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**Systemic Elements in Poliheuristic Theory  
of Foreign Policy Decision-making**

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The aim of this paper is to introduce systemic analysis in poliheuristic method of foreign policy decision-making analysis. It starts with theoretical review, and assessment of strengths and weaknesses of poliheuristic method, as developed by Mintz et. al. The paper proposes certain changes and/or amendments to the theory, and calls for better integration of this decision-making theory with other IR theories dealing with state behaviour in the international system. A hypothesis and potential tests are proposed and the paper ends with bibliography.

Foreign policy analysis is an important area of the discipline of international relations. It deals with ongoing concerns in the international arena as it tries to systematically communicate pros and cons of certain policy decisions. It is very difficult to develop a robust theory that could encompass all areas of foreign policy, as issues emerge and disappear, events take different forms and shapes, and decision-makers come and go (at least in democratic countries). It should be quite possible; however, to build a consistent analytical mode for a specific area of foreign policy – in this case, decision-making.

Decision-making is at heart of every foreign policy issue, as governments and state leaders have to react in one way or another to every important international development that demands their attention. Analysis of decision-making in foreign affairs could produce certain insights and create expectations of why some decisions differ from others, and why decision-makers opt for particular routes in foreign relations. Speculative reasoning in foreign policy analysis is abundant, and occasionally speculative reasoning could be quite insightful, but it would be helpful as well to have a consistent device for analysis of foreign policy decisions made in diverse, distinct and/or incommensurable situations.

Poliheuristic method of foreign policy decision-making analysis nowadays is the most developed and well articulated analytical mode in the area. It is a product of years of collaboration of a group of US based scholars informally headed by Alex Mintz. Their analytical output has been consistent since the early 1990s, as they have sought to build a bridge between cognitive and rational schools of decision-making. The current paper builds on this base, and attempts to make poliheuristic method more systemic and less dependent on unpredictable variables and spurious relations.

### **Literature**

In 1993, Mintz published a paper analyzing US decision to wage war on Iraq (Mintz, 1993). He argued that the US decision to initiate Gulf War was not based on systematic assessment of US interests, but on a non-compensatory analysis, informed by realities of US domestic political scene. This was a departure from the well established rational school path of reasoning, which emphasizes cost-benefit analysis by rational actors. Mintz did not deny that there was cost-benefit analysis involved in the US administration's decision to fight Iraq, but instead of a gain-motivated compensatory model that supposes the examination and/or comparison of alternatives, he proposed one that stressed the existence of a few criteria that help decision-makers to eliminate alternatives and arrive at a decision in a simplified, but logical way.

The same analytical mode was used in analysis of coalition formation (Mintz, 1995). Poliheuristic theory has maintained that the most important dimension in foreign policy decision making is domestic politics (Mintz, 1993, Mintz and Geva, 1997). While rational choice school does not deny that domestic politics plays a role in foreign policy decision-making, this role is only restricted supplementary relevance (Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1992). Poliheuristic method asserts that domestic politics creates absolutely essential and indispensable conditions for foreign policy decision making (Mintz and Geva, 1997, DeRouen, 2001).

Poliheuristic theory of decision-making owes its existence to various cognitive and rational theory schools of decision-making. Among them are original contributions by the following scholars: Maoz (1990), Simon (1957, 1959, 1982), Morrow (1997), Marra (1985), Kahneman and Tversky (1979), Bueno de Mesquita (1981, 1985), Jervis (1976), Zagare (1990).

### **Theory**

Poliheuristic theory is built on two basic propositions. One, in reaching a final decision foreign policy decision makers use a set of heuristics. Two, decision makers measure their success and failure in *political* units. The non-compensatory principle is derived from such [domestic] political units, and it is the most crucial element of poliheuristic theory. According to this principle, politicians (assuming that all top decision-makers are politicians) will not pursue a route in foreign policy that can hurt them politically. This means that potentially a very lengthy decision-making process is simplified dramatically by eliminating all those options that are politically ill-advised. They are not even considered as potential decisions. Whatever options are left, according to theory, are then examined through a number of heuristic processes that narrow the choices until a course of action is chosen.

According to poliheuristic theory, there could be one or more non-compensatory levels of decision-making. Non-compensatory implies that decision-makers would not be able to make-up or compensate for losses at this level with successes at other levels. Decision-makers' success and failure is measured in units of domestic politics – they evaluate gains and losses, risks and benefits in terms of political consequences above all other factors. Decision-makers, first of all, desire to avoid failure; loss aversion outweighs all other considerations. All non-compensatory decisions are made at the level of domestic politics.

Poliheuristic theory represents a middle ground between rational choice and cybernetic theories of decision-making. Rational choice theory argues that decision-makers go through alternatives with the goal to maximize their preferences. Human behaviour is a goal-oriented process with actors desiring to maximize their benefits, which does not mean that they always achieve what they want (Danilovic, 2003). Cybernetic model of decision-making, which is an umbrella name given to various schools known as bounded rationality, disjointed rationality, satisficing decision-making, organizational model, etc. (Liu, 2003), disagrees with rational choice theory, and points out that decision-makers lack cognitive capabilities and computational skills to process immense quantities of information simultaneously. Cybernetic school expects decision-making not to be all exhaustive, comprehensive, and systematic.

Poliheuristic theory agrees with cybernetic school of decision-making that humans lack cognitive powers to compute all kinds of decision possibilities and their consequences. Poliheuristic school accepts the notion of bounded rationality, and agrees that decision-making process is basically a rule of thumb process. At the same time, poliheuristic school accepts rational choice school's postulate that decision-makers weigh costs and benefits, potentials for success and failure. Policy-makers 'measure' success and failure in units of [domestic] politics – since they are viewed to be guided by heuristic reasoning in their deliberations, the unit of measurement must be common to all (so that it does not end up on the other side of bounded rationality). At the same, a criterion is needed so that heuristic process of reasoning could move forward, avoid endless loops of reasoning, and arrive at some kind of decision. The non-compensatory principle serves as a criterion against which all potential decisions are weighed and their selection is simplified.

### **Concepts**

The concept "poliheuristic" stands for many levels of heuristic analysis (*poli* or *poly* for many). Generally, heuristic mode uses formal reasoning that is based on experience, often because there is no precise, valid, and/or relevant algorithm available. In fact, heuristic reasoning is guided by trial and error. If a conclusion is reached after heuristic analysis, we could say that the process and the result are convincing, but it will be a stretch to argue that they are rigorous. Heuristic reasoning is basically a rule of thumb approach or a similar approximation that allows analyst to draw valid conclusions without being absolutely certain.

Heuristic reasoning is a problem-solving method that closely resembles everyday human reasoning. Even in natural and formal sciences heuristics is sometimes used if there are significant obstacles to sufficient data collection or for practical reasons or both. According to heuristic models in computational sciences, a decision is reached after considering a set of *yes* and *no* alternatives. This is why research in artificial intelligence is much concerned with heuristic reasoning.

In formal and natural sciences heuristic reasoning is not regarded as final and rigorous, but only provisional and plausible. At the same time, it should be noted that no scientific theory is regarded as final, but all of them exist in some kind of provisional form. This means that although there is an important difference between heuristic and rigorous conclusions in sciences, the gap between them is not very large. In political science, on the other hand, we cannot ever claim to be making rigorous conclusions at the same level natural scientists do. Political scientists very seldom have an opportunity to collect all the relevant data, and/or declare their findings final even with adjustments and approximations.

It would be unreasonable to expect that decision-makers ever have all they information they may need for a rigorous analysis and decision. They, like ancient mummies, are often pressed for time, and even if they were not, it would be unfair to expect them to go out and do all the research that is required to understand the ever-changing political world. Even if it were possible to collect all the needed data, decision-makers cannot possibly digest and analyze

such amount of information, as cybernetic school of decision-making points out. Therefore, the claim advanced by poliheuristic school that decision-makers go through heuristics to choose a viable option is not only valid, but rather common sense as well.

The non-compensatory principle implies that decision-makers cannot compensate losses at a certain level of decision-making with successes at other levels. In other words, there is always a possibility of a major domestic political damage with foreign policy decisions. Theory asserts that decision-makers, first of all, try to avoid such a damage using heuristic reasoning – that is they estimate that certain foreign policy decisions may kill them politically.

Poliheuristic method derives its logic from the satisficing principle. The latter plays a crucial role in the argument put forward by Mintz et. al. – according to the satisficing principle, people tend to make decisions when they feel satisfied that all the reasonable options have been examined and the best one of them has been chosen. Satisficing, as defined by Herbert Simon (1982), proposes an alternative to maximizing principle, which posits that rational actors make decisions to maximize their gains. Satisficing is different from maximization – the latter relies on cognitive powers to compute all potential variables and make the most rational decision, and the former is a method that does not address all potential variables, but chooses a decision based on satisfaction at some minimum level of variable analysis. Decision processes based on maximization require much more powerful cognitive powers, but they are more predictable. On the other hand, satisficing does not require a lot of computations, but the outcome of a decision process is less predictable. Chess masters could defeat most computer chess programs because the latter use maximization principle, and humans could predict what decision or a move a chess program may make – it makes the most rational decisions at any given situation. Sophisticated chess programs are guided by satisficing principle – as chess grandmaster Gary Kasparov experienced it. He commented after loosing to Deep Blue in 1997 that the machine played like a human, and it was difficult for him to anticipate its moves.

### **Systemic vs. Domestic Politics**

The claim by the poliheuristic school that domestic politics is *sine qua non* for foreign policy decisions is problematic on different levels of analysis.

a) *'Political' is too general (and so is 'politician')*. Poliheuristic theory asserts the paramount significance of "political" dimensions, implying domestic US political dynamics. The concept is too general and vague, since it is not clear what constitutes "political," i.e. if there is anything that could be regarded not political in US political life. If everything is political, then everything cannot possibly be considered as a criterion. Further, it is not clear whether things should be 'political' in purely domestic sense or there could be some cross-pollination between 'domestic' and 'international.' The concept 'political' is often used as synonymous to 'ideological' in US politics, and it is not clear whether poliheuristic theory does the same or makes distinctions between the two. Similarly, the boundaries of 'politician' are not obvious either – it is not explained whether only elected officials are regarded as politicians or by default any decision-maker in government is a politician.

b) *Does not directly account for international interactions.* Foreign policy decisions are pro-active or re-active to foreign development. By placing its strong emphasis on domestic political dynamics, poliheuristic theory seems to imply that foreign policy decisions are only re-active. Pro-active decisions cannot always trigger domestic political considerations at the non-compensatory level – it would be impossible to heuristically reason about something that has not taken place yet, and the general public or political actors are not aware of its existence.

c) *'Political' seems to imply US politics only.* Poliheuristic theory does not address well decisions made in non-democratic states, where foreign policy decisions do not necessarily take into consideration domestic political dynamics. Histories of the Soviet Union or the PDRK or the PRC are full of such examples. Further, in a non-democratic state decision-makers cannot anticipate what different political groups in their country (such as the military, clergy, large landowners, party apparatchiks, etc) may think about an issue simply because such opinions normally are not communicated openly (people who like to talk do not last long in those regimes).

d) *What about not so important decisions?* Poliheuristic theory addresses well 'big' foreign policy decisions, especially those related to war and peace and some form of military engagement. It is not clear whether important issues concerning trade or finances could be analyzed the same way. For example, US administration's decision to endorse new international financial arrangements at the end of World War II – very few people in the world could comment on complex international financial issues, yet the decision could have had very negative consequences for the United States. Further, foreign policy is not made of only widely discussed military or economic issues, but also of many little known or discusses decisions that are necessary to run day to day international affairs of a state.

e) *What about bad decisions?* Poliheuristic theory does not explain why bad choices are made at the non-compensatory level. How come LB Johnson could not see that the escalation in Vietnam would endanger his political life and cost the Democrats presidency? The ill-designed approach to the Iraq issue has cost the Republicans the Congress, and may help the Democrats to win presidency in 2008. It seems that there must be something else at the non-compensatory level that encourages decision-makers to overlook obvious political dangers at home.

f) *What about bureaucracy?* Domestic politics as *sine qua non* for poliheuristic method approach does not account for behaviour of bureaucrats who do not necessarily have to pay political price for their contribution to foreign policy making. At the same time, no evidence suggests that their decision-making behaviour is markedly different from those of elected officials.

g) *Decisions that were not made.* Some foreign policy decisions basically manifest themselves as a do nothing approach. However, certain cases may warrant more specific attention as some decision-makers may not do anything because they do not perceive certain inputs to be important or are ignorant or lazy or a combination of the above. Assuming that decision-

makers are rational beings, they could not ignore possibilities of political suicide even if they are highly inept or unqualified. Something else besides domestic politics 'encourages' them to ignore warning signs in policy inputs.

### **Hypothesis**

Domestic political considerations, no doubt, would figure at one or more levels of heuristics in foreign policy decision-making. However, it is highly questionable whether domestic politics is the non-compensatory principle poliheuristic theory needs. It would be prudent to examine the international system as the originator of the non-compensatory considerations. International systemic interactions trigger the non-compensatory reaction from foreign policy decision-makers.

Systemic considerations would make both elected and non-elected (those from authoritarian regimes or high level bureaucrats in democracies) foreign policy decision-makers behave similarly. Misreading of systemic developments may also encourage tardy decision-makers not to do anything. The same logic could explain bad foreign policy decisions, as well as the way not so important decisions are made. Finally, systemic elements are the same for every participant actor (nation-states), and those who act on its behalf (elected or non-elected heads of state, foreign ministers, etc).

### **Potential Links with Other Theories**

Replacing domestic politics with elements from the international system as the chief contributors to the non-compensatory approach to decision-making may also bring poliheuristic method in line with other IR theories, as well as other social theories that emphasize systemic interaction.

Some realist and neorealist schools assert that everyone's strategy depends on everyone else's (Waltz, 2001, Gilpin, ). Very powerful states, such as the US, could ignore minor states' strategies, but not always. Less powerful states cannot afford to ignore strategies of others, especially more powerful ones, as this may lead to their demise – Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, and the Taleban regime in Afghanistan would be good examples of smaller states ignoring designs of larger ones. If systemic elements were to be found important contributors to the non-compensatory heuristics, poliheuristic theory would conform with theoretical assertions by realist and neorealist schools.

Offence-defence theory posits that whenever offence is seen as prevalent, war is likely, and whenever defence is seen as more predominant, war is less likely (van Evera, 1998). Offence-Defence theory takes into consideration the ratio of the cost of the attacking forces the cost of the defender's forces (Glaser and Kaufmann, 1998). Offence-defence theory addresses fundamental systemic elements as it tries to locate occurrences of war and peace within distribution of power, and especially military capabilities in the international system. Systemic considerations at the non-compensatory level would inform the same level of analysis in poliheuristic theory, and in fact, would address the same question (the likelihood of occurrence of war) from a foreign policy making angle.

Foreign policy decision-makers often judge things under conditions of uncertainty. Mintz et. al. make use of relevant research done in economics by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) and others. The same theory could be examined to see whether the non-compensatory dimension could function at the systemic level. Further, foreign policy makers opt for decisions and commit their countries to certain international transactions much like buyers and sellers commit themselves to transactions in marketplace. Since decision makers often act under conditions of uncertainty, and they make decisions using heuristics, it would be fair to assume that on some if not most occasions decision-makers from different countries will not have identical or symmetric information about the ir (sometimes shared) issue of concern. Therefore, heuristics used by foreign policy decision makers could also be characterized as asymmetric when analyzed at the systemic level. Research by Akerlof, Stiglitz et. al. could be used to examine interaction between decisions guided by heuristics and asymmetry of information.

### **Heuristics of Systemic Considerations as the Non-Compensatory Level**

DeRouen argues that the US did not use force at Dien Bien Phu to relieve the French in 1954, because the American public and the Congress could not be convinced easily, and Eisenhower's high approval rate could not have compensated for potential political damage (DeRouen, 2003).

What were major international systemic considerations the US administration had to take into account in 1954? First of all, it was not in US interests to support colonial empires whether they were British or French. Empires tend to be mercantilist and protectionist that (i) severely restrict global and/or regional free trade, and (ii) could trigger global or regional military conflict. After World War II, the US boldly and openly committed itself to free international trade and regulated financial transactions. The US had abundant financial wealth that needed access to cheap labour and resources elsewhere. Colonial empires tend to severely restrict outsiders from accessing both. Besides, the US was just emerging from a bloody war in Korea with rather uncertain results. Therefore, it was not in US interests to support French imperial policies and help it to retain its colonies.

Mintz (1993) argues that domestic politics served as the non-compensatory dimension for the US administration's decision to wage war on Iraq in 1990. This claim is based on analysis of discussions that went on in the administration, and some documents. One could argue that systemic and/or strategic considerations played decisive role at the non-compensatory level. Moscow's decision not to support Saddam's policies and to side with Washington instead were crucial in President Bush's decision to wage war. According to Soviet TV reports after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Baghdad notified the Soviet government that the invasion had taken place in support of socialist revolution in Kuwait. President Hussein expected Soviet Union's support of socialist causes in the region. Moscow dismissed Baghdad's version of events, and sided with the US. One could make a persuasive arguments that President Bush would have opted for long negotiations and diplomacy had the USSR supported Iraq – there were more

things at stake for him personally if relations with Soviets went sour under his watch, and things reverted back to the Cold War mode.

Taylor-Robinson and Redd (2003) argue that domestic politics, and especially activism by the United Fruit Company, played the non-compensatory role in President Eisenhower's decision to support the CIA-led coup in Guatemala. The United Fruit 'framed' communist problem for the US administration, and Eisenhower could not afford to be seen weak on communism (Taylor-Robinson and Redd, 2003). The authors pose a basic question: why did President Truman call off Operation FORTUNE in 1952, but President Eisenhower authorize Operation PBSUCCESS in August of 1953 and gave a go ahead in June 1954? Taylor-Robinson and Redd find the non-compensatory dimension in domestic politics of the United States. Once again, a reasonable explanation could be found at the systemic or strategic level. The world clearly changed from 1952 to 1954. In 1952, the Korean war was still on, Stalin was in charge in the Soviet Union, and Mao's power and influence was getting stronger. In 1954, the Korean war was no more, Stalin was dead, and the Soviet Union was going through internal power struggle, and had no appetite for new adventures in foreign policy. Moscow could do nothing after PM Mossadegh of Iran was forced to resign in summer of 1954, and was very unlikely to retaliate for Guatemala. Subsequently, things changed by 1956, when the Soviet Union under Khrushchev's firm control stepped in and brutally suppressed pro-American turn of events in Hungary.

In short, before identifying explanations for international events elsewhere it would be prudent to look for explanations within the system itself. Waltz (2001) argues that international wars happen because the system has no mechanism to prevent their occurrence. This assertion seems to be correct especially when it comes to subversion of governments of smaller countries by governments of larger ones – on many occasions small countries simply cannot master enough power and/or international support to effectively deter large powers.

### **Tests**

The hypothesis above could be tested at a number of levels.

*A null hypothesis* could be proposed to see whether poliheuristic process of decision-making is indeed guided by heuristics, and not by deterministic or random choices. We could outright reject determinism as no compelling evidence suggests that decision-making in any sphere of human activity is a deterministic process. The null hypothesis could propose that decision-making in foreign policy is a process that is guided by random selection of options, and thus could be described as a Poisson process. That is, the null hypothesis could try to demonstrate that the selection of foreign policy options matches a random distribution of events that could be described as ordinary, stationary, and discrete.

*N-player strategy games* could be used to study decision making by players engaged in actual games of strategy. N-player strategy games model the international system the best. Chess is one of the most developed and most popular strategy games known to mankind; however, it only works with two players. From N-player games one could examine decision making

processes by players engaged in web-based virtual games. In strategy games such as chess, and some web-based games, most players take things very seriously and personally. For many stakes are very high as they try to win and demonstrate their superior intellectual skills. Such games would be a better model for the international system than a *lab experiment* using 'artificial' game scenarios as most players in such games are aware of the experimental nature of the game and do not regard their stakes as high. Nevertheless, lab experiments could also be employed in a support role to test the hypothesis.

### **Conclusion**

Poliheuristic theory of decision-making is the most advanced theory in foreign policy studies. In its current form, theory treats domestic politics as *sine qua non* for foreign policy decision making process – all non-compensatory decisions are made at this level. There are; however, certain problems with this assertion. Indeed, case studies analyzed to support non-compensatory significance of domestic politics display important omissions and weaknesses. The systemic level should be examined to establish whether it could provide a more consistent and stable dimension for non-compensatory decisions. Mathematical modeling, game modeling, lab experiments and qualitative interviews could be used to examine the importance of the systemic level in poliheuristic decision-making in foreign policy.

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