

# An Evaluation of the Prescriptive Utility of Psychological Bias Theory in International Relations

by

Wilson Leung

BSc Philosophy (2004)

London School of Economics and Political Science

Submitted to the Department of Political Science  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Science in Political Science**

at the

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

September 2005

© 2005 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved

Signature of Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Wilson Leung

Department of Political Science

August 5, 2005

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_

PA

Stephen W. Van Evera

Professor of Political Science

Thesis Supervisor

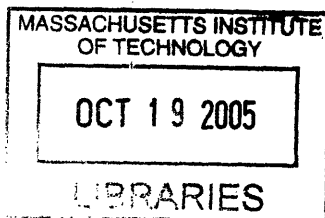
Certified By: \_\_\_\_\_

R. D. Petersen

Roger D. Petersen

Associate Professor of Political Science

Chair, Graduate Program Committee



ARCHIVES



# An Evaluation of the Prescriptive Utility of Psychological Bias Theory in International Relations

by

Wilson Leung

Submitted to the Department of Political Science  
on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005 in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in  
Political Science

## **ABSTRACT**

I evaluate the practical utility of psychological bias theory by examining two historical cases — the US decision to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in 1950 and the British policy of appeasement towards Germany in the 1930s — asking in each of these whether the theory could have helped policymakers to make better decisions.

Drawing from the lessons of these two cases, I argue that psychological bias theory can help foreign-policymakers to improve their decisionmaking capabilities and hence increase their chances of achieving favorable outcomes in international politics. However, even if the prescriptions of the theory are adopted, there is no guarantee that positive outcomes will obtain in every case because outcomes are affected by at least two other factors that one largely cannot control: the availability of information and the misperceptions suffered by one's opponent.

I also discuss other research methods that could be used to investigate the utility of the theory: examining how useful its prescriptions have been; looking at whether people can actually correct their psychological biases; and considering whether policymakers should attempt to rectify their biases.

Thesis Supervisor: Stephen Van Evera  
Title: Professor of Political Science



## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	7
Motivations	7
Why Psychological Bias Theory?	11
<b>Psychological Bias Theory</b>	14
Assumptions	14
Psychological Biases	17
<i>Unmotivated Biases</i>	18
<i>Motivated Biases</i>	28
Prescriptions	30
<b>Case 1: US Decision to Cross the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, 1950</b>	37
Background	37
Explanation	41
Prescription	45
Difficulties	48
<b>Case 2: British Policy of Appeasement Towards Germany, 1933-1939</b>	51
Background	51
Explanation	56
Prescription	58
Difficulties	60
<b>Lessons of the Cases</b>	64
Ambiguity	64
Opponents' Misperceptions	67
What These Problems Imply	67
What These Problems Do Not Imply	70
<b>Methods for Further Research</b>	72
How Useful <i>Have</i> the Prescriptions Been?	72
Can People Correct Their Psychological Biases?	76
Should Policymakers Attempt to Correct Their Biases?	77
<b>Conclusion</b>	78
<b>Bibliography</b>	81



## **Introduction**

In this essay, I evaluate the practical utility of psychological bias theory — that body of literature that emphasizes that foreign-policymakers, like all people, are subject to various cognitive constraints when they make decisions. This aim of this paper, in other words, is to ask how useful this theory is to policymakers. I start by describing my motivations for this essay, after which I carefully outline the assumptions, explanations, and prescriptions of the theory. I then turn to two historical cases and ask in each of these whether psychological bias theory could have helped policymakers to make better decisions. In the last section of the essay, I discuss further research methods that could help us to explore the utility of psychological bias theory. As we shall see, psychological bias theory offers prescriptions that can potentially help policymakers to achieve better outcomes for their states in the international arena, though there is no guarantee that it can do so in every case because there at least two factors besides psychological biases that affect foreign policy success: the availability of information and the misperceptions suffered by one's opponents.

## **Motivations**

At times, International Relations<sup>1</sup> theorists and foreign-policymakers appear to exist in two separate universes. Compared to other social science disciplines — e.g. economics, geography, and sociology — IR has made little impact on the actual making of policy. Relative to other subfields within political science, too, IR has been slighted by policymakers. This lamentable state of affairs has not gone unnoticed among IR scholars.

---

<sup>1</sup> I follow the convention of using the phrase “International Relations” (abbreviated as IR), with capital letters, to refer to the academic discipline, and the phrase “international relations”, with lower-case letters, to refer to the subject matter of that discipline. It is interesting to note that this convention appears to be somewhat more prevalent among British scholars than American ones.

Stephen Walt, for example, writes that “despite the need for well-informed advice about contemporary international problems...there has long been dissatisfaction [among policymakers] with the contributions of IR theorists.”<sup>2</sup> James Kurth similarly comments, “[IR] practitioners are not only rightly ignored by practical foreign policy officials; they are usually held in disdain by their fellow academics as well.”<sup>3</sup> One Indian scholar wryly notes that at mixed gatherings, IR scholars usually crowd around decisionmakers, hoping to receive crumbs of their wisdom — rather than the other way around.<sup>4</sup>

Those on the policy side of the fence have also voiced their discontent with the usefulness of IR theory. Paul Nitze, one of the chief architects of US Cold War doctrine, and who was also familiar with the academic world, stated that “most of what has been written and taught under the heading of ‘political science’ by Americans since World War II has been contrary to experience and to common sense. It has also been of limited value, if not counterproductive, as a guide to the actual conduct of policy.”<sup>5</sup> David Newsom, a former US Undersecretary of State and ambassador, remarks that “much of today’s scholarship [on international politics] is either irrelevant or inaccessible to policymakers...the results of much research remains locked within the community of scholars.”<sup>6</sup> One indication of the short shrift given to IR theory by those responsible for the making of foreign policy is the fact that, in the United States, being a prominent IR theorist is neither sufficient nor necessary for appointment to the National Security

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), 24.

<sup>3</sup> James Kurth, “Inside the Cave: the Banality of I.R. Studies”, *The National Interest* 53 (Fall 1998), 29. Kurth does admit a few exceptions to his charge that IR theories are barren from a practical perspective, including the works of John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, Jack Snyder, Stephen Walt, and Robert Gilpin.

<sup>4</sup> Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *A General Theory of International Relations* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1992), 1

<sup>5</sup> Paul Nitze, *Tension Between Opposite: Reflections on the Practice and Theory of Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 15.

<sup>6</sup> David Newsom, “Foreign Policy and Academia”, *Foreign Policy* 101 (Winter 1995), 65.



Council, the Department of State, or other similar foreign-policymaking bodies. (It is instructive to compare this situation with that of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, which is populated by economics PhDs).<sup>7</sup>

Numerous reasons have been advanced for this theory-policy gap. One prominent suggestion is that the vast majority of IR scholars do not conduct their research with policy relevance in mind. This is in large part because the incentives and norms of academia do not point in that direction. Budding academics are professionally rewarded for work that speaks (whether in support or in opposition) to established paradigms within the discipline, not for research that addresses real world issues faced by policymakers. As Newsom, the former diplomat, complains, "Academicians often appear caught up in an elite culture in which labels, categories, and even the humor have meaning for 'members only'. Their writings are filled with references to other scholars' writings; they speak to each other rather than to a wider public."<sup>8</sup>

This is an unfortunate situation, and a misguided one. IR has much to say about foreign-policymaking. When a state takes a particular course of action in the international arena, its leaders are usually implicitly relying on a theory of international relations that has already been debated by IR scholars. IR theory has the potential to provide the scientific knowledge for better decisionmaking. As Philip Zelikow argues, "the comparative advantage of academics is that they have the general knowledge,

---

<sup>7</sup> Walt, "Theory and Policy in IR", 24.

<sup>8</sup> Newsom, "Foreign Policy", 62. James Kurth similarly comments that "most academics are only concerned about the good opinion of about a dozen other academic specialists in their particular sub-sub-field"<sup>8</sup>, while Robert Jervis observes that academics often act like Winnie-the-Pooh and his companions, who thought that they were in close pursuit of an ever-growing number of Woozles when in fact they were only following their own tracks. See Kurth, "Inside the Cave", 33; and Robert Jervis, "Cumulation, Correlation and Woozles", in ed. James Rosenau, *In Search of Global Patterns* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1976).

disciplinary training, and opportunity to provide the needed analysis.”<sup>9</sup> Alexander George writes that “foreign policy must be based on sound analysis of the characteristics and dynamics of the international system, the nature of adversaries, the way in which various instruments of policy can be appropriately and effectively employed in pursuit of foreign-policy objectives, etc.”<sup>10</sup> IR theory has the potential to provide that sort of analysis.

One important way of increasing the extent to which IR theory is utilized by policymakers is to have greater and more explicit discussion of the extent to which particular IR theories are applicable to foreign-policy-making. In other words, if greater policy relevance is deemed a worthy goal, then we as IR theorists should increase our tendency to explicitly ask, ‘To what extent could such-and-such theory actually be used by policymakers?’

This essay intends to be a modest step in that direction. I take a particular theory within IR, and perform, as it were, an audit of its prescriptive utility. (This essay is thus an instance of what Stephen Van Evera calls a “literature-assessing” or “stock-taking” dissertation.<sup>11</sup>) Specifically, I examine what might be called ‘psychological bias theory’.<sup>12</sup> The essence of this theory is that policymakers, like all people, are subject to various cognitive constraints, which means that decisionmaking is almost never

---

<sup>9</sup> Philip Zelikow, “Foreign Policy Engineering: From Theory to Practice and Back Again”, *International Security* 28:4 (Spring 1994), 146.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 240.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 90. Van Evera laments the fact that “political science field culture is biased toward the creation and testing of theory over other work, including...the stock-taking of literature.” (*Guide to Methods*, 4).

<sup>12</sup> What I refer to here as ‘psychological bias theory’ is often referred to by other names, such as ‘political psychology’, ‘cognitive constraint theory’, ‘decisionmaking theory’, ‘cognitive psychology’, the ‘psychological paradigm’, and so on.

characterized by the pure rationality posited by rational choice theory.<sup>13</sup> In other words, any realistic model of, or guide to, foreign-policymaking must take into account the fact that foreign-policymakers are human beings and thus subject to a host of psychological limitations when they make decisions. Unlike earlier work that applied psychology to international relations, psychological bias theory does not concentrate on psychological abnormalities suffered by a small number of leaders such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao; instead, psychological bias theory emphasizes those cognitive limitations to which even intelligent and mentally healthy people are subject.<sup>14</sup>

### **Why psychological bias theory?**

I do not contend that there is at present universal — or even majority — assent among IR theorists to the propositions advanced by psychological bias theory. As Jack Levy observes, there is too little evidence at the moment to tell whether political psychology or its chief rival, rational choice theory, possesses superior explanatory power with respect to foreign-policymaking.<sup>15</sup> (The two theories are often seen as rivals because they both focus on the individual level of analysis to explain foreign policy outcomes.) In fact, it is probably right to say that IR theorists in recent years have embraced rational choice theory to a much greater degree than psychological bias theory. Levy (writing in 1997) observes that “rational choice has become the most influential

---

<sup>13</sup> Jack Levy, “The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998), 157; Michael Brecher, “International Studies in the Twentieth Century and Beyond: Flawed Dichotomies, Synthesis, Cumulation”, *International Studies Quarterly* 43:2 (June 1999), 230-233; Ole Holsti, “Theories of International Relations”, in eds. Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson, *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 77.

<sup>14</sup> Holsti, “Theories of International Relations”, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Levy, “Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations”, *International Studies Quarterly* 41:1 (March 1997), 108. Similarly, Michael Brecher similarly notes that “the vigorous debate between rational choice theory and its critics [particularly psychological bias theory] goes on. See Brecher, “International Studies”, 231.

paradigm in international relations and political science over the last decade.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Kurth, rational choice theory and postmodernist theory — i.e., not psychological theory — have overthrown neorealism and neoliberalism as the dominant paradigms in IR.<sup>17</sup>

When Robert Jervis published his landmark *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, probably the most important oeuvre in the psychological bias literature, in 1976 the prominent psychologist Robert Abelson predicted a “new wave in political science[:] the application of psychology concepts...to the situations confronting decisionmakers.”<sup>18</sup> It would be a stretch to say that this prediction has come true. However, this does not invalidate the purpose of the present essay. Since my principal aim here is to present a model for similar audits of prescriptive utility<sup>19</sup>, the truth of the particular theory analyzed is less important than the way in which we examine its practical significance. As such, I do not enter into the vast debate over whether the basic tenets of psychological bias theory are true; for the purposes of this essay, I assume that they are.

Psychological bias theory also possesses a number of advantages relevant to our present goals. First, psychological bias theory seems — at first glance, anyway — to have prescriptive potential because it attributes errors in foreign-policymaking to a factor (misperception) that could be amenable to manipulation and reduction. As Van Evera points out, “A theory gains prescriptive richness by pointing to manipulable causes, since

---

<sup>16</sup> Levy, “Prospect Theory, Rational Choice”, 87.

<sup>17</sup> Kurth, “Inside the Cave”, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), outside back cover.

<sup>19</sup> cf. Chaim Kaufman, who tests psychological explanations of decisionmaking using a single case, with the larger aim of providing a model for further research along similar lines. see Chaim Kaufman, “Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method for Testing Psychological Explanations of Political Decision Making”, *International Studies Quarterly* 38:4 (Dec. 1994), 558.

manipulable causes might be controlled by human action.”<sup>20</sup> Second, those who study psychological bias are usually quite willing to offer prescriptions on how to reduce the impact of those biases and hence make better decisions.<sup>21</sup> This makes it slightly easier to evaluate whether or not the theory is practically useful.

Besides, at least some scholars agree that psychological bias theory — or theories related to it — will increase in prominence within IR in the short-term future. Levy thinks that prospect theory (a particular variant of psychological bias theory) is becoming an important challenge to rational choice theory<sup>22</sup>; Van Evera argues that misperception holds the key to explaining many international political outcomes<sup>23</sup>; and Valerie Hudson points out that the end of the Cold War has engendered renewed interest in IR theories focusing on the individual level of analysis.<sup>24</sup> In other words, psychological bias theory remains at least a viable research program.

Finally, before proceeding to an explanation of psychological bias theory, I concede that by concentrating on policy implications and practical applicability, there is a danger that theoretical superficiality and intellectual shallowness will be allowed to creep in. Hedley Bull argues (probably with some truth) that “the search for conclusions that

---

<sup>20</sup> Van Evera, *Guide to Methods*, 21. Cf. Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 41.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 409-424; George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 137-260; Richard Ned Lebow, “The Deterrence Deadlock: Is There a Way Out?”, in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Irving Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 339-404; Yaacov Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 342-362.

<sup>22</sup> Levy, “Prospect Theory, Rational Choice”.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *More Causes of War: Misperception and the Roots of Conflict* (unpublished ms., 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Valerie Hudson, “Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations”, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1 (2005), 13.

can be presented as ‘solutions’ or ‘practical advice’ is a corrupting element in the contemporary study of world politics...such conclusions are advanced less because there is any solid basis for them than because there is a demand for them which it is profitable to satisfy.”<sup>25</sup> But considering that the balance in IR is at present heavily tilted in favor of theoretical concerns and away from practical ones, I think that there is no risk in the foreseeable future that an increased emphasis on policy in IR will result in a dilution of the field’s theoretical rigor.

### **Psychological Bias Theory**

There are numerous scholars whose work can be characterized as psychological bias theory. In this essay, I adopt the simplifying procedure of mainly (though not exclusively) focusing on the work of one particular author: Robert Jervis, arguably the most important and most frequently cited scholar in this subfield.<sup>26</sup> (Thus, in this essay, when I say ‘psychological bias theory’, it usually means ‘Robert Jervis’s version of psychological bias theory’.) Furthermore, I concentrate primarily on *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Jervis’s most comprehensive treatment of the topic, though I shall also draw on his other writings as needed.

### **Assumptions**

I begin by setting out briefly the assumptions that are contained in psychological bias theory. Knowing a theory’s assumptions is central to assessing its practical utility. Though some scholars argue that a positive theory should be judged on the accuracy of

---

<sup>25</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), 308.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Van Evera, personal correspondence. See also Stephen Van Evera, *More Causes of War*, 10.; Arthur Stein, “When Misperception Matters”, *World Politics* 34:4 (Jul. 1982), 505; Vertzberger, *World in Their Minds*, 17.

its predictions rather than on the truth of its assumptions<sup>27</sup>, it is arguable that the assumptions of a theory must bear at least some resemblance to reality in order for it to be useful for policymakers.

Psychological bias theory makes three major assumptions:

(A1) *The individual level of analysis matters.* Psychological bias theory assumes that individual policymakers have a significant influence on the way in which states behave, and therefore, that explanation of state behavior cannot proceed without reference to individual policymakers. As Ole Holsti puts it, the assumption is that “to reconstruct how nations deal with each other, it is necessary to view the situation through the eyes of those who act in the name of the state.”<sup>28</sup>

Policymakers are likely to think that this assumption is obviously true, but the so-called ‘level-of-analysis’ debate has in fact been one of the major areas of contention within IR over the past four decades.<sup>29</sup> Many theorists who espouse the systemic level of analysis argue that individual level factors are unnecessary in explaining the way in which states behave.<sup>30</sup> I do not wish to enter into this complicated debate here. For my purposes, I am content to observe that psychological bias theory assumes that the individual level of analysis has at least some explanatory power vis-à-vis state behavior.

Psychological bias theory, it should be noted, does not necessarily assume that the individual level of analysis is the *only* one that matters.<sup>31</sup> Psychological bias theory concedes that factors at the systemic and domestic-political levels may play a role in

---

<sup>27</sup> see esp. Milton Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics”, in eds. Michael Martin and Lee McIntyre, *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Holsti, “Theories of International Relations”, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Brecher, “International Studies”, 228-230.

<sup>30</sup> See esp. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> For example, in discussing the other levels of analysis, Jervis asserts only that they are insufficient for explaining international political outcomes; he does not argue that they are unnecessary. See Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 18-28.

determining state behavior; it contends merely that individual-level factors are also important.

(A2) *Psychological biases lead to misperceptions.*<sup>32</sup> Psychological bias theorists in IR usually model policymakers as information-processing systems.<sup>33</sup> That is, policymaking can be broken down into three interrelated stages: (1) the gathering and interpretation of information; (2) the evaluation of alternative courses of action, based on the information interpreted in the previous step and a calculation of relative costs and benefits; and (3) the implementation of the course of action chosen in the previous step.<sup>34</sup> Psychological bias theory holds that various psychological biases influence the gathering and interpretation of information (stage 1), which somehow impairs the rational evaluation of alternative courses of action (stage 2). In other words, psychological biases lead to misperceptions.

(A3) *Perceptions (including misperceptions) affect foreign policy outcomes.* The third assumption of psychological bias theory is that the perceptions of individual foreign-policymakers — especially their perceptions of other states' intentions and behavior — have a significant influence on the foreign policies that states adopt. Perceptions and beliefs are assumed to be a crucial determinant of the way in which states' leaders behave, which (by assumption A1) is an important factor in how states act. In Jervis's words, psychological bias theory posits that "it is often impossible to explain

---

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps it is more accurate to describe this proposition as the central thesis of psychological bias theory, rather than as one of its assumptions.

<sup>33</sup> George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 56; Vertzberger, *World in Their Minds*, 7-8. George observes (in 1980) that viewing the mind as an information-processing system is one of the "fundamental tenets of cognitive psychology". However, as Margaret Matlin notes, many cognitive psychologists have challenged the information-processing approach in recent years. See Margaret Matlin, *Cognition*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> Vertzberger, *World in Their Minds*, 7-8.



crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers' beliefs about the world and their images of others."<sup>35</sup>

Jervis summarizes the three assumptions of psychological bias theory as follows: "Many of the propositions advanced [by psychological bias theory]... are generalizations about how decision-makers perceive others' behavior and form judgements about their intentions. These patterns are explained by the general ways in which people draw inferences from ambiguous evidence and, in turn, help explain many seemingly incomprehensible policies."<sup>36</sup> The overall model of state behavior posited by psychological bias theory can be expressed, then, in the following diagram:

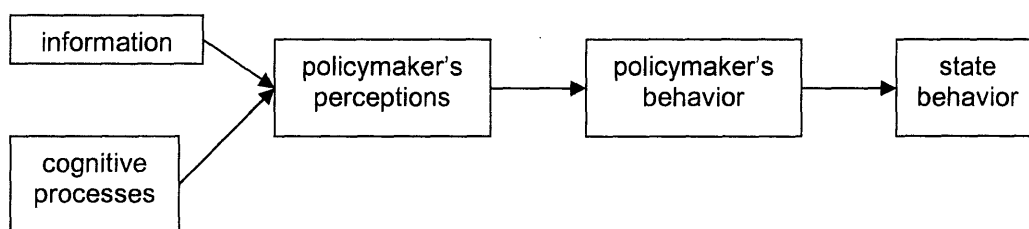


Fig.1. Psychological Bias Theory's Model of State Behavior

## Psychological Biases

I turn now to the various psychological biases posited by psychological bias theory. Following Yaacov Vertzberger, we can characterize biases as "deviations in judgment that are consistent and predictable."<sup>37</sup> Psychological bias theory distinguishes between two types of biases, depending on their source: (1) unmotivated biases (sometimes called cognitive biases); and (2) motivated biases.<sup>38</sup> I discuss these in turn.

<sup>35</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Vertzberger, *World in Their Minds*, 144.

<sup>38</sup> Note: Jervis does not distinguish between these two types of biases in *Perception and Misperception*, but does so in subsequent work. See, for example, Robert Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat", in

*Unmotivated (or Cognitive) Biases*

Unmotivated biases arise, in Jervis's account, because the "problem of dealing with complex and ambiguous information leads people to adopt short-cuts to rationality that simplify perceptions in order to make more manageable the task of making sense out of environments."<sup>39</sup> In other words, decisionmakers frequently find themselves facing difficult and complicated situations where information is limited and ambiguous. They must deal with these situations using inherently limited cognitive capabilities. Thus, they often turn to cognitive short-cuts in order to make the task more manageable. As cognitive psychologist Robert Sternberg explains, "These mental shortcuts lighten the cognitive load of making decisions, but they also allow for a much greater chance of error."<sup>40</sup>

Psychological bias theory in IR identifies a number of unmotivated biases that affect, sometimes adversely, the way in which foreign policy is made:

**(B1)** *Assimilation of new information to pre-existing beliefs* (sometimes known as *theory-driven thinking* or *cognitive dispositions*). The beliefs that a person holds has a significant impact on the way in which he perceives and interprets new information.<sup>41</sup> When one encounters information that fits well with one's pre-existing beliefs, one is likely to notice that information, accept it, and incorporate it into one's store of knowledge. When, on the other hand, one encounters information that is discrepant to what one already believes, that information is likely to be ignored, misperceived,

---

Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception", *International Security* 7:3 (Winter 1982-1983), 15; Robert Jervis, "Rational Deterrence: Theory and Evidence", *World Politics* 41:2 (Jan. 1989), 196-197.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat", 18.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Sternberg, *Cognitive Psychology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003), 409.

<sup>41</sup> As Jervis writes, "Our perceptions are strongly colored by our beliefs about how the world works and what patterns it is likely to present us with." See Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat", 18.

dismissed as an aberration, or interpreted in a distorted manner such that it does not contradict one's prior beliefs.

According to Jervis, this phenomenon is “probably the most pervasive and significant” of the various unmotivated biases.<sup>42</sup> While this bias is sometimes useful — indeed, without it, it would be very difficult for decisionmakers to organize and make sense of the kaleidoscope of information that they receive every day — it can often have negative consequences on the formulation of foreign policy. The problem is that this bias causes statesmen to maintain their beliefs and theories even in the face of large amounts of discrepant information, since any discrepant information is likely to be unperceived, dismissed, discounted, or distorted. In many cases, this leads even generally intelligent foreign-policymakers to maintain beliefs — most importantly, beliefs about other states — that, in retrospect, were clearly contradicted by the available evidence. This bias helps to explain, for example, why the US completely failed to predict the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Numerous pieces of information that may have alerted US (and Israeli) leaders to the imminent Arab attack were ignored or distorted; for instance, the evacuation of Soviet civilians from Syria a few days before the attack was misinterpreted by US leaders as evidence that the Soviet Union and Arab states had fallen out with one another — an interpretation that Henry Kissinger, who was then Secretary of State, later admitted to be absurd.<sup>43</sup>

Particularly dangerous are situations in which state leaders hold an ‘inherent bad faith model’ of another state, i.e. they believe that state to be fundamentally hostile and

---

<sup>42</sup> Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception”, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 144.

malevolent.<sup>44</sup> In such cases, seemingly hostile actions by the opponent are seized upon as evidence for the image of that opponent as vicious and belligerent, while seemingly conciliatory actions are ignored, discredited or otherwise twisted to conform to the image. (For example, as Ole Holsti shows, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles interpreted any Soviet move that was prima facie conciliatory as either a deceptive maneuver or an action compelled by weakness.<sup>45</sup>) Inherent bad faith models not only make it much more difficult for two states that are negatively disposed each other to move towards a reduction in hostilities, but they also increase the risk of hostility spirals: when State A attempts to make conciliatory gestures towards State B, these are likely to be dismissed or misinterpreted by State B, but since State A believes that it has been conciliatory, it may take the lack of positive response on the part of State B as an affront and hence increase its antagonism towards State B, provoking a hostile reaction from State B, and so on.<sup>46</sup>

At other times, the resistance of established beliefs to change may prevent policymakers from shifting to more successful policies. For a long time after the start of World War I, military strategists persisted in launching massive infantry charges due to their belief in the superiority of offensive strategies, in spite of the fact that such charges were blatantly ineffective and led to enormous numbers of soldiers being killed. (This case has led Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz to comment, “Men may die easily, but beliefs do not.”<sup>47</sup>)

---

<sup>44</sup> George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 65.

<sup>45</sup> Ole Holsti, “Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy: Dulles and Russia”, in David Finlay, Ole Holsti and Richard Fagen, *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1967).

<sup>46</sup> See Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 67-76.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz, “Technology, Strategy, and the Uses of Force”, in eds. Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz, *The Use of Force* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 13.

**(B2) Influence of historical analogies.** In making decisions, statesmen often rely on comparisons with past events as guides to choosing between alternative policies. New situations that confront policymakers are often difficult to assess, and historical analogies are frequently used as aides in diagnosing and dealing with the current situation. For example, when Truman was informed of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, he employed the historical cases of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the German annexation of Austria, and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in making his decision to send American forces to repel the North Korean attack.<sup>48</sup> As historian Ernest May notes, “Eagerness to profit from the lessons of history is the one characteristic common in the statecraft of such diverse types as Stanley Baldwin, Adolf Hitler, Harry Truman, Charles de Gaulle, and John F. Kennedy.”<sup>49</sup>

The use of historical cases as a guide to decisionmaking is not in itself a bad thing. There are valuable lessons to be learned from history<sup>50</sup>; indeed, much of political science scholarship is based on this notion. The problem is that policymakers tend to be unconsciously selective about the historical analogies that they employ. More often than not, the historical cases that are relied upon are those that are the most recent, the most dramatic, or ones that the policymakers have themselves experienced.<sup>51</sup> This can be a problem because there is no a priori reason why these categories of historical cases should provide the best guides to understanding the present situation. They often are not:

---

<sup>48</sup> Harry Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. 2: *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), 332-33. Discussed in Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 218.

<sup>49</sup> Ernest May, “The Relevance of Diplomatic History to the Practice of International Relations” (Paper given at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Sept. 1965), quoted in George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Though see Keith Robbins, *Munich 1938*, (London: Cassell, 1968), 4-5 for an alternative view.

<sup>51</sup> As Abraham Lowenthal writes, “Policy-makers seize on evils they have experienced and wish to avoid in order to organize their information about events they do not have the time to analyze from scratch.” See A.F. Lowenthal, *The Dominican Intervention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 161.

as Michael Roskin shows, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor ‘taught’ the next generation of US leaders that the US must relinquish its isolationist stance and be prepared to intervene, military or otherwise, wherever it feels that aggression is budding; this ‘lesson’ led directly to the disastrous American experience in Vietnam.<sup>52</sup>

**(B3) *Misestimating one’s role in causing other’s actions.***<sup>53</sup> States often misperceive the extent to which their own policies are responsible for causing other states’ actions. Whether overestimation or underestimation occurs depends on whether the other state’s action is seen as favorable or harmful to the first state’s interests.

When the action taken by State B is beneficial to State A, State A is likely to *overestimate* the extent to which that action was brought about by its own policies — e.g. its threats and reassurances — and thus underestimate the extent to which that action was caused by other factors such as domestic politics, the domestic economy, third-party states, and State B’s autonomous decisions. As Jervis writes, “When the other behaves in accord with the actor’s desires, he will overestimate the degree to which his policies are responsible for the outcome.” Hence, it is often the case that a state thinks it is responsible for causing another state’s positive actions when in fact the other state is acting for other reasons. For example, during the Opium War, the Chinese perceived every favorable British move as having been caused by Chinese policy, when in reality the British behaved as they did largely for other reasons.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Michael Roskin, “From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: Shifting Generational Paradigms and Foreign Policy”, in ed. G. John Ikenberry, *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Jervis calls this bias, confusingly, “Overestimating One’s Importance” in Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions*, Chapter 9, even though the bias leads states to *underestimate* their own role when others act in hostile ways. Jervis’s explanation that in such cases states are actually overestimating their own importance — albeit as targets — is unconvincing.

<sup>54</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 343, 344.

On the other hand, when State B's action is harmful to State A, State A is likely to *underestimate* its own role in causing that action, and overestimate the role of other factors. Jervis writes, "When the other's behavior is undesired, the actor is likely to see it as derived from internal sources rather than as being a response to his own actions."<sup>55</sup> Often, this means that when State B takes a hostile action towards State A, State A will fail to realize that it has done something to provoke that hostile action — or, at least, that the action was taken out of fear of State A — and instead interpret the action as evidence that State B is inherently hostile toward State A.

This dual bias can give rise to numerous sorts of problems. The propensity to overestimate one's role in bringing about positive actions on the part of others can hinder cooperation because a state will often miss signs that another state is friendly, (mis)interpreting those signs instead as evidence that its own efforts to compel are working. The other half of the bias is perhaps even worse because it can trigger spirals of hostility: When State A fails to see that State B acted in an apparently hostile manner out of fear of State A, it is likely to react aggressively towards State B, who will in turn react belligerently to State A (because State B, believing that its first action was a defensive one, will attribute State A's aggressive action to inherent belligerence), and so on. Even if State A does not react aggressively in the first 'round', the chances for cooperation are diminished because State A will neglect the possibility of positively influencing the other's behavior through reassurances or moderation of its own actions; after all, if State B is inherently hostile, there is no need for State A to critically examine its own actions.

**(B4)** *Belief that the other side understands that you are not a threat.* This bias is closely related to the last one. Actors tend to underestimate the extent to which the other

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

side feels threatened by them. Thus, when a state thinks that it has nothing but peaceful intentions towards another state, it often wrongly assumes that the other state knows this as well. As Jervis writes, “When an actor believes he is not a threat to another, he usually assumes that the other knows he is not hostile.”<sup>56</sup> Even when a state understands that its pacific intentions must be somehow conveyed, it usually underestimates the difficulties that it faces in getting other states to believe this message; in other words, states are likely to believe their efforts to reassure other states to be more effective than they really are.

This bias can play an important role in causing spirals of hostility. When a state thinks that its peaceful intentions are clear, it is hard for that state to believe that others may be acting out of fear of it. The problem, then, is that because a state tends to overestimate the clarity of its peace signals, it often mistakenly attributes inherent hostility to other states when in fact those other states are acting out of fear of it. So, for example, a limited conflict in North America between France and England escalated into the Seven Years’ War partly because each side assumed, wrongly, that the other side knew that its aims were mostly benign.<sup>57</sup>

**(B5) Overestimating others’ centralization.** According to psychological bias theory, statesmen have a tendency to overestimate the degree to which the behavior of other states is “centralized, planned and coordinated.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, state leaders tend to underestimate the extent to which other states’ actions are caused by blunder, accident, coincidence, confusion, and plain stupidity. They also tend to underestimate the inability of other states’ leaders to exert complete control over parts of their own government, i.e.

---

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 354-355.

<sup>57</sup> Patrice Higonnet, “The Origins of the Seven Years’ War”, *Journal of Modern History* 40 (March 1968), 57-90. Discussed in Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 69.

<sup>58</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 319.



the extent to which autonomy and insubordination on the part of other states' organs may play a role in the behavior of those states.

Consequently, policymakers often misperceive other states' behavior as indications of some coordinated plot or grand scheme when in fact that behavior resulted from coincidence. "It is much less common for a decision-maker to see as coincidental a set of events that are planned than for him to see as part of a plan actions that are in fact coincidental." The same goes for confusion and stupidity within other states' governments: "Because chaos and confusion are not intellectually and psychologically satisfying explanations, actors must often seek hidden manipulations... [and] like confusion, stupidity is rarely given its due. Instead, otherwise inexplicable behavior is seen as part of a devious plot, usually a hostile one."<sup>59</sup>

Examples of such misperceptions abound. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, an American U-2 reconnaissance plane got lost and mistakenly flew over Russia; President Kennedy found it extremely difficult to convince Soviet leaders that the aircraft was really lost and not sent to convey a threat. At the beginning of World War I, the German battle cruiser *Goeben* escaped from much stronger British forces, largely through the incompetence of the commanding admiral of Britain's Mediterranean fleet; German leaders, however, were unable to believe that this episode was due to ineptitude and instead saw it as indicating Britain's conciliatory stance toward Germany.<sup>60</sup>

This bias clearly has potential to be problematic, especially since it frequently causes statesmen to perceive hostile intentions on the part of other states when in fact those other states are behaving out of incompetence, lack of central governmental

---

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 321-323.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 322-323.

authority, or coincidence. In cases where an opponent state's actions are seemingly contradictory — for example, where its ambassador negotiates cooperation while its general makes bellicose statements — the state is apt to see this inconsistency as indicating duplicity and insincerity rather than incompetence and confusion.

**(B6)** *Tendency to overestimate the hostility of other states.* A corollary of **B4**, **B5**, and **B6** is, as already indicated, that foreign-policymakers will tend to overestimate the hostile intentions of other states.<sup>61</sup> Because states often misunderstand their own role in causing others' actions; because states underestimate how much they appear threatening to others; because they overestimate the centralization of other governments; states have a tendency to overestimate hostility in their opponents. The problem is compounded by spiral effects: when State A overestimates the hostility of State B, it is likely to act in an overly aggressive way towards the latter, which causes State B to overestimate the hostility of State A, which leads to State B acting more aggressively than otherwise toward State A, and so on.

It is important to note that Jervis is careful to say that states do not always overestimate others' hostility. Sometimes, they may perceive correctly; in some other cases, they may even underestimate the hostile intentions of an opponent (the standard example of the latter is that of British and French perceptions of German intentions throughout the 1930s). Jervis writes, "Both overestimates and underestimates of hostility have led to war in the past." However, Jervis also argues that the chances of overestimating an opponent's hostile intentions are greater than that of underestimating

---

<sup>61</sup> I may be criticized here for confounding psychological bias with their effects. But, as Yaacov Vertzberger observes, Jervis also confounds the two. Though Vertzberger's criticism that this causes confusion is perhaps justified, my presentation here does have the merit of staying true to Jervis's own account. See Vertzberger, *World in Their Minds*, 17.

it: “On balance, it seems that states are more likely to overestimate the hostility of others than to underestimate it.”<sup>62</sup>

(B7) *Availability*. According to cognitive psychology, people often make judgments on the basis of how easily they can call to mind instances of the phenomenon under consideration.<sup>63</sup> For example, if a college student is asked to estimate whether his college has more students from California or Minnesota, he is likely to answer the question by attempting to recall his schoolmates who come from California and Minnesota.<sup>64</sup> Occasionally, this may be a sensible and effective strategy. But at other times, it may lead to errors since the ease with which something can be recalled is a function of other things besides just the frequency with which it appears in the world. For example, psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman showed that when asked whether the letter *R* appears more frequently in English as the first letter of a word or the third letter, most people answer that *R* appears more frequently as the first letter, because it is easier to think of words that begin with *R* than words that have *R* as the third letter; in fact, there are more words that have *R* as the third letter.<sup>65</sup>

In international politics, this bias manifests itself most frequently in the tendency for statesmen to *use excessively their own frame of reference* — and thus, neglect others’ perspectives — when analyzing the behavior and intentions of other states. As Jervis writes, “What is highly available to a decision maker is his own plans and intentions. He will see the behavior of others in light of what he is thinking of doing himself and will

---

<sup>62</sup> Robert Jervis, “War and Misperception”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18:4 (Spring, 1988), 675, 688.

<sup>63</sup> See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “On the Psychology of Prediction”, *Psychological Review* 80 (1973) for the pioneering cognitive-psychology paper identifying this phenomenon.

<sup>64</sup> Matlin, *Cognition*, 422.

<sup>65</sup> Kahneman and Tversky, “On the Psychology of Prediction”. Discussed in Sternberg, *Cognitive Psychology*, 412.

use his own procedures and approaches to interpret what they are doing.”<sup>66</sup> Before World War II, for example, British military leaders estimated the size of the German air force by assuming that “the best criteria for judging Germany’s rate of expansion were those which governed the rate at which the RAF [Royal Air Force] could itself form efficient units.”<sup>67</sup>

### *Motivated Biases*

Motivated biases, sometimes called ‘affect-driven’ biases, arise from

the emotions generated by conflicts that personal needs and severe situational dilemmas pose. These biases serve important psychological functions, primarily minimizing the discomfort that would be created by a full appreciation of the negative attributes of objects the person values, such as his or her country or favored policy.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, statesmen often have a psychological need to perceive the world in certain ways, which influences their interpretation of new information. It is psychologically painful, for example, for a decisionmaker to realize that two of the policies that he values counteract each other; this may cause him to neglect or discount information that indicates the contradictory nature of those policies. Similarly, once a decision maker has committed himself to a certain course of action, it may be costly — both in terms of his psychological well-being and the resources that must be expended to change course — to realize that that course of action is mistaken; this may influence him to ignore or misinterpret information that demonstrates his error.

---

<sup>66</sup> Jervis, “Perceiving and Coping with Threat”, 23.

<sup>67</sup> F.H. Hinsley, E.E. Thomas, C.F. Ransom, and R.C. Knight, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, 4 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1:299. Discussed in Jervis, “Perceiving and Coping with Threat”, op. cit.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Jervis, “Introduction”, in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 4.

Clearly, this sort of bias can cause foreign-policymakers to misperceive and make poor decisions. Three biases, in particular, are important:

**(B8) *Rationalizations ex post facto.*** As already mentioned, when leaders make a certain decision or commit themselves to a particular course of action, it is psychologically uncomfortable to realize that their decision was wrong. Hence, even after they have made their decision, decision makers will seek information that justifies their choice while unconsciously ignoring or discounting information that might indicate the advantages of the road not taken. As Jervis writes, “The policy comes first, often for reasons that are politically illegitimate or psychologically painful to recognize, and the justification follows, reversing the normal order in which beliefs about other states precede and lead to the foreign policy.”<sup>69</sup>

**(B9) *Avoid seeing value trade-offs.*** In formulating policies, state leaders are likely to have multiple values that they wish to maximize: national security, economic prosperity, social stability, international reputation, strength of alliances, and so on. Psychologically, it is easier for leaders to believe that their preferred policy contributes to satisfying all their cherished values rather than involving major trade-offs between those values. Thus, policymakers tend to avoid — through unconscious ignoring or misinterpretation of information — the realization that their chosen policy requires value trade-offs. They may initially consider only one or two values in determining which policy to adopt, and then, as they become aware that other important values are affected by that policy, use flimsy arguments to convince themselves that those other values are satisfied as well. At other times, they may pursue a set of values simultaneously and simply fail to recognize that those goals may be inconsistent with one another. Thus, near

---

<sup>69</sup> Jervis, “Perceiving and Coping with Threat”, 25.

the end of World War II, American policymakers found favorable both the idea of having Soviet-friendly regimes in Eastern Europe and that of having free elections in the region, failing to realize that those two policies were unlikely to be successfully pursued in conjunction.<sup>70</sup>

**(B10) Overestimating the probability of success.** As a corollary of **B8**, statesmen often overestimate the chance that their chosen policy will succeed. After deciding on a course of action, policymakers often seek out a great deal of information that would justify their decision while unconsciously slighting, neglecting, or distorting information that would impugn it. This causes them to become overconfident regarding that policy's prospects. As Jervis writes, "When statesmen feel that alternatives are bleak, they are likely to exaggerate the chances that the chosen policy will success. Furthermore, they will not gather the information or perform the analyses that could indicate that this policy is likely to fail."<sup>71</sup>

### **Prescriptions**

As we have seen, psychological bias theory offers a host of explanations for why decision makers often go wrong when they formulate policy. But from the perspective of practical utility, it is more important for the theory to offer recommendations on how to counteract the psychological barriers that lead to faulty decisionmaking. As Stephen Walt argues, "Policy makers are often less interested in explaining a general tendency than in figuring out how to overcome it."<sup>72</sup> Stephen Van Evera likewise observes, "A good theory has *prescriptive richness*. It yields useful policy recommendations."<sup>73</sup> Thus, since

---

<sup>70</sup> George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 34.

<sup>71</sup> Jervis, "Rational Deterrence", 197.

<sup>72</sup> Walt, "Theory and Policy in IR", 37.

<sup>73</sup> Van Evera, *Guide to Methods*, 21.

our primary aim in this essay is to ask how useful psychological bias theory is to policymakers, we must examine the prescriptions that the theory offers.

Jervis readily admits that psychological biases are entrenched in human thinking and hence difficult to remove. Nevertheless, he clearly thinks that there are steps that policymakers can take to offset those biases. “There are,” Jervis writes, “ways to increase the likelihood that the decision-maker will apply the full measure of his intelligence to the tasks before him.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, psychological bias theory is intended to be prescriptively rich, in the sense of offering solutions for decisionmakers who wish to improve their decisionmaking abilities.

For prescriptions to be useful, however, they must be at least reasonably specific, and not just vague statements of principle. Jervis rightly asks of his own theory, “Can anything then be said to scholars and decision-makers other than ‘Avoid being either too open or too closed, but be especially aware of the latter danger?’”<sup>75</sup> What are, then, the specific solutions that psychological bias theory offers to policymakers?

**(P1) *Awareness of common misperceptions.*** The most obvious prescription is “for decision-makers to take account of the ways in which the processes of perception lead to common errors.” In other words, by becoming familiar with psychological bias theory and all the barriers to successful decisionmaking that the theory identifies, statesmen can alter their decisionmaking practices and formulate better policies. For example, by being aware that the interpretation of information is often influenced by preexisting beliefs, policymakers may be motivated to search for discrepant information and to be more careful about declaring the particular theory they hold to be confirmed. Awareness that

---

<sup>74</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 409.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception”, *World Politics* 20:3 (Apr. 1968), 462.

inappropriate historical analogies are often used because they are the most recent or most dramatic may induce decisionmakers to call into question the applicability of particular historical cases to the present situation.<sup>76</sup>

Besides awareness of *processes* that lead to misperceptions, Jervis also advocates consciousness of common misperceptions themselves. He writes, “Decision-makers...should also note the distortions that commonly result — e.g. the belief that the other side is highly centralized and carefully plans its moves, the belief that favorable actions by the other are a response to the actor’s behavior but that unfriendly acts spring from unprovoked hostility.”<sup>77</sup> If decisionmakers are aware that such perceptions are often *misperceptions*, they are likely to be more cautious about affirming them in any particular case.

Awareness of misperceptions and processes that lead to misperceptions is probably the most important prescription offered by psychological bias theory. Besides Jervis, many theorists who study psychological bias emphasize the importance of such awareness. According to Yaacov Vertzberger, “The most elementary and obvious measure [to improve decision making] is learning to be aware of and recognize the main pitfalls of information processing. To be aware is to be warned.”<sup>78</sup> Business professors John Hammond, Ralph Keeney, and Howard Raiffa similarly write, “The best protection against all psychological traps...is awareness. Forewarned is forearmed.”<sup>79</sup> Decision scientists Edward Russo and Paul Schoemaker emphasize, “By understanding how good

---

<sup>76</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 423.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 424.

<sup>78</sup> Vertzberger, *World in their Minds*, 357.

<sup>79</sup> John Hammond, Ralph Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, “The Hidden Traps in Decision Making”, in *Harvard Business Review on Decision Making* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001), 167.



thinking succeeds and how errors are made, we can better manage both the vast quantity of information that...besieges us.”<sup>80</sup>

(Of course, this is hardly surprising: almost any theory that offers policy implications will count, implicitly or explicitly, awareness of its content as a prime prescription; and most likely, the other prescriptions will presuppose such awareness.)

(P2) *Devils’ advocates*. One of the major problems that derive from psychological biases is that decision makers are frequently overconfident in their views. All too often, statesmen are so convinced of the truth of their beliefs that they do not stop to examine other theories which later prove to be superior. An example of this overconfidence is American leaders’ confidence prior to Pearl Harbor that there would not be a surprise Japanese attack – a confidence that had much to do with psychological biases. When informed of the Japanese assault, the US secretary of the navy responded, “My God, this can’t be true. This [message] must mean the Philippines” — not, as Jervis points out, that the report was not true, but that it *could not* be true.<sup>81</sup> (In fact, overconfidence in one’s beliefs is so pervasive that it is frequently listed as a bias in its own right by cognitive psychologists and other decisionmaking theorists.<sup>82</sup>) In other words, the wages of psychological bias is that people often suffer from “premature cognitive closure”<sup>83</sup> — they become certain of the truth of one particular theory long before they have sufficient reason to do so.

---

<sup>80</sup> J. Edward Russo and Paul Schoemaker, *Decision Traps: Ten Barriers to Decision-Making and How to Overcome Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 226.

<sup>81</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 145.

<sup>82</sup> see Sternberg, *Cognitive Psychology*, 415; Baruch Fischhoff, “Debiasing”, in eds. Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 431-440; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “On the Reality of Cognitive Illusions”, *Psychological Review* 103:3 (1996), 587-589; Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa, “Hidden Traps in Decision Making”, 162-163; Max Bazerman, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 32-34.

<sup>83</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 201.

Ideally, decision makers should formulate and consider alternative theories that may be true. However, it is usually difficult for an individual to do this by himself, for two reasons. First, it is psychologically difficult: as already shown, the upshot of the various psychological biases is that individuals often find it difficult to examine alternative images. Second, it may be politically difficult: leaders are usually chosen and valued for an ability to be decisive and bold rather than to carefully analyze issues from multiple angles.

One important solution is for leaders to include in their advisory staff analysts who are likely, for various reasons, to hold competing perspectives. By doing so, policymakers increase their capacity to consider multiple theories and hence their ability to avoid premature cognitive closure. As Jervis writes, “To make it more likely that [policymakers] will consider alternative explanations of specific bits of data and think more carefully about beliefs and images that underlie their policies, they should employ devil’s — or rather devils’ — advocates.”<sup>84</sup>

The employment of devils’ advocates is related to solution **P3**, discussed below, which is to make explicit one’s assumptions and reasoning. By being exposed to competing theories and explanations, a policymaker will compel himself to make a conscious decision about which theory to hold, rather than unconsciously assuming that his particular theory is necessarily correct. Also, implicit assumptions are often brought out during debates between individuals who hold competing theories, because “interaction with someone who holds a different position usually is the best, if not the only, way...[for a policymaker] to see where his arguments are most vulnerable.”<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

**(P3) Making theories and beliefs explicit.** A third prescription that psychological bias theory gives is for decisionmakers to make their beliefs and theories more explicit. There is a need to do this because people often make decisions without being conscious of what theories underlie those decisions, and without knowing what assumptions in turn underlie those theories; such unconsciousness increases the risk that a policymaker will make decisions based on inadequate theories or hidden, erroneous assumptions. As Jervis writes, “People often not only have a limited understanding of the workings of others’ arguments, they also do not know the structure of their own belief systems — what values are most important, how some beliefs are derived from others, and what evidence would contradict their views.”<sup>86</sup>

Making explicit the theory or belief on the basis of which one is acting yields several related benefits for decisionmaking. First, as already hinted at, it forces one to confront the theory and the assumptions on which one is acting, thus helping to prevent incorrect theories and assumptions from being translated into decisions. Second, it allows one to become cognizant of the *predictions* that are made by one’s theory, thus enhancing one’s ability to modify or discard flawed theories (i.e. when its predictions do not obtain). Decisionmakers should, in other words, “consider what evidence would tend to confirm, or, more importantly, disconfirm, their views.”<sup>87</sup> Third, making explicit one’s reasoning increases one’s adaptivity to changing circumstances because it forces one to distinguish between subgoals (i.e. means) and primary goals (i.e. ends), thus enhancing one’s ability to abandon certain subgoals when those subgoals are no longer appropriate for the

---

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

attainment of one's primary goals. (See prescription **P4** below for an explanation of why subgoals can unconsciously and problematically become ends in themselves.)

Besides Jervis, decision theorists Irving Janis and Leon Mann have made this prescription one of the cornerstones of their program to train individuals to make better decisions. They advocate an "awareness of rationalizations" procedure that uses various methods, such as role-playing and Socratic questioning, to compel individuals to confront the deficient reasoning that often underlies their decisions.<sup>88</sup>

**(P4)** *Not allowing one's identity to become attached to specific beliefs.* As discussed earlier, decisionmakers' perceptions are often skewed when they have psychological needs to see the world in certain ways. One major way in which this sort of need may arise is when people and organizations unwittingly allow specific theories, beliefs, and subgoals to become part of their identities. This can cause significant problems for decisionmakers: when one's identity is tied to a specific theory, it becomes hard to see when those theories are incorrect or no longer valid. Similarly, when one's identity is bound up with specific subgoals, it is difficult to appreciate when those subgoals are no longer the most appropriate means of reaching one's primary aims. For example, in the years leading up to World War II, the US Air Force's identity became tied to the virtues of strategic bombardment, leading to an overemphasis on bomber technology and an unfortunate neglect of fighter development; this neglect proved highly problematic in the first months of the US's entry into the war — bombers flying without fighter escorts proved too vulnerable to conduct effective bombing missions — but was still not corrected until 18 months into the American war effort.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, 340-365.

<sup>89</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 421-422.

Therefore, leaders should take care that their and their organizations' identities do not become bound to specific beliefs, and that means do not become ends in themselves which detract from the principal mission at hand. For foreign-policymakers, it is particularly important not to allow images of other states to become bound up with their identities.

Psychological bias theory, as we have seen, offers a variety of prescriptions. But how useful are those prescriptions to policymakers? Can they actually help statesmen to make better decisions in foreign policy? To examine this question, I propose the strategy of looking at two historical cases that are usually seen as having involved significant misperceptions. The first case is that of the US decision to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel during the Korean war, while the second concerns the British policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany. In each case, I shall ask whether psychological bias theory could have made a positive difference in the outcome. The chief advantage of the strategy pursued here is that it offers a concrete demonstration of the extent to which the theory is useful; the assumption is that policymakers are more likely to be convinced of a theory's practical utility if they see how it could be (or could have been) applied to actual cases, as opposed to hearing only abstract statements of the theory's usefulness.

## **Case 1: US decision to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, 1950**

### **Background<sup>90</sup>**

---

<sup>90</sup> For additional background, see Burton Kaufman, *The Korean Conflict* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999); Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (London: MacMillan, 1964); William Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy Towards China and Korea 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Walter Lafeber, *The American Age* (New York: Norton, 1989); and Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

In late September 1950, US President Truman and his staff faced a difficult decision. Three months previously, in late June, the communist regime in North Korea had invaded South Korea, a US ally. Truman had sent US forces to repel the North Korean attack. Though initially suffering severe setbacks, the combined South Korean and US troops were eventually able to stem the North Korean advance. By late September, the North Korean forces had been driven back over the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the line that marked the border between North and South Korea.

At this point, the original objective of the US mission — to repel the North Korean invasion and restore the status quo — had been achieved. American leaders now had two options: one, to stop the American forces at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, or two, to continue to push north past the parallel, defeat the remnants of the North Korean army, and reunify Korea.<sup>91</sup> A key factor in this decision was the possibility of Chinese and Soviet intervention: by pushing north with the intention of conquering North Korea, there was a real chance of provoking China or the Soviet Union into military involvement.

The US leadership eventually decided to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel into North Korea. South Korean troops crossed the parallel on October 1, followed shortly by US troops on October 7. The US and South Korean forces advanced into North Korea with a rapidity that surprised even American military leaders. The North Korean army suffered numerous defeats and retreated in disarray. Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, fell on October 19. On October 24, General Douglas MacArthur, the US commander, ordered his forces to advance to the Yalu River, which marked the boundary between China and North Korea.

---

<sup>91</sup> The country had been divided into USSR- and US-controlled halves after World War II, and agreed all-Korea elections were never held because of deteriorating relations between the two superpowers. Instead, two separate client states were established.

But the American success was short-lived. On October 26, US forces in North Korea began encountering — to their surprise — resistance from Chinese troops. After about two weeks of fighting, the Chinese forces mysteriously broke off contact and withdrew. MacArthur continued to march on north to the Yalu, announcing an ‘end-the-war’ offensive on November 24. Two days later, however, the Chinese forces attacked in massive numbers, wreaking havoc on the over-extended and ill-prepared US/South Korean troops. Unable to halt the Chinese attack, the US forces were forced into a hasty and chaotic retreat, suffering “one of the worst defeats an American army has ever suffered”.<sup>92</sup> By the time the Chinese advance was finally stalled, US forces had been pushed back over the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel — and were once again trying to prevent the conquest of South Korea.

The majority of historians view the US decision to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel as disastrous. Most scholars agree that the Chinese entry into the war could have been averted if the US had refrained from crossing the parallel.<sup>93</sup> In the ensuing conflict, which lasted for two and a half years, little was gained. Most of the war consisted of a bloody stalemate around the vicinity of the parallel. By the time the war ended, the border between North and South Korea was little changed from the status quo antebellum. The cost, however, was considerable: in addition to the vast number of lives lost<sup>94</sup>, the war

---

<sup>92</sup> Roy Appleman, *Disaster in Korea: The Chinese Confront MacArthur* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1989), 305-18, 332-53.

<sup>93</sup> See Rosemary Foot, “Making Known the Unknown War: Policy Analysis of the Korean Conflict in the Last Decade”, *Diplomatic History*, 15:3 (Summer 1991), 418-419. Foot wrote in this review essay that there was “virtual unanimity among scholars” on this point. For an alternative view, see Chen Jian, “China’s Road to the Korean War”, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6-7. Chen argues that the US could not have prevented the Chinese entry even if the US had not crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. However, Chen does acknowledge that he is arguing against the prevailing majority view.

<sup>94</sup> See Allan Millett, “Casualties”, in ed. Spencer Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000); and Allan Millett, “Korean War”, in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2002). The official US military estimate is 33,667 dead and over 103,000

greatly exacerbated the incipient hostility between the two great powers, and also prevented the US from taking early strategic advantage of the growing rift between China and the Soviet Union.<sup>95</sup>

The decision was also somewhat puzzling. First, Korea was acknowledged by US leaders to be of low strategic value. As the Cold War was starting to take shape, American energies were largely concentrated on Europe. The US did not want to overextend its finite military resources into other areas, such as Asia, lest this compromised the ability of the US to counter the Soviet threat in Europe. Even within Asia, Korea was considered to be an area of marginal strategic interest.<sup>96</sup> Second, there were also numerous indications, both before and after the American intervention in June 1950, of US reluctance to enter into military conflict with the Chinese Communist regime, especially a full-scale war like the one that eventually erupted.<sup>97</sup> Third, and perhaps most significantly, the Chinese regime had sent several messages to the US in early October 1950 warning that Chinese military intervention would ensue if American forces crossed the parallel.

---

wounded; estimates of Chinese deaths range from 150,000 to 500,000; while over 4 millions Koreans are estimated to have been killed, injured, or rendered missing.

<sup>95</sup> Walter Lafeber, "Crossing the 38<sup>th</sup>: the Cold War in Microcosm", in eds. Lynn H. Miller and Ronald W. Pruessen, *Reflections on the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1974); Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, 253.

<sup>96</sup> In an infamous speech given in January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson spoke of an American "defensive perimeter" in East Asia, which noticeably excluded Korea. In June 1949, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that "Korea is of little strategic value to the United States and that any commitment to United States use of military force in Korea would be ill-advised and impracticable in view of...our heavy international obligations as compared with our current military strength." See "Crisis in Asia — An Examination of U.S. Policy", remarks by Secretary of State Dean Acheson, National Press Club, Washington, 12 January 1950, in *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. XXII, no. 551 (23 January 1950), 111-118; and JCS 1776/4, 23 June 1949, quoted in James Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: the First Year* (Washington: United States Army Office of the Chief of Military History, 1972), 50.

<sup>97</sup> David McClellan, for example, notes the "prudent policy which the [Truman] administration had...adopted with regard to Red China" in the period before the Korean War. See David McClellan, "Dean Acheson and the Korean War", *Political Science Quarterly* 83:1 (March 1968), 16.



The clearest and most important of these messages was sent through K.M. Panikkar, India's ambassador to China, on 3 October 1950. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, stated unequivocally to Panikkar that "American intrusion into North Korea would encounter Chinese resistance."<sup>98</sup> This message was received by Washington through the American embassy in New Delhi, as well as the embassies in Moscow, Stockholm, and London. (The US and China, having no diplomatic ties at this time, had no direct means of communication.) A little more than a week earlier, Panikkar had been told something similar by the chief of staff of the Chinese army, who declared that the Chinese would not "sit back with folded hands and let the Americans come up to the border."<sup>99</sup> Moreover, in an official speech in September 1950, Zhou had voiced a fairly unambiguous warning to the US not to cross the parallel.<sup>100</sup>

Why, then, despite the low strategic value accorded to Korea; the apparent US reluctance to start a war with China; and the Chinese warnings that if US forces crossed the line, war would ensure, did US leaders take the decision to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in October 1950, triggering a war that "neither side wanted and both tried to avoid"?<sup>101</sup>

### **Explanation**

Psychological bias theory seems to be able to provide at least a partial explanation for the US decision. The historical consensus is that the US decision was primarily

---

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Priscilla Roberts, "Sardar K.M. Panikkar", in ed. Spencer Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2000).

<sup>99</sup> Nieh Jung-chen, quoted in Foot, *Wrong War*, 79.

<sup>100</sup> In this speech before the Central People's Government Council, Zhou stated, "The Chinese people enthusiastically love peace, but in order to defend peace, they never have been and never will be afraid to oppose aggressive war. The Chinese people absolutely will not tolerate foreign aggression, nor will they supinely tolerate seeing their neighbors being savagely invade by the imperialists." Quoted in Alan Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 108.

<sup>101</sup> Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 184.

caused by misperceptions in three areas.<sup>102</sup> First, Truman and his staff misperceived the capabilities of China, consistently underestimating the extent to which China could successfully fight a major land war against the US. Second, American leaders misperceived the Chinese image of the US. They believed that China knew that the US had no aggressive intentions in Asia; in reality, however, China viewed the US largely as a belligerent, expansionist power. Third, the US misperceived Chinese intentions: it wrongly thought that Chinese would not intervene if the US sent its troops over the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. (Of course, these three areas are interrelated: misperceptions of capabilities and the Chinese image of the US had much to do with why Chinese intentions were misperceived.)

The biases identified by psychological bias theory appear capable of explaining much of the US misperception. One of the main reasons that the US misestimated Chinese intentions is that it failed to realize that by advancing up into North Korea and toward the Yalu river, it would threaten China's sense of national security. The puzzle, as David McClellan aptly puts it, is that "the United States had not hesitated to resist aggression eight thousand miles from its shores; why should China not be expected to react to MacArthur's hostile campaign in similar fashion?"<sup>103</sup>

This failure can partly be explained by psychological bias **B4**, i.e. the tendency to *underestimate the extent to which the other side feels threatened by you*. The US by and large saw itself as a pacific nation that had been compelled to fight in Korea for defensive purposes. It also regarded itself as having no aggressive intentions in Asia and, in

---

<sup>102</sup> This consensus is noted, e.g., by Thomas Christensen, who writes of these "standard interpretations of the Chinese failure to deter the United States in October". See Thomas Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams", *International Security* 17:1 (Summer 1992), 129.

<sup>103</sup> McClellan, "Dean Acheson", 36.

particular, no desire to attack the Chinese mainland. The problem was that US leaders overestimated the extent to which these peaceful intentions would be clear to their Chinese opponents. This explains, for example, why US attempts to reassure China in the summer and fall of 1950 placed much more emphasis on declaring that they would not attack China's power stations on the Yalu river instead of promising that there would be no invasion of Chinese territory: Truman and his advisors did not realize that China actually feared a direct attack — largely because they believed that they had already made it obvious that there would be no such attack.<sup>104</sup> Because of **B4**, states usually overestimate the efficacy of their reassurance efforts. This helps to explain why Truman and his staff, underestimating the depth of Chinese suspicion, thought that their public statements would suffice to remove any doubt about the peacefulness of US intentions<sup>105</sup>, and that the Chinese threats of intervention must therefore be bluffs; there was no way, they thought, that China could still feel threatened after the numerous declarations of goodwill.<sup>106</sup>

Psychological bias **B7**, the tendency to *focus excessively on one's own frame of reference*, also helps explain why the US did not realize that its advance into North Korea threatened China's security. US analysis of the conflict concentrated entirely on the US view of the conflict, which was that of an operation to defend her ally, South Korea, against naked aggression by the North. The US was unable to grasp the extent to which China felt threatened because it failed to give sufficient consideration to the possibility

---

<sup>104</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 46.

<sup>105</sup> e.g. Acheson's public statement on 30 August 1950 that the US did not have any aggressive intent towards China or anywhere else, and Truman's public statement on 1 September 1950 that expressed his administration's hope that "the people of China will not be misled or forced into fighting against the United Nations and against the American people who have always been and still are their friends." See Walter H. Waggoner, "Acheson Says U.S. is Trying to Keep Peiping Out of War", *New York Times*, 30 August 1950; and Truman, *Memoirs*, 359.

<sup>106</sup> McClellan, "Dean Acheson", 20.

that the other side was operating from a completely different frame of reference, i.e. one in which the US was a hostile power which would be able to threaten China if it gained a foothold in continental Asia. As Alexander George and Richard Smoke write, “U.S. leaders miscalculated because they failed to understand *the frame of reference from which the Chinese Communist leaders assessed the significance of what the United States was doing in Korea.*” As a result, “U.S. leaders grossly underestimated the strength of Peking’s motivation to intervene.”<sup>107</sup>

*Motivated biases* also contribute to the explanation. Once the US had decided on its policy of sending forces to reunify the two Koreas, it became much less sensitive to information that would impugn the wisdom of that policy. As George and Smoke argue, “Washington’s reluctance to accept information that challenged the premises and wisdom of its policy strongly encouraged its tendencies to misread the frame of reference with which Peking perceived events in Korea, to misinterpret available intelligence, and to underestimate Peking’s motivation and willingness to take risks.”<sup>108</sup>

In short, psychological bias theory seems to be able to (at least partially) explain the US decision to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. However, as noted earlier in this essay, from a practical perspective, a theory’s explanations are less important than its *prescriptions*; it is more useful for a policymaker to know what he *should* do than to know why he acts as he does.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, in order to really use the Korean War case to analyze the utility of psychological bias theory, we need to ask ourselves what difference the theory’s prescriptions would have made in the case. In other words, if US leaders in 1950 had been adherents of psychological bias theory, would they have made a better decision?

---

<sup>107</sup> George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 213.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-192.

<sup>109</sup> Zelikow, *Foreign Policy Engineering*, 151-155.

## Prescription

At first glance, it seems that the prescriptions of psychological bias theory could have done much to prevent — or at least lower the likelihood of — the ruinous US decision to cross the parallel.

If US leaders had *made explicit the beliefs and reasoning that underlay their decision* — i.e. adopted prescription **P3** — they might have been able to correct the erroneous perceptions that contributed to their decision. For example, one line of reasoning used by the American leadership was that if China (or the Soviet Union) wanted to intervene in the conflict, it would have done so in July and August 1950, when US/South Korean forces were cornered in a small area around the southeastern port of Pusan and North Korean victory appeared imminent; since Chinese intervention had not taken place by September, it was probably not going to happen at all. As David Rees writes, “It was thought that as the Chinese had not intervened in August when merely a couple of extra divisions could have pushed the [US] Eight Army into the sea, why should they attempt military intervention in October.”<sup>110</sup> The implicit assumption was that China’s prime objective in any intervention would be the protection of North Korea’s territorial integrity. If US leaders had made this assumption explicit, they may have questioned its legitimacy and perhaps realized — or at least considered the possibility — that China was also worried about her own national security, and hence that the absence of intervention in August 1950 did not entail the low probability of such intervention in October.

Prescription **P3** could also have helped in another way. Truman’s orders up to mid-September 1950 had been based around the policy that if Soviet or Chinese troops

---

<sup>110</sup> Rees, *Limited War*, 111.

entered North Korea, the US would refrain from crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>111</sup> The problem was that Truman and his staff incorrectly assumed that Soviet and Chinese leaders were aware of the American policy.<sup>112</sup> This meant that when no Chinese and Soviet troops entered Korea after the Inchon landing of September 15<sup>113</sup>, the Truman administration inferred, erroneously, that the Communist powers did not intend to become directly involved in the conflict. If Truman and his advisors had made their reasoning more explicit, they may have questioned their assumption and realized that their policy was not obvious to China and the Soviet Union, and so that the Communist powers' lack of intervention immediately after the Inchon landing did not mean that they were not going to intervene at all.

*Awareness of common misperceptions* — prescription **P1** — also appears as it might have helped. One common misperception posited by psychological bias theory is the (mistaken) belief that the other side understands that you are not a threat. As discussed earlier, the US was quite certain that it had no intention of attacking Chinese territory and mistakenly believed that China knew this as well. If US leaders had been aware of this common misperception, they may have been more sensitive to the fact that the Chinese side did not share the US's benign self-image. In turn, if US leaders had rectified this misperception, they may have taken the Chinese threats more seriously,

---

<sup>111</sup> For example, NSC-81, the National Security Council report that Truman authorized on September 11 and sent to MacArthur on September 15 clearly stated: "The United Nations Commander should undertake no ground operations north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in the event of the occupation of North Korea by Soviet or Chinese Communist forces." See "NSC-81: US Courses of Action with Respect to Korea" in ed. Spencer Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 888-892.

<sup>112</sup> Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, 228-229.

<sup>113</sup> The amphibious US assault on Inchon, a port situated on the west coast of Korea, marked the turning point of the war. Previous to that, US/South Korean forces were trapped in an 80-mile perimeter around the southeastern port of Pusan. After the successful landing at Inchon, US forces were able to attack the North Korean army on two fronts and turn the tide of the conflict.

instead of as mere bluffs, and also done more to reassure the Chinese side of its peaceful intentions.

*Awareness of processes that commonly lead to misperception* (prescription **P1**) could have proved helpful to US policymakers. One important process that, according to psychological bias theory, frequently causes misperception is the tendency to neglect the other side's frame of reference. In this case, US policymakers failed to consider that the Chinese frame of reference may not have classified the US as a peaceful, non-aggressive power. If US leaders had been aware of the tendency to neglect the other's frame of reference, they may have made efforts to counter it. For example, they could have dedicated analytical energies to investigating factors that were relevant from the other side's perspective — much as Marshall Schulman, assistant to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, did during the SALT II negotiations, when he maintained a chart showing all the events and factors that were likely to be of relevance to the Soviet frame of reference.<sup>114</sup> They might also have employed what Alexander George and Richard Smoke call the “method of analytic predictions”, which is to examine actions that the other side might take and which appear improbable *prima facie*, and earnestly attempt to construct hypothetical scenarios or circumstances under which those seemingly unlikely actions would be taken; in this way, policymakers might discover that certain actions are much less implausible than previously thought.<sup>115</sup>

The use of *devils' advocates* (prescription **P2**) also might have helped. George and Smoke report that the record of the Korean crisis shows no indication that any US

---

<sup>114</sup> See Strobe Talbott, *Endgame: The Inside Story of SALT II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 80, 120, 146. Discussed in Robert Jervis, “The Drunkard's Search”, in eds. Shanto Iyengar and William McGuire, *Explorations in Political Psychology*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 346.

<sup>115</sup> See George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 480-481. George and Smoke also call it the “method of conditional prediction”.

official was given the task of vigorously playing devils' advocate in order to test the assumptions and theories on the basis of which the decision to cross the parallel was made.<sup>116</sup> (George Kennan, who had recently left his position as director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, did voice his opposition to the decision, but his opinion was neither heeded nor incorporated into any systematic effort to test assumptions.) If Truman had consciously instituted a system of devils' advocacy, those erroneous assumptions and theories may have been challenged and found lacking.

### **Difficulties**

Despite the apparent usefulness of psychological bias theory's prescriptions, however, there are also elements of the Korean War case that point to significant difficulties in the straightforward application of these prescriptions.

The main thrust of our account so far is that US leaders significantly misperceived Chinese intentions during the Korean War; that those misperceptions had much to do with psychological biases; and that the prescriptions of psychological bias theory could, through reducing psychological bias, have helped US leaders to more accurately perceive Chinese intentions.

But it must also be emphasized that there was a great deal of ambiguity about the situation, and in particular, about Chinese intentions. Historical accounts have usually focused on criticizing Truman and his advisors for failing to grasp the numerous signs of Chinese intentions, and underplayed the extent to which the Chinese gave off mixed signals. But, as Thomas Christensen writes, "even the most critical scholars understand the difficulties the Truman administration faced in reading Chinese signals of resolve in

---

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.



early October.”<sup>117</sup> In other words, the signs that might have indicated Chinese intentions were more ambiguous than historical accounts usually emphasize. It is illuminating to note that even Panikkar, who was the Indian ambassador to China, reckoned on 20 September 1950 — mere weeks before Chinese troops started entering North Korea — that direct Chinese participation was unlikely.<sup>118</sup>

It is at least arguable, then, that the signals given off by China could have been interpreted in a number of ways and were consistent with several competing theories of Chinese intention. In particular, there was the possibility that China was attempting to engage in deception, i.e. that the Chinese threat were bluffs intended to convince the US of her resolve. States, after all, often have an incentive to represent their willingness to fight as greater than it actually is, i.e. for compellence or deterrence purposes. Therefore, even though the theory adopted by the US — i.e. that China had no intention of intervening — was ultimately shown to be wrong, it can be argued that this theory was consistent with the limited amount of information available to the US at the time.

The problem of ambiguous signals is compounded by that of changing intentions. During a crisis, intentions can change rapidly. During the Korean crisis, the evidence shows that the Chinese leadership was uncertain about intervening and changed its mind numerous times (largely in response to changing Soviet promises of support). There was, in fact, intense debate within the Chinese leadership on whether to intervene even *after* Zhou Enlai’s warning to K.M. Panikkar on 3 October 1950.<sup>119</sup> Chairman Mao eventually made the decision to intervene — but not without much wavering and hesitation. (This vacillation afflicted both sides: Michael Hunt comments that “had Mao

---

<sup>117</sup> Christensen, “Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace”, 132

<sup>118</sup> Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, 229

<sup>119</sup> Foot, “Making Known the Unknown War”, 417.

and Truman been clairvoyant...both would have been shocked by the muddle their opposite number was in.”<sup>120</sup>) Because Chinese intentions changed so rapidly, it would likely have been difficult for US leaders to correctly perceive those intentions even if psychological biases had been removed.

A third problem is that the Chinese side greatly *overestimated* its own capabilities. Chinese military capabilities were not as weak as the US perceived, but were also *not as strong* as the Chinese themselves believed. The Chinese forces in Korea not only lacked air power, but also had serious shortages of armor, artillery, transport, communications, firearms, food supplies, and logistics. Mao thought that the supposedly high morale of the Chinese army would more than compensate for their lack of equipment. The Chinese troops, however, soon found that hard resources mattered more than their leaders had expected.<sup>121</sup> One could say, therefore, that China suffered misperceptions *of itself*. This means that even if the US had no misperceptions whatsoever about Chinese capabilities, and then rationally formed a picture of Chinese intentions based on those capabilities, it may *still* have made a sub-optimal decision simply because of mistaken Chinese self-perceptions.

These considerations show that there is no guarantee that prescriptions aimed at correcting psychological processes that lead to misperceptions will actually lead to better decisions being made. Also, because intentions are so difficult to ascertain, awareness of common misperceptions is not as useful as we might think: even if one knows that certain misperceptions are common, one cannot really judge whether that misperception is present in a particular case unless one has a reasonably good idea of the intentions of

---

<sup>120</sup> Michael Hunt, “Beijing and the Korean Crisis, June 1950-July 1951”, *Political Science Quarterly* 107:3 (August 1992), 475.

<sup>121</sup> Sandler, *Korean War*, 115.

one's opponent. I shall say more about these difficulties later on. Before doing that, however, I turn to examine our second case: the British policy of appeasement towards Germany in the 1930s.

## **Case 2: British policy of appeasement towards Germany, 1933-1939**<sup>122</sup>

### **Background**

Historians generally agree that British policy towards Germany in the 1930s was founded on serious misperceptions about German intention.<sup>123</sup> Early commentators were nearly unanimous in excoriating British leaders of the 1930s — especially Neville Chamberlain, prime minister from 1937 to 1940 — for foolishly pursuing a policy of appeasement and conciliation toward Nazi Germany when they should have taken a tough stance towards the German regime. The usual charge was that British leaders, who were desperate to avoid war, had tragically misperceived German intentions, erroneously believing that Hitler had only limited aims in Europe and that once those aims were satisfied, Germany would be content and not cause any more trouble. In particular, British statesmen thought that Hitler only wanted to unite all German-speaking people in a single state and to revise the more unjust terms of the Versailles peace settlement. In reality, as we now know, Nazi Germany had wide-ranging, expansionist aims that included the conquest of Eastern Europe and the extermination of the Jewish people.

---

<sup>122</sup> For simplicity's sake, I focus mostly on Britain as the perceiving subject and only mention France in passing. Though French perceptions were, of course, significant in the matter, it is probably fair to say that the French position in this period largely followed the lead of Britain. As R.J. Overy writes, "It was British strategy that tended to prevail." See R.J. Overy, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1998), 17

<sup>123</sup> For the historiography of appeasement, see Robert Beck, "Munich's Lessons Reconsidered", *International Security* 14:2 (Autumn 1989); and J.L. Richardson, "New Perspectives on Appeasement: Some Implications for International Relations", *World Politics* 40:3, (Apr. 1988).

British leaders' catastrophic misperception of German intentions caused them to acquiesce on numerous occasions when Germany challenged the status quo and abrogated the Versailles peace agreement. In 1935, Germany began to openly rearm, which had been forbidden by the Versailles treaty; Britain and France protested, but did nothing about it. (In fact, Britain even signed a naval agreement with Germany in the same year.) In 1936, Hitler sent German troops into the Rhineland, an area of Germany that was required by Versailles to be demilitarized. There was talk of intervention, but again, Britain and France did nothing. In 1938, Germany annexed Austria, again in violation of Versailles.

Most disgraceful, however, was the German takeover of the Sudetenland in September 1938. The Sudetenland was an area of Czechoslovakia in which the majority of the population was ethnically German. Hitler demanded that this territory be ceded to Germany, threatening war if Czechoslovakia did not comply. Despite earlier French security guarantees to Czechoslovakia, Britain, France, and Germany came to an agreement at Munich that Germany would be allowed to annex the Sudetenland, in exchange for vague promises of future good behavior. This effectively left Czechoslovakia defenseless against Germany because the Sudeten territory contained most of the Czechoslovak fortifications and armament industries. British leaders sighed with relief and believed that Hitler had been finally satiated and that peace had at least been achieved. Famously, Chamberlain declared publicly on his return from the Munich conference, "I believe it is peace for our time."<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>124</sup> Cited by Telford Taylor, *Munich: The Price of Peace* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), 65; and Beck, "Munich's Lessons Reconsidered", 170.

British confidence in the wisdom of appeasement was brutally shattered in March 1939 when Germany invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia; half of the country (Bohemia and Moravia) was turned into an official German protectorate, while the other half (Slovakia) became de jure independent but de facto a satellite state of Germany. As R.R. Palmer et al. write, “A horrible realization now spread in France and Britain. It was clear that Hitler’s most solemn guarantees were worthless, that his designs were not limited to Germans, but reached out to all eastern Europe, and beyond, that he was essentially insatiable, that he could not be appeased.”<sup>125</sup> Six months later, Germany invaded Poland. Britain and France finally resisted — something which they should have done years ago. The Second World War in Europe had begun.

Such is the essence of the highly critical account espoused by almost all commentators until the 1960s.<sup>126</sup> These authors generally concurred in the idea that war could have been prevented if Britain and France had only stood firm in the 1930s (though they disagreed on which crisis represented the last chance for peace). This view is best summed up by Winston Churchill, who wrote in 1948, “There never was a war more easy to stop than that which has just wrecked what was left of the world from the previous struggle.”<sup>127</sup> Lewis Namier similarly argues, “At several junctures [Germany’s bid for world domination] could have been stopped without excessive effort or sacrifice, but was

---

<sup>125</sup> R.R. Palmer, Joel Colton, and Lloyd Kramer, *A History of the Modern World*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002), 809.

<sup>126</sup> Such critics included Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude, 1938-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1948); A.L. Rowse, *Appeasement: A Study in Political Decline, 1933-1939* (New York: Norton, 1961); Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952); Elizabeth Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis: A History of the Relations Between Hitler and Mussolini* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949); John Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich: Prologue to Tragedy* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1948). See Beck, “Munich’s Lessons Reconsidered”, 164, for an extensive list.

<sup>127</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Book One: *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), iv.

not.”<sup>128</sup> Many proponents of this view asserted that a tough stance by the western powers would have cowed Hitler and deterred him from his quest of conquering Eastern Europe. Such scholars point, for example, to Hitler’s comment, made some time after the Rhineland reoccupation, that if French forces had been sent to oppose the move, Germany would have had to retreat with its tail between its legs.<sup>129</sup> Some critics went further, arguing that British and French resistance to Hitler could have caused the dictator to be removed from power in a coup: the German military leadership was initially skeptical of Hitler’s risky foreign policy and might have overthrown him had his gambles failed. Critics also argued that if Britain and France had been vigilant about restraining German rearmament, Hitler would not have acquired the military potency which eventually allowed him, by the end of the 1930s, to confidently make his bid for the subjugation of Eastern Europe.

From the 1960s onwards, some — though by no means all — historians began arguing for a more sympathetic portrait of Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement.<sup>130</sup> Many of these revisionists argue that other factors besides a mistaken image of Hitler contributed to British leaders’ adopting the policy of appeasement: national interests, a recognition of Germany’s grievances, public opinion, military weakness, and so on. They also contend that Chamberlain’s misconception of Hitler was not as severe as the early

---

<sup>128</sup> Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude*, ix. Discussed in P.M.H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1997), 47.

<sup>129</sup> Cited by Bell, *Origins of the Second World War*, 234. Note that Bell finds it dubious whether Germany would have retreated as easily as Hitler claims.

<sup>130</sup> Early challengers to the traditional view include A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961); and Donald Watt, “Appeasement: The Rise of the Revisionist School?”, *Political Quarterly* 36:2 (Apr.-Jun. 1965). Others include Paul Schroeder, “Munich and the British Tradition”, *The Historical Journal* 19:1 (1976); Keith Eubank, *Munich* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); Robbins, *Munich 1938* [fn. 50 above]; Iain Macleod, *Neville Chamberlain* (New York: Atheneum, 1961); Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (New York: Morrow, 1972); Paul Kennedy, “Appeasement”, *History Today* 32 (Oct. 1982). For a comprehensive listing, see Beck, “Munich’s Lessons Reconsidered”, 163-168.

critics alleged: records show that Chamberlain was privately much more doubtful about Hitler than his public statements indicated.<sup>131</sup> Some scholars also contend that Hitler was prepared to go to war no matter what and was hence undeterrable; appeasement, therefore, affected the timing but not the eventuality of World War II.

So there is a considerable degree of historical controversy over the extent to which British leaders, especially Neville Chamberlain, should be criticized for the policy of appeasement. Despite these divergent views, however, it is probably fair to say that most historians accept that Chamberlain and other British leaders suffered significant misperceptions, particularly of German intentions. As Jervis writes, “Almost all accounts agree that some French and many British leaders misperceived Hitler, thinking that his aim was only to review the most objectionable parts of the Treaty of Versailles.”<sup>132</sup> There is probably less agreement on what *difference* those misperceptions, manifested in the form of appeasement, made to the eventual outcome, but a sizeable proportion of mainstream scholarship does suggest that British and French policy would have been better, in some way or other, if the western powers had more accurately perceived German intentions and hence adopted a more forceful stance. Yaacov Vertzberger writes, “Had France and Britain taken a decisive stand toward Hitler and Germany in the 1930’s would not World War II have been prevented?”<sup>133</sup> Other authors argue that deterring Hitler was impossible, but even so, “most scholarly accounts of the 1930s conclude that appeasement was an error because it allowed Hitler to grow stronger”.<sup>134</sup> P.M.H. Bell, for instance, argues that if France had intervened in the Rhineland crisis, war would likely

---

<sup>131</sup> Beck, “Munich’s Lessons Reconsidered”, 172.

<sup>132</sup> Robert Jervis, “Political Science Perspectives”, in eds. Robert Boyce and Joseph Maiolo, *The Origins of World War Two: The Debate Continues* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 220.

<sup>133</sup> Vertzberger, *World in Their Minds*, 349.

<sup>134</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 223.

have broken out but “this war would have been fought in more favourable military circumstances than the later one; and if the French had shown boldness and determination it could surely have been won.”<sup>135</sup> Robert Beck — who emphatically rejects the extreme view of Chamberlain as deluded and weak-willed — nonetheless believes that “if Chamberlain had stood firm [at Munich]...Hitler might have been removed from power, or what is far more likely, war with Germany might have been fought under more favorable circumstances than those of 1939.”<sup>136</sup>

Because most scholars agree that misperceptions suffered by British leaders made a tangible and negative difference to British policymaking, then, it is worth asking whether psychological bias theory could have made a positive contribution to foreign policy in 1930s.

### **Explanation**

Consistent with our earlier discussion of the Korean War, I briefly note that psychological bias theory appears capable of (at least partially) explaining the misperceptions suffered by British leaders in the 1930s.

The *influence of recent historical analogies* — psychological bias **B2** — led British leaders to be inordinately wary of the dangers of spirals of hostility and hence overly focused on conciliatory diplomacy. Many British leaders who lived through the First World War believed that that conflict had been caused more by fear and security

---

<sup>135</sup> Bell, *Origins of the Second World War*, 236.

<sup>136</sup> Beck, “Munich’s Lessons Reconsidered”, 188. See also Williamson Murray, “Britain”, in eds. Robert Boyce and Joseph Maiolo, *The Origins of World War Two: The Debate Continues* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 122. Murray writes: “In every respect Munich was a strategic disaster for the Western Powers. In the autumn of 1938 the military situation was still relatively favourable to them. Whatever the weakness of their air defences, they faced little threat from a *Luftwaffe* which was running 50 per cent in commission rates through summer 1938 and which possessed no capability to execute blind bombing attacks against either French or British cities. Moreover, Germany possessed only three *Panzer* divisions, so that the *Wehrmacht* was not in a position to launch a decisive campaign against the French army.” However, see Overy, *Origins of the Second World War*, 71, for a competing view.



concerns than any deep-seated incompatibility. Thus, they believed that the next war could be averted by level-headed diplomacy and reasonable concessions.<sup>137</sup> The powerful force of recent history, unfortunately, made British leaders less sensitive to the possibility that there might be a genuine clash of interests between Germany and Britain, and that Hitler might be a committed — and hence implacable — aggressor.

The *influence of pre-existing beliefs* — psychological bias **B1** — can help explain why the British image of Germany as a state with only limited revisionist intentions persisted even in the face of discrepant information, such as Hitler's increasingly bold demands despite asserting each time that his current demand would be his last. As Jervis writes, "The benign image of Hitler was hard to dislodge. Many of his actions showed his aggressiveness only to those who already believed him to be so."<sup>138</sup>

Motivated bias also appears to play a role in explaining the case, especially the tendency to *avoid seeing value trade-offs* (**B9**). British leaders in the 1930s had three principal goals: to maintain Britain's security, to preserve the peace, and to safeguard the domestic economy (especially by minimizing the tax burden). This combination of values biased British policymakers against the possibility that the only way to maintain her security was to allocate scarce resources for rearmament and be prepared for war, because admitting such a possibility would mean acknowledging a clash between those three values.

As noted earlier, from a practical perspective, a theory's prescriptive ability is more important than its explanatory powers. Thus, I turn to the question of whether the prescriptions of psychological bias theory could have improved decisionmaking in this

---

<sup>137</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 267; Jervis, "Political Science Perspectives", 220.

<sup>138</sup> Jervis, "Political Science Perspectives", 220.

case. If British leaders in the 1930s had been students of psychological bias theory, would they have been able to make better decisions?

### **Prescription**

If psychological biases are (at least partially) responsible for the misperceptions suffered by British leaders in the 1930s, then it does seem that the prescriptions of psychological bias theory could have helped British policymakers.

If Chamberlain had *explicitly laid out the assumptions and reasoning* (prescription **P3**) behind his view that Hitler would be satisfied with limited gains in Europe — i.e. that Hitler's only aims were to reverse the more unfair clauses of Versailles and unite all Germans in a single state — he may have been more sensitive to information that indicated the opposite conclusion (because making explicit one's reasoning entails, among other things, considering what evidence would contradict one's views). For instance, Chamberlain might have taken more notice of Hitler's frequent violations of his promises, especially those in which he claimed that he would be satiated if his current demand was met. As Charles Webster notes, "Chamberlain came away from the meeting [at Berchtesgaden on 15 September 1939] with the impression that [Hitler] was a man to be trusted to keep his word. He seems to have forgotten how many times it had already been broken."<sup>139</sup> Chamberlain may also have been more sensitive to evidence that apparently revealed Hitler's expansionist ambitions in Europe. As R.J. Overy writes, "There were plenty of warnings, from a wide variety of official and unofficial sources, that Hitler's ambitions were without limit, unpredictable and

---

<sup>139</sup> Charles Webster, "Munich Reconsidered: A Survey of British Policy", *International Affairs* 37:2 (Apr. 1961), 146.

dangerous.”<sup>140</sup> The use of *devils’ advocates* (prescription **P2**) could have added to this increased alertness to data that would have challenged the settled image of Germany as essentially a status quo power with only limited demands.

It seems likely that British leaders would have benefited from *awareness of processes that often lead to misperception* (prescription **P1**). If they had been aware of the formidable influence of historical analogies, they may have been more conscious that they were powerfully swayed by their recent experience with World War I, and questioned whether that case was really an appropriate guide to the current one. World War I, as they saw it, grew out of illusory incompatibility; if they had been aware of the influence of historical analogies, they may have examined more diligently whether the incompatibility of the 1930s was more real than that of the 1910s.

*Awareness of the tendency to focus excessively on one’s own frame of reference* could also have proved useful. One important reason that the British acquiesced to Germany at Munich was because British and France leaders failed to see that Hitler’s frame of reference at the conference was very different from their own. From the British and French point of view, the surrender of the Sudetenland was tolerable because they accepted that Central Europe was largely within the German sphere of influence; Eastern Europe — Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania — was, however, a different matter, and the western powers were determined not to allow German trespassing there. Unfortunately, this frame of reference was not shared by Hitler, who instead “came to assume that he had been given at Munich a green light for expansion in eastern Europe.”<sup>141</sup> If Chamberlain and his colleagues had given more thought to the possibility that the

---

<sup>140</sup> Overy, *Origins of the Second World War*, 20-21.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

German frame of reference was different from their own, they may have stood firm at Munich in order to signal their intention not to let him go further.

### **Difficulties**

However, the present case — like the previous one — also reveals significant difficulties with straightforwardly applying the prescriptions of psychological bias theory to British policymaking in the 1930s.

First, there is the problem of ambiguous data. British policymakers in the 1930s faced a situation of enormous uncertainty. As numerous commentators have argued, it is only with hindsight that many of Hitler's actions appear clearly as evidence of his aggressive intentions. Jervis, besides emphasizing the role of psychological biases, also acknowledges that

part of the explanation for [British leaders' misperception] lies in the ambiguous nature of the evidence available to them. Only hindsight makes the pattern in Hitler's policies appear clear; until he moved against the non-German parts of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 one could easily believe that his aim was only to embrace all Germans within the Reich.<sup>142</sup>

Those keen on criticizing Chamberlain for the outcome of Munich should remember that on his return to Britain he was greeted by cheering throngs and countless letters from well-wishers, who were convinced that Chamberlain had made the right decision. As Overy writes, "Though with hindsight we might conclude that something vital had been at stake in the Czech crisis, it was not immediately obvious in 1938, when Chamberlain was universally hailed as the saviour of peace."<sup>143</sup>

Arguably, then, the data available to British policymakers at the time were underdetermining. In other words, the signals given off by Hitler were consistent with

---

<sup>142</sup> Jervis, "Political Science Perspectives", 220.

<sup>143</sup> Overy, *Origins of the Second World War*, 30.

two competing theories: one, that he was the satiable leader of a status quo power with only limited revisionist aims, and two, that he was implacable head of an uncontainable state with wide expansionist goals. Now, this does not necessarily mean that both theories were equally well-supported by the evidence. It may very well have been the case that the evidence more strongly supported the image of Hitler as unappeasable aggressor. But the evidence was at least consistent with the opposite image. This means that even if Chamberlain and other British leaders had suffered from no psychological biases, they may still have been unable to determine Hitler's intentions with certainty.

Of course, much of this ambiguity was propagated, with great skill, by Hitler himself. As Robert Beck notes, “[Chamberlain’s] diplomatic opponent, Adolf Hitler, was exceedingly shrewd and inscrutable, a master of bluff and deception.”<sup>144</sup> The German leader would alternate between fiery rattling of his saber and earnest declarations of peace, between repeated breaches of Germany’s Versailles obligations and earnest promises that each breach would be his last. As R.R. Palmer et al. put it, “[Hitler]... would rage and rant, arouse the fear of war, take just a little, declare that it was all he wanted, let the former Allies naively hope that he was now satisfied and that peace was secure; then rage again, take a little more, and proceed through the same cycle.”<sup>145</sup> Even without the influence of psychological biases, Hitler’s masterly use of deception means that it would have been difficult for British leaders to perceive his intentions with full confidence.

Second, the case throws into doubt whether awareness of common misperceptions (as distinct from awareness of processes that lead to misperceptions) is useful at all.

Many of the common misperceptions identified by psychological bias theory did not hold

---

<sup>144</sup> Beck, “Munich’s Lessons Reconsidered”, 187.

<sup>145</sup> Palmer, Colton, and Kramer, *History of the Modern World*, 803.

— in fact, the reality of the situation was the *opposite* of many of these common misperceptions. It is common for a state to underestimate the extent to which it appears threatening to other states, but in the present case, if anything, Britain *overestimated* the extent to which its posture was frightening to Germany. Germany had an entrenched image of Britain as weak and irresolute, an image that continued (erroneously) even *after* Britain decided in March-September 1939 that she would fight if Germany attacked Poland. Two days before Germany attacked Poland, Chamberlain sent a note to Hitler which he thought strongly demonstrated Britain's determination to fight; Hitler, however, interpreted the missive as placatory and conciliatory.<sup>146</sup> As another example, states often overestimate the degree to which other governments are centralized. But if British leaders had taken note of this tendency and tried to correct for it by seeing Germany as possibly decentralized, they would have made an error, since Hitler exerted immense personal authority over the German state.

Third, Hitler himself suffered from significant misperceptions of the western powers. After Munich, as already mentioned, Hitler made a “costly miscalculation” in thinking that he had been given *carte blanche* in Eastern Europe, and in particular, that he could invade Poland without risking general war.<sup>147</sup> He consistently underestimated Britain and France's resolve.<sup>148</sup> He also greatly underestimated the western allies' military strength and economic potential.<sup>149</sup> The fact that Hitler himself suffered from serious misperceptions means that even if Britain and France had accurately perceived

---

<sup>146</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 59.

<sup>147</sup> Overy, *Origins of the Second World War*, 62.

<sup>148</sup> Jervis notes, “Hitler underestimated his adversaries' determination. During the summer of 1939 he doubted whether Britain would fight and, in the spring of 1940, expected her to make peace.” Jervis, “War and Misperception”, 682.

<sup>149</sup> Overy, *Origins of the Second World War*, 80.

Germany's aggressive tendencies, the eventual outcome may still have been suboptimal. Many scholars, for instance, argue that Hitler could have been deterred if the western powers had recognized Hitler's aggressiveness early on and hence taken a tougher line. But this may not have been possible if Hitler was trapped in his own underestimations of Britain and France.

Fourth, examination of the case highlights the fact that certain psychological biases may sometimes be useful — and thus, correction of them undesirable. In particular, theory-driven thinking (bias **B1**) means that statesmen will often maintain their beliefs even in the face of discrepant information that would seem to indicate the error of those beliefs. But one could argue that it is sensible to adopt a conservative attitude and not let one's beliefs react too easily to discrepant information. As Jervis says of Chamberlain and his colleagues, "Their cognitive processing was neither unusual nor pathological. It is sensible to require extraordinary evidence before one reaches an implausible conclusion. Just as doctors are rarely quick to diagnose obscure diseases, so the Allied leaders were understandably slow to appreciate what they faced."<sup>150</sup> This conservative attitude may be particularly useful when changing one's beliefs would have serious, costly implications such as war. Accepting evidence of another state's hostility too readily may precipitate an unnecessary war. Thus, even though theory-driven thinking can sometimes cause misperception, the *opposite* error — allowing one's beliefs to be hypersensitive to every bit of discrepant information — may be just as bad, or even worse. We must be cautious, then, when trying to rectify processes that commonly lead to misperceptions.

---

<sup>150</sup> Jervis, "Political Science Perspectives", 220-221.

## **Lessons of the cases**

In each of the cases above, policymakers suffered from significant misperceptions that negatively impacted the quality of their decisionmaking, which in turn led to foreign policy outcomes that, in hindsight, appear to be suboptimal. If psychological bias theory is right, those misperceptions had much to do with various psychological biases to which leaders were subject. It seemed at first glance that the prescriptions offered by psychological bias theory could have helped policymakers to produce better outcomes. But closer examination revealed two difficulties with the straightforward application of those prescriptions.

### **1. Ambiguity**

First, and most important, is the *inherent ambiguity* of international politics. In most situations that a policymaker will face, the available information will not clearly demonstrate the truth of one particular theory (e.g. that an opponent is hostile and expansionist). In other words, the data that is available at the time will almost certainly be underdetermining, i.e. consistent with at least two competing theories. As Richard Betts writes, “Intelligence can fail because the data are too permissive for policy judgment... There is usually *some* evidence to support *any* prediction.”<sup>151</sup> This point is often missed by commentators who look back on historical cases and condemn past leaders for making decisions on the basis of theories that appeared plainly contradicted by the available evidence; if we remove the benefit of hindsight, the evidence is often much less clear than such critics contend. As Jervis argues, “In retrospect, one can always

---

<sup>151</sup> Richard Betts, “Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable”, *World Politics* 31:1 (Oct. 1978), 70-71.



find numerous instances in which decision-makers who were wrong overlooked or misunderstood evidence that now stands out as clear and important. But one can also note...that many facts supported the conclusion that turned out to be wrong.”<sup>152</sup>

In particular, there are serious difficulties involved in trying to determine the intentions of another state. Most of the time, the conduct of a state can plausibly be accounted for by competing theories of that state’s intentions. Jervis writes, “Few actions are unambiguous. They rarely provide proof of how the state plans to act in the future.”<sup>153</sup> The ambiguity of states’ actions vis-à-vis their intentions is compounded by the fact that states usually have great incentives to *deceive* — and, from a realist perspective, face few constraints in doing so. An aggressive state may wish to lull its opponents into thinking that it is peaceful in order to gain the advantage of military surprise (especially useful in the nuclear age), or to win concessions from other states by pretending it only has limited demands (as Hitler did). A state that is unwilling to fight, on the other hand, may wish to deceive others into thinking that it is prepared to take military action, in order to deter another state from acting, compel another state to do certain things, or to gain a reputation as a state that is willing to fight to protect its interests. Robert Beck comments, “[The] ability to hoodwink one’s opponent is a prerequisite for the successful diplomat”.<sup>154</sup> From a realist perspective — i.e., assuming that states do not follow norms for their own sake — there are few significant constraints to prevent states from lying. Perhaps the only important constraint is a state’s wish to avoid, for strategic reasons, the

---

<sup>152</sup> Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception”, 25.

<sup>153</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 9.

<sup>154</sup> Beck, “Munich’s Lessons Reconsidered”, 188.

reputation of a liar.<sup>155</sup> However, the skilful deceiver can get around this by being honest most of the time, thus building up a reputation as a truth-teller, and only lying when it really matters.

There are, of course, methods that policymakers can, and do, use to estimate other states' intentions and hence predict their actions. They can, for instance, assume that other states are unitary and rational actors whose primary motivations are to further their national interests. But this method is problematic. National interest, for example, is often interpreted differently by different officials within a government, so knowing that a state will act according to its national interest often does not allow for confident predictions.<sup>156</sup> Another strategy is to try and look at each state individually and ascertain how its leaders see the world — in other words, to determine those leaders' *operational code*, which includes their “beliefs about the nature of politics and political conflict, [their] views regarding the extent to which the historical developments can be shaped, and [their] notions of correct strategy and tactics.”<sup>157</sup> But, as Alexander George admits, it is difficult to construct these models, and even with a reasonably accurate model of an opponent's behavioral style, one may still fail to predict its intentions in a given situation (such as the US's failure to foresee the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba in 1962). In short, ascertaining another state's intentions remains “a difficult task at best.”<sup>158</sup>

Even if one could somehow be confident about another state's intentions at a given time and sure that that state was not lying, there is the problem of changing

---

<sup>155</sup> See Jervis, *The Logic of Images*, 70-83.

<sup>156</sup> George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 67, 219. George writes: “National interest has the characteristics of what decision theorists refer to as a ‘nonoperational goal’; it does not provide a measuring rod for comparing alternative policies.”

<sup>157</sup> Alexander George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making”, *International Studies Quarterly* 13:3 (Jun. 1969), 197.

<sup>158</sup> George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 66-70.

intentions. As we saw in the Korean War case, intentions often change rapidly during crises. Over the longer term, states can also change their intentions, i.e. an expansionist state can become a status quo one, and vice versa. (Though perhaps long-term changes are somewhat less of a problem than short-term changes because they are easier to track.) Because states change their intentions, even if one accurately perceives another state's intentions at a given time, this knowledge may be outdated by the time one actually formulates policy toward that state.

## **2. Opponents' misperceptions**

In addition to the inevitable "fog of foreign policy making"<sup>159</sup>, a second difficulty that emerged from our study of the two cases is that one's opponents can also suffer misperception. Sometimes, as in the Korean War case, an opponent may suffer misperceptions about relative capabilities. At other times, as in the World War II example, an opponent may misperceive one's intentions. The fact that one's adversary might suffer misperceptions means that correcting one's misperceptions may not produce a better foreign policy outcome.

### **What these problems imply**

The difficulties highlighted above have two implications for the utility of psychological bias theory's prescriptions.

First, the difficulties imply that awareness of common misperceptions is unlikely to be of much use — at least not directly. If a policymaker knows, for example, that statesmen are often prone to exaggerate the hostility of other states, he would not be able to thereby downgrade his estimates of a particular opponent's hostility, because, given the inherent ambiguity in the international system, he would not know whether this

---

<sup>159</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 113.

particular misperception obtained in the present situation. A possible reply is that if one knows that states overestimate their opponents' hostility more than 50% of the time, then it is in some ways rational for leaders to always start off by assuming that they are overestimating their opponents' hostility, pending additional data. But this time of 'rationality' is unlikely to be very assuring to policymakers who must worry about the formidable danger of incorrectly labeling expansionist powers as status quo ones.

Of course, this point should not surprise us too much. Looking at psychological bias theory generally (as opposed to specifically in IR), it is clear that mere awareness of common misperceptions is not very useful in correcting psychological biases. For example, behavioral scientists widely agree that people are subject to 'status quo' bias<sup>160</sup>, but merely knowing this is of little direct utility because in some circumstances, the status quo actually *is* superior to alternatives.

Insofar as awareness of psychological bias theory is concerned, then, it is more important for policymakers to be aware of *processes* that commonly lead to misperceptions than for them to know about common misperceptions per se. This suggests that if psychological bias theory is useful, it will likely be for *preventing* misperceptions from forming in the first place rather than correcting misperceptions that have already formed.

Second, and more importantly, the indelible ambiguity of the international system and the possibility of opponents' misperception means that even if all psychological biases are removed (by following the prescriptions of psychological bias theory), there is

---

<sup>160</sup> Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa, "Hidden Traps in Decision Making", 149; Gary Belsky and Thomas Gilovich, *Why Smart People Make Big Money Mistakes — and How to Correct Them: Lessons from the New Science of Behavioral Economics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 91-96.

no guarantee that a positive foreign policy outcome will result. This can be seen in the following diagram:

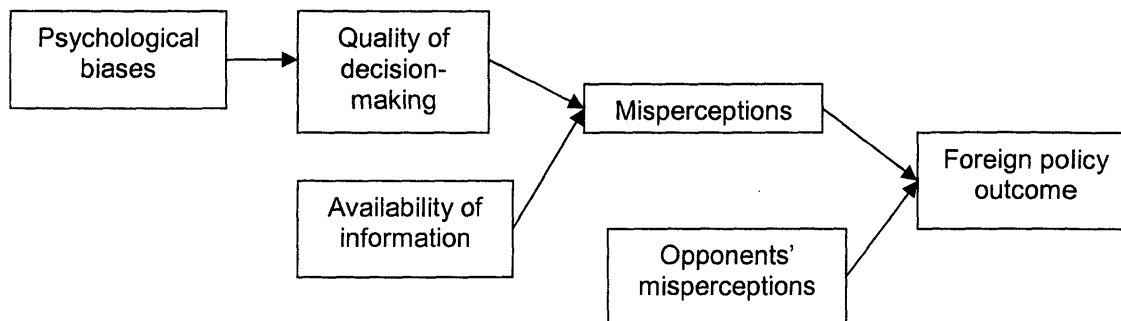


Fig. 2. Intervening factors between biases and foreign policy outcomes

Psychological biases, according to psychological bias theory, affect the quality of decisionmaking, so reducing psychological biases in a state's leaders should improve the quality of decisionmaking in that state. *Ceteris paribus*, this would reduce the number of misperceptions suffered by the state. But the amount of misperception is also affected by the availability of information; sometimes information will be readily available and helpful while at other times it will be murky and underdetermining.<sup>161</sup> So reducing psychological biases does not always reduce misperception. In turn, reducing misperception does not always translate into a better foreign policy outcome for the state, because that outcome is influenced not only by one's own misperceptions, but also those of one's opponent.

This shows that no method of decisionmaking — including those that are free from psychological biases — can guarantee that a state will always make the choices that result in the best foreign policy outcomes. Good decisionmaking procedures will

<sup>161</sup> An alternative way of stating this is to say that misperceptions are sometimes caused by biases, and at other times by *opacity* in the international system. I am grateful to Stephen Van Evera for this suggestion. See Van Evera, *More Causes of War*.

sometimes lead to disastrous foreign policy outcomes, while defective decisionmaking can occasionally result in favorable outcomes. As Jervis writes, “Errors are inevitable in light of the difficulty of assessing technological and organizational capabilities, the obstacles to inferring others’ intentions correctly, [and] the limitations on people’s ability to process information.”<sup>162</sup> In short, the prescriptions of psychological bias theory cannot completely eliminate misperception, and even if they could, they would not be able to ensure positive outcomes.

### **What these problems do not imply**

Of course, the impossibility of eliminating misperceptions and ensuring foreign policy success does not mean that psychological bias theory is devoid of practical utility. If the theory’s prescriptions can lead to even a moderate reduction in misperception, then it would already be immensely useful to policymakers. Even if the quality of information and the amount of opponent’s misperception varies from case to case, statesmen are likely to achieve better outcomes *than they would have otherwise* by following the prescriptions of psychological bias theory (assuming that those prescriptions do reduce biases). In other words, even if it is impossible to eliminate errors resulting from bias-induced misperceptions, it is possible to assuage them. As Yaacov Vertzberger writes, “The complete avoidance of faulty information processing is practically impossible...yet a great deal can be done and measures can and should be taken to limit the extent of faulty information processing.”<sup>163</sup>

Aside from simply reducing the extent of misperception suffered by policymakers, psychological bias theory can prove useful by helping states to limit the

---

<sup>162</sup> Jervis, “War and Misperception”, 699.

<sup>163</sup> Vertzberger, *World in Their Minds*, 356.

negative *impact* of misperceptions. Vertzberger argues, “Concentrating solely on the almost impossible task of completely preventing misperceptions should be avoided. More specifically, decisionmakers must concentrate on dealing with the *outcomes* of misperceptions.”<sup>164</sup> An important way of reducing the negative effect of misperception is to construct one’s policies under the assumption that misperceptions will probably occur. Statesmen should continuously bear in mind that they may hold incorrect belief — particularly about the intentions of other states — and thus “design policies that will not fail disastrously even if they are based on incorrect assumptions.”<sup>165</sup> In other words, state leaders should formulate policies that have a wide margin of error. Of course, this is much easier said than done and, as Jervis notes, “neither decision-makers nor academics have fully come to grips” with how to engineer such policies. Nonetheless, the principle is clear: if psychological bias theory is right, statesmen should take a skeptical view of their own cognitive abilities and craft their policies accordingly. (On an individual level, cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, who pioneered cognitive bias theory, argued that recognizing the limitations of our cognitive abilities was the principal way in which people can cope with cognitive biases.<sup>166</sup>)

In addition to recognizing their own cognitive limits, policymakers should recognize that their opponents may suffer from psychological biases and misperceptions. Such recognition can lead to significant changes in the way that foreign policy is conducted. In particular, statesmen should at least recognize that the signals that they send to other states may not be interpreted in the way that the sending state intended.

---

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 360. Italics added.

<sup>165</sup> Jervis, “War and Misperception”, 686.

<sup>166</sup> see Matlin, *Cognition*, 446.

## **Methods for further research**

The discussion above largely centered on speculative and counterfactual considerations. In examining the two historical cases, we asked whether state leaders would have been able to achieve better foreign policy if they have followed the prescriptions of psychological bias theory. In this section, I discuss further research methods that could be used to investigate the utility of psychological bias theory.

### **How useful *have* the prescriptions been?**

An obvious and important way of analyzing how useful these prescriptions are is to investigate how useful they *have* been for foreign-policymakers. In other words, to what extent have such prescriptions improved the decisionmaking processes of foreign-policymakers? This is an empirical question. At present, it does not appear to me that there are any major studies that systematically examine whether, and to what extent, prescriptions designed to reduce psychological bias have enhanced the quality of decisions made by foreign-policymakers. I suspect that this may be because governments have rarely adopted procedures to purposely improve their decisionmaking abilities through reducing bias.<sup>167</sup> If this is true, then it would be difficult to study how effective prescriptions to reduce psychological bias have been in improving foreign-policymaking.

I may be wrong here. It is possible that there are numerous cases in which governments have actively taken measures to reduce psychological bias. In any case, it

---

<sup>167</sup> One exception, already mentioned, was Marshall Schulman's analytical methods during the SALT II negotiations. (see fn.114)



would be worth asking how we *would* design a study to examine whether such measures have improved decisionmaking.

Intuitively, it seems that we would want to investigate the relationship between the establishment of such measures and the success of states' foreign policy. The first question that arises is whether we can meaningfully measure success in foreign policy. It is, of course, sometimes unclear whether a particular international incident represents a success or failure for a state that participated in that incident. But there are likely ways to surmount this problem, albeit imperfectly. One method, used by Gregory Herek, Irving Janis, and Paul Huth, is to survey scholars who are qualified to comment on a particular case, in order to seek a consensus view on whether that case was a relative success or failure for the state in question.<sup>168</sup> Of course, this method has its shortcomings, but is probably acceptable for our purposes. Assuming that there is a more or less adequate metric of foreign policy success, then, how would we investigate the relationship between that success and measures to reduce psychological bias?

One possible method would be to look at cases in which measures to reduce psychological bias were followed by more successful foreign policies. In other words, we could conduct longitudinal studies to try and determine the efficacy of such measures. But as Robert Putnam reminds us, when we are evaluating the effectiveness of a government measure, we must distinguish between what happened after the measure was implemented (*outcome*) and what effects the measure actually caused (*output*).<sup>169</sup> For example, the implementation of a particular economic policy may be followed by robust

---

<sup>168</sup> Gregory Herek, Irving Janis, and Paul Huth, "Decision Making During International Crises: Is Quality of Process Related to Outcome?", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31:2 (Jun. 1987), 212-213.

<sup>169</sup> Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 65.

economic performance, but this performance may not be a result of the policy (e.g. it might be just a normal part of the business cycle). In evaluating the effectiveness of a measure, we need to look at output rather than outcome. However, this type of study would not allow us to clearly distinguish output from outcome. In cases where the implementation of bias-reducing measures is followed by greater foreign policy success, we could not be sure that the greater success was caused by the measures; conversely, if the implementation of measures was not followed by greater policymaking success, we could not be sure that the measures were ineffective. This is because the conditions that were present before the implementation of the measures are likely to be different from those that were present after. In particular, the characteristics of the *crises* encountered by the state may be considerably different. So for example, if the crises faced by the decisionmaker after the implementation of the measures are much more intractable than those before (because of greater ambiguity, a more deceptive opponent, etc.), there may be no noticeable improvement in the success of policies even if the measures per se were efficacious.

A different strategy would be to compare the effect of such measures *across* states. Specifically, we would look at a number of similar states, some of which have adopted measures to reduce psychological bias, and some of which have not, then investigate whether there is a positive and significant correlation between states' adoption of such measures and the level of success in foreign policy. One difficulty with this strategy is the inherent ambiguity of the international system. As discussed earlier, the quality of decisionmaking is only one factor in determining the success of foreign policy; the availability of information and the amount of misperception suffered by one's

opponents also affect whether or not a positive outcome obtains. So even if certain measures to reduce psychological biases are effective, there is no guarantee that they will coincide with successful policy outcomes. This raises doubt about whether straightforward correlational studies between, on the one hand, bias-reducing measures and, on the other, foreign policy success will tell us whether those measures are efficacious. One way of getting around this difficulty is to assume that the effects of the other two factors — availability of information and others' misperceptions — will be cancelled out once all the cases are examined together; however, it is unclear whether such an assumption is warranted (especially since the number of cases is likely to be relatively small).

A more promising strategy is to establish a set of criteria for what constitutes good decisionmaking, and then judge measures designed to reduce psychological bias against whether or not they enable states' decisionmaking processes to conform more closely to those criteria. Irving Janis and Leon Mann, for example, present a list of seven criteria for what they call "vigilant information processing".<sup>170</sup>

But how should such criteria be formulated? Clearly, if such criteria are just varying ways of stating that psychological biases have been removed, then our investigation runs the risk of tautology: measures to reduce psychological bias would *by definition* conform to these criteria. In order for a set of criteria to be able to tell us whether measures to reduce psychological biases are actually useful, the criteria *themselves* need to be tested against foreign policy success. Herek, Janis, and Huth have undertaken such an investigation for Janis and Mann's seven-point criteria; according to this study, there is a positive and significant correlation between conformity to those

---

<sup>170</sup> Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, 11.

criteria and foreign policy success.<sup>171</sup> Any measure that enables decisionmaking to conform more closely to those criteria is — assuming that Herek et al. are right — likely to be effective in improving foreign policy outcomes for the state.

### **Can people correct their psychological biases?**

In our discussion so far, we have asked whether reducing psychological biases can improve decisionmaking and hence reduce misperceptions. This presupposes that psychological biases *can* be reduced. But it is not at all certain whether this is true. Thus, if we want to know whether psychological bias theory is useful, it is important to ask whether psychological biases can be reduced by any significant degree. If they cannot, then the practical utility of psychological bias theory would be considerably diminished (though not eliminated, because, as discussed earlier, the theory can be useful by encouraging decisionmakers to adopt policies with wide margins of error).

Clearly, this is a vast area of psychology that cannot be adequately examined here. But in any case, it does not appear that there is any clear consensus within the field on the extent to which it is possible to remove psychological biases. Some cognitive psychologists are pessimistic about whether we can reduce biases at all. Others are guardedly optimistic: for example, Baruch Fischhoff, in a oft-cited review of debiasing research, reports that certain intensive training programs have had moderate success in reducing biases; significantly, these training programs not only informed participants of common biases that impair decisionmaking, but also gave them feedback about the quality of their decisionmaking. Nonetheless, Fischhoff emphasizes that biases remain fairly robust, implying that debiasing remains difficult.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup> Herek, Janis, Huth, "Decision Making During International Crises".

<sup>172</sup> Baruch Fischhoff, "Debiasing" (fn. 82).

One relevant consideration is the relative importance of motivated and unmotivated biases vis-à-vis foreign-policymaking. As Philip Tetlock notes, psychologists who emphasize the importance of motivated biases are more likely to be optimistic about the prospects of reducing biases, because a large part of the motivation that underlie such biases come from organizational culture and structure, which are easier to modify than individual cognition.<sup>173</sup> Thus, the extent to which biases afflicting foreign-policymakers can be reduced may depend on whether motivated or unmotivated biases are more important in foreign-policymaking.

In any case, pending further developments in psychology, it would perhaps be best to join Tetlock in his declared position of agnosticism.

### **Should policymakers attempt to correct their biases?**

A third area for further research is the question of whether statesmen *should* attempt to correct their biases. There are three related considerations here.

First, some psychological biases may be useful *in themselves*, in certain circumstances. For example, as Tetlock and James Goldgeier note, one could make a case that the overconfidence bias (which we have not discussed here) is useful in negotiations because it can help convince an adversary of one's firmness and resolve.<sup>174</sup> Such possible utility, then, must be kept in mind if we are deciding whether to remove a particular bias.

Second, some psychological biases may be tolerable if the *opposite* error is worse. Even if biases are correctible, it is likely that corrective methods would be imprecise enough to allow for occasional over-correction, i.e. result in the opposite error being

---

<sup>173</sup> Philip Tetlock, "Theory-Driven Reasoning About Plausible Pasts and Probable Futures in World Politics: Are We Prisoners of Our Preconceptions?", *American Journal of Political Science* 43:2 (Apr. 1999), 363.

<sup>174</sup> Philip Tetlock and James Goldgeier, "Human Nature and World Politics: Cognition, Identity, and Influence", *International Journal of Psychology* 35:2 (2000), 90.

made. If the opposite error is worse — and, as we saw, Chamberlain’s hyposensitivity to data was arguably a case of this — then it may not be worthwhile to correct such a bias.

Third, partial correction of biases may be worse than no correction because such remedial measures may lead to overconfidence on the part of decisionmakers to whom such measures are applied. Because of the difficulties in debiasing judgement, it is almost certain that there will be a period of time when biases are only partially corrected; indeed, some biases may *never* be fully corrected. But such partial debiasing may actually *decrease* a policymaker’s overall decisionmaking capabilities by excessively boosting his confidence about those capabilities. This is nicely illustrated by an experiment in which subjects who were given a little clinical training in judging others’ psychological states actually made more errors in such judgements than they had before the training.<sup>175</sup> Thus, potential overconfidence effects must be borne in mind when considering whether to institute measures to reduce a particular bias. As Fischhoff writes, “A debiasing procedure may be more trouble than it is worth if it increases people’s faith in their judgmental abilities more than it improves the abilities themselves.”<sup>176</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Psychological bias theory appears to offer powerful explanations of state behavior, accounting for many actions that seem anomalous from a purely rational point of view. The theory also appears to offer useful prescriptions for policymakers. As we have seen, there are limits to this utility. Even if the prescriptions are followed, there is no guarantee that misperceptions will disappear — and even if misperceptions did

---

<sup>175</sup> Stuart Oskamp, “Overconfidence in Case-Study Judgments”, *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 29 (1965), 261-265. Discussed in Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception”, 20.

<sup>176</sup> Fischhoff, “Debiasing”, 431.

disappear, there is no guarantee that a favorable outcome will obtain for the state. But nonetheless, the prescriptions of psychological bias theory can help to improve decisionmaking processes, reduce misperception, and increase the likelihood of achieving a favorable outcome for the state. Psychological bias theory is also potentially useful because it can encourage leaders to formulate policies which take into account the fact that their beliefs may be wrong. The theory, therefore, is worthy of continued attention from policymakers and academics alike.





## Bibliography

- Appleman, Roy, *Disaster in Korea: The Chinese Confront MacArthur* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1989).
- Art, Robert and Kenneth Waltz, "Technology, Strategy, and the Uses of Force", in eds. Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz, *The Use of Force* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).
- Bandyopadhyaya, Jayantanuja, *A General Theory of International Relations* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1992).
- Barnett, Corelli, *The Collapse of British Power* (New York: Morrow, 1972).
- Bazerman, Max, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998).
- Beck, Robert, "Munich's Lessons Reconsidered", *International Security* 14:2 (Autumn 1989).
- Bell, P.M.H., *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1997).
- Belsky, Gary and Thomas Gilovich, *Why Smart People Make Big Money Mistakes — and How to Correct Them: Lessons from the New Science of Behavioral Economics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).
- Betts, Richard, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable", *World Politics* 31:1 (Oct. 1978).
- Brecher, Michael, "International Studies in the Twentieth Century and Beyond: Flawed Dichotomies, Synthesis, Cumulation", *International Studies Quarterly* 43:2 (June 1999).
- Bull, Hedley, *The Anarchical Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002).
- Bullock, Alan, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952).
- Chen, Jian, "China's Road to the Korean War", *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6-7.
- Christensen, Thomas, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams", *International Security* 17:1 (Summer 1992).
- Churchill, Winston, *The Second World War*, Book One: *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948).

Eubank, Keith, *Munich* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).

Fischhoff, Baruch, "Debiasing", in eds. Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Foot, Rosemary, *The Wrong War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

Foot, Rosemary, "Making Known the Unknown War: Policy Analysis of the Korean Conflict in the Last Decade", *Diplomatic History*, 15:3 (Summer 1991).

Friedman, Milton, "The Methodology of Positive Economics", in eds. Michael Martin and Lee McIntyre, *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

George, Alexander, "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making", *International Studies Quarterly* 13:3 (Jun. 1969).

George, Alexander, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: the Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980).

George, Alexander and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

Hammond, John, Ralph Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, "The Hidden Traps in Decision Making", in *Harvard Business Review on Decision Making* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

Herek, Gregory, Irving Janis, and Paul Huth, "Decision Making During International Crises: Is Quality of Process Related to Outcome?", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31:2 (Jun. 1987).

Higonnet, Patrice, "The Origins of the Seven Years' War", *Journal of Modern History* 40 (March 1968).

Hinsley, F.H., E.E. Thomas, C.F. Ransom, and R.C. Knight, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, 4 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Holsti, Ole, "Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy: Dulles and Russia", in David Finlay, Ole Holsti and Richard Fagen, *Enemies in Politics* (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1967).

Holsti, Ole, "Theories of International Relations", in eds. Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson, *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Hudson, Valerie, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations", *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1 (2005).

Hunt, Michael, "Beijing and the Korean Crisis, June 1950-July 1951", *Political Science Quarterly* 107:3 (August 1992).

Janis, Irving and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

Jervis, Robert, "Hypotheses on Misperception", *World Politics* 20:3 (Apr. 1968).

Jervis, Robert, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

Jervis, Robert, "Cumulation, Correlation and Woozles", in ed. James Rosenau, *In Search of Global Patterns* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1976).

Jervis, Robert, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

Jervis, Robert, "Deterrence Theory Revisited", *World Politics* 31:2 (Jan. 1979).

Jervis, Robert, "Deterrence and Perception", *International Security* 7:3 (Winter 1982-1983).

Jervis, Robert, "Introduction", in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

Jervis, Robert, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat", in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985)

Jervis, Robert, "War and Misperception", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18:4 (Spring, 1988).

Jervis, Robert, "Rational Deterrence: Theory and Evidence", *World Politics* 41:2 (Jan. 1989).

Jervis, Robert, "The Drunkard's Search", in eds. Shanto Iyengar and William McGuire, *Explorations in Political Psychology*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

Jervis, Robert, "Political Science Perspectives", in eds. Robert Boyce and Joseph Maiolo, *The Origins of World War Two: The Debate Continues* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Kahneman, Daniel and Amos Tversky, "On the Psychology of Prediction", *Psychological Review* 80 (1973).

Kahneman, Daniel and Amos Tversky, "On the Reality of Cognitive Illusions", *Psychological Review* 103:3 (1996).

Kaufman, Burton, *The Korean Conflict* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999).

Kaufman, Chaim, "Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method for Testing Psychological Explanations of Political Decision Making", *International Studies Quarterly* 38:4 (Dec. 1994).

Kennedy, Paul, "Appeasement", *History Today* 32 (Oct. 1982).

Kurth, James, "Inside the Cave: the Banality of I.R. Studies", *The National Interest* 53 (Fall 1998).

Lafeber, Walter, "Crossing the 38<sup>th</sup>: the Cold War in Microcosm", in eds. Lynn H. Miller and Ronald W. Pruessen, *Reflections on the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1974).

Lafeber, Walter, *The American Age* (New York: Norton, 1989).

Lebow, Richard Ned, "The Deterrence Deadlock: Is There a Way Out?", in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985)

Levy, Jack, "Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations", *International Studies Quarterly* 41:1 (March 1997).

Levy, Jack, "The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace", *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998).

Lowenthal, A.F., *The Dominican Intervention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

Macleod, Iain, *Neville Chamberlain* (New York: Atheneum, 1961).

Matlin, Margaret, *Cognition*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2005).

McClellan, David, "Dean Acheson and the Korean War", *Political Science Quarterly* 83:1 (March 1968).

McDermott, Rose, *Political Psychology in International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

- Millett, Allan, "Casualties", in ed. Spencer Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2000).
- Murray, Williamson, "Britain", in eds. Robert Boyce and Joseph Maiolo, *The Origins of World War Two: The Debate Continues* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- Namier, Lewis, *Diplomatic Prelude, 1938-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1948).
- Newsom, David, "Foreign Policy and Academia", *Foreign Policy* 101 (Winter 1995).
- Nitze, Paul, *Tension Between Opposite: Reflections on the Practice and Theory of Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1993).
- Oskamp, Stuart, "Overconfidence in Case-Study Judgments", *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 29 (1965).
- Overy, R.J., *The Origins of the Second World War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1998).
- Palmer, R.R., Joel Colton, and Lloyd Kramer, *A History of the Modern World*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002).
- Putnam, Robert, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- Rees, David, *Korea: The Limited War* (London: MacMillan, 1964).
- Richardson, J.L., "New Perspectives on Appeasement: Some Implications for International Relations", *World Politics* 40:3, (Apr. 1988).
- Robbins, Keith, *Munich 1938*, (London: Cassell, 1968).
- Roberts, Priscilla, "Sardar K.M. Panikkar", in ed. Spencer Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2000).
- Roskin, Michael, "From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: Shifting Generational Paradigms and Foreign Policy", in ed. G. John Ikenberry, *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 2002).
- Rowse, A.L., *Appeasement: A Study in Political Decline, 1933-1939* (New York: Norton, 1961).
- Russo, J. Edward and Paul Schoemaker, *Decision Traps: Ten Barriers to Decision-Making and How to Overcome Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).
- Sandler, Stanley, *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

- Schnabel, James, *Policy and Direction: the First Year* (Washington: United States Army Office of the Chief of Military History, 1972).
- Schroeder, Paul, "Munich and the British Tradition", *The Historical Journal* 19:1 (1976).
- Stein, Arthur, "When Misperception Matters", *World Politics* 34:4 (Jul. 1982).
- Sternberg, Robert, *Cognitive Psychology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003).
- Stueck, William, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy Towards China and Korea 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).
- Talbott, Strobe, *Endgame: The Inside Story of SALT II*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
- Taylor, A.J.P., *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961).
- Taylor, Telford, *Munich: The Price of Peace* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979).
- Tetlock, Philip, "Theory-Driven Reasoning About Plausible Pasts and Probable Futures in World Politics: Are We Prisoners of Our Preconceptions?", *American Journal of Political Science* 43:2 (Apr. 1999).
- Tetlock, Philip and James Goldgeier, "Human Nature and World Politics: Cognition, Identity, and Influence", *International Journal of Psychology* 35:2 (2000),
- Truman, Harry, *Memoirs*, vol. 2: *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956).
- Tucker, Spencer (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2000).
- Van Evera, Stephen, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- Van Evera, Stephen, *More Causes of War: Misperception and the Roots of Conflict* (unpublished ms., 2001).
- Vertzberger, Yaacov, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- Walt, Stephen, "The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations", *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005).

Waltz, Kenneth, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

Waltz, Kenneth, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).  
Wheeler-Bennett, John, *Munich: Prologue to Tragedy* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1948).

Watt, Donald, "Appeasement: The Rise of the Revisionist School?", *Political Quarterly* 36:2 (Apr.-Jun. 1965).

Webster, Charles, "Munich Reconsidered: A Survey of British Policy", *International Affairs* 37:2 (Apr. 1961).

Whiting, Alan, *China Crosses the Yalu* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

Wiskemann, Elizabeth, *The Rome-Berlin Axis: A History of the Relations Between Hitler and Mussolini* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

Vertzberger, Yaacov, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990)

Zelikow, Philip, "Foreign Policy Engineering: From Theory to Practice and Back Again", *International Security* 28:4 (Spring 1994).