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Autism in Foreign Policy

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Autism in IR theories

The term “autism” was first used by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1911 to describe a form of unsocial behavior by individuals. For him, autism was a crucial symptom of schizophrenia: a withdrawal from the outside world into one’s own, internal world. Sigmund Freud took up the concept and used it, similar to his concept of narcissism, to denote certain behavioral anomalies in his patients. I am aware of only two efforts to transfer this concept (in its original meaning autism was given by Bleuler and Freud) to the analysis of international relations. The more extensive of the two efforts was undertaken by Karl W. Deutsch and his German disciple **Dieter Senghaas**. In a co-authored article, they used Freud’s psychoanalytical terminology to analyze, in general terms, foreign policy behavior. Senghaas then took this analogy further in his work on deterrence and “threat policy”, in which the concept of autism played a key role. According to Deutsch and Senghaas, governments could be compared to a person’s ego that constantly struggled to reconcile contradictory demands and pressures from within - by the “id”, with its own, emotional and instinct-driven inclination to immediate gratification of desires, and the “superego”, representing the internalized parental and societal demands - with the pressures and opportunities in its external environment (the “reality principle”). Senghaas saw deterrence and threat policies as autistic: these policies, or rather the governments that pursued them, constructed their own images of the reality of international relations and then rationalized the results of their actions in terms of those perceptions as conclusive evidence that both justified and encouraged the initial decisions and policies.

Edward Luttwak is the other author who has used the concept of autism. In his book “The Rise of China versus the Logic of Strat-

egy”¹, he developed the theory that China has been unable to develop and execute a grand strategy because it held a grossly simplified and misleading view of reality. Luttwak attributes this to the fact that that China had been cut off from the rest of the world beyond East Asia for most of its history. This leads to what he calls “strategic autism” - China attributes to the U.S. motives and objectives it would hold itself if it were in America’s position, and it is unable to look at the world in any other way than through an exclusively Chinese lens. As a result, China simplifies reality into very schematic representations, leading it to opportunism and gamesmanship, Luttwak argues.

How accurate and useful Senghaas’ view on nuclear deterrence during the Cold War and Luttwak’s take on China’s grand strategy are is debatable, but need not concern us here. I am interested in the broader argument both are making: under certain circumstances, states - like individuals - may be seriously hampered in their ability to perceive and respond to their international environment adequately, a policy deficiency they call autism. I suggest this concept is useful to describe (as in fact does the contemporary understanding of autism in psychology) a spectrum of problematic foreign policy behavior patterns by states.

Definition

I define foreign policy autism (FPA) as follows:

- a) FPA describes patterns of foreign policy behavior that are clearly and persistently either too weak or too disruptive to realize the collective interests of that state and its people adequately and sustainably.
- b) FPA can result from specific political dysfunctions or weaknesses or from emotionally charged politics.
- c) FPA as an expression of political dysfunctions results from excessive involvement

¹ Edward Luttwak, »The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy«, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2012.

of organized interests and domestic political tactics in policy- and decision-making. As Mancur Olson has persuasively argued in his “The Growth and Decline of Nations”, societies that are economically and socially successful over longer periods of time suffer a proliferation of vested interests that tend to slow down and constrain policy-making. Organized interests tend to cancel each other out on the basis of lowest common denominators. Another form of weakness may be excessively tactical use of foreign policy substance in domestic political maneuvers. The qualifier “excessive” is important here: it implies that those weaknesses are “normal” if they remain within reasonable limits but “problematic” if they become dominant in foreign policy behavior.

- d) FPA as an expression of “emotional politics” results from images and perceptions of the world that are grossly distorted, simplified and one-sided and emotionally charged with collective feelings such as fear, loathing and hatred of “enemies”, resentment or guilt over past events, or concern over status. Such dysfunctional perceptions of world politics are recognizable *inter alia* by tendencies towards auto-immunization of those images: they can become “closed”, that is resistant against any falsification through contradictory observations: the “theory” or model of the world on which the image draws is able to explain any observation in ways that support the model. Thus, if Beijing is persuaded that it is America’s intention to block China’s rise any American policy and decision will be perceived as compatible with such a suspicion.

Freud defined the “id” as the part of the mind “... cut off from the external world [that] has a world of perception of its own. It detects with extraordinary acuteness certain changes in its interior, especially oscillations in the tension of its instinctual needs, and these changes become conscious as feelings in the pleasure-unpleasure series. ...self-perceptions ... govern the passage of events in the id with despotic force. The id obeys

the inexorable pleasure principle”.² In our analogy, “instincts” would be organized interests, but also collective emotions, such as nationalist fervor. Again, it should be pointed out that we are talking here about patterns of behavior that are “normal” in principle: any foreign policy will have to reflect organized societal interests to some degree, and will depend on a modicum of emotional commitment, not only on reasoned support.

There is thus a fine line diving “healthy” form “autistic” foreign policies, suggesting that foreign policies may easily cross it under the sway of specific domestic configurations. There are several reasons why present circumstances may be favoring FPA in both its variants: weakness and disruption.

FPA as weakness

FPA as weakness could be expected to result from the decades of increasing wealth and high levels of social stability that much of the Western world has experienced since the 1950s. There can be no doubt that this has produced a proliferation of organized material and ideational interests along the lines of Mancur Olson’s theory of growth and decline. This trend has been mirrored also at the level of party systems: the number of parties represented in parliaments has tended to increase over the last decades, making the formation of government with stable majorities and clear policy profiles more difficult.³ As globalization has intruded ever more deeply into economies and societies, the boundaries between domestic and foreign affairs, and hence between domestic and transnational interests, have become ever blurrier, aggravating the tendencies for foreign policy to be sucked into the domestic political arena. Finally, the proliferation of interests and the trans-

² Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious*, London: Penguin 2005.

³ Majority voting systems, such as the American, British or French system, have to some extent been formally immune to those tendencies, but the tendencies towards a proliferation of political positions with electoral backing has shifted them onto the major parties.

nationalisation of economies and societies as a result of globalization have made the design and implementation of “good” policies objectively more difficult. All those factors would seem to strengthen autistic tendencies in foreign policy making. One would expect those tendencies to surface first in individual decisions; as those tendencies gain momentum, such decisions would become more frequent and begin to affect basic foreign policy orientations.

FPA as emotionally charged

FPA as emotionally charged could plausibly reflect the disruptive impact of globalization on our societies. For the last quarter of a century, as a minimum, and more plausibly since the mid-1970s, the narrative of prosperity and social stability is only part of the full story: there has been a significant widening of social inequality and a closing of the horizons for some significant segments in societies, as well as enormous changes in work and employment patterns that have put emotional stress on parts of society. The continuing strength of nationalism and the rise of populism across the Western world points to the “oscillations in the tension” within our societies.

What would be examples of FPA in individual decisions or, more broadly, in the underlying foreign policy strategies of countries? And what are the implications?

Examples

Starting with German foreign policy, I would consider important individual foreign policy decisions (such as the one on UNSCR 1973 on Libya in 2011) of the German coalition government of 2009 to 2013 and its overall performance, which was focused essentially on only one important genuine foreign policy issue (the Eurocrisis), as examples of FPA as weakness. The failure of the United States in 1920 to join the League of Nations also falls into this category: societal and political resistance to a U.S. foreign policy that would have corresponded to its objective weight and potential in

world affairs was too large. The U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, on the other hand was an example of emotional FPA. More fundamentally, both the United States and China in their foreign policy role concepts display aspects of emotional FPA. In China, it is the emotions of resentment, anger and fear, of nationalism and of status-seeking that play a significant role in the collective view of the world and in foreign policy behavior patterns; in the U.S., it is emotions attached to status, nationalism and exceptionalism that play a similarly important role. Moreover, both foreign policy elites tend to be obsessed, albeit in different ways, with issues of security, and both overestimate the utility of coercive force in their pursuit of their (foreign) policy objectives.

Implications

As in its original field psychology, the concept of FPA does not pretend to explain; it offers a dense, analytically focused way of describing behavior. The possible value-added of this metaphor lies in identifying behavioral patterns, in this case patterns in national foreign policy behavior, as “deviant” or “dysfunctional”. It thus may help to caution against excessively optimistic assumptions of rational behavior in foreign policy. Moreover, the FPA metaphor can identify weaknesses in foreign policy decision-making (such as the dangers of misrepresentation of the external environment in a foreign policy, or its emotional baggage) and thus – at least in principle may also be able to suggest ways to address those weaknesses. To do so may be easier in democratic than in authoritarian political systems, though it should be noted that FPA may exist in both systems alike: in fact, FPA as weakness could well be more important in democratic systems, while emotionally charged FPA may be more prevalent in authoritarian polities. The relevant axis for FPA thus would not compare democracies and authoritarian polities, but well-governed with badly governed states. “Well-governed” in this context of foreign policy approximates what we would expect from a

“mature” individual – a capacity to manage the conflicting pressures from within and the demands from external environment of the “reality principle” in ways that allow the person herself to optimize her enlightened self-interests while interacting responsibly and empathically with others. Overall, German foreign policy appears to me to meet this criterion. So did the United States under President Obama. We will find out about the United States under its new management