How States Think:
The Rationality of Foreign Policy

By John J. Mearsheimer *and* Sebastian Rosato
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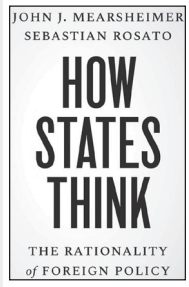

In their book *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*, Professor John J. Mearsheimer, an international relations theorist at the University of Chicago best known for developing the theory of offensive realism, and Sebastian Rosato, Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, present a compelling argument that states operate as rational actors in the international system. The book opens with a preface by challenging the dominant view in Western academia that Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine was an irrational act, instead asserting that it was a rational decision, consistent with the normal behavior of states. This argument aligns with Mearsheimer's earlier analyses, establishing him as one of the most contentious thinkers in recent years. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Mearsheimer reinforced his 2014[1] assessment of the Russian annexation of Crimea, contending that the West bears significant responsibility for the conflict due to its failure to anticipate Russia's reaction to Western social engineering in Ukraine and NATO's eastward expansion. In the new argumentative book, Mearsheimer and Rosato bolster this analysis by arguing that Russia's decision to invade "was a war of self-defense aimed at preventing an adverse shift in the balance of power," as it was also "the product of a deliberate process" (p. xii) based on "the consensus among Russian leaders regarding the dangers inherent in Ukraine's relationship with the West" (p. xiii). This perspective is emblematic of the book's overarching thesis that states typically act rationally rather than nonrationally.

The book is structured into 9 chapters. The first chapter focuses on conceptual analysis and offers a critical review of the existing literature on the rational choice assumption, indenting to highlight the originality of the framework. This framework is developed throughout chapters 1 to 4 in response to the first main research question of the book: "What is rationality?" In chapter 2, the authors begin with the premise that in a world characterized by uncertainty, goal-rational states almost always "place survival above all other objectives" (p. 16). In pursuing desired goals, however, they must "make sense of their situation and decide the way forward" as part of the strategic rationality (p. 36). As policymakers usually do not "have access to abundant information about the issues confronting them" (p. 25), they tend to rely on credible theories to find the best policy. This is simply a reflection of what the authors refer to as individuals being "homo theoreticus" (p. 7). Individual decision-making is thought to be followed by state rationality, which includes the process of deliberation.

Chapter 3 elaborates on this rough framework. At its core, Mearsheimer and Rosato argue that a state's strategy is rational if it is

based on "a credible theory or some combination of credible theories and is the product of deliberative process" (p. 65). What makes a theory credible is its foundation on "realistic assumptions," "causal logics," and "empirical claims," all corroborated by substantial "evidentiary support" (pp. 44-46). Deliberation is defined as a "two-step aggregation process involving robust and uninhabited debate among key decision-makers, followed by a final policy choice by an ultimate decider" (p. 65). These two elements routinely influence decision-making at both individual and collective levels. In essence, this "routine rationality" establishes rational action as the norm, with nonrationality regarded as deviation (p. 12).

In the subsequent chapters, the authors shift their focus to the book's second central question: "Are states actually rational actors?" They analyze ten case studies evenly split between the categories of grand strategy and crisis management. Chapter 5 explores the formulation of grand strategy, examining Germany's behavior toward the Triple Entente before the First World War, Japan's strategy toward the Soviet Union, France's approach to the Nazi threat before the Second World War, the U.S.' post-Cold War liberal hegemonic grand strategy, and Clinton's NATO expansion. Chapter 6 then investigates rationality in crisis decision-making, analyzing Germany's decision to initiate the First World War, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Germany's decision to invade the Soviet Union, the U.S. decision to settle the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Union's decision to invade Czechoslovakia.

These cases were intentionally selected due to their common classification as instances of nonrational behavior. The authors have chosen these particular cases to argue that, contrary to prevailing views, these actions can be construed as rational. Through this analysis, they seek to offer a more robust justification for their interpretation of rationality in decision-making. For example, the authors analyze President Clinton's NATO enlargement strategy, which has been characterized by numerous scholars and experts as "nonsensical", "pointless," "extremely dangerous," and "illogical" (p. 127). However, Mearsheimer and Rosato argue that "the decision to enlarge the alliance was," in fact, "rational" (p. 128). The U.S. foreign policy elite were divided, with perspectives grounded in credible theories such as liberalism and realism. The decision followed a thorough deliberation process, as policymakers engaged in an unconstrained debate before President Clinton ultimately pursued expansion.

Chapter 7 explores exceptional instances of nonrational behavior, including Britain's no-liability strategy before the Second World War, and the U.S. invasions of Cuba in 1961 and Iraq in 2003. Since the theoretical framework focuses on processes rather than outcomes, these cases are not classified as nonrational actions due to the failure of these strategies. The reason is that these policies are not based on credible theories or are not the outcome of deliberative processes. In the authors' view, for example, although the Bay of Pigs invasion was described as a "straightforward" American victory, it was underpinned by a "noncredible theory," and the Kennedy Administration's decision to invade "was the product of a nondeliberative process" (pp. 196-198). The same applies to the Iraq invasion. The argument is revisited in chapter 8, which further elaborates on goal-rationality by emphasizing how rational states prioritize survival as their most important objective.

The concluding chapter summarizes the implications of the book's arguments for both the theory and practice of international

politics, highlighting the work's significance. Indeed, the well-written and thoughtfully crafted book critically examines the rational actor assumption in world politics and effectively contributes to one of the most enduring debates in international relations scholarship. Since the 1990s, the dominance of "rationalistic" approaches like neo-realism and neo-liberalism has been increasingly questioned by "reflective" approaches such as constructivism, post-structuralism, and critical theory.[2] Central to this debate is the concept of rationality. The authors present a thorough critique, arguing that both the challenges posed by post-traditional international relations scholarship and political psychology, as well as the frequent tendency of policymakers to label foreign adversaries as irrational, are deeply flawed. In response, the book offers valuable theoretical and practical insights into foreign policy analysis.

Nevertheless, both theoretical and empirical dimensions present areas that require further development. Firstly, the theoretical framework, which argues that rational states rely on credible theories, contains some complex issues. The framework not only offers detailed explanations of how credible theories function but also clearly identifies the specific theories involved, including realism, liberalism, and constructivism. A notable problem is the assumption that these Western-produced scholarly theories are known to policymakers both within and outside the West. Another issue involves the confusion between the normative and explanatory characteristics of these theories. Normative theories prescribe how behavior should be, while explanatory theories aim to explain it. Consequently, state action is guided by normative theories, yet this distinction is not thoroughly addressed. For instance, constructivism is described as an explanatory theory, but it is unclear how a theory intended to explain behavior can also direct it. Similarly, neo-classical realism, an explanatory theory that combines external and internal factors to explain foreign policy, is cited as an example of a non-credible theory. However, the role of neo-classical realism as a normative theory in guiding decisions remains ambiguous.

Secondly, the book focuses on numerous case studies to test the validity of the theory, which, while supporting the argument, results in brief and superficial analyses of the cases without sufficient primary source support. A more focused approach with fewer case studies and in-depth analysis would have been more effective. Additionally, the omission of more recent significant events, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine –a topic briefly mentioned in the book's preface and considered inspirational for the study– represents a significant gap. Including such contemporary events could have strengthened the examination of the theory's applicability.

The book is primarily intended for scholars and practitioners of international politics, offering a comprehensive exploration of theoretical debates and their policy implications. While its theoretical complexity may pose challenges for students with limited prior knowledge of the field, they can still gain valuable insights. The book's focus on rationality and its implications for foreign policy provides a robust framework, making it particularly valuable for researchers and policymakers.

Endnotes

1. John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 77-89.

2. Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 32, No. 4 (December 1998), pp. 379-396.