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# "Bracketing" Foreign Policy from Domestic Affairs: A New Paradigm for International Negotiation and Decision-Making

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This paper argues that geo-political negotiators must separate domestic issues and politics from calculations on International Relations and consider only strategic international goals and national interests when working through issues with global leaders. The paper applies a poliheuristic lens to view the desultory influence of domestic politics on geo-political initiatives and suggests an alternative from the study of social science, namely the concept of "bracketing" as it is practiced in social science research.

Public policy, including foreign policy, is never decided in a vacuum. A host of considerations play a role in the decision-making process. Policies often emerge as flawed due to political compromises as part of the process. In a non-autocratic government it is natural for those in decision-making positions to take into account the needs and views of those who will be affected by the decision. After the Supreme Court decision on Citizen's United (2005), which enabled virtually unfettered campaign contributions from business interests on the grounds that businesses are comprised of people in a free society and should therefore enjoy the rights of people in a free society, the influence of non-decision makers on decision makers became more of a factor.

It is arguably unfortunate for this influence to occur in domestic policies: on the use of coal, for example, or solar power. Each constituency has a measure of influence that may offset the other. Contributions from the coal industry could avert a policy that favors solar power unless stakeholders within the solar power industry can counter that influence, to the best of their ability and within the constraints of their resources. However, when it comes to foreign policy, in many instances those affected by the foreign policy have no such ability, no resources to bear, and no influence on the outcome. The decision to implement a particular foreign policy might benefit a party or business or lobbying group here in the USA, and often does, but it just as easily can

adversely impact a party or business or group that has no ability to counter. Therefore there must be an attempt to create a mechanism for separating international and domestic issues to relieve a source of domestic pressure on policy makers.

The impetus for this discussion derives from poliheuristic decision-making theory, which suggests that "decision makers often attempt to cut through the plethora of complex information available during a decision task by employing cognitive short cuts, or heuristics" (Kinne, 2005; Mintz and Geva, 1997; Mintz, Geva, Redd, and Carnes, 1997; Mintz, 2004). One of these heuristics is the elimination of any choice that might lead to political fallout. The "non-compensatory" provision in poliheuristic theory states that in any given situation that requires a decision, if a certain alternative is unacceptable on the political dimension, "then a high score on another dimension (e.g., the military) cannot compensate/counteract for it, and hence the alternative is eliminated" (Mintz, 1993). The prefix "poli" in the title indicates the importance of the political dimension. According to poliheuristic theory, the political dimension is always non-compensatory in foreign policy decision making (Mintz and Geva, 1997; Mintz, 2004). Political leaders measure their success in political units, such as public approval ratings, and they are only able to turn their attention to other dimensions (e.g., economic or diplomatic concerns) after their political concerns have been satisfied (Mintz and Geva, 1997:83).

The link between domestic structures and foreign policy has been explored by many scholars, including Henry Kissinger in *Domestic Structure and Foreign Policy* (1969). Foreign policy is a strategy to fill in the gaps presented by limitations in a state's geography, natural and human resources and other factors. A nation's foreign policy is dependent on multiple variables often in tension with domestic realities that can be expressed as dichotomies: more practical than

moral, more economic than military; more interdependent than solipsistic; more international than national; more permanent or systemic than temporary or political.  Because of the dialectic nature of foreign policy, intra-national as well as international, leaders are forced to play two games of chess at the same time—one with allies and enemies abroad and the other with domestic or partisan allies and opponents.  Weakness at home can lead to weakness abroad; weakness abroad may be politically fatal at home.

Since its introduction in the 1990s, the poliheuristic model has been applied to numerous conflicts. In each case, leaders use a two-stage process in making decisions: "they first use simple heuristics to eliminate alternatives based on the avoid-major-political-loss principle, and then use more analytic calculations in selecting an alternative from a subset of surviving alternatives" (Mintz, 2005).  Various analysts have in this way examined the bombing of Kosovo by President Clinton, the decision to fight but not invade Iraq by President George Herbert Walker Bush, the decision by President Carter to try a military rescue of the hostages in Iran, the decision by President George W. Bush to invade Iraq, among many others. The theory has also been applied to autocratic regimes (Kinne, 2005). As has been noted by Barbara Geddes, autocratic regimes are as different from one another as they are from democratic governments. "They have different procedures for making decisions, different characteristic forms of intra-elite factionalism and competition, different ways of choosing leaders and handling succession, and different ways of responding to society and opposition" (Geddes, 1999a). Clearly, this makes for a more complex analysis (see Kinne, 2005 for a detailed analysis of the three types of autocratic regimes and a poliheuristic analysis). The difference between Bush 41 and Saddam Hussein is instructive: Bush had to hold together a very fragile coalition that included the Soviet Union, France, Syria, Saudi Arabia and others. He also had to factor in a "looming recession, the twin

deficits, the savings and loan crisis, the collapse of several major banks, the continued increase in oil prices (to more than $40 a barrel) due to the situation in the Gulf in the pre-January 15 period, the 'sunk costs' associated with the deployment and maintenance of a very large air, land, and naval force (of 400,000 plus soldiers) on Saudi soil for months, and Saddam Hussein's threats to blow out Kuwaiti and Saudi oil fields" (Mintz, 2005). He also had to answer critics at home, which was accomplished through a very thorough publicity campaign that positioned Kuwaitis as victims of the worst kind of despot and was determined to strike before the opposition (in this case, Democrats in the Senate and House) could organize a counter-campaign. Last, but perhaps not least, he had the capitalist interests of the military-industrial complex, stuck without an enemy since the end of the Cold War, to consider.

On the other hand, Hussein had no such worries. "Hussein had a free hand to alter Iraq's policy without loss of domestic support mainly because he has had 'a secure domestic position' that permitted wide policy latitude" (Kugler, 1991; Kinne, 2005). That only one of them would remain in office for over a year after the war ended testifies to the most basic difference between autocratic and democratic regimes.  But the factors weighing on President Bush speak to the enormous domestic pressures placed on a foreign policy. Researchers have found that "historically, reduced popularity and a deteriorating economy have been two of the most important variables explaining presidents' decisions to use force" (Ostrom and Job, 1986 quoted from Mintz, 1993).

A brief poliheuristic analysis of the Portsmouth Treaty negotiation that ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 is revealing. Economic pressures faced by leaders in Japan tilted peace negotiations in favor of the Russians even though the Japanese won every battle and completely destroyed the Russian navy. Part of this was due to the tyranny of the Russian leader: Tsar

Nicholas had no concern for the suffering of his crushed armed forces or the disastrous effects of the war in Russia. The victorious Japanese could not continue the war, in part due to pressure from the Jewish-American financier, Jacob Schiff, who basically funded the Japanese war effort himself and was demanding that it end. Therefore, Japanese negotiators could not even keep the gains they won on the battlefield. Domestic issues played a big role in the negotiations: in effect, Japan won the war but lost the peace.

The poliheuristic framework proves that decision makers like Presidents and their advisors that are charged with securing and preserving the national interest as the impetus for a foreign policy take other considerations into account when making decisions. In fact, Mintz (1993) wonders if the Gulf War would have been fought if Bush 41 had spoken with Mother Theresa instead Margaret Thatcher. It's a fair question.

Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security advisor for President Barack Obama, said on Frontline that when it comes to decisions you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. While at one time the cliché that criticism of the President stopped at the shoreline was true, this is no longer the case. In addition to the chatter of the opposition party, foreign governments lobby and spend money to influence congressional decisions. It is imperative that decision makers in Foreign Policy remain aloof to criticism, lobbying influence and any other factors beyond the national interest and the preservation of states, lands, fauna, flora and people that do not have a voice capable of altering a decision. The technique that can achieve this goal that I propose comes from social science. It is called bracketing.

Bracketing is a term use in phenomenological research. Phenomenology is a "reasoned inquiry which discovers the inherent essences of appearances" (Stewart and Mickunas,1990).

Although it is often mistaken for a philosophy, phenomenology is rather a scientific inquiry designed to understand the world in its essence, beyond "constructions, preconceptions, and assumptions" (Gearing, 2004). Therefore, bracketing is used in phenomenology to get to the *eide* or essence of an experience or phenomenon. It is especially important to use bracketing when investigating something that has emotional weight. For example, "in investigating batterers' experiences of being violent, Reitz (1999) recognized the importance of this foundational focus of bracketing: 'Interviews were constructed using a 'bracketing' technique that removes much of the researcher's preconceptions' (Gearing, 2004). A decision-maker could use the same technique to escape his or her own pre-suppositions and the influence of would-be stakeholders and make the decision based on the essence of the problem, conflict or policy itself. There is technique and separate elements involved in bracketing, the foremost among them the explicit acknowledgement of the opinions, constructions and pre-suppositions of oneself and all other stakeholders. History itself would need to be bracketed out. While pundits and armchair statesmen ponder if the deal with Iran over nuclear weapons is Munich or the Cuban Missile Crisis, or whether Iraq is Vietnam, etc. a decision-maker must learn the lessons of history and then omit them from consideration as being beyond the essence of the policy. And just as bracketing protects the researcher from his or her own bias against wife-beaters, it will insulate decision-makers from the second-guessers, the naysayers and the zealots who plague them.

The benefit of bracketing includes insulation from many of the elements that make us who we are—to the extent that this is possible. These influences must be acknowledged and understood before being put aside for the time being. For example, if President Barack Obama makes decisions based on a post-Colonialist orientation, a gift from his father, he must acknowledge it and push it aside. If former President George W. Bush is influenced by his own

evangelistic Christianity, he must acknowledge it and push it aside. Bernie Sanders would have to put aside his experience and orientation as a Democratic Socialist and get to the essence of the matter that requires a decision. Thus, self-knowledge along with the discipline and ability to set aside these constructions – no matter how important they are to one's personality and political philosophy—are the most important traits one could want in a leader. Questions about character and faith and fidelity and philosophy are relevant only as a way to question self-knowledge. Self-discipline becomes the most important element of the character of a national leader. An emotional leader, as satisfying as that may be to some people; a religious leader, as important as that is to many people; a knowledgeable and experienced leader, as important as that may be— these are at best secondary and tertiary traits of leadership that the world requires and in many cases would be disqualifying. Analytical, (analytical bracketing has been rising in importance over the past few decades), pragmatic, disciplined and thoughtful are the key traits this role demands. A thick skin and the ability to turn a deaf ear to critics is also paramount.

In conclusion, bracketing is a scientific concept that requires decision-makers to have a methodological awareness of its complexity, theoretical underpinnings, and applicability to the situation. It is not easy, although it may appear to be to some outsiders. If practiced enough, it can be a formidable tool, as it can help reveal the issue in its essence, without the noise of interpretations, political calculations, political philosophies, religion, morality, etc to interfere with clarity of purpose and ability to resolve crises. Michelangelo was reportedly asked how he could sculpt marble into the masterpieces he created. Simple, he is supposed to have said that one simply chips away everything that is not that thing. Clarity of vision leads to success. In foreign policy as well as social science, bracketing can be useful to discover the essence of a thing and act accordingly.

In the end, it is up to our leaders to act without fear. When it comes to tough foreign policy issues, domestic politics must be bracketed; that is, the leader must separate the two and ignore the commentary and the consequences. Poliheuristic theory shows how local politics affects decisions made around the world, often to the detriment of stakeholders, due to the non-compensatory effects of political loss.

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