Personality in international relations

ASSIGN BUSTER

This essay will explore the extent to which the personality traits of a decision maker impact upon his foreign policies. It will not argue that such idiosyncratic variables alone are the exclusive determinants, but that they have a significant role to play. As political scientist James Barber remarked, " Every story of decision making is really two stories: an outer one in which a rational man calculates and an inner one in which an emotional man feels. The two are forever connected" (quoted in Brewer, 1992, p. 149). Foreign policy decision making is an outcome of how individuals with power perceive and analyse events. Political leaders are not beyond the reach of the human traits of assumptions, subjectivity, prejudices and biases. Their underlying beliefs and motivations will have a bearing upon the conclusions they reach. Culture, geography, history, ideology, and self-conceptions shape the thought process of a decision maker, forming what has been referred to as the psycho-socio milieu of decision-making (Sprouts, 1965). The foreign policy decisions of Harry Truman, Saddam Hussein and Charles de Gaulle will be used as case studies to demonstrate how personality can affect the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, whilst also providing the opportunity to show the differing extents to which such traits have occasion to make an impact, due to situational factors such as in a crisis or in non-democratic regimes. This essay will conclude that the influence of individual personality traits is most evident in the foreign policies of persons in unrestricted positions of authority, and in crisis situations. In democracies, during non-critical times, the extent to which the leader's personality influences decision making varies according to his relative passive/aggressive nature. Dominant leaders will seek to reshape the international political system in accordance with their own personal vision,

resulting in tenacious foreign policies through which they attempt to advance a central idea, whilst maintenance of the status quo can be attributed more to low-dominance, introvert individuals, seeking to power-share and delegate decision making (Etheredge, 1978).

The effects of personality on decision making are difficult to quantify. Interpersonal generalisation theory suggests that behavioural differences in interpersonal situations have some correlation to behavioural differences in international situations, for example, a relationship between self-assertiveness/dominance, and willingness to resort to military action (Etheredge, 1978). However, it would be naive and over-simplified to state that certain personality traits of a decision maker lead a country to war; instead they can be seen as tipping the balance towards or against a certain policy, because, put succinctly, " some leaders are willing to gamble the destiny of their people in a war; others are not" (Ali Musallam, 1996, p. 5) It is also important to take into consideration the extent to which individual traits can be separated from role-playing. Decision makers may act how they perceive a leader in their society is expected to act, taking role-appropriate decisions which are not necessarily in line with their personal nature.

No individual can know all the relevant factors when making a decision, thus each individual's perception of reality will be different from reality. This incongruence between the psychological and operational environments permits filters, such as the past experiences of leaders, to shape decision making. It has been argued that " there is strong, robust evidence that most human choice is preconscious and strongly and quickly influenced by emotion... despite their expertise, foreign policy makers are no less biased

than other people" (Gross Stein, 2008, p. 113). Core beliefs are held to be true even if they cannot be verified, providing the foundation of myths and ideologies; efforts to challenge them are met with hostility. The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance enables even the most intelligent of human minds to resist and deny important, uncomfortable aspects of reality. Human psychological make-up limits rationality, having a need for simplicity. In the processing and analysing of complex information, we break down information and choose how we want to interpret it.

When analysing the influence of personality upon foreign policy, it is important to emphasise that the differing political environments surrounding leaders will naturally create highly variable boundaries within which they have the freedom to operate. It is a given that a dictator in an authoritarian regime has much greater, unconditional, unaccountable power to create policies suiting his personal interests, than the leader of a democracy. Within a democracy, the head of government is obliged, to some extent, to take into consideration the opinions of other authorities and experts, and must especially consult the Foreign Minister with regard to foreign policy. However, ultimately, the final decision does lie with the leader, and he does possess the power to override other opinion if he wishes. Leaders of governments can also have the advantage of hand-selecting those who they put into positions of power. A leader is likely to choose key advisors who share his core beliefs and he considers to be generally cooperative, creating an environment in which groupthink has the potential to flourish.

Political leaders in democracies should, theoretically, and sometimes in practise, reflect the attitudes and core values of their citizens. Having been

through the same socialisation process and sharing the same core cultural values as his citizens, the democratic leader can be seen as an embodiment of societal character. Decision making is an institutionalised process, in which " personality factors merge with cultural background factors and can often be explained in more generalisable group terms" (Cerny, 1980, p. 13). The mood of society sets broad boundaries around the theoretical foreign policy alternatives of decision makers. However, it has been alleged that, beyond academic elites in foreign affairs, there exists a lack of public interest in foreign policy; seemly too distant and irrelevant compared to domestic issues. It is argued that the general public is " ill-informed and unstable, prone to changes in opinion... at worst [they] possess non-attitudes with respect to international politics" (Robinson, 2008, p. 139). This gives the government greater freedom of movement than in formation and implementation of domestic policies, and hence greater scope for domination by significant personalities and ideologies. Nonetheless, it could also be argued that this apparent apathy is now declining due technological, transportation and communications revolutions which enable foreign affairs to be brought much closer to the daily lives of ordinary people.

Personality can impact to differing extents on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. Whilst a policy can be formulated, within the relative situational and bureaucratic restraints, to the particular personal liking of a leader and his colleagues, the implementation stage, translating foreign policy objectives into practise and desired outcomes, is more complex. Attempts to implement a policy can come into conflict with the objectives of other actors and the environment, as the boundary between

decision makers and the outside world is crossed. It is true that " orders may be easily issued, but that is only the beginning of the process of attempting to achieve one's goals... for all kinds of states… [because] leaders rely on sub-contracting to bureaucratic agents, some of whom may take the opportunity to slow down or undermine the policy, or even to run their own policies in competition" (Brighi&Hill, 2008, pp. 130-4). Foreign policy is not self-executing, and requires resources, support or mobilisation of the public, and some political consensus, particularly in a democracy. The more charismatic, persuasive and motivational the leader, the greater his chances of overcoming such opposition. This task is made particularly easy in authoritarian regimes such as North Korea, where the media is subject to state control. A leader can gain public support for his policy through the strategic use of propaganda, promoting both his 'greatness' as a decision maker, and that of the policy.

President Truman provides an interesting example of a decision maker in a democracy acting under crisis conditions. In the turbulent international conditions of the closure of WWII, he was thrust into power, following the sudden death of President Roosevelt. It was President Truman who took the historical, controversial decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It would be difficult to argue that, under the power of a different presidential personality, the US would definitely not have taken this dramatic course of action. However, a number of factors related to Truman's personality and previous experiences can be linked to his ultimate decision to drop the bomb. The first Truman had heard of the atomic bomb came after his inauguration. This bomb changed the nature of warfare to a degree

that is difficult to comprehend. With such little time to absorb such information, having fought as an artillery officer in WWI, it is possible that Truman " may have thought about the atomic bomb as [simply] a larger… explosive than the ones he fired in Europe" (Strong, 2005, p. 15). Its radical scale of destruction was close to incomprehensible. A self-confessed amateur in foreign policy, in the shadow of Roosevelt, he wanted to establish himself. He was an active decision maker, preferring to do something rather than nothing, " who enjoyed his presidential powers", and preferred not to delegate authority, believing that " the President makes foreign policy" (Frankel, 1963, p. 21). A direct, pragmatic character, he was willing to be accountable for his decisions, " proud of the sign…on his desk announcing that 'the buck stops here'" (Strong, 2005, p. 18).

Truman continued his presidency from the aftermath of WWII into the beginnings of the Cold War. Under the heightened tension of possibly imminent nuclear war, presidential power and responsibility was great; the " president's finger was, indeed, on the nuclear trigger" (Fraser & Murray, 2002, p. 5). His conviction in the superiority of capitalism, the benefits to be gained from its adoption in other parts of the world, and the dangers outlined by Domino Theory, lead him to take a foreign policy of 'containment' with regards to communism. In line with his military background, Truman adopted a confrontational attitude to USSR, what came to be known as the 'Iron Fist' approach, partly in reaction to the previous Western failure of appeasement to stop Nazi expansionism. He was sceptical of all totalitarian states, claiming " I don't care what you call them - Nazi, Communist or Fascist-…they are all alike" (Gaddis, 1982, p. 66). To follow through with the

Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, Truman needed the support of Congress and the public, which he won using his popular, persuasive, extroverted personality. A supporter of the UN, Truman was " a convinced internationalist, conscious that the United States should not repeat the isolationist errors of the 1920's" (Fraser & Murray, 2002, p. 9). This helps explain why he followed such an interventionist foreign policy during his presidency. He was willing to place himself as leader of the free world, protecting and expanding his core beliefs in democracy and capitalism.

In a dictatorship, foreign policy decisions lie almost solely in the hands of the leader; his decisions can be made without the accountability, checks and balances which exist in a democracy. In 1990, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein took the decision to invade neighbouring Kuwait. Arguably, " the whole war... [is] to be found in his psyche [and] insecurity" (Hughes-Wilson, 1999, p. 350). In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq, the country was financially destitute. Recent acrimonious encounters with the West added to Hussein's growing feeling of paranoia and desperation. Having " bludgeoned his way to the top", Hussein was prepared to use any means possible to stay there (Ali Musallam, 1996, p. 45). He had a need to live up to his own hard-line rhetoric, to avoid meeting the fate he had recently seen Romanian dictator Nicolae fall to. Saddam was " devious, untrustworthy, greedy, ambitious... [and] broke... his own people did have about three goes at assassinating him in the seven months before he invaded Kuwait", so his paranoias of public rioting and coups were not unfounded (Hughes-Wilson, 1999, p. 341).

Saddam took Kuwait's refusal of a moratorium on its wartime loans, and refusal of other financial aid to Iraq, as a personal affront. Kuwait was

incredibly rich in oil, and virtually defenceless, so " to a personality like Saddam Hussein the temptation to solve his economic problems at a stroke must have been irresistible" (Hughes-Wilson, 1999, p. 322). The invasion was symptomatic of the stereotypical qualities of a dictator. Aggressive, egotistical and unwilling to compromise, Hussein simply decided he would take what he wanted. His bloodthirsty, ruthless nature and readiness to resort to violence can be traced back to his childhood socialisation. Suffering the physical and psychological abuse of his stepfather, Hussein " was raised in the hard world of the mountains, and mafia-like warlords and family clans that control them. Guns [were seen] as essential to a man... it is alleged that Saddam had shot and killed his first man by the age of eleven" (Hughes-Wilson, 1999, p. 314). This culture of casual violence influenced his beliefs in the harsh realities of the survival of the fittest. As a child, he would be sent to work in the fields whilst his stepbrothers would be allowed to go to school, aiding the development of his intense inferiority complex which would lead to his hunger for power and glory in later life (Ali Musallam, 1996).

The former French President Charles de Gaulle was highly driven by his ideology and patriotism. He took a keen interest in foreign policy, and had the ultimate goal of restoring French historic cultural 'greatness' on the international stage. De Gaulle came to power as a highly respected, charismatic military leader with great moral authority, often playing up to this image by making public appearances in military uniform. He obsessed over his legacy, wanting to be an inspiration for the generations of French citizens that would come after him; becoming a symbolic embodiment of how he perceived 'France'. He was well aware of his own great personality

and prestige, " conscious of living his own biography", and often spoke of himself in the third person (Grosser, 1967, p. 26). He assumed the role he believed a leader should take whilst in public, conforming to the perceived requirements of the title, whilst keeping his private life as detatched as possible.

De Gaulle's father, passionate about politics and history, was a professor who instilled his pride of France and her past into his son (de Gaulle, 1998). He considered all the actions he made by how they would mark history; less concerned with the criticisms made by those at the time of his action, and more by their judgement by future historians. Despite being a strong advocate of democracy, de Gaulle grew up in a royalist environment, and carried with him to adulthood its goals of continuity, leadership and an embodiment of the state, which were reflected in his politics. De Gaulle's first Prime Minister was Michel Debré, " a devoted Gaullist… [who] could not refuse to do what his hero asked him to do" (Thody, 1998, p. 23). There was a certain unwillingness amongst de Gaulle's advisors to disagree with their charismatic leader; he encouraged an environment of groupthink by surrounding himself with people of a similar view point. This was the perfect occasion for his personality to strongly influence the direction of French foreign policy. Possessing a certain distrust of diplomatic personnel, " there is no doubt that it is General de Gaulle himself who makes the decisions on foreign policy issues" (Grosser, 1967, p. 13). A strong believer in intuition, if he felt a decision was right for France, he would take it.

De Gaulle's foreign policy was farsighted in that it was based upon his image of a post cold-war world, in which " the mature nations of the old world and

the newly independent states of the Third World would act to counterbalance the…hegemony of…the US and the Soviet Union" (Cerny, 1980, p. 1). A born maverick, de Gaulle was not afraid to make his foreign policy disruptive of the world order. His self-perception was that of a guardian of national interest; he wanted to develop autonomy for his people by resisting the strength of the superpowers and exercising power inconsistent with his relatively limited resource capabilities, through manipulation of the international system; it would be fair to say that he had " a taste for the impossible" (Grosser, 1967, p. 65). His policy of boycotting NATO and UN conferences was " to oblige others to take greater account of France through absence than they do when she is obliged to join in decisions over which she can exert no decisive influence" (Grosser, 1967, p. 132). His doubts over the support of the US against Soviet invasion lead to his decision to develop a French nuclear deterrent, and to withdraw troops from NATO in 1966. He refused to accept that the two superpowers should be the sole possessors of nuclear power. De Gaulle strongly linked the notion of national security to independence, the intertwining of diplomatic and military strength, which can be explained by his military background. It would appear that " the personal style of the General gives its special shape to a policy which… corresponds to French desires…it is a policy that dares to take risks, to gamble for high stakes, to court failure rather than resigning itself to mediocrity and timidity" (Grosser, 1967, p. xi). De Gaulle symbolically rejected Britain's entry into the ECC, fearing it would upset the Franco-German leadership. He saw Britain as a 'Trojan Horse' for America to gain greater influence in Europe, and was so strong in his beliefs he dared to take a stance against the other five ECC members; " it is…unlikely that any

French politician other than de Gaulle would have vetoed Great Britain's attempt to join the ECC" (Thody, 1998, p. 29).

This essay has shown that the role of personality in the formulation and implementation is variable. The more critical a situation is perceived to be, the fewer people will be directly involved in its management, and so there is a greater likeliness that their conclusions and actions will reflect their own personal beliefs, attitudes and interests. Despite institutional constraints, the political leader has a significant influence over decision making, particularly when national security is seen to be at stake, or when policy can be formed relatively secretly. Even in non-crisis situations, a political leader has " the potential to exercise power and thereby impose his preferences on policy. The extent to which he does so " depend[s] on his own values, beliefs, background and personality" (Brewer, 1992, p. 160). Every person in a position of power brings personal experiences, values, preconceptions and emotions to their decision making, although some will allow bureaucracy and the power-sharing nature of democracy to counter and balance these idiosyncrasies. Ultimately, the personality of a leader has the most influence in unaccountable, dictatorial regimes, often due to the climate of fear surrounding their unlimited powers. However, even a dictator cannot continuously take whichever foreign policy actions he pleases without some eventual restraints posed by resources, the international community, uprising of his own people or a coup.