doi: 10.17323/1728-192x-2024-4-259-266

"…Such is the Reality of International Politics"

Book review: Mearsheimer J. J., Rosato S. (2023) How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. — 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-30026-930-7.

Maxim Fetisov
Candidate of Philosophical Sciences
Independent Researcher
Address: Lermontova str., 241, Stavropol, 355041 Russian Federation
E-mail: msfetisov@gmail.com

> Some will remind us of the saying "while the Romans deliberate, Saguntum is lost." On the other hand, when the few decide everything, simply on the basis of their own affects, freedom and the common good are lost. For human wits are too sluggish to penetrate everything right away. But by asking advice, listening, and arguing, they're sharpened. When people try all means, in the end they find ways to the things they want which everyone approves, and no one had ever thought of before.
> Spinoza, Political Treatise, ix, 14

The realist perspective on global politics, which once existed in the shadows of ideological euphoria, is now experiencing a remarkable resurgence, albeit primarily in practical terms. As is often the case in such situations, its conceptual and doctrinal design is somewhat delayed. The old realist authors were seen as relics of the Cold War, preserved in its remote corners, somewhere in time, while the departments of international relations, dominated by ideological triumphalism, failed to bring up the new generations of realists for academia. Thus, by the second decade of this century, a meeting with a foreign policy realist equals an encounter with a prehistoric creature.

John J. Mearsheimer, the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago and a renowned scholar of international relations, has always been an exception to this rule. As a foreign policy theorist, he never stepped back, retreating into liberal fairy tales about "democratic peace", "rules-based order", or "decline of violence". He always firmly adhered to the vision of the political world established by Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau. This is a world riddled with chaos, anarchy, and ignorance; here, "the large ones eat the smaller" and your survival depends on the actual ratio of power and strength. This is the case that Mearsheimer makes in his books and in numerous public appearances. The main players in this scenario are still the states, and as we know from the classics of political philosophy, the virtue of a state is security. This is not a particularly promising outlook, so is it even possible to have any stable political knowledge within this grim perspective? The question is discussed in the book "How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy" that was written by Mearsheimer together with his former student Sebastian Rosato, who is a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame.

The general answer is yes, because if this were not the case, then no meaningful statements about international politics would be possible at all: "If nonrationality is the norm, state behavior can be neither understood nor predicted, and studying international politics is a futile endeavor. For practitioners, rationality enables states to devise effective foreign policies. Only if those other states are rational actors can one anticipate how friends and enemies are likely to behave in a given situation and thus formulate policies that will advance one's interests" (p. xiv).

Moreover, according to the authors, most foreign policy actors are primarily concerned with trying to behave in the most rational manner. This line of argument runs contrary to the familiar trope of Western discourse that habitually accuses opponents of "irrationality" or even insanity. This perspective does afford us the opportunity to perceive certain events in a fresh light, particularly in the context of crisis and warfare.

The authors begin their argument by covering current events: "It is widely believed in the West that Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was not a rational act." Putin's critics also insist that "the only morally acceptable reason for going to war is self-defense, but the invasion of Ukraine was a war of conquest" (p. ix). The main reason that prompted Putin to launch the Ukrainian campaign, they say, is that "Putin was bent on conquering Ukraine and other countries in Eastern Europe to create a greater Russian empire, something that would satisfy a nostalgic yearning among Russians but that makes no strategic sense in the modern world" (p. xi).

This is the point that Mearsheimer and Rosato strongly disagree with. They say that these "claims rest on common understandings of rationality that are intuitively plausible but ultimately flawed. Contrary to what many people think, we cannot equate rationality with success and nonrationality with failure. Rationality is not about outcomes. Rational actors often fail to achieve their goals, not because of foolish thinking but because of factors they can neither anticipate nor control. There is also a powerful tendency to equate rationality with morality since both qualities are thought to be features of enlightened thinking. But that too is a mistake. Rational policies can violate widely accepted standards of conduct and may even be murderously unjust" (p. x).

But actual situation, in the opinion of the authors, was precisely the opposite. Russia's decision to invade Ukraine was rational because "Putin and his advisers thought in terms of straightforward balance-of-power theory, viewing the West's efforts to make Ukraine a bulwark on Russia's border as an existential threat that could not be allowed to stand… In short, this was a war of self-defense aimed at preventing an adverse shift in the balance of power." (p. xi-xii). Moreover, as the evidence indicates contrary to all widely shared rhetoric about "Putin's reckless bid for empire", Russia's decision to openly intervene in the civil war in Ukraine was not only a product of some sort of strategic rationality, but also the result of a lengthy deliberative process: "Putin's subordinates shared his views about the nature of the threat confronting Russia, and he consulted with them before deciding on war" (p. xiii).

If this is the case, then the decision to start a war by invading Ukraine was not only rational, but there was nothing unique or anomalous about it. Moreover, history pro-

vides us with a lot of examples of such actions by great powers, when their seemingly irrational behavior actually turned out not only to be rational but was taken after a due deliberation process (p. xiii). It was the discrimination and criminalization of war that occurred after 1945, its ban from the list of possible ways to resolve political disputes, that made it possible to perceive the state's decision on war as deeply irrational. It is this widely shared delusion that Mearsheimer and Rosato seek to unravel: "Against the increasingly common view among students of international politics that states are often nonrational, we argue in this book that most states are rational most of the time" (p. xiv). The initial hypothesis put forward by the authors proceeds from the fact that there is no "good definition" of rationality in the international relations scholarship. They suppose it something to be about "making sense of the world world — that is, figuring out how it works and why — in order to decide how to achieve certain goals. It has both an individual and a collective dimension. Rational policymakers are theory-driven. They rely on credible theories — logical explanations based on realistic assumptions and supported by substantial evidence — about the workings of the international system, and they employ these to understand their situation and determine how best to navigate it. Rational states aggregate the views of key policymakers through a deliberative process, one marked by robust and uninhibited debate. In sum, rational decisions in international politics rest on credible theories about how the world works and emerge from a deliberative decision-making process" (p. x-xi).

However, the vast majority of the research literature on foreign policy proceeds from completely different premises, which the authors find completely unsatisfactory and deeply flawed. There is a general framework for international relations scholarship, this is the so-called "rational actor assumption" (p. 1). It implies that key decision-makers act, as a rule, in a rational way. This means that they make sense of the world by making up credible theories about its workings and composition. This assumption "has both individual and state-level dimensions". When describing the individual dimension, the authors resort to the help of Max Weber (albeit through the mediation of Steven Kalberg): "mental processes that consciously strive to master reality are common to all the types of rationality. . . All of these processes systematically confront… social reality's endless stream of concrete occurrences, unconnected events, and punctuated happenings. In mastering reality, their common aim is to banish particularized perceptions by ordering them into comprehensible and 'meaningful' regularities" (p. 20-21). This is quite a traditional definition, however, when shifting to the collective dimension, it takes on a certain intellectualist and deliberative twist: "A state is rational if the views of its key decision makers are aggregated through a deliberative process and the final policy is based on a credible theory. Conversely, a state is nonrational if it does not base its strategy on a credible theory, does not deliberate, or both. A careful review of the historical record shows that judged by these criteria, states are regularly rational in their foreign policy" (p. 2). The authors assume this hypothesis to be a "radical intervention in the debate" since they are going to "offer a meaningful definition of rationality in international politics where none existed" (p. 4).

It is important to make a clear distinction between two different types of rationality: the rationality of means and the rationality of ends: "there is a difference between what we call 'strategic rationality' and 'goal rationality'". It is the distinction that is most wanting in contemporary foreign policy scholarship since "the debate on rationality in the international relations literature focuses almost exclusively on whether a state's strategies are rational and pays little attention to evaluating the rationality of its goals (p. 4).

There is an old philosophical habit of attributing the strategic rationality of means to the sphere of instrumental action, which is controlled by a calculated cost-benefit ratio aimed at solving a specific problem. The rationality of goals, on the other hand, is linked to the realm of morality and is governed by ethical imperatives. This leads to obvious confusion and misunderstanding when decision-makers, political scientists, journalists, and even historians on numerous occasions describe the policies of their opponents or subjects as "nonrational". Consequently, when they confuse morality with political affairs, they become susceptible to cognitive biases. This old dichotomy, however, does not accurately express the situation in foreign policy analysis. According to the realist logic, the highest priority of the state dealing with the international system is survival. This means that all strategic policies and subsequent actions should be entirely subordinated to this ultimate goal: "survival is particularly important. States aim to preserve the integrity of their physical base and maintain their ability to determine their own political fate" (p. 213).

The paramount importance of survival necessitates that foreign policy must be proactive in the face of high uncertainty, which is a defining and essential feature of interstate relations, with war being the most critical factor: "Policymakers confront serious information deficits regarding most of the elements that matter for designing grand strategies or navigating crises. The farther they peer into the future, the larger these deficits become. Among other things, policymakers may not have good data about their own people's resolve or how their weaponry and combat forces will perform in a war. Additional uncertainties apply when it comes to assessing other states, friends as well as enemies" (p. 25).

It is important to differentiate between uncertainty and risk, which is simply choosing from a range of pre-determined options: "In a risk world, decision makers do not know the consequences of pursuing any given strategy, but they can acquire the information needed to calculate the odds of various outcomes… In an uncertain world, actors cannot acquire the information needed to evaluate the likely consequences of pursuing different strategies." (p. 23-24).

Rational decision-making in a situation of uncertainty requires not only collecting and processing vast amounts of raw data, but also doing so in a fundamentally information-deficient environment, such as international politics: "It is difficult to measure the military assets, objectives, intentions, and strategies of other states, especially since states often conceal or misrepresent their capabilities and thinking. Taken together, these information deficits mean that decision makers are bound to have limited knowledge about

how their states' interactions with other states are likely to play out and to what outcome" (p. 25)

This data-driven approach does not constitute a rational policy in itself. The transition to rational action requires a reliable theory supported by an active process of deliberation: "A state's policy is rational if it is based on a credible theory or some combination of credible theories and is the product of a deliberative process. Policies that do not rest on credible theories or are not the products of a deliberative process are not rational" (p. 65).

The bulk of ideas about rationality in foreign policy can be divided into two main paradigms: the rational choice theory and behavioral economics. Both of these patterns, for all their differences, proceed from the axiom of expected utility maximization: "There are two bodies of scholarship that explore the rational actor assumption in international politics. Rational choice scholars and political psychologists both think about rationality in terms of expected utility maximization, which is basically a data-driven enterprise. But they emphasize different issues: the former focus on rationality while the latter focus on nonrationality" (p. 70). The actor in this scenario is homo economicus, aiming not for survival, but for maximizing profit. This kind of behavior is considered to be rational. At the same time, rational choice theories focus on outcomes and do not describe the actual process of making decisions. In other words, they do not describe the workings of rationality. Mearsheimer and Rosato even introduce the Kantian term "as if" in their description. They say that the aforementioned researchers "pay scant attention to how rational policymakers make sense of the world or how rational states aggregate the views of those individuals. They do examine how individuals make choices, as one would expect from scholars who describe themselves as rational choice theorists. Yet they do not discuss the mental processes by which rational policymakers make decisions. Instead, they assume that those individuals act "as if" they were expected utility maximizers" (p. 70)

Behavioral economics, despite the fact that it describes the work of rationality from a different perspective, also relies on the figure of homo economicus. The essential difference is that it tries to describe the actual workings of rationality in foreign policy, but it does so by identifying various cognitive tools that are explicitly or implicitly used in decision-making: heuristics, shortcuts, historical analogies, and so on (p. 91). Thus, it identifies various errors, cognitive biases, i.e., rationality limitations, in order to come to the conclusion that there is no rationality in world politics and most of the decisions made are essentially nonrational: "Political psychologists define nonrationality as deviation from expected utility maximization, which they call bias. Focusing almost exclusively on how individuals make choices, they argue that policymakers routinely rely on mental shortcuts — primarily analogies and heuristics — that lead to biases" (p. 71).

From the perspective of Mearsheimer and Rosato, political psychology and behavioral economics seem to be in a clear performative contradiction, since if their arguments were true, no international policy could be implemented at all. Nevertheless, the tools of political psychology (hard-wired into the human brain or based on observations of historical events) and behavioral economics are actively used by political scientists, experts, and journalists. This leads to another source of cognitive errors and unacceptable confu-

sion between politics and morality, as is regularly demonstrated by impressive failures in various foreign policy areas.

It is also important to note that neither rational choice theory nor political psychology, with behavioral economics, provide a consistent perspective for understanding the process of aggregating individual decisions into collective strategies. In their view, the actions of individuals and the actions of the states look equivalent, which is of course not the case in reality (pp. 73-74).

This, of course, does not mean a complete absence of nonrationality in international affairs. However, it needs to be assessed within a completely different conceptual framework. To support their argument, Mearsheimer and Rosato provide a series of historical examples to illustrate the process of developing grand strategy and managing crises. The authors demonstrate that these events, traditionally viewed by political scientists and historians as nonrational and insane decisions, were actually well-reasoned attempts to implement rational policies in situations of high uncertainty. Such are, for example, Germany's decision to enter the Great War in Europe, The United States' decision to pursue liberal hegemony after the Cold War, Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor, the settling of the Cuban Missile Crisis or Soviet decision to invade Czechoslovakia (pp. 103-179). These cases are clearly in line with the criteria for rational state behavior in international politics outlined by Mearsheimer and Rosato: the availability of a reliable theory and a robust deliberation prior to decision-making. The mere existence of rationality does not guarantee success in foreign policy. There are numerous other factors, such as insufficient data, misinterpretation of intelligence, and more, that can influence the outcome: "policies derived from credible theories sometimes fail because circumstances change in important and unexpected ways — what Niccolo Machiavelli calls fortune and both Thucydides and Clausewitz call chance" (p. 68). However, the authors propose assessing not the outcomes of decisions but the processes that lead to them. Conversely, there are nonrational ways of acting and making decisions. The authors explore several such examples: Germany's decision on a risk strategy before the World War I, Britain's no-liability strategy prior to World War II, the United States' bid to invade Cuba in 1961, and the United States decision to invade Iraq in 2003 (pp. 180-209). Although nonrational policies can sometimes lead to success, it depends on factors that are unrelated to the quality of the decision-making process. The criteria of nonrational state behavior are the ban or exclusion of information necessary for forming reliable theories, as well as absence or distortion of proper deliberation.

A full understanding of state strategic rationality is impossible outside the broader framework, namely the goals for which states exist: "if rationality means making sense of the world for purposes of navigating it in pursuit of particular goals, then an understanding of the concept must involve how states think about their goals as well as how they pursue them" (p. 211). Here, the authors repeat their "bottom-up" logic of political action, again referring to Max Weber (and again through Kalberg): "Something is not of itself 'irrational,' but rather becomes so when examined from a specific 'rational' *standpoint*" (p. 212). A "rational standpoint" that determines all other goals and actions is, as we men-

tioned earlier, survival. It is an idea that comes well from Thomas Hobbes, who maintains that "reason" tells us that "a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or takes away the means of preserving the same" (p. 213).

The same applies to the state: "There is only one inviolable rule. Survival is primary, and all other objectives must be subordinated to it. It is a matter of incontrovertible logic and evidence that a state cannot achieve any other goal if it does not first survive as a state" (p. 213). The state, according to the authors, drawing on the work of the sociologist Charles Tilly, represents a historical form of human survival: "Human beings — who prize survival above all other goals — are social animals. They are born into and operate in tight-knit social groups, which also rank survival as their number one goal. To function effectively and protect their constituents, these groups construct political institutions". These institutions, i.e., "states", have existed throughout f human history, but retained their primary goal (p. 214).

Of course, states may put this primary goal at risk, but this risk does not arise from the fact that survival is not prioritized or considered subordinate compared to other goals. Instead, it is usually associated with overstretched power, which occurs when there is an incorrect identification of threats or excessive involvement in security competition, as was the case with Germany's engagement in the general European war in 1914, or with Japan's decision to launch Word War II in the Pacific (p. 219). Foreign policy, therefore, is a dangerous undertaking and one should not confuse politics with morality: "Rational decision makers simply try to figure out the most effective strategy for dealing with other states, and as should be apparent by now, threatening or initiating violence sometimes makes sense. This message is hardly uplifting, but such is the reality of international politics" (p. 225).

The attempt made by Mearsheimer and Rosato in their book to protect foreign policy analysis from moral reasoning, to prevent the invasion of economics into political theory, and to restore its independence is interesting in itself and deserves attention. Nevertheless, it does not dismiss certain problems. The prioritization of survival, for example, which is unconditional in relation to other goals, undoubtedly works in a system of foreign policy based on interaction between nation states. But what will be the hierarchy of goals in the case of some "post-national constellation" or "after empire"?[1] Assuming, of course, that such conceptual constructions pass the reality check. There are certain doubts about this.[2]

The description of a political animal as homo theoreticus also raises the question of the gap between theory and practice. This intellectualism is not new — it is a well-known problem that has been around for a long time. The hypothesis suggests that if something makes sense at the level of theory, then its practical implementation is not bound to come across any obstacles. However, this is often not the case. Just as any war plan does not survive its first meeting with front lines, so the implementation of any seemingly

1. Habermas J. (2001) *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, Mass.: MIT Press.

2. *Certain objections to Mearsheimer's argument see in Todd E.* (2024) La Défaite de l'Occident, Paris: Gallimard.

perfect political idea often encounters resistance that either destroys it or alters it beyond recognition.

It is this gap that we mean when we talk about, for example, of the role of affect in politics. What might the deliberation theory look like in that case? The very concept of deliberation bears distinct Habermasian turn that implies non-manipulated, unbiased, "domination-free communication". However, is this the case with actual deliberation when making a political decision? Abundant historical evidence suggests otherwise. Could this absence of communicative reciprocity be accounted for by theoretical frameworks? How to address the issue of popular sentiment? It is evident that no economic framework for political action can fully explain it. But what about the intellectualist models, the advocates of which the authors claim to be? Can they do? The authors explicitly deny any theoretical status for affect, although it is clear that Mearsheimer fully understands the significance of collective feelings, and in his previous work, for example, he gave sufficient attention to nationalism as the most significant driving force in world politics.[3] The authors mention the importance of the affective dimension in politics and even refer to Antonio Damasio, a renowned neuroscientist (p. 60). Damasio is famous for his "Spinozist turn" in neuroscience that showed an inextricable link between rationality and affect.[4] The development of this topic is wanting in the book, although it is clear that the authors had a different initial purpose. Hopefully, this void will be filled in the future.

«…Такова действительность международной политики»

Рецензия на книгу: Mearsheimer J. J., Rosato S. (2023). *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. — 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-30026-930-7.

Максим Фетисов
Кандидат философских наук, независимый исследователь
Адрес: ул. Лермонтова, 241, г. Ставрополь, 355041 Российская Федерация
E-mail: msfetisov@gmail.com

3. Mearsheimer J. (2018) *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

4. Damasio A. (2003) *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, London: William Heinemann.