

Thinking About Rogue Leaders: Really Hostile or Just Frustrated?

by Akan Malici

When the Cold War came to an end almost two decades ago, scholars contemplated that we might soon miss it.¹ The reason for such a counterintuitive feeling is simple: with the move from bipolarity to unipolarity, security threats no longer emanate from the rivalry of two superpowers but rather from the existence of rogue states. Rogue states are said (or partly known) to sponsor or practice international terrorism and to engage in the acquisition and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.² Their leaders are said to be genuinely belligerent and hostile, and sometimes they are even described as crazy.³

In thinking about rogue states and their leaders, scholars, security analysts and observers of international politics have two fundamental options. The first option is to join the conventional wisdom, which is attractive because of its apparent plausibility. However, there is also a danger to this option. Judgments are often made on a purely descriptive basis without sufficient effort towards critically asking why rogue leaders behave in the ways they do. Simply asserting that they are crazy or irrational is too simple and, indeed, wrong. Too often labels and slogans are substituted for reflection and actual analysis. This, in fact, helps perpetuate our crises with rogue states rather than ameliorate them.

Thinking about rogue leaders more deeply than is conventionally done is more important than ever. This is my main contention in this paper. The predominant strategy of the US towards rogue leaders takes the forms of containment or isolation. These strategies have proven to be fundamentally ineffective. The threat emanating from rogue states has increased, rather than decreased, over the last years. What is needed is a better informed and more context-sensitive strategic approach towards rogue leaders. This leads to the specification of the second option scholars and security analysts have.

The second option is to leave the door open for the conventional wisdom, while simultaneously attempting to understand the crucial *why*, i.e. why rogue leaders behave the way they do. *Understanding* a leader means dwelling into his psychology. In a well-known article in peace and conflict scholarship, the renown political psychologist Philip Tetlock probematized the foreign policy decision-making

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process as he asked “What do we [psychologists] have to contribute?”⁴ The obvious answer is “a lot” and it follows from the recognition that politics is an inherently sociopsychological affair. A close attention and investigation of leaders’ psychology, their subjective beliefs and perceptions, is thus of absolute necessity.

This is what I intend to do in this paper by specifically focusing on the psychology of rogue leaders. It is important to emphasize that my goal is not to justify the words and deeds of rogue leaders, but simply to try and understand them. Understanding does not mean approving or agreeing with what rogue leaders say or do. It is simply an effort to “come to grips” with them and thereby contribute to the identification of peaceful methods of conflict resolution that subsequently can be reflected in US foreign policy and diplomacy towards rogue leaders.

UNDERSTANDING ROGUE LEADERS

Scholars working in the tradition of foreign policymaking have long argued that, in order to understand the foreign policy behaviors of leaders, one must concentrate on their “psychological milieu” and their “attitudinal prism.”⁵ These psychological areas of human existence are of enormous importance because it is here where cognitive distortions, motivational biases, and subjective beliefs for subsequent action are situated.⁶

These biases and beliefs lend subjective legitimacy to a leader and his foreign policy actions. It is important to recognize this and to take it into account in the analytical effort regardless of how illegitimate these subjective beliefs appear to an outside observer. In order to understand the cognitive processes of leaders and how and why these processes compel them to certain actions, it is important to engage in what the preeminent peace researcher Ralph White has labeled “realistic empathy.”⁷ As “the great corrective for all forms of war-provoking misperception,” it has arguably become a very important factor in the guidance of international policy and diplomacy.⁸ White defines empathy as:

[S]imply understanding how a situation looks like to another person (or group). It does not necessarily imply sympathy, or tolerance, or liking, or agreement with the person – but simply understanding. In many contexts the word “understanding” can be substituted for empathy, but empathy implies especially a focus on the other’s situation – trying to look out at his situation through his eyes rather than at him as an individual.⁹

Thus, the task in thinking about rogue leaders is not to proceed deductively as it is commonly done. More specifically this means that one should avoid drawing absolute and firm conclusions about a leader’s personality dispositions on the basis of his behavior. The result of such reasoning tends to condemn the situation into deterministic hopelessness: a leader acts aggressively because he is genuinely hostile. Therefore, short of containing and isolating such a leader, nothing can be done to manage the threat more effectively. However, such a strategy is unproductive. It only reifies the conflict and, in fact, bears the danger of further escalation. The recent experiences of the US with rogue states are a convincing testimony to this assertion.

For the sake of attempting more peaceful or, at least, more stable international relations, it might be much more productive to proceed inductively when thinking about rogue leaders. One must, of course, acknowledge the aggressive behavior of rogue leaders. However, at the same time, one may not assume away *a priori* that this behavior results necessarily from a genuine hostile predisposition of the rogue leader. Instead, one must work from the bottom up and examine a variety of potential factors that may lead to aggressive behavior. Genuine hostility may certainly be one of these factors. However, equally certain is that it is not the only possible factor. Psychologists argue that a very prominent alternative factor, which causes individuals to behave aggressively, is their level of frustration.

FRUSTRATION AND AGGRESSION

More than six decades ago a research group at the Yale Institute of Human Relations published a study that proved to have a fundamental impact on a variety of behavioral sciences.¹⁰ The group aimed at accounting for “virtually all of human aggression with a few basic ideas.”¹¹ The title of the study, *Frustration and Aggression*, suggests indeed a very basic hypothesis: frustration in individuals leads them to act aggressively towards the outside world. It is important to recognize that, in this formulation, aggressive behavior is not motivated by genuine hostility, but by frustration—a psychological configuration of an individual’s subjective perceptions and beliefs.

From a psychological perspective frustration can formally be defined as (a) an individual’s perception of a hostile environment, coupled with (b) his pessimism about the realization of goals and (c) the perception that the fate of these goals is in the hands of others.¹² In conventional terms, if a person is frustrated he feels, “It’s a dark world out there, I am not getting what I want, and worse, I can’t even do anything about it.” Anybody who has ever experienced frustration will be able to trace this psychological experience to some form of these three interrelated statements. This is true for common people and it is, of course, also true for state leaders.

Early on, psychologists adopted an absolute view of the frustration-aggression hypothesis and they argued that “the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression.”¹³ Subsequently, the linearity of this assertion was revisited and scholars concluded that aggression is not the necessary and only behavioral manifestation of frustration, but that other behaviors than aggression are possible as well.¹⁴ However, aggression does become more likely as the number of frustrated response sequences increases, that is, as an individual is pushed into deeper levels of frustration.¹⁵ In this case the individual’s perception of a hostile environment and his pessimism about the realization of his goals worsen. In addition, his perceived level of control decreases. As a result, according to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, this individual becomes more dangerous as aggressive behavior becomes more imminent.

FRUSTRATION, AGGRESSION, AND ROGUE LEADERS

Proceeding inductively in their analysis about rogue leaders, a small group of peace and conflict researchers have applied the frustration-aggression hypothesis to rogue leaders.¹⁶ These researchers utilize newly developed methods of belief system and personality assessment. The methods are sophisticated, and computerized techniques of content analysis and their reliability and validity have been demonstrated and underlined in various recently published books and articles.¹⁷

It will be valuable to illustrate these procedures through two simplified examples. The first aspect of frustration is an individual's perception of his level of control in a social situation. The underlying assumption is that researchers can determine this perceived level of control by paying close attention to what this individual says and how he says it. On the basis of locus-of-control literature, this perceptual belief is operationalized as the ratio of self attributions to self-plus-other attributions. It follows that "as the ratio increases, the speaker's rhetoric demonstrates that self is doing more than others in the political universe, indicating that self is more in control."¹⁸

Another defining aspect of an individual's frustration is his view of the political universe and others in it: is it cooperative, mixed, or conflictual? Researchers answer this question by aggregating the individual's verb constructions made about others in the political universe in positive/cooperative and negative/conflictual terms. The underlying assumption here is that researchers can assess how the individual thinks about the nature of the political universe by aggregating those things he or she says about others. This belief is operationalized as the percent of positive other attributions minus the percent of negative other attributions.¹⁹ The end product of these procedures are quantified results of a leaders' belief systems.

Coding rules such as these are applied through a software program called Profiler+ and concrete evidence has been set forth for historical and contemporary leaders that have been described as rogue leaders. Among the latter are for example Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Fidel Castro. Specifically, the findings demonstrate convincingly that rogue leaders are not necessarily genuinely hostile but rather frustrated. More specifically, in accordance with the definition of frustration provided above, they a) perceive the political universe to be hostile and they are b) pessimistic about the realization of their political goals. Moreover, c) these leaders perceive themselves as having a lack of control over the ensuing events.

There have been many assertions about the psychology of these leaders in public and scholarly discourse. However, these are often speculations and they are based on anecdotal evidence. What distinguishes the above described studies is the application of valid and reliable procedures and methods to the study of leaders resulting in systematic evidence. To date the empirical scope of these studies is limited to the leaders mentioned above, as well as to some historical examples. However, there is good reason to assume that similar results might be obtained for other rogue leaders because they find themselves in similar geopolitical

predicaments. The findings that do exist have far-reaching implications for the conduct of US foreign policy and diplomacy towards rogue leaders of the present and the future.

CONTAINMENT VERSUS ENGAGEMENT

Containment and engagement are two fundamentally distinct strategies a state has at its disposal towards a target state. The strategy of containment was central during the Cold War and, in fact, many observers of this period consider it to have contributed to the retreat of the Soviet Union from the stage of superpower competition.²⁰ Whether this is indeed the case is questionable. Good evidence exists to the contrary, namely that the Cold War ended the way it did because of a strategy of graduated dyadic engagement by both Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev.²¹ The strategy of containment must also be questioned with regard to rogue regimes.

The goal of a containment strategy is to shun away the opponent and to marginalize him to the extent possible. In the case of rogue regimes, the underlying assumption is that they “cannot be engaged and by virtue of their international isolation they should be left to collapse on their own accord.”²² Moreover, there is also the argument that a strategy of containment “would be more consonant with the U.S.’s normative inclinations not to reward or condone rogue behavior and thereby discourage” such regimes in the future.²³ In contrast, the immediate goal of an engagement strategy is to work towards the stabilization of relations with the target state. A more long-term aspiration of this strategy is to integrate the opponent into the existing rule-based, institutionalized, and normatively guided international system.

The strategies of containment and engagement are generally well-known and they need no further elaboration here. What is of special interest and relevance in the context of this paper is the psychological effects these distinct strategies can have on a target leader. It is important to recall again that a leader’s frustration is constituted through his a) hostile worldview, b) pessimistic outlook, and c) perceived lack of control. The strategies of containment and engagement have two fundamentally different effects on the frustration level of a leader. Examining these effects is important towards developing a better informed, more context-sensitive and, therefore, more effective strategy towards rogue regimes.

The strategy of isolation is a conflict strategy and the actor practicing it aims at dominating the opponent through means, such as coalition building against the target state, political & economic sanctions, and even embargos. The strategy of containment is, therefore, contributing to and increasing the target leader’s hostile and pessimistic perception of the political environment. Because the strategy is aimed at domination, the target leader will also perceive a lack of control. This is especially the case when a disproportionately strong state aims at isolating a relatively small state. In the end, the strategy of isolation has the effect of increasing the target leader’s level of frustration and, along with it, his propensity to act aggressively towards the outside world.

The strategy of engagement is a cooperative strategy and the practicing actor aims at a settlement with the opponent primarily through means of diplomacy and incentives, rather than sanctions. In contrast to a strategy of containment, it contributes to the decrease of the target leader's hostile and pessimistic perception of the political environment. Moreover, because the strategy is aimed at mutual settlement, the target leader will also experience an increased level of control over ensuing events. In the end, the strategy of engagement has the effect of decreasing a leader's level of frustration and along with it the propensity to act aggressively. In the final section of this paper I will draw conclusions and implications based on the discussion and analysis presented to this point.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In deciding on foreign policy and security strategies, American decision makers as well as the American public tend to personalize conflicts between the United States and its security contenders. This appears to be an appropriate tendency, particularly in cases in which the leader or a small ruling elite in the target country is not constrained by systems of checks and balances or veto points.²⁵ This is, of course, the case for rogue leaders. Paraphrasing the French King Louis XIV, we can say that "they are the state." Therefore, their subjective beliefs and perceptions play a crucial role in the foreign policy behavior of the states that they rule. Attention to such factors is an analytic mandate.

Based on the foregoing discussion about the psychology of rogue leaders, a clear prescription for US foreign policy and diplomacy follows, namely a strategy of sustained engagement. This strategy runs counter to much of the foreign policy conduct of the Bush administration towards rogue states. High-level officials in the administration repeatedly articulated the apparent failure of engagement and the promise of a strategy of isolation. The argument against engagement is that such a strategy would be equal to giving into blackmail by rogue leaders and that any cooperative gestures would ultimately be exploited. Engagement, in short, is judged to be fruitless.

Such arguments are often based on a distortion of historical facts. A brief but critical look at US-North Korean relations will illustrate the point. At the beginning of the 1990s the US experienced an intense crisis with North Korea. As the crisis deteriorated, the regime in Pyongyang threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and a military confrontation seemed likely. Ultimately war was avoided and this outcome was due to a series of bilateral diplomatic efforts, which included the engagement of former US President Jimmy Carter. In 1993 the two governments reached a settlement known as the North Korea-US Agreed Framework. Within this framework Pyongyang agreed to freeze its nuclear weapons programs and to remain part of the NPT. The US agreed to a provision of fuel oil and the construction of two light-water reactors as a substitute for nuclear reactors.

However, in more recent years the relationship between the US and North Korea has deteriorated again. The conventional wisdom in the US is that “North Korea abrogated the Agreed Framework by restarting its nuclear weapons program.”²⁴ Putting the blame for the renewed worsening of the relationship solely on Pyongyang defies historical accuracy as it denies the lack of commitment by the US toward the Agreement. If the goal is to resolve the crisis peacefully, analysts need to be more accurate and policymakers more honest. One North Korean specialist points out correctly, “the Clinton administration was never eager to implement its side of the bargain, and both US administrations have violated both the letter and the spirit of the agreement.”²⁶ A point in case is the building of the promised light-water replacement reactor which was scheduled to become functional in 2003. However, already in 1998 it was clear that this reactor would be far behind schedule, “due to U.S. reservations and hesitance.”²⁷

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In contrast, at the same time observers have also pointed out that North Korea had by and large adhered to the terms of the 1994 Agreed Framework with the US. This assessment was even confirmed by former CIA director George Tenet who gave a retrospective testimony to Congress on March 19, 2002. Before 2002, when South Korea initiated the conciliatory “Sunshine Policy” toward Pyongyang, the situation surrounding North Korea was indeed rather calm. Several commentators have pointed out, for example, that North Korea abstained from provoking major border incidents with South Korea. Also in 1999, the North Korean leadership declared that all test-flight launches of ballistic missiles would be suspended.²⁸

The strategy of engagement should not be simply discarded as has largely been done by the Bush administration. To be fair, in some instances the US has been open to multilateral discussion conducted at lower levels. However, this is not sufficient. What is needed to successfully break the frustration of rogue leaders is the direct engagement of high-level officials. The implications of the frustration-aggression hypothesis and the analysis presented here suggest that a strategy of sustained and direct engagement may decrease rogue leaders’ sense of frustration, and dampen their inclination towards hostile behaviors. Scholars have also proposed various forms of engagement as they see value in this strategy. What distinguishes the analysis in this paper from the arguments of other scholars is that it provides rationale for engagement based on psychological insights. Humans are psychological beings and this is not different for state leaders.

In this paper I have problematized the psychology of rogue leaders and my goal in doing so was not to justify them, but to understand them. This has nothing to do with being soft. It has to do with safeguarding the national security of the U.S. in

effective ways. Matters of national security are always confronted with the same question, namely how to ensure stability and peace. The answers should not be guided by intuition. The intuition is that rogue leaders are genuinely hostile and must be treated accordingly. Intuition can be a poor advisor and it is my contention that it, indeed, is especially so in the case of rogue leaders. The answers to questions about national security are sometimes counterintuitive. My intention in this paper was to tap into this counterintuition in an effort to contribute towards deeper thinking about methods of peaceful conflict resolution with rogue states.

Notes

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² Raymond Tanter, *Rogue Regimes. Terrorism and Proliferation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

³ John Thornhill and Andrew Ward, "The Puzzle of How to Deal with North Korea's Strange Autocrat," *Financial Times*, December 15, 2002.

⁴ Philip Tetlock, "Psychological Advice on Foreign Policy. What Do We Have to Contribute?" *American Psychologist*, 41 (1986): 557–567.

⁵ Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *Man-Milieu Relationship Hypotheses in the Context of International Politics* (Princeton: Center of International Studies, 1956); Michael Brecher et al., "A Framework for Research on Foreign Policy Behavior," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 12 (1969): 75–101

⁶ Philip Tetlock, "Social Psychology and World Politics," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. 2, eds. Daniel Gilbert et al. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 868–982.

⁷ Ralph White, *Fearful Warriors. A Psychological Profile of U.S.-Soviet Relations* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Ralph White, "Empathizing with Saddam Hussein," *Political Psychology*, 12 (1991): 291–308.

⁸ White, *Fearful Warriors*, 160.

⁹ White, "Empathizing with Saddam Hussein," 292.

¹⁰ John Dollard et al., *Frustration and Aggression*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939).

¹¹ Leonard Berkowitz, "Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis: Examination and Reformulation," *Psychological Bulletin*, 106 (1989): 59.

¹² Mark Schafer et al., "Operational Codes and the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland: A Test of the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2 (2006): 63–82; Leonard Berkowitz, "The Study of Urban Violence: Some Implications of Laboratory Studies of Frustration and Aggression," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2 (1968): 14–17; Leonard Berkowitz, ed., *Roots of Aggression: A Re-examination of the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis* (New York: Atherton Press, 1969); Leonard Berkowitz, "Whatever Happened to the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis?" *American Behavioral Scientist*, 21 (1978): 691–707.

¹³ Dollard et al., *Frustration and Aggression*, 338.

¹⁴ Neal E. Miller et al., "The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis," *Psychological Review*, 28 (1941): 337–342.

¹⁵ Leonard Berkowitz, ed., *Roots of Aggression: A Re-examination of the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis* (New York: Atherton Press, 1969).

¹⁶ Akan Malici, *When Leaders Learn and When They Don't: Mikhail Gorbachev and Kim Il Sung at the End of the Cold War*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, forthcoming); Akan Malici and Johnna Malici, "The Operational Codes of Fidel Castro and Kim Il Sung: The Last Cold Warriors?" *Political Psychology*, 26 (2005): 387–412; Akan Malici and Johnna Malici, "When Will They Ever Learn? An Examination of Fidel Castro and Kim Jong-Il's Operational Code Beliefs," *Psicologia Política*, 31 (2005): 7–22; Schafer et al., *Operational Codes and the 1916 Easter Rising*.

¹⁷ See for example Mark Schafer and Stephen Walker, eds., *Beliefs and Leadership in World Politics: Methods and Applications of Operational Code Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁸ Mark Schafer, "Issues in Assessing Psychological Characteristics at a Distance," *Political Psychology*, 21 (2000): 521.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 511–528.

²⁰ Victor Cha, "The Rationale for 'Enhanced' Engagement of North Korea," *Asian Survey*, 39 (1999): 846, 851.

²¹ Richard Ned Lebow, "The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism," *International Organization*, 48 (1994): 249–277; Janice Stein, "Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as an Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner," *International Organization*, 48 (1994): 155–183; Akan Malici, "Committed Teacher Meets Motivated Learner: Altercasting at the End of the Cold War," in Schafer and Walker, *Beliefs*

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²² Victor Cha, “The Rationale for ‘Enhanced’ Engagement,” 846.

²³ *Ibid.*, 851.

²⁴ George Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²⁵ David Kang, “International Relations Theory and the Second Korean War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 47 (2003): 321.

²⁶ David Kang, “International Relations Theory,” 321.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

²⁸ Eberstadt, Nicholas, “Korea,” in *Strategic Asia 2002–2003*, eds. Richard Ellings and Aaron Friedberg (Seattle, WA: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2003), 131–182.