



methodology and ethics. Robert Chambers, one of the spiritual fathers of the relatively young but influential participatory approach would be probably delighted.

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### **Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change**

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What leads states to radically change their foreign policies and is it possible to anticipate these changes? It is exactly with these questions that David Welch starts his book *Painful Choices*, in which he seeks to develop a theory of foreign policy change. Looking at current international relations (IR) theories, he comes to the conclusion that these concepts describe and explain current or past behaviour of states more or less well, yet they fail when it comes to anticipating how states will behave in the future. This is why Welch tries to find a theory that would rectify this failure. However, he argues it is probably impossible to predict specific foreign political behaviour and that it might not even be necessary. It would suffice to specify the circumstances and conditions that might lead to a radical change in foreign policy and then pursue them up to the point when the red lights start flashing and alert us that the time of change may be imminent.

According to Welch, this is sufficient because he presumes that foreign policy tends to be stable and radical changes only occur rarely. Thus, it is more sensible to focus on the prospects of change rather than on concrete state behaviour. Welch elaborates his case over six chapters. In the first section, he analyses the weaknesses of current IR theories concerning the anticipating of states' behaviour and defends the need for a new theory. This theory is developed in the second chapter including the presumptions, hypotheses and its operationalization.

In the following three sections, he attempts to test-drive his theory using four examples of foreign policy change and one example of a foreign policy avoiding change. The former include the deliberations of the Argentine junta on the upsides and downsides of invading the Falkland Islands; the reasons that led United States' (US) President Lyndon B. Johnson to start the war in Vietnam and the thoughts that shaped Richard Nixon's mind when he decided America should have left Vietnam; and the evolution of Canadian trade policy towards the US until the Canadian government finally decided to conclude an agreement on free trade with the US. The last example is the dovish Japanese approach to Russia concerning the long-running dispute over the Southern Kuriles. In the final section, Welch summarizes these cases and gives recommendations for how to use his theory in practice.



Welch builds his concept on the presumption that 'there must be reliable patterns in how states match means to ends for us to anticipate policy changes' (p. 30). He justifies another of his presumptions that radical policy changes are rare and, when states do change their behaviour dramatically, they will do so for what are formally similar reasons (p. 31). Welch draws on three theoretical concepts: organizational theory; cognitive and motivational psychology; and prospect theory, even though he takes only the framework of these theories rather than applying them literally.

Organizational theory implies that a policy is created in a more or less bureaucratic environment where different interests of various organizations and branches of administration enter the debate and limit decision-makers' fields of action. The bureaucracy naturally tends to resist any dramatic changes. However, the decision-makers' field of action depends on the scale of bureaucracy and its power to influence a decision-maker. Thus, Welch formulates the first of his three hypotheses: foreign policy change should be less frequent in highly bureaucratic states with democratic regimes than in less bureaucratic states with autocratic regimes (p. 45).

According to cognitive psychologists, we rely heavily on our prior beliefs to help us interpret new information and make sense of an ambiguous world (p. 37). This interpretation is made through cognitive schemata. These, however, have one crucial feature – once formed, they resist change (p. 38). Nonetheless, if one realizes that their schemata lead to the wrong conclusions and that there is information and experience proving one is mistaken, the schemata adjust to these new circumstances and knowledge. This can happen gradually or suddenly, but it is still a painful process. Upon reaching this conclusion, Welch sets out his second hypothesis: foreign policy change will be most likely when policy fails either repeatedly or catastrophically, or when leaders become convinced that it will do so imminently (p. 46).

Prospect theory concludes that people assess the alternatives presented to them not by assessing the net assets the particular option could bring them, but by comparing the outcome of a choice with their reference point defining what they consider to be an acceptable outcome (p. 41). A key finding of this theory is that people are more sensitive to losses and consider them more painful than gains are pleasurable and therefore tend to accept more risks to avoid a loss than to achieve a gain.

The problem is that the theory does not elaborate more on what the reference points are. Welch claims that it is an acceptable state of affairs or of what individuals or states want to achieve. Then, they compare this reference point to the *status quo* and realize whether the *status quo* brings them losses or gains. Upon these considerations, they ponder whether or not it is worth changing the policy. Based on the prospect theory findings Welch derives his third hypothesis: leaders are more likely to pay the inherent costs of (and embrace the inherent risks in) foreign policy change to avoid losses than to realize gains of equivalent magnitude (p. 45). As for the sensitivity to losses, Welch suggests that democratic and highly bureaucratic states are less sensitive to small prospects of loss or gain than are autocratic or relatively non-bureaucratic states (p. 47).

The cases serving as tests of these hypotheses prove Welch has set off in the right direction. They also show the strengths and weaknesses of his theory, albeit it is necessary to admit that Welch is aware of both of them.

Assessing the fit of his hypotheses to the analysed cases, Welch concludes that most cases confirm them. However, he also tries to point out aspects of some cases where the



fit was not perfect. One of these emerged in the analysis of the Russo-Japanese dispute over the Southern Kuriles. Welch admits that the inaction of Japanese governments can also be explained by using other approaches focusing on different aspects of the same problem. Namely, it has also been, if not above all, the outside constraints of the international environment that has discouraged Japan from pursuing its goals more fiercely (i.e. for instance the strategic alliance with the United States, geopolitical positioning of the dispute, the position of post-Soviet Russia in the international system, etc.).

This leads to the question of whether Japan would have been more eager to act and defend its interests if there had not been any of these outside constraints. It also points to the very heart of Welch's theory, that is, the evaluation of a perceived loss that would make decision-makers change their policy. In each case, he seeks to assess a concrete loss felt by the decision-makers as regards the *status quo*. However, in the case of Japan it would perhaps be more useful to try to compare the different losses resulting from the different policy options. Thus, it might not have been the low level of disappointment with the *status quo* that has prevented the government from acting. A more likely explanation could be that the Japanese decision-makers considered the loss of the Northern Territories to be relatively smaller than the loss of the special relationship with America. This is what distinguishes the Japanese case from the Argentine one since the Argentine junta was not forced to make such a trade-off.

Another problem emerges when the change in policy is caused by a change in the decision-maker's mind. This was the case of Nixon — up until the election in 1968 he was a supporter of the American war in Vietnam but after he assumed power he changed his mind, deciding there was no possibility of winning the war and sought a face-saving exit strategy. This is also the case of President Bush Jr. who, in his own words, changed his perception of the duties of an American president after 11 September, 2001. In cases like these, probably all theories would fail since they cannot look into the black box of one's mind.

When reading the book, one question steadily comes into the reader's mind. It is how Welch's theory could be used in practice. Welch admits that the theory is useful for intelligence service analysts who have all the necessary information, especially the psychological profiles of foreign decision-makers. For scholars, the theory is more of another useful tool for analysing and explaining the past behaviour of states. It provides them with an opportunity to look at international events from a different perspective from that they have been used to. The theory could also be considered as a tool for formulating the conditions in which a perceived loss could shift its weight in foreign leaders' minds up to the point when it could become dangerous for the outer world.

To sum up, Welch's book is well worth reading. It brings some fresh air into the room of IR theories. If nothing else, it makes the reader think about IR in a new way.

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