What is rationality, and do states act rationally? John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato propose and answer these questions in *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*. Their central claim is that “most states are rational most of the time” (p. xiv). Mearsheimer and Rosato postulate that if their claim is not accurate, the study of international relations is at an inflection point, as most assumptions in this field hinge on states being rational actors.

The authors’ framework for determining a state’s rationality is a three-step process. First, policymakers must come together and use credible theories regarding the situation. Mearsheimer and Rosato elaborate that a credible theory is one that rests on evaluation of assumptions, casual logic, and empirical claims. Second, the policymakers must openly debate the credible theories. Third, the “ultimate decider” chooses the proper decision based on the debate.

Once debate begins, there are three possible outcomes. First, all the policymakers come to the debate with the same credible theory and make decisions based on that theory. Second, the policymakers come to the debate with different credible theories, and open and free debate occurs. After debate, the policymakers compromise and decide on the most relevant and credible theory. The third is like the second, however, no compromise arises, and the “ultimate decider” steps in and chooses the most appropriate credible theory for decision-making.

The framework is logical, and the use of repetition while examining case studies assists the reader’s understanding of the process. The book’s flow induces the reader to think about rational choice making at the state and strategic level inside the authors’ framework. The first four chapters set the above-described framework to examine numerous case studies. The subsequent two chapters examine decisions made by states tradi-
tionally seen as nonrational in grand strategy and crisis management. A few examples include France’s decision in dealing with the Nazi threat prior to World War II, the United States’ decision to expand NATO after the Cold War, Japan’s decision to attack Pearl Harbor, and Germany’s decision to start World War I.

Mearsheimer and Rosato give examples of noncredible theories like democratization and war theory, and what they call forcible democracy theory. They provide their reasons for why these two theories are noncredible. Disproving the credibility of democratization and war theory, they point to evidence that an incomplete democratizer has not started a war for a period of 176 years ending in 1992 (p. 57). As evidence of the noncredibility of forcible democracy theory, they begin by explaining that the theory is that people throughout the world crave democracy and are inhibited by tyrants. Therefore, a democracy can use superior military force to remove tyrants and provide the democracy the people want. The authors then point to evidence of the United States intervening thirty-five times and achieving success only once (p. 58). These statistics give credence to Mearsheimer and Rosato’s claim of noncredibility.

The authors caution that outcomes should not determine whether a decision is rational. The emphasis on process over outcome is stated throughout the book and is in line with the overall thesis set up in the first four chapters. A rational decision follows the prescribed framework, and nonrational decisions do not follow the framework. The authors emphasize caution about positive outcomes, stating, “Nonrational states can succeed for many reasons, including material superiority and dumb luck” (p. 99). Conversely, rational actors can employ credible theories that attempt to simplify complexity. Because of the complexity, the rational actor may make a wrong decision that leads to an unfavorable outcome despite the rationality of the choice.

Mearsheimer and Rosato do not shy away from critiquing competing ideas about how rational choices are made. The authors point to rational choice scholars and political psychologists, stating that neither group offers compelling definitions of rationality or nonrationality. Instead, rational choice scholars and political psychologists both view rationality through the lens of utility maximization theory. The problem with utility maximization is that it deals with probabilities, which cannot be accurately assigned while living in an uncertain world. One critique by the authors is that both rational choice scholars and political psychologists look only at the individual level of analysis. Another critique is that political psychologists equate nonrational decisions to a “failure to employ the expected utility maximization formula,” then further claim there is no evidence of leaders employing this formula, thereby saying “all leaders are nonrational all the time” (p. 96).

In a show of transparency that not all decision-making is rational, Mearsheimer and Rosato give examples of nonrational decision-making. These examples are Germany deciding to build up its navy to compete with Britain in the North Sea before World War I, Britain using a no-liability strategy before World War II, and the United States’ invasions of Cuba and Iraq. All of these nonrational decisions emerged from one of three possibilities, according to the authors. First is the use of a noncredible theory and a failure to debate. Second is the use of a credible theory without debating it. Third is the use of a noncredible theory with debate.

_How States Think, The Rationality of Foreign Policy_ adds a new look at what constitutes rationality and if states act rationally. Mearsheimer and Rosato’s framework supports the thesis that most states act rationally, most of the time. The critiques of rational choice scholars and political psychologists are thought-provoking, as analysis at the individual level will not account for all actions at the state level. However, individuals make up
states and therefore must be accounted for in de-
ciding rationality. The authors' framework, if used,
will help the reader make more informed judg-
ments about the rationality of state decisions, es-
pecially if that judgment accounts for individuals
that make up the state.

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