Book Review

John J. Mearsheimer, Sebastian Rosato **How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy**

Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London, 2023, 304 pp.

Professor Mearsheimer has gained a lot of publicity lately because of his view on the Russo-Ukrainian War. Namely, while most Western politicians and experts in international relations identify Putin's imperial ambition as the main cause of the war, Mearsheimer claims that Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was a rational and realistic reaction to NATO's eastward expansion, and as such, not an anomaly. That said, it does not imply that Mearsheimer necessarily supports Putin or Russia, but rather that he, along with his former student Sebastian Rosato, firmly believes in the theory of offensive realism. Together, in this book, they introduce a new concept of rationality in foreign policy.

In order to explain the behavior of states, historians and political scientists alike usually describe states' behavior as mostly nonrational. Such an explanation is questioned by the authors of this book. The authors claim that such an explanation of the behavior of states is incorrect and that states mostly behave rationally.

But before defending their claim about the rationality of states, the authors offer a new concept of rationality in international relations, along with a critique of existing concepts of rationality. Since there are two dominant concepts of rationality usually used in international relations debates – one provided by political psychologists, the other by rational choice theorists – which one should we prefer? According to Mearsheimer and Rosato, none of them, because "rationality is all about making sense of the world – that is, figuring out how it works and why – in order to decide how to achieve certain goals". This kind of thinking about rationality, the authors notice, is usually absent from the above-mentioned debates in international relations, which reduce rationality to the narrower issue of how individual decision-makers decide among alternative options.

So, how should we understand the rationality of foreign policy? First of all, it is about the way states, not only individuals, decide between alternative policy options. Rationality is a feature of the decision-making process, and it does not depend so much on the real outcome. In other words, success is not a criterion for rational action. If rationality is not about the outcomes, because the state can be rational and unsuccessful, or nonrational and successful, then why should we prefer rationality over nonrationality? The authors suggest that, "Nevertheless, a state that pursues a rational strategy is more likely to succeed than fail since it has a good understanding of international politics and has carefully pondered how to proceed".

Along this way of thinking about rationality, Mearsheimer and Rosato propose two criteria that must be met in order to call an act of a state "rational": it has to be based on a credible theory, and it has to be

a result of deliberation. "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." The first criterion implies that not all international relations theories are credible because not all international relations theories are "logical explanations based on realistic assumptions and supported by substantial evidence". For example, hegemonic realism and institutional liberalism are credible (as most realist and liberal theories are), but neoclassical realism, the clash of civilizations theory, the domino theory, and racial theory are not. The second criteria of rationality in foreign policy is deliberation. "Rational states aggregate the views of key policymakers through a deliberative process, one marked by robust and uninhibited debate." This is the way states, not individuals, make rational decisions. The process of deliberation ensures that all options are on the table (no information is hidden) and all participants in the discussion are allowed to express, without fear, their opinions about the suggested options.

To sum up in the authors' words, "rational policymakers are *homo theoreticus*: they employ credible theories to make sense of the world and decide how to act in particular circumstances".

After defining the criteria of rationality in foreign policy, Mearsheimer and Rosato analyze numerous cases to back up their thesis that states mostly make rational decisions in foreign policy, particularly concerning their grand strategies and crisis management. They examine ten cases that political scientists and historians typically refer to when they aim to demonstrate the nonrationality of state decisions, five concerning grand strategy and five concerning crisis decisions. For example, France's decision on how to confront the Nazi threat before World War II (strategy) and Germany's decision to invade the Soviet Union (crisis) are often cited as examples of the nonrationality of state decisions. By applying their criteria of rationality (a credible theory and deliberation), Mearsheimer and Rosato demonstrate that these decisions were rational, although the outcomes were not as the decision-makers had expected.

But not all states in all cases act rationally. In the next part of the book, the authors present two cases of grand strategic decisions and two crisis decisions that they find to be nonrational, showing that states are not always rational. For example, Germany's decision on the risk strategy before World War I (strategy) and the United States' decision to invade Iraq in 2003 (crisis). In these cases, the decisions are nonrational because they relied on noncredible theories and nondeliberative processes.

For Mearsheimer and Rosato, the story about rationality does not end with rational processes – there is also a need to say something about goal rationality in order to make sense of the world of international politics.

Many scholars who adhere to the belief that rationality solely encompasses instrumental or strategic dimensions often dismiss the notion of discussing goal rationality, asserting that goals lack the capacity for rational or nonrational classification. However, the authors of this book hold a contrary stance. While advocating for states to devise rational strategies, they also advocate for the application of rationality in setting goals. They argue that certain goals pursued by states exhibit greater

rationality than others, proposing the existence of a hierarchy of goals delineated by the criterion of rationality. For instance, for states, survival holds paramount importance, necessitating that all other objectives be subordinate to it. In essence, prioritizing survival as a primary goal is deemed rational. Throughout history, numerous instances exist wherein states have prioritized survival over other significant goals. Examples include the Thirty Years' War, during which survival superseded religious objectives; Germany's decision to go to war in 1914, prioritizing survival over prosperity; and British foreign policy during World War II, where survival took precedence over ideology. The goal of survival dominates all other goals of the state. Though there have been attempts to find instances where states have risked their survival through reckless and aggressive foreign policies or by failing to deter a dangerous rival, such behavior does not necessarily indicate that they subordinated their survival to another goal.

According to the authors, to fully understand the role of rationality in international relations, it is essential not only to consider the rationality of the decision-making process but also to take into account the rationality of the goals. If the critics are correct, and states are mostly nonrational, then the discipline of international relations is in trouble.

Like all of Mearsheimer's books, this one is also well-written and the result of a huge effort to tackle a topic that is very important, but unfortunately theoretically very demanding and confusing. Numerous scholars may contend that the cases presented are, at the very least, contentious, and there exists disagreement regarding the rationality of the described actions, notwithstanding adherence to the criteria outlined by the authors. However, this publication represents a significant advancement in comprehending the role of rationality within the domain of foreign policy.

Damir Mladić
Libertas International University

Book Review

Tomaž Mastnak
Civilna družba

Založba ZRC, Ljubljana, 2023, 219 pp.

The book *Civilna družba* (*Civil society*), written by Tomaž Mastnak, represents the first volume of the broader project of the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts entitled *The Eighties: Glossary of the New Cultural Field*, with the aim to explain some of the crucial notions and concepts that were used during the 1980s and the way that they influenced and re-shaped the political and social reality in Slovenia. It is thus the first step in the reflection of the turbulent 1980s, which were the time when the real-socialist regimes in Europe were slowly coming to an end, while the capitalist mode of production, instead of socialism, became the only one imaginable.

In this context, it is not a surprise that the broader publishing project begins with