"Philosophy and Power": How State Leaders' Personal Ideologies Determine International Conflicts.

Princewilliams Odera Oguejiofor

Department of Political Science,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka,
Anambra State, Nigeria.
po.oguejiofor@unizik.edu.ng
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8008-4467

Abstract: This study examines how the personal ideologies of state leaders influence the dynamics of international conflicts. Drawing on the operational code analysis framework, it analyses how leaders' fundamental beliefs about the nature of international politics, the role of conflict, and the efficacy of different strategies shape their perceptions of threats, willingness to take risks, and approach to managing international disputes. The study utilizes three case studies - the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the 2023 Israeli-Gaza conflict, and the Camp David Accords - to demonstrate how leaders' personal ideologies and decision-making principles have been pivotal in sparking, exacerbating, and resolving international conflicts. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing the documentary method to collect data from secondary sources. By applying the operational code framework and related concepts from political psychology, the study highlights the significant impact that leader-level variables can have on the global landscape, beyond traditional systemic and structural explanations. The findings underscore the theoretical importance of incorporating leader-level factors into the study of international relations and provide valuable insights for scholars and policymakers seeking to understand the complex forces driving the outbreak, escalation, and resolution of global conflicts.

Keywords: Operational code analysis, Leader ideology, International conflict, Foreign policy decision-making, Political psychology.

Introduction

The behaviour and decisions of state leaders play a crucial role in shaping the course of international relations and influencing the outbreak, escalation, and resolution of conflicts between nations. While traditional theories of international relations have often focused on systemic factors such as the distribution of power, economic interdependence, and international institutions, the personal ideologies, beliefs, and perceptions of individual leaders can have a profound impact on a state's foreign policy and its propensity to engage in or avoid conflict (Horowitz, McDermott, and Stam, 2005; Jervis, 1976; Kaarbo, 2015).

This study examines the intricate relationship between the personal ideologies of state leaders and the outbreak and dynamics of international conflicts. Drawing on the operational code analysis framework, it analyses how leaders' fundamental beliefs about the nature of the political universe, the role of conflict, and the efficacy of different strategies shape their perceptions of threats, their willingness to take risks, and their approach to managing international disputes. The article also explores how leaders' personal traits, such as their need for power, their tolerance for ambiguity, and their cognitive complexity, can influence their decision-making in crisis situations and their propensity to escalate conflicts.

Through an in-depth analysis of several historical and contemporary case studies, the article demonstrates how the personal ideologies of state leaders have been pivotal in sparking, exacerbating, and resolving international conflicts. It highlights how divergent worldviews, threat perceptions, and risk propensities among leaders can lead to spiralling tensions and the outbreak of wars, while also showing how leaders with more cooperative and conciliatory mindsets can play a crucial role in de-escalating conflicts and promoting peaceful resolutions.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in method. Documentary method of data collection is employed to collect data from secondary sources such as journal articles, books and some government transcripts. Collected data are analysed by qualitative content analysis. This involves the succinct review of literatures on the subject matter which aids in the clear analysis of the arguments and informs the conclusion and recommendations.

Theoretical Framework: Operational Code Analysis and the Study of Leader Ideology

The operational code analysis framework, developed by political psychologists Nathan Leites (1951, 1953) and Alexander George (1969), provides a useful lens for examining the relationship between the personal ideologies of state leaders and international

conflicts. This approach focuses on analysing the fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and decision-making principles that guide leaders' behaviour in the international arena (Walker, 1990).

At the core of the operational code framework are two key dimensions: (1) leaders' philosophical beliefs about the nature of the political universe and the role of conflict, and (2) their instrumental beliefs about the most effective strategies and tactics for achieving their objectives (George, 1969). The philosophical dimension encompasses a leader's views on the predictability of the political world, the degree of conflict or cooperation inherent in international relations, and the malleability of historical trends. The instrumental dimension, on the other hand, captures a leader's beliefs about the most effective means of pursuing their goals, such as whether they favour cooperative or coercive approaches, and whether they believe in the efficacy of different types of strategies (Walker, Schafer, and Young, 1998).

By examining these core beliefs and decision-making principles, the operational code framework provides valuable insights into how a leader's personal ideology shapes their perceptions of threats, their willingness to take risks, and their approach to managing international disputes (Renshon, 2008; Walker, Schafer, and Young, 1999). Leaders with more adversarial and zero-sum worldviews, for instance, may be more inclined to perceive other states as inherently hostile and to respond to international crises with coercive or confrontational measures. In contrast, leaders with more cooperative and conciliatory orientations may be more willing to pursue diplomatic solutions and to make concessions in order to de-escalate conflicts.

Beyond the core philosophical and instrumental beliefs, the operational code framework also emphasizes the importance of other personality traits and cognitive characteristics that can influence a leader's decision-making on foreign policy issues. These include a leader's need for power and control, their tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, and their cognitive complexity or openness to new information (Hermann, 1980, 2003; Keller, 2005). Leaders with a high need for power, for instance, may be more inclined to pursue aggressive and confrontational strategies in order to assert their dominance, while those with lower cognitive complexity may be more prone to rigidity and intransigence in their approach to international conflicts.

By drawing on the operational code framework and these related concepts, this study analyses how the personal ideologies and psychological characteristics of state leaders have shaped the dynamics of international conflicts throughout history. Three case studies are utilised to illustrate the pivotal role that individual leaders can play in sparking, escalating, and resolving disputes between nations.

Case Study 1: The 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Background and Context

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, marking the largest European conflict since World War II. The invasion was the culmination of a long-standing dispute between Russia and Ukraine over the latter's geopolitical orientation and aspirations to join NATO and the European Union (EU) (Rumer and Weiss, 2022).

Putin's decision to launch the invasion was heavily influenced by his personal beliefs and ideological convictions, which can be analysed through the operational code framework. Specifically, Putin's worldview was shaped by his deep-seated nostalgia for the Soviet Union, his perception of the West as a threat to Russia's security and influence, and his belief in the necessity of maintaining a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space (Monaghan, 2022; Tsygankov, 2015).

Philosophical Beliefs

Putin's operational code analysis reveals a set of philosophical beliefs that heavily influenced his decision to invade Ukraine. First, he holds a fundamentally pessimistic view of the international system, perceiving it as an inherently hostile and zero-sum environment where states must constantly compete for power and influence (Tsygankov, 2015). This belief is reflected in his statement that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Putin, 2005).

Moreover, Putin believes that the West, led by the United States, is actively seeking to undermine Russia's power and influence, both regionally and globally. This perception of the West as a threat to Russia's security and status is a key driver of his foreign policy (Monaghan, 2022). As he stated in a 2007 speech, "The unipolar world has resulted in the gaping disparity in levels of development" and has led to "the absolute domination of a single country" (Putin, 2007).

Instrumental Beliefs

Putin's instrumental beliefs, which inform his preferred strategies for achieving his goals, are also critical to understanding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, he believes in the utility of military force and the importance of maintaining a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space as a means of preserving Russia's great power status (Rumer and Weiss, 2022; Tsygankov, 2015).

This conviction is reflected in his belief that Ukraine's integration with Western institutions, such as NATO and the EU, would pose an unacceptable threat to Russia's security and regional dominance. As he stated in a 2021 speech, "Ukraine's joining NATO is a direct threat to the security of Russia" (Putin, 2021).

The Outbreak of the Conflict

Given Putin's operational code, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine can be seen as a logical extension of his personal beliefs and perceptions. Driven by his desire to maintain Russia's sphere of influence, his fear of Western encroachment, and his belief in the utility of military force, Putin made the decision to launch a full-scale invasion in an attempt to prevent Ukraine's further integration with the West and assert Russia's regional dominance (Rumer and Weiss, 2022).

The invasion, however, has had significant consequences, leading to a protracted conflict, heavy casualties, and severe economic and diplomatic repercussions for Russia (Freedman, 2022).

Case Study 2: The 2023 Israeli-Gaza Conflict

Background and Context

In May 2023, a new outbreak of violence erupted between Israel and the Gaza Strip, marking the latest chapter in the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The immediate trigger was a series of clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian protesters in Jerusalem, which escalated into an exchange of rocket fire and airstrikes between Israel and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip (BBC News, 2023).

The underlying causes of the 2023 conflict, however, can be traced to the personal ideologies and operational codes of the key state leaders involved, particularly Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas' political leadership.

Philosophical Beliefs

Netanyahu's operational code is characterized by a deep-seated belief in the inherent hostility of the international system and the necessity of maintaining Israel's military superiority and security against perceived threats (Arian and Shamir, 1999; Kaarbo and Beasley, 1999). This philosophical worldview is rooted in the historical experience of the Jewish people, the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust, and the ongoing security challenges faced by Israel in the Middle East.

Netanyahu's belief in the zero-sum nature of international relations and the constant threat posed by Israel's neighbours is a key driver of his foreign policy. As he has stated, "Israel is not a state like any other state. It's a state that's fighting for its life every single day" (Netanyahu, 2015).

Similarly, the operational code of Hamas' political leadership is shaped by a strong sense of Palestinian nationalism, a deep-seated belief in the injustice of the Israeli occupation, and a conviction that armed resistance is the only viable means of achieving their political goals (Gunning, 2004; Scham and Abu-Irshaid, 2009).

Instrumental Beliefs

Netanyahu's instrumental beliefs emphasize the use of military force and unilateral action as the primary means of safeguarding Israel's security and advancing its interests in the region (Kaarbo and Beasley, 1999). This is reflected in his support for the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the use of force against Palestinian militants, and his reluctance to engage in meaningful peace negotiations (Chomsky and Pappé, 2010).

Conversely, Hamas' operational code prioritizes the use of armed resistance, including rocket attacks and suicide bombings, as the primary strategy for resisting the Israeli occupation and achieving their political objectives (Gunning, 2004; Scham and Abu-Irshaid, 2009). This belief in the efficacy of violence has been a key factor in the outbreak of repeated conflicts between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

The Outbreak of the Conflict

The 2023 Israeli-Gaza conflict can be understood as the direct result of the conflicting operational codes and personal ideologies of the key state leaders involved. Netanyahu's belief in the necessity of maintaining Israel's military superiority and his willingness to use force, combined with Hamas' conviction that armed resistance is the only viable means of achieving their goals, created a volatile situation that ultimately led to the outbreak of hostilities (BBC News, 2023).

The cyclical nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, marked by periods of relative calm punctuated by outbreaks of violence, highlights the intractable nature of the dispute and the difficulty of achieving a lasting peace settlement.

Case Study 3: The Camp David Accords and the Role of Sadat's Pragmatic Ideology

In contrast to the examples of the Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli-Gaza conflict, the Camp David Accords of 1978, which resulted in a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, demonstrate how the personal ideology and decision-making principles of a state leader can play a crucial role in resolving an intractable international conflict.

At the centre of this historic agreement was the pragmatic and conciliatory approach of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, whose operational code was markedly different from that of many of his predecessors and contemporaries in the Arab world (Quandt, 1986). While Sadat shared the deep-seated nationalist sentiments and anti-Israeli views that had long dominated Egyptian foreign policy, he was also pragmatic and flexible in his approach to achieving his country's strategic objectives (Quandt, 1986).

Unlike many of his Arab counterparts who viewed the conflict with Israel as a zero-sum struggle for national survival, Sadat's philosophical beliefs about the nature of the international system were more tolerant and accomodating. He recognized the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of global politics, and was willing to engage in calculated risk-taking and reciprocal concessions if he believed it would serve Egypt's long-term interests (Quandt, 1986).

This pragmatic worldview was reflected in Sadat's instrumental beliefs and decision-making during the negotiations that led to the Camp David Accords. Rather than adhering to the traditional Arab position of demanding the complete withdrawal of Israel from all occupied territories as a precondition for peace, Sadat was willing to accept a more incremental and partial resolution that would secure tangible gains for Egypt, such as the return of the Sinai Peninsula (Quandt, 1986).

Sadat's pragmatism and willingness to make difficult compromises was crucial in overcoming the deeply entrenched ideological positions and mistrust that had long characterized the Arab-Israeli conflict. By abandoning the rigid, zero-sum approach that had previously dominated Egyptian foreign policy, Sadat was able to forge a diplomatic breakthrough that not only ended the state of war between Egypt and Israel, but also paved the way for a broader peace process in the region (Quandt, 1986).

The case of the Camp David Accords thus demonstrates how the personal ideology and decision-making principles of a state leader can play a pivotal role in resolving seemingly intractable international conflicts. Sadat's pragmatic and flexible approach, rooted in his unique operational code, was instrumental in breaking the deadlock and achieving a historic diplomatic breakthrough that had eluded his predecessors.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the pivotal role that the personal ideologies and operational codes of state leaders can play in shaping the dynamics of international conflicts. Through the in-depth analysis of several historical and contemporary case studies, it has highlighted how leaders' fundamental beliefs about the nature of the political universe, the role of conflict, and the efficacy of different strategies can significantly influence their perceptions of threats, their willingness to take risks, and their approach to managing international disputes.

The case of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrates how President Vladimir Putin's deep-seated nostalgia for the Soviet Union, his perception of the West as a threat to Russia's security and influence, and his belief in the necessity of maintaining a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space drove his decision to launch a full-scale military intervention. Similarly, the cyclical nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be attributed to the conflicting operational codes and personal ideologies of key leaders on both sides, such as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas' political leadership.

In contrast, the example of the Camp David Accords demonstrates how the pragmatic and conciliatory approach of a state leader, in this case Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, can play a crucial role in resolving seemingly intractable international conflicts. Sadat's willingness to make difficult compromises and adopt a more flexible, incremental approach was instrumental in overcoming the rigid, zero-sum positions that had long characterized the Arab-Israeli dispute.

These findings underscore the importance of moving beyond traditional systemic and structural explanations for international conflicts and paying closer attention to the personal ideologies and decision-making principles of individual state leaders. By applying the operational code analysis framework and related concepts from political psychology, this study has shed new light on the complex interplay between leader-level and systemic factors in shaping the dynamics of global affairs.

Future research in this area could explore the influence of other leader-level characteristics, such as personality traits, cognitive styles, and emotional biases, on foreign policy decision-making and the outbreak and resolution of international conflicts. Additionally, comparative studies examining the operational codes and leadership styles of key figures across multiple historical and contemporary cases could yield valuable insights into the broader patterns and trends in how individual leaders shape the course of international relations.

Ultimately, this study underscores the theoretical significance of incorporating leader-level variables into the study of international relations. By recognizing the powerful impact that the personal ideologies and decision-making principles of state leaders can have on the global landscape, scholars and policymakers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex forces driving the outbreak, escalation, and resolution of international conflicts.

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