

Original Paper

What Do States Maximize?

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Abstract

The well-known professor John Mearsheimer answers power or security in a world characterized by anarchy. Despite his insightful analyses of the Two major wars now, his theoretical postures cannot be upheld. States in fact do not maximise anything at all.

1. Introduction

In the philosophy of the social sciences as well as in history of Ideas the maximising axiom or hypothesis plays a major role. It is key in homo economics theory like equilibrium economics as well as game theory. It is centrally disputed in political science and public administration. Moreover, it is rejected in the new institutionalism. In theories of war, on the other hand, we encounter it with Clausewitz and Mearsheimer for instance. Thus, the maximising hypothesis or axiom has been much debated in economics and management theory. On the one hand, the equilibrium analysis of markets assume *homo economics* and instant clearing of markets with zero transaction costs. On the other hand, management theory admits only of bounded rationality. This debate still rages on in business schools, initiated by Herbert Simon after the war.

Recently, new developments in game theory have increased the relevance of the rationality hypothesis. However, the rejection of rationality and maximising is strong in the new literature on how to nudge. How about foreign policy making?

2. Rationality

One may distinguish between two concepts of rationality, a weak and strong one. In historical inquiry, an actor is analysed with Weber's means-end scheme:

“Any coonscious reflection on the most fundamental elements of meaningful human action is from the beginning tied to the categories ‘ends’ and ‘means’.” (Weber, 2014, p. 102)

For example, Bismarck's goal for his newly created Germany—survival—was to-be enhanced by the following means: low competitive naval armament with Great Britain, social legislation for the trade unions and secret pact with Russia—counterproductive or not.

Yet, the stronger concept of rationality is much more specific following von Neumann:

- Knowledge of all alternatives of action and their consequences;
- Transitive order of all preferences;
- Calculate probabilities of outcomes (p) x utility (u) of same outcomes;
- Choosing Max pxu.

Whereas the Weber means-end concept meets little resistance, the great debate concerning this stronger concept has been rocking the boat: Do actors - individuals or organisation like a government—satisfy the stronger conditions?

3. Mearsheimer's Objective Function

Emphasizing parsimony in theory, he mentions only power and security as the goals of big countries. Although these two objectives are intentional objects, he states that they are close. Not so, it seems. The US led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan fall under power, whereas the Cuban crisis belong under security. How to classify the Vietnam war?

Mearsheimer is highly critical of Biden's policy toward the Ukraine (power), but much in favour of containing China by US support to Taiwan (security).

The emphasis on security parallels the rights of states in international law. But it bypasses all the events where governments engage in war due to aggression or opportunism. Governments take to arms for a variety of reasons. Normativity has no place in his theory.

4. Balance of Power

Big countries dominate international politics maximising their power to become regional hegemons, argues Mearsheimer. One country can be a global hegemon for a short time like the US between 1990 and 2020. One may develop this change as a result of the balance of power in a system of countries facing anarchy, meaning no judge or court to rule over peace and war.

Balance of power is the international system of sovereign countries with no global hegemon. It is not a unique or strong equilibrium. Different geopolitical situations are conceivable among the regional hegemons. Actually, balance of power is supported institutionally by the veto power in the security council as by cultural legacy. But Mearsheimer looks upon the balance of power as meany determined by the rational pursuit of power by big states.

5. What Is the State?

It seems that "State" comes from Italian renaissance "*stato*". Today international law requires these properties:

- A. People
- B. Territory
- C. Monopoly on the legitimate use of physical violence.

Agency belongs to other units within the state such as government, parliament, court, bureau etc. In these units we find agents and agency -a complex set of principal—agents relationships.

We are back to the Simon—von Neumann controversy Do people in government maximise power in foreign policy making ?

The evidence points to a NO answer. There is a set of maximalist actions like for instance Japanese warfare in China, German invasion of the USSR and the Israeli destruction of Gaza. At the same time one finds blatant mistakes like LBJ and Bush junior.

6. Conclusion

Neorealist theory harbours the *axiom* that states maximise power or security under anarchy. Conceptualising foreign policy and international policy with this basic assumption leads to a neglect of factors like uncertainty, risk and opportunism.

Take the case of Ukraine. Mearsheimer has dared to question the standard view of Russian aggression. Why is the NATO trying to extend its Eastern flank into the Russian border and the Black Sea? Balance of power? Sevastopol could become US naval base! NATO countries and the EU funds the war. But who wants to fight, I.e. risk to die?

The risks involved are just enormous as thr worrying parties ascend the escalation ladder. If governments are maximising their power or security, they would never start a nuclear attack. Alas, a government performs sometimes irrationally.

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