

Lessons and Learning in Foreign Policy: What Went Wrong in Afghanistan

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Date: July 14th, 2023

In fulfilment of the requirements of the Major Research Paper
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Abstract

This paper examines decision-making pathologies and learning models in foreign policy. More specifically, I examine the fundamental question: What does the learning and decision-making evidence suggest regarding why states continue to invest significant funding and resources into political strategies that are explicitly failing? I applied the existing literature on the topic to a case study of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in order to understand why the U.S. persisted in counter-insurgency efforts after the failure of their previous strategies. I find that the best decision-making pathology that reflects U.S. decision-making in Afghanistan is the sunk cost fallacy.

Keywords: Counterinsurgency, Afghanistan, United States, Sunk Costs, Decision-making, Learning

Introduction

In the contemporary era, political conflict is comprised of nothing short of a conglomeration of various incentives, and decision-making. One need not look very far to realize that these conflicts have occurred as a result of the various motivations, beliefs, and values of various political leaders' decisions. Similarly, as one recalls human history, it becomes explicitly clear these decisions have also been driven by ideological, social, and political differences that have been at the root of many conflicts. However, as we dissect the very phenomenon of which factors contribute to such ideological, social, and political tensions, it becomes clear relatively early on that each of them was produced due to the decision-making of one individual, or in the case of groupthink, multiple individuals. Decision-making plays a critical role in a variety of circumstances where particular conclusions and outcomes are selected over other possibilities. In this light, by examining the role of decision-making, these discussions open the pathway to understanding that ultimately politics has little to do with factors such as statehood, sovereignty, and wealth, albeit these are critical aspects as well. However, one of the utmost significant aspects of politics involves who is in power, what views they harbour, and as a result, which decisions they pursue concerning various circumstances.

Whether in today's age, or centuries ago, the decisions made by various leaders fashioned the path for the victory of some groups and the demise of other groups and systems. Examples of this thought process include embarking on questions and ideas such as, "Why did Richard Nixon resign from the presidency as the Watergate crisis heated up and Donald Trump would not after the insurrection in the United States Capitol building went awry?"¹ In understanding the decision-making of leaders and administrations, we also examine the

¹ Margaret G. Hermann, "What Leaders Are Like and Their Effect on Decision- Making: Analysis-at-a-Distance," *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science*, (2021): 1-23.

multifaceted nature of each individual and their cognitive processes. Cognition plays an imperative role here as it enables scholars to understand how leaders and decision-makers process information, that they then use to make judgments.² To examine why particular leaders, fixate on particular ideas or decisions over others, we navigate the existing literature on decision-making pathologies for factors such as cognition, motivation, beliefs, and reactions.³ Although the forces that drive various ideas and justifications may differ for each leader, the outcomes can be a crucial basis for understanding which components are involved in the decision-making that affords particular results.

With respect to the field of International Relations (IR), this research paper examines the fundamental question: What does the learning and decision-making evidence suggest regarding why states continue to invest significant funding and resources into political strategies that are explicitly failing? In exploring this question, this paper alternatively inquires, why do states fail to change their course of action before conditions worsen? In doing so, I assess the variety of decision-making pathologies that enable us to understand why states persist with strategies that explicitly foreshadow or immediately demonstrate weakness and failure, as well as which factors drive the various decision-making pathologies.

Articulation of the Research Problem

This research paper aims to understand various learning and decision-making pathologies, as well as the factors involved in these processes. In doing so, the objective is to understand how decision-makers arrive at their conclusions, as well as what factors are involved. By exploring the literature on decision-making and learning, this paper will then transition into a

² Hermann, "What Leaders Are Like," 1-23.

³ Ibid.

case study of Afghanistan during the U.S. mission from October 2001, until August 2021. More specifically, this section of the research paper will focus on examining why the U.S. persisted in doubling down on counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. In order to analyze this, the existing literature and evidence discussed in the first half of the paper will be used to draw an understanding of which of the decision-making pathologies best reflects what took place in Afghanistan. By diving into the background operations of how political leaders approach various choices and decisions, we can understand which factors are at play as they finalize particular choices. We take a look at factors such as a leader's particular beliefs, motivation, personality traits, and reactions to understand cognitively which psychologically driven behavioural traits can allow us to determine the cognitive thought processes of leaders who rationalized, justified, or defended particular ideas and decisions over other ones. In understanding this specific process, this research paper aims to highlight which factors can be responsible for the conditions we see in the world today.

In understanding the events that take place in the world around us we often examine the key agents involved, the geographic locations, victims, and many other important factors. While we can recognize certain events for the contributions they have made to man's political history, we have yet to produce a deeper analysis regarding the developments that ensue before the events themselves. As a result of this, I draw on the existing qualitative academic literature to highlight the various decision-making pathologies, as well as the various factors that drive them.

Furthermore, the objective of this research paper focuses on contributing to the ongoing conversation regarding the various decision-making pathologies that influence decision-makers to consider, rationalize and conclude on the various choices that they do. By examining the qualitative literature on this topic, this research paper then transitions into applying the discussed

information to the case of Afghanistan. In doing this, I aim to analyze which decision-making pathologies best encapsulate the case of Afghanistan during the U.S.-led invasion, where U.S. officials opted to persist in their operation, despite the explicit signs of weakness.

In highlighting the case of Afghanistan in the context of what specifically occurred throughout the U.S.-led invasion, there is an important opportunity to understand how the existing literature and evidence that has been produced thus far on decision-making can be applied to a recent and modern-day political event. To employ the knowledge we have regarding decision-making through cognitive schemas of distorted understandings of governance, as well as biased decision-making approaches such as sunk costs, we recognize the various factors that are involved in how political leaders, agents, and individuals in general, make various decisions. In a time where the international political climate is constantly developing, it becomes even more crucial to understand how, and why, decision-makers, in this context being political leaders, produce the often-transformative decisions that they do.

Research and Methodology

In undergoing the research project, this paper will use comparative qualitative methods to draw on the existing literature on decision-making pathologies and learning processes, from scholars who have previously examined this topic in greater detail. These ideas will be explored in greater depth throughout the second half of this paper where I will identify each of their accounts, highlight the implications of these arguments, and then apply these ideas to the case of Afghanistan to understand which decision-making pathologies were involved. By comparing the contributions of different scholars, this paper will aim to offer an understanding of the different decision-making pathologies, as well as the various factors involved in these processes. In doing so, this paper will then apply the existing evidence to the case of Afghanistan during the time of

the U.S. mission. By focusing on the case of Afghanistan, the specific aim of the research paper is to analyze the U.S. doubling down using counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan despite the worsening conditions in the region.

To begin, I will examine secondary sources derived from academic journals and articles. This includes the contributions made by authors such as Margaret G. Hermann, Lesley Terris and Roland Paris, who articulate that decision-making is largely associated with a set of individual behavioural factors. In other words, decision-making is largely comprised of inaction inertias, uninformed assumptions, as well as the interconnected role of cognition, motivation, and reactions, which operate to drive specific decision-making developments.

Though the previous group including Hermann, Terris and Paris, diverge in their approaches to examining decision-making, they examine a similar larger idea regarding the process of how, as well as why, individuals at some of the highest political levels of leadership make the decisions that they do. They inquire and explore varying personality characteristics, psychological assessments, as well as behavioural explanations. While their approaches to understanding these phenomena vary, they are still nevertheless focused on the idea of decisions and their associated pathologies. However, this focus varies from that of authors such as Eric Stern, Jack S. Levy, and Allan McConnell who provide a subsequent analysis of how decision-making assessments can be applied to the process of learning. The previously listed scholars incorporate decision-making by crediting the varying factors that are involved in these processes i.e., personality characteristics, individual behaviour, and sunk costs effects on rationality, while using these elements to understand learning more specifically in the context of the larger international foreign policy framework. For these scholars, decision-making is a critical element in an overall kaleidoscope of complimentary, but also contrasting, factors that conglomerate in

informing learning processes, negotiations, and the aftermath of decision-making.⁴ Moreover, in a similar light, Allan McConnell develops this point by including an analysis of understanding the nature and causes of foreign policy failure. McConnell suggests that learning is understood to be largely determined based on previous experiences, related to lived errors, and miscalculations.⁵ Decision-making and learning are no short of human error, and in many cases, inevitable.

With this in mind, the third and final section of the literature review will discuss the works of Markus Domeier, Pierre Sachse, and Bernd Schafer to consider the biased decision-making pathology concerning sunk costs, and its important role in foreign policy.

Therefore, the sunk cost mentality and foreign policy ‘failures’ should not be treated as negative causes but rather embraced as they provide opportunities to continue to seek more effective solutions and improve learning.⁶ In analyzing this literature through various perspectives, and explanations, this paper will then transition into applying the existing evidence regarding decision-making pathologies to the case of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. In doing so, this paper will aim to understand which of the evidence mentioned by the various scholars best supports the events which unfolded in Afghanistan.

I conclude by drawing on the existing decision-making evidence and discussion to assert that the decision-making pathology that best encapsulates the case of Afghanistan during the U.S. presence. In doing so, I highlight the various factors involved in the sunk-cost fallacy.

⁴ Jack S. Levy, "Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield," *International Organization*, (1994): 279-312.

⁵ Allan McConnell, "A public policy approach to understanding the nature and causes of foreign policy Failure," *Journal of European Public Policy*, (April 2016): 667-684.

⁶ McConnell, "A public policy," 667-684.

Research Limitations

Due to the limited scope of this research project, some elements and factors in understanding the decision-making process have been excluded. This paper does not consider a variety of case studies to demonstrate context for every outlook on the decision-making process to offer an in-depth analysis of multiple perspectives. Rather it focuses on just one case study concerning Afghanistan during the U.S. presence in the region. Although providing supplementary case studies from different historical and political events for context to the outlooks on decision-making that do not prominently consider psychology would have contributed an additional level of analysis, for the sake of the length this research paper is limited to one case. In addition to this, while I aim to touch on some of the core understandings of decision-making and its associated pathologies, many substantive views have not been analyzed. In this respect, I sought to focus on the specific perspectives that appeared most prominent within the literature regarding the variety of instruments at play throughout the decision-making process. In doing so, I fixated my research on some of the most complimentary perspectives related to this topic.

Additionally, despite the established scholars who have researched and analyzed the decision-making process, the currently existing literature and evidence are nevertheless relative. This is because the research that has been undergone is derived from a selection of innovative mechanisms, where some scholars have drawn on psychobiography, as accessing political leaders and actors is extremely difficult. Moreover, while this research is completed with contributions from a variety of important and qualified voices and ideas, it remains contingent. With this in mind, it can be further thought-provoking should one day researchers have the resources to gather the personal accounts of respective political leaders directly from them.

While this may be difficult given numerous reasons pertaining to security and privacy factors, among others, this mechanism can enable the field of IR, among others, to receive an understanding of decision-making that may originate straight from the source. In doing so, the literature can be privileged with receiving the personal experiences and knowledge of the very individuals it seeks to form an understanding of in the face of various instances, events and circumstances.

Literature Review – The Role of Personal Policy Partisanship

Purpose

In order to understand which decision-making pathologies best reflect the case of Afghanistan during the U.S.-led invasion, during which U.S. officials opted to persist in their operation, despite the explicit signs of weakness, it is important to first examine the literature. In doing so, this paper highlights the existing literature regarding decision-making and learning within IR. Engaging with the existing literature allows readers interested in the topic of decision-making to receive a clearer understanding of the various factors, and driving forces responsible for how, and why, particular decision-making pathologies are applied in different contexts by decision-makers.

Personality Assessments

Beginning with the first analysis of decision-making operations, scholars such as Lesley Terris, Margaret G. Hermann and Roland Paris discuss that a significant portion of decision-making contains personal and psychological factors. While each of the previously listed scholars offers a slightly different account for how these factors are employed in different circumstances with varying political leaders, the overall theme of psychological elements being at play in the

decision-making process remains stagnant. For scholars such as Margaret G. Hermann, these factors can be recognized as cognition, motivation, personality traits, and reactions.⁷ These four core psychological factors play a critical role in the decision-making process as it influences how leaders develop specific conclusions, as opposed to other ones. By drawing on the role that such psychological instruments play in these decision-making pathologies, scholars such as Margaret G. Hermann examine which elements influence leaders to rationalize and justify certain decisions, as opposed to others.⁸ Therefore, since political leaders are often inaccessible individuals given the nature of their occupations, Hermann draws on approaches such as psychobiography, which is the “structured, focused comparative case studies; personality assessment-at-a-distance; and the simulation of policymaking via experiments. With each, researchers have tried to become more systematic and objective in how they study leaders and what leaders are like”.⁹ In addition to this, Hermann highlights that such psychological mechanisms derive from the field of behavioural psychology, whereby behavioural factors such as an individual’s day-to-day reactions and responses are studied to formulate an informed analysis of who they are.¹⁰ In doing so, such an approach utilizes subjective ornaments such as human behaviour, thoughts, and responses to produce informed judgments on particular personalities.

As previously mentioned, by employing such a method, this approach considers the four core psychological factors of cognition, motivation, traits, and reactions. Where cognition includes, “beliefs, attitudes, cognitive biases, stereotypes, ways of processing information”.¹¹

⁷ Hermann, “What Leaders Are Like,” 1-21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The role of cognition here is central as “political leaders’ rationality is often bounded by their beliefs and their openness to information that help to shape how they perceive and react to their environment”.¹² As a result of this, it is ultimately critical to learn how political leaders’ “views of reality” eventually shape their overall actions and decisions.¹³

Beliefs

According to Hermann’s research, “beliefs are, in essence, that which we hold to be true”.¹⁴ Much of this can be attributed to the fact that beliefs construct our postulations about how the world around us functions. The beliefs we adopt also explain how individuals react to their day-to-day experiences and responsibilities. Therefore, in the context of political leaders, Hermann expresses that “beliefs have implications regarding the objectives political leaders are likely to adopt as well as what aspects of their environments will capture their interest and attention. At the behest of political leaders, beliefs often shape the norms guiding the political institutions, organizations, and agencies such leaders oversee, framing what is considered “right” and “wrong” and becoming resistant to change”.¹⁵ Moreover, the beliefs of political leaders have been a “tool that has been used for half a century now in examining [how] political leaders assess their operational code—the particular philosophical and instrumental beliefs that define these leaders’ standards for action”.¹⁶ Hermann highlights that philosophical beliefs dictate the understanding of political leaders towards the “political universe (e.g., politics are inherently zero-sum), whereas instrumental beliefs portray leaders’ proclivities toward strategies for reaching their goals (e.g., punishment is more effective than reward)”.¹⁷ “These beliefs guide

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

political leaders' perceptions of others, the information they are likely to seek, and their policy choices".¹⁸

Motivation

Similarly, the second critical factor includes motivation. Motivation in this context refers to "the goals that drive political leaders' behaviours".¹⁹ These motivations can be rooted in a leader's desire "to solve a problem or address a cause, seek approval from others, have a sense of obligation to serve to need to compensate for personal shortcomings, react to the challenge of the position, or be interested in status or recognition".²⁰ Leaders maintain an assortment of individual motivations that they consider before the decisions they make because of the end objectives they may have. These objectives can be linked to various incentives they may have for their reputation, and their re-election, among other factors. These incentives can then also be traced back to a leader's ambitions and desires, which may reflect their respective personalities and characteristics. As such, "motives are driven by situational awareness—obstacles and opportunities, time since last satisfaction, the ability of different incentives to satisfy that motive—and the more situations that arouse a particular motive, the stronger that motive is in driving behaviour".²¹

Characteristics

These sentiments also coincide with the third psychological instrument known as personality traits, that can help determine why leaders make the decisions they do. In this context, individual characteristics "channel or direct how motives and cognition are expressed in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

particular actions”.²² In producing this research, five key traits were dominant, these being “distrust of others, ingroup bias, self-confidence, focus on controlling what happens and having a task versus an interpersonal focus of attention”.²³ In addition to these traits, factors such as the “degrees of experience, levels of interests, target of behaviours” among others, are also largely used to identify how a political leader may act concerning the decisions they must make.²⁴ The archetype of the characteristic’s a leader has can allow researchers to make sense of which traits might drive specific choices leaders make.

Integrative Complexity

A political leader’s behaviours can also be tied to the fourth and final factor mentioned by Hermann, which includes integrative complexity, also known as how leaders react and process the information they are provided.²⁵ Examining how leaders process various news and sets of information allows researchers to understand how a leader’s reactions can drive them toward specific decisions. Akin to this, the level at which distinction may occur in thought processing, as well as the degree of integration of these different scopes in a specific situation, is also highly important. This is because “it is assumed that leaders have a certain level of conceptual complexity and interest in integrative complexity, that is, how much more information they will seek in dealing with the current problem”.²⁶ However, this varies from the role of beliefs which are more often found to be stable and certain, whereas integrative complexity can fluctuate given the circumstances; “and it is that dynamic characteristic that has made it useful in understanding what leaders are planning”.²⁷

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Inaction Inertia and Sunk Costs

While the assessment of personality traits and cognitive systems plays a fundamental role in understanding the choices made by leaders, there are additional factors to consider. Such factors include the contributions made in the realm of behavioural political science, as examined by scholars such as Lesley Terris. Similar to Hermann, scholar Terris applies a parallel approach to understanding decision-making. According to Terris, the recent contributions made by behavioural political scientists have enabled researchers to consider another account of understanding the decisions made by political leaders and actors.²⁸ This includes, “the influence of previous decisions made by actors on their mindsets and, consequently, on their subsequent negotiation decisions”.²⁹ The role of previous decisions is critical here because it also shines a light on the fact that previous political scientists utilized rational perspective standpoints which are considered formal models, to understand the decision-making of leaders. These perspectives drew on game theoretical models, where “changes in the negotiation setting... [are] captured by altering the underlying game and depicting how they impact the game’s equilibria. Overall, classic rational models focus on the strategic conditions of a given situation and portray how rational actors are expected to behave under a specific set of conditions”.³⁰ However, while it is important to draw on rational perspectives, rational models do not always provide all of the answers. This is further argued by Terris who states that classic rational models “frequently fail to explain why actors involved in ongoing negotiations at times deviate from the classical rational actor model by repeatedly rejecting rationally acceptable settlement offers that promise

²⁸ Lesley Terris, "The Effects of Time in Negotiations: Bargaining Theory, Sunk Costs, and Inaction Inertia," *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science*, (2020): 1-22.

²⁹ Terris, “The Effects of Time in Negotiations,” 1-22.

³⁰ Ibid.

to end conflict”.³¹ Therefore, to provide a nexus in this gap, in recent years, additional research has been invested into the behavioural study. This is because the behavioural research “has shifted attention to the decision maker as the main unit of analysis by focusing on psychological and cognitive factors affecting actors’ thinking processes and negotiation behaviour”.³²

With this in mind, Terris’ work focuses on two behavioural effects that have begun being more prominently recognized within the international negotiation literature, known as the sunk cost effect and inaction inertia.³³ Sunk costs lead decision-makers to “stick to sub-optimal conflict policies”,³⁴ and inaction inertia includes decision-makers to “continue rejecting settlement opportunities after an attractive opportunity has been forgone”.³⁵ Both sunk costs and inaction inertia highlight the lingering influence of past choices on decision-makers psychological states and consequently, their current decisions. Yet, whereas sunk costs focus on underlying motivations for action, inaction inertias concentrate on the underlying motivations for inaction.

While sunk costs might prompt continued suboptimal actions, such as costly war, inaction inertia is associated with continued avoidance of optimal actions, such as the acceptance of good settlement offers. Both sunk costs and inaction inertia account for suboptimal negotiation behaviour. This points to an interesting point within the existing literature because while sunk costs and inaction inertia seemingly involve opposite behaviour patterns, a closer examination reveals that they share common characteristics and perhaps could be understood in terms of the same underlying psychological mechanisms. With this in mind, sunk costs represent

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

in a sense a psychological vulnerability. This is because terminating engagement in an endeavour is associated with psychological costs. Terminating an action is likely to trigger regret and recrimination, the anticipation of which encourages continued action”.³⁶ The implications of sunk costs for negotiations in conflict situations are clear as abandoning an, albeit faulty, policy of conflict by accepting a settlement offer is likely to expose decision-makers not only to the unpleasant feeling of regret but also to harsh external criticism for demonstrating indecisiveness and inconsistency, for pursuing the original policy in the first place, or for both. For instance, one need not to look far to find an example as the 2008 Obama surge, which will be discussed in further detail in the second half of the research paper, is an excellent example of this.

However, unlike the sunk-cost effect, the causes for inaction inertia vary in their respect. This is because the focus here becomes on inaction, instead of action, which was the case with the sunk costs where actors will remain engaging in specific projects or activities, even when such demonstrate weaknesses or failure. In the case of inaction inertia, the core understanding relates to the realization that an appealing chance is no longer available, and as such creates susceptibility to regret. Therefore, “by quickly dismissing subsequent inferior—yet still good—opportunities, regret can be avoided”.³⁷ Furthermore, this mentality follows the train of thought that suggests “having passed up one opportunity to gain, the person becomes more likely to pass up another opportunity to gain but gain less.” The inaction inertia effect highlights the influence decisions, once made, have on subsequent decisions. Thus, several explanations have been offered to account for inaction inertia. However, a key component of these reasons is the leaders’ expectation of regret.³⁸ “The psychological juxtaposition of the superior—forgone—opportunity

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

and the inferior current opportunity triggers an unpleasant counterfactual thinking process ‘if only I had acted sooner’, rendering decision-makers highly susceptible to the experience of regret”.³⁹ By immediately dismissing the opportunity to have made a proactive choice, the decision-maker can prevent themselves from thinking unsatisfying thoughts to avoid the sentiments of “regret, albeit at the cost of missing another opportunity”.⁴⁰

The existing evidence from the field of behavioural political science allows researchers to highlight that inaction inertia illustrates that settling for a rejection in any case, but more specifically in a negotiation conducts not only immediate consequences for leaders and their administrations but will also influence future decisions regarding ensuing offers and discussions. “Repeated negotiation inertia–induced decisions are likely to grind constructive negotiations to a halt simply due to the existence of a history of a missed opportunity”.⁴¹ Considering this acknowledgement, it is reasonable to assert that a leader’s decisions and negotiations set the precedence for future events, and in return, this pressure can commission significant pressure on decision-makers concerning the discussion they enter, as well as exit.⁴² With this in mind, it is important to recall that although a significant amount of the existing literature applies a rational perspective when examining phenomena such as decision-making and subsequently, negotiations, many times rational calculations are not the only probable outlook.

Governance Schemas and Foreign Intervention

Most of the literature within IR assumes that leaders make various decisions based on rational calculations of expected utility, however, as so far discussed, this strategy does not

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

accurately apply to every incident or scenario.⁴³ This is largely because when attempting to understand how political leaders conclude on the respective decisions they make, their thought processes, ideas, reasoning, and understandings are not objective facts. Rather, they often mirror subjective analyses that differ according to each respective leader. Roland Paris builds on this point by applying this notion of re-thinking decision-making through such a rational-based model, by examining the role of governance schemas in foreign-imposed regime changes.⁴⁴ He articulates that to the extent that scholars of foreign-imposed regime change have examined the role of classic rational models exercising utility outcomes, “they have tended to assume that interveners make such decisions for instrumental reasons, such as to increase their own security, to ensure continued access to critical resources, or to achieve other desired ends”.⁴⁵ These outlooks assume that “interveners rely on ‘rational’ means-ends calculations in order to decide which types of political arrangements to promote”.⁴⁶ However, these explanations originate from the very assumption that external actors, often being political leaders and actors, exercise “cost-benefit calculations to decide which governance agreements to promote”.⁴⁷ This perspective reinforces the notion that intervening states set out by the decisions of political leaders are presumed to be “utility-maximizing rational actors”.⁴⁸

However, the limitations of this specific thought application concern what these perspectives overlook, which is the possibility that such decisions made by leaders may be “conditioned by unspoken assumptions that delimit the range of choices that interveners will

⁴³ Roland Paris, "State of Mind: The role of governance schemas in foreign-imposed regime change," *International Relations*, (2015): 139-176.

⁴⁴ Paris, "State of Mind," 139-176.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

readily consider”.⁴⁹ This idea taps into a similar stream of thought discussed by both Hermann and Terris, in that there may be psychological factors at play throughout the decision-making processes of leaders and political agents. These perspectives have previously highlighted the ineffectiveness of applying classic rational models to understand the actions of various political leaders throughout various decision-making processes. While Hermann draws on analysis-at-a-distance approaches to understand the decisions of political leaders through their beliefs, motivations, traits, and reactions, and Terris concentrates on behavioural political science applied by drawing on the sunk cost fallacy and inaction inertias, Paris employs the concept of schemas in cognitive and social psychology to understand the decision-making processes of foreign interveners.

Psychology of Intervention and Intervening Actors

Beginning with the concept of schemas concerning cognitive and social psychology, schemas offer a unique theoretical framework for understanding the decisions of foreign interveners and their respective ideas of governance. This is because a “schema is a ‘cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes’”.⁵⁰ Scholars of psychology who have long studied the human mind, have determined that how the mind “‘perceives the world and processes information [is] by compartmentalizing and sorting things into categories’”.⁵¹ Schemas, therefore, function as “mental representations of categories, or organized repositories of general knowledge about a particular subject or phenomenon, which are critical to ‘the processing of new information and the retrieval of stored information’”.⁵² Understanding the function of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

schemas and the ways by which the individual mind comprehends information into categories allows scholars to identify the possible ways in which political leaders draw specific conclusions based on the information they have compartmentalized in their mind, as well as which information they engage with mentally while retrieving information.⁵³ However, in Paris' work, the function of schemas in the decision-making of foreign interveners is further enhanced by acknowledging *inter alia*, the “ways in which belief systems, paradigms, operational codes, strategic cultures, frames, and metaphorical and analogical reasoning shape political actors' understandings of the world around them”.⁵⁴ Each of these two approaches, schemas and *inter alia*, identifies the various inconsistencies present in rationalist models when they are applied to engaging with politics and understanding the reality of decision-making.⁵⁵ However, what is less recognized, though deeply crucial to this dialogue, is the concept of “taken-for-granted governance assumptions”.⁵⁶

Understanding the role of such taken-for-granted governance assumptions is critical to understanding decision-making as it highlights the internal nature of presumptions and the costly effects they may have when exercised by leaders in foreign intervention, but also in general. While presumptions can sometimes be considered faulty errors of judgements, Paris states, “any governance system is built on assumptions about the nature of political authority”.⁵⁷ Most government structures are predicated on a set of knowledge and understandings that derive their formulation based on a series of needs, and services for both the citizens and the administration exercising authority. With this in mind though, this embarks a series of questions highlighted by

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Paris, such as “What is the source of political authority? Who can wield it? Is this authority meant to be centralized or dispersed, personalized, or depersonalized, formalized or informal? And what is the relationship between political authority and territory?”.⁵⁸ The answers and solutions to these questions are implanted into the very construction of every governance arrangement. They are embedded within any present or forthcoming group’s plan to replace an existing regime through international intervention. Therefore, the question of what becomes the source of political authority, who exercises such authority, and which ideas are considered to be the correct ones becomes paramount to understanding the process of decision-making and which tools drive such operations.

By that means, Paris’ account which draws on governance assumptions of schemas and inter alia has two important implications for understanding decision-making processes. The first “suggests that interveners’ decisions might be more constrained than the rationalist literature suggests”.⁵⁹ This first implication is identified as compartmentalizing and organizing issues, events, and an understanding of the world into specific categories, which enables a cognitive schema to outline the institutional structures and actors that are best associated with governance, as well as the practices that these actors are “‘socially empowered’ to perform”.⁶⁰ This specific implication highlights a possible upcoming dilemma whereby the actors from the intervening side believe they are best suited to engage with foreign civilians, structures, and regimes, solely because they have a particular cognitive schema reserved that empowers them to maintain the belief that they are participating in a valuable plan. This information demonstrates that schemas may not only shape the preferences of political actors but also “determine which forms of actions

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

are thinkable and unthinkable”.⁶¹ By discounting certain alternative views of governance, and “creating an ‘aura of factuality’ around historically and culturally contingent models of political organization, schemas may make these models appear ‘natural’”.⁶² This in return, produces implications where in circumstances if certain practices and institutional forms are not contingent on the supposed valid governance structures and its services, “these understandings may be rejected, discounted, or simply not recognized as instances of governance”.⁶³ With this in mind, these pieces of knowledge further apply to the extent that this classification process relies on taken-for-granted assumptions about the meaning of governance, where it mirrors a... “‘logic of habit’, where a decision-making process manifests as largely ‘unintentional, unconscious, involuntary, and effortless’”.⁶⁴

The second implication includes the existing research on schemas suggests that the interveners’ governance assumptions are often difficult to refute. This is largely because schemas offer cognitive consistency where there is a sense of safety in the predictability of understanding the world.⁶⁵ In these instances, individuals will very rarely choose to listen to any opposing critics, or dialogue that contradicts the knowledge they maintain on respective topics and situations. An individual’s desire to maintain the safety of their reserved thinking, which allows them to maintain a certain level of prediction on certain topics, will extend to great measures. This may even include instances where there is evidence to suggest the opposite of the conserved understanding held by actors. Consequently, social psychologists have long contemplated this topic and have often disagreed about the “precise mechanisms of schema change”, as “most

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

emphasize the overall rigidity of belief systems, including among elites and policy-making experts, who tend to be ‘more cognitively consistent and rigid’ than the general public because they are ‘more attentive, informed and committed to their beliefs’”.⁶⁶ This point reinforces the idea outlined by Paris, in that:

If interveners involved in regime change are constrained by their own unacknowledged assumptions about governance, and if these constraints lead them to reconstruct the target states in conformity with these unacknowledged assumptions, then the ‘constitutive’ dimensions of power would seem to be at work.

The literature here points to a great issue here where decision-making becomes affected by an individual’s hesitation to accept new ideas and engage with them based on the sum of knowledge they have maintained and conserved within their minds for longer periods. Where actors are hesitant to accept and acknowledge new and different information, one can reasonably conclude the biases that would appear in one’s ability to make informed decisions. This may explain some of the previously outlined questions concerning why certain events resulted in the removal of particular political leaders, whereas other events made no stark difference in the leadership of other political figures. This evidence points to a sharp understanding for scholars who study decision-making in demonstrating that while studying political agents and actors applying rational models cannot accurately depict a durable understanding of the subject. Because political actors are still nevertheless human beings with a set of ideas, knowledge, and traits, a rational model cannot accurately explain every single actor’s decision-making in the same way as the next. With this in mind, there is light shined on the limitation of applying rational models to understand decision-making. Rather, instead, it may be more effective to consider the credibility of nuanced approaches to understanding these phenomena, such as the psychological, behavioural, and cognitive structures at play.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

This is not to state that rational models are entirely incorrect and faulty. Rational models that consider the role of objectivity are important to the study of decision-making in understanding how actors rarely act in so-called ‘rational’ manners. Consequently, this point allows scholars to examine a variety of alternative approaches to understanding decision-making. Among the variety of alternative approaches, a few have been discussed in great depth in this section so far by drawing on the accounts of Margaret G. Hermann, Lesley Terris and Roland Paris. However, an additional perspective is also prevalent in understanding decision-making pathologies. This second account encapsulates the works of authors such as Eric Stern, Jack S. Levy, and Allan McConnell.

While the first group of scholars concentrated on understanding decision-making for the factors that drive it in the first place through psychological tools, i.e., personality traits, behavioural assessments, and cognitive structures, the second set of scholars examine what can be recognized as the aftermath of decision-making, which is largely focused on learning. For Stern, and Levy, followed by McConnell, there is a lot to be said for how decision-making is affected by learning. This is because, for these scholars, decision-making and learning are closely linked together⁶⁷. As previously mentioned, these scholars believe that decision-making cannot be accurately studied without understanding the learning processes that have taken place. This includes learning following policy failures, political conflict, and faulty errors of judgment.

In essence, this perspective is largely predicated on the idea that for decision-making to be accurately analyzed, one must also examine which learning instruments were at play as political agents prepared for making decisions. However, as one examines the role of learning in the decision-making process, it becomes clear that learning is not static. Rather, the process of

⁶⁷ McConnell, "A public policy," 667-684.

learning is multifaceted, incorporating a variety of experiences, factors, and understandings, to accurately have maintained a lesson from specific incidents, experiences, and operations. In this light, the works of authors such as Stern, Levy, and McConnell portray a critical emphasis on understanding that decision-making is not divorced from lessons and learning in foreign policy. Therefore, to accurately comprehend how foreign policy outcomes occur, one must examine the decision-making pathologies alongside learning operations.

Crisis Learning

As previously discussed, learning is not a static process divorced from elements such as experience, failure, and misjudgment.⁶⁸ For scholars such as Eric Stern the main question that he ponders includes, “can governments learn?”⁶⁹ For scholars to understand and conceptualize learning and the possibility for change, Stern argues that the notion of learning must initially be articulated for what it is. Stern makes the point the locus of learning can also be recognized as the ontological problem, this idea relating to the deeper realm of understanding the nature of how one exists, and the nature of existence for a human being.⁷⁰ Stern makes the argument that a significant portion of learning has to do with “the question of at what level of social aggregation learning takes place. In other words, who or what learns?”⁷¹

When articulating this question of who or what learns, scholars of various fields have offered their contributions, ranging from developmental learning experts to policy experts, to government experts. Such scholars have discussed the importance of social learning where “individuals linked in smaller-scale social structures, such as groups, networks and

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Eric Stern, "Crisis and Learning: A Conceptual Balance Sheet." *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, (1997): 69-86.

⁷⁰ Stern, “Crisis and Learning,” 69-86.

⁷¹ Ibid.

organizations, think and learn collectively through communicative interaction”.⁷² Another account has considered the significance of group or work team learning as fundamental to a collective organizational learning process.⁷³ In addition to this, others have similarly considered “the deployment of the learning concept from an institutional perspective often focusing on the development of roles, rules and routines through social experience”.⁷⁴ For those in government bodies, the approach to learning is different as Stern argues the collective approach in incorporating social interaction is not present, rather government bodies focus on long-term learning processes that determine “competence-building or competence-decline”.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, each of these approaches considers learning in one shape or another as a means of moving forward and improving from a previous state, condition or stream. However, the static theme in each of these varying perspectives is the presence of explanation-based learning, which originates from experience-based learning.

As well, Stern explains that explanation-based learning models a type of learning that “results from the application of reason and reflection to direct, vicarious or virtual experience”.⁷⁶ This can be more explicitly understood as the analysis and interpretation of past experiences are believed to be able to “generate new understandings of ‘causal’ processes which have generated previous favourable or unfavourable outcomes”.⁷⁷ In return, the attempts made to understand the collections of factors producing a particular result, “may lead to heightened consciousness of potentially obscure or counter-intuitive relationships and which may inform subsequent decisions.”⁷⁸ To accurately determine if actors have truly learned from various events or

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

circumstances, Stern applies the notion of *cognitive differentiation and integration*, which is the “dual criteria for the identification of learning” where increased intelligence and sophistication of thought illustrate whether an individual has grasped the new lesson.⁷⁹ The purpose of the application of this notion to understanding learning processes and their influence on decision-making is “assessing the hierarchical integration of thought processes” where “one asks whether the individual or collective in question demonstrates an enhanced ability to ‘... coherently pull together and systematize all the complexity, relate parts of the problem to each other, relate parts to wholes, to evidence and inference?’”.⁸⁰ In other words, this embarks on the idea of whether decision-makers demonstrate a progressively more informed, or well-rounded understanding of the problem they are facing. Identifying whether actors maintain any lessons or newfound pieces of knowledge plays a vital role in understanding how an experience is a critical tool in informing accurate decision-making operations.

Stern additionally builds on this by mentioning a second criterion of the experience-based model of learning which includes *competence acquisition*, referring to where “learning has often been conceptualized as the mastery of increasingly complex tasks”.⁸¹ In other words, this element of the experience-based learning process concerns the amount by which an individual actor may have learned, in terms of the improvement or enhancement of their skillset. Skills refer to the capacity, given adequate resources, to translate intentions into successful outcomes. However, to truly achieve these successful outcomes, it includes the engineering of knowledge, including the applied practical knowledge of how to bring ideas into play, essentially “how to make things happen”.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

In the context of crisis, learning takes a starkly different image as the factors involved completely alter the course of actions for most actors. Stern states, “the escalation to crisis levels of stress by decision-makers and wider publics commonly brings about a number of changes in the state of the political arena and its actors”.⁸³ These changes arrive as the political atmosphere produces a shift in the focus toward the crisis issue at hand. An example of this includes the recent conflict in Eastern Europe right now following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The entire international atmosphere, across various fields whether that be politics, economics, or social entertainment, paused for a moment and shifted towards acknowledging this new issue. In the face of events such as this, “other issues may be eclipsed”.⁸⁴ In this respect, the mass media networks and organizations also play an important role by providing interpretations of ongoing events, these interpretations influence other elements within society whether that be the general public or organizations. Moreover, “in crisis, the actions or inactions of political actors are scrutinized with an intensity which surpasses the normal, largely due to the narrowed agenda”.⁸⁵ In such moments, crisis becomes an opportunity, or a threat, for actors to begin engaging in a variety of decision-making processes.

Stern argues that political learning here manifests as radically accelerated given the crisis conditions at hand, whereas without conflict political learning and change processes take place at a “slower rate”.⁸⁶ Experiencing a crisis affects how individuals think, which ideas appear at the forefront of their minds and which information is put aside. Crisis experience is often understood to challenge tacit or explicit beliefs about adversary actors and characters. This is because “acute crises ... produce a kind of collective trauma in that they confront leaders on both sides with

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

serious threats to their personal and national interests and are likely to leave them somewhat shaken even after the successful mastery of such challenges”.⁸⁷ An example of this Stern articulates includes the “intense fear and elaborately visualized scenarios of nuclear holocaust on the part of the participants of the Cuban Missile Crisis... produced the learning which was required to escape the predicament without a war”.⁸⁸ In return this specific case study allows scholars to note that the participants seemed to have learned that the deep predicament between them simply had to be avoided given the stakes involved. Stern notes “the profundity of the learning from that nuclear crisis has matched the profundity of the fear which gave rise to it”.⁸⁹ The example of the Cuban Missile Crisis reminds individuals that “while we learn best from experience, we never experience directly the consequences of many of our most important decisions”.⁹⁰ The following statement reinforces the idea that while learning is crucial to decision-making, there is still the overarching question outlined by Stern at the beginning of this section concerning, “can governments learn?”.⁹¹

Learning in Experience

Similar to Stern, According to Jack S. Levy, the learning model of foreign policy includes individuals learning from experience, and their inferences from experience influencing their behaviour.⁹² However, he notes “evidence of individual learning is necessary but not sufficient to confirm a learning model of foreign policy change.”⁹³ Instead, Levy points to a variety of directions for further research on learning and foreign policy. One direction is to

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy," 279-312.

⁹³ Ibid.

dismantle the learning model and examine some of its core sections parts. An important set of research questions involves embarking on the sources of learning. Such questions include “from what types of events do political leaders learn? Do they learn more from failure than from success, more from their own experiences than from the experiences of others, or more from singular events than from the gradual accumulation of experience over time? Under what conditions is learning most likely? Are some types of people more likely to learn than others? Through what processes do political leaders learn? How well do they learn? How quickly do they learn? Is learning about causal laws different than learning about initial conditions? Is experiential learning different from deductive learning?”.⁹⁴ The significance of these questions lies in understanding that “learning models alone do not provide complete explanations for foreign policy change.”⁹⁵ This is largely because they fail to accurately and consistently articulate how and under what conditions individual learning is translated into policy change. According to Levy, it is not enough to solely identify whether learning has occurred. This is because learning is a far more complicated and nuanced process, an individual’s ability to process new information according to Levy, does not signify the immediate or effective possibility for decision-making to alter policy.⁹⁶ Learning might directly affect individual policy preferences; however, this needs to be incorporated into a theory of the foreign policy process that explains how individual preferences are transformed into governmental policy decisions.⁹⁷

As a result of this, Levy poses the question of “what is learning”, and how can it be accurately grasped? Therefore, according to Levy, learning can be defined as “experiential learning as a change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one's beliefs) or the development

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience.”⁹⁸ This definition differs from several alternative conceptions that one can find in the literature because as previously mentioned, “it does not require that learning involve policy change, an improved understanding of the world, or an increasingly complex cognitive structure.”⁹⁹ Learning is active in several respects, one of them being that learning is an analytic construction.¹⁰⁰ People interpret historical experiences through the lens of their analytical assumptions and worldviews. Second, actors actively search for the information they believe is necessary for a valid interpretation of historical experience. Actors also conduct experiments to “test” their assumptions: they implement small policy changes, observe their effects, learn through trial, and error, and proceed incrementally.

In this case, the next important section of Levy’s account includes understanding what people learn about. Beginning with *causal learning and diagnostic learning*, Levy articulates how these approaches to learning provide a clear depiction of how individuals learn, and what that process looks like. Firstly, causal learning refers to changing beliefs about the laws (hypotheses) of cause and effect, the consequences of actions, and the optimal strategies under various conditions.¹⁰¹ Secondly, diagnostic learning refers to changes in beliefs about the definition of the situation or the preferences, intentions, or relative capabilities of others.¹⁰² For example out of political history, the “Munich analogy” refers to causal learning about the likely consequences of appeasing an aggressor, whereas observation of the adversary’s actions may lead to diagnostic learning about that adversary’s preferences and intentions.¹⁰³ In addition to

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

this, “beliefs about both the initial conditions and causal laws can be probabilistic as well as deterministic, and this implies that learning can involve changes in the degree of confidence in one's beliefs about causal relationships or initial conditions, a point that is generally neglected in most conceptions of learning”.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, in understanding how learning operates, it is also important to consider the levels of learning that take place. According to Levy, learning takes place at different levels. In "simple" learning, new information leads to a change in means but not in ends, and in "complex learning" a recognition of conflicts among values leads to a modification of goals and means.¹⁰⁵ This distinction has been extensively developed in the literature and provides the basis for hypotheses about the learning process. Levy draws on the works of Philip Tetlock here to produce an argument “that foreign policy belief systems are organized hierarchically, with fundamental assumptions and policy objectives at the highest level, strategic policy beliefs and preferences at an intermediate level, and tactical beliefs at the bottom.”¹⁰⁶ He argues that most learning takes place at the tactical level and that political decision-makers reconsider their basic strategic assumptions and orientation only after repeated failures.¹⁰⁷ This is because to generate a tactical solution to their foreign policy problems, “policymakers reconsider their basic goals or objectives only after repeated strategic failures, and that fundamental learning is so psychologically difficult that it is likely to occur only in conjunction with massive personnel shifts.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, this then coincides with the notion put forward by Levy revolving around the idea of learning to learn. In addition to learning about causal laws and initial conditions,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

individuals also learn how to learn. Levy states that individuals “learn new decision rules, judgmental heuristics, procedures, and skills that facilitate their ability to learn from subsequent experience.”¹⁰⁹

Levy’s account here similarly parallels that of Stern, where both authors argue in favour of experience-based learning being at the forefront of a decision-maker's ability to draw informed conclusions. Stern recognizes the role that crisis circumstances may affect decision-makers, and Levy highlights the importance of understanding that learning is not a linear process that is divorced from a variety of separate mechanisms. In fact, the literature presented by Levy and Stern emphasizes the importance of crediting learning for the multifaceted and complex phenomenon that it is. In this respect, both authors have not shied away from recognizing that decision-makers are not immune to faults and errors, however, to fixate on such errors is where further dilemmas of repeated mistakes and catastrophes may come from.

Learning in Failure

According to Allan McConnell, “regardless of the extent of evidence, modelling, projections, risk assessment, expert advice and political skills that contribute to policy design and decision-making, no government is immune to the risk of policy failure”.¹¹⁰ Similarly, policy failures can consume significant amounts of government time, producing bigger problems than they seek to solve, provoking media-feeding frenzies... damaging political careers and leading to the demise of governments.¹¹¹ In short, policy failure is not an ideal circumstance for any country, or administration to find themselves in. However, while there is a significant understanding of the consequences of policy failure, the literature on how and why such policies

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ McConnell, "A public policy," 667-684.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

fail seems to be scarce. According to McConnell, “if governments and societies have a poor understanding of if and why policies fail, there is a significant risk that they will continually make the same ‘mistakes’ again, pursuing policies vulnerable to failure with a high risk of political backlash.”¹¹² In this context, the word ‘failure’ has an air of completeness about it, as though a policy either fails or doesn’t fail, it is characterized to be a notion that can only be either one or the other, either policy are successful or they fail. However, McConnell urges that this should not be the approach given to understanding these operations, rather “there are many reasons why we cannot and should not think of policy failure as an indivisible and wholly objective phenomenon.”¹¹³ Therefore, to understand these mechanisms, McConnell outlines a variety of understandings that relate to how the concept of ‘foreign policy failure’ can be understood in a more nuanced manner.

One aspect of understanding policy failure includes the consideration that there are multiple standards for failure. “The word failure implies undesirability and the breaching of a goal, aspiration, or value. Defining failure would be quite straightforward if analysts could agree on such a ‘standard’.”¹¹⁴ In reality, however, there are an array of failure criteria. A few of these criteria will be mentioned as this paper continues to provide a sense of the clear ambiguity of the concept of policy failure.

To begin the first standard includes the failure to achieve the goals of government. “Evaluation against what government set out to do is a standard feature or much policy analysis – especially of the rationalist–scientific tradition and it is the default of most intra-governmental assessment of policies.”¹¹⁵ It is also a common feature of academic analysis. One example

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

assesses the G.W. Bush administration's goals in Iraq in precisely this manner, arguing that it did not achieve the three key goals of defeating terrorism, promoting democracy, and blocking nonconventional proliferation among adversaries.¹¹⁶

The second considers the failure to benefit particular interests or groups. "At times policies may have failed to benefit the particular target group or groups that were, in theory, the formal target of the original policy design."¹¹⁷

The third failure includes the failure to produce benefits greater than the costs. Cost-benefit analysis is a standard tool of economic analysis but can also be used in political discourse and often in policy evaluations, via a weighing-up of positive and negative outcomes. In this light, a policy is considered to fail, de facto, if the costs exceed the benefits.¹¹⁸

The fourth includes the failure to match moral, ethical, or legal standards. Regardless of what objectives governments set out or claim to have achieved, many political agents claim policy failure to be a breach of deeper values. "¹¹⁹It may be breaches of the law... or a policy failing to live up to some higher ethical or moral standards. A report by the UN Human Rights Committee (2013) found Australia to have breached a series of human rights Articles in its detention of refugees."

The fifth failure includes the failure to improve on what went before. A common feature of 'failure' discourse is that we are 'worse off' as a result of what the government has done (or failed to do). The benchmark here is how policy outcomes compare to a prior state of affairs. McConnell highlights that "most judgements of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

policy of appeasement and the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938 saw this move as paving the way for war rather than avoiding it (McDonough 1998).”¹²⁰

The sixth failure touches on the failure to do better than others upon dealing with similar issues. “The benchmark here is government doing worse in addressing a problem than another jurisdiction (usually a nation) addressing a broadly similar problem, e.g., threat from global terrorism.”¹²¹

The final standard of failure considers the failure to garner sufficient support from those actors and interests who matter. “Policies may be considered a failure because they were unable to command sufficient support from those who either played a strategic role in the implementation process or whose support was vital in the legitimation of the policy.”¹²²

Having examined the various standards of failure set out by McConnell, it is evident that the existence of multiple standards for policy failure seems to be a major barrier to our understanding when attempting to understand what policy failure objectively mirrors. For instance, McConnell states “one hundred civilian casualties in a military intervention could be considered a failure if we assess this outcome against certain standards (for example, failure to produce benefits greater than the costs and failure to match moral, ethical or legal standards).”¹²³ Yet, such deaths may be perceived as regrettable but successful if they contribute to broader standards, such as “achieving government goals (helping restore democracy in another nation), improving on what went before (ousting a dictator) and even producing benefits greater than the costs (the long-term benefits of peace and democracy being considered more important than the

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

lives lost regrettably along the way)”.¹²⁴ In other words, when employing a utilitarian perspective that considers the benefits in comparison to the disadvantages, conclusions on how a scenario can be understood largely vary from one individual to the other.

With this in mind, there are also additional challenges to understanding what constitutes policy failure. For example, “virtually every policy in the world produces some ‘achievement’, from the very minor to the substantial, just as there are always some ‘failures’, from the minor and inconsequential to the major. Failure is not ‘all or nothing’.”¹²⁵ Policies also, and typically, have multiple goals, often changing over time, and with tensions between them. Producing unambiguous ‘evidence’ of failure can also be challenging. A policy fails, even if it is successful in some minimal respects if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent. Therefore, McConnell argues, “in such accounts, the causes of failure are in essence ‘good intentions’ or ‘good societies’ that have gone marginally askew at the periphery. The corollary of such sympathetic tendencies is that we shouldn’t have inflated expectations that we can foresee and prevent all failures, but once they happen, we can at least reflect, learn, and refine.”¹²⁶

McConnell’s account of understanding policy failures also takes into consideration the attitudes placed on failure and lessons. According to McConnell, the causes of policy failure are many in number, often vague, complex in their relationship and often highly contested.¹²⁷ However, governments do the best they can with the resources available to them. This perspective considers the value in lessons and learning that derive from often errors of judgments, miscalculations, and overall lessons. As previously mentioned, McConnell suggests

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

that learning is understood to be largely determined based on previous experiences, related to lived errors, and miscalculations.¹²⁸ Decision-making and learning are no short of human error, and in many cases, inevitable. Therefore, the sunk cost mentality and foreign policy ‘failures’ should not be treated as negative causes but rather embraced as they provide opportunities to continue to seek more effective solutions and improve learning.¹²⁹

The authors in this section including Stern, Levy and McConnell make a strong argument for the role of experience-based learning as being at the forefront of decision-makers' abilities to make informed choices and draw the most effective conclusions. While they vary in their approaches to exploring the notion of learning and its subsequent pathologies, they unite in their focus on demonstrating the linkages between lessons and learning in foreign policy, concerning decision-making, including that mistakes and failure are part of the human learning process and should not be heavily ridiculed. This theme ties into that explored by scholars Markus Domeier, Pierre Sachse and Bernd Shafer.

The Rationality of Sunk Costs

If one were to solely focus on data that demonstrates how often decision-makers make incomplete, or uninformed judgments that result in unfavourable outcomes, then this would “lead to the impression that the human mind is hopelessly flawed”.¹³⁰ Instead, authors such as Markus Domeier, Pierre Sachse and Bernd Schafer believe “no present or future findings in literature or research can lead to the assumption of faulty competence in human reasoning,”¹³¹ instead it is more worthwhile to examine the “patterns of illusions, which might be active during reasoning

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Markus Domeier, Pierre Sachse, and Bernd Schafer, "Motivational Reasons for Biased Decisions: The Sunk Cost Effect's Instrumental Rationality," *Frontiers in Psychology*, (2018): 1-11.

¹³¹ Domeier, Sachse, and Schafer, "Motivational Reasons for Biased Decisions," 1-11.

and could lead to faulty conclusions”.¹³² Therefore, while decision-making pathologies and learning processes are subjective and may contain errors, this does not suggest that they always occur as a result of human irrationality.¹³³ Oftentimes, there are reasonable factors that influence decision-makers to rationalize various choices. Domeier, Sachse and Schafer focus on this idea in their work *Motivational Reasons for Biased Decisions: The Sunk-Cost Effect’s Instrumental Rationality*, in understanding the “reasons for cognitive biases and their formation in the human mind”.¹³⁴

Cognitive Biases

According to Domeier, Sasche and Schafer, “if we want to find the instrumental rationality in relation to cognitive biases, we need to clearly understand their function and the purpose they might have. Therefore, the goal should not only be to eliminate or reduce biases but also to understand them and identify their negative and possible positive effects.”¹³⁵ However, to begin this process, it is critical to initially examine what ‘cognitive biases’ refers to in this context. Domeier, Sasche and Schafer define this notion by explaining ‘biases’ as an “undistorted and normative standard from which the behaviour deviates”¹³⁶ and cognition being the “mental process”.¹³⁷ The authors explain that “despite the fast-growing literature in the field of decision-making, there is still a lack of understanding on how to overcome or how to understand biases”.¹³⁸ They articulate that the best way to reduce biases would be to have a

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

better understanding of mental processes in general, as this would include motivational and emotional aspects to the focus on cognition in decision-making research.¹³⁹

The Psi Theory

In order to understand the significance of emphasizing the ‘mental processes’, the authors introduce the notion of the *Psi theory*. The Psi theory provides an understanding of the human mind regarding the motivational, emotional, and cognitive processes that create a “holistic architecture of the human mind”.¹⁴⁰ The theory combines the emotional and motivational aspects of an individual’s decision-making ability into the cognitive system. The Psi theory includes five different needs that are distinguished as: “(1) existential needs (thirst-, hunger-, and pain avoidance), (2) the need for sexuality, (3) the need for affiliation (positive signals from others), (4) the need for certainty (predictability), and (5) the need for competence (active control). Of these five needs, the authors focus on the need for competence”.¹⁴¹ The need for competence refers to having active control over a situation, which contains the extent to which a person feels capable of handling the problems presented by their environment.¹⁴² This need also encompasses the need for power, control, or autonomy, and is connected to status, self-competence, and self-worth.¹⁴³

According to Domeier, Sachse, and Schafer, with the Psi theory, there is a difference between goal-oriented and need-oriented behaviour. A goal is defined as a situation associated with a motivational value.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, need-oriented behaviour refers to a behaviour

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

focused on the satisfaction of needs.¹⁴⁵ This becomes important in understanding the impact of motivations on decision-making and a decision-maker's thought process while considering various rationales.

The Role of Motivation

The authors explain that decision-making is part of the problem-solving process. The act of decision-making can be described as the ability to choose one of several alternatives and to act accordingly following the decision being made. However, the goal of a decision lies in the future, meaning that when making a good decision, an individual has to pick an alternative in the present moment, which best fulfills the future requirements of an upcoming situation. Therefore, in these instances, the role of motivation in complex problem-solving becomes ever more apparent, as consequently, motivation also influences decision-making. This is because as the authors state “decisions do not take place in a vacuum; the needs are influenced by specific characteristics of the situation”.¹⁴⁶

Sunk Costs

One of the best-known effects of cognitive biases is the sunk-cost effect. It is defined as a “tendency to continue an endeavour once an investment in money, effort, or time has been made”.¹⁴⁷ This means that when individuals display sunk-cost effect behaviour, they typically continue “with the option which they have already invested in and resist changing to another option that might be more suitable regarding the future requirements of the situation”.¹⁴⁸ The authors distinguish between two different situations in which the sunk-cost effect occurs. The first is described as a “utilization decision,” a decision wherein the decision maker has to choose

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

between two equal alternatives.¹⁴⁹ The second situation is a “progress decision,” which describes a situation “where the decision hinges upon whether or not a chosen pathway should be continued or not”.¹⁵⁰ Domeier, Sachse, and Schafer note that additional instances where the sunk-cost effect occurs also include, decision-makers not wanting to appear wasteful, the effect of mental accounting or the escalation of commitment.¹⁵¹

Domeier, Sachse and Schafer’s account of the reasons for biased decision-making concerning the sunk-cost fallacy highlight another angle of the decision-making pathology. Their perspective incorporated factors such as instrumental rationality, the psi theory of the human mind, motivational factors, and the sunk-costs effect in discussing how decision-making can be influenced by cognitive biases formed in a decision maker’s mind. Therefore, in doing so, the authors highlighted a variety of elements that exist as decision-makers consider, rationalize, and conclude on various choices, as well as how those respective factors may later influence the subsequent learning lessons.

Having examined the existing literature on decision-making and learning, this paper will now transition into applying the evidence to the case of Afghanistan with respect to the U.S. mission that took place from October 7th, 2001, until August 30th, 2021. By drawing on the existing evidence regarding decision-making pathologies, which was examined in the first section of this paper, including distorted understandings of governance models and sunk cost mentalities, this paper strives to understand which decision-making pathologies were at play during the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid..

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Case Study – The Case of Afghanistan

U.S. Decision-making in Afghanistan

The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, which ousted the Taliban regime, was followed by a major international effort to stabilize the country.¹⁵² However, more than a decade later, this effort produced “neither security nor political stability in Afghanistan”.¹⁵³ In fact, it eventually resulted in the U.S. withdrawing its military presence in the country altogether in August of 2021, despite spending two decades in the region, coupled with significant economic investment, military, and civilian casualties, as well as additional resources spent. Therefore, this embarks the question of What happened in Afghanistan? What went wrong? To provide a possible explanation for these questions, one must initially understand the circumstances at the beginning and during the invasion.

The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan was initially established as a limited exercise of military power to strike Al Qaeda, with the intent to remove the Taliban government from Afghanistan and prevent the United States from facing any future threats.¹⁵⁴ This exercise was established following the September 2001, 9/11, attacks in the United States, organized by Al Qaeda.¹⁵⁵ The beginning of the invasion involved very little resistance from the Taliban resulting in the invasion progressing rapidly, where Afghan groups who opposed the Taliban “did most of the fighting, supported by U.S. air power—and in less than six weeks, the Taliban was driven from the capital, Kabul”.¹⁵⁶ However, at this point in time, there was an explicit hesitation in Washington where officials were reluctant to “take charge of the aftermath of regime

¹⁵² Roland Paris, "Afghanistan: What Went Wrong?" *Perspectives on Politics*, (2013): 538-548.

¹⁵³ Paris, "Afghanistan: What Went Wrong?" 538-548.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

change”.¹⁵⁷ An explicit example of this includes President George W. Bush vocally rejecting the role of the U.S. in nation-building, stating: “We are not into nation-building. We are focused on justice,”¹⁵⁸ meaning, “killing or capturing members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban”.¹⁵⁹

However, while Washington was demonstrating signs of hesitations, the United Nations selected a special envoy by the name of Lakhdar Brahimi, to “lead international preparations for post-conflict peacebuilding in Afghanistan.”¹⁶⁰ With Brahimi in this position, the concept of a light footprint was introduced, which meant a small, “unobtrusive international presence in the country.”¹⁶¹ Moreover, this approach was “well aligned with Washington’s distaste for nation-building, and it quickly became the operating framework for international involvement in Afghanistan.”¹⁶² Although “some allies—and even some U.S. officials—were calling for a more substantial commitment, the international security presence was limited to a small force of 5,000 troops to patrol Kabul only.”¹⁶³ With these troops on the ground in Afghanistan, several thousand U.S. forces performed “counterterrorism” tasks, “which included hunting down remaining members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban—but that was all, as Washington officials “prohibited troops from performing any peacekeeping or security functions or helping the international contingent in Kabul.”¹⁶⁴

While this invasion began as a relatively “modest” project, it soon “evolved into a massive military and aid enterprise over the ensuing decade.”¹⁶⁵ The initial decision to remove

¹⁵⁷ Astri Suhrke, "When More is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan," *Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE)*, (2006): 1-18.

¹⁵⁸ Paris, "Afghanistan: What Went Wrong?" 538-548.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

the Taliban regime, instead of taking disciplinary measures against Al Qaeda alone, “proved to be a critical juncture”¹⁶⁶ as it created the platform for a much larger war between the United States “and a reconstituted Taliban”.¹⁶⁷ Following the creation of this conflict, the “next decade witnessed a “step-by-step interaction of hostile forces” that produced “steadily escalating violence””.¹⁶⁸ However, at the same time, “the civilian dimensions of the operation were also expanding, driven in part by the ‘international peacebuilding regime,’ a sprawling network of governmental and non-governmental agencies.”¹⁶⁹ This machine of international and seemingly collective collaboration “which was now engaged to help Afghanistan, largely under the umbrella of the UN—was “harnessed to a strong belief in social engineering,” including the conviction that democratization, good governance, the rule of law, and other broadly liberalizing reforms were necessary for peace””.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, “bureaucratic and organizational interests, including aid lobbies, also contributed to a ‘seemingly unstoppable momentum’ toward an ever-expanding mission”.¹⁷¹ Yet as the scale of international commitments mounted, so did the rhetoric of political leaders in the intervening countries, who invoked objectives such as peace, security, democracy, and freedom.

However, as the international presence began to grow, if not escalate, other factors also began to cultivate such as corruption, increasing insurgency which produced additional violence, and more. As more foreign assistance fueled “spectacular”¹⁷² levels of corruption and created a “rentier state,”¹⁷³ which “was more responsible to external donors than to its own people—

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

contrary to the goal of strengthening Afghan democracy”.¹⁷⁴ “Responding to such problems by further expanding international assistance served to amplify, not remedy, the problems”.¹⁷⁵

Similarly, by increasing its military operations, the international alliance of states involved in Afghanistan, “elicited even greater resistance from the insurgency, thus intensifying the violence and further alienating Afghan civilians, who were often caught in the middle”.¹⁷⁶

The international mission in Afghanistan escalated incrementally over the course of the decade, however, “a closer look reveals that the international presence started out small and expanded at a relatively slow pace until 2009”.¹⁷⁷ Following 2009, the course of these years witnessed changing conditions within Afghanistan. “An initial period of public enthusiasm for the new Hamid Karzai government and openness to the international presence gave way, instead, to a growing resentment over the failure of the central government to provide public goods, and to declining support for the international mission”.¹⁷⁸ By the end of the decade, circumstances in Afghanistan were significantly less promising for a large-scale international presence than at the beginning of the decade with civilians becoming increasingly unhappy with their society as violence escalated, resources decreased, and more. Yet paradoxically, this was the exact moment when the United States, under President Barack Obama, decided to scale up its efforts completely.¹⁷⁹ The decision to scale up efforts was later noted as the 2009 Obama surge. This refers to President Barack Obama’s announcement, “in December 2009, that the United States would commit tens of thousands of additional troops and civilians to the mission,”¹⁸⁰. This decision became a “turning point,” as Obama seemed to contradict himself. Having

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

“simultaneously announced that the United States would begin withdrawing its forces in mid-2011 and complete the process by 2014”¹⁸¹ while having just stated that rather U.S. efforts in the region will be increased. With this in mind, one wonders what decision-making pathologies were at play to enable the decision to scale up efforts. What factors encouraged decision-makers to double down on efforts at this point in the region?

In order to answer these questions, we refer back to the first section of the research paper. Given the literature discussed at the beginning of the research paper which explored various decision-making pathologies and learning processes, it is apparent that decision-making occurs throughout several circumstances, involving differing factors. This research paper touched on a variety of these decision-making pathologies, including firstly, distorted understandings of government where individual decision-makers may be driven by behavioural and cognitive factors such as motivation, beliefs, and schemas. The second decision-making pathology touched on learning as a factor by which decision-makers produce their decisions as they rely on past experiences to inform their judgments of existing or foreshadowing issues. The third decision-making pathology discussed the notion of sunk costs, where decision-makers persist “in an endeavour once an investment in money, effort, or time has been made”.¹⁸²

While there may sometimes be one specific model of a decision-making pathology that is being engaged with, we cannot be absolutely sure given that in the context of understanding the decisions of political leaders, it is difficult to obtain clear information. Therefore, in the case of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan following the period after 2009 as conditions worsened, it is reasonable to assert that the key decision-making pathologies that seem to be present, included

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Domeier, Sachse, and Schafer, "Motivational Reasons for Biased Decisionsy," 1-11.

the distorted understanding of governance, but more predominately the notion of sunk cost fallacies.

Drawing on the literature explored in the first half of the research paper, the decision-making pathology surrounding sunk costs best encapsulates an understanding of what happened in Afghanistan, including why the U.S. began doubling down on counterinsurgency efforts in the region, despite the evidence of the reality of the circumstances pointing to weakness and ineffectiveness. The sunk cost fallacy best captures the U.S.' approach to facing the crisis in Afghanistan at the time for a few reasons.

The first is that as previously mentioned, the sunk cost fallacy refers to the notion of continuing to invest in specific endeavours, despite the apparent drawbacks. This continued commitment can occur for several reasons including, having already dedicated considerable effort in the first place. With this in mind, when examining the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, by the time the conditions truly started to worsen, the U.S. had already spent nearly a decade in the region. Throughout that time frame, respectively being from 2001 until 2009, the U.S. had invested \$38 billion in Afghanistan¹⁸³, over 50,000 troops had been deployed to the region¹⁸⁴, and thousands of civilian casualties occurred throughout this time within Afghanistan.¹⁸⁵ These stark numbers illustrate just a few angles of the commitment made by the international community, specifically the U.S. throughout this time, including the amount of funding and human life that was allocated to this operation. However, these efforts nevertheless contributed to the worsening crisis that unfolded in Afghanistan over the years. Therefore, keeping in mind

¹⁸³ Council on Foreign Relations, "Council on Foreign Relations," 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

¹⁸⁴ Nick Kirkpatrick, Craig Whitlock, and Julie Vitkovskaya, "The Washington Post," April 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/afghanistan-war-photos/#>

¹⁸⁵ Brown University, "Costs of War," August 2022, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan>.

the previously mentioned statistics, it is reasonable to believe that a sufficient part of the reason why the U.S. engaged in the effort to double down counterinsurgency as resistance grew, was rooted in the knowledge of how much substantial commitment had already been given to the region, and the costs that the U.S. had endured so far.

This ties into what the authors in the first half of the paper had discussed regarding the rationality behind pursuing the sunk-cost approach. As previously mentioned, scholars such as Domeier, Sachse, and Schafer highlighted that additional instances where the sunk-cost effect occurs also include, escalation of commitment.¹⁸⁶ By 2009, approximately eight years into the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, conditions in the region began to worsen despite the fact that the earlier parts of the mission had included some positive momentum for change and reform. While the initial parts of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan occurred rather rapidly due to the little resistance, the years to come approaching 2009 presented a starkly different image regarding the public sentiment towards the foreign presence. However, as time progressed, additional funding, resources and efforts continued to be invested in the region, making Domeier, Sachse and Schafer's point regarding the escalation of commitment appear accurate in this context.

In addition to this, another angle by which the case of Afghanistan can be well encapsulated by the sunk cost fallacy approach is due to possible motivations or fears decision-makers may have had regarding the mission. In other words, had the U.S. decided to withdraw their presence at the peak moment as the crisis in Afghanistan escalated, this could have had various impacts on the U.S. Some include the reputation of the country on the international stage, to fellow allies or enemies, public citizens, and the larger precedent it could attach to the Obama administration's legacy. This point is reflected in Domeier, Sachse and Schafer's point regarding

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

the Psi theory. As previously mentioned, The Psi theory provides an understanding of the human mind regarding the motivational, emotional, and cognitive processes that create a “holistic architecture of the human mind”.¹⁸⁷ The theory combines the emotional and motivational aspects of an individual’s decision-making ability into the cognitive system. The Psi theory includes five different needs, the fifth being the need for competence (active control). The need for competence refers to having active control over a situation, which contains the extent to which a person feels capable of handling the problems presented by their environment.¹⁸⁸ However, this also includes the need for power, control, or autonomy, and is connected to status, self-competence, and self-worth.¹⁸⁹

In the context of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, it is reasonable to assume that the need to ensure the security of one’s status, self-competence and self-worth could have also been at the forefront of the decision-making that occurred. This is because it is possible that in order for U.S. decision-makers to maintain any status or reputation, it would have been crucial for the mission in Afghanistan not to appear as a failure. The overall operation in the region could have been closely tied to how various decision-makers understood their own abilities and competencies. It is reasonable to assume that perhaps if the operation in Afghanistan were abandoned at the peak of its escalation, this could negatively affect the individual reputation of decision-makers, whether that be of the President, or high-up officials in important roles, which in return would produce a variety of other personal consequences. Therefore, by opting to maintain the operation, and instead of leaving, doubling down on counterinsurgency efforts within Afghanistan, it is possible that decision-makers also resorted to the sunk-cost method, as they had already devoted

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

various elements in the operation thus far, including their own reputations, and therefore, abandoning the mission could result in possibly losing credibility or respect.

In addition to this, as previously discussed, sunk costs also represent a degree of psychological vulnerability.¹⁹⁰ As articulated by Terris at the beginning of the paper, this is because oftentimes limiting, or completely stopping engagement in an endeavour can be associated with psychological costs. Choosing to stop engaging with a certain action or plan, can trigger regret.¹⁹¹ The implications of sunk costs for negotiations in conflict situations are clear because if a decision-maker were to abandon an, albeit faulty, policy by accepting a settlement offer, this can lead decision-makers not only to face unpleasant feelings of regret but also to face harsh external criticism for demonstrating indecisiveness and inconsistency, for pursuing the original policy in the first place, for abandoning the policy, for abandoning the first policy and opting for an alternative, or for the entire situation altogether. In the context of Afghanistan, decision-makers may have felt they needed to pursue counterinsurgency efforts in the face of a failing operation. This is because they were likely concerned with how the public, as well as the international community, might criticize the Obama administration if they decided to abandon the mission altogether, instead of increasing their efforts. Although in any case, decision-makers face opportunities to be criticized and doubted, decision-makers do not often make choices to intentionally receive criticism and backlash. Therefore, their decisions are prone to being carefully considered and prepared to garner public support, rather than public condemnation.

In 2009 when conditions in Afghanistan were worsening than before, Obama had spent just one year in office as President. Obama's presidential campaign and eventual success in

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

winning the election illustrated the divisive nature of politics in the U.S.,¹⁹² including some citizens being doubtful of his capabilities as a leader due to his race, ethnic background, past experience, and more.¹⁹³ Obama being the U.S. first Black president also allowed him to receive more attention, speculation, and criticism than his white predecessors.¹⁹⁴ These specific factors placed Obama in a position where his choices were publicly criticized and contemplated in a framework that many of his predecessors did not experience, as a result of their backgrounds.

Therefore, it can be reasonable to assume that perhaps some of the decision-making pathologies occurring while Obama and his administration approached the U.S. operation in Afghanistan, included how the decision to abandon the operation instead of continuing efforts could influence public perception of him as a political leader. As previously mentioned, as a result of how Obama was viewed as a leader within the U.S. with some political groups and day-to-day citizens questioning his capacity to serve adequately, it is reasonable to assume he and his administration may have felt strongly towards ensuring he made a decision regarding Afghanistan that did not jeopardize public opinion of him, from his trusted following or those who already were doubtful of him.

A final point regarding why U.S. decision-makers opted to double down on counterinsurgency efforts in the region despite the evidence of weaknesses and failures, included that “while decision-making became more urgent, [it] was no less short-sighted”.¹⁹⁵ Scholars such as Astri Surkhe emphasize this by stating, “it was hoped that the latest change in strategy

¹⁹² Rowland, Robert C., and John M. Jones, "One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* (2011): 125-154.

¹⁹³ Samuel, Terence, “*The Washington Post*,” April 22, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/racial-backlash-against-the-president.html>.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

and personnel or increase in aid would be the silver bullet”.¹⁹⁶ It may be reasonable to assert here that despite the evidence of the operation in Afghanistan becoming weak and failing, the decision to keep going may have also arisen from the falsely optimistic hope that eventually, the worsening conditions would reduce, and ultimately, improve. This ties into the points mentioned earlier by McConnell, Stern and Levy regarding lessons and learning in decision-making and foreign policy. As previously mentioned, according to Allan McConnell, “regardless of the extent of evidence, modelling, projections, risk assessment, expert advice and political skills that contribute to policy design and decision-making, no government is immune to the risk of policy failure”.¹⁹⁷ McConnell’s account of understanding policy failures also takes into consideration the attitudes attached to failure and the subsequent lessons that may arise because of them.

According to McConnell, there are several causes for foreign policy failures, often being vague, and complex in their relationship, as well as highly contested.¹⁹⁸ However, governments act in the most effective manner that is available to them with the given resources accessible to them. McConnell suggests that learning is understood to be largely determined based on previous experiences, related to lived errors, and miscalculations.¹⁹⁹ Decision-making and learning are no short of human error, and in many cases, inevitable. In addition to this, Stern stated that most learning takes place at the tactical level and that political decision-makers reconsider their basic strategic assumptions and orientation only after repeated failures.²⁰⁰ This is because to generate a tactical solution to their foreign policy problems, “policymakers reconsider their basic goals or objectives only after repeated strategic failures”.²⁰¹ Therefore, this coincides with the notion put

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ McConnell, "A public policy," 667-684.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

forward by Levy revolving around the idea of needing to make mistakes and learning from those mistakes, to retrieve a larger lesson. In the context of the case of Afghanistan, it is possible that decision-makers opted for the sunk-cost mentality in doubling down on counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan as they believed that they truly had learned from their previous mistakes. It is reasonable to assume that the decision-making factors motivating this approach included that for the U.S. to obtain a clear understanding of their mission in the region, they needed to employ an additional effort through this strategy, as it could be the final and accurate strategy to achieve the respective objectives. While it may not be likely, it is still possible that decision-makers believed they were in their right to continue the effort in case it could provide some effective outcome.

Many decision-making pathologies were discussed throughout this research paper. However, the one that can be recognized as the best reflection of understanding what U.S. decision-makers were considering when doubling down on efforts in Afghanistan despite the signs of weakness, includes the sunk cost fallacy approach. The following approach was articulated throughout the literature review section by various scholars and provides the soundest account of which factors were involved in the decision to double down and increase efforts in the region despite the ongoing signs of increasing resistance, and overall weakness in the part of the interveners. By examining sunk cost fallacies, there is a larger understanding that can be drawn from the existing literature regarding why states may, in general, seek to continue opting for sunk-cost approaches to foreign policies, instead of alternative options. The existing literature depicts a clear image of what kinds of factors might influence decision-makers to consider or reconsider their strategies and objectives.

Conclusion

The following research paper aimed to understand the decision-making pathologies often exercised by political leaders and political actors. Decision-making plays a critical function in a variety of events and circumstances where particular conclusions and outcomes are selected over other possibilities. Therefore, with respect to the field of International Relations (IR), and the decision-making literature, this research paper examined the fundamental question: What does the learning and decision-making evidence suggest regarding why states continue to invest significant funding and resources into political strategies that are explicitly failing? In exploring this question, this paper alternatively inquires, why do states fail to change their course of action before conditions worsen? In doing so, I assessed various decision-making pathologies that allow us to understand why states persist with strategies that explicitly foreshadow or immediately demonstrate weakness and failure. This research paper was prepared with the ultimate objective to understand various learning and decision-making pathologies, as well as the factors involved in these processes.

In doing so, the goal was to understand how decision-makers arrive at their conclusions, as well as what factors are involved. By exploring the literature on decision-making and learning, this paper will then transition into a case study of Afghanistan during the U.S. mission from October 2001, until August 2021. I examined the works of scholars such as Margaret G. Hermann, Lesley Terris, and Roland Paris for the first section of the literature review that discussed behavioural and cognitive schemas concerning distorted understandings of governance. In the next section of the literature review, I discussed the ideas of scholars Eric Stern, Jack S. Levy, and Allan McConnell regarding lessons and learning in decision-making within foreign policy. The third section considered the role of biased decision-making using the

sunk cost approach analyzed by Markus Domeier, Pierre Sachse, and Bernd Schafer. In analyzing this literature through various perspectives, and explanations, this paper then transitioned into applying the existing evidence regarding decision-making pathologies to the case of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

Due to the limited scope of this research project, some elements, and factors in understanding the decision-making process have been excluded. This paper does not consider a variety of case studies to demonstrate context for every outlook on the decision-making process to offer an in-depth analysis of multiple perspectives. Rather it focuses on just one case study concerning Afghanistan during the U.S. presence in the region. Therefore, in doing so, I conclude by drawing on the existing decision-making evidence and discussion to assert that the decision-making pathology that best encapsulates the case of Afghanistan during the U.S. presence, involved the sunk-cost approach used by American decision-makers.

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