National Security through a Cockeyed Lens: How Cognitive Bias Impacts U.S. Foreign Policy

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Recommended Citation
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Minister Junichiro Koizumi went steadily downhill between 2000 and 2005, as Koizumi repeatedly visited the Yasukuni Shrine; Jiang played the history card at every turn, having none of Mao’s forget-and-forgive approach. The relationship improved when Shinzo Abe replaced Koizumi in 2005, but the subsequent annual turnover of Japan’s prime ministers gave Hu Jintao’s steady hand on the tiller time to overtake Japan economically, as well as to spend heavily on military infrastructure improvements, most notably on the People’s Liberation Army Navy. By 2010, China’s GDP had surpassed Japan’s, and its economy was the second largest in the world, after that of the United States. Periodic conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has recently led to a series of status quo changes in China’s favor, as China’s leadership baton was handed to Xi Jinping in November 2012 and Japan’s returned to Abe, reelected in December 2012. China and Japan both bristle over naval patrols and air-defense zones around the disputed islands, as well as, in Japan’s case, at Xi’s demands for twentieth-century-history apologies from Japan, while Abe for his part visited Yasukuni in late December 2013 on the anniversary of his first year in office.

The theoretical meat of the book is no less interesting. Yahuda uses a blend of sociocultural constructivist approaches, liberal economic and institutional interdependence analysis, and realist strategic analysis to discuss the complex interrelationship between China and Japan, as well as their competitive relations with the Koreas, Taiwan, and the states of Southeast Asia. In Yahuda’s analysis, the United States is the key swing variable in the relationship between the Asian tigers, first as Japan’s ally and second as China’s opposite on the world stage of great-power relations.

A version of the “two tigers” Chinese proverb was used recently by S. C. M. Paine in her book *The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949* (2012). She used the phrase to refer to the two protagonists of the long Chinese civil war, the Nationalists and the Communists. Her translation gloss, “Great rivals cannot co-exist,” implies a zero-sum game. Yahuda’s conclusion is that two tigers on a single mountain need not represent a zero-sum game. He posits that in the period ahead, the two tigers, China and Japan, must share the same mountain, East Asia. Recent events confirm that this is a tough matchup, with both tigers snarling ferociously, neither inclined to back down the mountain.

Yahuda is the Louis L. Jaffe Professor of International Relations at Old Dominion University and University Professor. His premise in this book is simple. Cognitive biases impact human decision making and tend to reduce the impact
of attempts to use a rational decision-making process. The impact of these biases is almost always adverse and affects all decision making, even when the president deals with national security issues. The author also claims that these biases are not usually taken into account when teaching about or actually engaging in decision making. This claim may be somewhat overstated, as many decision making courses, including those at the Naval War College, do acknowledge the potential effect of cognitive biases on decision makers, but the main point—that cognitive biases affect decision making—has considerable merit.

This book has a commendably straightforward structure. Yetiv presents five case studies, each important to U.S. national security, in which cognitive biases are argued to have played a major role. The first two case studies examine the U.S. reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Reagan administration's decision to sell arms to Iran and transfer the profits to the “Contras,” an armed group fighting in Nicaragua. The third case study seeks to explain how mental biases affect jihadists' view of the United States. The fourth analyzes the George W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. The fifth and final case looks at the role of cognitive bias in what Yetiv describes as a failure to develop a comprehensive U.S. energy policy.

The first case examines misperceptions on the parts of both the United States and the Soviet Union. Yetiv delivers a convincing argument that cognitive biases likely played a role in each actor’s decision making. Members of the Jimmy Carter administration, particularly Zbigniew Brzezinski, always saw the Soviets as planning offensive moves, perhaps designed to gain access to the Persian Gulf. In reality, decision makers in Moscow authorized the invasion as a defensive move, to prevent the fall of a friendly socialist government in Kabul. Thus, U.S. decision leaders misinterpreted the reason behind the Soviet invasion and their Soviet counterparts misinterpreted subsequent U.S. reactions.

Yetiv argues that the Iran-Contra case represents two cognitive biases that played significant roles—“the focusing illusion” and “noncompensatory decision making.” The focusing illusion led decision makers to place excessive importance on one aspect of an event—American hostages held in Lebanon—while the noncompensatory bias produced a focus on the belief that some particular factor is so important that it cannot be balanced by any other factor or combination of factors, which in this case only increased America’s determination to recover the hostages. The result was a willingness to grasp at slender straws and attempt risky actions because of the artificially high value placed on the hostages.

Yetiv then attempts to explain why Al Qaeda and similar organizations so hate the United States and are quite willing to kill “millions of Americans.” Yetiv’s explanation centers on “distorted perceptions” and on a combination of “confirmation bias” and an additional bias known as “the clustering illusion,” which basically means that the leaders of Al Qaeda have a warped view of the United States—they see what they want to see.

The fourth case advances the primary claim that President Bush and his key advisers suffered from overconfidence when they planned and executed the invasion of Iraq in 2003. They were also, according to Yetiv, overoptimistic.
These attitudes were encouraged by both the misuse of analogies and the personality and style of Bush. The final discussion, on U.S. energy policy, seeks to determine why the United States, despite the oil embargo of the early 1970s and a continually acknowledged need for a long-term, consistently applied energy policy, has been unable to put such a policy into effect.

However, national security decisions by their very nature are extraordinarily complex. To his credit, Yetiv recognizes and addresses these complicating factors. In each case he presents, there is a deliberate attempt at least to identify, if not discuss, alternate explanations and influential factors not relating to cognitive biases. For example, in the case of U.S. energy policy, Yetiv makes a persuasive argument that a general unwillingness to pay more, the power of the automobile industry’s lobby, and a short congressional election cycle go a long way in explaining why the United States tends to resemble Aesop’s grasshopper more than it does his ant.

That said, the book still leaves questions unanswered. For example, how can the cognitive biases held by Al Qaeda’s leaders become those of all their followers? In what ways are group biases different from groupthink? How can an analyst determine the relative importance of cognitive biases in explaining or, better, predicting a decision? Finally, given all the other forces acting in the decision domain and on the decision maker, how can one determine how important biases may be in the overall mix? Yetiv does attempt to offer some methods to combat the effect of cognitive biases. Surprisingly, he argues that merely knowing such biases exist is not enough to guard against their effect. Better approaches include the use of a devil’s advocate, the institution of formal decision-making processes, and expansion of the circle of advisers consulted prior to a decision.

At the end of the day, National Security through a Cockeyed Lens is worth a read. By not overselling his argument, Yetiv makes a stronger case for considering the presence and possible impact of cognitive biases. In doing so he also makes the case, perhaps inadvertently, that rather than being used in isolation, models of decision making should be used in conjunction with one another—and that is a very useful concept.

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Given the book’s title and the cover photo of the Los Angeles–class fast attack submarine USS City of Corpus Christi, readers might reasonably assume that James P. Delgado’s Silent Killers: Submarines and Underwater Warfare is focused on modern submarines and undersea warfare. However, this is not the case. Instead, it is a small coffee-table book on the overall history of submarines, with pronounced emphases on early (pre–World War I) development and on the archaeology of submarine wrecks. A few minutes on the Internet readily explains this. In addition to having a keen interest in submarines, Delgado is a historian, former executive director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum, and PhD in archaeology who has published nearly thirty books. He is also a cohost of National Geographic’s