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**RATIONALITY, TRUST AND EMOTIONS IN STRATEGIC RELATIONS
BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST**

Abstract: *This article presents considerations regarding the role of rationality, trust and emotions in the strategic relations between Russia and the West in the context of the intensification of the conflict in Ukraine. The author comes to the conclusion that emotions currently represent a serious obstacle to strategic stability, yet with a return to building trust based on reason and calculations, it is possible to find a way to manage the situation successfully. The author emphasizes the necessity for the sides to (re)negotiate the common understanding about key points relevant to strategic relations between them, in particular, the legitimacy of red lines and the appropriateness or proportionality of responses in case those red lines are crossed.*

Key words: *rationality, emotions, strategic stability, deterrence, Russia, NATO, conflict in Ukraine*

The issue of rationality in international relations has been quite thoroughly studied, as evidenced by numerous theories dealing with it, at the same time, the issues of trust and emotions have been widely ignored for a long time. With the ongoing situation in Ukraine, rationality, emotions and trust, as well as strategic relations between Russia and the West are once again back on stage. This article, thus, presents considerations regarding the role of rationality, trust and emotions in the mentioned relations in the context of the intensification of the conflict in Ukraine.

Strategic relations between states may be understood as relations in which states have a common understanding of the existing strategic environment and of the existing or potential threats to their security. Such relations often imply some level of trust between the states, however, defining trust in international relations is not an easy task. One of the possible understandings is that trust is inevitably linked to finding oneself in a vulnerable position since trust, according to A. M. Hoffmann, “implies a willingness to take risks on the behavior of others based on the belief that potential trustees will “do what is right”¹, i.e. trust is based on belief. It is sensible to assume that a certain level of trust is needed in strategic relations between states and in international relations in general, but it would be false to state that trust is a universal recipe for success in these relations, since if it was the case, states would not conclude treaties or any other types of agreements imposing certain obligations on them and providing them with guarantees. In this regard, it is possible to assume that a certain role in shaping strategic relations between states is allocated to confidence based on guarantees and calculations, which brings us to the idea of rationality.

It is one of the most popular assumptions in International Relations theory (e.g. Rational Choice theory or Bounded Rationality theory) that states are rational actors which make rational choices based on calculations of costs and benefits. States can initiate wars or construct partnerships, but the point is that they will not commit a certain act if costs outweigh benefits. This assumption may serve as a good explanation for the state of strategic relations between the USSR and the West during the Cold War. In particular, it is possible to refer here to the application of the deterrence strategy in the Soviet-American relations. Both the USA and USSR were nuclear weapon states, what is more, their nuclear forces were sufficient not only to carry out the first

¹ Hoffmann, A.M. (2002). A Conceptualization of Trust in International Relations. *European Journal of International Relations*, 8(3), 375–401. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066102008003003>.

strike, but also to ensure retaliation. This way, both states were deterred from using nuclear weapons or from engaging into a direct conventional military confrontation because of so-called “mutual assured destruction”¹. In other words, basing their assumptions on calculations, both sides were confident that their opponent had capability to carry out the threat of using nuclear weapons, as well as the political will to do so. Nevertheless, were it only the calculations that allowed the sides to act rationally? Our stance is that, actually, in the most critical situations, such as the Cuban missile crisis, it was the parity in capabilities and the understanding that any further escalation could not bring any gains for either of the two sides that played a significant role.

This brings us to another question – do states always act rationally? Given the way this question is formulated, the answer would be “no” for several reasons. First of all, even the already discussed strategy of deterrence, while seeming to be perfectly rational, contains in itself an interesting paradox, which was formulated by Barry O’Neill as “to trust deterrence is to believe that the adversary will not act suicidally, and that the adversary thinks that you might react suicidally”², which means that, basically, a state which is deterred acts rationally because it accepts the possibility that the state which is deterring can act irrationally. A similar situation can be observed in the case of the so-called “chicken” game, when players try to persuade each other that they are ready to go “all-in”, even if this implies the most insane outcomes, counting on their adversary to surrender or retreat first. In this way, irrationality can be considered as a part of a strategy of getting the desired outcome.

Besides, it is important to bear in mind that there is no such thing as “universal” rationality. For example, according to the definition provided by R.D. Luce and H. Raiffa, a rational actor is the one who, when confronted with “two alternatives which give rise to outcomes, will choose the one which yields the more preferred outcome”³. The difficulty here lies in identifying what is the preferred outcome for one’s adversary. In this case, it seems appropriate to mention the concept of strategic culture, which implies that even though states as international actors usually are indeed rational, this rationality is culturally encoded⁴. This means that in order to forecast the essential elements of the adversary’s behavior, the states have to take into account their adversary’s history, culture and many other factors that could influence their preferred strategies and endstates.

In addition, when speaking about rationality, one should not forget about emotions. It is difficult to imagine that a state as a collective actor can experience any kind of emotion, however, states are governed by individuals, who are definitely prone to all kinds of emotions, even though they may be quite successful in managing them. It is necessary to admit that however rational the individuals in power aspire to be, the decision making process and emotions cannot be separated, and different emotions can have different effects on the decision making. For example, according to J.W. Knopf, “fear tends to induce caution, whereas anger makes people more likely to take risks and act without much concern for the consequences”⁵, and particularly strong reactions might be provoked by the feeling of injustice or unfairness. Additionally, one needs to take into account that different actors may react differently under stress when the stakes of their decisions increase: some may become more careful in their decision-making, while others might be willing to take more risk. Partly, this can be explained by the Prospect theory, which suggests that most individuals tend to be risk averse to secure gains, but risk acceptant to avoid losses or if they perceive themselves to be

¹ *Jervis, R.* (2002). Mutual Assured Destruction. *Foreign Policy* (133): 40–42. DOI:10.2307/3183553.

² *Snyder, C.A.* (1999). *Contemporary Security and Strategy*. Routledge.

³ *Luce, R.D., Raiffa, H.* (1957). *Games and Decisions: Introduction and Critical Survey*. New York: Wiley.

⁴ *Johnson, J., Kerry, M.K., Jeffrey, A.L.* (eds.). (2009). *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based insights Into Comparative National Security Policymaking*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ *Knopf, J.W.* (2013) *Rationality, Culture and Deterrence*, Monterey Institute of International Studies.

facing gains relative to their reference point¹. Interpreted in the context of deterrence strategy, these assumptions may mean that in order to exercise successful deterrence, states must make sure that their threat is credible enough to evoke fear, but is not exaggerated to evoke anger or the feeling of being treated unfairly, and that their threat does not push their adversary to the domain of losses so as not to evoke risk acceptant behavior.

Turning back to the example of strategic relations between Russia and the West, it is appropriate to mention the post-Cold War period. The end of the Cold War marked the shift in balance of power in favor of the US: with the dissolution of the USSR and the Warsaw Treaty Organization, Russia had to apply significant effort to restore its positions in the international arena, while the positions of the US remained stable and so did the positions of NATO. The latter deserves special attention since it remains a “nuclear alliance” and, thus, plays a significant role both in nuclear deterrence strategy and in maintaining the strategic relations between Russia and the West. While NATO is claimed to be a defensive alliance, which exists with the purpose of ensuring the security of its members, it is useful to remember that defence usually is not exercised for the sake of defence, and, in fact, it usually implies that there is a certain threat which needs to be countered. Unfortunately, Russia is perceived by NATO as a significant source of threat, and it needs to be mentioned that this perception is mutual. The question that arises in this situation is the following: the mutual perception of the sides did not change much since the Cold War period, but why is the reaction different in today’s conditions? Actually, it is possible that the answer lies in the conditions themselves.

First of all, the post-Cold War shift in balance of power in favor of the US might have provoked the feeling of being defeated among the political elites of Russia, which in its turn urged them to search for means of reestablishing Russia’s influence in the Post-Soviet states. The problem was that many of these states were experiencing a so-called identity crisis. In other words, the population of these countries felt that their national and ethnic identity was suppressed by Soviet policies and they were afraid that Russia, as a USSR successor, was posing a threat to them. Thus, they were seeking solutions to secure their existence and independence both on physical and identical levels. In such a situation, their willingness to become part of a collective defence alliance (like NATO) seemed a good and rational idea, even though emotions, e.g. fear, played some role in this case. This way, Post-Soviet states (particularly, Baltic republics, Ukraine and Georgia) became a kind of a new arena of strategic rivalry between Russia and the West. Paradoxically, while attempting to ensure their security, the newly emerged states became trapped in the so-called Security dilemma, since their actions combined with NATO’s “open door policy” evoked serious security concerns on the Russian side.

Even though it is a complex problem, we will attempt to illustrate a part of it using the example of deterrence strategy. The reality remains that both Russia and the US are nuclear powers which are in the state of mutual nuclear deterrence. However, the US is also a part of NATO, which includes two other nuclear weapon states – France and the UK, and while the US and Russia are engaged in the strategic stability dialogue, the UK and France prefer to stay aside, which complicates the situation for Russia. At the same time, the nuclear arms control regime has already lost several important bilateral agreements, namely, the ABM Treaty in 2002 and the INF Treaty in 2019. This situation itself signals the dangerous tendency of the regime erosion, but combined with NATO expansion to the East and with NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements, it puts Russia in a more tense situation than ever, since it becomes difficult to calculate whether the current state of Russian nuclear forces and missile defence capabilities is sufficient to ensure Russia’s security and retaliatory capability, which is important for effective deterrence. The uncertainty produced by the reduced chances of effective rational calculations may urge for emotional reactions and for riskier

¹ *Taliaferro, J.* (2010). Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies. URL: <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-281> (accessed: 30.07.2022).

behavior when the stakes are really high. Actually, it is possible that we are witnessing such a situation in Ukraine, especially, in the context of the current intensification of the conflict. Even though the conflict is a complex matter, it would be imprudent to ignore the role the tensions between Russia and NATO played, taking into account that one of the demands Russia is expressing nowadays is Ukraine's neutrality¹. As already mentioned, the desire of Ukraine (and Georgia) to join NATO is more or less understandable, however, NATO's decision to welcome these countries' Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in the alliance in 2008, and the decision to agree that they would become members of NATO, as well as ignoring Russia's recent demands to withdraw the said decisions of that summit, illustrate some sort of irresponsibility of NATO in the issue of maintaining peace and security, since these actions seem to absolutely ignore both Russian security interests and possible responses.

Returning to the case of Ukraine specifically, the failure to arrange an agreement with NATO may have urged Russia to attempt solving the problem directly with Ukraine, which manifested in the demand for neutrality of the latter. While the idea seems rational, the means of its implementation seem to be disproportionate. The beginning of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine in February, 2022 has become a point of no return in some sense. While expert communities tended to believe that the scenario of military intervention is unlikely since the costs of applying military force in the context of interdependence would almost definitely outweigh benefits, the operation still happened². Even though Ukraine is not a NATO member, thus, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty does not apply to it and NATO cannot be an active side of the conflict, the alliance still has to express its reaction to the events, both on the level of the organization and on the level of member-states. These days Russia is already facing consequences of this reaction: risk of protracted conflict, attempts to diplomatically isolate Moscow, Western support for Ukraine, severe economic sanctions, military build-up in Europe, strengthening of NATO in Europe, etc. Even though Russia has shown its resilience, it has definitely suffered losses as well, which, combined with the fact that the true purpose of the operation remains hidden behind the vague language used by officials, complicates making assumptions regarding whether benefits outweigh costs in this case. One of the possible explanations for Russia's actions and the timing of these actions may be the legacy of the "defeat" in the Cold War and the feeling of anger which emerged from continuous disregard of Russian security interests by Western states that pushed Russia to the domain of losses and evoked risk acceptant behavior forcing Russian political elites to apply the logic of "now or never" in the matter of challenging the Western hegemony in world politics. However, the conflict in Ukraine can be viewed from another angle, in particular, from the perspective of so-called Russian imperialism, which is quite popular in the West and implies that Russia has an ambition of taking full control of Ukraine and/or other states that were once part of the USSR, or even earlier the Russian Empire. The validity of this assumption is derived mainly from the speeches and articles produced by the current president of Russia Vladimir Putin, namely the narrative of historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians and the claim that modern Ukraine was created by the USSR³, etc. In this case, it is really hard to calculate whether Russia could have actually been deterred from its actions in Ukraine, since the damage inflicted on Russia's economy and other social and political spheres could have been perceived as acceptable in the light of the necessity to restore its strength, secure its existence and, again, to challenge the Western hegemony in world politics.

¹ Suny, R. (2022). Ukraine war follows decades of warnings that NATO expansion into Eastern Europe could provoke Russia, *The Conversation*. URL: <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-follows-decades-of-warnings-that-nato-expansion-into-eastern-europe-could-provoke-russia-177999> (accessed: 30.07.2022).

² Timofeev, I. (2022). Why Experts Believed an Armed Conflict with Ukraine Would Never Happen, *The Russian International Affairs Council*. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/why-experts-believed-an-armed-conflict-with-ukraine-would-never-happen/> (accessed: 30.07.2022).

³ The Kremlin. (2022). Address by the President of the Russian Federation. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (accessed: 30.07.2022).

Nevertheless, probably the main question that arises today is what can be done in the existing circumstances? Obviously, it is hard to expect any trust or confidence building on the basis of committed partnership, however, it is possible to assume that it is not too late to return to the “well-trodden path” of shaping the strategic relations between Russia and the West on the basis of reason and calculations. In this regard, it is crucial to (re)negotiate the common understanding about key points relevant to strategic relations between Russia and the West, in particular, the legitimacy of red lines and the appropriateness or proportionality of responses in case those red lines are crossed. Communication, thus, is the key, and frank strategic dialogue between the key players is crucial. The result of this dialogue should also be comprehensive enough to provide security guarantees for all sides, which means that apart from a bilateral treaty between Ukraine and Russia, there should be a kind of agreement regarding new security arrangements in Europe, which means that the negotiation process should include the USA, the representatives of the EU, as well as NATO.

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РАЦИОНАЛЬНОСТЬ, ДОВЕРИЕ И ЭМОЦИИ В СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЯХ МЕЖДУ РОССИЕЙ И ЗАПАДОМ

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Аннотация: *в данной статье представлены размышления о роли рациональности, доверия и эмоций в стратегических отношениях между Россией и Западом в контексте обострения конфликта в Украине. Автор приходит к выводу, что эмоции в настоящее время представляют собой серьезное препятствие для стратегической стабильности, однако при возвращении к построению доверия на основе разума и расчета можно найти способ успешного управления ситуацией. Автор подчеркивает необходимость того, чтобы стороны (заново) договорились об общем понимании ключевых моментов, касающихся стратегических отношений между ними, в частности, легитимности красных линий и уместности или пропорциональности ответных мер в случае их пересечения.*

Ключевые слова: *рациональность, эмоции, стратегическая стабильность, сдерживание, Россия, НАТО, конфликт в Украине.*

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