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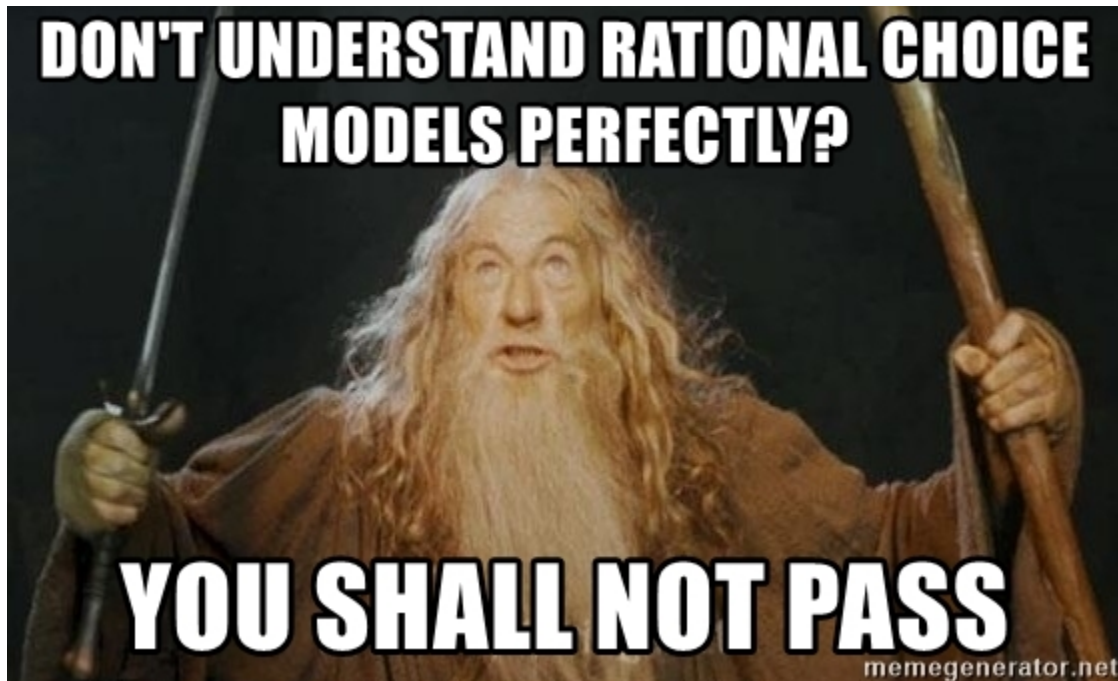
# Is Putin Rational?

6-7 minutes

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A number of people online, not to mention the media, have questioned if Putin is rational, and the push-back against those who say he is has been intense. I think there is a lot anger, propaganda, and more importantly a failure to understand how that term is used in various contexts that clouds the issue. Unfortunately a lot of people use the term “rational” to mean “agrees with or thinks like me.” Of course that’s

not what it means. It may surprise you to know it doesn't really even mean "makes good/optimal decisions."



OK folks, back to school ...

When I and other geopolitical/intelligence analysts use the term "rational", we are mostly using it within the context of [Rational Choice Theory](#) as meaning a Rational Actor. Some of you may be familiar with the term as it is used in Economics (the

basic underlying theory goes back to Adam Smith). Parallel related theories have emerged in political science and other fields such as international relations and military analysis. What follows is simplified, but hopefully introduces some background in the context of geopolitics. To be sure it is not a perfect analysis method for various human behaviors, and there are lots of variations such as bounded rationality, and folks get in to poo throwing contests over the details, but it's a good start.

**In short, a rational actor does a benefit/cost analysis of various options and selects the option that**

**maximizes that benefit/cost ratio.**

However, hidden within that simple statement are a lot of factors such as the framework and values in which the calculations of “benefit” and “cost” are made, the amount and quality of information available to the actor, and so forth.

Rational Choice Theory, and the determination if someone is a Rational Actor within that theory, is extremely important. You can predict and potentially change the behavior of a rational actor by taking actions that change the factors the actor uses in their calculation. A non-rational actor is in contrast dangerous and

unpredictable. Note there is no moral judgement involved here. Hitler pre circa 1942 or so was a “rational actor” (later not so much), especially if you factored in the importance of his ideology. Repugnant to be sure, but, within the context of Rational Choice Theory, rational. Likewise, Gandhi was a rational actor – yet you could not find two different individuals or moral systems.

It should be evident that a rational actor, working in a framework different from the analyst, may decide a given course of action is rational, whereas someone who has a different framework may see it as irrational

(strictly speaking, if moral values are involved, distasteful or even evil are words often used in that case).

Information also plays in to this. Time frame also matters; what is “rational” in the short term may be “irrational” or sub optimal in the long term, and vice versa. So “rational decisions” can easily be bad decisions, not just because of a flawed moral framework, or bad information, especially when they depend on the “rational” decisions of other actors.

So it is vital to realize that you can't always assume other actors are working within the same framework, time frames, and with the same

information that you are. **IMNSHO this has been the greatest failure in US Foreign Policy over the last 30 years, be it in the Middle East or with Russia. We take actions that would result in a certain outcome by assuming that the other actors hold to our values, and we make assumptions as to their information space that are not valid.**

It is far too complex to go in to detail a lot of detail here, but when you look at Putin's actions within the framework of modern Russia and its environment, his actions thus far are "rational". We may not like them, but they make sense to him and those around him.

And this is my frustration, that we could have worked with him, within his worldview, to prevent the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine. By discounting his actions as irrational, we absolve ourselves of the need to negotiate or compromise, and that makes the world a lot more dangerous place.

Reducing these kinds of things to mathematics and logic, be they hurricanes or wars, isn't always popular. I have been criticized for being "emotionless" about this stuff, and sadly neutrality in this case is often seen as siding with Russia given the tremendous bias present in the Western information space. **Anyone**



**who knows me, and what I have been through in my life, knows that nothing could be further from the truth.** As noted in a previous post, I feel all this very deeply – I've seen war firsthand. But what is also true is that I have learned to try to use a careful mix of logic and empathy when analyzing these situations, and not let either get out of control. That is essential in trying to figure out policies that minimize human suffering while maximizing human dignity. It is simply not possible to do that while angry, in a politically charged environment, saturated by propaganda. And anyone who thinks there is always a good outcome is delusional. Sometimes there are no

good outcomes. Trying too hard to change complex, dangerous situations for the “better” can be very risky. Noble sometimes, selfish more often than we would like to think, but risky.

Sadly, especially in geopolitics, all we can hope to do is try to make things less worse, while laying the groundwork for a better tomorrow. That is increasingly impossible in our complex world and flawed systems of governance that rely on manipulation through emotional triggers rather than rational analysis guided by empathy – but that’s a different post.