

## **Robin Markwica: Emotional Choices. How the Logic of Affect Shapes Coercive Diplomacy**

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### *Review by Corneliu Bjola*

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The idea that emotions have a pernicious effect on human decision-making is deeply rooted in modern (Western) culture. Ever since the Enlightenment, Western societies have taken pride in anchoring human reason in scientific principles and empirical observations, as a way of making sure that the knowledge produced is not unduly influenced by speculative thoughts and emotional intuitions. As reason trumps passion, the argument goes, we are supposed to take more informed decisions and by extension to manage relations with each other much better, not least because, as Voltaire once remarked, we can avoid the pitfalls of emotional manipulation: “those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.” The notion of ‘reason over passion’ continues to retain its influence in the public space, albeit that it has been occasionally disputed, derided and even rejected. Woodrow Wilson, one of the strongest supporters of a more rational and transparent approach to international politics once warned, for instance, against the dangers of completely ignoring the role of emotions in foreign policy. Peace should be without victory, he argued, as the victor’s terms imposed upon the vanquished “would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which term of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand.”<sup>1</sup>

Speaking implicitly against this intellectual tradition, and building on scholarly debates about the role of emotions in shaping foreign policy decisions, the book authored by Robin Markwica on *Emotional Choices* advances an original theoretical framework, *the logic of affect*, for understanding how emotions shape the way in which policy-makers form judgements and take decisions when the countries they represent are the subject of coercive diplomacy. Central to the argument advanced in the book is the idea that emotions are discrete predispositions with specific appraisal and action tendencies; emotions inform both the way in which individuals perceive certain events and how they may think about reacting to them. For example, during the Cuban missile crisis in Oct 1962, Khrushchev’s decision to remove the Russian missiles in exchange for a US pledge not to attack Cuba (action tendency),

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1 President Woodrow Wilson, “Peace Without Victory” speech, January 22, 1917. 64th Cong., 23 Sess., Senate Document No. 685: “A League for Peace”, available at <http://web.mit.edu/21h.102/www/Wilson%20Peace%20Without%20Victory.htm>

was informed, according to Markwica (p. 176), by Khrushchev's growing fear of nuclear escalation (appraisal tendency). The logic of affect refers not only to how emotions shape leaders' thinking and behaviour, but also to what type of emotions matter more in times of crisis (fear, anger, hope, pride and humiliation), and to what kind of strategies leaders may resort in order to regulate their emotions (expressive suppression, defensive avoidance, situation modification, and attentional deployment). The author combines insight from these three conceptual areas to develop testable propositions about the decision-making preferences of top leaders during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and the Gulf Conflict in 1991.

Despite minor disruptions, generated by the occasional overuse of technical terms or the presence of dense bundles of references, the book reads well overall, with clearly articulated arguments, probing analysis and good empirical insight. What is less clear, however, is whether the book is sufficiently illuminating to push the agenda forward in a manner that can steer the academic research about the role of emotions in foreign policy making in an exciting new direction, or rather adds valuable yet limited insight to the topic. Three questions are particularly important to address in order to investigate the truth-value of this statement. First, what original contribution does *the logic of affect* make to our understanding of the role of emotions in foreign policy decision-making? Second, how credible are the empirical findings and to what extent can they be generalised to other cases? Third, how well does the thesis advanced in the book serve as a theoretical platform for developing a broader research agenda about the role of emotions in foreign policy making? The three questions offer useful benchmarks for assessing the contributions of the volume to the ongoing debate about the 'emotional turn' in IR theory, so they have to be carefully considered.

On the first issue, there is no doubt that *the logic of affect* helps bring together various strands of theoretical insight about the nature of emotions, the way in which they work to influence decision making and the effect they produce, which thus far have been discussed rather in disjunction one from another. The focus on the five key emotions and the series of testable propositions the author puts together as a way to assess their value in the context of coercive diplomacy is also welcome. However, this analytical contribution mainly serves to probe the ramifications of existing schools of thought on emotional appraisal and action tendencies in a particular context, rather than to advance new knowledge about modes of individual or collective action as the implied terminology about the '*logic of action*' seems to suggest. More intriguingly, however, is the methodology the author proposes for inferring actors' emotions, which combines techniques from linguistics, psychology and sociology in order to trace the influence of emotions in strategic or individual contexts. Markwica is careful not to dismiss longstanding conceptual reservations about researchers being able to get into other people's minds, but he offers a credible typology of emotional signs (explicit, implicit, cognitive and behavioural) for weighing and interpreting the influence of the five key emotions in decision-making. The typology carries good analytical currency for conducting sentiment analysis beyond the specific context of coercive diplomacy examined in the book, so the value this methodology adds to the broader discussion about the role of emotions in foreign policy making deserves attention.

From an empirical perspective, the two case studies examined in the book, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the Gulf Conflict of 1991, reflect situations of

gross strategic miscalculation on the part of Russian leader, Nikita Khrushchev and Iraqi strongman, Saddam Hussein, respectively. Markwica argues that the reasons that led both leaders to overplay their hand in each situation have much to do with their emotional state and the way in which *the logic of affect* unfolded during each crisis. For example, Khrushchev's defiance of Kennedy's demand to remove the missiles from Cuba was informed by his sense of humiliation and anger of not being recognized as a leader of a power equal to the United States. Similarly, a self-induced sense of victimisation amplified by a narcissistic personality convinced Saddam Hussein that he could prevail, militarily and diplomatically, over the coalition of forces assembled by the United States after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In both case studies, Markwica carefully unpacks the motivations of the two leaders in pursuing certain decisions and at the end of a meticulously conducted empirical analysis he concludes that in 50 percent of decisions, one or more of the five key emotions were the primary forces guiding the behaviour of the two leaders. This figure is impressive and speaks well to the strength of the emotional choice theory, but at the same time, one needs to keep in mind the model does not measure the influence of emotions in causal but in processual terms. In other words, the influence of emotions on Khrushchev's and Hussein's decisions is examined not in a casual-effect pattern, but as a series of 'transformative confluences' that connect the appraisal and action tendencies of emotions to the leader's choice selection in specific contexts. Consequently, the 50 percent score of emotional influence on decision-making rather refers to the evidenced presence of the five emotions in the process of preference formation of the two leaders. This allows the conceptual framework to expand its scope of applicability to a potentially wider range of cases of foreign policy making decision, but arguably at the expense of its degree of analytical precision.

That being said, *Emotional Choices* is a welcome addition to the growing literature informing the recent 'emotional turn' in the international relations discipline. A well-written book that scholars and graduate students will find enlightening in understanding the complex mechanism by which emotions may exert influence on decision-making, especially in times of crisis. While the added-value of the conceptual framework is promising, albeit not ground-breaking, *the logic of affect* nevertheless creates a constructive centre of gravity for existing schools of thought on emotional appraisal and action tendencies to be juxtaposed and discussed together in the context of coercive diplomacy. The methodology the author proposes for inferring actors' emotions and the related typology of emotional signs are particularly useful for tracing the influence of emotions in strategic or individual contexts; they also hold out the promise of application in areas outside the specific theme of the book. For example, as the role of emotional thinking in the digital medium continues to grow, *the logic of affect* and especially its underlying methodology may offer good analytical tools for better understanding the patterns by which emotions travel online and the way in which they influence how online audiences help frame and disseminate messages around which 'alternative' or 'post-truth' realities are constructed. To conclude, the book wisely refuses to be drawn into the longstanding and largely futile debate concerning the "reason over passion" dilemma, but it provides readers with a constructive framework with which to more carefully consider the role of emotional influences on rational decision making in foreign policy.