

# Learning from History in Shaping Foreign Policy - A Theoretical Framework

Written by Yoav Tenembaum

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/04/04/learning-from-history-in-shaping-foreign-policy-a-theoretical-framework/>

YOAV TENEMBAUM, APR 4 2017

There are two distinct ways to learn from history: *The Chronological and the Analogical*. The first entails the study of a historical process leading to a given point in time. Its aim is to understand better the *causes* of the event/s being assessed. The latter entails the attempt to find out similar historical events to the event with which one has to deal at present. Its aim is to overcome the cognitive hurdle of coping with the emergence of a new actor or event, to facilitate the intellectual challenge of having to define the unknown.

### Analogy to Elucidate and to Persuade

A distinction ought to be drawn between the use of historical analogy as a tool *to elucidate* and as a means *to persuade*. The first is aimed at enhancing understanding while the latter at marketing policy. Thus, as an illustration of the first, United States President John F. Kennedy tried to learn from the crisis leading to the outbreak of World War I in order to avoid sliding unintentionally into armed conflict during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. As an example of the latter, United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, resorted to the Munich Agreement of 1938, which led to the eventual disintegration of Czechoslovakia and became a synonym to the perils of the policy of appeasement, when he endeavoured to elicit the support of public opinion both in the United States and in Europe to the intended attack by the United States on Syria in 2013.

To be sure, the same analogy could be used both *to elucidate* and *to persuade*.

### Effective and Deceptive Analogy

Historical analogy can be *effective* or *deceptive*. If used with caution, dwelling on similarities *and* differences, realizing that the distinctive nature of each event and personality precludes a mathematical-like formula, it can be *effective*. If used like a mirror endeavouring to find a reflection of the present in the past, it can be *deceptive*.

In this context, it is important to stress the difference between *an event* and *a phenomenon*. The Cuban Missile Crisis was *an event*. An International Crisis is *a phenomenon*. Thus, in order to learn any lessons from the crisis that led to the outbreak of World War I, President Kennedy dwelt on how the mishandling of an international crisis caused an unintended catastrophe. That was the main lesson he wished to learn from it. He didn't think that the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was a reflection of the crisis that led to the outbreak of World War I.

### A Deterministic and Probabilistic Analysis

The past is not a certain compass to the future, only a possible guide to it. History affords analytical tools that can serve to assess processes, not to anticipate them as one could in the realm of meteorology. A distinction ought to be drawn in this respect between assessing *the likelihood* of an event occurring or a process unfolding and *the certainty* thereof. History teaches us to be modest in foresight.

In the study of history there is a difference between a *deterministic* and a *probabilistic* analytical perspective. The

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first negates whereas the latter allows for contingency. Thus, stating that World War I *would have* occurred anyway, sooner or later, denotes a *deterministic* analytical perspective; arguing that World War I *might have* occurred, sooner or later, reflects a *probabilistic* analytical perspective.

To learn from history entails an awareness that events were not necessarily meant to occur. The belief in fate or design that go beyond human choice and objective constraints render a *deterministic* analytical perspective easier to accept. A *probabilistic* analytical perspective implies a non-deterministic approach to the study of history.

## Chance and Accident – Cause or Trigger?

Chance and accident are an integral part of history. Their role in the shaping of events cannot be dismissed. The question that arises is whether chance and accident constitute a *cause* or a *trigger*. To ascertain that, Counterfactual History can help. Posing a question such as 'might World War I not have broken out had Archduke Franz Ferdinand not been killed by Gavrilo Princip?' is an example of how counterfactual history can help in assessing whether that particular event was *the cause* leading to World War I or *the trigger* instigating it.

## The Role of Choice

In this context, it should be emphasized that the question, "Why has policy X been discarded?" may lead to discover explicitly or infer implicitly the constraints facing decision-makers. The preference for policy Y, rather than X, may have had to do as much with the perception of constraints as with the perception of opportunities. In either case, the existence of *choice* is implied. The assumption by the decision-maker that there was a viable alternative denotes free will, for only by free will can an alternative be discarded.

The existence of constraints does not denote the absence of choice. Choice by its very nature implies not only the availability of an alternative but the existence of constraints, for no decision-maker operates in an environment devoid of limits.

Discarded decisions may be no less revealing than adopted decisions. By dwelling on the options that had been contemplated but ultimately left out, a clearer picture of the decision-making process is thus revealed including the assessments of risks and opportunities entailed in each one.

Thus, for example, to revert to the Cuban Missile Crisis, one can learn not only from the reasoning behind the decision by President Kennedy to institute a quarantine of Cuba, but also from the arguments adduced in discarding the other options that had been considered, such as a full-scale invasion, an aerial attack, a diplomatic approach, and not doing anything. Learning from history entails a reasoned analysis of the decision-making process as whole, and not only of the decision itself that was ultimately adopted.

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## About the author:

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