

2019/2/5 (EN): Russian vabanque game

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An explanation of the Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war by means of the Prospect Theory

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Putin surprised the international public. The support of the internationally almost totally isolated Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – except the complicated partner Iran – is very risky. This essay shows that the Prospect Theory, which so far has not been regarded in works about the Russian military intervention in Syria, offers a sensible framework for explanations. In order to understand Russia's action one has to consider its more or less unfavourable situation in international politics: The perspective of the previous losses lets this "escape bid" appear plausible. The intervention in Syria has been the first mission abroad of Russian armed forces outside its direct neighbourhood since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, Russia's objective may be meeting the USA at eye-level. Two things can be deducted for the future. First, one ought to try to put oneself into the position of states where both fears of encirclement and the feeling of an unjustified international decline are dominant. Such states tend towards risky decisions. In this respect it would be sensible to try to take up the perspective of the particular states. Doing this, decisions, which appear incongruous and irrational from the own perspective, suddenly become more plausible, and future scenarios become more calculable. Purely rational decision models have the disadvantage of suggesting impartial assumptions concerning costs and profit without regarding psychological factors. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, from a social-psychological perspective, is an explanatory factor which cannot remain unconsidered. Second, this essay reveals the strategic dilemma of foreign political decision-makers dealing with states such as Russia. There has to be a medium between stringency of consequences, dialogue and constructive cooperation. If, for example, one concentrates only on sanctions and rejection, there will be a higher risk of further "escape bids". But the limitations are obvious: Only one single foreign political decision has been explained. Actors can become more predictable by viewing self-perception. In this essay the perspectives and Russian explanation patterns were delineated in order to detect a sensible framework of explanation for the actions of a political system. It is not the objective of this essay to take a normative view of the positions of the international actors mentioned in the essay. On the other hand, by means of a change of perspectives one could find better explanations, thus taking sound normative positions.

