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“Chessboard Strategies in Foreign Policy, Are we Winning to Lose?”

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Let’s start a conversation.... If international relations involve complex, and if we are to be honest, “interdependent” relationships, why does the “winner take all” game of chess continue to be used and referenced as a guiding strategy for foreign policy?

Chess, a long-standing international relations (IR) strategy favorite, is a game of patience, tactics, and strategy. In a world of powerful state actors, i.e. “governments” that are driven by self-interests and have exclusive abilities to conduct war and broker economic, political, and security agreements between and among themselves, using chess game strategies to optimize your “win rate” makes sense. However, in today’s world, where there is increasing diversity, representation, and influence of non-state actors, information platforms, and their collective ability to wield power, influence, or otherwise impact the global order, the game of chess as an informing strategy may be insufficient to yield outcomes if not outright undermine national and global interests. At minimum, the authors feel it is worth examining whether chess and the strategies it produces, are an effective, usefully applied and/or otherwise beneficial contribution to the development and application of foreign policy goals and outcomes.

The Game

Chess is a two-player game governed by simple rules applied to hierarchical pieces that are weighted on each side of a checkered board. Game play strategies consist of calculated battlefield maneuvers conducted in a closed space with the objective of defeating one another, or perhaps more pertinently to *avoid* defeat. A classic binary, closed system, zero-sum interaction, whereby one player’s victory *requires* the second player’s loss. This strategy has served the international relations community and its hierarchy of political powerbrokers for centuries. But in the 21st century, where global economic, political, security, environmental, and other communities are increasingly intertwined (if not fully integrated), national and global power structures are more diffuse (see below more on non-state actors), and national borders are transcended by virtual interactions and flow of information, relationships, and goods, this IR classic may be outliving its utility. If true, is it time for political and IR theorists, national leaders and policy makers, and other stakeholders in the international community to turn to alternative IR strategies and human interaction models to deliver mutually reinforcing, beneficial, and sustainable, outcomes? In other words, should we be looking for open system, “win-win” strategies to underpin grand strategy and IR goals?

The Game in Action

During the Cold War, chess gained status as an ideological weapon and propaganda tool (McLellan, Richard. “COLD WAR CHESS.” *Prairie Schooner* 35, no. 2 (1961): 177–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40625828>) but also became symbolic of a broader statist trend of foreign policy strategy that informs international interactions to this day. Like the chessboard, there was, and remains, a tendency to view foreign policy as a game where states are viewed as pieces and their movements confined to predictable patterns. Brzezinski, former U.S. National Security Advisor under the Carter administration, was particularly notable in linking the pursuance of security to that of a

chess game. In his post-cold war book *The Grand Chessboard* published in 1997, Brzezinski predicted American dominance would rest on its geostrategic performance on the European and Asian chessboard, writing it is *imperative that no Eurasian challenger emerges, capable of dominating Eurasia and thus also of challenging America*. The use of terminology like challenger, dominating, and implication of “Eurasia” as opposed to America creates a sentence rife with power differentials that while appropriate in a Cold War context, feel anachronistic and old-fashioned in 2023. Yet, in 2022, we saw this game strategy trending once again within the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The Russia-Ukraine Chessboard

Russian leaders are known to use chess as a reference for their foreign policy decisions going back to the Cold War but likely extending back to the days of tsars and the Russian empire. Russian theorist Alexey Kupriyanov noted that foreign policy is akin to multiple chess games where *moves on one board cast a strategic shadow on the other boards, and a loss on one board leads to a loss of the entire game* (Kupriyanov, A.V., 2022. *Cold War as a Special Type of Conflict: A Strategic Sketch. Russia in Global Affairs*, 20(1), pp. 78-92. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-1-78-92).

In the above context, Eurasia represents a prominent chessboard for Russia, being the geographic convergence of many of its global interests, national priorities, and security concerns, the latter including an economically advancing China and the perception of continued threat posed by America and western Europe. Modern Russia’s Cold War experience conditioned them to playing a long game (patience and deep strategy) but they have also demonstrated, especially in the last decade, a preparedness and willingness to go on surgical “offense” to avoid being perceived as weak, ceding ground or leverage, and/or “losing” the big picture game.

That said, recent articles in the western media have suggested that Putin is no longer playing foreign policy chess and has potentially even *thrown the board across the room* in overstressing Russia’s capabilities (Why the Chess Metaphor for Putin Is Wrong: The problem with Russia is not a game. D. B. Baer, Foreign Policy, 5 February 2022 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/05/putin-chess-metaphor-russia-ukraine/>). While it may be enticing to think of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as irrational, such an offensive move should be viewed in the context of Moscow’s perception of threat and national narratives. The aggression belies a longer game strategy grounded in strategic posturing and that reflects the boldness of a player who well understands that powerful chess pieces remain on the board (think nuclear weapons arsenal). In this context, Russia is not only far from throwing the chessboard out, but very much adhering to traditional chess game rules and moves.

The Russia-Ukraine War: Chessboard Players, Pieces, and Perceptions

The war in Ukraine presents an opportunity to assess the use of chessboard strategies in a modern context. In this example, Russia can be seen to be player 1 and the United States, *not Ukraine*, player 2. Each represent the hierarchical tier one pieces of king and queen (China, in a separate example would represent a tier one player on the Eurasia chessboard). Depending on perspective, Ukraine may be considered a secondary tier piece – rook, knight, or bishop – along with the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and NATO, all of which are to be utilized in a game that best serves the interests of, or are in a supporting role, to tier one players. Tier two players choose a side or are aligned based on which primary player or outcomes best serve their interests. Third tier players – pawns – are symbolic of even less influential countries or stakeholders whose ambitions are easily sacrificed or subsumed within the bigger game; Moldova or the Balkan states offer such examples. All players align their interests according to simplified narratives that are perceived to best serve their national objectives. In this binary game, one side represents the hero, the other the villain, one side is characterized as an

aggressor, the other a victim of that aggression. These narratives shape and influence global perception and all players' foreign policies. Player actions or moves are focused on one side cancelling out the other until the survival of the state or country (primary players) is assured, and a realigned chessboard is readied for the next match.

The Russia-Ukraine War: Chess Strategy Outcomes

Now that we have considered game strategies, roles, motivations, and perception frameworks of the players and pieces, it is prudent to consider the cost of "winning" in a zero-sum game by understanding the impacts to real players experiencing real losses in the real world. Are primary players taking such impacts into account and are these impacts shaping their decisions or actions?

In the case of Ukraine, we must consider if or how large swathes of its population will survive the game as well as the implications of its destabilization on the rest of the world. Is the future of Ukraine being taken into consideration by tier one players? In such a game, Ukraine's interests are subservient to the hierarchically more powerful tier 1 players. Humanitarian aid and military reinforcements may minimize Ukraine's losses and destabilizing impacts on tier 2 and 3 players, but ultimately long-term human prospects will depend upon the ability of its people and non-Ukrainian communities impacted by this war, to adapt to or overcome wartime conditions such as food and gas shortages, environmental damage, mass migrations, and the emergence of black-market trading and trafficking. This is difficult to do in the best of circumstances let alone during periods of active war or in post-conflict environments.

In the case of Russia, sanctions, while having a minor bearing on Russia's ruling elite, are producing nonlinear effects that not only negatively impact the livelihoods of millions of Russians, but those of non-Russians outside of Russia's borders and beyond. While oil and gas are obvious examples, restrictions on agriculture and other industrial exports from Russia are limiting global supplies while simultaneously debilitating whole sectors and removing jobs from the market in Russia. Sanctions extend to Russian imports, such as items needed for technical maintenance and industrial advancements, which will inevitably reduce Russia's capacity to compete in the global market but also its ability to service its population. To compound matters, reports from December 2022 estimate anywhere between 70,000 and 100,000 Russian soldiers, many of which were ill prepared, have died during the conflict (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-russia-ukraine-war-and-its-ramifications-for-russia/>). In trying to avoid being drafted, hundreds of thousands of Russians at the very least have also fled their country, contributing towards a regional migration shift as well as loss of Russian labor resources and a brain drain that will hinder long-term development efforts. By November 2022, Russia's economy had shrunk by 4% based on a 12-month rate of change (<https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/monthly-gdp-yoy>), with projections that this will worsen in 2023.

The systemic and cascading nature of the problem should be emphasized. Russia's declining resources, migration, and supply chain disruptions are passed on to global markets that, in turn, affect those countries that rely on either Russia's stability or the Russian market for its imports and exports. This, in turn, triggers domestic and foreign policy position shifts as countries work to circumvent negative impacts such as restricted food and energy supplies. For example, the above referenced oil and gas supply shortages from Russia to Europe have forced Germany to reopen its coal mines for energy, going against its own environmental policy. It is not only Europe being hit by these cascade impacts. Countries outside the region who rely on Ukrainian imports, take Lebanon for instance, are facing inflated food prices to such a rate that monthly salaries are unable to cover basic provisions (Food supplies in Arab world strained due to Ukraine war (jns.org)).

If the Russian invasion of Ukraine and U.S. response to it demonstrate the application of traditional chessboard strategies, it is with a twist of irony that in doing so, they have created unfavorable outcomes (lose-lose) for themselves and the tier 2 and 3 players that support one or the other. At the very least such an adherence to traditional strategy appears to have hindered these tier 1 players from effectively calculating or planning to counteract the cascading and webbed consequences that would follow. The powerful isolation being imposed upon Russia by the global system it seeks to shape and needs to survive is undermining them politically, militarily, and economically and is compromising, not strengthening, their national morale, security, and stability. This miscalculation jeopardizes the wellbeing and connectivity of its population to the global system for an indeterminable period.

From a security perspective, in addition to the specific impacts on Ukraine and Russia, the general influx of rockets, explosives, and small arms into Ukraine that, while perhaps slowing Russia's campaign and weakening its military, simultaneously create an impermissible environment in Ukraine, which does not bode well for Ukrainians or those wanting to do business with, be educated in, or visit that country. The chaos of war also creates exploitable conditions and markets for mal-intended opportunists, particularly those involved in weapons trafficking.

In essence, the effects of this war will be damaging to the human condition and global stability in the long-term. And therein lies the problem. The world in which we live is neither a closed game nor representative of such a fixed hierarchical system as is offered by the game of chess. In fact, there are numerous players occupying space across many different levels and whose interconnectivity mean that even a simple action, let alone a war, can and will have diverse and far-reaching effects.

So, while chess may provide a simple, understood, and accepted foreign policy framework, the actual game, if we are to stick with that metaphor, is vastly more complex, includes richer, more diverse, and myriad layers of influences and shaping factors, and produces second and third order (and beyond) impacts that are only now being seriously parsed out, studied, and analyzed. Such complexities and layers can appear overwhelming, but a deeper understanding and factoring of these dynamics will yield more appropriate strategy assessments and by extension, handling of high consequence, multi-dimensional scenarios.

From International to Interconnected Relations: Moving from a Closed to an Open System

It is no great discovery to assert that most country's foreign policy draws heavily on IR theory; much of which itself is predicated on linear scientific methods that reduce social dynamics to simple rules that assume logic and rationality (see Kavalski, 2007:446). However, despite advancements in science and technology and efforts to eradicate human error, our ability to accurately apply and process data from different disciplines and deductive methods for the purpose of prediction is challenged as it does not reflect the fulsomeness of social contours and complexities that characterize our human existence. Reducing the global system to interactions between states can be considered a macro-centric perspective that ignores the very real ability of micro and mid-level actors, comprised of individuals, sectors or communities, and other groupings of power- or influence-wielding, to shape, thwart, or otherwise impact macro level actors and their agendas. These "lesser" actors, in today's world, are increasingly able to effect change or pose challenges to macro level ambitions by using a variety of technological methods, such as the internet and social media. When you add externalities such as changing weather or climate patterns and other natural or human-created phenomena or crises to this mix, many of which can and do affect the relationships and behaviour of the micro, mid, and macro level actors, you see that the world is far more interconnected than what a chess game or board can support. Actions, actors, and context influences and can be influenced by myriad factors and

dynamics that compound and produce new conditions, in essence a true trait of what is called an *open* system.

Contrary to an open international system, the chessboard analysis for foreign policy reflects a *closed* system. In a closed system the focus is on state survival and tends to disregard the many historical and dynamic factors that have influenced a single action. What this means is that states are perceived to be isolated from the energy created at the micro or macro levels, and instead produce results through the interaction with one another in a closed game. Dismissing Russia's invasion of Ukraine as irrational behaviour fails to factor in or acknowledge the many dynamics and nuances that have shaped its perception of the game over an extended period. It also ignores the roles that other countries have played in shaping geopolitical conditions leading to this moment. We can break this down further with the sand analogy. When pouring sand high on a table, is it the final grain that forces the pile to reposition, or is it the nature whereby each sand grain poured has interacted from the very beginning, at first through local coupling, to produce an energy that creates a change in the sand pile? Taking this further, what would happen if we opened the door or a window to the room where the sand was poured? Or what if we focus on the human pouring the sand, is the person tired or in a rush for example? The repositioning of the sand pile would now be dependent on the interaction between sand grains as they are poured, but also weather conditions and the unpredictability of human involvement. To add further complexity, the position of the sand grains can affect the contours of a breeze in the room, or even the mindset of the pourer. The point here is that even what may appear to be the simplest of interactions are actually quite dynamic. And while a given process can remain stable for prolonged periods of time, it is not uncommon for circumstances to change very quickly without prior notice, causing behavioural changes and even punctuations to the once stable conditions. Ultimately, applying closed system strategies, as represented by the game of chess, to problems that are fundamentally open system constructed or based, are not likely to yield predictable or productive results.

There is a long history between Russia and the west, and even after the collapse of the Soviet Union relations have evolved through periods of negotiation and tension. The most recent escalation in Ukraine should not, therefore, be viewed in isolation from the historical and macro, mid, and micro level factors that accumulated to produce a change to the conditions. Every action, from local political activity in the east of Ukraine to the various NATO related programs in the environs of the conflict have contributed towards the instability. Russia, have of course chosen aggression, but if both the west and Russia would have done things differently 15 years ago and emphasized or leveraged communications networks at a variety of levels, would we be watching a war that is ruining if not destroying the lives of millions? Of course, this does not mean there is an ideal solution and tensions will always exist but assessing the dynamic in which relations evolve and using this to better inform communication can promote flows of reliable information at both micro and macro levels.

Conclusion and Invitation

So, what does this all mean or why does it matter? In the grand scheme of geopolitical friction, Russia and those seeking to counter its actions (namely the U.S. and western European states) are projecting and acting within a game where they perceive their hierarchical positions and interests to be at stake. They are doing so with what appears to be limited acknowledgment or understanding of the cascade impacts and disproportionate effects stemming from their actions. Applying a zero-sum chess-strategy foreign policy diminishes the role of Ukraine and its people and relegates the long-term, and more broadly reaching impacts of war to a secondary concern. Both of which could have near- and long-term catastrophic effects upon the global system. If a zero-sum chess-based strategy is what got us here, is it possible for a different thought architecture or strategic model to get us out of it and possibly

even minimize if not outright avoid future such instances? There is no way to know for sure but at minimum, it is at least time to start the discussion and propose alternatives in the hunt for evolved human engagement solutions and strategies built for today's world versus continuing to lean into those dusty, anachronistic habits and rituals that were designed for a pre-information age world.

This conversation piece has sought to highlight the deficiencies in understanding the world through reductionist methods, which has led to the use of analogies that depict a closed, hierarchical foreign policy game. Chess of course, is not the problem, rather, it is the application of closed system foreign policy strategies in a world characterized by open systems that is hampering more mutually viable IR outcomes. Foreign policy practitioners, government officials, and IR strategists must increase their awareness of and appreciation for the fact that the IR playing field and players are more diverse, powerful, and distributed, and their movements and the results of externalities within the game generate cascading effects of actions that significantly impact international relations. If these realities are left unchecked or unplanned for, closed system, chessboard foreign policy strategies will increasingly result in state actions, or manoeuvres, that are detrimental to short- and long-term human prosperity and stability. We advocate openness, diversity, authenticity, and pragmatism in understanding and designing peace for the world in which we all live. This means incorporating a variety of factors, including micro and mid-level interests, priorities, perspectives, and narratives into policy formation at the macro level. However, it is not the aim of this article to exclude foreign policy thinkers who challenge this position or bring additional perspectives. Rather, we warmly invite and encourage discussion so that we may build relationships and understanding that enables collective education and aptitudes surrounding our shared human survival. So, let us start this conversation.

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