
Emotional and Rational Decision-Making in Strategic Studies: Moving Beyond the False Dichotomy

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Emotional and Rational Decision-Making in Strategic Studies: Moving Beyond the False Dichotomy

Abstract

It is common, though erroneous, to think of rational and emotional decision-making as being opposed to each other. The binary distinction originated in Western philosophy and subsequently spread to other fields, including strategic studies. Strategic studies scholarship has nurtured this binary in two mainstream traditions, classical strategic theory and the coercion school. The distinction is fallacious because all strategically relevant decisions are emotional, and many of these decisions can be rational. Abandoning the false dichotomy is necessary for the field to remain relevant and for strategists to better understand their choices and the decisions made by their adversaries. Accordingly, this article proposes a new way of thinking about the role of emotions in strategic decision-making, one that starts from the appreciation that all strategically relevant choices are emotional.

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Introduction

Although strategic theory is primarily famous for its trinities, it is equally fond of binaries.¹ Binary thinking can be useful. For example, the distinction between war and peace is reasonable because it appreciates how things change when actors decide to employ organized violence to resolve their political disagreements. Despite the on-going questioning of that binary from the proponents of the concepts such as hybrid war and gray-zone conflict, the distinction between war and peace remains analytically and practically useful.² Binary thinking can also lead to irrelevant distinctions. In strategic studies, distinguishing between state and non-state actors makes little sense because there is no clear pattern of strategy-making associated with either type of actor.³ But binaries can also become fallacious, thus turning into false dichotomies. The fallacy occurs when the two options presented are inseparable or when more options are available. It is the tendency to divide the inseparable that is the most prominent form of false dilemma in strategic studies. For example, some theorists divide military actions into attrition and manoeuvre, ignoring the fact that each of them is an essential part of the other one.⁴ They also contrast wars of choice and wars of necessity, when all wars begin with the defender choosing to parry the adversary's blow.⁵ This form of false dilemma impedes clarity of thinking because it deceives us about the real options at our disposal and makes it difficult to appreciate nuances associated with complex phenomena.

One prevalent false dichotomy in strategic studies is the notion that decision-making in strategic practice is either emotional or rational. This article understands emotions as stimulated feelings that shape cognition and behaviour.⁶ Rationality denotes the pursuit of reasonable objectives, doing so effectively, or both.⁷ Although the roots of the distinction are ancient in origins, this distinction has prevailed in two main traditions of strategic studies. Classical strategists have nurtured the dilemma by propagating interpretations of Clausewitzian theory of war that contrast emotion and rationality as two opposing forces, each pulling the character of war in a different direction. In contrast, coercion theorists have propagated the distinction by assuming that emotions inevitably impede rational-decision making, the latter being a necessary requirement for successful coercion. The two traditions retain prominence within the field, and the distinction is still popular, despite the occurrence of some more nuanced treatments recently.⁸

The binary is fallacious because all strategically relevant decisions are emotional, and many of them are also rational. Recent emotion research clearly shows the supposed distinction between emotional and rational decisions is illusory.⁹ Emotions are an essential part of cognition.¹⁰ They enable us to make decisions by helping us to choose between competing values at any given moment. People with no capacity to feel emotions cannot make even the most straightforward decisions because they do not care about the consequences of their actions.¹¹ In this sense, all choices are emotional. This observation applies even more strongly in strategic practice where so much is at stake and where emotions tend to be particularly intense. Furthermore, many of these emotional choices can be rational if the emotional character and intensity correspond to the situation at hand. For these reasons, distinguishing between emotional and rational decisions does not make sense.

The prevalence of this false dichotomy has negative consequences on the field of strategic studies and on the practice of strategy, which I understand as the use of military power to submit the adversary to one's will. The obvious problem is that the binary does not correspond to reality, it does not capture how the real-world decision-making works. That alone is a reason for concern for any scholar who wants to know the truth. Yet the binary is also harmful in its consequences because it inhibits the ability of the strategic studies scholars to understand how practitioners make choices concerning the use of military power. Subsequently, scholars of strategic studies may derive wrong lessons from the study of strategic history based on this impaired understanding of decision-making. The binary is at least equally problematic when it comes to strategic practice, as it deceives strategists about how they make their decisions. For example, the binary implies that once strategists make decisions under the influence of emotions, these decisions cannot be rational. However, as shown later in this article, emotions can often be beneficial to decision-making. Since the binary urges strategists to avoid emotions in their decision-making, it can have negative impact on the choices people make, or in extreme cases, it may prevent strategists from making any choices at all. Finally, the binary also deceives strategists concerning the decision-making of their adversaries. The binary would have us believe that when the adversary makes an emotional decision, that decision cannot be rational. Besides being incorrect, such an

assumption is also dangerous in strategic practice because it may motivate the strategist to underestimate the adversary.

If strategic studies scholars and strategists want to understand and anticipate choices people make in war, they need to go beyond the emotional/rational decision-making distinction. Since emotions are the salient force driving cognition and behaviour, any analysis of strategically relevant choices should be emotion-centric. Scholars from other fields have already developed nuanced decision-making models along these lines.¹² It is high time for the strategic studies community to follow suit. The best way to start is by acknowledging that all human choices are inherently emotional. Since each emotion has a unique influence on cognition, it is necessary first to identify the emotion that the actor feels and the stimulus that inspires the emotion. The next step then is to appraise how each emotion influences cognition and what behaviour it motivates. The final step is to assess the appropriateness of the emotional response, which tells us how rational the resulting choice was. Although this kind of emotion-centric analysis may not convey the same robust predictive power as traditional rational choice models, it best reflects how humans make choices and act in the real world. Since strategy inevitably takes place in the real world, the emotion-centric analysis is the best tool available, if not for prediction, then for description and anticipation.

The current article contributes to the relatively recent but ongoing incorporation of emotion science into research on strategy. International Relations scholars have already recognized the relevance of emotions to human decision-making.¹³ While strategic studies scholarship has adapted more slowly to this “emotion-centric” trend, some notable works on the subject have already emerged. For example, some scholars of strategy have already explored how military power can elicit certain emotions and how those emotions then affect subsequent decision-making.¹⁴ Yet these studies are still too few and the topic remains on the periphery of scholarly interest. It is possible that one of the reasons for the relative lack of research on this topic is the prevalence of the false dichotomy examined in the current work. This theoretical article thus may serve as a stepping stone for further empirical work on the subject because it sheds light on how people make strategically relevant choices and it provides guidelines on how to analyse those choices.

The article proceeds in the following way. The first section traces how the binary has become popular within the two mainstream traditions of strategic studies. The second section explains the fallacy behind the distinction. The third section develops a new way of thinking about choices in war. The conclusion presents the academic and practical implications of the argument.

The Binary

The tendency to put rational and emotional decision-making in contrast with each other originated in the Western philosophical tradition. From antiquity onward, philosophers such as Seneca and René Descartes argued for a separation of mind and body, and hence of rationality and emotion. Even as late as in the 1980s, some philosophers saw emotions as a burden to rational decision-making and, therefore, to a good life in general. For example, in his essay on the utility of emotions, philosopher Jerome Shaffer observed that “from a rational and moral point of view, I can see no possibility of a general justification of emotion. And it is easy enough to imagine individual lives and even a whole world in which things would be much better if there were no emotion.”¹⁵ Although recent philosophical scholarship has reassessed the relationship, the binary thinking about emotion and reason had already leaked to other disciplines, including strategic studies.¹⁶

Strategic studies have nurtured the binary in two distinct traditions. The first one is a legacy of the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, whose writings keep inspiring contemporary scholars of classical strategy. Clausewitz himself had a rather nuanced understanding of the relationship between emotion and rationality. However, his theory's fundamental concept, the so-called wondrous trinity, can be (and has been) interpreted as putting emotions in opposition to rationality.¹⁷ Clausewitz described war as consisting of “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity...chance and probability...and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy.”¹⁸ He further asserted that any war's character results from the interaction between these tendencies, just as a pendulum oscillates chaotically when put between three magnets. Prominent scholars in the field now consider the trinity, and the associated contrast of emotion with rationality, to be the centrepiece of Clausewitz writing.¹⁹ These modern interpretations aim to make the theory more accessible to wider

audiences and simplify what Clausewitz describes in a more complex manner.

Thus, contemporary scholarship casts the individual elements of the trinity as “emotions, chance and probabilities and reason” or as “irrationality, non-rationality and rationality.”²⁰ These recent interpretations thus explicitly equate emotions with irrationality. The magnet metaphor has also caught on, and it further propagates the idea that emotions (irrationality) pull war into one direction while policies (rationality) into another one.²¹ Hence, through their well-intentioned efforts to emphasize the relevance of Clausewitz to contemporary wars, classical strategy scholars keep popularizing the idea that choices in war are either emotional or rational.

The second tradition in which the binary has flourished is the coercion school of strategic studies. The school emerged in response to the invention of nuclear weapons and its main task was to assess the utility of this weaponry. The school’s adherents, such as Bernard Brodie and Thomas Schelling, have theorised ways through which the threat of using these weapons impacts the adversary’s decision-making. For much of its history, the coercion scholarship relied on the assumptions of inherent rationality, assuming that humans generally aim to maximize benefits and reduce costs associated with their efforts.²² To the extent the scholarship considered emotions at all, it assumed that emotions inevitably interfere with rational decision-making.²³ This perspective may seem ironic given that deterrence, as its etymology betrays, relies on fear for its functioning.²⁴ Consequently, some coercion scholars have recently started to question the distinction between emotion and rationality.²⁵ However, these works have yet to penetrate to the mainstream of general coercion scholarship. Since the assumption of rationality still underlies much of the coercion theorising, the distinction between emotion and rationality remains popular.

In summary, the binary distinction between emotional and rational decision-making remains popular in the two prominent schools of strategic studies. Classical strategists see the binary as a defining feature of Clausewitzian theory of war, which they consider the best theory available. In contrast, coercion theorists maintain the distinction because they rely on decision-making models that assume the inherent rationality of human decision-makers and treat emotions

as an interfering factor in the process. The next section uses recent emotion research to show why the binary is inaccurate.

The Fallacy

Emotion research over the last four decades shows that the binary distinction constitutes a false dilemma. Far from being a mere nuisance in life, emotions form the most important aspect of our lives. Emotions are the key mechanism people have to deal with the complexity and uncertainty of reality.²⁶ Emotions help people make sense of the world by influencing both the ways they think and how they act to best respond to the situations at hand. Emotions influence both what people think and how they think about it.²⁷ They also shape behaviour because they can suspend all the other actions to orchestrate various bodily mechanisms to deal with the stimuli a person finds relevant for their survival and well-being at any given moment.²⁸ These findings paint a radically different picture of emotional utility than the traditional distinction would have made us believe.

The separation of emotional and rational-decision-making is fallacious for two reasons. First, rationality without emotions is irrelevant, especially in the conduct of strategy. Rationality is only relevant when it manifests itself in decisions or actions; otherwise, it is a mere exercise in abstract theorising with no utility to the real world. Emotions enable rationality to be relevant because they help us make choices. It is through emotions that people can decide between competing priorities. Simply put, emotions make us care.²⁹ Without emotions, people are unable to make even the simplest decisions.³⁰ This observation applies even more strongly in the context of strategic affairs because these present people with difficult choices all the time. Hence, all relevant choices, whether rational or less so, are emotional.

Second, many of the emotional choices can be rational as well. Emotionally selected objectives can be reasonable, and emotionally motivated actions can be effective. For example, Otto von Bismarck, a man often cast as the quintessential rational decision-maker, was an exceptionally emotional individual.³¹ Yet, instead of hindering his decision-making, emotions often enhanced it. Fears of the outside intervention, of the protracted war and the instability at the borders, motivated Bismarck to choose limited rather than absolute objectives in his wars. These objectives were reasonable, given the limited resources at Prussia's disposal and the other European nations' hostile

disposition. Emotions also guided Bismarck's conduct of war. For example, during the Franco-Prussian war, the chancellor chose to bombard besieged Paris rather than starve the inhabitants because he feared other nations coming to France's aid.³² Fear motivated him to act quickly and violently rather than to wait. His action was effective and hence rational because it saved time and contributed to the desired objectives since France surrendered soon after the heavy bombardment. Therefore, if the character and the intensity of the emotion are appropriate to the situation, then the selected objectives might be reasonable, and the actions taken can be effective.

Of course, not all emotional choices are inherently rational. Emotions emerge based on our appraisal of situations rather than because of the situations themselves.³³ Hence, if people interpret the situation at hand in a wrong way, they may experience emotions that motivate them to make irrational decisions. For example, if they interpret a particular action as a provocation instead of a threat, then they will feel angry rather than scared, and depending on the actual situation, decision motivated by anger may in fact be unreasonable or ineffective compared to one made on fear. Similarly, if they find themselves in a situation where prudent decisions made in intense fear promise the best chance of success, then feeling a less intense fear may prevent them from making the right decision. Hence, if the character or the intensity of the emotion is inappropriate to the situation, then the resulting decision is likely to be irrational.

Altogether, the false dichotomy is untenable considering contemporary emotion research. Emotions are necessary for strategically relevant decision-making to occur, and indeed the decisions made on emotions are often rational. At the same time, emotions are not inevitably sufficient to rational decision-making; they may hinder rational decision-making if their character or intensity does not correspond to the real situation. The next section proposes a way on how to move beyond the traditional distinction.

The Way Ahead

This section uses the emotion-centric perspective to offer basic guidelines on how to think about choices in strategic affairs. The first step is to identify the relevant emotional experience that has occurred or is about to occur. A good way to start an analysis is to try to understand how the strategists appraise the situation in which they happen to be.

Their appraisal of the situation will tell us what sort of emotions they might feel.³⁴ Do they see the situation as threatening? Then perhaps they feel scared. Do they deem the situation to be a provocation? Then maybe they are angry. Do they consider the situation to be a loss? Then they are most likely sad. Relatedly, it is imperative to identify the stimulus that inspires the emotion. Are the strategists afraid of the home front developments or do they fear the adversary's military power? If they are angry, is it because they an ally betrayed them or because of the adversary's provocation? If they are sad, is it because they lost an ally or a battle? Understanding the emotional experience in the proper context gives us a solid ground to explain subsequent choices.

The second step is to map the influence of specific emotion on cognition and behaviour. This influence depends on each emotion's intensity, character, and on the stimulus that inspires the emotion. In general, more intense emotions are likely to have more profound influence on decision-making than the less intense ones. Similarly, due to the prevalence of the so-called negativity bias, negative emotions are likely to have stronger influence on decision-making than positive emotions.³⁵ Beyond these generalizations, each emotion has unique effects, and the scholars need to know them in advance.³⁶ Some emotions convey a rather straightforward influence.

Sadness, for example, makes people pessimistic and motivates them to abandon the objective they originally pursued but now see as lost.³⁷ Sadness can then decrease the will to fight and even motivate surrender or at least abandonment of conquest.³⁸ Anger is the exact opposite of sadness. Angry individuals are optimistic and bold, even reckless in their behaviour.³⁹ Anger then motivates bold actions and aggressive behaviour in war. Fear is a more complicated emotion. It has a similar cognitive influence as sadness, but it offers a portfolio of behavioural tendencies, from freezing to fleeing to fighting. Consequently, fearful individuals may be reluctant to seek battles, but they will fight when they appraise other options as denied.⁴⁰ However, these general observations only apply if the adversary inspires the respective emotions. Changes in emotional stimuli may alter subsequent emotional influence. For example, if the strategists fear unfavourable domestic developments more than they fear the adversary, they may prefer fighting to strengthen their position at the home front. Hence, while the influence of individual emotions is to some extent predictable, it is also context-dependent.

The final step is to assess the appropriateness of the emotional experience to the situation at hand. The aim here is to appraise whether the emotion suits the situation. Were the strategists justified in seeing the situation as a threat, a provocation, or a loss? If yes, were they scared, angry or sad about the right thing? It is always possible that the strategists care about wrong issues and subsequently feel emotions that motivate them to make irrational decisions. Hence to evaluate whether any given emotional choices are also rational, it is crucial to assess strategic choices about the emotional context.

A case of the Roman Emperor Augustus can illustrate the suggested approach to analysis. In the year 9 A. D., Emperor Augustus learnt that Germanic tribes annihilated three Roman legions in the battle of Teutoburg forest. This event had a profound psychological impact on the emperor and his subsequent decisions. Which emotions did Augustus feel when the news reached him? Direct accounts of his psychological response indicate he felt intense fear and sadness.⁴¹ He saw two aspects of the situation as especially threatening. He feared a foreign invasion of The Roman Empire. Augustus suspected that Rome's adversaries might attack once they saw that it was possible to defeat Romans in battle. For similar reasons, he feared domestic uprisings. The Roman population now included significant numbers of Germanic natives, and these, according to Augustus, posed a potential security threat. But Augustus also felt sad. He perceived the defeat as a significant loss of well-trained soldiers that he might have needed in the future. How did fear and sadness influence his decision-making? Fear of domestic revolts led him to post guards throughout Rome, dismiss troops composed of German natives and empowered local governors in provinces that he considered as conveying a serious risk of revolt. Fear of external invasion motivated Augustus to strengthen forward defenses in the areas he saw as insecure. Sadness motivated Augustus to abandon further conquest beyond the Rhine. Some historians disagree with this traditional interpretation and instead argue that the decision to abandon further conquest was only made by the subsequent Emperor Tiberius. In either case, sadness probably played the role in the decision because Tiberius was aware the significant loss the defeat constituted for the Empire.⁴²

Were the emotions appropriate to the situation and hence rational? The fears of foreign invasion and domestic uprisings were perhaps unreasonably intense as no such threats occurred. It is, of course,

possible that Augustus' policies dissuaded the dangers from manifesting, but there is no sufficient historical evidence to support this proposition. In contrast, intense sadness was appropriate to the situation because the defeat constituted a significant loss of men and material by any measure. The consequent abandonment of the conquest seems like a wise political choice in this context. Therefore, it seems that of the two emotionally driven decisions, the first one was arguably irrational while the second one was rational.

This emotion-centric approach does not convey the robust predictive power of traditional rational choice theories. While specific emotions do have clear cognitive and behavioral tendencies, their influence is also heavily context-dependent. This means that predictions rooted in emotion theories do not offer strong grounds for prediction. The emotion-centric approach sacrifices predictive power for the sake of accurate description. Like traditional strategic theory, it seeks to cast some light on the phenomenon's complexity rather than offer simplistic hypothesis testing grounds. It gives scholars a tool to understand and, at best, to anticipate choices people make in war. Ultimately, explanations that correspond with reality are more valuable than predictions imposing simplicity on an inherently complex phenomenon.

Conclusion

Emotions are necessary for all strategically relevant decisions to emerge and many of these decisions can be rational. Emotions enable priority selection between competing objectives, and they often motivate the most sensible courses of action. For these reasons, strategic studies scholarship should abandon the false dichotomy of dividing decisions into rational and emotional. The article proposes a new way to make sense of choices in war. It introduces an emotion-centric analysis is required to identify the proper emotional context of the situation, appraise the influence of emotions on cognition and behavior, and assess the emotional experience's appropriateness. This new perspective is more useful than the traditional distinction because it appreciates real-world decision-making nuances. This, in turn, gives scholars a better tool to understand how choices occur and it may motivate strategists to reflect on the choices they make in practice, as well as to anticipate the decisions the adversary may make.

Eschewing the false dichotomy may have salient impact on some aspects of strategic theory, especially on the Clausewitzian theory of war. If emotional decisions can be rational, then the Clausewitzian theory, at least in its mainstream interpretations, makes little sense. The whole point of the theory is that the character of each war depends on the interaction between emotional and rational decisions. Yet as this article shows, that interaction cannot occur, because all decisions are inherently emotional, and many are rational. Hence, while previous critiques of Clausewitz have focused on marginal and often misinterpreted aspects of the Prussian's theory, contemporary psychological research cuts to the matter's essence.⁴³ The popular interpretation of Clausewitzian theory of war is no longer tenable considering our current knowledge.

Strategic studies scholars now face two choices, provided they want to follow the most recent emotion science rather than cling to an outdated tradition at all costs. The more radical step would be to abandon the use of the trinity altogether. While possible, this course of action is perhaps too harsh because Clausewitzian theory can still say a lot about war, if only by stressing chance and probabilities as the latter's essential components. A more prudent way to deal with the contradiction may be a slight reinterpretation of the trinity. Instead of emotion, chance and rationality, the components should include violence, chance and friction, and politics. This reinterpretation avoids the false dichotomy and acknowledges the central role of violence in Clausewitzian theory, which has always been oddly missing in the more popular interpretations. Thus, the reinterpretation stays sufficiently faithful to the original material while also better reflecting contemporary psychological research.

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- ⁴³ Lukas Milevski, "The Mirage of Post-Clausewitzianism: Understanding War and Politics on the Frontier of Clausewitzian Thought," *Military Strategy Magazine*, Special Edition, (2020): 16-20, <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/the-mirage-of-post-clausewitzianism-understanding-war-and-politics-on-the-frontier-of-clausewitzian-thought/>.