

The Agent-Structure Co-Constitution and the Vietnam Commitment Decisions: A Rejoinder to Yuen Foong Khong

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Abstract

This essay responds to Yuen Foong Khong's (2002) spirited defence of his *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Khong, 1992). The author had earlier criticized Khong's overemphasis of agency over structure in his accounting of the 1965 US troop deployment decisions (Duffy, 2001). This essay points to several deficiencies in Khong's defence. Chief among them are (a) the inconsistency between Khong's conception of structure and his professed constructivism, and (b) the false dualism between agency and structure open which Khong's defence rests.

I find both gratifying and disappointing Yuen Foong Khong's (2002) lengthy response to my criticism (Duffy, 2001) of his *Analogies at War* (Khong, 1992), in which he explores the 1965 US decision to commit ground troops in Vietnam. Khong's decision to respond gratifies me initially. By engaging my commentary, he implicitly credits it as worthy of thoughtful reply. He might well have ignored it on the ground that I directed it less to him and more to those who explore political agency from constructivist perspectives. As he notes, Khong did not couch *Analogies at War* in the theoretical vocabulary of constructivism. I chose to consider the work constructivist because it examined seriously the effects of agents on political outcomes. In any event, however he classifies his work, Khong decision to engage my criticism exemplifies the cooperative spirit characteristic of genuine scholarship.

Khong's explicit endorsement of my advice – that constructivists not over-emphasize agency at the expense of structure – more directly gratifies me. Having detected this overemphasis in some recent constructivist work, I thought such a warning useful. I recognize now, however, that I might have performed a greater service had I warned more generally of the unsupportable dualism within some constructivist

scholarship. I find Khong's response replete with this dualism, and this is the source of my disappointment. It so nettles me that I feel compelled to issue this rejoinder. Mindful of both the opportunity costs to editors and the diminishing marginal returns to readers of our exchange, I will not be exhaustive. I will focus mainly on the source and substance of our disagreement, although I will digress occasionally to treat those of Khong's minor points that merit comment in that they obscure major disagreements. On any other matter, my silence in no way signifies my assent.

Recapitulation

Khong argued in *Analogies at War* that foreign policymakers reasoned analogically, evoking historical events as templates with which they make sense of the policy dilemmas – in this case the Vietnam dilemma – in which they find themselves. Skeptics agree that such analogies find their way into policymaking discourse, but they contend that policymakers do not use analogies diagnostically as they formulated policies. Rather, skeptics believe policymakers establish their policy positions on other grounds and evoke analogies for the purposes of persuasion and post hoc justification. Those other grounds include the following countertheses, each of which Khong rejected as an explanation of the troop commitment decisions.

- *Containment*: Policymakers opted to continue US containment policy, which stood at the center of US foreign and defence policy during the Cold War.
- *Political-Military Ideology*: Policymakers' positions on Vietnam reflected their relative hawkishness or dovishness. Even their choice of analogies signified their positions on this underlying ideological scale.
- *Bureaucratic Politics*: Policymakers adopted positions consistent with their roles in the federal bureaucracy. 'Where you stand depends on where you sit'.
- *Domestic Political Considerations*: Johnson opted for escalation in order to preserve his domestic 'Great Society' agenda, which a loss in Vietnam would wreck.

After collapsing the 'Political-Military Ideology' counterthesis into the 'Containment' counterthesis (because the former arguably refers to attitudes about the latter), I labeled the three remaining countertheses 'structural'. In *Analogies at War*, Khong dismissed these structural countertheses in favor of a view that would attribute the decision to agents' selection among several analogies. In my critique, I argue that this attribution relies of five questionable presumptions regarding the context of deliberation and thereby overemphasizes agency at the expense of structure.

Pointing to 'process, perceptual, and personality variables' associated with them, Khong claims that I miscast the three countertheses as structural. Much of our disagreement revolves around our incompatible conceptions of structure. For this reason, before turning to Khong's responses to my claims about his analytic presumptions, I should first clarify our contending conceptions of structure.

Contending conceptions of structure

Khong (2001: 3) characterizes my conception ‘a catch all category that is ultimately unfalsifiable’. Now this unfalsifiability attribution entirely mystifies me. Owing to the centrality of the agent-structure co-constitution in all constructivist formulations, a conception of structure necessarily stands among the first principles of any constructivist. As such, to use the vocabulary of falsificationism, it resides within constructivism’s hard core, where any constructivist would, by fiat, hold it to be unfalsifiable. I can accept a contention about the vagueness of my conception, as I did not define it explicitly in my critique. However, even were I a falsificationist and even if falsificationists did not presume – contrary to constructivism – that meanings can be established by the collective fiat of scientists, I would still find Khong’s unfalsifiability contention wholly unintelligible.

I expected that most readers would infer constructivist conceptions of agency and structure from the constructivist context of my critique. This expectation still seems reasonable to me. However, to the extent that it has engendered confusion, I willingly apologize for my imprecision. Unfortunately, Khong compounds my error by providing no definition of his own. He instead offers examples that for him capture the structural relations relevant to two of the countertheses. He excludes the bureaucratic counterthesis because of the ample evidence available to refute it. Khong sharply delimits the structural factors potentially relevant to the two remaining countertheses.

- For the containment counterthesis, his notion of structure extends only the bipolar Cold War system of superpower competition.
- For the domestic politics counterthesis, his notion extends only to the institutional apparatus that comprise the separation of powers.

These certainly count as structures, but so does much else. My conception, which I take to be much more general and less idiosyncratic, subsumes Khong’s examples. To offer a definition, ‘structure’ refers to: *the set of institutions that, by affecting the material interests of human agents, condition and constrain the subsequent practices of those agents so as to reproduce those institutions*. This is rather a mouthful, so I elaborate by summarizing Nicholas Onuf’s (1998) useful clarification of the agent-structure co-constitution, depicted schematically in Figure 1.

Arbitrarily entering the graph from the agency side, repeated uses of certain speech acts in similar contexts produce regularities that ultimately come to be understood as practices. Various practices, codified (implicitly or explicitly) as rules, comprise institutions that promulgate additional rules and thereby constrain practices. As a byproduct, practices produce regularities (and consequently expectations), which in turn affect the speech acts persons select in particular social settings. Through their rules, our institutions constrain our practices, agents act in ways that tend to reproduce those rules and institutions. In this sense, our actions are ‘path-dependent’ – they are structurally constrained by historically contingent institutional arrangements.

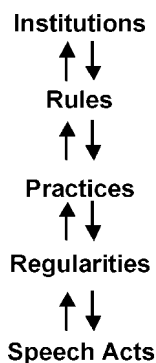


Figure 1 The Agent-Structure Co-Constitution

Importantly, institutions need be neither brick-and-mortar affairs nor formal organizations with codified by-laws. The Cold War, for instance, counts as such a structure, as does any trading regime, any state's national economy, and the world economy. Any institution, broadly conceived, or any coordinated set of institutions – so long as they condition human interests – merits the attribution 'structural'.

Structural effects on agency typically do not occur surreptitiously. We stop to consider them infrequently, but we generally do know that structures routinely influence our action choices. We do not object because these influences ordinarily serve our interests. To invoke a pedestrian example, state sanctions against violating traffic rules contribute to our interest in observing those rules. Insurance firms promote this interest both by increasing rates if our failure to observe these rules produces accidents or traffic tickets and by discounting the rates of drivers with good records. Such structural sanctions and inducements serve our agentic interests in the preservation of self and in the maintenance of a coherent social order.

To be sure, institutions sometimes structurally constrain our actions in ways contrary to our interests, as for instance when the US government forced hundreds of thousands of its citizens to fight a senseless and brutal war in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise, the mutual insecurity system produced in the Cold War produced a precarious peace founded on the fear of mutual annihilation. Regardless whether one attributes his actions to the agency reflected in his 'new thinking' or to structural constraints engendered by the US military build-up in the Reagan administration, Mikhail Gorbachev intervened actively to destroy a structural social pathology. Notwithstanding Khong's construction of me as a structural determinist, I elsewhere argue the former (Duffy, Frederking, and Tucker, 1998). Under pathological conditions, and if cognizant of them, agents act to undermine, subvert, or even overthrow existing structural arrangements. More often than not, to the extent of their legitimacy, institutions govern us in ways we wish to be governed. We produce them, and then, by conforming our actions to their constraints, we reproduce them. Structures are consequential for the sociality that produces them.

Khong scolds me for committing what he considers a category mistake. He finds my conception of structure too broad. I consider his, however he defines it, too narrow and the real category mistake. Internationally, his conception apparently excludes intergovernmental organizations, security alliances, trading partnerships, and other transnational structures that may conceivably have pressured Johnson to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

Khong's domestic politics conception similarly seems too narrow. The domestic politics counterthesis might include more than motivation through fear of a domestic backlash that might threaten his Great Society programs. Johnson necessarily concerned himself with his and his party's ability to mobilize voters in the 1966 mid-term and the 1968 Presidential elections. In order to do this, Johnson would have wanted to provide services to organized economic interests domestically. A cursory examination of the business pages of the *New York Times* would convince any skeptic that American business interests were invested heavily in Vietnam at the time of the troop commitment decisions. Surely they would turn to the administration for protection of those interests.

Although I offer this only as an hypothesis, I would be unsurprised if it survived empirical and critical scrutiny. It coheres, after all, with an explanation that many of the Vietnamese victors prefer (see McNamara *et al.*, 1999: 54–55), that the US acted from neocolonial motives. Because Johnson operated behind the shrouded pre-Watergate campaign finance regime, failure to find corroboration in White House policy memoranda would not count as its disconfirmation.

Khong (2002: 5) challenged me either (a) to argue why the decision outcome need not be explained or (b) to offer a better explanation than his selected-analogy explanation. I believe the foregoing may well explain the choice better, but it is not incumbent on me to defend it or any other alternative hypothesis. In demanding this of me, Khong commits the 'argument from ignorance' fallacy. He bears the argumentative burden for his thesis. My burden is to show that he has inadequately explored the structural countertheses – a burden I have by now more than amply discharged.

In effect, Khong in *Analogies at War* presents his readers a correlation between certain analogical speech acts in the policy discourse and the policy option ultimately selected. But correlation, we continually remind ourselves, is not causation. If we wish to explain the policy choice, we should explore the motivations of speakers to invoke analogies that associate with the policy choice. Khong's skeptics believe that speakers select analogies in order to justify or rationalize positions – in both the internal deliberative discourse and in the external public discourse – they adopt on the basis of considerations that, for whatever reason, they wish not to verbalize. For them (and for Rusk and McNamara), the policy choice is the antecedent and the analogical speech is the consequent. Khong does not, indeed cannot, show that the causal linkage runs the other direction. To the skeptics' argument I would add that the reasons for their choices – of both policies and rationalizing analogies – naturally involve structural constraints, as human structures bear on almost everything human agents do.

Khong's analytic presumptions

Khong does not address the structural motivations for the selection of analogies because he begins from the presumption – presumption one in my critique – that the policymakers under study were cognitive misers who used analogical reasoning as a satisficing strategy. I argued in my critique that these agents are least likely to satisfice, as they were highly trained, as policymaking was their primary duty, as their decision was momentous, and as they had at their disposal huge bureaucracies that subsidized their information costs. Khong responds by asserting that the deluge of war information and their fact-finding trips forced them to adopt various satisficing strategies, including analogical reasoning.

Satisficing strategies are ordinarily adopted in the absence of information sufficient to support sound reasoning, so these policymakers' access to information counts against Khong's thesis, not for it. One might argue, of course, that the overwhelming mountains of information that faced them forced them nevertheless to adopt satisficing strategies. But this does not square with the fact that many of them churned out lengthy policy memoranda that drew upon this information to support policy conclusions. Khong only presumes that these agents were cognitive misers, but this does not suffice. We have better reason to presume that – because of their education, their government positions, their access to information, and the importance of the policy choice – these officials would seek assiduously to avoid cognitive shortcuts.

Khong also presumed (presumption two) that contributions to the internal discourse uniformly served diagnostic purposes and never the ends of justification and advocacy. He denies this, pointing to a passage in his book to the effect that his thesis does not rely on denying that analogies can be used to justify or advocate a position. Khong misses my point, so I'll put it more bluntly. It is preposterous to suppose that all policymaking discourse inside the White House was diagnostic. These officials may have invoked analogies to justify and advocate positions to one another in the internal discourse. Khong insists in *Analogies at War* (59–60) that policymakers' analogical invocations inside the White House reflect poorly on the skeptics' position – that analogies were used for policy justification and advocacy and not for diagnosis. To the contrary, uses of analogy inside the White House indicates only that it, like the external discourse, included much policy justification and advocacy.

I identified as the third of Khong's presumptions the idea that diagnosis, justification, and advocacy exhaust the uses of historical analogies. Henry Cabot Lodge's invocation of the Munich analogy, for instance, can be interpreted as a Republican political warning to Johnson about the consequences of a Vietnam withdrawal. Any invocation, I observed, may simply have been a convenient rhetorical shorthand to refer to an argument expressed verbosely in earlier conversations. Khong in his response agrees that other purposes are conceivable. In so doing, he undercuts his own position that appearances of analogical utterances in the internal policy discourse reflect analogical policy diagnoses.

Nevertheless, Khong (2002: 14) doubts that Lodge's Munich invocation was a threat, pointing to a Johnson comment in McGeorge Bundy's note that reads 'To give in = another Munich. If not here – then Thailand'. Khong asks 'if this is not Johnson relying on the Munich analogy to assess the international (not domestic) stakes involved and the international (not domestic) consequences of giving in, what is?'

Of course, Johnson may not be diagnosing here, but merely parroting a justification he had heard from one of his advisers. Moreover, the passage 'If not here – then Thailand' may have referred to George Ball's contention (not analogical) that Thailand, because of its terrain and relative political stability, would be more defensible than Vietnam as a bulwark against communist insurgency. But let me acknowledge that Khong's analogical diagnosis thesis is at its strongest with respect to Johnson. The President was not as steeped in the matter as Rusk, Ball, McNamara, and the Bundys. If any of the principals had need of a satisficing strategy, it was Johnson.

Khong, however, does not limit himself to Johnson. He applies his thesis to the full range of high-level Vietnam advisers in Johnson's administration. Given that the outcome (Option C) is a collective product, its association with one or another analogy might suggest the vitality of that analogy in Johnson's mind, if one wanted to be less than generous toward him. But it does not follow from any such association that Johnson's advisers conducted analogical diagnoses. Certainly they may have drawn upon an analogy for insight, but these men were educated enough to recognize the need to check the coherence and reality of any such insight. More plausibly, they invoked analogies to satisfy the President's need for cognitive shortcuts.

Robert McNamara indicated his disdain for analogical reasoning a few weeks prior to the major troop commitment decision, when he told Henry Graff (1970: 37) that 'analogies are false in logic; although significant in psychology'. Khong interprets this passage as confirmation of his thesis, but it seems more a disconfirmation. Khong (2002: 15) wrote that '[t]he book documented many instances [in which] policymakers explicitly acknowledged the logical pitfalls of reasoning by analogy but who then blissfully proceeded to attack or recommend an option based on analogical reasoning! The reason they did this was precisely the reason given by McNamara: analogical reasoning is significant in psychology'.

Khong misreads McNamara, who can hardly be expected in 1965 to be uttering theses in cognitive psychology. His statement that 'analogies are false in logic' conveys that diagnoses of the situation in Vietnam should not rely on analogies, and his 'although significant in psychology' implies that analogies are useful tools for persuasion and thus also for policy justification and advocacy. I certainly did not, as Khong (2002: 16) claims, neglect McNamara's (1995: 195) comment 30 years later concerning the importance of Munich for his generation. In fact I refer to it explicitly in my critique (Duffy, 2001: 170). Khong missed not only my reference to McNamara's Munich invocation, but also my point in referring to it. So I reiterate with added emphasis: McNamara's invocation of Munich in his *mea culpa* 30 years after the 1965 decision so

contradicted his statement just weeks before the decision that it exposed the Munich invocation as a self-serving rationalization.

It is quite understandable that policymakers in the Johnson White House would acknowledge the pitfalls of analogical reasoning and yet still invoke analogies in internal policy deliberations. Analogies can be convenient anaphoric shorthand for expressing the sense and force of otherwise lengthy arguments. Moreover, because they evoke salient historical sequences in the imaginations of hearers, analogical utterances communicate vividly and persuasively. But they are still only utterances. Khong errs in mistaking his subjects' utterances for their thoughts (presumption five). Simply put, *the method of our expression of ideas does not necessarily indicate the method of their formulation*. Khong's offers no account of the causal relation between how these policymakers thought and what they said and wrote. Yet he claims to infer their method of thought from their verbal expressions. Moreover, he does so over their objections.

Khong also misconstrues my point regarding George Ball's argument. I tried to convey that construing Ball's argument as analogical – the 'Dien Bien Phu analogy' – obscures the fact that his analysis concerned the same terrain and the same foe led by the very same General Giap. For this reason I would not consider it analogical. Khong, of course, does consider it analogical because Ball goes into similarities and differences between the US situation and the French situation during the previous decade. By Khong's lights, then, about everything is analogical. I am not the same me as yesterday, because, although I live at the same location, drive the same car, and am related to the same relatives, yesterday I wore a blue shirt but today I wear a white one. The US situation in 1965 and the French situation in 1954 were similar up to the limit of identity. This was one war of national liberation fought in one location. It strains credulity to equate the relation between the Vietnamese fight against the US and against the French to the relation that the Vietnam conflict bears to the Korean conflict or the Munich appeasement.

Conclusion

I find quite apt the quotation from Marx and Engels with which Khong begins his conclusion: 'Men make history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves . . .'. Marx and Engels here express elegantly what we in our current fashion term 'the agent-structure co-constitution'. I do not believe, however, the Khong accurately depicts our respective positions with respect to this passage. He associates himself with its first conjunct, that 'men make history', and contends that I believe more strongly in the second conjunct, that 'they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves'. I agree with his self-ascription, of course. He *does* privilege agency over structure. This of course encapsulates the main thrust of my critique. But I disagree with his ascription to me of the second conjunct.

My view, which I share with thinkers as metatheoretically disparate as Alexander Wendt (1987: 337) and Bent Flyvbjerg (2001: 137–138), rejects the agent-structure dualism that Khong embraces. Our analyses should privilege neither structure nor agency.

Precisely because agents and structures constitute one another, adoption of either strategy seems a sure road to analytic ruin. Whether we seek to interpret political reality from one or another theoretical perspective in order to show its cogency or whether we seek to reconstruct a political reality from the perspectives of its participants in order to understand how their action choices flowed from their dilemmas as they constructed them, we must always consider carefully the fundamental feature of the human condition expressed succinctly in the passage quoted above. Agents chose and agents act, but always conditioned by the terms of choices already made and actions already taken. Structures affect action, but mediated always by the conscious choices of agents capable at their collective discretion of forestalling structural effects.

The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful suggestions of Joe Blasdel and Augusta del Zotto. He cheerfully accepts responsibility for any errors.

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