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Rationality and risk-taking in Russia's first Chechen War: toward a theory of cognitive realism

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This article seeks to establish a better scholarly understanding of former Russian President Boris Yeltsin's decision to launch an ill-planned, risky, and ultimately disastrous invasion of the breakaway republic of Chechnya in 1994. Examining the decision-making environment that led up to the invasion, I conclude that while neorealism provides an adequate explanation for Yeltsin's motives in this case, the decisions that he made in pursuit of these goals do not reflect the logic of rational utility maximization commonly associated with neorealist theory. Instead, I suggest that prospect theory – based on the idea that decision-makers tend to be risk averse when confronted with choices between gains while risk acceptant when confronted with losses – offers significantly more explanatory insight in this case. Thus, the article offers further support for an alternative theoretical approach to international relations that some scholars have termed 'cognitive realism', incorporating neorealist motives with a more empirically accurate perspective on the decision-making processes undertaken in pursuit of these motives.

Keywords: Chechen War; realism; prospect theory; Yeltsin; Russia

Introduction

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union inaugurated an unprecedented period of political, economic, and social upheaval in the territories that formerly comprised the USSR. Particularly prominent among the various sources of turmoil were issues of sovereignty and state-building in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's demise. While the process of dissolution and reconstitution in the USSR was decidedly more peaceful than, for instance, in Yugoslavia, it was nevertheless marked by numerous conflicts over sovereignty and independence – particularly among ethnopolitical groups living in these new states. Such contentious matters are perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the effort to return the breakaway republic of Chechnya to the Russian fold following its declaration of independence in 1991. In turn, this struggle culminated in the first Chechen War of 1994–96 – a bloody military conflict that

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not only resulted in nearly 100,000 reported casualties and fatalities[1] and forced hundreds of thousands of Chechens into refugee 'filtration' camps, but also raised significant questions regarding Russia's continued status as a great power in the post-Cold War era.

In this study, I address a seemingly simple question: why Chechnya? More specifically, why did Russian President Boris Yeltsin – who came to power espousing the rhetoric of regional independence in the former Soviet Union – launch a military campaign against the breakaway republic in 1994 that was, by all accounts, poorly planned, ill-advised, and a clear risk? Moreover, why was the question of Chechen independence a 'sticking point' warranting war, whereas Russia had already allowed the Caucasian republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to peacefully declare independence and negotiated an agreement with Tatarstan granting a limited level of autonomy to the region within the Federation – all without resorting to the use of force?

Following a brief historical overview of the first Chechen War, I address this puzzle through examining the neorealist perspective on the conflict. I argue, however, that while neorealism offers insight into Yeltsin's motivations in launching the first Chechen War, its theoretic core of rational decision-making, and power maximization are ultimately insufficient with regard to explaining his decidedly non-maximizing approach to pursuing his and Russia's security-oriented interests *vis-à-vis* Chechnya. Thus, re-examining the conflict through the conceptual lens of prospect theory, I will offer an alternative perspective on the first Chechen War that takes various cognitive factors into account. In particular, I will explore how the setting of reference points on the part of Russian leaders arguably placed them into a losses frame and led to risk-acceptant behavior in the form of the invasion of Chechnya. Based on the shortcomings of the rational decision-making model, I contend that prospect theory represents the most promising avenue for scholarly inquiry into the Chechen War due to its theoretical capacity to account for risky, non-objective decisions. To this end, I conclude by offering support for a broader theory of cognitive realism: an approach to international relations that not only draws upon neorealist notions of the motivations of decision-makers, but also takes into account the decision-making context and other significant cognitive factors in predicting how actors will ultimately pursue these goals.

A brief history of the first Chechen War

Hostility between Russia and the predominantly Muslim Chechens dates back as far as resistance against the Czarist conquest of the Caucuses during the era of

[1] Precise numbers regarding casualties and fatalities are difficult to obtain for the first Chechen War due to the wide range of conflicting, and oftentimes politically motivated, sources. While some estimates place the death toll as high as 100,000, others instead place the number as low as 18,000. Most recent sources place the death toll at roughly 35,000 – over 28,000 of which are thought to be civilian deaths.

imperial expansion, leading Elletson (1998: 191) to describe Chechnya as 'a thorn in Russia's side, or more precisely, its southern underbelly, for over two hundred years'. Lapidus (1998: 11) argues, however, that while 'the long history of Russian–Chechen antagonism provided the underpinnings of the conflict, the ideological and political liberalization that culminated in the dissolution of the USSR was its more immediate catalyst'. Therefore, for the sake of brevity, I will confine this historical analysis to the post-Soviet era and the events following Chechnya's initial announcement of its intention to secede in November 1990.[2]

Ironically, it was in part Yeltsin's encouragement of national republics to seek greater autonomy during his struggle for political control of Russia that led the Chechen parliament to declare its intention to secede from the Soviet Union in 1990 (Kipp, 2003: 184). Almost a year later, following the turmoil of the August Coup of 1991, former Soviet General Dzhokhar Dudayev seized power in Chechnya. When Yeltsin's government, now decidedly less accommodating of notions of regional autonomy, declared Dudayev's election to the Chechen presidency null and void, Dudayev responded by again declaring Chechnya's independence in November 1991 – this time from Russia – and later refusing to sign the Federative Treaty in 1992. Although Yeltsin declared a state of emergency in Chechnya and moved interior troops to the border, he ultimately did not order an invasion, and Dudayev remained in power as the new president of Chechnya. Thus began the initial era of *de facto* Chechen independence.

As Kipp (2003: 184) observes, 'While the Dudayev government managed to gain control of most of the Soviet weapons left in Grozny, it did not create an orderly or stable government'. In fact, Chechnya almost immediately found itself sinking into a morass of organized crime and economic collapse. Seizing on growing public dissatisfaction with Dudayev's regime in Chechnya, Moscow began covertly funding opposition movements in the rebel republic in 1992, recognizing a shadow government known as the Provisional Council as the 'only legitimate power structure' in the region (Lapidus, 1998: 18). When the Council attempted to overthrow Dudayev in August 1994, the Russian government provided 40 billion rubles to the Provisional Council, as well as loaning it the use of several armored units. After this, coup attempt failed and Dudayev remained in power, Yeltsin ordered 40,000 troops into Chechnya – the largest Russian deployment since Afghanistan – on 11 December 1994, arguing that the Dudayev regime was a totalitarian state serving as a base for terrorism, drugs, and arms-running and, as such, posed a significant threat to the security and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation (Bowker, 1997).

Although the Defense Minister Pavel Grachev boasted that a single regiment of Russian paratroopers could capture the Chechen capital in less than 2 hours, the battle for the city of Grozny proved far more grueling than many of Yeltsin's more

[2] For a more detailed, long-term historical account, Robert Seely's *Russo–Chechen Conflict, 1800–2000: A Deadly Embrace* (2001) is a particularly valuable resource.

hawkish advisors initially projected (Sirén, 1998).[3] By and large, the Russian advance into Chechnya in December 1994 was slow and uncoordinated, serving not only to undermine the Provisional Council's opposition movement, but also to raise morale among the Chechens and once again unite citizens of the breakaway republic behind the resurgent Dudayev regime. Furthermore, whereas the Russian forces were unprepared for the brutal realities of urban combat, the Chechens operated in small, mobile groups and managed to inflict a shocking 1500 Russian causalities on new year's day alone in 1995 (Kipp, 2003). Finally, after a bloody month of fighting in the streets of Grozny, Russian forces captured the capital. However, Chechen troops successfully withdrew from the city and initiated a campaign of partisan warfare in the surrounding countryside. In turn, what followed was a conflict that, while initially portrayed by its advocates as a brief 'surgical strike', quickly turned into 'a massive, brutal, and protracted war that devastated the republic of Chechnya, weakened Yeltsin's political standing at home and abroad, and exposed the military and political weakness of the Russian state' (Lapidus, 1998: 20–21).

Despite the nominal agreement to a June 1995 cease-fire, fighting continued throughout the secessionist republic into 1996. In April 1996, Russian forces managed to kill Dudayev by locking two laser-guided missiles onto his cell phone signal, thus bringing the Vice President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev to power (Kipp, 2003). Although Yandarbiyev was perceived as a hardliner, he agreed to meet with Yeltsin in late May of 1996 to negotiate another cease-fire. Once again, both sides again failed to abide by the terms of this agreement, and Russia eventually began preparations to renew their campaign in July. Before the new strike could materialize, however, Russian General Alexander Lebed negotiated a peace settlement with the Chechen government in August 1996. Emphatically declaring that there were 'no victors in this war', Lebed signed the so-called Khasavyurt agreements that covered the withdrawal of Russian federal troops and deferred the definition of Chechnya's official status for 5 years (Shevtsova, 1999: 198). Thus, after almost 2 years of conflict, Russian troops withdrew from Chechnya in what most Chechens viewed as an act of capitulation by a country unwilling and unable to continue its fight. In turn, Chechnya once again enjoyed *de facto* sovereignty – although at the cost of thousands of lives and massive devastation throughout the republic.

I have presented an abbreviated account of both the circumstances leading up to the first Chechen War, as well as the events of the war itself. Gall and de Waal (1998: ix) describe this story of Chechnya's declaration of independence and the eventual Russian military response as 'quite fantastic', observing:

> A rogue regime survived within Russian territory for three years, trading oil with a government that was supposedly "blockading" it. Kremlin politics turned on

[3] By the launch of the first Chechen War, Yeltsin's traditional alliance with liberal, reform-minded elements in the Russian government had largely deteriorated, with power and policymaking influence increasingly concentrated in a hawkish Security Council that answered only to Yeltsin (Specter, 1995) and other 'shadowy advisory bodies' (Ford, 1995).

> trivial incidents and personal rivalries in the making of decisions of the greatest global importance. Chechen fighters bought weapons off soldiers who were meant to be "disarming" them. Internal documents intended for government use in Moscow ended up in the hands of Dudayev. And – most incredibly – a small Chechen guerilla army that had been dismissed as "bandit groups" brought the Russian army to its knees and forced it to withdraw.

As this passage suggests, the Chechen War is virtually defined by a series of unanswered questions and apparent contradictions. Perhaps the most striking of these puzzles is the issue of why Yeltsin chose to embark upon an unquestionably risky and ultimately disastrous war effort in Chechnya. In an attempt to resolve at least some of these ambiguities, I will now shift my focus toward the search for a satisfactory theoretical explanation for the first Chechen War, beginning with neorealism.

Neorealism and rationality

Although relatively few works have examined Yeltsin's decision to launch the Chechen War through the lens of international relations theory, most treatments of the conflict – both scholarly and journalistic – at least implicitly assume the underpinnings of a basic neorealist model built upon a foundation of security-driven state interests. The assumptions of the neorealist perspective on world politics flow from its fundamental conceptualization of the international system as anarchic in nature – that is, the basic hierarchical order and enforcement mechanisms found in domestic politics are absent internationally. Therefore, the distribution of capabilities, or power, among various state actors serves as the key explanatory variable in the neorealist approach. States, as the primary actors in the international system, will consequently seek power to provide security and, above all, defend their own sovereignty. As a result, neorealists assume that relations among states are inherently conflictual and that such conflicts are ultimately resolved by war. States therefore inhabit a self-help system, where they must rely on 'the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves' (Waltz, 1979: 111).

Neorealism further contends that states set about making these arrangements as unitary, rational actors – maximizing their own security and power whenever possible (Waltz, 1965, 1979; Keohane, 1986; Baldwin, 1993). In his *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz (1979: 113) observes that 'each state plots the course it thinks will best serve its interests'. Similarly, Mearsheimer (1994: 10) identifies the principle that states 'think strategically about how to survive in the international system' as a central tenet of neorealist thought and goes on to describe state behavior as instrumentally rational. Ashley (1984: 244) concurs, stating 'Neorealism approaches the international system from a utilitarian point of view .... For the neorealist, states are rational individual actors whose interests and calculating actions and coactions give form and moment to the international system'. As Mearsheimer (2009: 55) summarizes, neorealists argue that states 'think carefully

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about the balance of power and about how other states will react to their moves. They weigh the costs and risks of offense against the likely benefits. If the benefits do not outweigh the risks, they sit tight and wait for a more propitious moment'. In fact, Fearon (1995) goes so far as to suggest that without a rationalist model of war at its core, neorealist theories of world politics are essentially untenable. With regard to foreign policy analysis, one sees similar ideas reflected in the 'rational actor' model described by Allison in *Essence of a Decision* (1971), his highly influential study of decision-making during the Cuban Missile Crisis.[4]

Given its close relationship to neorealist thought, the rational actor model perhaps merits further examination. As noted above, the assumption of rationality implies that individual decision-makers have a certain set of internal preferences and, in turn, act in a manner that effectively maximizes their expected utility relative to these preferences. In *Choosing to Cooperate: How States Avoid Loss*, Stein (1993: 32) offers an indispensable set of criteria to determine whether the assumption of rationality is 'an appropriate and powerful model of the decision process and its outcome' in a given situational context. First, expected utility models assume that the decision-making process begins with a fundamental question: how can we do 'best' or 'least badly?' From there, Stein suggests that researchers should determine whether decision-makers in a given context: (i) searched extensively for options; (ii) searched for information about all the consequences of the options they identified; (iii) made probabilistic judgments about the consequences of these options; (iv) assigned estimates of cost and benefit – or gain and loss – to these consequences; and (v) compared across the expected values of the options they identified. If all these criteria are present, Stein (1993) argues that rational choice is an appropriate theoretical model for a particular case.

How do neorealism and the rational actor model apply to Yeltsin's decision to initiate the 1994 invasion of Chechnya? Neorealism asserts that issues of security, sovereignty, and survival are central to state behavior, and that these issues were clearly at stake in the case of the first Chechen War. Moreover, the assumption of rationality offers a general framework outlining how states will set about pursuing these goals. Therefore, under rational choice theory, one would hypothesize that Yeltsin weighed his various options *vis-à-vis* Chechnya and ultimately behaved in a manner consistent with the maximization of his – and Russia's – expected utility. In turn, I will discuss below at greater length whether the empirical evidence seems to support this hypothesis.

What security-related factors motivated Russia's decision to enter Chechnya in 1994? As Seely contends, 'The most obvious cause of the war was the reluctance

[4] Allison presents the rational actor model alongside his 'organizational process' model, which emphasizes the importance of standard operating procedures in shaping foreign policy, and his 'governmental politics' model, which views foreign policy outcomes as the product of competition and compromise within the government bureaucracy. It is his rational actor model, however, that most closely reflects the neorealist perspective on international relations.

of Russia's political leadership to allow a lawless part of the federation to secede'. (Seely, 2001: 175). In turn, such issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity are clearly primary considerations in the neorealist perspective; for instance, Grieco (1995) claims that survival – not individual well-being – is the core interest of states. Not only did many Russian leaders consider Chechen independence a threat to Russia's territorial integrity, but they also feared that the 'trouble' in Chechnya might eventually spread throughout the northern Caucasus and result in a domino effect that would spell the end of the Russian Federation (Cornell, 2001). As Yeltsin observes in his memoirs, he and his advisors believed that Chechnya's breakaway from Russia would signal 'the beginning of the collapse' of Russia; in turn, as he argued in a speech to the Russian populace in December 1994, the war was primarily a matter of 'defending Russia's unity' (Yeltsin, 2000: 59; Lieven, 1998: 84).[5] Such issues of security, sovereignty, and state survival are closely associated with neorealist thought.

Another key strategic motivation for the invasion of Chechnya was, as emphasized by much of the Western media coverage of the conflict, related to the geopolitics of oil. Despite some claims to the contrary, however, Cornell (2001: 222–223) maintains that Chechnya's oil production itself was by no means of any vital strategic importance to Moscow. 'In fact', he notes, 'both the oil and gas production of Chechnya totaled <1% respectively of Russia's total production. However, the importance of Chechnya in the transportation of Caspian oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan is of a more distinctive nature'. In summary, Chechnya's strategic value lies in its geographic position as a corridor to the oil deposits of the Caspian region; or, as Lieven, 1998: 85) argues, 'it is not that Chechnya is important in itself, but that it lies on the routes to much more important places'. Furthermore, to add to the motivations for military action, Dudayev's regime had siphoned off significant quantities of oil from the pipelines crossing Chechen territory during the 3 years before the invasion (O'Ballance, 1997). In turn, the ongoing Chechen 'problem' represented a source of serious anxiety for the Russian oil industry and ultimately began to have a negative impact on the Russian economy as a whole.

In addition to these concerns over sovereignty and oil, much of the literature also cites a third catalyst for the decision to invade Chechnya: the perception of the breakaway republic as 'a hub of international crime, from which the Chechens … could safely pursue their policy of destabilizing Russia through narcotics and arms trade' (Cornell, 2001: 223). Yeltsin frequently referred to Chechnya as a

[5] While relying on autobiographical accounts of the Chechen War contained in the memoirs of Yeltsin and other Russian leaders arguably opens the door to historical revisionism by the their respective authors, given the closed-off nature of the Russian foreign policy decision-making process in 1994 and the lack of official government documentary evidence, such texts have the potential to offer much-needed insight into these events. Where necessary, this study will attempt to draw upon autobiographical accounts from both those Russian leaders who supported the war, as well as those who opposed it, in order to ensure a balanced presentation of the case.

lawless bandit state, a locus of terrorism, and a 'powerful crime-breeding zone' in his speeches to the Russian public (O'Ballance, 1997). Furthermore, organized crime was already endemic throughout much of the Russian Federation, and many Russians saw the rise of illicit activities in the Caucasus as only exacerbating this predicament. Hence, as Sirén (1998: 100) observes, 'It was opportune for the Russian government to portray the military operation in the North Caucasus as an effort to address the criminal problem in the country, while at the same time restoring political order on the Russian periphery'.

Yeltsin summarized these motivations for Russia's intervention in Chechnya in his February 1995 state-of-the-federation address, several weeks into the military operation. 'An abscess like the Medellin cartel in Colombia, the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia, and the criminal dictatorship in Chechnya', Yeltsin argued, 'does not disappear by itself. In order to preserve our sovereignty, independence, and integrity, the state can and is obligated to use force' (ITAR-TASS, 1995; Sloane, 1995). In turn, Yeltsin's emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity further suggests the kind of security-focused mindset that neorealism assumes.[6]

Of course, the neorealist perspective is just one of many possible theoretical explanations for Yeltsin's decision to invade Chechnya.[7] For example, in his comparative study of the leadership styles of Mikhail Gorbachev and President Yeltsin, Breslauer (2002) offers several alternative hypotheses to explain the invasion of Chechnya, including both an incremental engagement model and a personality-driven approach. The incremental engagement model suggests that 'the Russian leadership was incrementally 'sucked into' an ever-deepening commitment in Chechnya' (Breslauer 2002: 208), which culminated in a full-scale invasion. In turn, this approach emphasizes Moscow's ongoing involvement in Chechnya dating back to the breakaway republic's declaration of independence in 1991, including overt attempts at negotiation as well as clandestine efforts to support the Chechen resistance aimed at toppling the Dudayev regime. When these attempts at resolution failed, the incremental engagement model argues that pressure began to mount – both within the government and among the citizenry, due to the media's extensive coverage of Russia's dealings in Chechnya – for Yeltsin to finish what he had started and resolve the Chechen situation. As such, this perspective shifts much of the direct responsibility for the invasion away from Yeltsin; instead, the war becomes the almost inevitable outcome of the mounting pressures of an untenable status quo and the provocation of the Russian media. However, Breslauer rejects this model, arguing that this interpretation 'cannot explain why, after the failure of negotiations in summer 1994, Moscow decided to escalate …. Similarly, after the defeat of covert operations, it is difficult to believe

[6] For further analysis of the respective roles played by concerns over national security, economics, and domestic politics in both the first and second Chechen Wars, please see Ashour (2004).

[7] For other examples of realist–neorealist interpretations of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy, see Lynch (2001) and Baev (2006).

that the media provoked Yeltsin and his associates to do what they were otherwise disinclined to do' (2002: 209). By denying Yeltsin's any true agency in the decision to invade, I would argue that incremental engagement fails to offer a compelling explanation for this conflict. Moreover, this perspective does not necessarily contradict the security-driven focus of neorealism – only its decision-making rationale of utility maximization.

Breslauer also examines the invasion of Chechnya as a reflection of Yeltsin's personality – specifically the Russian president's predisposition toward solving problems through struggle and conquest. In this model, the Chechen War is reduced to 'Yeltsin's annual dose of intense struggle, which he needed to achieve psychodynamic catharsis' (Breslauer, 2002: 210). Along similar lines, Yeltsin's political rival Grigory Yavlinsky famously likened the Russian President to 'a person who can't play chess, so he kicks over the board' (Goldberg, 1994). Breslauer goes on to argue, however, that such an approach sells Yeltsin short and downplays both his pragmatism and sophistication as a politician. Furthermore, I would argue that this personality-driven explanation, while appealing in a 'pop psychology' sense, compares unfavorably with neorealism in terms of generalizability due to its inherently idiosyncratic and context-specific nature.

Given these alternative explanations, I contend that the neorealist perspective remains the best theoretical fit in terms of reflecting the security-focused motives cited by Russian leaders for initiating the Chechen War. However, did Yeltsin's decision to invade fulfill the criteria of utility maximization as delineated by Stein? As Yeltsin recalls in his memoirs:

> I had some reports on the table before me [at the session of the Security Council when the decision was made to begin the Chechen campaign] – there were dozens of such reports then, prepared by various ministers – with the motivations and reasons to start the operations. There were also other analyses presented that said that we should not intervene in Chechnya's affairs. I laid out the arguments and asked: What are the arguments for and against? What can we expect? And the general position was unanimous: We cannot stand idly by while a piece of Russia breaks off, because that would be the beginning of the collapse of the country (Yeltsin, 2000: 58–59).

This passage, as well as much of the literature on the subject, suggests that Yeltsin and his advisors searched for options for dealing with Chechnya, made probabilistic judgments about the consequences of these options, and assigned rough estimates of cost and benefit to the consequences. Hence, at least in this respect, they behaved in a manner consistent with the theoretical framework of rational choice. Despite the fact that they weighed the various strategies available to them, however, I maintain that Yeltsin and the Russian Security Council nevertheless failed to behave in a manner that maximized their expected utility in the decision to invade Chechnya. Therefore, as I discuss in greater detail below, rational choice theory proves inadequate in terms of predicting Russia's risky – and ultimately disastrous – decision.

First, many scholars fundamentally question the actual substance of the perceived threats most frequently cited by Russian leaders as the principal justifications for the war. For instance, as Cornell (2001: 222) observes, 'The Chechen state was allowed to survive for three whole years without any comparable movement erupting anywhere in Russia'. Hence, oft-cited anxieties that Chechen independence would create a domino effect throughout the Russian Federation seem rather unfounded based on the empirical reality. With regard to Russia's oil interests, (Lieven, 1998) notes that Russia could have simply built an oil pipeline *around* Chechnya to the north through Dagestan and Stavropol with relatively little additional cost and avoided the problem of Chechen rebels diverting oil flows. On the other hand, if Russia were to launch a war against Chechnya, the strong possibility remained that Chechen forces might destroy the pipeline, seriously impeding the flow of oil from the Caspian. Finally, while Chechnya was unquestionably rife with criminal activity before the war, one could say the same for much of the Russian Federation. As Sirén (1998: 100–101) notes, 'Considering the size of Chechnya…it is unlikely that Chechen criminal gangs by themselves constitute a major threat to law and order in the Russian Federation'. Furthermore, one might argue that a protracted military strike was far from the most effective form of law enforcement in terms of significantly lowering crime statistics in a region. Nevertheless, Elletson (1998: 204) maintains that at least some of Russia's apparent concerns regarding its security – with regard to Chechen bandits, as well as oil and territorial integrity – were realistic 'or, at least, had a loose connection with reality'.

Such uncertainty regarding the actual degree to which Chechnya threatened Russia's security interests can be ascribed to incomplete information or decision-makers' misperceptions. However, I argue that the rational actor model's primary weakness as it applies to the first Chechen War is in its failure to account for the serious risks associated with the invasion. For instance, most observers agree that the general dilapidation of the Russian military following the end of the Cold War served as the primary source of risk in the operation. The Russian forces were not only poorly funded and inadequately trained, but also they suffered from considerable morale problems amongst their conscripts and officers alike. Because of Russia's economic collapse and military disarray following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many of its troops were unpaid, equipment had lapsed into disrepair, and discipline had broken down among the soldiers, resulting in 'a sharp rise in offences ranging from violence and drunkenness to the illegal sale of weaponry' (Seely, 2001: 220). As one Russian colonel observes, 'Never before has the country had a Minister under which the Army was so disarmed, ill clad, and ill shod …. Never before has it been so humiliated and demoralized' (Sirén, 1998: 119). In turn, given the rather deplorable state of affairs in the Russian military, an invasion of Chechnya presented a significant risk in terms of its chances for success.

To borrow from economic advisor Yegor Gaidar (1999: 282), the 'far from sterling' shape of the armed forces was no secret among Russian leaders. In fact,

there is significant evidence to suggest that Yeltsin was keenly aware of these weaknesses. In an address to Russian military commanders on 14 November 1994, he noted that 'the main effort in training troops and naval forces must be focused on improving the form and methods of using troops in local wars and conflicts, taking into account probable threats to the Russian Federation and the capabilities of the armed forces' (Sirén, 1998: 109). Moreover, many of Yeltsin's closest advisors noted the risks involved in an invasion of Chechnya and counseled against it. For instance, as Yurii Kalmykov – Justice Minister at the time – recalls, 'I said [to Yeltsin and the Security Council] that strong-arm tactics in Chechnya would lead to a partisan war, that a one-day victory might be won but that a long war would then begin and would result in protracted hostilities' (Dunlop, 1998: 208). Similarly, such prominent Yeltsin advisors as Gaidar and General Alexander Lebed were particularly outspoken against the war. In fact, the Speaker of the Duma at the time, Ivan Rybkin, recalls that Yeltsin himself expressed similar doubts in a Security Council meeting only days before the invasion: 'I don't know why, but Boris Nikolaevich [Yeltsin] turned to me and, looking straight into my eyes, said, "I am very much afraid this may turn into a second Afghanistan"' (Peuch, 2004).

In addition to risks related to the poor state of Russia's armed forces, the actual planning of the invasion also represents a far cry from what most would describe as utility-maximizing behavior. For instance, various military experts advised Yeltsin and the Security Council against launching the invasion in December – a time of year marked in the region by an almost constant cloud cover that leaves no possibility of the effective use of air power. Notably, air power was one area in which the Russian forces actually held a relatively decisive advantage over the Chechen rebels. Yeltsin, however, chose to ignore 'the important Russian strategic doctrine that stemmed from bitter historical experience: never launch a military campaign in the Caucasus in winter' (O'Ballance, 1997: 179). In turn, similar planning and coordination problems plagued much of the Chechen operation. As one Russian general recalls, 'My God, our tank troops went into battle without maps of the city!' (Evangelista, 2002: 38). In fact, Moscow gave many commanders less than two weeks' notice to prepare for combat. As General Lebed argued a month after the invasion began, 'No one planned the operation. It was started 'Russian style', on the off-chance it would work' (Specter, 1995). Secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States Defense Ministers' Council, Leonid Ivashev, elaborates:

> If the decision is nevertheless taken to conduct a military operation, then preparations have to be carried out with proper care. First of all, the political and military aims of the operation and the means of achieving them should be identified; secondly, the requisite forces and facilities should also be decided upon with due regard for a comprehensive evaluation of the adversary, the nature of the terrain, and so on, down to the weather conditions.... However, what was used was our good old tactic, whereby empty promises are given and then attempts are made to live up to them by the deadline.... As a result, the

> operation was launched hastily and without thorough preparation (Official Kremlin International News Broadcast, 1995).

Nevertheless, rather than delay the invasion for a few months to wait for more favorable climatic conditions and to provide more time for preparation, Yeltsin and the Security Council instead chose to push ahead with the unquestionably risky operation.

Clearly, Yeltsin himself remained conflicted concerning the risks of an invasion of Chechnya in the weeks leading up to the war. Approximately 3 months before making the decision to invade, in August 1994, Yeltsin asserted, 'Armed intervention [in Chechnya] is impermissible and must not be done…. It is absolutely impossible' (Evangelista, 2002: 11). Furthermore, the considerable potential for the failure of Russian military operations in Chechnya held serious implications for Russia's own legitimacy and great power status. For instance, as Dunlop (1998: 213) argues:

> The Yeltsin leadership…seemed to be unaware of or indifferent to clear-cut major weaknesses of the Russian state: its structural semi-collapse; acute economic and administrative dislocations; and most, significantly, the demoralization, corruption, and rampant inefficiency of the Russian military and of other "power structures." A war with well-armed and highly motivated Chechens would predictably serve to strain the rickety structures of the Russian state to the utmost.

However, as the preceding statements suggest, there is significant evidence to suggest that the Yeltsin leadership was in fact quite aware of these weaknesses. Hence, ignoring warnings from experts regarding its potential for failure as well as his own personal misgivings, Yeltsin gave the ill-fated order to launch an invasion of Chechnya in December 1994. In the process, he and the Security Council dismissed other covert or non-military options for resolving the Chechen crisis and ultimately chose instead to initiate the campaign – despite inclement weather and the lack of preparedness on the part of the Russian military. Such fundamentally risky actions, I would argue, are not those of decision-makers attempting to maximize their expected utility.

As Sergei Yushenkov, chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee, maintains, 'War was not inevitable. There are all grounds to stipulate that the direct reason for the war was an incompetent decision by the Security Council' (Dunlop, 1998: 210). Elletson (1998: 104) argues along similar lines: 'There was no single reason for Russia's military involvement in Chechnya. Rather, there were a number of different factors which combined with an unrealistic assessment of the risks involved to make covert military operations and then open war seem a necessary and, ultimately, even attractive political option'. Furthermore, when Yeltsin and the Security Council made the decision to invade the breakaway republic, other less risky options remained for resolving the situation. For instance, had Yeltsin been willing to negotiate with the Chechens, sources suggest

that Dudayev would likely have been at least somewhat amenable to the so-called 'Tatarstan solution' – effectively granting Chechnya limited economic and political autonomy while re-establishing its status as part of the Russian Federation. Or, as suggested above, Russia could have simply delayed its military action for a few more months to allow for additional preparation and more careful planning. After all, Russia had already postponed military action in Chechnya for 3 years. Nevertheless, facing growing public criticism to address the Chechen situation, Yeltsin gambled on a decisive show of strength and ultimately lost.

Therefore, the central puzzle remains unresolved. How do we account for Yeltsin's risky decision to invade Chechnya? In the following section, I will apply prospect theory to this case, arguing that Yeltsin's dependence on reference points played an important role in his risk-acceptant behavior. As such, I maintain that prospect theory offers significant insight into the origins of the first Chechen War – particularly in those areas where rational choice theory proves inadequate.

Prospect theory

Starting from the simple presupposition that decision-makers tend to pay far more attention to losses than gains and thus do not make risky choices objectively, prospect theory has established itself as a viable and theoretically robust alternative to rational choice over the course of the past few decades. In their foundational work on prospect theory, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) note that decision-makers identify the consequences of their choices as either gains or losses relative to a neutral reference point. Moreover, different internal reference points, or frames, on the part of the decision-maker could lead him or her to make distinct decisions – even when confronting the same objective circumstances. Therefore, determining whether an individual chooses under a so-called gains or losses frame plays an important role in terms of ultimately predicting his or her behavior. In turn, Berejikian (2002: 165) briefly summarizes the theoretical foundations of prospect theory as follows: 'In contrast to rational choice, prospect theory finds that decision-makers do not maximize in their choices, are apt to overweigh losses with respect to comparable gains, and tend to be risk averse when confronted with choices between gains while risk acceptant when confronted with losses'. Simply put, prospect theory predicts that decision-makers are more likely to make risky decisions when faced with prospective losses – the same way that a compulsive gambler might ignore sunk costs and continue making risky bets in an attempt to 'get even' with the house.

Hence, from the perspective of prospect theory, the decision-making context clearly matters. As Levy (1997b: 87) observes, 'It is ironic that just as rational choice has become the most influential paradigm in international relations and political science over the last decade, expected-utility theory has come under increasing attack by experimental and empirical evidence of systematic violations of the expected-utility principle in individual-choice behavior'. Of course, the

existence of a rational, utility-maximizing *Homo economicus* has always been more myth than reality – a simplified model of human decision-making adopted in the interest of theoretical and predictive elegance. Based on the laboratory findings of cognitive psychology, prospect theory offers a decision-making rationale that more closely reflects the way that *actual* human beings make *actual* decisions based on their understanding of the decision-making environment. As such, it offers significant theoretical insight into decisions that rational choice cannot easily explain.

Clearly, prospect theory has significant implications for studies of international behavior and the foreign policy decision-making process. In fact, scholars have already applied prospect theory to cases including the Cuban Missile Crisis (Haas, 2001), US and EU application of the Montreal Protocol to address ozone depletion (Berejikian, 2004), the Sudetenland Crisis (Farnham, 1992), the launch of the first Gulf War (McDermott and Kugler, 2001), public support for rebellious behavior in Northern Ireland and Gaza (Masters, 2004), the strategic logic of compellence and deterrence (Schaub, 2004), Soviet behavior toward Syria from 1966 to 1967 (McInerney, 1992), the Suez Crisis (McDermott, 1998), and many others, and the findings are robust.[8] In turn, Levy suggests that scholars of international affairs can draw several hypotheses from prospect theory, including the following:

> (1) State leaders take more risks to maintain their international positions, reputations, and domestic political support than they do to enhance those positions. (2) After suffering losses (in territory, reputation, domestic political support, etc.), political leaders have a tendency not to accommodate to those losses but instead to take excessive risks to recover them.... (3) Because accommodation to losses tends to be slow, sunk costs frequently influence decision makers' calculations and state behavior (Levy, 1997a, b: 93).

To this end, Stein (1993) offers a valuable set of criteria for determining whether prospect theory is the appropriate analytical tool for a particular case. Prospect theory, she argues, begins with the following fundamental question: how can we best avoid loss? From there, Stein suggests that scholars should establish whether decision-makers in a given situation (i) held a clear reference level that defined minimally acceptable payoffs; (ii) viewed the status quo at, above, or below their reference level; and (iii) weighted loss more heavily than gain. Therefore, an approach to explaining the Chechen War based on prospect theory would hypothesize that the setting of particular reference points on the part of Russian leaders placed them in the domain of losses and, in turn, led to risk-acceptant behavior in the form of the invasion of Chechnya.

Taliaferro's (2004) application of prospect theory to explain great power intervention in the periphery is of particular relevance to this study. He centers his analysis around two key questions: (i) why do great powers initiate risky

[8] For a thorough overview of the contributions of prospect theory to international relations, please see McDermott (2004).

diplomatic and military interventions in the periphery and (ii) why do they frequently persist in these efforts when faced with ever-rising costs and the diminishing likelihood of victory? In turn, Taliaferro concludes that:

> [S]enior officials' aversion to perceived losses – in terms of their state's relative power, international status, or prestige – drives great power intervention in peripheral regions. Officials initiate risky diplomatic and/or military intervention strategies to avoid perceived losses. When faced with perceived losses, they tend to select more risk-acceptant intervention strategies. Leaders then persevere and even escalate failing peripheral interventions to recoup their past losses. Instead of cutting their present losses, they continue to invest blood and treasure in losing ventures in peripheral regions (Taliaferro, 2004: 178).

Drawing upon these conclusions, Taliaferro goes on to advance what he calls the balance-of-risk theory to explain such behavior on the part of great powers. Applied to the present case, these findings would suggest that, faced with losses, Yeltsin was willing to gamble on risky intervention in Chechnya in the hope of reclaiming his state's lost power and prestige.

Given the centrality of framing and reference points to prospect theory, the first step in re-evaluating the Chechen case using prospect theory is to determine the reference point adopted by Yeltsin and his advisors and establish whether the status quo before the invasion represented gains or losses relative to this reference point. As noted in the previous section, issues of territorial integrity and sovereignty, oil, and crime were the reasons most typically cited by Russian leaders for the invasion of Chechnya. For instance, Yeltsin emphasizes in his memoirs that 'Russia's very statehood, Russia's very life was now at stake' due to the Chechen crisis (Yeltsin, 2000: 60). In turn, as Evangelista (2002: 86) observes, 'The worst-case scenario for Boris Yeltsin…was a breakup of the Russian Federation along the lines of what happened to the Soviet Union'. Moreover, the breakup of the Soviet Union had already led to independence for the three Trans-Caucasian states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia – a noteworthy setback for Russia from a historical perspective. To this end, one journalist summed up the post-Soviet mindset at the time of the Chechen invasion as follows:

> The empire that Russia had been expanding and fortifying for three centuries fell in upon itself. Suddenly, Russians found their horizons had shrunk. On maps, Russia's borders were dramatically redrawn, sometimes several thousand miles closer to Moscow. But in people's minds, the shock was even greater. One of the world's two most powerful nations, and its last great empire, found itself a pauper begging for alms, when once it had dictated terms (Ford, 1997).

In turn, Cornell maintains that political control over the Caucasus remained a cornerstone of the country's foreign policy priorities in the post-Cold War era. He goes on to argue that Russian leaders, 'conscious of the loss of prestige and strength that came with the fall of the Soviet Union, were determined to put an end to the rebellion of a troublesome Muslim people in the Caucasus, which

tarnished Russia' position as a world power' (Cornell, 2001: 222–224). Therefore, much of the evidence suggests that Russian leaders had set some arbitrary time in the state's past (or perhaps the Soviet Union's past) as their reference point – a time at which such threats to the territorial integrity and security of the Federation either did not exist or were sufficiently suppressed. In turn, I argue that dependence on this subjective reference point played an important role in shaping the decisions that led to the first Chechen War.

Relative to the reference point discussed above, Yeltsin and his more hawkish advisors were clearly in a losses frame with regard to Chechen separatism. In applying prospect theory to a case, Stein notes that researchers should consider how heavily decision-makers weighted their attention toward consideration of losses versus consideration of gains (Stein, 1993). In the case of the first Chechen War, Russian decision-makers were overwhelmingly concerned with potential losses and, in turn, conceived of the status quo of *de facto* Chechen independence as an ongoing loss. In the minds of many Russian leaders, each subsequent day of Chechnya's independence represented a series of losses for Russia – a loss of prestige, a loss of territorial integrity, a loss of sovereignty, a loss of security, a loss of oil, and a loss of money. Therefore, with the status quo against them, these decision-makers focused on reversing ongoing losses and restoring the admittedly sanguine reference point of a stable, cohesive Russian Federation – regardless of the risk involved.

However, decision-makers' perceptions of the mounting losses associated with Chechen independence offer relatively little insight into why Russia was willing to wait over 3 years after the status quo shifted against them to launch their ill-timed invasion of the breakaway republic. Therefore, in addition to the aforementioned motivating factors of territorial integrity, oil, and crime, I would also argue that domestic politics played a significant role in placing Yeltsin and his advisors into a losses frame with regard to Chechnya. For instance, there is significant evidence to suggest that certain elements within the government believed a war against Chechnya could potentially increase Yeltsin's popularity with Russian voters – which had fallen precipitously at the time of the Chechen crisis (Lieven, 1998). For example, according to survey work conducted by the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research in December 1994 (just few days before the invasion), Yeltsin averaged an approval rating of only 3.4 out of a possible 10 points among Russian citizens – down from 3.6 a month earlier (VCIOM). In turn, Breslauer (2002: 196) asserts that 'Yeltsin's political defensiveness and his search for means to recoup lost authority were decisive determinants of the fact and timing of his decision to invade Chechnya'. Hence, I would contend that the setting of the losses frame and the resultant timing of the Chechen invasion take on the characteristics of a classic two-level game (Putnam, 1988), drawing upon both foreign and domestic influences.[9]

[9] For a more detailed discussion of applying prospect theory to two-level games, see recent research by Jasinski and Berejikian (2009).

For instance, elections to the Duma in 1993 had already resulted in significant gains for the Communist, nationalist, and agrarian parties. As a result, many of Yeltsin's closest political planners began to panic about a possible landslide defeat for reformist candidates in the 1995 Duma elections as well as a similar fate for Yeltsin himself in the 1996 presidential elections (Elletson, 1998). Hence, to regain domestic support, Secretary of the Security Council Oleg Lobov suggested that Yeltsin needed 'a small, victorious war – like the United States had in Haiti' (Lieven, 1998: 87). Such a military operation, Yeltsin's advisors hoped, would effectively divert public attention away from various economic and political issues, meanwhile portraying Yeltsin as a tough leader, determined to deal swiftly and decisively with the Chechen 'bandits'. Pain and Popov summarize the situation as follows:

> A more likely explanation of the decision to invade has to do with Yeltsin's belief that a "small and triumphant war" would improve his prospects for reelection, despite the predictable outrage that a resort to force would induce in certain quarters. By early 1994, the "love affair" between the president and liberal public opinion had entered the phase of "forced cohabitation" (Seely, 2001: 203).

In fact, a *Moscow Times* article published mere weeks after the invasion goes further, arguing that Yeltsin's entire political future hinged on the success or failure of military operations in Chechnya (Bershidsky, 1994). As Alexei Pushkov, editor of the *Moscow News*, summarized the situation prior to the invasion: 'I think we may have reached the point where Yeltsin's domestic image is more important to him than the risks of intervention' (Ford, 1994). In turn, I would argue that the unresolved status of the Chechen crisis and its role in undermining Yeltsin's reputation among both the Russian leadership and citizenry further contributed to the establishment of a losses frame.

Having argued that Russian leaders were in the domain of losses with regard to the issue of Chechnya, I will now attempt to determine precisely what constituted risky behavior in the case. As noted above, an invasion of Chechnya entailed significant risk for Russia. First and foremost, the Russian military was, for all intents and purposes, unprepared for such an operation. Second, the timing of the invasion was inopportune considering the difficulties in launching a military operation in the Caucasus during the winter. Furthermore, a possible defeat of the once esteemed Russian armed forces at the hands of mere 'bandits' would undoubtedly raise questions regarding the future of Russia's status as a great power in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. Finally, as noted above, Yeltsin's popularity at home was already on the decline at the time of the first Chechen War; a protracted conflict – whether an eventual success or a failure – could potentially exacerbate this problem. As an editorial in *The New York Times* argued approximately 2 weeks after military operations began, 'The nasty little war risks derailing Russia from the reform track Mr Yeltsin had set it on, and risks further eroding his support at home' (*New York Times* Editorial Board, 1994).

In turn, Goldman (1999: 49–50) summarizes, 'Political and military experts in his own defense and security agencies had warned Yeltsin against a military invasion, arguing that the political, economic, and military costs would be horrendous'. Furthermore, many of these advisors cautioned Yeltsin not to overestimate the ease with which Russian forces could subdue the breakaway republic. Certainly, this is not to go so far as to suggest that simply ignoring the Chechen situation did not present its own set of considerable risks for Russia. However, the extremely deficient planning of the military effort coupled with the fundamentally questionable probability of its success from the beginning clearly form the basis for a very risky decision – a decision that a *Moscow Times* editorial written only days after the launch of the invasion described as the riskiest move of Yeltsin's presidency (de Waal, 1994).

Nevertheless, the invasion of Chechnya was a risk upon which Yeltsin and his advisors were willing to gamble – a risk that in turn led to disastrous consequences for Russia both domestically and abroad. How do we explain the willingness of the Russian leadership to ignore the risk inherent in an invasion of Chechnya and push ahead with the operation? Rational choice, as argued above, offers relatively little insight into such non-maximizing behavior. On the other hand, prospect theory predicts risk-acceptant behavior when decision-makers operate in the domain of losses. In turn, as discussed above, statements from Yeltsin and his advisors concerning their justifications for initiating the first Chechen War suggest that just such a losses frame was prevalent throughout much of the Russian leadership. As such, the status quo of *de facto* Chechen independence signified unacceptable losses to decision-makers – losses of security, losses of prestige, losses of income, losses of popularity – and, in turn, they were willing to discount risks and embark upon an ill-advised course of action to stem those ongoing losses. Therefore, whereas the origins of the first Chechen War remain somewhat perplexing from the limited theoretical perspective of rational choice, I maintain that the application prospect theory sheds significant light on the case.

Conclusion: support for a theory of cognitive realism

In addition to prospect theory, Russia's decision to launch the first Chechen War also lends itself to analysis from a variety of other cognitive perspectives. For instance, there is significant evidence to suggest that the decision-making process employed by Yeltsin and his Russian Security Council exhibited many of the pathologies typically associated with groupthink. Janis (1973) defines groupthink as the deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and judgment that results from social pressures to conform under group decision-making settings. In turn, he argues that groupthink can ultimately give rise to over-optimism and excessive risk-taking, stereotyped views of adversaries as either too weak to pose a threat or too evil to make negotiating worthwhile, self-censorship of deviators from the consensus, and the unofficial appointment of 'mindguards' to insulate the group

from information that contradicts their established point of view. Later research by Baron (2005) suggests that groupthink is even more ubiquitous than Janis envisioned, occurring in a wider range of group settings that Janis initially posited. As Seely (2001) observes, the decision to use force in Chechnya was taken before any debate took place. After everyone had voted in favor of force, discussion began. In turn, 'voices of doubt were lost in the chorus of obsequious approval', and the ministers of defense and interior 'blindly endorsed the policy and began to convince everyone who had doubts that their units would be capable of suppressing Dudayev in the shortest period of time' (Seely, 2001: 170). In fact, as Evangelista (2002) observes, many of Yeltsin's 'experts' deliberately hindered the dissemination of accurate information and analysis within the government. Moreover, critics of the military operation had their access to Yeltsin blocked in the weeks leading up to the December invasion. For instance, as Emil Pain, Yeltsin's chief advisor on ethnic affairs, stated in January 1995, 'Since the beginning of September (1994), I have not been asked once about my ideas on Chechnya. I have sent proposals to the highest levels of government four times anyway, but they have come back with the same comment on the bottom: "Think of other variants"' (Ford, 1995). Certainly such examples suggest that groupthink may have in fact played a role in the Russian leadership's risky decision to initiate the first Chechen War.

Other scholars have emphasized the 'politics of personality' in order to explain the risky decision to invade Chechnya in 1994. In addition to Breslauer's aforementioned treatment of Yeltsin's personal need for struggle, Dunlop (1998) asserts that the Russian President allowed himself to give way to strong emotion and pride in his dealings with Dudayev's regime, ultimately crossing him off the list of politicians with whom it was permissible to have any dealings. Similarly, former Minister of Nationalities Valery Tishkov offers this perspective:

> I am firmly convinced that until November 23, 1994, the Chechen War was not fatally inevitable and there were possibilities for resolving the crisis. All Yeltsin had to do was lift the telephone receiver and call Dudayev, who would immediately have flown to Boris Nikolayevich's side for discussions. Yeltsin merely needed to overcome his personal ambitions (Shevtsova, 1999: 113).

While such perspectives offer significant insight into the eventual decision to invade Chechnya, I would argue that they are too retrospective, idiosyncratic, and context-specific to contribute meaningfully to understanding the first Chechen War in the more generalized context of international relations as a whole.

Therefore, while neorealism can effectively point us toward goals that motivated the Russian invasion of Chechnya, I maintain that it offers relatively little in the way of theoretical insight into why decision-makers chose to pursue these goals in a non-maximizing fashion. On the other hand, prospect theory accurately predicts that the setting of subjective reference levels on the part of Russian leaders placed them into a losses frame and ultimately led to risk-acceptant

behavior in the form of the first Chechen War. Hence, I would conclude that prospect theory clearly outperforms rational choice in terms of explaining the origins of Russia's 1994 invasion of Chechnya. In turn, future research efforts on this topic could perhaps explore how framing effects influenced the Russian decision to withdraw from Chechnya in 1996 – or why Russia eventually chose to launch a second war under Vladimir Putin to return the breakaway republic to the national fold in 1999. Ascertaining a more robust theoretical and empirical understanding of such questions, I would argue, is quite significant considering the still-unresolved final status of Russia's so-called 'Chechen brushfire'.

From a theoretical standpoint, however, these findings offer further support for what Taliaferro (1997, 1998) terms a theory of 'cognitive realism'. Such an approach to understanding international relations combines elements of the neorealist stance on state interests – characterized by distribution of power concerns, a fundamental focus on security issues and sovereignty, and the pursuit of relative gains – with the more empirically sound decision-making model of prospect theory that takes into account situational context and other cognitive factors. Certainly, the parsimonious assumption of the existence of *Homo economicus* has allowed for significant theory building in the field; however, many prominent scholars in political science, psychology, and other fields have argued that the basic tenets of rational choice serve as a rather poor approximation of actual human nature. In turn, as Walt (1999: 17) observes, 'If human decisions in the real world are not made in the way that rational choice theorists assume, then the models may be both deductively consistent and empirically wrong'. A single case study does not necessarily close the door, so to speak, on decades of research into rational choice. It does, however, provide additional evidence that suggests we might rethink how the core of rationality integrates with the overarching theoretical perspective of neorealism in world affairs.

Clearly, the application of prospect theory does 'muddy the waters' of neorealism somewhat in terms of overall theoretical elegance in exchange for empirical precision. In other words, prospect theory requires that we as scholars must look beyond merely the outcomes of state interaction and actually study the context and rationale of the decision-making process itself. Of course, prospect theory is not without its own weaknesses. As McDermott (2004) notes, prospect theory is still in the process of developing a robust theory of framing, as well as adequately accounting for group behavior and the role of emotion in decision-making.[10] Nevertheless, this case study suggests that a cognitive realist approach can certainly 'hold its own' against – and even outperform – the traditional realist–neorealist perspective in terms of explaining *risk-acceptant* behavior. These traditional approaches based on rational choice, meanwhile, offer relatively

[10] McDermott's more recent research with James Druckman (2008) attempts to address this third shortcoming by exploring how decision-makers' emotional states can impact framing and risk-acceptant behavior.

little insight in such cases and are left with little recourse but to finger the specter of incomplete information in order to explain risky behavior in international politics.

What is the scholarly contribution of this study? On the one hand, I have brought to bear both the theoretical insights of neorealism as well as the decision-making heuristics of prospect theory on a heretofore under-theorized case, the first Chechen War. Moreover, this study shows how the decision-making context, both international and domestic, shaped Russia's approach to resolving the Chechen situation. Perhaps more significantly, however, by advancing a cognitive realist explanation for these events, I have presented significant evidence in support of an alternative theory of international relations that boasts significant explanatory power – particularly with respect to those cases in which states engage in risky foreign policy decisions. While the application of prospect theory alone to a particular case study may offer considerable insight into the decision-making process, it tells us very little about how states define their interests in the international system. Conversely, while the application of neorealism convincingly points us toward the security-focused origins of state interests, it is built on feet of clay – that is, the core assumption of rationality that both oversimplifies the decision-making process and fails to account for risk-acceptant state behavior. Therefore, I would argue that a hybrid theory of cognitive realism represents the best of both worlds, offering theoretically robust insights into how states define their interests, as well as how they go about making decisions in pursuit of those interests. In turn, cognitive realism can help explain those events that existing theories of international relations tend to dismiss as aberrations, miscalculations, or cases of misperception.

Arguably, those cases in which rational choice fails to offer a satisfactory explanation for state behavior are among the most fascinating in international relations. They are, in essence, puzzles in search of a solution. They are the cases that 'armchair historians' debate, pondering how a leader could have chosen such an obviously risky course of action – whether it ultimately worked out in his or her favor or not. A theory of cognitive realism that incorporates contextual factors into its understanding of decision-making places scholars at least one step closer to solving these puzzles in a manner that combines relative parsimony with an accurate understanding of how politics unfolds in the real world. Certainly, further application of prospect theory and cognitive realism to a range of cases is necessary in order to establish it as a viable alternative to traditional theories of international relations. Drawing upon the case of Russia's first Chechen War, however, I believe that I have added further evidence in support of these cognitive approaches.

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