FALLING DOMINOS OR THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHIC MENTAL MAPS IN FOREIGN POLICY.

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Abstract

Geographic mental maps are commonly used to explain foreign policy behaviour of political decision-makers. However, despite the proliferation of their usage, a theoretical account of how mental maps influence foreign policy is still lacking. The current paper seeks to contribute to the development of a theoretical framework which can support the use of mental maps as an analytical concept for foreign policy analysis. Moreover, the paper uses the domino theory as an example to illustrate how geographic cognition and reasoning effectively influence foreign policy.

Keywords: beliefs, decision-making, domino theory, foreign policy, geographic mental maps

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent proliferation of studies focusing on political decision-maker's mental maps testify to the fundamental role of these geographic constructs in influencing foreign policy-making (Casey and Wright, 2008; 2011; 2015; Thomas, 2011a; 2011b). Despite their obvious distortions, few authors would contest that "the decisions that lead to political action, however, are taken in the more amorphous, nuanced world of the mental map" (Henrikson, 1980: 497). Political decision-makers have to make decisions based on information and events that are generally outside their national or even regional contexts. Therefore, mental maps are "systems of orientation" which are used for guidance in foreign policy-making (Henrikson, 2002).

To make sense of the diversity and complexity of the political world, decision-makers rely on simplified representations or mental models (Barr et al., 1992; George, 1969; Golledge and Stimson, 1997; Holsti, 1976; Sapienza, 1987). No one individual can encompass the complexity of the world in its entirety (Lowenthal, 1961). Scientific studies have established that individuals and groups have cognitive spatial constructs which they use to simplify reality and aid political decision-making (Golledge, 2002; Henrikson, 1980; Mark et al., 1999). Consequently, "the beliefs that compromise these maps provide the individual with a more or less coherent way of organizing and making sense out of what would otherwise be a confusing array of signals picked up from the environment by his senses" (Holsti, 2006: 34).

More precisely, decision-makers act with regard to their perceived geographic context, meaning "what matters in the explanation of decisions and policies is how the actor imagined his environment to be, not how it actually was" (Sprout and Sprout, 1960: 147). Accordingly, different actors can respond differently to the same event in the international environment (Bilgin, 2004; Gould and White, 1974; Jervis, 1976; Kiesler and Sproull, 1982). As a result,

mental maps are essential to policy-making in the sense that they are a "critical component of general spatial problem-solving activity" (Golledge and Stimson, 1997: 239). By informing decision-makers about particular geographic settings, mental maps contribute to the process of spatial choice inherent in foreign policy decision-making.

However, very little research has been devoted to the relationship between geographic mental maps and political decision-making. The current paper provides an analytical framework to try to explain the relationship between mental maps and foreign policy. It begins by employing theoretical assumptions from cognitive and social psychology to provide some insight on how mental maps influence decision-makers. It subsequently examines how geographic mental maps guided US foreign policy during the Cold War. More precisely, the second section demonstrates how particular geographic concepts and reasoning influenced US policy in Asia, by creating an image of a potential domino effect of communist expansion in the region.

2. HOW GEOGRAPHIC MENTAL MAPS INFLUENCE FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKERS

We may define a geographic mental map as a "cognitive representation which encloses an individual or group's beliefs about the geographic character of a particular place or places and their relationship to other places or spatial phenomena" (da Vinha, 2011: 137). The use of mental maps as an analytical concept has become a commonplace. However, there has been very little theorizing on how geographic mental maps influence foreign policy decision-making. Though it is widely accepted that "individuals have cognitive images of places which they use to simplify reality" and that these "perceptions [are] important in foreign policy decisionmaking" (O'Loughlin and Grant, 1990: 506), the causal relationship has not been compellingly demonstrated. In order to understand the role of mental maps on foreign policy decision-making we will borrow from the theoretical literature on cognitive and social psychology, particularly regarding beliefs.

The cognitive research agenda has claimed that beliefs, while "subjective representations of reality", are important in explaining world politics (Walker and Schafer, 2006). Therefore, by conceptualizing mental maps as beliefs about geographic phenomena, it seems entirely logical to assume they affect decision-making in the same manner as belief systems. Beliefs can be defined as propositions which we assume to be true about causal relationships or elementary assumptions regarding the way the world functions (Renshon, 2008; Rosati, 1991; Vertzberger, 2002). The sum of an individual's beliefs makes up his belief system. In essence, belief systems comprise all the accumulated and organized knowledge that an individual possesses about himself and the world (Holsti, 2006; c.f., Rosati, 1991). This presumes that they are internally consistent, they fluctuate along a central-peripheral dimension, and they are hierarchically arranged – i.e., the most central beliefs inform the less central ones (Rosenberg, 1986). However, they surpass mere scientific or social-scientific knowledge (Jervis, 2006). Emotion is a central factor in understanding beliefs. Therefore, beliefs can represent inner states as well as outer realities. Also, they can be exhortative, inciting and encouraging human behaviour. Ultimately, they can acquire a high level of commitment and faith. As Jervis has exemplified:

> When people talk about "beliefs to live by", moral and empirical considerations are fused. When people say that they believe that democracy can be brought to the Middle East and that doing so will make this a better world, they are combining how they see the evidence and what their values and desires lead them to think should and must be true. (Jervis, 2006: 642)

While a wide range of different types of beliefs have been identified (c.f., Goldstein and Keohane, 1993), it suffices to know that beliefs contribute to an individual's understating of the world. Beliefs help individuals simplify and deal with the complexity of the real world (however defined and determined) (Holsti, 1976; George, 1969; Jervis, 2006; Renshon, 2008). No one individual can encompass the complexity of the political world in its entirety. Even large bureaucratic institutions cannot process all the available information and produce an infallible portrait of the world (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; George, 1969; Henrikson, 1980; Kiesler and Sproull, 1982). To make sense of the diversity and complexities of the political world, decision-makers rely on simplified representations which help organize all the intricate variables and give them meaning (Axelrod, 1976; Barr et al., 1992; Golledge and Stimson, 1997; Holsti, 1976; 2006; Renshon, 2006; 2008; Sapienza, 1987). Accordingly, beliefs "provide the individual with a more or less coherent way of organizing and making sense out of what would otherwise be a confusing array of signals picked up from the environment by his senses" (Holsti, 2006: 34).

As a result, beliefs acquire an important function in foreign policy decision-making. They simultaneously serve both a descriptive and prescriptive purpose. At the most basic level, beliefs act as filters through which we manage and interpret incoming information about the political world (Brodin, 1972; Deutsch and Merritt, 1965; Eidelson and Eidelson, 2003; Renshon, 2008). Due to their position between the environment and behaviour, beliefs serve as relatively stable templates which help individuals select, organize, process, and understand the plethora of signals they receive (George, 1980; Rosati, 1991; 2005).

Beliefs comprise assimilation and appraisal mechanisms that aid individuals in assimilating new information within existing knowledge and representing it in ways which reduce conflict with expectations – i.e., beliefs help individuals maintain their quality of "consistency seekers" (George, 1980; Holsti, 2006; Jervis, 2006). First of all, expectations play an important role in interpreting information; people tend to perceive events in accordance with their existing beliefs. Thus, beliefs help individuals maintain a high degree of cognitive consistency (Jervis, 1976). Furthermore, incoming information is also more easily integrated when it is considered plausible and resonates with existing beliefs. As Vertzberger has (2002: 117) has indicated "when the core beliefs of another person or actor are in line with one´s own, one tends to see them as even closer than they actually are". In contrast, when beliefs are divergent, they tend to be discounted and perceived as "much more dissimilar and incongruent than they actually are (Vertzberger, 2002: 117). Equally important, ambiguous information is generally considered consistent with existing beliefs and, in the majority of the cases, reinforces individual's prior convictions.

In their prescriptive role, beliefs provide orientation guides for behaviour. By providing norms and standards for action, beliefs stipulate what George (1940) has termed "choice propensities" which bound the policy choices available to decision-makers. While not completely determining behaviour, beliefs do serve as "road maps" (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993) which lay down the moral and ethical boundaries for political action. Therefore, they can they can determine "what is right and wrong, provide new social visions, or merely suggest what economic policy will steer a nation towards increased wealth" (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 16). Equally, beliefs can provide key "focal points" that allow various individuals to rally around and act upon. Beliefs can also be embedded in institutional frameworks, generalizing rules and actions and associating diverse issues. Once beliefs are institutionalized they tend to constrain policy in the absence of innovation. In other words, once beliefs are entrenched in organizational and normative structures "that policy idea can affect the incentives of political entrepreneurs long after the interests of its initial proponents have changed" (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 13).

By providing a number of different cognitive cues these various features facilitate the decision-making process by abridging the complexity involved in foreign policy decision-making (Rosati, 2000). Accordingly, beliefs can act upon individual´s behaviour through a wide gamut of formulas, but this does not imply that they mechanically affect foreign policy decision-making. The role of beliefs in foreign policy decision-making is not as straightforward and direct as many assume. Their influence is more subtle and discreet. By affecting the way individuals define the situation they indirectly condition the options for action.

> Rather than acting as direct guides to action, they form one of a several clusters of intervening variables that may shape and constrain decision-making behaviour. They may serve the policy makers as a means of orienting him to the environment; as a lens or prism through which information is processes and given meaning; as a diagnostic scheme; as one means of coping with the cognitive constraints on rationality; as a source of guidelines that may guide or bound – but not necessarily determine – policy prescriptions and choices. Thus, attention should be directed to the linkages between beliefs and certain decision-making tasks that precede a decision – definition of the situation, analysis, prescription, and the like. (Holsti, 1976: 34-35)

In effect, it is precisely in the definition of the situation (i.e., the problem representation) that geographic mental maps contribute to foreign policy decision-making, for it has been accepted that "the initial problem representation strongly constrains subsequent behavior" (Taber, 1998: 26; c.f., Sylvan, 1998; Vertzberger, 2002; Voss, 1998). More precisely, when a problematic state of affairs arises in international politics, decision-makers develop a problem representation in congruence with their knowledge and beliefs (Beasley, 1998; Voss, 1998). This representation is an essential part of the information processing stage of foreign policy decision-making. Its significance derives from the fact that it helps recognize and concentrate on incoming information, evaluate its relevance to the problem under consideration, and integrate it into the existing knowledge structure (Vertzberger, 2002).

Accordingly, when an individual has to make a spatial decision, his mental map is "triggered", allowing him to make sense of the diversity and complexities of his environment by cognitively categorizing, associating, and ordering disparate geographic information (Golledge, 2002; Henrikson, 1980; Mark et al., 1999). In other words, the complexity resulting from the various geographic factors present in a specific place is abridged in order to be manageable and intelligible to individual decision-makers. In this sense they help mediate our geographic beliefs about the world.

This capacity to simplify geographic complexities is accomplished through what Golledge and Stimson (1997: 32) have designated as the "first motivated response" which is responsible for activating the decision-making process. Accordingly, a particular event in the international environment can provide a stimulus for decision-makers to act – i.e., the first motivated response. This naturally implies a search for information. Seeking out relevant information is not a straight-forward, rationally inspired process. On the contrary, the search for information is regularly guided by personal or organizational objectives and expectations and, as mentioned above, suffers from many cognitive constraints that lead to selectivity of the information. The ill-defined nature of problems, characteristic of international politics, makes selecting relevant information even more complicated. As a result:

> When ill-defined problems compete for attention with well-defined and structured problems, the later often distract attention from the former. Decisionmakers prefer to deal with what seems manageable rather than with what is ambiguous even if it is possibly more important and potentially dangerous. Yet decisionmakers are not always aware of the differences

between well-defined and ill-structured problems. In fact they unconsciously transform ill-structured problems into well defined ones by ignoring their distinct attributes. (Vertzberger, 2002: 54)

An additional procedure of the first motivated response is the development of an individual's behaviour-space perception (Golledge and Stimson, 1997). This process involves selecting information, of either spatial or non-spatial quality, from an individual's existing mental maps, usually located in his long-term memory. The reason for this process is that, as stated above, the information received from the environment is normally vague and imprecise and, consequently, individuals need their pre-existing knowledge and beliefs to make sense of the incoming inputs (Taber, 1998). Thus, the non-spatial attributes may comprise a wide array of features relating to a specific place or space of an event such as regime type, military strength, economic development, institutional association, religion, etc. For their part, the spatial attributes permit individuals to locate and order the features and initiate spatial correlations.

Once the assorted information is assembled, the mental map can then be activated for processing. This implies that components of the stored mental maps are transmitted from the long-term memory to the working memory in order to be processed in accordance with the decision-making criteria necessary to solve the particular problem under consideration. The array of geographic knowledge available in our long-term memory results from the fact that individuals have countless geographic mental maps. In fact, individuals store multiple representations of their geographic environments (Battersby and Montello, 2009; Tversky, 2003; Tversky et al, 1994) which has allowed Downs and Meyer (1978: 68) to speak of mapping rather than maps, for what is at stake is "the capacity to generate a representation of the spatial environment… representing some part of the world at one instance in time". The geographic information evoked at any given moment depends on the nature of the task at hand. Accordingly, Walker (2000) has identified an assemblage of different mental maps which policy-makers use to help them come to a decision: security maps; economic maps; cultural maps; religious maps; geographic maps; and political maps. The entire assortment of these different mental maps compromise an individual's world view (Peuquet, 2002).

3. MAPPING FALLING DOMINOS

As noted above, instead of passively reflecting the political environment, geographic mental maps steer foreign policy decisions by shaping policy-maker's perceptions, acting as mechanisms of cognitive and motivated bias that distort, block, and recast incoming information. An example of how geographic mental maps affect foreign policy is vividly illustrated by George Ball's recollection of the US policy towards Southeast Asia:

> We can live with the Vietnam war so long as we remember that it is a peripheral contest, but we do not always act as if we thought so. Sometimes we behave as though Southeast Asia did lie at the center of power (…) but any shooting war takes a large toll in the emotions of the public and the attention of the top government leaders who are responsible for navigating the ship of state in international waters. Moreover, it tends to confuse priorities and leads to navigation by a distorted chart – like something drawn by a medieval cartographer, in which Vietnam appears as a major continent lying just off our shores and threatening our national existence. (Ball, 1968: 351-352)

Ball's words testify to Cottam and McCoy's (1998) assertion that the Cold War was a cognition-dominated conflict. Central to US involvement in Vietnam and Southeast Asia was

a specific geographic cognition that emphasized certain threats and opportunities over others – i.e., the domino effect. Since the end of the 2nd World War, the domino theory has underpinned US foreign policy in the Third World (Slater, 1987). But nowhere has it been more compelling than in the case of the US intervention in Vietnam. While there where certainly many other rationalizations for US involvement in Vietnam – .e.g., the safeguard of freedom and democracy, upholding of self-determination, upkeep of US commitments to its allies (SEATO) – none was more determinant the domino theory (Slater, 1993).The underlying logic of the domino theory has a long standing tradition in international politics. Geopolitical reasoning is filled with the principle convictions of the domino effect. Lord Salisbury reasoned in the mid-nineteenth century "that Russia was in Armenia, that Armenia is the key to Syria, that Syria is the Key to Egypt, and that anyone advancing into Egypt has the key to Africa" (cited in Jervis, 1991: 21). No one, however, has had more success promulgating the theory's underlying principles than Halford Mackinder (1996). His heartland theory rested on the basic assumption that he who controlled East Europe would ultimately dominate global politics. Thus, it is not surprising that the logic of the domino theory found such receptivity in US decision-makers.

In very broad terms, the domino theory asserts that a defeat or retreat in one area of the world would produce further demands and aggression by adversaries in other areas. While, as affirmed above, the logic of the falling dominos has a long tradition in foreign policy rationalizations, it was the events in Asia that consolidated its validity it in the minds of US decision-makers (Glad and Taber, 1990; Jervis, 1980). President Eisenhower (1954) set down the principles in a press conference by insisting that in Indochina "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly". Prior to the Korean War, the US had discriminated between areas of high strategic value and ones of more peripheral interest (Gaddis, 2005; Jervis, 1980). As instability grew and friendly regimes were challenged throughout the region, this dichotomy vanished. Every area was now of vital interest for America and their defence against communist expansion was of strategic significance.

However, the application of the domino theory to Vietnam evoked an inevitable tragic blow for US interests. Any concession in the region was deemed to be a major forfeiture of America's global standing:

> The fall of Vietnam would cause the loss of all Indochina and then the rest of Southeast Asia, with implications extending far beyond. The communists had just taken over in China. Indochina, Burma and Malaya were swept by revolution, and the newly independent government of Indonesia seemed vulnerable. Because of its location on China's southern border and because it appeared in the most imminent danger, Vietnam was considered crucial. If it fell, all of Southeast Asia might be lost, denying the United States access to important raw materials and strategic waterways. (Herring, 1991: 107)

While US officials never truly offered a conceptual description of how the theory was applied in practice, it is possible, however, work out some of the basic assumptions or causal links that supported its claims (Glad and Taber, 1990; Slater, 1987; 1993). To begin with, revolutions – specifically communist revolutions – were considered to be externally guided events, sponsored by the Soviet Union. Secondly, the Soviets challenged the US on peripheral issues in order to test its determination to resist. In other words, instead of overtly challenging the US, the Soviets would promote subversive activities in areas of allegedly marginal interest for the US.

Another fundamental assumption was the direct relationship between revolutions in one country and revolutions in its adjacent region. The contagion effect was quite straightforward and it was perceived that "successful revolutions quickly spread, both because of an emulation effect and because revolutions actively seek to export themselves" (Slater, 1987: 107). Underlying this belief is a basic geographic reasoning based on the primitives of spatial knowledge, particularly those associated with proximity, connection, and linkage (c.f., Golledge, 1995).

From this postulation it followed that the US had to act quickly and decisively in order to contain the spread of the revolutionary malaise. The common understanding was that standing up to the aggressor would cause them to yield from their expansionary activities. Should the US fail to meet the aggressor's challenge, even in a traditionally insignificant country, it would lead to the fall of the entire region and put vital US interests and American national security at stake. While the domino theory never actually established the causality between the fall of a region and the endangerment to US national security, the basic assumption was that the failure to respond to the threat would undermine US credibility worldwide. Above all, it would encourage less powerful states to accommodate to Soviet expansion as well as embolden the Soviet expansionist fervour:

> The integrity of the US commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. (…) If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war. (Rusk cited in Gaddis, 2005: 238).

The veracity of these assumptions has been amply debated and it is generally accepted that they do not resist empirical scrutiny (Glad and Taber, 1990; Slater, 1987; 1993). However, the validity of the domino theory is of no interest to the present study. Rather, it suffices to acknowledge that the domino theory offered US foreign policy decision-makers a geographically-inspired framework which they could use to understand international events and respond to them. Whereas Slater (1987: 130; 1993) denunciates the domino theory as a combination of analogy and ideology which was used to "justify a policy of indiscriminate global anticommunism", we rather prefer to understand it as a collection of beliefs about the international environment and politics. As a matter of fact, instead of a theory, Jervis (1991) identifies "domino beliefs" that ultimately encompassed propositions about the way the revolutions in foreign countries worked and what the adequate policy responses should be. According to Glad and Taber (1990: 63), the domino theory, "provided American decision makers with a map explaining their new world". This map not only exposed the problem at hand, but also "suggested simple prescriptions for dealing with the threat" (Glad and Taber, 1990: 63).

In reality, the domino theory incorporated a wide range of geographic mental maps that comprised a set of geographic beliefs that helped decision-makers define the problem representation. The most obvious geographic beliefs involved a great deal of spatial reasoning. More precisely, spatial concepts such as contiguity, sequence, connection and linkage, boundary, dispersion, and pattern were all involved in the domino theory. The mental maps of US decision-makers portrayed a centre of hostility – i.e., the Soviet Union – that was pushing outward, gulping up entire countries until it would circumscribe US vital interests. A mechanical-like process would propagate communist insurrections from country to country, crafting a regional arrangement of Soviet dominated regimes. The revolutionary impulse would be unfettered by natural topographies, national boundaries, or even local

specificities. One by one each country would inevitably fall to the revolutionary impulse. Only quick and strong intervention from the US could possibly halt the communist tide.

The implications of this rationale are quite revealing from a holistic geographic perspective. What it reveals is an overarching mental map that distorted and oversimplified the political environment in order for decision-makers to cope with its complexity. First of all, the dominant geographic mental maps identified a single, monolithic threat to the US – i.e., the USSR. The Soviets, according to official accounts, had an imperial agenda which culminated in the eradication of any alternative models of society. This agenda proposed an expansionist policy which sought to enlarge Soviet control over other territories, namely through the subversion of foreign regimes. Since the USSR commanded international communism, this left no margin for any autonomous action on the part of other national communist movements. Therefore, the threat to the US became geographically homogenized, meaning that since the Soviets were behind every revolution it was impossible to distinguish between places of central and peripheral interest. And since what generally "makes an interest or a geographical area essential is the fact that it is threatened by an adversary" (Jervis, 1991: 24) any area facing a communist uprising was deemed of primal significance.

What is even more revealing is how US decision-makers regarded the local political situation. The people of Southeast Asia were cleansed of any political autonomy. Not only were the local populations and political officials easy prey for communist machinations, but they were also powerless to resist such aggression. Without strong and determined US involvement local resistance would collapse and accommodate to Soviet rule. As pointed out above, geographic mental maps also serve the purpose of characterizing the people of foreign lands. Of the most unrelenting ideas is that "some places are inhabited by normal human beings, much like ourselves, while other places are inhabited by barbarians" (Elliot, 1979: 250; c.f., Latham, 2001). In Southeast Asia and particularly in Vietnam, the geographic mental maps of US officials depicted a fragile and vulnerable people that required US protection and involvement in order to repel aggression. From this perspective, geography can conjure up images of either fear or hope (Sparke, 2007) which consequently condition the policy options. The geographic mental maps of US decision-makers were certainly maps of fear, which highlighted endless threats and risks. However, the problem representation rendered by the geographic mental maps also framed the possible course of actions. The policy options were conditioned a priori:

> If the domino theory explained why it was important to prevent even small forceable changes in the status quo, the emerging theory of deterrence explained why it was possible to do so. This theory argues that when war is the worst possible outcome for both sides, a state can prevail by committing itself to stand firm – by staking its reputation on not giving in. (Jervis, 1980: 582)

Accordingly, the US mental maps revealed as much about the beliefs of the US as it did about Southeast Asia. Ultimately, "what was at stake in Vietnam was not 'national security' but rather America's image of itself as a global power (Slater, 1993: 215). In this sense, the US was imperilled by the massive threat of Soviet communism. It was at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the USSR and was apprehensive of the future. Not only would the US have to step up to the challenge, but it would have to do it unaided. Consequently, only a determined and fully committed US could deter the Soviet expansion. Any hesitation would undermine US security for no other force could prevent the communist onslaught from bordering the American shores. In fact, the mental maps underlying US foreign policy bare a very isolated and alarmed superpower.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Mental maps are useful analytical concepts for analysing foreign policy (c.f., da Vinha, 2011). However, much theoretical work is still required to fully exploit their analytical potential. In particular, the mental map research agenda requires a substantial theorising enterprise which can help us better understand the dynamics and mechanisms involved in influencing decision-makers. In addition, the geographic elements underscoring mental maps have to be clarified. Political science, and International Relations in particular, lack a clear appreciation of geography. Recent research testifies to the continued primacy of the determinants of physical geography and spatial reasoning in analysing international politics (c.f., Kaplan, 2009).

The requirements for such an undertaking should not be underestimated. Current international politics continue to be influenced by decision-maker's mental maps. Geographic considerations such as those inspiring the domino theory continue to exercise their sway over foreign policy-makers. For example, recent events in the greater Middle East testify to this rationale. For some, the forced democratization of Iraq or the endogenous democratic uprisings in a few countries would transform the political landscape of the entire region. For others, the threat of state-failure and the growth of the non-state terrorist entities would have devastating consequences for the entire region and its immediate periphery. In each case, once the first domino falls, the rest would follow. The veracity of such claims are irrelevant. Policy decisions are made according to the decision-maker's beliefs regarding the existing situation and the potential outcomes of their policy options. Understanding how our geographic mental maps shape our decisions is of greater importance, for it can shine insight not only on how we view others, but also how we view ourselves.

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