

Fatti e analisi di politica internazionale

International studies and decision-making*

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«Nothing ever happen twice»

Wisława Szymborska, *Nothing Twice. Selected Poems*,
Ed. Literackie, Kraków 1997).

Point of departure

The relationship between international studies and decision-making is a complex one. There is no simple answer to the question of whether – and if so, what impact – international research and studies have on the decision-making process. Do these studies play an important role in the decision-making process of state leaders? I have in mind both global and regional powers, as well as medium and small countries. If we consider that this impact is limited, marginal or even non-existent – it is worth considering and understanding the reasons for this state of affairs.

There is no doubt that international studies shape the way students think and thus influence the attitude of new generations. They organize the systemic approach, and are reflected in the construction of models and scenarios for the development of events. Young generations learn from universities and diplomatic academies the habits of holistic and logical reasoning. However, heads of state and people who play a key role in the process of making political decisions are not usually graduates of diplomatic academies or departments that prepare a cadre of officials implementing foreign policy and state security. What is more, people with not only appropriate theoretical preparation, but even professors and scholars who have gained authority as authors of valued scientific works

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at the moment of appointment to diplomatic leadership positions in the governments of their countries, are usually not guided by the carefully formulated thoughts that their works contain. In practice, they accomplish the national interests of their countries, as they understand them. This is natural and understandable. Leaders of democratic countries naturally carry out the mandate they receive from their society. They are obliged to represent the interests of the community, the state and the nation, i.e. the citizens who have given them this mandate.

At this point, an important specification and clarification, or rather a reservation, should be added. Namely, the mandate obtained from a national community governed in a democratic way is different, and completely different criteria are followed by the leaders of countries who exercise power in an autocratic, authoritarian, dictatorial or even despotic way.

In assessing the decision-making process – in addition to social, economic, military and demographic factors – it is worth considering three important arguments that are often neglected: first, I mean the blurring of the difference between what is internal and what belongs to external relations; secondly – we live in times of fundamental change in the circumstances in which decisions are made; thirdly, and finally, the subject of our assessment should be the moral responsibility of *leaders* for the decisions they make, i.e. respecting universal human values.

Change

The analysts in the 1990s believed that under the conditions of accelerating globalization, universal global standards would become necessary for the international system to operate. The flaw of that reasoning, however, was the fact that they primarily sought solutions in the regulations between states, and failed to observe that the main problem of the modern world and their potential conflicts are generated within states and not between them¹.

Over 30 years ago in the introductory part of *SIPRI Yearbook 1992. World Armaments and Disarmament*, I wrote: «A new and significant phenomenon is that division between domestic and international security factors is blurred. This phenomenon, inherently related to the implementation of the right of peoples to self-determination is inalienably bound together with the emergence of new states. The aspirations of the

¹ More see: Adam D. Rotfeld, *Porządek międzynarodowy. Parametry zmiany (The International Order. The Parameters of Change)*, in «Sprawy Międzynarodowe» (“International Affairs”), Warszawa 2014, n. 4, pp. 31-45.

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peoples of multinational states to gain independence are usually treated by their governments as a domestic issue, and the governments consider international recognition of the newly emerging states as interference in their internal affairs»².

This new aspect of the change in the order and hierarchy of values was noticed by Pope Francis a long time ago. In his reflections on the fundamental meaning of universal values, he recalled four rules of primacy: 1. Time over space; 2. Reality over ideas; 3. Peace over conflict; and 4. The whole over the part³. The interpretative perspective and context proposed by the Pope allow us to better understand the complexity of today's problems, in which *time* and *change* play a much greater role than unreflective referencing to geopolitics and attempts to restore the *status quo ante* with the use of force. This approach, which is quite common, and is characterized by a mixture of ignorance and arrogance, is like using a primitive tool such as a lockpick rather than searching for an appropriate, sophisticated key that would allow us to understand the accelerated changes in time and space.

Process

After the end of the Cold War, many serious and inspiring studies were published, which became the subject and leaven of political and academic debate. I will only mention Samuel Huntington's study, *Clash of Civilizations*, that is rarely cited today⁴, and Francis Fukuyama's numerous and often cited studies, especially *The End of History and Last Man*⁵. For our considerations, it is worth noting John Mearsheimer's study entitled *Back to the Future. Instability in Europe after the Cold War*, which appeared in the quarterly «International Security» twenty five years ago (Summer 1990, vol. 15, No. 1). The text, published in a prestigious journal

² Adam D. Rotfeld, «The Fundamental Changes and the New Security Agenda», in *SIPRI Yearbook 1992*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 2. A year later, I wrote that the weakness of the emerging new international system stems from the fact that: «[...] the international system and the means available to international security organizations have been tailored to resolving conflicts *between* the states, not *within* them». *The new security environment*, in *SIPRI Yearbook 1993*, p. 2.

³ Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Wyd. WAM.pdf.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remarking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schustr, 1996.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press 1992; Id., *The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

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under the auspices of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs of Harvard University, accurately predicted potential destabilization in Europe after the end of the Cold War. However, the author of this very erudite dissertation focused his attention on potential conflicts between states, while the sources of this destabilization were and are mainly *within* states. The same comment could be addressed to Mearsheimer's monography published in 2018: *The Great Delusion. Liberal Dreams and International Realities* published by Yale University.

It is no coincidence that the beginning of armed conflicts on the periphery of Europe were multinational federations – first the collapse of the Federative Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (1989-1990), and then – after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1991) – bloody conflicts in the North Caucasus, then the bloodshed and secession of the so-called Transnistrian area on the left bank of the Dniester, where local leaders proclaimed a self-styled republic)⁶. As a result, the decisions of the second Summit of the countries of Europe and North America in Helsinki (1992) were a reaction to the bloody events in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Vojvodina and Sandžak, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ossetia, Georgia, Tajikistan, the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Moldova. It was a time when virtually all international institutions – the UN on a global scale, the OSCE on a regional scale, as well as sub-regional structures in Asia, Africa and Latin America –, made efforts whose common denominator was a strategy of preventive diplomacy. The effects of these measures have been moderate, limited and sometimes very disappointing. This is not the time and place to provide a detailed analysis of the reasons why accurate and timely proposals and strategies for action have not been implemented. I am thinking, for example, of the important strategic program that the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, presented on the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations⁷. At that time, my attention was drawn to the convergence of the thinking of an Egyptian scholar, an expert in international law, such as Boutros-Ghali, with a report presented by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, who was nominated

⁶ Adam D. Rotfeld, «In Search of a Political Settlement. The Case of the Conflict in Moldova», in *The Challenge of Preventive Diplomacy. The Experience of the CSCE*, ed. by Staffan Carlsson, Stockholm, Published by Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994, pp. 100-130.

⁷ Supplement to *An Agenda for Peace*, Position paper of the UN Secretary-General on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations A/50/60-S/1995/1, 3 January 1995, New York 1995.

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as the first CSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, Max van der Stoep. He wrote: «Conflict prevention is vital to the future of our continent. [...] The issue of the mobilization of the international community is of crucial importance for conflict prevention to succeed. Without international political, economic and moral support, the efforts of many individual states have only limited chance of being successful. In addition, there should also be increased coordination and cooperation with other relevant international bodies»⁸.

Since the main actors of the political scene at the time, and at the same time decision-makers, were aware of what had to be done within the existing order and in the atmosphere of declared trust, it is worth considering what the main obstacle and difficulty was in the implementation of the tasks set by the international community.

Sovereignty vs interdependence

In my understanding the main obstacle was and remains the fact that there is an abyss between verbal assurances and the real interests of states and their attachment to conservatively understood sovereignty. Even democratic countries that are friends with other countries stand firm on their internal rights for fear that they will lose control and their own traditionally understood identity, giving priority to international obligations. In other words, we should not ignore the fact that the processes of globalization and integration are accompanied by resistance, which is expressed in centrifugal tendencies, disintegration and fragmentation of the international system.

There are various reasons for this. In global powers, it means setting their own norms and regulations above transnational ones or – to say it simply – impose their own norms on all countries regardless of their demographic, economic or military potential. In medium-sized and small countries, there are fears of losing their cultural and political identity. Finally, among the newly formed countries, it is a kind of hypersensitivity to their own newly acquired political, legal and cultural subjectivity.

These problems were noticed as early as the 90s of the last century⁹. At that time, questions were asked that have remained valid to this day:

⁸ Max van der Stoep, «The Role of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in CSCE Preventive Diplomacy», in *The Challenge of Preventive Diplomacy*, cit., p. 53.

⁹ Cfr. Samuel Huntington, *Culture, Power and Democracy*; Robert Cooper, *Integration and Disintegration*; Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *Globalization and Fragmentation*, in *Globalization Power and Democracy*, ed. by Marc F. Plattner and Aleksander Smolar, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

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«To what extent does the goal of promoting human rights and democracy justify intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign state? Should matters of human rights and the rights of minorities, as well as the closely associated right of peoples to self-determination and a democratic order (pluralism and the rule of law), even be considered “internal” affairs, especially when rights violations are massive and severe? If we agree that the international community cannot tolerate such violations, then who is to decide how states may be coerced into respecting the rights that are being violated, including the rights of their own citizens?»¹⁰.

A kind of answer to these and other questions was a debate on the considerations published in the monograph *Russia and Europe. The Emerging Security Agenda* (OUP 1997)¹¹. The participants and authors of this project, which included experts in the field from the United States, France, Russia, Germany and Poland, presented an outline of a scenario for the desired development of relations between Europe and Russia. In their conclusions, they signaled the dangers of «challenges and options inherited from the period of bipolar confrontation»¹². In this context, the “conspiracy mentality” dominating the thinking of the Russian political *élites* has been noted, blaming the West for its own failures (including the collapse or self-dissolution of the Soviet Union). The authors of the conclusions that resulted from the completed project predicted that Russia’s return to thinking in terms of the Cold War could determine both future Russian foreign and security policy, as well as multilateral security structures, especially NATO, the OSCE and the European Union. It was an impressively accurate forecast, although it was formulated a few years before Vladimir Putin was entrusted with the function of the president of the Russian Federation.

In other words, the authors of this collective work discerned much deeper roots of this policy, which culminated in the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, than just the personification of the Russian president’s responsibility for the decision made. The conclusions of this project boiled down to working out ways «to alleviate the security consensus of the post-

¹⁰ Adam D. Rotfeld, *The Role of the International Community*, Chapter 8, p. 83. Cfr. also *Strategic Coercion. Concepts and Cases*, ed. by Lawrence Freedman, Oxford University Press, 1998, *passim*.

¹¹ *Russia and Europe. The Emerging Security Agenda*, ed. by Vladimir Baranovsky, Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹² *Idem*, p. 13.

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cold war international actors – without, however, exacerbating the ‘security dilemmas’ of others»¹³. In the authors’ opinion, «The vector of this interaction (cooperative vs. confrontational) will be a paramount importance for both Russia and Europe; joint efforts by the two are a fundamental condition for organizing a safer post-Soviet and post-Cold War international order»¹⁴.

The main weakness of these recommendations was that, in the authors’ understanding, decisive and determining factors are related to and result from military power, the balance of power, and diplomacy. In fact, it was a way of thinking based on the experiences of the past and attempts to maintain imperial power in the image of times that are irretrievably gone. In the third decade of the 21st century, the decisive factor for the international position of states is their internal strength. They understand democracy not in an ornamental and declarative way, but as an institution that ensures respect for equal rights and civil liberties, and at the same time ensures the optimal and comprehensive development of the internal national community. This means social security, equal access to education and science, and respect for human rights, including social achievements. At this point, we touch on a significant difference, and at the same time overlapping decision-making processes within states and in relations between states¹⁵.

Effectiveness

We assess the significance of political acts and acts of international law agreed between countries on the basis of their effectiveness. Hundreds and thousands of resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly are approved by states because they are not binding. They are accepted with the awareness that they do not have to be applied in practice. On the other hand, the decisions of the UN Security Council – adopted with the approval of all permanent members of this Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) are obligatory, because the UN members agreed – in accordance with Article 25 of the UN Charter – «to

¹³ *Idem*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *International relations: origins, structure, dynamics*, edited by E. Haliżak, R. Kuźniar, Warsaw, UW Publishing House, 2006, pp. 26-27; L. Zyblikiewicza, *Power in International Relations*, in *Zarys stosunków międzynarodowych w erze współczesnej globalizacji*, Warszawa, PWN, 2023, p. 115.

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accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter». It has often happened that certain political acts of particular importance, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 adopted in the form of a resolution, are not questioned as a document binding on all countries of the world, while the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, on the basis of which the permanent members of the Security Council – in exchange for Ukraine’s renunciation of nuclear weapons that were deployed on its territory – confirmed their commitment to refrain from using the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine. Moreover, they solemnly pledged that no weapons in their possession would ever be used against Ukraine¹⁶. Although the legal force of this document is obligatory, in practice it is the political will of the states that are decisive, as they verbally acknowledge their obligations, but in fact subordinate them to their political interests. This applies mainly to global powers, but also to many other medium-sized and small countries.

Indeed, the only legitimacy for the use of force in international relations is justifiable intervention, the purpose and intention of which is the international and legitimate protection of groups of people and the prevention of mass crime. The inaction of organizations such as the UN is perceived by world opinion as a testimony to the weakness and ineffectiveness of the entire international system.

One of the explanations is the new security dilemma. Charles L. Glaser at George Washington University explains: «A security dilemma arises when an insecure state that seeks to protect itself acts in a way that unintentionally makes another state feel threatened and insecure». In other words, «tensions can escalate and lead to war, even though both sides merely want to live in peace»¹⁷.

Ethics (morality)

In this context, the moral responsibility of the international community as a whole, and in particular of the leaders and elites in power, is crucial.

¹⁶ *Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, UN General Assembly document A/49/765. UNSC document S/1994/1399, 19 Dec. 1994.

¹⁷ Charles L. Glaser, *Fear Factor. How to Know When You’re in a Security Dilemma*, in «Foreign Affairs», July/August 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/fear-factor-security-charles-glaser>.

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However, moral responsibility has its legal and political limits when confronted with the sovereign equality of states and the right of nations to self-determination¹⁸.

Morality belongs to those categories of values that guide people. For the leaders of democratic countries, the patterns of moral leadership were such figures as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa, Robert Schumann and Jean Monnet in France, Willy Brandt in Germany or the Dalai Lama as a moral authority in many countries of the world.

The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict published a collection of five essays in December 1998 by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, George Bush Sr., Jimmy Carter, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Desmond Tutu¹⁹. It is a set of expectations and qualities that should characterize the leaders of the modern world. In the opinion of these authoritative figures, a leader should be visionary, courageous, cooperative, politically intuitive, and eloquent. Boutros-Ghali wrote: «[...] We urgently need leadership that [...] can project a comprehensive, coherent, and compelling vision of human society, communicate that vision convincingly to the world's peoples, foster its implementation through cooperative endeavor, and make through on the hard decisions that will inevitably arise»²⁰. In the eyes of Desmond Tutu, the key quality of a leader should be credibility, solidarity with those he leads, cooperates with and identifies with; he should be intuitive, charismatic and courageous, and «to read the signs of the times»²¹. President George Bush Sr. wrote: «What I mean by leadership is just that: identifying, organizing and leading coalitions of like-minded friends and allies in the service of shared interest»²².

In Gorbachev's understanding, it was crucial for future leaders to understand that times of chaos and disorder are coming: «Entropy is growing in the world. Our policy must forestall the events, be prognosticative, and heal by prevention»²³. Interestingly, all the authors in this collection recognized that integrity and moral authority are necessary qualities of a leader. Unfortunately, we live in times when there is apparently a deficit of these features.

¹⁸ Jeff Mc Mahan, *Intervention and Collective Self-Determination*, in «Ethics and International Affairs» 1996, vol. 10, *Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs*, pp. 1-24; and W. Kegly, Jr., *International Peacemaking*, pp. 25-46.

¹⁹ *Essays on Leadership*, Carnegie Corporation of New York, December 1998.

²⁰ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Leadership and Conflict*, *ivi*, cit., p. 6.

²¹ Desmond Tutu, *Leadership*, *ivi*, cit., p. 70.

²² George Bush, *American Leadership and the Prevention of Deadly Conflict*, *ivi*, cit., p. 13.

²³ Mikhail Gorbaciov, *On Nonviolent Leadership*, *ivi*, cit., p. 63.

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Concluding remarks

The real world – not the desired and imagined world – confronts decision-makers with new challenges and risks and threats unknown in history. The Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) recently published a Report on *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946-2023*, based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). The report indicates that since 1946 we currently have the highest number of state-based conflicts (there were 59 armed conflicts in 34 countries)²⁴. At the same time, two major armed conflicts – in Ukraine and Gaza – have resulted in at least 122,000 victims to date. This is happening despite many efforts and decisions to end these conflicts, prevent their continuation and recurrence. The problem of ensuring the security of states without the use of force is the most important challenge of our time. The likelihood of the world sliding towards nuclear war is today the most serious risk since the end of World War II. This is despite and contrary to the decisions and treaties that have been agreed within the framework of the United Nations and many other multilateral structures of international security. The answer to the question of why the international community and its structures have proved ineffective in preventing new risks and threats must be a primary focus for scholars and researchers whose subject is international studies.

²⁴ Siri Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview*, in «PRIO Paper», Oslo 2024.