



Ukraine: beware of the pitfalls of the decision-making process

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No decision-making process follows a rational logic, which would imply the possibility of arriving at an optimal decision at all times through a reasoned analysis of the costs and benefits of a given problem. On the contrary, the literature abounds on the limits of rational decision-making. Decision-makers are often influenced by numerous cognitive biases, analogies, internal struggles between advisors or between bureaucracies. This is no different in the decision-making process regarding the war in Ukraine.

This Commentary is an opportunity to look at a few examples of decision-making biases that are less well known than those mentioned above and that illustrate the limitations of any decision-making process.

Let's start with the danger of the salami tactic used by the Ukrainian government against the Europeans. The salami tactic is defined as follows: "With the salami tactic one innovates by splitting the new plan of action into a series of gradual policy options. Although each change deviates only marginally from the previous policy, each [change] also determines the stage for the subsequent decision.... Instead of a dry departure from the previous policy, [one] takes a series of steps that will have the same effect as the innovative alternative that the manipulator invariably wanted" (1). The salami tactic thus consists of achieving one's ends by directing the other's decision through a long series of small concessions.

From the beginning of the conflict, the Ukrainians asked for the delivery of weapons (tanks, fighter planes, artillery...). However, they quickly realized that the Western countries were not ready to provide them with the full package of arms they had requested. So, they cleverly changed their approach in order to obtain all the military capabilities requested. They switched to a step-by-step approach, demanding the necessary equipment in separate packages: light armor, then artillery... and in recent weeks, heavy tanks. As soon as they received the promise of delivery of these tanks, they insisted on obtaining fighter planes and very long-range artillery.

Discreet and subtle, especially when it comes from a partner, the salami tactic leads the decision-maker, who does not realize that the sum of the various concessions ultimately results in the original demands (the full package), to be easily taken in. This tactic also plays on the lack of medium- and long-term vision of European decision-makers who, unable to project beyond a few weeks or months, do not anticipate Ukraine's future demands.

A second example of decision bias is illustrated by groupthink. According to studies by Janis, and later by 't Hart, groupthink is most prevalent in situations of stress and threat (2). Such situations will often have many negative consequences on decision-making, including cognitive

rigidity, polarization, arbitrary selection of information and reduction of ambiguities and alternatives (3). There is a collective pressure to make decisions in a certain way. The tendency towards homogeneity within a group leads decision-makers to ignore all options, since they share the same values and beliefs. The group as a whole then primarily seeks consensus, rejecting dissenting views. While it is indeed important to seek compromise in decision-making, this policy can become suspect in several instances: (a) when beliefs are no longer justified; (b) when decision-makers ignore facts that run counter to their beliefs; (c) when they refuse to re-examine alternatives so as not to jeopardize the homogeneity of the group; and finally, (d) when they refuse to analyze divergent arguments.

To explain this phenomenon of groupthink, Janis outlined the influence of eight symptoms that promote the tendency to conform: (a) the illusion of invulnerability shared by the majority of members, which usually creates excessive enthusiasm encouraging decision-makers to take high risks in their overly optimistic assessment of a situation; (b) a constant and collective effort to justify the decisions made, contributing to the reinforcement of certain collective perceptions which, in turn, reinforce the belief in the validity of the first choices made by the group, without taking into account the information that could lead members to reconsider their position; (c) an unquestioned belief in the underlying morality of the group, leading members to ignore the moral and ethical consequences of their decisions (d) a stereotypical view of the "other," thereby greatly dehumanizing the issue or enemy of concern; (e) self-censorship of any deviation from the apparent consensus, to the point where group members minimize any doubt or counter-argument that might run counter to the consensus; (f) a shared illusion of unanimity around a decision that would be in line with the group's vision; (g) the presence of mindguards that prevent this unanimity from being challenged, by filtering out unfavorable judgments, information and opinions coming from outside; (h) direct pressure on any member to express strong arguments against the group's stereotypes and illusions, in order to reinforce members' loyalty to the group(4). The author points out that groupthink is present when the majority (5 to 6) of these symptoms are present.

Let us now examine whether these symptoms of groupthink are present in European decision-making on Ukraine. The illusion of invulnerability of European leaders and their advisors leads to an overestimation of their ability to control events, assuming that "Good" will defeat "Evil" (symptoms a and c). Europeans believe in their invulnerability, in their moral superiority, and do not hesitate to promote a risky policy, even a very risky one. As Vertzberger reminds us: "decision-making groups that have a record of successful decisions or believe in the superior abilities of their members because of past performance and achievement, or that believe they are guided to make risky decisions, are more likely than other decision-making circles to make risky decisions. This is an extreme case of the broader phenomenon of the illusion of control" (5). European decision-makers tend to have a very high self-esteem, which makes them impervious and deaf to any information that does not support their perception. Information is thus filtered and sorted on the basis of the decision-makers' beliefs, and not on the relevance and importance of the facts themselves. It is also possible to observe a biased interpretation of facts that does not conform to reality. Much of the information that arrives about the situation in Ukraine is selected in such a way that only information that supports or justifies a predetermined policy is retained (symptom b). Consciously or unconsciously, many political and military decision-makers fall into the trap of "biased evidence": they look for information that confirms their point of view or their intuition and neglect information that could contradict them (6).

There is no doubt that in the case of the war in Ukraine, European decision-makers stereotype, stigmatize and label the opponent (symptom d). As the available data and the author's conversations with decision-makers and advisors demonstrate, self-censorship (symptom e) is present. This leads to the next symptom, namely the illusion of unanimity (symptom f). In fact, if the EU and its members are unanimous in their support for Ukraine at the military level, there is no unanimity as to the means to be used (for example, heavy tanks) and the objectives to be reached. At most, there is an operational consensus at the EU level. It is likely that there is a presence of gatekeepers, i.e. those people who strive to protect the group from opinions,

analyses and advice that would call into question the defined approach (symptom g). Finally, pressure is exerted by some EU members on others as soon as the latter express divergent points of view (h). Thus, as soon as President Macron or Chancellor Scholz express themselves on possible negotiations, they are put under pressure to retract their statements.

Most of the symptoms of groupthink are thus present in the European decision-making process, even though the literature on avoiding these symptoms and their dangerous consequences is abundant. There are indeed ways to protect oneself from the groupthink trap. The first safeguard is to have a devil's advocate at the discussion table. As A.L. George defines it, "The devil's advocate fills a role; it is understood that the person filling that role will advocate an unpopular position that should be considered, but that no one else supports and that the devil's advocate himself does not really favor. Filling an agreed-upon role and not being a real critic is designed, of course, to protect that person and allow him or her to challenge the opinion of the group or the views of the leader. Defined in this way, the limitations as well as the potential value of the role become clear: for a time the devil's advocate introduces some diversity into the group's deliberations or challenges some of the premises that enter into the leader's judgment [but] he or she will not be able to persist in his or her defiance, nor, more importantly, will he or she be able to seek to develop a coalition within the group to oppose, and if possible overcome, the majority" (7). According to this definition, the role of devil's advocate is therefore not filled by someone fundamentally opposed to the policy being pursued, thus avoiding a form of tension or ad hominem opposition. In practice, however, the devil's advocate is often a person with a divergent view. It is therefore necessary to distance oneself from A. George's definition. The devil's advocate ensures that all aspects of the issue are considered and thus succeeds in influencing the decision making. In order for a person to fulfil the role of devil's advocate, he or she must have a strong personality and must also be able to convince some of the discussion partners of the validity of his or her position. A second safeguard against groupthink is the use of people who are not part of the inner decision-making circle. These people are free of commitment and have no emotional attachment to the decision-making unit, and therefore have more detachment from the process; they bring a more

objective, non-judgmental approach to the issue. External advice has its limitations, however, particularly in that external advisors necessarily have limited access to intelligence information.

Finally, the European management of the Ukrainian case represents a textbook case of one of the main errors of strategic thinking, namely the tacticization of strategy. Mao, who theorized about revolutionary war, explained the dangers of losing sight of the nature of the relationship between the part and the whole: when operational considerations on the ground are reified and become strategy as such, the essential connection between the strategic and political levels breaks down. How can the use of a given tactic, equipment or movement in the field be reconnected to a general political project without going through the strategic level? To be meaningful, the tactics used must certainly be effective at the operational level, but above all they must be relevant within the framework of the general strategy defined beforehand and modified according to the reality on the ground. By focusing on the means and modes of combat in Ukraine, European decision-makers lose sight of the more global dynamics of the war and its stakes, which are always intrinsically political. The ensuing decontextualization thus risks leading to strategic myopia, a form of materialistic blindness to the detriment of the political dynamics that begin, explain, lead and end wars.

In conclusion, while it is generally considered that a good decision is one that is based on a rigorous and methodical analysis of the situation, it should be kept in mind that most decisions are the result of subjective judgments, compromises, and consensus, even when they are believed to be based on rational grounds. Janis identifies seven factors that contribute to effective decision making, which many European decision-makers could learn from:

- 1) analysis of the policy objectives to be achieved, taking into account the multiplicity of values and interests at stake;
- 2) the study of as many alternatives as possible;

- 3) the search for new information to evaluate the alternatives;
- 4) Proper assimilation of expert information or analysis, even if the information or judgment does not support the initial preferred course of action;
- 5) reconsideration of the positive and negative consequences of alternatives originally considered unacceptable, before making a decision;
- 6) careful consideration of the cost and risk of different alternatives;
- 7) detailed consideration of the control and enforcement of the course of action taken, with particular emphasis on the planning that may be required if certain risks materialize (8).

References

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