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Review Article

Uncertainty and Miscalculation in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Role of Bureaucratic Structures

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Abstract

Drawing on Tyler Jost's *Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation*, this review article engages with the book's themes and examines the institutional causes of failures in international crises. It first outlines Jost's core argument, that variation in national security institutional design explains why leaders misjudge the likely costs and outcomes of conflict more than regime type or leader personality. It then situates Jost's theory within broader literatures on misperception, cognitive bias, and organizational behavior, and reflects on key assumptions about bureaucratic competence, the reliability of intelligence, and the clarity of information to explore how even accurate information can be distorted by individual and institutional filters. The review also considers additional pathways to miscalculation beyond those explored in the book and examines the policy implications of Jost's framework for alliance durability, the behavior of authoritarian states like China, and the risks posed by fragmented institutions in democratic nations. Jost's work is an important contribution to the study of foreign policy decision-making, and this article raises further questions about the limits of institutional design in a world shaped by uncertainty and political self-preservation.

Keywords: miscalculation; foreign policy decision-making; bureaucratic politics; national security institutions; intelligence failure

When Britain's most senior military officer, General Sir Nick Carter, warned in 2021 that the world faces "the greatest risk in decades of a miscalculation" that could lead to war between Russia and the West, he captured a concern long echoed in both academic and policy circles: that conflict is often less the product of deliberate aggression than of misunderstanding, misperception, and flawed decision-making.

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Miscalculation has been widely recognized in the literature as a pathway to international crises. Even when states act rationally and have access to high-quality information, they may still stumble into conflict due to cognitive biases, distorted perceptions, bureaucratic dysfunction, or failure in information flows. Robert Jervis identified multiple sources of biased perception, including the desire for cognitive consistency, selective learning from history, resistance to changing beliefs, and the tendency to interpret others' actions as more intentional than they are.[1] Decision-makers can interpret new information through preexisting cognitive frames that can lead to systematic errors in judgement. Richard Betts similarly observed that intelligence failure is "political and psychological more often than organizational" and are in many cases inevitable.[2] More recent studies have extended this analysis to new domains such as cyberspace, where semigoverned environments, cognitive frameworks, heuristics, and rigid organizational cultures heighten the risks of misinterpretation and inadvertent escalation. The growing integration of AI-driven systems into military operations further complicates assessment, as uncertainty about how such technologies are embedded in adversarial command structures increases the potential for misinterpretation.[3]

What explains why some states misjudge the costs and outcomes of international crises more than others? In *Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation*, Tyler Jost offers a compelling and original institutional theory to answer this question.[4] Drawing on a rich array of historical case studies and a novel cross-national dataset, Jost finds that factors like regime type, leader personality, or elite hawkishness do not sufficiently explain why leaders often fail to achieve objectives in crises they create. He challenges the conventional wisdom that more bureaucracy necessarily leads to worse strategic outcomes and greater miscalculation. Instead, Jost argues that well-functioning bureaucracies, those that expand information search, improve information quality through inter-agency dialogue, and impose institutional checks on rash decision-making, can reduce the risk of costly errors. Variation in the structure of national security institutions, he contends, best explains variation in crisis outcomes, and in particular why states often initiate crises that end in policy failures.

From the outset of this book, Jost introduces the simple but powerful idea that leaders rarely make foreign policy decisions in isolation, yet the quality of their choices depends on how well they can gather and interpret information from the bureaucratic institutions around them. He sets the stage by identifying the central puzzle he aims to solve: why are some leaders more prone to miscalculation even when they have access to large and robust security institutions? The answer lies in the design of those institutions that mediate the flow of information. Jost challenges the presumption that greater bureaucratic input binarily improves decisions. Instead, outcomes depend on institutional trade-offs and information quality, including whether institutions encourage competitive deliberation or reinforce hierarchy, insulation, and distortion.

[1] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[2] Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (1978): 61–89, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009967.

[3] Nicholas D. Wright, ed., *Artificial Intelligence, China, Russia, and the Global Order* (Air University Press, 2019), http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19585.

[4] Tyler Jost, *Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009307253.

The argument of the book is intuitive and convincing. Jost classifies national security institutions into four types depending on leader information search capacity and bureaucratic access to information: integrated, siloed, dictatorial, and fragmented. Integrated institutions, which foster inclusive deliberation and horizontal communication among defense, diplomatic, and intelligence bodies, provide the highest quality information. They enable bureaucrats to cross-check one another's advice and create incentives to search for relevant data, ultimately reducing the leader's risk of strategic error. However, these same institutions also empower bureaucrats politically. In both democracies and autocracies, competent and well-informed officials can challenge, embarrass, or even depose leaders, either through public dissent or, in extreme cases, through coups. The paradox is that the institutional arrangements best suited for sound decision-making also expose leaders to heightened political risk.

By contrast, siloed institutions have bureaucracies report vertically to the leader; however, they lack mechanisms for horizontal coordination. Fragmented institutions exclude bureaucrats from the decision-making process altogether. Both types reduce political threats to leaders, but at a steep strategic cost. Siloed institutions often produce biased or incomplete information that goes unchallenged, while fragmented institutions demotivate bureaucrats from producing relevant information in the first place. As a result, this causes states to experience more frequent miscalculations based on insufficient or inaccurate information. In choosing a national security institution, the decision-making process of the leader is dependent on how they balance informational quality against political risk. Dictatorial institutions are rarely encountered, and thus Jost does not spend much time analyzing them.

Jost's framework posits hypotheses about both the sources of institutional design and the causes of decision-making failures during crises. These propositions are tested against alternatives through a multimethod approach. This is where the book really excels. First, Jost conducts a large-N statistical analysis based on his own *National Security Institutions Data Set*, which traces institutional designs across 152 countries from 1946 to 2015. Leveraging this dataset, he finds that integrated institutions see greater success in achieving their goals during international crises relative to nonintegrated institutions, generating support for his institutional theory of miscalculation. He also finds that institutional choices are shaped by leader-specific political calculations, especially the perceived threat of bureaucratic dissent and the focus of the leader's agenda. For me, the biggest contribution of this section is his assessment that institutional design is a better predictor of crisis decision-making than regime type.

The most interesting component, however, are the five in-depth case studies Jost conducts to demonstrate the applicability of the institutional theory across regime types: China under Mao, China after Mao, India, Pakistan, and the United States during the early Cold War. Relying on interviews and archival materials, Jost reviews each crisis, identifies the leader's objectives, and evaluates whether those objectives were achieved by the end of the crisis.[5] Jost shows not only that national security institutions are not as "sticky" as previously thought but also that institutional design had a decisive impact on the likelihood and nature of miscalculation during crises.

[5] Jost, *Bureaucracies at War*, 79.

Chapter 4 explores China under Mao Zedong; it shows how a shift from integrated to fragmented institutions during the Cultural Revolution created strategic miscalculations in the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict. While Mao initially permitted inclusive deliberation in crises like the 1962 Taiwan Strait Crisis, he later insulated himself from bureaucratic institutions in the face of growing internal disloyalty. The next chapter extends this analysis to post-Mao China. Jost finds that although China moved away from personalist rule, the country still favored fragmented and siloed institutions over integrated institutions due to persistent political distrust of the bureaucracy. This helps explain misjudgments in both the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and the 2001 EP-3 crisis with the United States. In both instances, the lack of institutionalized cross-bureaucratic scrutiny led Chinese leaders to make overly confident assumptions about adversary intentions and likely responses.

Chapter 6 turns to India and illustrates the costs of fragmentation under democratic rule. During the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Jost shows that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru marginalized defense voices in favor of his civilian advisers, leading to an information-poor decision to escalate along the Himalayas. Decades later, India adopted an integrated institutional framework. This culminated in the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC), which in turn generated information that helped mitigate missteps during the 2001–2002 Twin Peaks Crisis with Pakistan. Jost then shows that Pakistan consistently favored siloed institutions over integrated institutions due to the persistent threat of military coups. This resulted in the approval of the 1999 Kargil War by then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, which in turn stymied the potential for long-term peace with India. Jost shows that Sharif was deprived of the institutional mechanisms, and thereby sufficient information, to critically evaluate military advice.

Lastly, Jost turns his attention to the United States. Here, he shows that democracies with integrated institutions are not immune to miscalculation. Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the robust and integrated model of the National Security Council was essential in addressing conflicts like the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis. However, under President Lyndon B. Johnson—and to a lesser extent, under John F. Kennedy—domestic priorities and fears of bureaucratic dissent led to the marginalization of the NSC in favor of informal and siloed decision-making through "Tuesday Luncheons." This fragmentation played a key role in encouraging escalatory actions in Vietnam; flawed intelligence and insular decision-making made room for disastrous misjudgments.

The case studies are designed to show that miscalculation might have been avoided if leaders had incorporated information the bureaucracy already possessed at the time. But this treats information as clear and factual, when in reality, assessments are often based on incomplete information, not only with different bureaucracies interpreting it differently but even at the individual level. To be fair, Jost argues that institutional design is only one component, but a reader cannot help but think about Erik Gartzke's contention that situations like war just have too many variables for any bureaucracy or leader to be able to adequately consider, let alone gather sufficient information,[6] that is "perfect projections"

[6] Erik Gartzke, "War Is in the Error Term," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999): 567–87, https://doi.org/10.1162/002081899550995.

are never possible.[7] Additionally, the book suggests that bureaucrats, more so than leaders, have access to complete and high-quality information and are motivated to share it. In other words, it is not only leaders who "lack complete information about the outcome and costs of initiating a crisis relative to other strategic alternatives available to the state."[8] But bureaucrats also suffer in this way.

In other words, it is unclear how arguments about competency and efficiency of bureaucracies in creating knowledge interact with the institutional design theory. Jost identifies two pathways to miscalculation: either leaders lack the information that bureaucrats possess, or that information is of low quality. But bureaucrats might not be halfhearted or purposefully distort information they relay—there are other pathways to miscalculation. Even when intelligence is accurate and bureaucracies are functioning effectively, political leaders may still miscalculate due to cognitive biases. As Jervis famously observed, "Decision-makers tend to fit incoming information into their existing theories and images."[9] This leads to the dismissal or distortion of intelligence that conflicts with prior beliefs, political agendas, or wishful thinking.[10] Or as Keren Yarhi-Milo shows in *Knowing the Adversary*, decision-makers and intelligence organizations use different filters in how they assess the intentions of adversaries in that they tend to prioritize emotionally compelling, concrete, and directly experienced information, such as face-to-face interactions or personal impressions.[11] In contrast, intelligence organizations pay selective attention to indicators that align with their bureaucratic expertise, typically material capabilities, and interpret signals through the lens of their institutional mission. As a result, perceptions of adversary intentions diverge between leaders and bureaucrats, even when both are examining the same set of available signals. Crises, by definition, require leaders to make decisions in a time-sensitive environment—but it remains unclear what types of bureaucracies can collate information quickest and how much information is "enough" to make informed decisions.

In his final chapter, Jost emphasizes that this research is a highly relevant corrective to theories that overemphasize regime type, public accountability, or elite preferences in explaining foreign policy decisions. His book suggests that the design of national security institutions, and the extent to which they foster bureaucratic competition, conditions how leaders perceive and respond to international threats. Bureaucratic institutions can be an asset to leaders, but trade-offs between informational quality and political risk build resistance to institutional reform.

Jost's book also raises a number of questions about the applicability of his theory and its policy relevance. For example, Jost argues that "leaders who confront salient international threats should be more likely to adopt the siloed institutions. . . . In contrast, leaders whose survival depends on addressing domestic crises . . . may instead opt for fragmented or dictatorial institutions."[12] This touches upon a debate about the current leader of China, Xi Jinping, and the degree to which economic issues impact decisions about the use of force. While Jost does not mention it

[7] Jost, *Bureaucracies at War,* 23.

[8] Jost, *Bureaucracies at War,* 23.

[9] Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (1968): 454–79, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009777.

[10] Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," 460–62; Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision," 65–67.

[11] Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjvf7.

[12] Jost, *Bureaucracies at War,* 73.

explicitly, his argument suggests that we can backtrack from the observable—the nature of China's national security institutions—to the threat perceptions of an otherwise opaque leader. Jost also mentions that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between being allied with the United States and adopting integrated institutions,[13] which raises questions about allied decision-making in crises—that is, how does the institutional design variable work in a dyadic relationship? Is it sufficient that one ally has an integrated system, or do both need such institutions in order to make favorable decisions regarding the use of force? Are leaders in siloed or fragmented institutions more likely to overestimate the amount of support they will get from allies during a crisis, and is this a reason why U.S. alliances have been relatively more durable than others over the past 75 years? Do institutions impact performance not only in crises but also in strategic competition? One can imagine that selecting into crises that fail to achieve objectives could make a country less competitive over time in the international system.

Jost's theory not only makes a significant contribution to several areas of international relations, on bureaucracies, information and accountability, and the origins of national security institutions, it also provides insight into contemporary policy issues. It is difficult not to think about the Trump administration and DOGE when reading Jost's arguments about how some leaders feel threatened by the expertise of bureaucracy, and thus they purposefully weaken it. In Jost's words, "Leaders opt out of integrated institutions when they believe that the bureaucracy possesses the capability and intent to politically harm them."[14] President Trump, with his domestic focus, seems to follow Jost's logic in creating fragmented institutions, which "insulates the leader's decision-making processes from the bureaucracy and raises costs for bureaucrats to relay information to leaders."[15] The result, Jost warns, may be miscalculation in crises due to incomplete information delivery to the leaders.

Overall, Jost's work is an important addition to the existing body of literature on foreign policy decision-making. It explains why leaders can and do make catastrophic errors, along with why they may choose institutional arrangements that increase their propensity to make such errors. Jost's sobering conclusion is that miscalculation is not merely the result of bad judgment or irrationality. Rather, it is often a predictable byproduct of political self-preservation. For scholars and policymakers alike, *Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation* offers an urgent reminder to leaders, bureaucrats, and private citizens: the road to war is often paved not just with poor intelligence but with institutions designed to promote obscurity, distortion, and restriction over healthy competition and information cost-reduction.

[13] Jost, *Bureaucracies at War,* 74.
[14] Jost, *Bureaucracies at War,* 11.
[15] Jost, *Bureaucracies at War,* 9.