

Risk Acceptant Behavior in International Politics:

The status quo, including the rules, norms, and relationships of international relations, designed by the US and their western allies which has remained relatively static since World War II is evolving before our eyes. The United States' relative power is in decline and while the US remains a hegemon atop the international hierarchy, the challenging Chinese are on the rise. The coming years will see the current network of relations that makeup international relations evolve as nations attempt to improve their position within this insecure status quo. We should not be surprised when risk acceptant actors take drastic actions in an attempt to change the status quo in their favor.

One of the key tenets of Power Transition theory is status quo evaluations, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the current status quo and a nations position within the global hierarchy. This is not a binary evaluation but rather a gradient. Highly satisfied nations like the United States or Germany may still have dissatisfaction with elements of the status quo, but prefer their current position to any change that will weaken their position. Since they are satisfied, they work together to maintain the status quo and this mutual agreement creates trust within their dynamic interactions. Similarly, pairs of nations that are dissatisfied may develop similar trust based on this mutual dissatisfaction with the status quo. This dissatisfied dyad will prefer a shift in the status quo that improves their position in the international status quo.

Satisfied and dissatisfied nations are various in all variables, but dissatisfied nations have, on average, a much greater risk propensity. Dissatisfied nations are much more likely to be risk acceptant, willing to take gambles that may be unlikely, but if successful improve their position significantly. In 2014, a risk acceptant Russia took a gamble invading Crimea to improve their position. They risked an alignment of western powers against their invasion and a strong response, as a combined western alliance could overpower Russia. Alternatively, satisfied nations are risk averse, often seeking a minmax approach (minimum cost with the maximum reward). A western alliance could put boots on the ground and push Russia out of Crimea, but this would be at great cost. The man and military power to simply push them out would cost billions, not to even mention the possible but exceedingly unlikely chance of nuclear war which would push the cost even higher. The maintainers of the status quo, the US and west, weighed the importance of Crimea to the status quo relatively low, not worth the cost of maintaining it. Alternatively, the Russians understood the invasion was a risk, with high potential costs, but calculated that the risk-averse west would face high costs to push back the invasion. The Russians accepted the risk, and potential costs, but the US did not accept the risk and potential costs. Russia demonstrated a law of international relations, risk acceptant actors may challenge the status quo, even if incredibly risky, if the potential reward from succeeding is large.

Deterrence fails when it lacks credibility. Russia called the western bluff of extended deterrence to Ukraine in 2014 with the invasion of Crimea. In 2022, Russia tried to repeat this trick, but has met much stronger resistance than in 2014. One critical difference is the US mindset, with a rising China, the US and their western allies want to demonstrate their resolve to deter changes to the status quo, especially from the Chinese alliance of dissatisfied nations.

Deterrence's reliance on credibility makes it frail, when it loses credibility its value plummets, but when you demonstrate your resolve in matters of deterrence, its value skyrockets.

Deterrence is the weapon of satisfied nations attempting to maintain the status quo and prevent dissatisfied nations from taking action to challenge the status quo. Risk acceptance is the weapon of dissatisfied nations, they may take action that they can only hope to win, if it is uncredible deterrence, but they may take this risk rather than maintaining their current position. This risk acceptance can increase as an individual or parties grip in tenuous positions, based on the simple logic that if things go well their position may be saved and if things go bad what did they have to lose.

We have all seen the gambler who lost 500 dollars decide to go back to the table with 100 more dollars to try and win it back. We have seen Russia go back to the table; we should not be surprised when we see others sit down at the table to gamble.