

Decision-making in Russia's Foreign Policy Modelling Russia's Decision-Making with reference to Ukraine and Moldova (2004-2018)

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Received: August 2, 2021

Accepted: September 21, 2021

Available online: September 27, 2021

doi:10.11114/ijsss.v9i6.5364

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v9i6.5364>

Abstract

There is a substantial body of literature on Russian foreign policy; however, the decision-making aspect remains comparatively less explored. The ambition of this research developed in two directions; on a practical level, it contributes to knowledge on Russia's foreign policy decision-making and, on a conceptual plane, to scholarship by way of theory development, underpinning academic research on decision-making in foreign policy. Russia's decision-making was first viewed through the prism of the Rational Actor Model and Incrementalism; however, their utility was found to be limited. Blended models also did not figure strongly. Through the prism of author's proposed model of Strategic Incrementalism and its principles, this research demonstrates that Russia's foreign-policy decision-making is far from a case of 'muddling through,' it retains a long-term purposefulness, and that its incremental decisions are guided by farsightedness. The simplicity and general applicability of the model potentially suggest its broader utility.

Keywords: Russia, decision-making, foreign policy

1. Introduction

Observing Russian actions following the German invasion of Poland, Churchill commented that "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma..." (1946, p. 403). He also proposed the key to this riddle, Russia's long-term interests. Russia's foreign policy decision-making represents an example of interest-driven foreign policy that straddles multiple contemporary decision-making paradigms. Studying foreign policy from a decision-making perspective is not new (Snyder, Bruck, & Sapin, 1954; Mintz & De Rouen, 2010; Renshon & Renshon, 2008; Yarger, 2006; Rynnig, 2015). As in any other public policy areas, decisions in foreign policy are made on a daily basis; however, the context in which these decisions are made is complex and fluid. This is due to the diversity of variables that, according to Mintz and de Rouen (2010, p. 4), include decision environment, psychological factors, international and domestic factors. Adaptation on the part of decision-makers, their ability to grasp the diversity of options and chose those that are the most appropriate within given circumstances, is an essential requirement of good decision-making. From the analysis point of view, this represents a major challenge as only limited patterns can be established; hence, there are limitations for the development of theoretical frameworks. There, however, is an opportunity for research to contribute through systematic analysis of case studies drawing upon similarities and differences in decisional patterns and behaviours, borrowing from Henry Mintzberg's idea of strategy as emergent and a pattern in a stream of actions (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996).¹

There is a substantial body of literature on Russian foreign policy (Dawisha, 2015; Light, 2003; Giusti & Penkova, 2008; Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2012; Iliopoulos, 2014); however, the decision-making aspect remains comparatively less explored. The ambition of this research is two-fold; on a practical level, it contributes to knowledge on Russia's foreign policy decision-making and, on a conceptual plane, to scholarship by way of theory development, underpinning academic research on decision-making in foreign policy. The central thesis is built on the preamble that Russia's foreign policy decisions is not captured in the two popular approaches; namely, rational actor behaviour (Allison & Zelikow, 1999) and 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959) – or the hybrid derivatives of these models that emphasise structure over agency, such as mixed scanning approach (Etzioni, 1967). The thesis put forward is that Russia's foreign policy decision-making is based on strategic incrementalism that is not captured by contemporary rational or incremental decision models.

2. Methodology

The analytical framework for this research is derived from analysis of two major structural theoretical models, namely the Rational Actor Model (RAM (Allison & Zelikow, 1999)) and the Incremental decision-making model (Lindblom, 1959). The empirical analysis is built around a set of functional and contextual indicators derived from the analytical framework developed by the author based on these models.

This research employs qualitative methods for data collection and analysis using an inductive approach; implicit therein is the need for a new theoretical model. To this end, patterns of decision are examined from an aspirational perspective, using official documents and rhetoric, and the contextual application of these in Russia's relations with Ukraine and Moldova. The systematic analysis of official documents is used to establish a baseline which is then applied to the two case studies. A set of indicators was developed using the Rational Actor Model, Incremental decision-making model and Etzioni's mixed scanning approach.

The empirical part of the research focuses on two selected case studies, namely Ukraine and Moldova during the period 2004 - 2018. The reason for choosing these two particular case studies is based on shared geography and history. It is also based on political and economic differences between the two, as well as on different levels of individual strategic importance to Russia and recent history. Both countries are part of what is considered to be the natural zone of influence for Russia, which is the single most common factor between the two. And yet, both expressed a desire to integrate into Western economic and political structures and in the case of Ukraine into military structures as well. This research focuses on a significant and particularly revealing period in the context of expression of Russian foreign policy. For the purpose of closure and to allow analysis to be contained, this research is temporally bound between January 2004 and December 2018. The starting year, 2004, is significant from both an external and an internal point of view. External factors, such as NATO and EU's eastward expansion, directly affected Russia's relations with the West and its neighbours. From the internal perspective, 2004 is significant as a year of transition and the consolidation of presidential powers that had a direct impact on the way the decisions were made.

The data used in this research comes from primary sources such as official texts, documents, political statements, directives, legal documents, treaties, speeches, and news reports, commentaries and institutional publications. Media reports, published in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Western outlets, and relevant on-line material such as blogs are also be used. Secondary sources such as existing data sets, scholarly literature and analysis are also used. Triangulation of official documents, scholarly literature and grey literature sources was done to ensure the reliability of data and sources. Essentially, the available data were examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge in the nature of decision-making as relevant to this research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

3. Decision-Making in Foreign Policy

Foreign policy decisions are typically characterised by high stakes, enormous uncertainty, and substantial risk (Renshon & Renshon, 2008, p. 509). Decisions occur in an environment that Barber describes as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (1992; Yarger, 2006, pp. 11-14). The decisions themselves more often than not are complex and appear puzzling not only for the outsiders but also for insiders. The monopoly of government, or rather a small group within the government, in decision-making is also expressed in its highest degree (perhaps only comparable with defence policy). Renshon and Renshon (2008, p. 511) take the argument on monopolisation further, putting an emphasis on the role of individual leaders arguing that no crises or war can be understood "without direct reference to the decision-making of individual leaders". Lunenberg (2010) echoes this argument saying that while decision-making is an important administrative process, it is fundamentally a people process. The emphasis on agency is clearly evident in relatively recent literature.

Foundation Decision-Making Models

The RAM is one of the key models used in explaining decision-making and will be used in this research as one of the two basis models for analysis, alongside Lindblom's Incremental Model. This model takes a different approach within the structural categories (such as aims, objectives and actors) and provides a useful theoretical framework of its own, and in synthesis with the more rigid RAM.

Rational Actor Model

The salient feature of the RAM, commonly used in analysing international events,ⁱⁱ is the explanation of international events by recounting the aims and the calculations of national governments (Allison & Zelikow, 1999, p. 30). Despite its limitations, the model offers a useful foundation and theoretical framework for analysis. The model assumes that human behaviour is a goal-directed activity that becomes rational through consistency in both goals and objectives relative to a particular action and application of principles in order to select an optimal alternative (p. 33); and emphasising structure over agency. In other words, to choose rationally is to choose the alternative that maximises the

output for a given input. The decision-maker selects the alternative in terms of utility and foreseeable consequences in order of preference (p. 34). RAM premises on purposefulness in everyday decisions. Rationality imposes a consistent, value-maximising choice within specified constraints. The model assumes a somewhat rigid methodology of decision-making that requires pre-set steps to be taken to arrive at a rational choice.

The model could be visualised in the following way:

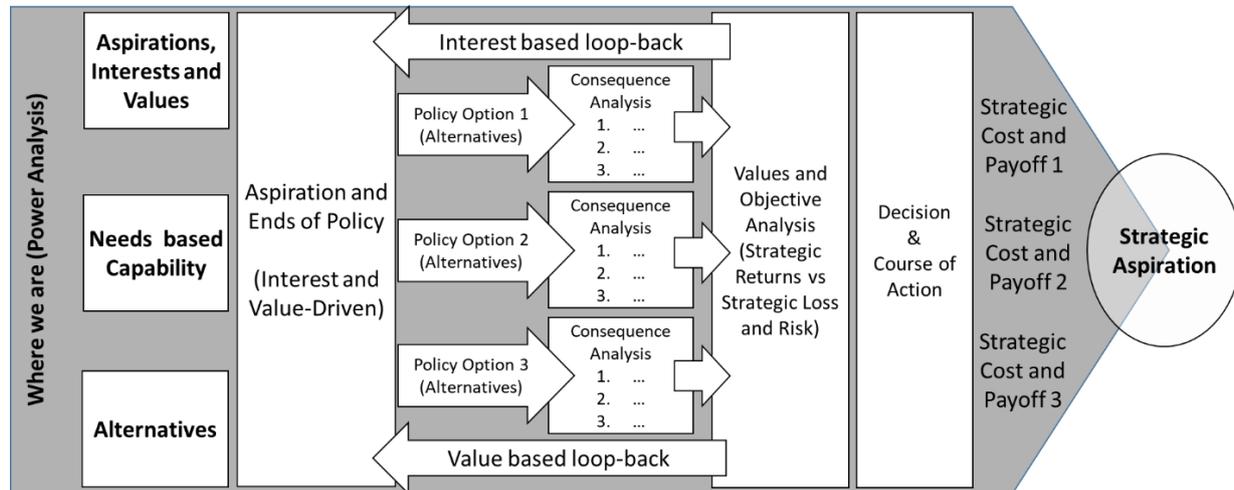


Figure 1. Author's Illustration of Allison and Zelikow's Rational Actor Model

Critique of the Rational Actor Model

The emphasis on the process of consistently ranking all alternatives and consequences remains a major criticism of the model.ⁱⁱⁱ There is rigidity in the model which prevents it from dealing with uncertainties, arguably making this model impossible to implement (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). The model diminishes the role of agency and human behaviour by narrowing the analysis to a focus on end-goals of the decision-maker which presuppose symmetry of priorities, cultural context, and interpretation of ongoing events on part of the opposing side. Decision-makers invariably attach a personal spin to decisions.

Simon (1985; 1982), being a *rationalist* himself, argued that what we actually refer to when talking about rationality, implies bounded rationality – that is rationality that is bounded by human nature, the boundaries of which are impossible to define *a priori*. Bounded rationality (as opposed to Allison's original model) specifies the core concepts of objectives, alternatives, consequences and choices by assumptions or empirical evidence about the specific actor; in other words bringing to fore the role of agency. It recognises the unavoidable limitations of knowledge and human ability and dissonance (Simon, 1985, p. 297). Political psychologist Robert Jervis (1976) takes the argument further, arguing that agents have limits to their cognitive capacities. Other authors in their discussions also supported the importance of agency (Shepsle & Bonchek, 1997, pp. 15-36). Understanding the role of agency becomes more important for the analysis of decision-making; which is undervalued in the RAM. Jervis (1976) argues that once a leader believes in something, that perception would influence the way they perceive all other relevant information.

Allison and Zelikow's model is focussed on the process of arriving to a decision and does not explicitly discuss the implementation, albeit the model does refer to the application of means. Other authors, such as Anthony Dawn (1957), suggest that the rationality factor extends to the implementation stage as the decision-maker will choose the reasonable way to reach their set objectives. However, even the most calculated approach could eventually lead to undesirable outcomes.

Incremental Model

Linblom identified a set of distinctive steps in the decision-making process that he called 'successive limited comparisons' or incremental steps. Incrementalism takes a different approach premised on the disparity between a rational actor's requirements and their decision-making capacities. RAM does not take into account the decision-making capacity and is, therefore, the main critique of the RAM by proponents of other models (Braybrooke & Linblom, 1963; Lindblom, 1979; Lindblom, 1965; Etzioni, 1967). Due to the complex nature of problems that decision-makers have to face regarding international relations, they are not amenable to total rationality. Decision-makers "must start from the existing policy and take, remedial steps to cope with problems as they arise" (Jervis, 1976, p. 77).

The free competition model of economics influences Lindblom’s model; it rejects the notion of centralisation in decision-making, looking for a collective ‘good’. The model is based on numerous actors, and the decision is a product of agreement among themselves. However, Lindblom only indirectly discussed the distributive nature of incremental decision-making. He did not devote much attention at all to actors, concentrating on the process instead. It emerged in later writings that often-presented incrementalism as the typical decision-making process of pluralistic societies, as contrasted with the master planning of totalitarian societies (Etzioni, 1967). Putnam (1988, p. 432) followed this premise in his discussion on decision-making in pluralistic societies, arguing that decision-makers are not a monolithic body. This conclusion is opposite to the premise of the RAM that emphasises the unitary nature of decision-making.

Critique of the Incremental Model

Policy to attain certain objectives and objectives are chosen simultaneously (Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963, pp. 82-83). This particular feature of the Incremental Model deprives it of being considered strategic and lacking goal orientation, which is one of the model's main criticisms. Incrementalism to Spanier is a ‘policy machine in low gear, moving along a well-defined road rather slowly’ (Woodhouse & Collingridge, 1993). Critics of the Incremental Model would say that the model is appropriate for a narrow range of decisions and cannot be applied to fundamental decisions. On the other hand, Lindblom asserts that even incremental changes to policies could lead to major changes over time (that in itself could be an objective) and as such be a deliberate political strategy, whether overt or covert. Lindblom further noted that his model does not neglect long-run considerations, although he provides no detail of how incrementalism incorporates a long-term and strategic perspective on ends-ways-means.

Blended Models

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni attempts to capitalise on the strengths of both models while mitigating their respective shortfalls through a blended model that he describes as Mixed Scanning. This model is designed as a balancing act between the RAM and Incremental Model. Lindblom himself saw the two models of decision-making as mutually supporting, as did other authors (Smith & May, 1980). In the Mixed Scanning model fundamental decisions are frequently prepared by incremental ones so that the final decision will initiate less abrupt substantial changes (Etzioni, 1967). Gradual changes are remedial, serial and exploratory. While they focus on specific ills or issues, rather than comprehensive reforms, decision-makers can pursue long-term change through a sequence of moves; as posited in Lindblom’s model (Braybrook & Lindblom, 1970). Etzioni’s model and other blended models emphasise structure over strategy since, in the short term structures are difficult to develop or change; strategy, therefore, must conform to what existing structures offer (Quinn, 1980; Elbanna, 2006).

Figure 2 is a graphical representation of Mixed Scanning Model and Incremental Model:

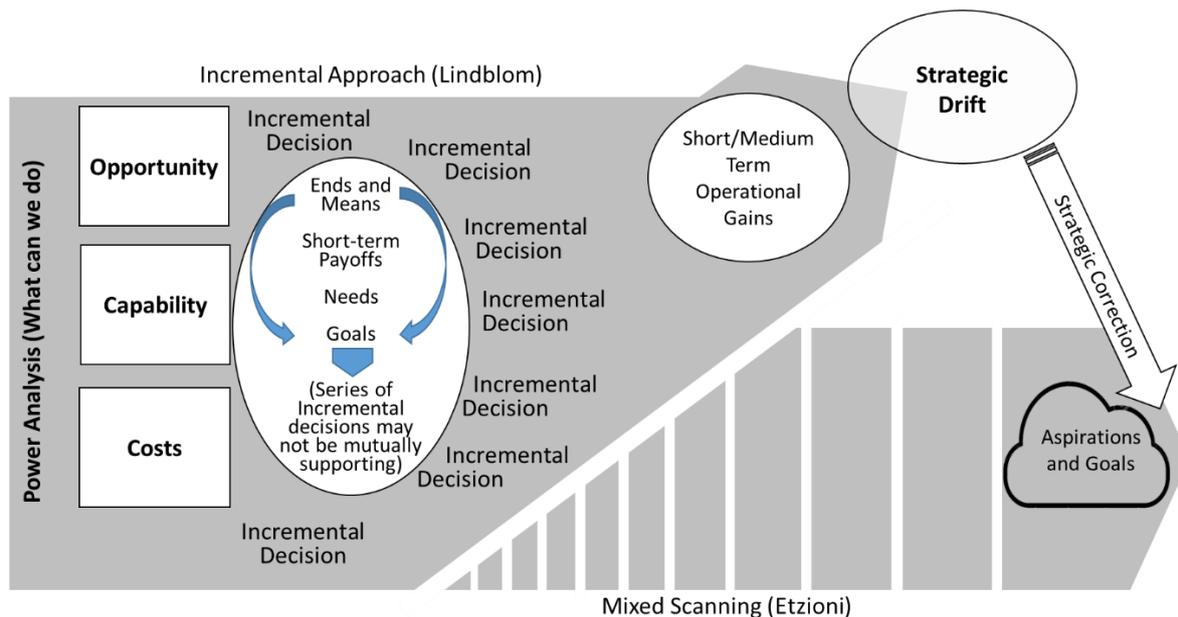


Figure 2. Author’s Illustration of Incremental Model and Mixed Scanning Model

4. Towards a Third Model

The utility of hybrid models remains questionable. Etzioni constrains his approach by remaining bounded to the fundamental premises, namely the place of structure and agency and strategy and structure. There is a case to consider new models that recognise the role of agency and put strategy before structure (Chandler, 1962), while continuing to draw on the exceptional work presented in the basic models and their further development through the work of Simon, Etzioni, Quinn, among others.^{iv} Strategic Incrementalism demonstrates theoretical grounding and practical relevance.

Strategic Incrementalism: A Conceptual Model

The aspirational principles on which the exploratory Strategic Incrementalism model is built are:

1. **Aims and Objectives.** Decisions are selectively emergent, guided by a predetermined strategic direction. How far a direction can be rationally travelled (ends) is moderated by capabilities and context.
2. **Agency versus Structure.** Role of agency and structure in decision-making is balanced by type of actor within the obtaining environment.
3. **Strategy and Structure.** Agency may innovate, disregard or create structures to drive strategy.
4. **Capability and Context.** Opportunities that advance prevailing strategy are exploited after due consideration for prevailing risks and long-term payoffs.

The difference between the model presented above is self-evident and justifies Strategic Incrementalism as a third model as opposed to a hybrid or blended derivative. The flexibility of incrementalism is attractive; however, its lack of strategic direction deprives it of long-term value. The strategic direction should arguably be imbedded in every decision-making process, however small a change is sought. In this exploratory stage of Strategic Incrementalism, both these notions are assumed to control and balance each other. This assertion, together with other features of the model, will need to be revisited after the empirical part of the research.

The resulting model is represented below:

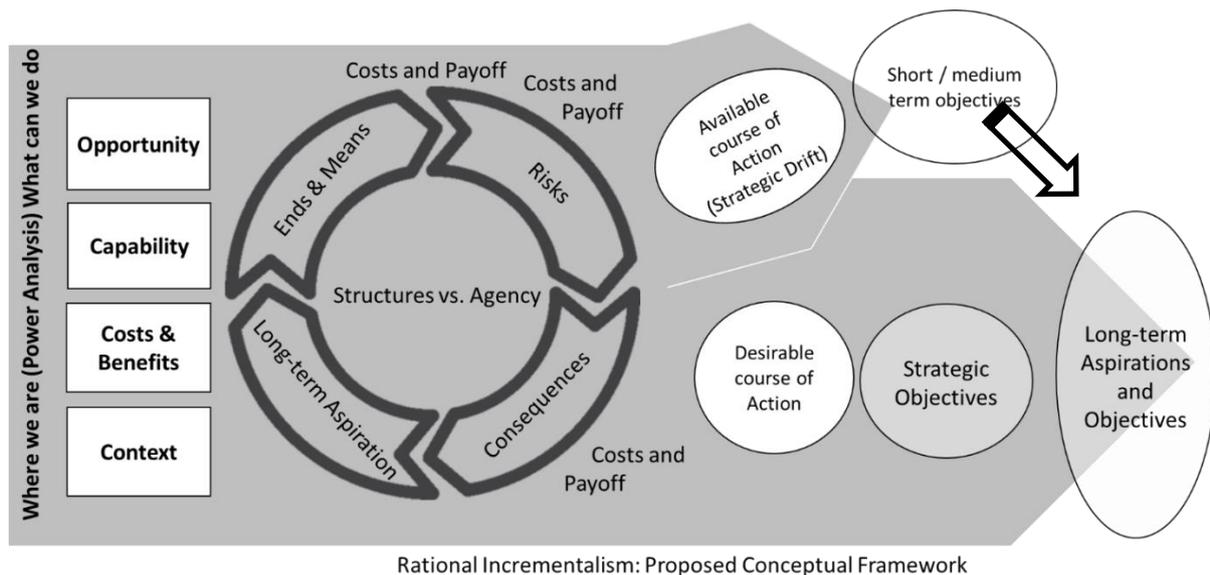


Figure 3. Strategic Incrementalism: A Conceptual Model

The model is an exploratory manifestation of the hypothesis and includes the critical parameters drawn from the basic models' analysis. In this model, the structural foundations of the other models are supplemented with post-structural approaches. The post-structural features, such as the diminished influence of formal state institutions, and an increased role of agency in decision-making, is implicit in this model and needs further investigation.

Framework for Analysis – Functional Indicators

To help guide the empirical analysis, a set of functional indicators have been drawn from the two foundational theoretical models, the RAM and Incrementalism. However, additional indicators need to be adopted to enable the foundational model to be compared against the nuances of Strategic Incrementalism. The indicators are grouped into

three major categories that are prominent in RAM and Incrementalism. These are:

- the process of formulating aims and objectives (addressing questions of ‘why’ and ‘what’);
- the level of formulating and decision-making (addressing the question ‘by whom’); and
- the process of decision-making leading to the application of means (addressing the questions of ‘how’).

Table 1. Functional indicators

| | Conceptual framework | Scale | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| | | 1: Rational Actor Model | 2: Incremental Model | 3: Strategic Incrementalism |
| Aims and Objectives (Why and What?) | Setting aims and objectives | Functional indicators | | |
| | | Strictly defined aims and objectives with possibility of making clear connections between actions and pre-defined aims and objectives. Aims and objectives are not subject to regular reviews; there is continuity over a longer period of time. | Aims and objectives are not set in advance and emerge, being formulated in close correlation with other factors, such as environment and capabilities that may advance their achievements, at a particular point of time. | Aims and objectives are pre-set but can be subject to regular review to reflect changing contexts. The causal link between aims and objectives, and decisions, both fundamental and incremental, can be established. |
| | Objectives exist independent of context – objectives may drive context. | Contexts create objectives. There is a strong correlation between changes and political / economic / social contexts that exist at a given point in time. | Context creates opportunities for actions to advance pre-set objectives. | |
| | Anticipated changes | Change as an end. Aims and objectives are ambitious and are associated with aspiring toward significant social/political/economic changes. | Realising the aspired level of change at a given point of time is limited; change therefore occurs in small steps, the direction for change is determined by context, not strategy. | Combination of small and big changes. Readiness to take a long-term approach to make change happen. Acceptance that not all chosen alternatives can bring in immediate gains and may even bring disadvantages at a given time. |
| | Actors (Including the level of delegation and devolution) | Unitarian model: All decisions are made at the highest political level. | Pluralistic model: A number of actors are involved in the decision-making process, and the final decision is based on a compromise | Balanced model: It is not possible to attribute majority of decision-making to a specific type of actor; allocation depends on the level of decisions (fundamental or low-level), but remains within the prevailing strategy. |
| | The role of agency | The role of structures is prominent. | Structures remain prominent; agency plays a decreased role with the rising number of actors involved in decision-making. | The role of agency is prominent. The relevance is particularly apparent in the fundamental decisions but even low level/incremental decisions can be traced back to actors’ values etc., as these are linked to fundamental changes pursued. |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Application of Means (How?) | Time and consideration are taken to evaluate all possible alternatives to choose the one that will help make maximum advancement towards set objectives. Alternative that leads to the most preferred set of consequences is chosen. | Some attention is given to alternatives, however difference between those is marginal as any change is only a small deviation from the exiting practice and/or approach. The link between the incremental change and a bigger picture is ambiguous. | Alternatives are considered as dictated by context. In fluid context more options may emerge. Actions often appear disjointed and opportunistic; exploiting window of opportunity is, however, selective as the focus remains long-term. |
|------------------------------------|---|--|---|

Author’s generated table

Once applied to each of the case studies, the author should be in a position to conclude which of the three models, if any, prevail. Overarching conclusions can then be drawn as to whether the hypothesis stands or is rejected.

5. Decision-Making in Russian Foreign Policy – Documents and Rhetoric

To help navigate this part of the analysis, a number of strategic documents have been considered, such as Foreign Policy Concepts, National Security Concepts, Military Doctrines, Maritime Doctrines, relevant President’s Executive Orders and Decrees as well as other documents. Political rhetoric expressed through high-level statements, such as annual Presidential addresses to the Parliament, press conferences and interviews, was also included in the analysis. The review and analysis of major strategic documents and rhetoric were based on the analytical framework and the functional indicators. A summary is presented below.

Table 2. Summary of the analysis of the official documents and political rhetoric

| Aims and Objectives (Why and What?) | Conceptual framework | Functional indicators and degree of mapping to the Principles of the Strategic Incrementalism; expressed as high (H), medium (M) and low (L) | |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| | Setting aims and objectives | Russia’s strategic interests have remained consistent. In modifications of objectives, the direction remains consistent. There is a clear causal link between aims and objectives and decisions, both fundamental and incremental. The importance of context as a catalyst or impediment is apparent in thought and action. Ability to shape the context is limited, and hence it brings in a degree of adaptation reflected in the official documents but more profoundly – the opportune use of the context. | RAM Principle 1, M Principle 4, H |
| Anticipated changes | Aspired changes are fundamental (pursuing the aspiration of a great power). It is not time-bound and is moderated by capability and context. | Principle 1, M Principle 4, H | |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|
| | Actors (Including the level of delegation and devolution) | <p>Dominance of the unitarian approach. The President defines foreign policy strategic direction as well as its manifestation at the operational level.</p> <p>The Presidents in their personal views on the role of the state influencing policy represents the role of agency.</p> | <p>RAM</p> <p>Principle 2, H</p> |
| | The role of agency | <p>Agency plays a substantial role in the way decisions are formulated and priorities defined. There is a link between aims and objectives that underpin decisions and actors' values, beliefs, aspirations and experiences.</p> <p>In the combination of rational and incremental approaches to decision-making, the increased role of agency is a nuance.</p> | <p>Principle 2, M</p> <p>Principle 4, H</p> |
| Application of Means (How?) | <p>At the implementation level, the role of strategy over structure. One example is the modification of structures such as abolition and/or restoration of direct election at regional and local levels; the other evidence comes from the swapping of roles between the President and Prime Minister due to constitutional constraints and Putin's need to remain in power while adjusting the system. However, more data will be needed before a conclusion whether this principle maps onto Russia's actions or otherwise.</p> <p>Combination of small and big changes with various degree of difference made. However, fundamental or incremental, these changes are not detached from the overall strategy.</p> | <p>Principle 3, L (due to lack of data)</p> <p>Principle 1, H</p> | |

Author's generated table

While moderated in various iterations of the documents, the directions of foreign policy remain consistent since the 1990s and, in particular, during the temporal boundary of this research. The moderation in ambition, based on the evidence of the analysis of the document and the prevailing environment in which they emerged, suggests a due consideration for context. The discussion above demonstrates how the context influenced the way aspirations were formulated and not vice versa. The major historic shift (collapse of the Soviet Union) has already taken place, what we see here is a subsequent adjustment as a result of a new global order. Hence the moderations are seen to be connected directly to Russia's own ability to pursue national interests (capability), constraints imposed by the external order and events (obtaining environment) and the broader international climate of the time (context). Putin's drive towards the consolidation of power was seen mainly as a move towards authoritarianism. However, it allowed a move away from the multiple foreign policies of the early 1990s. While, from the point of view of removing multiplicity, the centralisation of power by the President (structuration) can be seen in the positive light, it can also be viewed as power accumulation (agency).

6. Decision-Making in Russia's Foreign Policy – The Case of Ukraine

Post-independence Ukraine's relationships with Russia had a rocky beginning. The negotiation process leading to the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, signed in 1994, is an example followed by other examples. As President Putin noted during his visit to Ukraine on 23 April 2004, where the parties exchanged certificates of ratification of the Treaty on State Border between Ukraine and Russia that it "will remove the existing disagreements and will create conditions for the development of Russia-Ukrainian relations in the economic and humanitarian areas" (The Kremlin, 2004).

During the temporal boundary of this research Ukrainian aspirations to align with Western economic, political and military structures became increasingly evident, while Russia's own regional integrational projects were gearing up with Ukraine in mind. This disparity of aspirations could not but impact the relationships between the two countries, setting the context for the decisions taken in Russia in relations to Ukraine. Russia's aims and objectives that remained consisted of Ukraine need to be seen as part of other relevant contexts, such as Russia's positioning in the world, its ambitions in relations to the CIS, and policies towards compatriots abroad as geopolitical constraints among other related contexts. As a maximum Ukraine is seen as part of Russia's-led political and economic structures, such as Eurasian Economic Union that would mean keeping it out of the European Union; in military-political terms to keep Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine,^v and Ukraine out of NATO (which would be two mutually exclusive notions). As a minimum, it would serve as a buffer between Western economic, political and military structures, as Putin affirmed in his UN General Assembly speech in 2015 (The Kremlin, 2015). This is particularly evident in economic terms with Russia remaining the major trading partner and a significant investor in Ukraine's economy (Romanyshyn, 2018).^{vi} Even in the light of political tensions, also reflected in negative public opinions in Russia, the dialogue and collaboration continued based on long-term interests of keeping Ukraine in Russia's sphere of influence. However, Russia's ability to pursue these aims and objectives through creating favourable context was limited, and the reactive elements become more pronounced. Russia appeared to react to threats and opportunities while attempting to make advances towards its longer-term direction.

Application of RAM would consider Russia's actions as inexplicable, whereas Incrementalism would see them as the exploitation of available windows of opportunity and would not link them with long-term objectives. When seen in the light of long-term interest and the obtaining environment, what appears reactive produces actions that are deeply embedded in a strategic outlook. The obtaining environment does not influence aims and objective, only how they are pursued. However, a major shift in context occurred as a result of developments in Ukraine between autumn 2013 to spring 2014. Russia would now have to follow its long-term interests without the possibility of rapprochement with Ukraine. This implied that its ambitions for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a cornerstone of Russia's policy, would need serious modification. Another geopolitical consequence was the potential loss of Russia's naval presence in the Crimea, critical to her domination of the Black Sea and access to the Mediterranean and beyond. In defence of its core interests, the risk and payoff justified what was labelled as a rash action in the Crimea. In 2004, following the "Orange revolution", Russia's actions were only moderate. This disparity is explained by the risks and payoff analysis.

While the engagement of a variety of actors could be observed, decision-making over Ukraine remained largely in the hands of the President who set the main directions and retained control over implementation. Combined with the high level of consolidation of power, strong agency implied, in Ukraine's case, its prevalence over structure in decision-making, where obtaining environment remains a secondary, rather than influencing factor. The overpowering role of agency in driving strategy also implies the prevalence of strategy over structures. Referring to his interest in Sambo and Judo, President Putin assigned importance to the ability 'to feel the moment... to strive for the best results' on a personal website (Putin, 2018). While this may be construed as an opportunist approach, in the light of the discussion so far, it refers to the broader context and the obtaining environment. This points towards strategic 'contextual opportunism'. The environmental factors then inform means by way of constraining or enabling certain instruments of national power. The application of means is not an act of spontaneous thinking and reckless decisions, it was a moment of either seizing the opportunity or arriving at a moment of desperation or a combination of both. "Putin as improviser" discourse concerning Crimea is only valid when discussing it in the context of seizing the opportunity moment but not in the context of the lack of strategy.

Russia's approach to decision-making in Ukraine represents an example of a rational actor taking an incremental approach in advancing its aims and objectives via a combination of a series of seemingly disconnected and sporadic decisions (such change in tariffs and export prices or incident in the Kerch Strait) and major changes (such as take-over of the Crimea). Russia utilises the obtaining environment, aligning with capabilities through the application of contextual opportunism, underpinned by risk and payoff analysis. All in all, to advance the strategic objectives. The case study analysis of Ukraine brought the argument of the benefits of the third model more to the fore. At the same time, RAM remains present when analysis focused on the long-term nature of aims and objectives and centralisation of decision-making.

7. Decision-Making in Russia's Foreign Policy – The Case of Moldova

Russia's relations with Moldova are complex; over the years there has been a series of mutually expressed hopes that interstate relationships move towards a new momentum or strategic partnership with no substantial results. Scarce, and yet, the constant indication of Russia's tailored aspirations for Moldova should also be seen within a broader context of Russia's view of its position in the world, its ambitions in relations to the CIS as well as to a large extent what is

broadly defined as protecting the interests of its diaspora. In addition to tailored and contextual references to Moldova in official documents, political rhetoric provides another valuable input for the analysis. Albeit, Moldova is hardly part of the political rhetoric, particularly by the President that is another indication of Moldova's position in Russia's political agenda.

Moldova's economic dependency across various areas including gas, electricity and agricultural produce to a large extent defined the type of decisions, namely of a short terms nature. But the analysis of these decisions cannot and should not be detached from Moldova's foreign policy aspirations and how these are viewed providing a context within which Russia's short-term decision should be considered and understood. Russia's focus remained on keeping Moldova within Russia's zone influence and within its economic structures that would in effect maintain Moldova's dependency, particularly in energy and agricultural sectors. For example, Russia resisted Moldova's attempts to diversify the sources of energy provision overturning the agreement signed with a Ukraine-based provider in 2017.

With Moldova's neutral status and lack of proclaimed interest to become part of a military alliance, Russia's foreign policy's major focus remained the country's potential integration in the EU and hence leaving Russia's zone of influence. However, Moldova's lack of aspiration to join NATO did not automatically imply warmer reception from Russia as relationships between the two countries remained strenuous for most of the period. President Putin was quoted saying in 2017 that "It needs to be recognised that mutually beneficial ties with Russia deteriorated against the background of attempts to force a closer relationship with the European Union" (Dyomkin, 2017).

One of the major factors that defined relationships between Moldova and Russia was the situation in Transnistria. The relationships are overshadowed by Russia's *de facto* recognition of the breakaway region. Although formally Russia does not recognise Transnistria as an independent state, its continuous political, economic, military and diplomatic activities in the region are akin to *de facto* recognition and serve as a polarising factor in relationships between the two countries.^{vii}

In the case of Moldova, Russia took a relatively less active approach towards the realisation of aspired changes than in Ukraine, predominantly focusing on maintaining the status quo. Even its approach to Moldova's progress towards the Association Agreement remained relatively passive and was limited to selective application of economic coercion and political rhetoric. Like Ukraine, Russia's ability to shape the environment to its advantage to pursue its aims and objectives remained limited. It made decision-making towards Moldova merely reactive and opportunistic in response to the obtaining environment. It was also more prepared to make concessions and shy away from decisive steps, such as preventing the signing of the Association Agreement between the EU and Moldova in 2014. However, it does not imply that the signing of the agreement should be viewed as a loss; instead, it should be considered part of the long-term outlook where not all steps are taking a linear approach towards the desired end-state. Re-energised dialogue following the election of a Euro-sceptic President Dodon at the end of 2016, aiming to achieve Moldova's withdrawal from the agreement and turning towards Russia's led Eurasian Union,^{viii} illustrates this point.

Russian Presidents over the years remained hardly visible figures in relations with Moldova. However, this lack of public display of presidential engagement did not diminish the Presidents' role in decision-making, instead reinforces their centralised nature. The impression of decisions being delegated to a lower level was context-driven and linked to strategy, indicating centralised control over strategic issues. The shift that took place after 2016 with the changing context within Moldova brought the President to the fore with his vision for Moldova being directly conveyed and reinforced. This illustrates the point of how the role of agency and structure in decision-making is balanced by the obtaining environment. While the President was visibly more detached from Russia's engagement with Moldova, the decisions remained consistent with the President's position in relation to the key factors that shapes Russia's foreign policy in Moldova.

Looking through the prism of consistency and long-term outlook of Russia's foreign policy and the way Moldova features in it (as part of the CIS and Eurasian Economic Union, non-allied state and out of bounds for the EU), RAM offers a useful framework for analysis. Russia's consistent resort to incremental steps, such as sanctions or other economically coercive activities designed to harm the economy of Moldova, is a continuous indication of the limited application of instruments of power. Russia repeatedly applied the tested patterns that became a distinct strategy (using Mitzberg's analogy) of Russia's approach to Moldova. This link of incremental decisions to overall strategy also demonstrates the limitation of the Incremental Model in explaining Russia's approach. These patterns are small in their application and give an impression of lower-level decision-making, but their timing and context indicate that they are designed to achieve more significant change over a more extended period. Due to the incremental nature of actions, risks remained low allowing even small payoffs to accumulate over time into long-term strategic gains. All in all, the combination of small measures and their consistency is in line with the Strategic Incrementalism prescription. While foundational models are able to offer useful insights on the aspects of the above, they fall short of explaining the totality

of Russia’s approach.

8. Conclusions

This research had two-fold objectives; on a practical level it aimed to contribute to knowledge on Russia’s foreign policy decision-making, and on a conceptual plane, to contribute to theoretical development that underpins academic research on decision-making in foreign policy. RAM, Incrementalism and Mixed Scanning models provide but an insufficient explanation of Russian decision making. A new conceptual model, Strategic Incrementalism, was proposed. This approach takes structure and agency, context and capability, and critical interests into consideration. The key considerations being: what decisions are made, why and by whom; what is the approach to applying these decisions; is there a pattern and with it, predictability, within the fluid context of international relations?; how consistently does Russia’s decision-making map on to existing theories; whether contemporary theoretical frameworks are limited in explanation? These general questions informed the extension of the original thesis that Russia’s foreign policy decisions-making in Ukraine and Moldova represents a third model, distinct from blending of the two foundational theoretical models. While inspired by the foundational models and their critique, Strategic Incrementalism draws on additional indicators to help navigate foreign policy decision analysis in a more nuanced way. Analysis of the basic models and their derivatives pointed to three areas that needed more significant consideration; these were either missing or less prominent in the models, namely: the role of agency, capability and context, and the relationship between strategy and structure. Advancing aspects of the basic models and incorporating these three areas led to the development of principles underpinning the exploratory version of Strategic Incrementalism. The four principles initially derived from the gaps identified in decision models in general and the two basic models in particular informed the experimental model’s development.

The empirical part, case studies of Ukraine and Moldova, drew on these indicators to test the basic models against the Strategic Incrementalism and the foundational models. The process of testing Strategic Incrementalism and its underpinning principles produced new data that was then used to further inform the development of the model. Table 4 summaries significant findings from the baseline and case study analysis. The analysis was conducted in three major categories through systematic application of indicators developed for each: aims and objectives (what?), decision owner(s) (who?), application of means (how?).

Table 3. Summary of conclusions through the application of the analytical framework

| Cases | Categories and Indicators | Findings | | | |
|----------|---|---|----------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| | | <i>H (high), M (medium) and L (low) where H is most corresponding with the indicators of respective models and L is the least corresponding.</i> | | | |
| | Examples of findings in each of the categories of analysis mapped against corresponding indicators presented in Chapter 2 | RAM | Incrementalism | Strategic Incrementalism | |
| Baseline | Aims and Objectives | Evidence of consistency of aims and objectives and aspired changes in strategic documents; however, research substantiates their moderation over time as a response to the obtaining environment and capabilities to pursue these over time. President Putin: “Russia’s Foreign Policy is determined by ... long-term interests and by tendencies in global development.” | H | L | P4, H P1, M |

| | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|---|---|---|-------|
| | | Combination of fundamental and incremental decisions to advance aims and objectives. Perceived incremental decisions should be carefully analysed as these could be part of a larger strategic outlook and not a one-shot opportunistic endeavour. | L | L | P4, H |
| | | Context plays a significant role; ability to shape it is limited, instead paving the way for a contextual opportunism. | L | L | P4, H |
| | Actors and agency | Centralised model of decision-making with the President's role, as a chief decision-maker, reinforced in the strategic documents. While some elements of pluralisation can be observed, these are clearly at the level of inputs that may or may not be taken into account at the level of decision. | H | L | P2, M |
| | | President's long standing views on major geopolitical developments and regional and global aspirations inform approach to objectives setting; Putin's vision of Russia as a leader in the world (2012). | L | L | P2, H |
| | | Calculus and yet flexible approach to foreign policy. Putin, drawing parallels with dude implying conceding in case it eventually leads to a victory. | M | M | P4, H |
| | Application of means | Extracting agency through structures, illustrated through of continued strengthening of the presidential institution that is seen as a core of a strong state, while adjusting rules to allow for the continuity of power. | L | L | P3, L |
| | | Flexible approach linking to context and capability is reflected through Putin's "feeling the moment, along with the ability to recognise an opponent's strengths and weaknesses, as one of the key factors in striving for the best results." Recognition of the importance of a quick action within emerging and changing contexts indicated towards contextual opportunism as an approach. | L | L | P4, M |
| | Aims and Objectives | Russia's aims and objectives in Ukraine remained long-term and should be viewed within the context of Russia's pursuit of its regional and global ambitions. | H | L | P1, M |
| | | Both fundamental and incremental decisions are to be seen through the prism of long view pointing towards a common direction. Due considerations need to be given to small scale decisions and their link to strategic outlook. Choices are actions, with due consideration of risks and payoffs, are moderated by context and with available instruments of power. | L | L | P1, H |
| | | Fundamental decisions are made when both payoffs and risks of non-action are high, speaking directly to core interests. Even if short-term risks of action are considered to be high, this does not serve as a deterrent. In this sense there is a primacy of payoffs over risks of action. | L | L | P4, M |

| | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|--|--|---|----------------|-------|
| | | Short-term and long-term gains and occasional losses are directed towards approximation of aspirations. While aspiring fundamental changes, over a longer period of time the small changes themselves combine to form change of fundamental nature. The smaller steps – collectively advance the aspired change taking a long-term approach. | L | L | P1, H | |
| | Actors and Agency | Centralisation of decision-making with President playing a core and public role. Other actors remain marginal, implementers, or messengers rather than decision owners. Once the power consolidation process was over, Putin exercised high level of agency in steering Russian politics in general and foreign policy in particular. | H | L | P1, H | |
| | | President’s strong view on the place of Ukraine in a new global order (UN General Assembly, 2015) combined with Russia’s aspirations for a status of a great power and role of Ukraine in structures that are designed to facilitate its achievement, as well as potential obstacles in the process. | L | L | P2, H | |
| | | Case of Crimea as an example of action underpinned by strong beliefs (agency) and core strategic interests expressed through power to act (key to agency) when recognising “a position of no exit”. Links to the payoff analysis argument above. | L | L | P2, H P3, H | |
| | Application of Means | Putin’s “feel the moment... to strive for the best results” combined with the long view and the role of the broader context and the obtaining environment points towards strategic ‘contextual opportunism’ as an approach of choice. Instruments of power are chosen appropriately to the environment. | L | L | P4, H | |
| | | Application of means is not an act of spontaneous thinking and reckless decisions, it was a moment of either ceasing the opportunity or arriving to a moment of desperation or a combination of both (Crimea). | L | L | P4, H | |
| | | Capability is not separable from the context; the latter creates impetus to act, provided there is strategic prudence in the action. | L | L | P4, H | |
| | Case study 2 Moldova | Aims and Objectives | Decisions are guided by long-term aims and objectives. Prevalence of incremental decisions linked to strategic outlook, strategic non-linearity. Choice of instruments of national power is moderated, depending on context. Comparison of Ukraine (combination of foundation and incremental decisions) and Moldova (prevalence of incremental decisions) case studies is useful in terms of applicability of the model to seemingly different cases. | H | L | P1 H |
| | | | Passive approach to the realisation of aspired changes, predominantly focusing on maintaining the status quo. However, needs to be seen as a contributing factor toward broader Russia’s aspirations at regional and global levels. | L | L | P1, H |

| | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|--|---|---|----------------|
| | Actors and Agency | The role of the President as decision-owner is consistent. Impression of devolution of power due to low visibility of the President is not substantiated. | H | L | P2, M |
| | | With the dominance of unitarian approach to decision-making there is a consistency of views and beliefs that are turn linked to the long-term nature of aims and objectives. Agency plays a prominent role, utilising structures within the obtaining environment. | L | L | P2, H P3, H |
| | Application of Means | Incremental changes as part of the strategy; reoccurring pattern of approaches. Accumulation of small payoffs that, through long-term approach, are designed to bring desired outcome. | L | L | P4, H |
| | | Tendency to utilise the obtaining environment that creates opportunities to advance prevailing strategy. Inactions or retreats are part of risks and payoff analysis within emerging contexts and part of the long-view approach. | L | L | P3, H P4, H |

The summary, derived from the table above, is presented in Table 5. Each category within an individual case needs to be viewed separately before viewing the summary based on the case studies' calculation.

Table 4. Summary of comparison of indicators across the three models

| Cases | Categories and Indicators | RAM | | | Incremental-ism | | | Rational Incremental-ism | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----|---|---|-----------------|---|----|--------------------------|---|---|
| | | H | M | L | H | M | L | H | M | L |
| Baseline | Aims and Objectives | 1 | | 2 | | | 3 | 2 | 1 | |
| | Actors and Agency | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | 3 | 2 | 1 | |
| | Application of Means | | | 2 | | | 2 | | 1 | 1 |
| Case study 1 Ukraine | Aims and Objectives | 1 | | 3 | | | 4 | 2 | 2 | |
| | Actors and Agency | 1 | | 2 | | | 3 | 3 | | |
| | Application of Means | | | 3 | | | 3 | 3 | | |
| Case study 2 Moldova | Aims and Objectives | 1 | | 1 | | | 2 | 2 | | |
| | Actors and Agency | 1 | | 1 | | | 2 | 2 | | |
| | Application of Means | | | 2 | | | 2 | 2 | | |
| Summary | | 6 | 1 | 8 | | | 24 | 18 | 5 | 1 |

From the above summary, it is evident that the hypothesis holds; moreover, the data show that the third model is distinct from a simple blend of the foundational models. The evidence from the baseline and the case studies indicates that Russia's foreign policy decisions-making is more closely described by Strategic Incrementalism and is distinct from the basic models or their blended variants. Incrementalism appears to be least suited to explaining Russia's decision-making allaying suspicions of Russian foreign policy as 'muddling through'. RAM, while having a presence, particularly in some categories of analysis, reveal its shortcomings, first and foremost due to its fixated normative approach to decision-making. Recognition of the importance of a quick action within emerging and changing contexts indicated towards contextual opportunism as an approach to advance strategic objectives.

Strategic Incrementalism in its conceptual form also demonstrated some shortfalls where the data and analysis also pointed to further grounding the model and refining its principles. The analysis revealed disparities between the two cases; however, a clear pattern in decision analysis emerged when viewed through the Strategic Incrementalism Model, providing comparable conclusions across the two cases following the consistent application of indicators. What also

emerges is the diminished role of structures but the increased role of agency in decision-making; this was particularly facilitated by centralisation and accumulation of power by the President multiplied by power continuity. This, among other nuances identified, is another significant departure from the basic models that focus on structures alone and justifies Strategic Incrementalism as a separate model. The case studies demonstrated that the conceptual model of Strategic Incrementalism requires refinement following data analysis. This approach is methodologically underpinned by the application of Grounded Theory in this research. The refined principles and the model is presented below:

Principle 1: Aims and Objectives. Decisions are selectively emergent, guided by a predetermined strategic direction. How far a direction can be rationally travelled (ends) is moderated by capabilities and context.

Principle 2: Agency and Structure. Role of agency and structure in decision-making is balanced by the type of actor within the obtaining environment. Agency will play a more profound role in systems where leadership comes from a narrow group or even a single person at the top; the more hierarchical structures are, the more dominant role agency will obtain. Decision analysis must take into account the degree to which agency prevails. When a high degree of agency exhibited by an actor, historical patterns in decision making become less relevant and the agency's perspective becomes more dominant.

Principle 3: Strategy and Structure. Agency, if dominant over structures, may innovate, disregard or create structures to drive strategy. Indeed, it may also choose to work within structures for practical or political reasons. Conversely, where agency is diminished, structures may dominate strategy.

Principle 4: Capability and Context. Opportunities that advance existential strategy are exploited after due consideration for prevailing risks and long-term payoffs. The decision-maker exploits opportunity when strategically prudent in a given context and obtaining environment.

Principle 5: Strategy Adapts to Protect Core Interests. Recognition of Core Interests that sit beyond moderation is critical in decision analysis. An actor is inclined to greater risk-taking and propensity for action when inaction threatens a nation's vital and core interests.

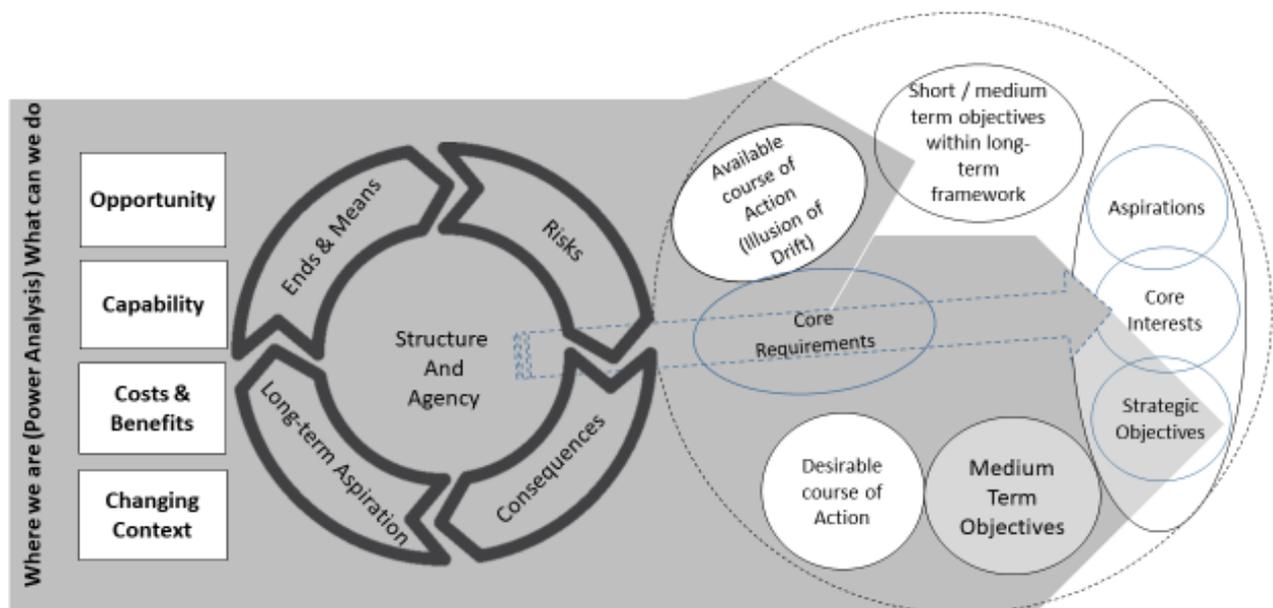


Figure 4. Strategic Incrementalism

This model advances the analytical framework. The nuances are the role of the non-linearity in context—volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Pursuit or the defence of core interests impulse lateral direct actions. The model also approaches the strategic possibilities in short term (muddling through) decision, the examining of alternatives, making choices and considering possible consequences. Because of the strategic nature of what may appear to be impulses of agency, the probability of such departures as being strategic remains high. Strategy as a pattern in a stream of actions as opposed to viewing individual decisions and their immediate and apparent consequences/outcomes. Increased role of Agency diminishes the role of Structures in decision-making and vice versa. In addition, analysis demonstrated the primacy of pay-offs over the risks of actions, particularly when core interests are at stake. Strategic Incrementalism

remains an exploratory model and therefore further research is needed to validate and advance its development.

Through the application of Strategic Incrementalism Model, the author demonstrates that Russia retained purposefulness and long-term view while recognising the importance of quick actions within emerging and changing contexts indicating *contextual opportunism* as an approach. This is far from the incremental extreme of 'muddling through', but suggests a careful understanding of the strategic environment and the will to exploit opportunities in a utilitarian way without compromising the long term direction.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Mintzberg rejects the notion of a realised strategy as the result of deliberate long-term strategy and strategic shocks. He suggests strategy results overtime as a result of emergent decisions, what he calls 'emergent strategy.'

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- ii For example Morgentau's analysis of reasons behind WWI (1970), or Freedman and Kerch's analysis of Iraq-Kuwait war (1993)
- iii For example, Etzioni (1967) argues that RAM is utopian as in actual practice the rationalistic assumption that values and facts, means and ends can be clearly distinguished is inapplicable. Braybrooke and Lindblom (1963) refer to the RAM as unrealistic and undesirable. According to them it is neither a description of actual procedures nor an ideal.
- iv An historical example of employment of the RAM, as Braybrooke and Lindblom (1970, p. 41) as well as other analysts argue, does not exist. See also Tarter and Hoy (1998).
- v In the original treaty (Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of Ukraine, 1997), the status of Russia's Black sea fleet in Sevastopol was agreed until 2017. In 2010 it was extended for another 25 years. The treaty was terminated by Russia after the takeover of Crimea on 31 March 2014.
- vi Over the years Russia remained the fourth largest investor in Ukraine. The overall share is higher in 2018 than it was in 2004 and amounts to about 7%. Even in 2014 the level of foreign investments from Russia remained within its usual limits of 5.9%.
- vii According to 2015 Transnistria's census (conducted separate to Moldova's) there were 161,300 Russians (34%), 156,600 Moldovans (33%), and 126,700 Ukrainians (26.7%). About 6 per cent of Moldova's population identify themselves as Russians according to Census 2014 (UNHCR, 2018).
- viii Dodon also opposed the opening of the NATO Liaison Office in Chisinau planned in December 2017.

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