

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Making decisions under uncertainty: The Prudent Judgement Approach

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## Abstract

This article offers an alternative conceptualisation of prudence as encompassing four normative components: reflective reasoning, experience, long-term well-being, and moderation. Prudence involves a pattern of reflective reasoning informed by experience in the pursuit of long-term well-being through moderate judgements and actions. This conceptualisation allows distilling a set of prescriptions for guiding deliberation and choice under uncertainty, which I name the Prudent Judgement Approach. An analysis of John F. Kennedy's deliberations at the start of the Cuban Missile Crisis uncovers evidence of prudent judgement and demonstrates the practical feasibility and value of this approach. Although the numerous cognitive and procedural sources of errors in decision-making under uncertainty are by now well understood, there are few prescriptive approaches for guiding the process of formulating judgements and making choices. This article shows how prudence can help improve the quality of deliberative processes and policy choices.

**Keywords:** Prudence; Decision-Making; Uncertainty; Foreign Policy; Cuban Missile Crisis

## Introduction

Political leaders shoulder the responsibility of making difficult decisions that affect the prosperity and security of their citizens, and potentially the lives of people elsewhere. In non-routine problems involving uncertainty, however, decision-makers face an uphill task in trying to form good judgements and decide well even if they intend to deliberate carefully. Drawing upon insights from psychology and behavioural economics, behavioural studies in political science have demonstrated the various sources of errors. For example, analyses of the George W. Bush administration's decision-making before the costly and devastating invasion of Iraq in 2003 identified a flawed process involving several biases such as groupthink,<sup>1</sup> the tendency to ignore conflicting information,<sup>2</sup> and overconfidence.<sup>3</sup> These studies confirm that the quality of decision-making procedures is associated with outcomes.<sup>4</sup> However, although International Relations (IR) scholarship has demonstrated the importance of sound deliberation and diagnosed myriad

<sup>1</sup>Dina Badie, 'Groupthink, Iraq, and the War on Terror: Explaining US policy shift toward Iraq', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 6:4 (2010), pp. 277–96; Franz Eder, 'Making concurrence-seeking visible: Groupthink, discourse networks, and the 2003 Iraq War', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15:1 (2019), pp. 21–42.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Pillar, 'Intelligence, policy and the war in Iraq', *Foreign Affairs*, 85:2 (2006), pp. 15–26.

<sup>3</sup>Aaron Rapport, 'The long and short of it: Cognitive constraints on leaders' assessments of "postwar" Iraq', *International Security*, 37:3 (2012/13), pp. 133–71.

<sup>4</sup>Gregory M. Herek, Irving L. Janis, and Paul Huth, 'Decision-making during international crises: Is quality of process related to outcome?', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 31:2 (1987), pp. 203–26.

sources of errors, there is a dearth of prescriptive theories for guiding the process of formulating judgements and making policy decisions.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that the virtue of prudence is aptly suited to the particular demands of decision-making under uncertainty.

Policymakers and IR scholars have consistently advised prudence, especially in times of uncertainty. Morgenthau famously argued that prudence is ‘the supreme virtue in politics’, and Nitze recommended prudence as the Cold War was coming to an end.<sup>6</sup> Recent global crises and the perceived shift in power from the West to rising powers have also raised calls for prudence in US foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Urging global cooperation in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic UN Secretary General António Guterres suggested, ‘this is a time for prudence, not panic’ on 13 March 2020. More recently, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz urged prudence in determining how to deal with Russia over the crisis in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, even though discourse about prudence seems ubiquitous, the meaning of the concept remains elusive.

Although prudence never fully disappeared from IR scholarship, interest in the concept has been experiencing a revival in recent years. This renewed interest relates to revisiting the role of practical wisdom in both practice theoretic and constructivist approaches, a growing concern about the role of reflexivity and dissent in contemporary scholarship and political life, as well as a rediscovery of classical realist scholarship.<sup>9</sup> These discussions do much to remind us of the value of prudence, but they do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept such that we may know what it means to think and act prudently. One recent and substantive treatment of the concept is Wali Aslam’s (2021), which develops prudence as an analytical tool for evaluating cases of international intervention.<sup>10</sup> Criticising existing scholarship for using ‘the concept to conduct “agent-centric” studies (albeit in a simplistic way and without defining the key ingredients of prudent action)’, Aslam focuses on conceptualising prudence for assessing the outcomes of particular decisions. In contrast, my focus here is to develop a theory of prudent judgement for

<sup>5</sup>‘Descriptive’ theories seek to describe and explain regularities, for example, the choices that states or individuals are more likely to make in the context of decision-making. In contrast, ‘normative’ theories involve moral judgements concerning the choices one *should* make and prescribe conduct. Some scholars of foreign policy have provided recommendations for improving decision-making by using historical lessons effectively (Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1986); mitigating biases (Robert Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); and improving organisational processes (Alexander L. George, ‘The case for multiple advocacy in making foreign policy’, *American Political Science Review*, 66:3 (1972), pp. 751–85). But they do not provide prescriptions for specific problem-solving tasks such as evaluating alternatives and policy selection. Although Janis and Mann’s ‘vigilant decision-making’ approach offers such prescriptions, it is similar to rational choice theory and therefore subject to human cognitive limitations (Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, and Commitment* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1977)).

<sup>6</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 10; Paul H. Nitze, ‘America: An honest broker’, *Foreign Affairs*, 69:4 (1990), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Eliot Cohen, Eric Edelman, and Brian Hook, ‘Presidential priority: Restore American leadership’, *World Affairs*, 179:1 (2016), pp. 7–14; Joseph S. Nye Jr, ‘The twenty-first century will not be a “post-American” world’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 56:1 (2012), pp. 215–17.

<sup>8</sup>Swiss Info, ‘Germany Urges “Prudence” in Potential Sanctions against Russia over Ukraine’, available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/germany-urges--prudence--in-potential-sanctions-against-russia-over-ukraine/47285604>.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, David M. McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022); Sean Molloy, ‘Realism and reflexivity: Morgenthau, academic freedom and dissent’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 321–43; Stefano Guzzini, ‘Saving realist prudence’, in J. Samuel Barkin (ed.), *The Social Construction of State Power: Applying Realist Constructivism* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2020), pp. 2, 17–232; Jason Ralph, ‘What should be done? Pragmatic constructivist ethics and the responsibility to protect’, *International Organization*, 72 (2018), pp. 173–203; Olivier Schmitt (ed.), *Raymond Aron and International Relations* (Oxon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2018); Patrick Porter, ‘Taking uncertainty seriously: Classical realism and national security’, *European Journal of International Security*, 1:2 (2016), pp. 236–60; Chris Brown, ‘Practice, prudence and International Relations theory: Bourdieu, Aristotle and the classical realists’, *Spectrum: Journal of Global Studies*, 4:1 (2014), pp. 27–46; J. Samuel Barkin, *Realist Constructivism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup>Wali Aslam, ‘International interventions and normative prudence as a “forgotten” virtue of statecraft’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15:2 (2021), pp. 181–200.

guiding decision-making under uncertainty. Whereas Aslam presents an outcome-centric understanding of prudence, my goal here is to offer a process-centric account of prudent judgement.

I conceptualise prudence as a contextually situated pattern of reflective reasoning informed by experience, which helps actors pursue their long-term well-being through moderate actions. This understanding of prudence is related to classic realist perspectives on the concept as an alternative to both morality and expediency in the conduct of foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> A few IR scholars still value this conception of prudence as an ‘ethic of responsibility’.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Robert Jackson argues that prudence is ‘the situational ethics of statecraft’ that involves ‘the correct appreciation of circumstances’.<sup>13</sup> However, these perspectives offer a one-dimensional interpretation of prudence. Rooting the discussion in classical realist accounts and enriching them with various perspectives in IR and political philosophy, I argue that prudence encompasses four core normative components: reflective reasoning, experience, long-term well-being, and moderation.<sup>14</sup> Synthesising these four components will provide us with a more lucid and helpful concept of prudence to guide both the process of formulating context-specific judgements as well as problem-solving and making policy choices, particularly under conditions of uncertainty.<sup>15</sup>

Habits and intuitive responses usefully inform decision-making in routine situations characterised by stability and high levels of predictability, and low levels of improvisation.<sup>16</sup> However, these can result in biases and errors in unfamiliar problems,<sup>17</sup> which require more complex forms of reasoning and deliberation.<sup>18</sup> The uncertainty and non-linearity of the world make forecasting future risks and predicting outcomes very difficult even in normal times.<sup>19</sup> But in extreme cases such as crises, ‘the foundations of the *known knowns* crack open’ limiting the usefulness of analogies and invalidating ‘mechanical if-then sentences’.<sup>20</sup> The greater the uncertainty, the greater the need and cognitive pressure to re-establish meaning and order quickly. Unfortunately, this process can be susceptible to numerous individual-level cognitive and personality factors,<sup>21</sup> group-level dynamics,<sup>22</sup> as well as bureaucratic imperatives<sup>23</sup> and organisational routines.<sup>24</sup> All of these can

<sup>11</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*; Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (New Brunswick, Can.: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>James W. Davis, ‘The (good) person and the (bad) situation: Recovering innocence at the expense of responsibility?’, in James W. Davis (ed.), in *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), pp. 199–219.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Contact in a World of States* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 21–2.

<sup>14</sup>This conceptualisation is related to, but also refines and goes beyond, Aslam’s (‘Operation Iraqi Freedom: A prudent action by a responsible great power’, *Journal of Global Ethics*, 6:3 (2010), p. 309; ‘International interventions and normative prudence’) understanding of prudence as comprising deliberation and reasoning, caution and circumspection, foresight, and knowing the limits of one’s powers.

<sup>15</sup>For a detailed discussion of the value of prudence under uncertainty, see Porter, ‘Taking uncertainty seriously’.

<sup>16</sup>Ted Hopf, ‘The logic of habit in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:4 (2010), pp. 539–61; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

<sup>17</sup>Jonathan Renshon and Stanley A. Renshon, ‘The theory and practice of foreign policy decision making’, *Political Psychology*, 29:4 (2008), pp. 509–36 (p. 514).

<sup>18</sup>Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Deborah Welch Larson, ‘Good judgment in foreign policy: Social psychological perspectives’, in Stanley A. Renshon and Deborah Welch Larson (eds), *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

<sup>19</sup>Porter, ‘Taking uncertainty seriously’.

<sup>20</sup>Christopher Daase and Oliver Kessler, ‘Knowns and unknowns in the “War on Terror”: Uncertainty and the political construction of danger’, *Security Dialogue*, 38:4 (2007), pp. 411–34 (p. 421).

<sup>21</sup>Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

<sup>22</sup>Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne, ‘The polythink syndrome and elite group decision-making’, *Political Psychology*, 37:S1 (2016), pp. 3–21.

<sup>23</sup>Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision* (New York, NY: Longman, 1999).

<sup>24</sup>Morton H. Halperin, Priscilla A. Clapp, and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

negatively affect the quality of judgements and choices. Even though it is well established that *how* we think is crucial for good judgement, scholars of foreign policy have avoided developing prescriptive approaches for improving decision-making processes.

I address this gap by using my alternative conceptualisation of prudence to distil a set of prescriptions for guiding deliberation and choice under uncertainty, which I name the Prudent Judgement Approach (PJA). All four components of prudence are involved in the PJA. However, the first two components of prudence, reflective reasoning, and experience, are primarily important for offering prescriptions for the process of meaning making required for mitigating uncertainty, interpreting available information, and formulating judgements. Of course, feedback during this evaluative process is necessary: one's clarification and understanding of the situation, as well as resulting judgements, must be weighed against conceptions and norms of well-being and moderation. The components of long-term well-being and moderation primarily guide the process at the secondary stage, that is, of articulating policy objectives, evaluating alternatives, and determining how to act in situations where outcomes or effects of actions are unknown and probabilities cannot be calculated.

The discussion below is organised as follows. First, I explicate the four normative components of prudence: reflective reasoning, experience, long-term well-being, and moderation. Second, I operationalise prudent judgement, and discuss the empirical goal, case selection, and methods. Third, I demonstrate the practical value of the PJA by examining President John F. Kennedy's decision-making process during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. The purpose of this case is to show that decision-makers can approximate prudent judgement in their deliberations even in high-stress contexts involving uncertainty, and when they do, prudence can improve the course and results of their deliberations. I conclude that the prescriptions of the PJA, although cognitively demanding, are feasible in practice. Decision-makers could avoid the negative consequences of heuristics and biases by explicitly relating short-term policy objectives to the long-term interest of securing national well-being, drawing on diverse experience, and engaging in self-consciously critical reflective reasoning.

This article makes two contributions. First, my alternative conceptualisation of prudence offers a new purchase on an ancient nest of concepts and a timely reminder of the value of being guided by reflective reasoning, privileging long-term welfare, and moderation in our thoughts and actions in increasingly fraught domestic and international contexts. Second, the Prudent Judgement Approach bridges the scholarship-practice gap by offering a set of practical prescriptions that could inform the deliberations of policymakers as they solve complex problems and make policy decisions under uncertainty.

## Reviving prudence

Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, Classical Realist scholars of IR challenged the idealist perspective's assumption of moral universalism and argued that morality could only be relative.<sup>25</sup> They accepted the primacy of states, each pursuing its rational interests, competing in an anarchic environment that could lead to war. But they also accepted the fundamental uncertainty of the world and stressed that the standards used to judge policies are always historically particular constructions and moral ideas cannot be separated from the interests of those who advance those values. The classical realist recommendation for prudence in the conduct of foreign policy, then, was rooted in an effort to balance a belief in objective facts with an awareness of the historically contingent nature of our ideas.<sup>26</sup> In this view, the interests sought by political actors, as well as the content and use of power, are both historically specific constructions shaped by the political and cultural contexts in

<sup>25</sup>Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (London, UK: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1939), p. 19.

<sup>26</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 4–14.

which foreign policies are framed.<sup>27</sup> This requires distinguishing between universal moral principles (the 'ought') and the specific spatial and temporal context of an act (the 'can'). To be successful a policy must balance moral considerations with practical requirements. It is for this reason that prudence becomes the 'supreme virtue' in international politics.<sup>28</sup>

For the classical realists, prudence should be the driver of political action rather than ideology. Refusing to ascribe universality to the moral objectives of any particular state, they recommended judging the policies of others as we would judge our own, and to pursue policies for furthering one's interest while respecting the interests of others.<sup>29</sup> Since the context, including the balance of power between states changes over time, so does state behaviour.<sup>30</sup> Thus, prudence requires acting 'in accordance with the particular situation' rather than 'passive obedience to a norm'.<sup>31</sup> In their telling, prudence involved understanding the particular context of each case and pursuing limited objectives while trying to balance the competing requirements of power and principles.<sup>32</sup>

This account makes clear the value of prudence, but it falls short of explaining the process of prudent deliberation or the ends that prudence helps pursue.<sup>33</sup> Recognising historical contingency and rejecting the rationalist ambition of discovering universal laws, classical realist perspectives identify important elements of prudence such as accepting the unpredictability of the future, privileging context-based, experience-informed reasoning, and pursuing moderate objectives. However, these discussions forbear treating prudence as a complete normative theory of deliberation, judgement, and choice under uncertainty. To develop a more productive conceptualisation of prudence, I enrich these classical realist perspectives with discussions in international relations and political theory.

I argue that prudence entails four normative components. First, prudence involves employing a specific pattern of 'reflective reasoning' to formulate context-specific judgements. Second, a stock of relevant experience is required to enable prudent deliberation. Third, the purpose of prudence is explicitly oriented towards identifying choices that would help advance long-term well-being. Fourth, although there could be more than one prudent decision, prudent choices must be enacted through policies characterised by moderation. This conceptualisation of prudence is more productive. The first two requirements prescribe the process of deliberation and judgement, while the latter two prescribe kinds of aims, choices, and policies. All four components are equally important and work together to make prudence possible.

### **Prudence and reflective reasoning**

Diverse accounts of prudence hold that it is a form of deliberative judgement uniquely suited to human or political affairs. These discussions distinguish between theory and universals on the one hand and practice and particulars on the other. Scholars also consistently identify the multifaceted nature of prudent deliberation: use of reason, circumspection, foresight, open-mindedness, and contextually situated provisional judgements. On the other hand, imprudence involves carelessness, lack of forethought, speculation, or insistence on principles without due regard to the historically conditioned complexities of particular situations.

These requirements are rooted in the premise that, unlike the mind-independent natural world, the social world is at least partly 'constituted by the assumptions, concepts and intentions of the persons who participate in them'.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, while it is possible to produce

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 11; Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 585.

<sup>29</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 11; Aron, *Peace and War*, pp. 584–5.

<sup>30</sup>Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 584.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 585.

<sup>32</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 4–14; Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 609; Reed M. Davis, *A Politics of Understanding: The International Thought of Raymond Aron* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), p. 109.

<sup>33</sup>Hariman and Beer, 'What would be prudent?', p. 301.

<sup>34</sup>Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 76.

generalisable knowledge and postulate laws about the natural world, social phenomena are *sui generis* and lack ‘exact precedents or exact parallels’.<sup>35</sup> Non-routine problems involve uncertainty precisely because that particular mix of actors and issues has not been encountered previously. Fast and frugal responses based on habits or standard operating procedures are no longer applicable, which raises the need for deliberative problem solving. Likewise, although cognitive devices such as analogies and metaphors help process information by linking the lessons of past experiences to help define the nature of the present situation, assess the stakes, and provide policy prescriptions, they can be imperfect and susceptible to biases.<sup>36</sup> Prudence is the mode of ‘reasoning about contingent matters’ in precisely such situations and helps determine how to act in pursuit of one’s goals in the situation at hand.<sup>37</sup>

Prudent deliberation begins by identifying the particulars of the situation, which involves inductive reasoning. This requires ‘a highly developed discrimination of what matters from the rest’ and ‘a sense for what is qualitative rather than quantitative, for what is specific rather than general’, ‘a sense of what will “work”, and what will not ... [it is] a capacity ... for synthesis rather than analysis’.<sup>38</sup> That is, the purpose of reasoning is not simply to examine the constitutive elements of the situation, but how these particulars together form the whole. Privileging the particular, however, is not to reject universals. Rather, ‘individual cases in all their particularity cannot be simply “deduced from” universal and general principles of a theoretical kind: at best, theories can be required to “make sense of” the ways in which we succeed in dealing with particular cases’.<sup>39</sup> Although theories alone cannot serve as foundations for successful practice, they may nevertheless ‘help us understand why or under what conditions [specific] procedures work’.<sup>40</sup> Thus, prudence involves inductively identifying the particulars of the situation and undertaking pattern-matching with universals that ‘hold generally rather than invariably’.<sup>41</sup>

John Dewey’s discussion of reflective thinking, although not about prudence specifically, is pertinent here. He argued that reflective thought is instantiated by an unexpected problem, ‘a shock or an interruption needing to be accounted for, identified, or placed’.<sup>42</sup> In situations that ‘perplex and challenge the mind’ making ‘belief at all uncertain’,<sup>43</sup> reflection aids the process of meaning making by identifying the ‘relationships and continuities’ between different elements of a particular experience, as well as among different experiences.<sup>44</sup> Dewey defined reflection as a disciplined way of thinking constituted by ‘[a]ctive, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends’.<sup>45</sup> Reflective reasoning thus involves critical thinking to assess the bases of one’s judgements and open-mindedness to acknowledge the possibility that one’s beliefs may be incorrect.

Since the purpose of reflective thought is to guide action in an uncertain situation, deliberation must also employ foresight to explore the likely consequences of possible alternatives. This is

<sup>35</sup>George F. Kennan, ‘The two planes of international reality’, in *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 36.

<sup>36</sup>William Flanik, ‘“Bringing FPA back home”: Cognition, constructivism, and conceptual metaphor’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 7:4 (2011), pp. 423–46; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>37</sup>Robert Hariman and Francis A. Beer, ‘Maximizing prudence in International Relations’, *E-International Relations* (2013), available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/12/maximizing-prudence-in-international-relations/>}.

<sup>38</sup>Berlin, ‘Political judgment’, pp. 46–7.

<sup>39</sup>Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 133.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 102, 133.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>42</sup>John Dewey, *How We Think* (New York, NY: D. C. Heath & Co., 1910), p. 25.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 25–6; John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), pp. 254, 283, 288.

<sup>44</sup>John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1944 [orig. pub. 1916]), p. 140.

<sup>45</sup>Dewey, *How We Think*, p. 25.

essential because ‘an act overtly tried out is irrevocable, its consequences cannot be blotted out. An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable.’<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Jackson argues that prudence ‘is disclosed by forethought and deliberation before an important decision or action is taken’ and involves ‘careful preparation and attention to the situation in its manifest concreteness’.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, imprudence is driven by ‘stupidity, dogmatism, recklessness, lack of foresight, miscalculation, negligence, or poor judgment’, which ‘needlessly put at risk others who depend upon the decision-maker’.<sup>48</sup>

### **Prudence and experience**

Modern thinkers and classical philosophers have long stressed the importance of developing experience, mediated through reflection and analysis, for perceiving the particulars of a specific context, relating them to our ends, and implementing choice. The ‘family resemblances’ between prudence and the practice turn have already been discussed by IR scholars.<sup>49</sup> Knowledge from experience is crucial for interpreting facts, endowing information with meaning, and facilitating understanding. The implication is that the more experience one has, the greater one’s ability to recognise patterns or connect particular causes with specific consequences, and therefore the greater one’s ability to be prudent.<sup>50</sup> However, an individual with many years of experience in running a software company will have prudence specific to that business, not conducting foreign policy. Thus, the ability to be prudent in a given situation depends on the amount and relevance of an actor’s previous experience to the specific domain in which a problem arises.

The acquisition of knowledge and the ability to use it well by engaging reflective reasoning is a matter of experience, which can be gained in three ways. First, through direct first-hand practice, which is essential for developing expertise. But learning through the accumulation of experience is neither the same as developing habits nor a cognitively passive process.<sup>51</sup> Rather, it involves developing dispositions to think and analyse through mindfulness and the use of reason. As Morgenthau argued, practice is what enables statesmen to be successful, by endowing them with the ‘intellectual ability to comprehend the essentials of foreign policy’ and the ‘political ability to translate what he has comprehended into successful political action’.<sup>52</sup> The second way of acquiring experience is by studying history; as Machiavelli advised, studying the causes for the successes and failures of past leaders are important ways to ‘exercise’ the mind and can help ‘avoid the failures and imitate the successes’.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, contemporary scholars invoke the importance of historical understanding for informing deliberation and action.<sup>54</sup> The third way of increasing the available experience is by relying on the advice of other experts. As Machiavelli noted, it is ‘not that the prince’s prudence depends upon good advice, but that good advice, no matter where it originates, depends upon the prince’s prudence’.<sup>55</sup> This is echoed

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>47</sup>Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, p. 154.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Chris Brown, ‘The “practice turn”, *Phronesis* and classical realism’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 40:3 (2012), pp. 439–56; Mervyn Frost and Silviya Lechner, ‘Two conceptions of international practice: Aristotelian *praxis* or Wittgensteinian *language-games*’, *Review of International Studies*, 42:2 (2016), pp. 334–50.

<sup>50</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Book VI, ch. 7; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), chs 3, 5.

<sup>51</sup>Brown, ‘The “practice turn”’; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>52</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Tim Parks (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2014 [orig. pub. 2009]), p. 79.

<sup>54</sup>Aslam, ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’, p. 309; David McCourt, ‘What is at stake in the historical turn theory: Practice and *phronesis* in international relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:1 (2012), p. 38.

<sup>55</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. James B. Atkinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008 [orig. pub. 1976]), ch. 23, lines 75–8.

by more recent empirical findings: even ‘an experienced team cannot compensate for a lack of experience at the top.’<sup>56</sup>

Although experience is essential for decision-making, it is notoriously difficult to harness. Experienced elite are better able to think strategically and use heuristics more effectively,<sup>57</sup> however, experience can also increase susceptibility to biases such as overconfidence and risk taking.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, experienced leaders can monitor their advisors more effectively, better manage delegation to advisors, and improve the nature and extent of information collection and use.<sup>59</sup> Studies also show that increasing diversity in the decision-making group can help mitigate biases.<sup>60</sup> Since no single individual can have the range of experience required to deliberate well about foreign policy matters, prudent deliberation and judgement are more likely when an experienced principal can draw upon advisors who are veterans of the conduct of diplomacy, defence, and military affairs, and knowledgeable about the history and interests of relevant other actors. In turn, diversity promotes reflective reasoning by increasing the range of perspectives available and helps mitigate a range of cognitive and ideological biases.

### ***Prudence and long-term well-being***

Prudence is explicitly oriented towards securing long-term well-being through the right action. Perspectives on prudence in other disciplines focus on the connection between present choices and future welfare. For example in economics and finance, the contemporary understanding of prudence is related to the concept of precautionary savings,<sup>61</sup> and in psychology, prudence is defined as acting in the interest of the future self.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it is considered prudent to sacrifice present benefits to secure future goods.

It is not that short- or medium-term goals are not important or should not be pursued. However, in problems involving uncertainty, prudence demands using long-term goals to identify and orient more immediate objectives. Although defining what constitutes a ‘short’ or ‘long’ horizon *a priori* is unavoidably arbitrary, for our purposes a ‘short’ horizon typically involves the next couple of days, weeks, or months, while a ‘long’ horizon would involve considering future configurations of the world beyond the scope of the present problem. Individual-level psychological and behavioural research has established the tendency towards ‘present bias’, that is, the preference to seek short-term gains when immediate objectives contradict long-term ones.<sup>63</sup> In politics, especially in democracies, there are increased domestic incentives for decision-makers to privilege short-term goals. However, this can create negative outcomes in the long run. As Machiavelli observed, ‘man’s imprudence initiates a policy for immediate gain, unmindful of the poison inherent in it.’<sup>64</sup> Thus, prudence requires considering how present actions would affect long-term goals and values beyond any particular leader’s time in office at the very least.

<sup>56</sup>Elizabeth N. Saunders, ‘No substitute for experience: Presidents, advisers, and information in group decision making’, *International Organization*, 71 (Supplement) (2017), pp. S219–47 (p. S221).

<sup>57</sup>Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, D. Alex Hughes, and David G. Victor, ‘The cognitive revolution and the political psychology of elite decision making’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 11:2 (2013), pp. 368–86.

<sup>58</sup>Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>59</sup>Saunders, ‘No substitute for experience’, pp. S219–47.

<sup>60</sup>Scott E. Page, *The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 2–4.

<sup>61</sup>Miles S. Kimball, ‘Precautionary saving in the small and in the large’, *Econometrica*, 58:1 (1990), pp. 53–73; Harold Evensky, ‘Prudence’, *Journal of Financial Service Professions*, 59:3 (2005), pp. 18–21.

<sup>62</sup>Karen Lemmon and Chris Moore, ‘The development of prudence in the face of varying future rewards’, *Developmental Science*, 10:4 (2007), pp. 502–11.

<sup>63</sup>Richard H. Thaler, *Misbehaving* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 152.

<sup>64</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 13, lines 16–17.



Instead of specifying the precise content of national interest, prudence requires framing interests as 'well-being'. Realist and Neoliberal theories of IR assume that states pursue a combination of security, power, and wealth. Despite acknowledging that what constitutes 'interest' or 'power' is historically and contextually contingent, Morgenthau nevertheless defined interest in terms of power.<sup>65</sup> Aron criticised the reduction of national interest to any single universally valid objective as 'distorting the human meaning of diplomatic-strategic action'.<sup>66</sup> More recently, Martha Finnemore has argued that such assumptions say nothing about what kinds of power or wealth are considered worth pursuing, and for what purposes.<sup>67</sup> Her argument that 'ultimately, power and wealth are means, not ends' is similar to the Aristotelian position against identifying the 'good' or *summum bonum* with money, honour, or pleasure, for these are lower-order ends pursued for other purposes.

The emphasis on well-being has a long tradition in political philosophy and is valuable for international relations. For Aristotle, the purpose of prudence, that is, *phronêsis*, was to help secure *eudaimonia*, a concept often translated as flourishing or well-being, which is a 'higher-order end pursued for its own sake'.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Hobbes argued that human behaviour is motivated by 'felicity', that is, continual success in achieving our desires and avoiding our aversions.<sup>69</sup> In international relations as well, although 'survival' is valuable in and of itself, most states most of the time are not worried about avoiding invasion or a complete economic collapse. States pursue a broad range of goals, which are defined in the contexts of both domestically and internationally held norms and understandings about what constitutes the good life and what sorts of interests are appropriate to pursue.<sup>70</sup> Since such national conceptions tend to remain stable over long periods, framing national interest in terms of these values provides a way of articulating more 'permanent' long-term interests. Prudence involves using these long-term interests to identify more immediate objectives, which increases the possibility of intertemporal consistency among interests and objectives.

This notion of long-term well-being is central in T. V. Paul's 'prudent realism', which explains why some states decided to forgo nuclear weapons. He argues that the narrow definition of interests as military power in 'hard' realism fails to explain many states' choice to forgo nuclear capability.<sup>71</sup> Because 'economic well-being is a cardinal goal of most states', he contends 'states recognize that the pursuit of military autarky could harm their economic welfare'.<sup>72</sup> This, combined with the recognition that efforts to increase security can cause security dilemmas in an anarchic international system, causes states to 'engage in sovereignty-sacrificing behaviour in order to improve their security'.<sup>73</sup> Thus, he identifies 'enlightened self-interest' as the core of prudent realism, which involves acknowledging the interdependence of states' security policies.<sup>74</sup>

### **Prudence and moderation**

Whereas defining interests as 'security' or 'power' can narrow our frame of analysis, 'well-being' forces us to consider the full range of interests that are pursued in international society.

<sup>65</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup>Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 91.

<sup>67</sup>Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>68</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I.2, 1094b, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 6.

<sup>70</sup>Ted Hopf, *The Social Construction of International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*.

<sup>71</sup>T. V. Paul, *Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons* (Montreal, Can.: McGill Queen's University Press, 2000), p. 150.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 148–9.

Consequently, one's ability to secure well-being successfully requires taking into account the needs of others. This is why prudence is usually associated with 'moderation' and rejection of ideology.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Aslam highlights 'circumspection' and 'awareness of one's limits' as the two 'pillars of prudent decision-making'.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, while he does not define prudence explicitly, Carpenter identifies the tendency to 'overreact to adverse developments in the international system' and 'foreign policy hypochondria' as symptoms of imprudence in US foreign policy.<sup>77</sup> Although, it is often treated merely as restraint, caution, or a reason for inaction, one of the components of prudence is moderation, and for good reason.

Aron captures well the broad conception of moderation when he describes prudence as acting 'in accordance with the particular situation and the concrete data, and not in accordance with some system or out of passive obedience to a norm or pseudo-norm; it is to prefer the limitation of violence to the punishment of the presumably guilty party or to a so-called absolute justice; it is to establish concrete accessible objectives conforming to the secular law of international relations and not to limitless and perhaps meaningless objectives, such as "a world free for democracy" or "a world from which power politics will have disappeared"'.<sup>78</sup> Moderation involves formulating contextually specific measured judgements and choices concerning the particular problem at hand and is also reflected in the classical realist criticism of idealism. For instance, Aron argued, 'realism – the recognition of national selfishness – is more conducive to an awareness, on everyone's part, of the interests and ideas of the others than idealism or the cult of abstract principles'.<sup>79</sup> This was because 'true realism takes into account the whole of reality, dictates diplomatic strategic conduct adapted not to the finished portrait of what international politics would be if statesmen were wise in their selfishness, but to the nature of the passions, the follies, the ideas and the violences of the century'.<sup>80</sup>

Moderation is vital not only in articulating policy objectives, and making and implementing policy decisions but also in formulating judgements. As we begin to make sense of a problem under uncertainty, our initial analyses and definitions frame all our subsequent interpretations and choices.<sup>81</sup> How events are classified, for instance, as acts of terror or war, and the characterisation of strategic others as friend or enemy and their intentions as cooperative or malicious, delineates the realm of (im)possible responses. David M. Edelstein's recent argument concerning why existing and rising powers may choose to cooperate in the short-term demonstrates the value of moderation. Since the long-term involves 'true and unmeasurable uncertainty', it is 'impossible for states to accurately assess long-term threats and opportunities'.<sup>82</sup> Instead of risking 'the costs of assuming the worst about long-term intentions', existing powers choose to cooperate with rising powers in the short term.<sup>83</sup> Moderation in perceptions can thus help avoid conflicts like preventive wars.

The association of moderation with prudence is also rooted in Aristotelian thought, which understands the *phronimos* (prudent person) as someone who can judge according to right reason by finding the mean between 'excess' and 'deficiency' in a particular context.<sup>84</sup> This relates to the general Aristotelian understanding of virtue as a 'mean' between two corresponding vices,

<sup>75</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 554; Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 585.

<sup>76</sup>Aslam, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'.

<sup>77</sup>Ted Galen Carpenter, *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>78</sup>Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 585.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 594.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 600.

<sup>81</sup>McDermott, *Risk Taking in International Politics*, pp. 20–8; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk', *Econometrica*, 47:2 (1979), pp. 263–91.

<sup>82</sup>David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), p. 6.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1138b, p. 25.

which not only requires finding the right balance but also knowing when it is appropriate to feel something or do something and when it is not. For example, while courage is the mean between the feelings of fear and confidence, virtuous courage involves being confident about ‘*the right things, for the right reason, in the right way, and at the right time; for the courageous person feels and acts in accordance with the merits of the case, and as reason requires*’.<sup>85</sup> Both excess and deficiency can have tragic consequences; Dominic Johnson argues how overconfidence is an important cause of war.<sup>86</sup> Such a sense of moderation is also apparent in Machiavelli’s many recommendations, including his advice that any use of cruelty should be ‘short-lived ... no more than is necessary to secure your position and then stop; you don’t go on being cruel but use the power it has given you to deliver maximum benefits to your subjects’.<sup>87</sup> This suggestion finds a parallel in Richard K. Betts’s more recent argument in favour of restraint: ‘intervention should be limited and impartial ... and when violence is necessary it should be used only abstemiously because it hurts people. These Olympian presumptions ... have the ring of prudence, fairness, and restraint.’<sup>88</sup>

To be clear, moderation does not imply compromise policies, which run the risk of being ineffectual.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Aron clarified that moderation does not require ‘peace by compromise, or negotiations, or indifference to the internal regimes of enemy states or allies’.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Kautilya explained: ‘one should neither submit spinelessly nor sacrifice oneself in foolhardy valour’.<sup>91</sup> Rather, prudence emphasises moderation for preserving strategic flexibility. Since our actions today affect future outcomes, it is strategically important to avoid extremes (much like finding the Aristotelian mean): doing too much reduces the room to manoeuvre in the future while doing too little risks not exercising adequate influence in shaping future outcomes. Therefore, prudence involves acting to ‘manage the situation... in a way that helps to moderate the conflicts involved, while taking care to avoid adding still further complexities to the initial situation’.<sup>92</sup> So Kautilya advised, ‘it is better to adopt such policies as would enable one to survive and live to fight another day.’<sup>93</sup> In dynamic contexts and under uncertainty, since we cannot predict how the situation is going to evolve, success requires adaptability to make sure that one’s approach is in step with the circumstances.<sup>94</sup> Uncertainty and the impossibility of knowing future outcomes is also precisely why Betts recommends caution and restraint in security policy.<sup>95</sup>

As circumstances change and ‘an opportunity for action might arise which might not exist at another [time]... Correctly recognizing and seizing the moment of opportunity’ is also an important part of prudence.<sup>96</sup> However, in addition to ‘timely action’, prudence also involves self-restraint in knowing when not to act.<sup>97</sup> Because consequences of actions cannot be known especially in situations of incomplete information, prudential moderation also involves considering not only when to act, but also whether to act at all. In the conduct of foreign policy, leaders often fail to seriously consider the alternative of not taking any action. Since ‘one is free to act

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 49, emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup>Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>87</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 47.

<sup>88</sup>Richard K. Betts, *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 52.

<sup>89</sup>For a discussion of the many risks of compromise security policies, see Betts, *American Force*, which is also careful to distinguish between restraint and compromise.

<sup>90</sup>Aron, *Peace & War*, p. 599.

<sup>91</sup>Kautilya, *The Arthashastra* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999), p. 508.

<sup>92</sup>Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 93.

<sup>93</sup>Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, p. 508.

<sup>94</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 134–5.

<sup>95</sup>Betts, *American Force*.

<sup>96</sup>Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, p. 145.

<sup>97</sup>Hariman and Beer, “Maximizing prudence”.

but not to undo all prior actions',<sup>98</sup> prudence involves reflective self-knowledge and self-mastery to restrain one's impulses in the face of short-term concerns and humility in one's ability to influence the world.

### The Prudent Judgement Approach

The challenge for decision-making in non-routine situations is to mitigate uncertainty through deliberation and judgement.<sup>99</sup> However, these efforts are susceptible to biases and errors in reasoning. Drawing on the four components of prudence, the Prudent Judgement Approach (PJA) prescribes *how* to go about the process of solving problems and making policy choices under uncertainty. Since non-routine problems are novel and *sui generis*, and involve information constraints, the PJA recommends deliberation be guided by reflective reasoning informed by experience and a sense of moderation. The prudential components of long-term well-being and moderation help inform the kind of interests to be pursued, the evaluation of alternatives, as well as the selection and implementation of a policy. However, like many theoretical concepts, 'prudence' and its four components are not directly observable.<sup>100</sup> Operationalising such concepts requires referencing the 'consequences that result from [their] presence or absence'.<sup>101</sup> Here, I operationalise prudent judgement by identifying the indicators we would expect to find in an ideal-type case of prudent judgement to inform the empirical analysis in the following section. Next, I discuss the empirical goals of the present discussion as well as the case selection and methods.

### Operationalising prudent judgement

Reflective reasoning aids the process of searching for precedents, identifying which rules may apply, and extracting lessons from experience. We would expect to find decision-makers inductively identifying the particular characteristics of the problem at hand and engaging in 'pattern matching', that is, comparing the present problem against previous experiences.<sup>102</sup> However, using historical analogies and metaphors to interpret current situations deductively and unreflectively can bias judgement in non-routine situations, which would negatively affect the rest of the decision-making process.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, we would expect decision-makers to undertake efforts to establish whether the chosen historical references are appropriate. Deliberating prudently would also involve engaging foresight to explore the various possible consequences of one's actions including how other actors may respond and affect future possibilities of action.

During deliberations, expressions of doubt and concern by individuals involved in the decision-making process, attempts to probe each other's reasoning, and willingness to express disagreement with each other's judgements encourage reflective reasoning. On the other hand, too much agreement within the group and especially attempts to enforce consensus within the group would diminish the possibility of reflective reasoning. Given the emphasis on recognising the

<sup>98</sup>Robert Hariman, 'Theory without modernity', in Robert Hariman (ed.), *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2003), p. 10.

<sup>99</sup>Larson, 'Good judgment in foreign policy'.

<sup>100</sup>James W. Davis, *Terms of Inquiry: On the Theory and Practice of Political Science* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

<sup>102</sup>Gary Klein's 'recognition-primed decision' is precisely such a model, and highlights the importance of experience for being able to undertake such 'pattern matching' quickly, identify reasonable responses, and evaluate the suitability of alternatives. See, for example, Gary Klein, *Sources of Power: How People Make Decision* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), esp. pp. 15–30.

<sup>103</sup>Khong, *Analogies at War; Jervis, Perceptions and Misperceptions*; Jack Levy, 'Prospect theory and international relations: Theoretical applications and analytical problems', *Political Psychology*, 13:2 (1992), pp. 283–310; Donald A. Sylvan and James F. Voss, *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3–28.

uncertainty and complexity of the social and political world and the *sui generis* nature of each problem, we would expect prudent decision-makers to acknowledge the multiple factors involved in the problem at hand and admit the limitations of available knowledge ('we do not know' or 'it is difficult to say why or how').

Experience is understood here as 'substantive expertise about particular foreign policy areas, often (though not exclusively) acquired prior to taking office.'<sup>104</sup> While this is notoriously difficult to measure, it may be inferred from indicators of the cognitive traits it helps develop. Domain-specific knowledge is essential for capably making use of secondary sources of knowledge and enabling reflective reasoning.<sup>105</sup> Since it endows experts with the cognitive architecture to assimilate new information, gather and assess information more quickly, and use heuristics appropriately to process information and identify patterns, we would look for these indicators in how different decision-makers convert a problem into a manageable task and how they engage in deep analysis.<sup>106</sup>

We would also expect efforts to draw upon experience to manifest in the form of direct requests for opinions from individuals due to their functional expertise, requests for additional information or analyses, and references to historical analogies. Expertise could also be indicated by efforts to consider the practical and logistical requirements of actions being considered, discussing how a policy may be implemented by drawing on practical knowledge as well as undertaking contingency planning and making efforts to be prepared to respond to foreseeable negative outcomes of actions. Finally, given the importance of learning from experience, prudent judgement would also involve undertaking a continuous assessment of outcomes of actions, and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of own decision-making and policy implementation to inform future decision-making.

The goal of prudent judgement, that is, preserving the long-term well-being of the polity, would be indicated by efforts to explicitly articulate and prioritise among short-term goals, and identify long-term interests at stake. Since present actions affect future possibilities and well-being, we would expect prudent decision-makers to consider how each alternative would affect short-term goals and long-term interests, and whether short-term objectives are consistent with long-term national interests by exploring how the former might affect the latter. We would also expect attempts to balance short-term goals with long-term interests, and a willingness to accept short-term setbacks if required.

Finally, we would expect to find indicators of moderation in forming judgements about the intentions of other actors, especially attempts to consider the perspective of other parties and avoid assuming the worst intentions. In line with the PJA, we would expect efforts to define specific objectives, which are directly related to the problem at hand, limited, and attainable. When considering alternatives, moderation would be indicated by acknowledgements of the logistical and/or practical limits of one's ability to undertake a particular course of action or achieve specific goals. Importantly, we would expect decision-makers to consider whether to act at all, and how to time the action. We would also expect explicit discussion of whether the policy under consideration preserves strategic flexibility or provides room to manoeuvre based on the consequences or reactions of others.

### **Exploring the feasibility of prudent judgement**

A theory, Morgenthau observed, 'must be judged not by some preconceived abstract principle or concept unrelated to reality, but by its purpose'.<sup>107</sup> Since the prudent judgement approach is a

<sup>104</sup>Saunders, 'No substitute for experience', p. S224.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., pp. S224–5.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.; Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor, 'The cognitive revolution'; Klein, *Sources of Power*; and Robert Glaser and Michelene T. H. Chi, 'Overview', in Michelene T. H. Chi, Robert Glaser, and Marshall J. Farr (eds), *The Nature of Expertise* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988).

<sup>107</sup>Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (1960 edn), p. 3.

normative theory and its prescriptions for responsible decision-making impose significant cognitive costs on actors, rather than evaluating its explanatory or predictive accuracy the principal empirical objective is establishing its feasibility in practice. Accordingly, the focus of the empirical analysis is to explore whether decision-makers can reason and deliberate in the cognitively demanding manner of the PJA by reconstructing their deliberations as they occurred. The goal is to explore how decision-makers went about formulating judgements during the problem-solving process, identify instances where they approximate the prescriptions of prudence, and consider whether these approximations helped improve the quality of their deliberations?

To explore the practical utility of the PJA for foreign policy decision-making under uncertainty, I analyse John F. Kennedy's deliberations during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. This case selection is theoretically motivated. First, since the PJA is a theory of decision-making for previously unexperienced situations that require deliberation before making a judgement and deciding a course of action, a likely case would involve a foreign policy problem that was considered non-routine by the decision-makers. Second, the availability of time is an important factor affecting the quality of decision-making.<sup>108</sup> Given the tendency to make 'fast and frugal' decisions by relying on heuristics under conditions of time pressure and uncertain deadlines, which can lead to errors in reasoning, it is more likely that policymakers will be able to deliberate carefully, and indeed prudently, when they do not face time constraints.<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, the most likely case for prudent judgement would involve a non-routine decision made under a non-crisis situation with sufficient time for deliberation. In contrast, crises would be the least likely cases for prudent judgement as leaders are required to make high-stakes decisions in short time spans under significant cognitive constraints. Since the Cuban Missile Crisis required solving a high-stakes problem in a short period of time, there is a low likelihood of prudent judgement in this case.

On 16 October, the first day of deliberations, Kennedy stated 'We're certainly going to do number one [limited air strike]. We're going to take out these missiles.'<sup>110</sup> Yet, on 22 October he announced a naval blockade of Cuba. Specifically, I explore how the president came to prefer an alternative that his advisors agreed was unlikely to help secure the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. Although some scholars have declared Kennedy's handling of this crisis an exemplary case of sound decision-making,<sup>111</sup> others have identified deviations from rational<sup>112</sup> and vigilant<sup>113</sup> decision-making. Despite the many symptoms of 'poor' decision-making, including the role of organisational behaviour and bureaucratic politics in affecting judgements about Soviet intentions and the identification of alternatives, what enabled the process to be adaptive to the circumstances? Building on David R. Gibson's argument that each decision made by Kennedy during this crisis was a product of his deliberations,<sup>114</sup> I demonstrate how the president and his senior advisors talked their way into prudent judgement.

I focus on Kennedy's meetings with his senior advisors from 16–20 October by analysing the transcripts of secret tapes reproduced in *The Presidential Recordings* series edited by Ernest May, Timothy Naftali, and Philip Zelikow. Like all textual records, transcripts also have limitations;

<sup>108</sup>Renshon and Renshon, 'The theory and practice', p. 513.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

<sup>110</sup>Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow (eds), *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises, Volume Two* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 422.

<sup>111</sup>Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982); Herek, Janis, and Huth, 'Decision-making during international crises'.

<sup>112</sup>Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*; Mark L. Haas, 'Prospect theory and the Cuban Missile Crisis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 45:2 (2001), pp. 241–70.

<sup>113</sup>David A. Welch, 'Crisis decision making reconsidered', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 33:3 (1989), pp. 432–9.

<sup>114</sup>David R. Gibson, *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

'they rarely tell the whole story'.<sup>115</sup> Elements of non-verbal communication (such as body language, gestures, facial expressions, silences, etc.) are important aspects of human interaction that cannot be reproduced in textual records. More generally, archives are not neutral repositories of information. At a minimum, institutional imperatives and contemporary purposes affect which information is recorded and in what manner. Human judgement is also an important factor in determining which parts of a discussion should be recorded in minutes or summaries of meetings. Moreover, these texts only record some formal, verbal deliberations. There were no doubt countless conversations, both formal and informal, among the individuals involved in decision-making that were never recorded. Despite these limitations, the secret tape recordings are sufficiently detailed to allow reconstructing the decision-making process and studying the features of the deliberations.

I do so using process tracing, which has come to be used widely in Political Science to trace causal mechanisms.<sup>116</sup> Since this method focuses on 'discovering how exactly [a] specific result has been possible',<sup>117</sup> it allows for making 'strong within-case inferences about the causal process whereby outcomes are produced'.<sup>118</sup> However, process can also be understood more broadly as 'a sequence of events or activities that describes how things change over time, or that represents an underlying pattern of cognitive transitions by an entity in dealing with an issue'.<sup>119</sup> Studying the process in this manner allows focusing on the 'progression of activities' involved in a phenomenon over time, such as decision-making. The method I use here adopts this understanding of process and is, therefore, more in line with the 'interpretivist perspective' of process tracing, which focuses on 'how' a particular event came about.<sup>120</sup> In this variant, process tracing makes it possible to 'evaluate empirically the preferences and perceptions of actors, their purposes, their goals, their values and their specification of the situations that face them'.<sup>121</sup>

To the extent that I am studying decision-making processes, the analysis presupposes causality. How decision-makers go about their deliberations is one important factor in 'causing' them to select a particular policy. Similarly, the judgements and outcomes of each stage of decision-making have causal consequences for the decisions and actions taken during subsequent stages of the process. However, given the purpose here, rather than presenting causal arguments concerning 'why' a particular decision was made, I focus on evaluating *how* the decision-makers went about formulating their perceptions, goals, and decisions. This analytical approach serves two important functions.<sup>122</sup> First, studying the process in detail allows differentiating between the 'major sequences of the overall process' as well as identifying 'critical moments that further shape the process'.<sup>123</sup> Second, we also gain insights into how particular approximations of prudence, influenced the broader decision-making process. Together, these functions allow evaluating the character of the deliberations *vis-à-vis* the PJA. Although a more detailed analysis is

<sup>115</sup>Douglas T. Stuart, 'Foreign-policy decision-making', in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 587.

<sup>116</sup>Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 206–07.

<sup>117</sup>Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland, *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 84.

<sup>118</sup>Derek Beach and Rasmus B. Pederson, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>119</sup>Andrew H. Van de Ven, 'Suggestions for studying strategy process: A research note', *Strategic Management Journal*, 13 (1992), p. 170.

<sup>120</sup>Pascal Vennesson, 'Case studies and process tracing: theories and practices', in Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating (eds), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 233.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

<sup>122</sup>For a discussion of these functions for 'causal process tracing', see Blatter and Haverland, *Designing Case Studies*, p. 111. Here, I only discuss the usefulness of process tracing in relation to the more particular purposes of the present study.

<sup>123</sup>Blatter and Haverland, *Designing Case Studies*, p. 111.

beyond the scope of the present discussion, I draw on a few examples from these meetings to identify approximations of prudence at ‘critical moments’ in the decision-making process demonstrate how these affected judgements and choices.<sup>124</sup>

### **Evidence from the Cuban Missile Crisis**

Discussions during the first meeting establish the non-routine nature of the problem for the Kennedy administration. For example, Secretary of State Dean Rusk called it ‘a very serious development’, which they ‘had not really believed the Soviets could carry this far’.<sup>125</sup> Faced with an unexpected occurrence, prudent judgement requires policymakers to begin with meaning making using reflective reasoning to understand the nature of the present problem. The resulting problem definition should serve as the basis for articulating short-term objectives that align with long-term interests and evaluating alternatives. Finally, prudent policy choice involves selecting a course of action that not only minimises risks to long-term interests but also preserves strategic flexibility.

Kennedy and his group of senior advisors’ collective deliberations enabled approximations of prudence at key junctures of the crisis. Engaging reflective reasoning allowed them to probe each other’s judgements and employ foresight as they defined the problem and evaluated alternatives. By explicitly relating short-term objectives with long-term outcomes, Kennedy and his advisors realised that any hard military option would endanger the US’s alliances. This in turn led the group to redefine their short-term objective and discard their preferred alternative in favour of implementing a blockade of Cuba, which was a moderate alternative that preserved strategic flexibility for both the US and the Soviet Union. The following discussion demonstrates that President Kennedy’s decision-making during the Cuban Missile Crisis is an instance of prudent judgement.

### ***Marshalling experience***

As the crisis began unfolding, President Kennedy brought together a group of senior advisors to deliberate collectively and help manage the crisis. Many of these advisors were also a part of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (the ExComm), which was formally established on 22 October. Over the next 13 days, the president would meet with this group regularly, generally at least twice a day, to review the latest intelligence and deliberate how the US should respond. Both Kennedy and his advisors also drew upon the expertise of others widely. For example, the president invited former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who was not a part of the Kennedy administration, into his advisory group. Kennedy also consulted with important allies, especially British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and French President Charles de Gaulle. Kennedy’s advisors also created strategy and planning groups within their departments and agencies to draw upon institutional expertise. These groups analysed particular alternatives or strategic issues and their studies informed the senior advisors’ deliberations with the president.

Kennedy’s collective deliberations with his senior advisors enabled reflective reasoning. Freely expressing disagreement and making efforts to explain their reasoning allowed them to challenge assumptions and uncover weaknesses, and thus affected the judgements they formulated about the nature of the problem and the suitability of alternatives.

### ***Engaging reflective reasoning***

The prudential requirement of reflective reasoning was an important feature of Kennedy’s deliberations with his senior advisors, especially as they attempted to define the problem and evaluate available alternatives.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid.

<sup>125</sup>Naftali and Zelikow (eds), *The Presidential Recordings*, p. 404.



In the first meeting, after Rusk, McNamara, and Joint Chief of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor had identified available alternatives, Kennedy initiated problem definition by asking why the Russians would place Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) in Cuba.<sup>126</sup> Taylor suggested one reason might be to ‘supplement their rather defective ICBM system’,<sup>127</sup> while Rusk said it indicated an effort to ‘balance that political, psychological flank’.<sup>128</sup> After all, the US had ‘a substantial nuclear superiority’ and had stationed 15 Jupiter missiles in Turkey; perhaps Khrushchev felt ‘it’s important for us to learn about living under medium-range missiles’.<sup>129</sup> But National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy found it ‘very hard to reconcile’ these actions with a Soviet statement from 12 September that only defensive military equipment was being sent to Cuba.<sup>130</sup>

The group returned to the question of Soviet motivations in their second meeting with open-mindedness and a willingness to acknowledge errors in their strategic beliefs. Rusk noted that the US had ‘never really believed Khrushchev would take on a general nuclear war over Cuba’ but admitted, ‘we could be just utterly wrong’.<sup>131</sup> The president agreed, ‘We certainly have been wrong about what he’s trying to do in Cuba’.<sup>132</sup> Bundy then raised an important question: ‘How gravely does this change the strategic balance?’<sup>133</sup> Kennedy’s advisors had different opinions, which were discussed by the group openly and critically. Whereas the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that MRBMs in Cuba altered the strategic balance ‘significantly’, Bundy thought ‘not so much’, and McNamara believed ‘not at all’ because the Soviet Union already had Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capability.<sup>134</sup>

As the group considered the nature of the problem more carefully, it came to be seen as a political problem rather than merely a military one. The president noted that his public statement on 4 September now tied his hands: ‘Last month I said we weren’t going to [allow it]. Last month I should have said that we don’t care. But when we said we’re not going to, and then they go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then I would think that our risks increase’.<sup>135</sup> Agreeing with McNamara’s and Bundy’s strategic assessment that ‘They’ve got enough to blow us up now anyway’, Kennedy characterised the problem as ‘a political struggle as much as military’.<sup>136</sup> This definition of the problem informed the group’s consideration of how to respond in the coming days.

The group’s evaluation of available alternatives also furnishes evidence of reflective reasoning. In the first meeting, Rusk, McNamara, and Taylor had identified several options: a limited air strike; a broad air strike; an air strike and blockade; and, a full invasion of Cuba. As McNamara described the military planning required to implement either option one or two, he worried they had not yet ‘considered the consequences of any of these actions satisfactorily’.<sup>137</sup> Engaging foresight led him to express a feeling of deep uncertainty: ‘I don’t know quite what kind of a world we live in after we have struck Cuba, and we’ve started it.’ His strategic analysis also raised concerns regarding the loss of freedom of action: ‘after we’ve launched 50 to 100 sorties, what kind of a world do we live in? How do we stop at that point? I do not know the answer to this ...’.<sup>138</sup>

Likewise, Attorney General Robert Kennedy also invoked the need for foresight: ‘we should also consider what Cuba’s going to be a year from now, or two years from now’.<sup>139</sup> Would

<sup>126</sup>Naftali and Zelikow (eds), *The Presidential Recordings*, p. 409.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., pp. 410–11.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid., p. 440.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., pp. 442–3.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid., p. 450.

these options deter the other side from undertaking the same course of action again in a few months? He underscored the importance of carefully considering the US's strategic position in clear terms: 'Where are we six months from now? Or that we're in any better position? Or aren't we in a worse position if we go in and knock them out ...?' Following his lead, Bundy engaged foresight and connected military alternatives with more long-term concerns: 'Our principal problem is to try and imaginatively to think what the world would be like if we do this, and what it will be like if we don't.'<sup>140</sup> He observed: 'I think any military action does change the world. And I think not taking action changes the world. And I think these are the two worlds we need to look at.'

Kennedy's first instinct had been to conduct an airstrike against Cuba to destroy the Soviet MRBMs in Cuba. Doing nothing was not considered a viable action because his September announcement that the US would not tolerate Soviet offensive capabilities in Cuba now tied his hands by putting the US's credibility at stake. However, employing reflective reasoning to understand Soviet motivations and evaluate alternatives created deep uncertainty for the president and his advisors. As we will see below, considering the outcomes of alternatives and their consequences for long-term interests would force the group to redefine their objectives and reconsider the wisdom of military action.

### ***Taking the long-term view***

As Kennedy and his advisors evaluated their alternatives on 18 October, they started thinking about the consequences of various actions explicitly and debated how their options affected their long-term goals. Their deliberations focused on two main issues: whether the US should undertake a strike against Cuba, and whether this strike should be conducted with or without prior warning to Khrushchev.

While exploring the consequences of conducting an airstrike against Cuba, the group realised this alternative did not balance their short-term objectives with the US's long-term interests. Rusk, who had expressed certainty that the US must act during the first meeting, now admitted his thinking had changed in light of new intelligence and wondered, 'Is it necessary to take action?'<sup>141</sup> If the US did nothing then Cuba 'could become a formidable military problem in any contest ... with the Soviet Union over a threat in any other part of the world'.<sup>142</sup> Yet, he acknowledged, any 'action involves very high risks' – the Soviets may respond anywhere else 'from Berlin right around to Korea, and ... the United States itself'.<sup>143</sup> The US had to weigh its immediate options against its long-term interest of preserving its alliances.<sup>144</sup> But as Kennedy conceded, since most allies considered Cuba 'a fixation of the United States and not a serious military threat', a strike would be regarded 'as a mad act by the United States, which is due to a loss of nerve'.<sup>145</sup>

Discussion about whether to give Khrushchev a 24-hour warning before conducting a strike against Cuba also explicitly explored the consequences of this action and was instrumental in raising the value of moderation. McNamara cautioned that an unannounced strike would kill 'several hundred' Soviet citizens 'at absolute minimum', which would force Khrushchev to respond strongly.<sup>146</sup> Thus, they must consider whether the US was 'willing to pay some kind of a rather substantial price to eliminate these missiles', such as removing its missiles from Italy and Turkey.<sup>147</sup> Ball agreed, '... it's easy sitting here to, to underestimate the kind of sense of affront

<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., p. 521.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid.

<sup>143</sup>Ibid.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., p. 522.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid., pp. 528–9.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., p. 538.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid., p. 539.

that you would have in allied countries ... if we act without warning, without giving Khrushchev some way out.<sup>148</sup> Doing so would be 'like Pearl Harbor. It's the kind of conduct that one might expect of the Soviet Union. It is not the conduct that one expects of the United States'.<sup>149</sup>

The Pearl Harbor analogy not only highlighted ethical concerns<sup>150</sup> but also became linked with preserving the US's identity in the minds of these decision-makers. The group's difficulty in imagining a future in which the US had invaded Cuba increased the importance of selecting alternatives that avoided escalation. Robert Kennedy struggled with the question of 'assuming that you do survive all this, we don't have, the fact that we're not ... what kind of country we are'.<sup>151</sup> The US had maintained it would not make the first strike against the Soviet Union; if 'Now, in the interest of time, we do that to a small country. I think it's a hell of a burden to carry'.<sup>152</sup> Rusk concurred about this burden, referring to, 'This business of carrying the mark of Cain on your brow for the rest of your lives ...'.<sup>153</sup> By the end of the morning meeting, the group was not convinced that the blockade alternative would succeed in securing the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba. However, they had become keenly aware of their dilemma: while swift military action seemed the most likely way to achieve the US's immediate objectives, doing so, especially without prior warning, not only risked the US's alliances but also threatened its identity for the decision-makers.

### **The value of moderation**

No one believed that diplomatic measures or a blockade alone would help achieve an adequate resolution. But either a general war with the Soviet Union or other unacceptable costs seemed inevitable once any military action was undertaken. Kennedy and his advisors' attempts to engage foresight and explore the long-term consequences of alternatives highlighted the importance of moderation. Kennedy's September announcement that the US would not accept Soviet offensive weapons in Cuba had already limited the alternatives now available; taking any military action would create a logic of its own and constrain the US's ability to exercise strategic control.

On 18 October, as the group evaluated alternatives, the president established the basis for making a policy decision: 'the question really is to what action we take which lessens the chances of a nuclear exchange, which obviously is the final failure'.<sup>154</sup> Talking to Khrushchev first would put the US in a better position with its allies, with the world, and in history.<sup>155</sup> Thus, the group began to seriously consider the prudential need to retain strategic flexibility while deliberating alternatives. Remarkably, despite supporting military alternatives at the beginning of deliberations that day, nearing the end of the meeting McNamara changed his preference in favour of a blockade because 'it reduces the very serious risk of large-scale military action from which this country cannot benefit'.<sup>156</sup> 'The best possible conclusion of a blockade', McNamara noted, 'is that the alliance is not divided'. The blockade would permit consultations with all parties.<sup>157</sup>

Although Kennedy did not meet with his group of advisors on 19 October, most of them congregated as a 'strategy group' in the State Department to review the latest intelligence. The group remained divided: while several senior advisors including Acheson, Dillon, McCone, and Taylor

<sup>148</sup>Ibid.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid.

<sup>150</sup>Dominic Tierney, "'Pearl Harbor in reverse": Moral analogies in the Cuban Missile Crisis', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9:3 (2007), pp. 49–77.

<sup>151</sup>Naftali and Zelikow (eds), *The Presidential Recordings*, p. 547.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid.

<sup>153</sup>Ibid.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., p. 541.

<sup>155</sup>Dillon and Ball, *Ibid.*, pp. 553–4

<sup>156</sup>Ibid., p. 568.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid.

supported a 'quick' and 'surgical' airstrike, McNamara and Robert Kennedy favoured the blockade alternative.<sup>158</sup> Based on a conversation with the President earlier that morning, the Attorney General argued that although 'to do nothing' was 'unthinkable', an airstrike would be 'very difficult' for the president to approve due to 'all the memory of Pearl Harbor and with all the implications this would have for us in whatever world there would be afterward ... A sneak attack was not in our traditions ... the action should allow the Soviets some room for manoeuvre to pull back from their over-extended position in Cuba'.<sup>159</sup> The strategy group spent several hours developing scenarios for and debating the merits of both the airstrike and the blockade options.

On 20 October, Kennedy and his advisors deliberated the pros and cons of the airstrike and blockade alternatives. The objective of removing offensive weapons from Cuba could only be achieved through military action. However, although opinions remained divided among his advisors, Kennedy agreed that an 'air strike would lead to a major Soviet response'.<sup>160</sup> But this course of action created deep long-term uncertainty. On the other hand, beginning with a blockade would allow determining 'whether the missile development had ceased or whether it was continuing', which would leave them 'in a better position to know what move to make next'.<sup>161</sup> Rusk then suggested a more moderate objective; instead of demanding the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba, the US should seek 'an immediate freeze of the strategic missile capability in Cuba'.<sup>162</sup> Following a brief discussion, President Kennedy authorised his advisors to 'go ahead with the blockade' and 'to take actions necessary to put us in a position to undertake an airstrike on the missiles and missile sites by Monday or Tuesday'.<sup>163</sup>

## Conclusion

Prudence requires formulating context-specific judgements using a distinct pattern of reflective reasoning informed by experience to pursue long-term well-being through moderate actions. The Prudent Judgement Approach offers a procedural account of prudence, that is, it prescribes the intellectual process of reasoning and deliberation through which prudent decisions can be made. It makes only limited claims of substantive prudence beyond requiring that choices and actions undertaken in the pursuit of one's goals be moderate and flexible. What precisely characterises a prudent outcome would be contextually specific and cannot be specified *a priori*. However, the prescriptions of the PJA are cognitively demanding. Is the average decision-maker even capable of adopting this approach, given their political circumstances, psychological traits, and cognitive limitations?

An analysis of President Kennedy's deliberations during the first few days of the Cuban Missile Crisis suggests that prudent judgement is feasible in practice despite the range of constraints involved in foreign policy decision-making. Kennedy and his group of senior advisors employed reflective reasoning in their collective deliberations. Not only did they probe each other's judgements and engage foresight as they explored the nature of the problem and evaluated alternatives, but they were also willing to change their judgements. When explicitly relating short-term objectives with long-term outcomes created deep uncertainty about the future, the group rejected their original short-term objective and preferred alternative in favour of implementing a blockade of Cuba, which was a moderate choice that preserved strategic flexibility for both the US and the Soviet Union. Thus, Kennedy's decision-making during the Cuban Missile Crisis can be considered an instance of prudence.

<sup>158</sup>Foreign Relations of the United States, 'Record of Meeting', Document 31. 1961–3, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961–September 1962, 19 October 1962 (1996), available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d31>.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid.

<sup>160</sup>Naftali and Zelikow (eds), *The Presidential Recordings*, p. 609.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid., p. 610.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid., p. 611.

These findings suggest that the four components of prudence – reflective reasoning, experience, long-term well-being, and moderation – have a cumulative effect on the quality of deliberations. Moreover, prudent judgement can be learned. Those seeking or performing leadership roles should strive to develop the experience and reflective reasoning skills required to deliberate prudently. Inexperienced leaders may be better off appointing advisors with significant experience. Indeed, lacking direct experience, President Harry S. Truman left foreign policymaking to his Secretaries of State. The European Recovery Program, still considered one of the most successful examples of post-Second World War US foreign policy,<sup>164</sup> was formulated by the State Department with little guidance from Truman.

Given the uncertainty and complexity involved in political decision-making, there is no guarantee that outcomes will be ‘good’ or prudent. However, by deliberating as prudently as possible, we may increase the odds of better outcomes. When decision-makers explicitly consider long-term well-being while articulating objectives and considering alternatives, draw upon diverse experiences, and engage in reflective reasoning, the closer they are to prudence and the more likely they are to avoid cognitive biases. This has profound prescriptive implications for an increasingly complex and uncertain strategic policymaking environment. The PJA outlined here offers a first step towards designing a decision-making process that can not only aid the pursuit of long-term interests but also provides strategies that can help mitigate human cognitive limitations.

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<sup>164</sup>John Agnew and J. Nicholas Entrikin, ‘Introduction’, in John Agnew and J. Nicholas Entrikin (eds), *The Marshall Plan Today: Model and Metaphor* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).