

Interview - Bruce Bueno de Mesquita

Written by E-International Relations

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Bruce Bueno de Mesquita is the Silver Professor of Politics at New York University, director of NYU's Alexander Hamilton Center for Political Economy, and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is an elected member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was also a Guggenheim Fellow and president of the International Studies Association. He co-wrote *The Logic of Political Survival* (2003), *The Predictioneer's Game: Using the Logic of Brazen Self-Interest to See and Shape the Future* (2009), *The Dictator's Handbook* (2011), and co-authored the selectorate theory with Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James Morrow. He is an expert on international conflict, foreign policy formation, the peace process, and nation building. He received an honorary doctorate in 1999 from the University of Groningen and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Michigan.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I began as a comparative politics, South Asia specialist with little formal training in international relations. Hence, when I moved into the IR arena I started from the perspective that system-level structural theories were the right way to study the subject. I stopped believing that with a set of papers I wrote in the late 1970s that highlighted the debate in the field over polarity and stability. I contended that the debates really were about how decision-makers respond to uncertainty. That led me to several conclusions that changed how I understood – or did not understand – how the international arena worked. First, since there were plausible arguments that multipolarity; that is, high uncertainty, led to cautious responses and alternatively that it led to miscalculations and misjudgments, I concluded that there was no inherent logical link between polarity and instability. Second, I concluded that variation in how states responded to uncertainty depended on who was in a leadership position and so we needed to study leaders rather than states, treating them as if they were unitary actors. I was particularly influenced by A.F.K. Organski's *Stages of Political Development* (1965) in forming a view of how national decision making coalitions formed and William Riker's *Theory of Political Coalitions* and his subsequent book with Peter Ordeshook. Their research exposed me to the possibility of rigorous logic as a substitute for opinion and hunches in studying politics. Grad classes with Donald Stokes also reframed how I thought about politics, especially after he exposed me to Von Neumann and Morgenstern.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think the most exciting research and debates revolves around the linkage between comparative and international politics. For me, the centers of the important developments in the field today are NYU (especially our formal models, quantitative, and IR faculty), Stanford (especially Fearon and Schultz), Berkeley (Robert Powell), and the Harris School at the University of Chicago (with their outstanding group of political economy researchers) – scholars in these places are particularly expanding our understanding and probing alternative arguments based on rigorous logic and evidence.

In what ways do you think game theory is a better indicator of political outcomes than ideology?

Ideological views can be expressed as the intensity of preference – that is, utility – for alternative outcomes on issues. Game theory provides a method to analyze how people work their way through choices in constrained environments

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where others are competing with them to shape the outcome. Ideology is not an alternative to game theory as the question implies. Rather it is one of many elements that may enter any decision maker's utility function. One way of thinking about ideology is that it is reflected in extreme positions on key issues coupled with great resolve/low flexibility when it comes to considering alternative views. My forecasting model, a game solved for Perfect Bayesian Equilibria, for example, considers just such factors in estimating player utilities in a dynamic game.

Your prediction published in the The New York Times on Iran has been proven correct. Could a similar prediction work for North Korea as well?

Yes! Indeed, it should be easier to predict North Korean choices than Iranian choices because there is less variance in political or policy stances in the DPRK. Indeed, I have done predictions on this subject but not in the public domain.

Selectorate theory seems to fit well with the state of modern governments. Can it also be applied to regimes of the past?

Indeed I am currently writing a book on the origins of so-called "Western exceptionalism" using selectorate theory on the Catholic Church since the Council of Nicaea (325) and the monarchs of Europe, especially since the emergence of the Holy Roman Empire, after 800. I have recently completed estimating the size of the winning coalition, for instance, in the Church from before Nicaea to the present. In *The Logic of Political Survival* my co-authors and I applied selectorate theory to 19th century Belgium, to the Roman Empire, the Mamluks and other historical cases. In *The Dictator's Handbook* we also applied it to corporate behavior and to securities fraud.

Is Russia under Vladimir Putin a credible threat in Syria or is it cheap talk?

Certainly we cannot describe Putin's actions and statements regarding Syria as cheap talk since he has committed military force in the region – a credible, costly signal.

In my view, Putin hopes to resurrect the lost influence that Russia had in the 1960s and 1970s. Outside of his immediate neighborhood he has few beachheads to advance his agenda. Syria is one of those beachheads — and Iran is likely to become another. Hence his commitment to Assad's regime. His loyalty in the face of adversity may also serve as a valuable signal to others in the region that he may be someone they can count on and that may help increase Russian influence in the Middle East in the future.

Could rational choice theory still hold true if Donald Trump becomes president?

Of course. Rational choice theory has to do with the actions a person takes, given their preferences and goals. Rationality is about action, not about what a person wants.

You've written that in rational choice theory, decision makers do not have complete freedom of action as they must consider their constraints and adjust their policies accordingly. How likely then is Trump to renege on his promises, given both the enormous backlash and support he has received?

Campaigns are generally filled with promises that are lacking in commitment. Donald Trump probably is not significantly different on this score than most politicians. It is very common for elected officials to renege on many campaign promise. President Obama, for instance, was going to focus on immigration reform in his first year; he was going to close Guantanamo, etc. Events come to overwhelm the rhetoric of the campaign period. In Trump's case we probably have to add that his statements are very high variance so it is hard to tell what he is promising (other than the wall along the border I guess) and therefore if – as is extremely unlikely – he were elected it would be hard to tell exactly what he was reneging on or carrying out.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

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In my view graduate school is a time to learn what the cutting edge questions are in any field and to learn the tools one needs to address those questions. The half-life of a pretty important International Relations study is maybe 5 years so half of what one reads in graduate school is not very important by the time they get out into the field. But methods for doing research remain important and can be built on throughout a career. Additionally, methods of research are much harder to learn on one's own than is the literature. And tools are more transportable as interests change.