

BOOK REVIEW

Sebastian Rosato, Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict (Yale University Press, 2021)

Orhan Mehmed IRFAN

Ph.D. Student, Department of International Relations, Ankara University, Ankara

To cite this article: Orhan Mehmed Irfan, “Sebastian Rosato, Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict (Yale University Press, 2021)”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Advanced Online Publication, 22 June 2023, pp. 1-3.

Submitted: 3 November 2022

Last Revision: 6 June 2023

Advanced Online Publication: 22 June 2023

Uluslararası İlişkiler - International Relations
E-mail: uidergisi@gmail.com

All rights of this paper are reserved by Uluslararası İlişkiler (International Relations), which is published by the International Relations Council of Turkey (IRCT). With the exception of academic quotations, no parts of this publication may be reproduced, redistributed, sold or transmitted in any form and by any means for public usage without a prior permission from the copyright holder. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the author(s)'s and do not reflect those of the *Council*, editors of the journal, and other authors.

Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict

Sebastian ROSATO

New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2021, 376 pages, ISBN: 9780300253023

Orhan Mehmed IRFAN

Ph.D. Student, Department of International Relations, Ankara University, Ankara

E-Mail: omirfan@ankara.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0003-4116-6165

Students and practitioners of International Relations have always been wondering whether the effects of anarchy can be mitigated, where anarchy stands for the absence of hierarchical organization among states. In other words, is it possible for states to abandon their endemic suspicions and anxieties, and start to trust each other? Sebastian Rosato, with his timely and much needed work, concludes that this cannot be the case and those who foresee rosy scenarios for the United States (US)-China rivalry are, to put it mildly, mistaken.

For realists (especially structural ones), uncertainty among great powers is taken as an axiomatic assumption; thus, competition for security and potential for conflicts are immutable features of the realm. Whereas optimists (critics of realists) put forth that under some conditions great powers can trust each other and make conflicts unthinkable. Sebastian Rosato proposes a new two-pronged theory, that of ‘intentions pessimism’, according to which: first, states cannot acquire the needed information to build confidence regarding their peers simply because that information is in the minds of a bunch of decision-makers, and second, there is always the so-called problem of the future, which builds on the fact that future intentions can change in an unpredictable way.

The book is constituted in three main parts. The first, following the introduction, lays the foundations of the theory of ‘intentions pessimism’ and deals with the available counterarguments. At the roots of intentions pessimism, Rosato argues, lie the problems of information. States find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to access firsthand information. This derives from a basic observation that the current and potential future intentions are purely in the minds of leaders who do not reveal their ideas. Under such circumstances, it is argued that intentions can be inferred by analyzing secondhand information, which is more than abundant. Of course, great powers communicate, declare their interests, and publicly share strategic documents such as grand strategies, national defense reports or even military doctrines. As a result, intentions optimists argue that it is possible under some situations to

access firsthand information. However, due to strong strategic incentives, great powers also conceal their real intentions to gain tactical superiority. In addition, the problem of the future is of cardinal importance; there is no way to predict when and in what direction today's intentions will change tomorrow.

The second part of the book runs the theory against the historical record of five different cases where optimists felt the most confident. In other words, Rosato studies the most critical cases where common sense would strongly agree with the optimists, since it seems obvious that great powers have trusted each other and have abandoned security competition. The cases are as follows: (1) Russo-German relations during the Bismarck Era, especially between 1871-1890, (2) Britain and the US during the great rapprochement (1895-1906), (3) France and Germany, (4) Japan and the US in the interwar period (1919-1930), and (5) the Soviet Union and the US during the end of the Cold War. In all these instances, either the sides abandoned the competition unilaterally or came to an agreed solution to do so. These, understandably, are mentioned as prime exemplars of the feasibility of circumventing the effects of anarchy. However, Rosato, based on a diligent work, astutely shows that the historical record points out the exact opposite direction; that is, the protagonists remained acutely uncertain regarding their peers' intentions. The fact that these cases did not lead to direct conflict does not mean that the competition had been abandoned. As a matter of fact, they all suffered from endemic uncertainty even escalating to war-threatening crises.

The last part of the book scrutinizes how this theoretical approach performs regarding the future relations between the US and China. Drawing on the abovementioned instances and the simple but powerful logic of his theory, Rosato casts doubt on the smoothness of US-China relations. As the US has not trusted China for the last two decades, the argument goes, the same is going to be valid for the future as well, simply because there is no possible way for great powers to know for sure their peers' intentions. It is indeed a matter of acquiring the requisite firsthand information and the inherent nature of intentions that cannot be trusted, for they always refer to the future that is unknown, regardless of great powers' internal characteristics, such as ideological commitments, type of government, culture, or religion.

When it comes to shortcomings, two important questions beg to be asked. Although, more often than not, personal characteristics are applied to states, still it needs further clarification how well intentions, borrowed from philosophy or psychology, which are in the minds of individuals, can be applied to structures as states. For instance, Rosato mentions that neoclassical realists include a circle of top leaders under "decision-makers," but does the aggregate of individual minds equal that of the state, and if so, how specifically? This is not a shortcoming exclusively of this work, but a common one for those who attach an independent variable role to structural factors and incorporate state-level factors such as decision-makers as if they constitute the state as a unit of analysis.

Another point that must be raised is regarding great power status. For instance, it is argued that Britain, during the great rapprochement, and the Soviet Union, at the end of the Cold War, unilaterally abandoned competing for security due to a lack of material resources. Normally, one would expect great powers by definition to have the wherewithal to compete for security, since they are so obsessed with that. The case of the Soviet Union should be discerned

from that of the Great Britain, as the latter, as shown by Rosato, found it extremely difficult to show presence simultaneously in distinct parts of the world, and the US did not pose a first-rank threat due to its distance. In other words, Britain, at that time, had other adversaries and was not in a position to wage a fierce competition with everyone in different regions of the world and had to quit the rivalry with the distant one, but still made this decision due to a shortage of material resources, not because it trusted the US. Whereas the Soviet Union could not sustain the security competition to its first and foremost adversary in a world with just two superpowers. Does this not reveal anything about its great power status? The Soviet case falls somewhat short of explaining great power rivalry since the protagonist in question had lost the great power status that was directing its behavior. Perhaps it is time to reassess our terminology and move beyond that of the Cold War period and distinguish between nuclear-armed states and great powers.

Despite these subtleties, *Intentions in Great Power Politics* is worth reading for anyone concerned with the fate of great power politics and the feasibility of mitigating anarchy. Considered the current turbulence in international politics, it is, indeed, a well-timed book for both students and practitioners. One cannot help but be impressed to find out how simple but powerful the theory of intentions pessimism is. Also, I, for one, hold the view that more authors in the field should adopt Rosato's style of writing, which is easily attainable, smooth, enthralling, and so well-organized.