

Research Statement

Scholars derive radically different predictions about peace and war if they assume a state's foreign policy is motivated by a single goal such as ethnic-nationalism, access to resources, political survival or fear from external threats. More realistically, different states can hold different combinations of these motives, their true motives are private, and they face complex incentives to misrepresent. Given this uncertainty, how do decision-makers infer other states' foreign policy motives through specific actions? To better understand how decision-makers assess their rival's motives, I interviewed six National Security Council principles, and surveyed hundreds of intelligence and foreign policy professionals about how they assess threats to US interests. Based on these insights, I argue that a state's foreign policy is determined by an interaction between its underlying motives and its historical context. A state motivated by ethnic-nationalism, for example, covets different concessions than a state motivated by security, prosperity or political survival. A state's true motives are private, and it faces complex incentives to misrepresent them in different strategic settings. However, great powers know about their rival's history and culture and exploit that information to make nuanced inferences from their rival's foreign policy behavior. For example, if China is motivated by restoring its borders, then it will prioritize acquiring historically controlled territories (e.g., Taiwan). In contrast, if China is motivated by revenge, it will want to inflict damage on past rivals (e.g., Japan). Consequently, the US can make different inferences about China's motives if China uses force against Japan rather than Taiwan because the US understands how these different objectives serve the different motives that China might hold.

I integrate historical and cultural aspects of a state's motives into formal models to produce unique predictions about crisis bargaining (*Journal of Politics*), military interventions (*Journal of Peace Research*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*), nuclear proliferation (under review), power transitions (*book manuscript*, *dissertation*), and other important interactions. Paradoxically, by introducing complex motives into rational theories of conflict I find effective signaling in many settings where we previously believed incentives to misrepresent were insurmountable. I make these new findings because, unlike other rational signaling theories, I allow states to make inferences based on their rival's *specific* demands, and not just the scope of demands or militarization choices. Thus, puzzles about effective diplomacy, the timing of war, and commercial partnerships can be explained by how states combine historical context and specific foreign policy choices to communicate their own motives or understand the motives of others. I validate my mechanisms using survey experiments with real-world intelligence analysts and using archival research. I also operationalize motives in quantitative models to explain variance that theories of power and bargaining fail to capture.

In my book project and dissertation, I integrate complex motives into the most high-stakes and uncertain interaction in world politics: power transitions. Current scholarship struggles to explain why power transitions start peacefully and why only some devolve into war. Evidence suggests diplomacy plays a role, but scholars cannot explain why given rising powers' incentives to understate their motives. For example, how did Hitler convince the British in 1932 that his aims were limited and why did the British become alarmed only after years of violent demands? I argue that rising powers use diplomacy early on to communicate their underlying motives, not just the scope of their demands. In doing so, they allege that they care about some issues but not others. Declining powers could ignore these claims, but they prefer to evaluate whether the rising power's deeds match its declared motives. For the rest of the power transition, declining powers use these early promises as a benchmark to evaluate future behavior. I predict declining powers become mistrustful and turn to competition only after the rising power makes a territorial demand that is inconsistent with its early diplomatic

justification. Thus, inconsistencies between costless diplomacy and costly demands explain when peace breaks down and why it breaks down in some cases but not others.

Chapter 4 tests how private diplomacy affects elites' beliefs about their rival's intentions through a survey experiment that samples 93 real-world foreign policy and intelligence professionals. The vignette simulates a National Security Council (NSC) assessment of a rising power and randomly assigns the rising power's diplomatic messages about its intentions and information about its military interventions. Subjects that observed the rising power use force to take territory that was consistent with its declared core interests were no more worried about its long-term intentions. However, subjects that observed inconsistencies were alarmed. I rule out alternative explanations from cognitive psychology using post-survey questionnaires. I recently completed a second elite experiment with Korean diplomats to evaluate a second theory about diplomacy and culture, and a third experiment with intelligence analysts to better understand group-level decision-making.

Chapters 5 and 6 summarize archival and historical research. To establish external validity, I first test my core predictions against the universe of great power, power transitions through a medium-*n* analysis. I developed a new dataset of power transitions that measures rising powers' declared motives, and codes their behaviors as consistent and inconsistent with these motives. I also measure shifts in the declining power's strategy from cooperation to competition. My motives-based theory predicts the timing of competition during power transitions, as well as the cases where peace prevails, better than any power-based theory. When combined with Powell's theory of shifting power, my theory explains the complete pattern of war and peace during all power transitions since 1850. In chapter 5, I use historical data from National Security, Foreign Affairs and prime ministerial archives to process trace my mechanism through British assessments of Soviet intentions (1941–46).

Chapter 7 considers a modern case: America's assessment of Chinese intentions since 1989. To understand Cabinet level decision-making, I interview NSC staff from every Administration since 1989 including a Director of National Intelligence, and a Chairman of the NSC. The interviews show that subjects were optimistic about cooperation with China even after the Tiananmen Square Massacre and Taiwan Straits Crisis. Yet they all grew concerned after China's 2010 posturing in the South China Sea because there is no long-standing claim there. The interviews are corroborated by computational text analysis of 600,000 U.S. foreign policy reports, speeches and government documents about China.

Chapter 8 considers theoretical and policy implications. Existing research on reassurance emphasizes how behaviors—invasions, military spending, institutional membership—signal a state's intentions. Yet the context that surrounds these behaviors is often ignored. Policymakers want to know: does Russia's intervention in Syria signal its intention to re-ignite the Cold War, has Iran abandoned its nuclear aspirations in favor of global economic engagement, and do China's investments in Africa signal a more expansive foreign policy? Existing rational theories are poorly equipped to deal with these contextualized events because they do not distinguish between what states fight over, or the meaning of specific military and commercial partnerships. I provide a tractable way to understand specific foreign policy choices based on both strategic behavior and history and culture. By including cultural aspects of state motives into the canonical models of power transition, I predict more varied strategic behavior and greater uncertainty than theories with simple preferences. I also uncover hidden logics about how states coordinate to resolve this complexity that explains puzzling great power behavior through history.

My future research will extend my theory of motives to other great power interactions. In “A Little Bit of Cheap Talk is a Dangerous Thing” (*JOP*), I found that during crisis bargaining states use pre-crisis diplomacy to clarify their core interests but sometimes purposefully induce war in the process. I am now

extending this insight to resolve contradictory findings in research on repeated crises. In “Cross-Domain Signaling” (working paper), I explain contradictory findings in theories of repeated crisis about whether aggressive acts lead to long-term peace or war. I show that when states fight over their declared core interests, they signal high resolve, leading to peace, but when they fight over peripheral interests, they signal unrestrained aggressive intentions, leading to war. Other manuscripts on my website show that complex preferences provide unique predictions about nuclear containment, and why wars sometimes spread to many theatres and other times are confined to a specific geographical location.

I am also developing theoretically driven, time series measures of state preferences and foreign policies. For example, my theory makes new claims about the role of diplomacy in foreign policy. In “A Break From the Past” (under review), I leverage these insights to show that patterns of diplomatic behavior indicate foreign policy changes. I gathered new daily data on every diplomatic event since 2006 for 16 different countries using a novel web-scraping algorithm. I then developed non-parametric models that forecast the Ukraine Crisis. Based on the results of this test case, IARPA, the CIA’s think tank, has considered expanding the project to a real-time dataset. In another project, I digitized 25 years of daily reports from the CIA to the president. In this data, I identified 1400 unique CIA assessments of different countries’ intentions using supervised classification algorithms. I am now correlating those assessments with political events to explain how the CIA updates their beliefs about threats to the United States.

Second Project: Motives, Digital Technology, and National Security Abuse.

Understanding the intelligence community (IC) is vital to my research because the IC is responsible for both concealing a state’s true motives and evaluating the motives of rivals. Through extensive in-person interviews with the Intelligence Community, I have started to study how the IC, and by extension states, processes information and form beliefs, and the role secrecy plays in this process. I argue that modern digital and media technologies have revolutionized how states both conceal their own preferences and decipher the preferences of their rivals because it makes available an enormous amount of low-quality information. The project began as a paper, “Media Technology, Covert Action and the Politics of Exposure,” *JPR*. In it, Michael Poznansky and I argue that leaders use covert action to pursue objectives inconsistent with their declared core interests, but modern media technologies increase the risk that covert actions will be exposed. Using a dataset of declassified CIA interventions, we show that fear of exposure constrains the president from authorizing secret missions against targets with dense communications technologies.

We continue to write about national security classification in the digital age in an ongoing co-authored project. The project clarifies the rise of fake news, presidential tweets, and national security accountability broadly. In “National Security Whistleblowers,” (draft on website) we argue that perverse motives can drive the president to exploit national security classification in an age where social media is the American public’s primary news source. Using mechanism design, we argue that laws that fiercely punish national security whistle-blowers make their claims more credible leading to executive accountability even in the digital age. We validate our mechanism through semi-structured interviews with incarcerated whistle-blowers. In a third paper, we explore how the president responds to whistleblower and media claims about national security abuse. We use experiments of conspiracy theory claims to establish that lying generates high audience costs. We argue that because Americans will punish the president for lying, public denials of controversial policies are persuasive.

You can find three published papers, two articles under review and five other manuscripts on my website www.michaelfjoseph.com.