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Armed non-state actors in conflict: strategic decision-making in the 2014 IS-KRI conflict

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Chapter 3

Analyzing strategic decision-making

To answer how to explain the strategic decision-making of IS and the KRI during their 2014 conflict, the previous chapter conceptualized ANSA and strategic decision-making. The next step is to introduce how to analyze these concepts. Chapter 3 introduces three established foreign policy paradigms and one alternative paradigm, discusses the state of the art of each in analyzing ANSAs' strategic decision-making, and criticizes and operationalizes the paradigms. The chapter answers how do foreign policy paradigms explain strategic decision-making? This question provides insight into how the study can answer the central research question. In other words, which analytical frameworks exist within IR that might explain strategic decisions taken by IS and the KRI?

The overview of established IR paradigms in this chapter indicates that these paradigms are appropriate for analyzing strategic decision-making by ANSAs. Therefore, it appears theoretically unjustified to express doubts about whether existing geopolitical theories remain valid³⁹³, whether the traditional paradigms for analyzing foreign policy still suffice³⁹⁴, or to establish a new paradigm to explain the geopolitical consequences of IS' and the KRI's rise.³⁹⁵ Yet, the chapter observes a tendency for the paradigms to incorporate elements of the other paradigms. Complexity theory, as a fourth paradigm, merges these elements. The chapter explores complexity theory as an alternative paradigm.

3.1 Analyzing ANSAs' strategic decision-making

Existing IR paradigms struggled to explain the turmoil in the Middle East since 2011.³⁹⁶ Some scholars argued that 'states are very different from non-states – and we cannot make the

393 Black, *Geopolitics*, 243-4.

394 Gunter, "The Kurds in the changing political map," 78.

395 Cf. *Ibid.*, 78. Also see: Black, *Geopolitics*, 243; Stansfield, "The unravelling of the post-First World War state system?" 259-82.

396 Freedman, *The future of war*, xv.

assumption that they operate according to the same logic and constraints.³⁹⁷ Others claim they do.³⁹⁸ Baumann and Stengel thus wondered: '[s]ince there do not seem to be theoretical reasons for not taking on NSAs, the question then is: are there inherent methodological problems that stand in the way of analysing NSAs from an FPA perspective?'³⁹⁹ Baumann and Stengel did not find methodological objections other than practicalities, such as a lack of available information, as most ANSAs operate clandestinely.⁴⁰⁰ Following Baumann and Stengel, that ANSAs are not a distinctive category of actors within IR methodologically, this chapter explores how ANSAs' strategic decision-making can be analyzed using existing analytical frameworks within IR.

Despite scholars realizing that ANSAs are the historical continuity and states the anomaly⁴⁰¹, since IR fully developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and different perspectives evolved within IR⁴⁰², nation-states were and remained IR's focus.⁴⁰³ Research in the 1960s and 1970s disputed IR's state-centric approach and whether states were unitary actors⁴⁰⁴, causing a rupture between traditionalist IR and the more progressive foreign policy analysis.⁴⁰⁵ IR remained state-centric and focused on interactions within a balance-of-power system; foreign policy analysis incorporated internal processes into strategic decision-making⁴⁰⁶, recognizing that non-state actors exist within – and beyond – the state that exercise influence and hold power.⁴⁰⁷ One study contributing significantly to the rupture between IR and foreign policy analysis while simultaneously applying both approaches was Allison's 1971 *Essence of decision*. It is considered one of the most influential studies in foreign policy analysis.⁴⁰⁸ Next to the

397 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 21.

398 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 7.

399 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 502.

400 *Ibid.*, 503; Hegghammer, "Resistance is futile," 48, 49–51; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 4, 63. For example: Abu Abdullah al-Masri, "Principles in the administration of the Islamic State," *Islamic State* (1435H) [2014], transl. Aymenn al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015; Christoph Reuter, "The terror strategist. Secret files reveal the structure of Islamic State," *Der Spiegel*, April 18, 2015.

401 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 490; Seyom Brown, *New forces in IR* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 1974), 171. Also see: Bremmer, "The technopolar moment"; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 3.

402 Goldstein, *International relations*, 6–10. Also see: Wæver, "Figures of international thought," 7–15.

403 Brown, *New forces in IR*, 124. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 36; Goldstein, *International relations*, 6–10; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 21; Henry Kissinger, *Wereldorde*, transl. Huub Stegeman (Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2015), 13–7, 34–42.

404 Joseph Nye & Robert Keohane, "Transnational relations and IR. A conclusion," in *Transnational relations and IR*, Joseph Nye & Robert Keohane (eds.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 371, 393. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 39–84; Russett & Starr, *World politics*, 13–6.

405 Darwich, "Foreign policy analysis," 5; Jonathan Paquin, "Foreign policy analysis," in *The SAGE handbook of political science*, Dirk Berg-Schlosser *et al.* (eds.), (London: SAGE, 2020), 1, 218; Tanter, "International system," 7. Also see: Brown, *New forces in IR*, 123–81; Vendulka Kubáľková, "What constructivism?" in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 30; Nye & Keohane, "Transnational relations and IR," 377.

406 Tanter, "International system," 7. Also see: Paquin, "Foreign policy analysis," 1, 214.

407 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 16; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 3; Little & Smith, "Introduction," 6.

408 Blatter & Haverland, *Designing case studies*, 3; Don Munton, "The three puzzles. Essence of decision and the missile crisis," in *The Cuban missile crisis. A critical reappraisal*, Len Scott & Gerald Hughes (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2015), 142.

dominant state-centric rational actor paradigm, Allison observed two alternative foreign policy paradigms: one emphasizing procedures and cultures, the other emphasizing bargaining processes among individual decision-makers.⁴⁰⁹ Allison applied all three paradigms to a case study for comparison and concluded that the paradigms complement one another. That suggests they are positioned simultaneously, not successive.⁴¹⁰

Allison claimed that the paradigms apply not only to states but to other actors as well.⁴¹¹ Allison regarded the paradigms as 'systematic statement[s] of the basic assumptions, concepts, and propositions employed by a school of analysis'⁴¹², recognizing they are '[w]eaker than a satisfactory theoretical model,⁴¹³ but an improvement compared to the previously employed implicit models.⁴¹⁴ While theories can logically explain past events and suggest similar events in the future⁴¹⁵, paradigms 'have no explanatory or predictive power; they are neither testable nor falsifiable, since no expectations or predictions follow directly from them.'⁴¹⁶ Nevertheless, valuable paradigms contribute to developing sound theories⁴¹⁷, and some authors described the paradigms as summaries of specific schools of thought.⁴¹⁸

Allison observed that foreign policy is typically studied using what he labeled as the rational actor paradigm. This analytical model assumes events to result from the intentional behavior of actors within IR, typically nation-states⁴¹⁹, fitting the dominant approach that views decision-making as a rational process.⁴²⁰ The rational actor paradigm was unable to explain all strategic decisions, though.⁴²¹ Therefore, analysts developed alternatives. Allison observed two, which he labeled the organizational behavior paradigm⁴²² and the governmental politics paradigm.⁴²³ These two analytical models emphasize the institutional contexts in which foreign policy occurs.⁴²⁴ The organizational behavior paradigm recognizes that different

409 Allison, "Conceptual models," 690; Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 2-7, 23. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 39-84; Goldstein, *International relations*, 149-59.

410 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 392. Also see: Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 6, 18.

411 *Ibid.*, 7.

412 *Ibid.*, 114-5. Also see: Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996), 29-30.

413 *Ibid.*, 23. Also see: Pijl, *Wereldorde en machtspolitiek*, 258.

414 Welch, "The organizational process," 115.

415 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 21.

416 Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 86.

417 Welch, "The organizational process," 116.

418 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

419 *Ibid.*, 23.

420 Stone, *Policy paradox*, 232.

421 For example: Barbara Tuchman, *The march of folly* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 4; Yarhi-Milo, "Why smart leaders to stupid things," 154-60. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, xi.

422 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 143. Also see: Allison, *Essence of decision*. Initially, the paradigm was called the 'organizational processes model.'

423 *Ibid.*, 255.

424 Tanter, "International system and foreign policy approaches," 7-10. Also see: Kubáľková, "What constructivism?" 25-30.

organizational entities exist within actors, each with its procedures and cultures, which lead to strategic decisions. The governmental politics paradigm considers strategic decision-making as the outcome of bargaining processes among critical decision-makers.⁴²⁵ The paragraphs below discuss the three paradigms observed by Allison, encompassing a literature review, a state-of-the-art, an overview of criticism, and operationalization. As suggested by Allison and acknowledged by research, combinations of external and internal factors guide actors' strategic decision-making.⁴²⁶ Therefore, merging the three paradigms might prove beneficial.⁴²⁷ Complexity theory implicitly incorporates elements of the three paradigms.⁴²⁸ This study presents complexity theory as a fourth, alternative paradigm and an avenue for future research on strategic decision-making in general and ANSAs' strategic decision-making in particular.

3.2 Rational actor paradigm

Although usually traced back to the classical world⁴²⁹, an IR perspective focusing on power and security matured during the 1930s and 1940s. This perspective was the traditional, state-centric approach, assuming that states pursue national interests – relative to other states – within a quasi-anarchic environment⁴³⁰, known as realism. Realism was never a single theory, merely a 'variety of models for thinking about the world,'⁴³¹ which 'will offer some insight into state behavior, they [realists] do not offer any explanatory perspectives on leadership style or domestic factors that could influence decision-making.'⁴³² Additionally, 'adherents of the realist paradigm usually do not consider nonstate entities as important actors in major world events because they do not believe that nonstate actors wield sufficient power to affect global disputes.'⁴³³

Later, neo-realism incorporated elements of domestic politics, perception, and human limitations into the realist model⁴³⁴, but maintained that 'systemic interdependence is low [...], that states can be seen as unitary actors, [and] that non-state-actors are relatively

425 Allison, "Conceptual models and the Cuban missile crisis," 690.

426 Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, "Foreign policy making," 239.

427 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 11-2n1, 392.

428 Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, "Foreign policy making," 239. Cf. Mark Lynch, "The end of the Middle East. How an old map distorts a new reality," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022, 61.

429 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 42-3; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 26. For example: Thucydides, *De Peloponnesische oorlog*.

430 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11-5; Little & Smith, "Introduction," 3. Also see: Haun, "Air power in the age of primacy," 1.

431 Emma Ashford, "In praise of lesser evils. Can realism repair foreign policy?" *Foreign Affairs* 100:5 (2022), 211-8. Also see: Ewan Stein, "Historical sociology and Middle East international relations," in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahrām Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 47-8.

432 Shahrām Akbarzadeh, "The blurred line between state identity and realpolitik," in *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, Shahrām Akbarzadeh (ed.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 7.

433 Mishali-Ram, "Powerful actors make a difference," 57.

434 Akbarzadeh, "The blurred line," 7-8; Ashford, "In praise of lesser evils"; Juneau *et al.*, "Neoclassical realism," 8-11; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11; Stein, "Historical sociology," 47-8. Neo-realism is also indicated as structural realism.

insignificant.⁴³⁵ Neo-realism assumes an objective reality that does not depend on observers' perceptions but that those same observers will only understand by using 'conceptual/theoretical lenses'.⁴³⁶ Analysts usually described reality in dichotomies such as 'domestic-international, order-anarchy, peace-war, internal-external, agent-structure, realism-idealism'.⁴³⁷ That reality also implies that factors belonging to different levels of analysis might be applied to provide sufficient explanations.⁴³⁸ Neo-realist studies incorporated states' interactions with non-state actors⁴³⁹ but remained state-centric, nevertheless.

Whereas realism and neo-realism assumed cost-benefit decision-making leading to strategic decision-making, this could not explain all decisions. Some decisions seemed contrary to material self-interest. Feelings of dignity or resentment, following from identity or ideology, seemed to provide better explanations.⁴⁴⁰ Yet, 'realism does not address behavior that is based on ideologically driven agendas because it sees behavior driven by self-interest'.⁴⁴¹ A state-centric constructivist interpretation of the politics of power and security thus evolved along that line of reasoning, assuming that collective identity intentionally is socially constructed and that states use identity to maintain or increase their power.⁴⁴² Despite these developments, the state-centric and unitary essence of the rational actor paradigm approaches in IR⁴⁴³ remained intact.

The rational actor paradigm from (neo-) realism not only adopted the so-called metaphysical realism, the assumption that only one objective reality exists.⁴⁴⁴ The rational actor paradigm also adopted realism's assumption that this reality is an anarchic environment, and actors deal with it using plausible cost-benefit calculations.⁴⁴⁵ This 'consistent, value-maximizing

435 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 66.

436 *Ibid.*, 70-1.

437 Spike Peterson, "The politics of identity and gendered nationalism," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack et al. (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 169.

438 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 74-5.

439 Stein, "Historical sociology," 47.

440 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 7-24. Fukuyama used *al-Qaeda* leader Osama bin Laden as an example.

441 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 15.

442 Akbarzadeh, "The blurred line," 8; George Dimitriu & Beatrice de Graaf, "Fighting the war at home. Strategic narratives, elite responsiveness, and the Dutch mission in Afghanistan, 2006-2010," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12:1 (2016), 5; Jonathan Eyal, "Introduction. ISIS – borne of the Middle East's unresolved problems," in *Inherently unresolved. Regional politics and the counter-ISIS campaign*, Jonathan Eyal & Elizabeth Quintana (eds.) (London: RUSI, 2015), 3; Ezrow, *Global politics*, 14-5; Fukuyama, *Identity*, xiii; Raymond Hinnebusch, "The politics of identity in Middle East international relations," in *International relations of the Middle East*, 4th ed., Louise Fawcett (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 163; Kubáľková, "What constructivism?" 29-33; Peterson, "The politics of identity," 168, 176-7, 184. Also see: Michel Foucault, *Discipline, toezicht en straf. De geboorte van de gevangenis*, transl. Vertalerscollectief (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1989), 412-3.

443 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 66. Cf. Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 27; Welch, "The organizational process," 114.

444 *Ibid.*, 70-1.

445 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 27; Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 15; Mintz & DeRouen,

choice within specified constraints' can be described as rationality.⁴⁴⁶ Such rational decision-making happens along four consecutive steps: (1) specify the goals; (2) decide which alternatives could achieve these goals; (3) evaluate these alternatives; and (4) choose the most efficient alternative.⁴⁴⁷

The rational actor paradigm's rationality suggests the actor is a-political. The decision-maker – personifying the actor – chooses whatever is the best option for the actor and does not consider any internal political considerations.⁴⁴⁸ Because perceived threats and opportunities are the input for these calculations, its proponents claimed that the rational actor paradigm is a valid way to view security issues⁴⁴⁹, assuming the primary concern of nation-states – critical actors in IR, according to the paradigm's proponents – was and remains 'military and territorial security'.⁴⁵⁰ The rational actor paradigm held pretty well when applied to different cases and is 'comparatively well-developed, and whose advantages in clarity, parsimony, and operationalization are obvious'.⁴⁵¹ The paradigm is considered most appropriate in analyzing 'long-term policy trends'⁴⁵² and strategic issues⁴⁵³ if there is consensus on requirements and a direct link between decisions and actions.⁴⁵⁴

3.2.1 State-of-the-art: identity added

Analysts typically conduct IR in a rational actor paradigm approach.⁴⁵⁵ Still, Middle Eastern politics researcher David Romano remarked in 2015 that '[a]nalyses in the neo-classical realist tradition have yet to be applied to sub-state actors'.⁴⁵⁶ Despite discussions among methods that

Understanding foreign policy decision making, 6; Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 70-1.

446 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 18; Chatagnier *et al.*, "The decision calculus," 126.

447 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24; Jonathan Bendor & Thomas Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's models," *The American Political Science Review* 86:2 (1992), 305.

448 Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 87.

449 Guilhot, "The Kuhning of reason," 20.

450 John Rothgeb, "The changing international context for foreign policy," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 37. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 11.

451 Welch, "The organizational process," 138.

452 Crockatt, *The fifty years war*, 162.

453 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 8.

454 Graham Allison & Morton Halperin, "Bureaucratic politics. A paradigm and some policy implications," in *Theory and policy in international relations*, Raymond Tanter & Richard Ullman, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 58; Joe Hagan, "Domestic political explanations in the analysis of foreign policy," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 121; Bruce Moon, "The state in foreign and domestic policy," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 188-9.

455 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 4; Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 343n5.

456 Romano, "Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking," 346.

embraced the rational actor paradigm⁴⁵⁷ or looked for alternatives⁴⁵⁸, only a little had changed in the paradigm. IR scholar Ryuta Ito, in 2023, recognized the realist phenomenon of hubris or overconfidence as the psychological element of self-deception by decision-makers.⁴⁵⁹ As such, Ito added to a growing awareness of psychological factors in IR.⁴⁶⁰ Relevant to this study is that Ito's study illustrated opportunities to connect the rational actor paradigm to psychological elements that are important in the governmental politics paradigm. Yet, Ito's study remained state-centric.

In her 2017 study on ANSAs, Ezrow concluded that 'realism can update itself to the 21st century. It can apply a revised version of the logic that it applies to states.'⁴⁶¹ Such a revised version might include special attention to identity, as illustrated by Hinnebusch's 2014 reflection on states in the Middle East: '[w]hile realism assumes the congruence of national identity and the state (thus nation-states), and hence imagines states as cohesive units whose policymakers pursue the "national interest," in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region no such national interest can be assumed.'⁴⁶² This lack of national identity might create opportunities for ANSAs that can provide some form of identity.⁴⁶³

IR scholar Mohammed Ayooob in 2019 suggested the concept of subaltern realism. Ayooob explored Middle Eastern power dynamics by incorporating unsuccessful attempts to construct stable Arab states from former Western protectorates. These power dynamics led to fragile states that occasionally failed and created power vacuums that benefitted other actors.⁴⁶⁴ As such, Ayooob explained the context in which ANSAs emerged and added identity politics to the rational actor paradigm. Similarly, political scientist Edward Last concluded in 2021 that *al-Qaeda* and its affiliate AQIM had distinctive strategic cultures due to specific local circumstances and different strategic objectives, despite sharing a jihadi-salafist ideology⁴⁶⁵,

457 For example: Huntington, *The clash of civilizations*, 43-6, 125-30. Also see: Lamis Andoni, "ISIS and the 'clash of civilizations,'" *Middle East Monitor*, September 16, 2014; Sam Chandler, "Islamism and the 'clash of civilizations,'" *Blogs don't burn*, January 20, 2020; Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in international relations. Power, politics and ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16-7; Gilles Kepel, *Fitna. Oorlog in het hart van de islam*, transl. Frans de Haan (Amsterdam: Contact, 2005), 174; Robert Wright, "The clash of civilizations that isn't," *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2015.

458 For example: Ted Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 40th anniversary ed. (Boulder: Paradigm, 2011), 319-38. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 57-8; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 77, 84-5.

459 Ryuta Ito, "Hubris balancing. Classical realism, self-deception and Putin's war against Ukraine," *International Affairs* 99:5 (2023), 2,038-44.

460 *Ibid.*, 2,055.

461 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 22.

462 Hinnebusch, "Foreign policy in the Middle East," 9.

463 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 56.

464 Ayooob, "Subaltern realism," 59-67. Also see: Jackson, "Warlords," 148.

465 Last, *Strategic culture*, 221-2. Also see: Black, "Strategic practice," 14; Gray, *Modern strategy*, 129-51; Beatrice Heuser & Jeannie Johnson, "Introduction. National styles and strategic culture," in *Insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. National styles and strategic cultures*, Beatrice Heuser & Eitan Shamir (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10-7; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 14-5. For an alternative view on strategic culture,

which suggests that strategic culture – potentially influencing strategic decision-making – is relevant for understanding other ANSAs as well.

Rational actor paradigm analysis concerning IS and the KRI is widely available, for example, an anonymous 2014 paper on whether the KRI pursued a foreign policy. The paper concluded that the KRI, as ‘de jure a non-state’⁴⁶⁶, had a foreign policy based on economic ties and foreign representations abroad.⁴⁶⁷ It observed foreign policy without having many official documents available. Instead, the analysis relied on generic statements via the Internet and secondary sources. The paper mentioned the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a *pars pro toto* for the KRI, implicitly regarding the KRI as a unitary, rational actor. Other analyses adopted similar rational actor paradigm approaches.⁴⁶⁸ However, actors do not always conduct strategy rationally⁴⁶⁹, and in explaining how and why they made strategic decisions, ‘academic scholars [...] tend to assume an orderly and more rational policymaking process than is justified.’⁴⁷⁰ Kurdish political rights activist Yoosef Abbaszadah in 2015 applied a constructivist approach to the KRI’s decision to support Syrian Kurds who were besieged in Kobanî, concluding that a shared Kurdish identity was essential.⁴⁷¹ Like Ayoob, Abbaszadah contributed to developing the rational actor paradigm by adding identity, which – together with the addition of strategic culture – acknowledged the paradigm’s main shortcomings, as addressed below.

3.2.2 Critical reflections: simplification

The state-of-the-art approaches to the rational actor paradigm indicate that the basic paradigm is too simple. While the paradigm held pretty well despite the lack of a bureaucratic dynamic, it does not explain how internal structure impacts outcomes.⁴⁷² Moreover, the paradigm leaves out uncertainty and ‘strategic interactions,’⁴⁷³ paradoxically as if foreign policy exists within a vacuum. Furthermore, the paradigm ignores non-state actors and cannot explain the establishment of non-state actors, their motivation and impact⁴⁷⁴, or actors’ counter-productive

see: Strachan, *The direction of war*, 7.

466 “Iraqi-Kurdistan. Does the Kurdistan Regional Government have a foreign policy?” (Hamburg: *GRIN Verlag*, 2014), 13.

467 *Ibid.*, 14.

468 For example: Gunes, “The IS Factor,” 71-90; Mustafa Mahmoud, “Islamic State attacks two energy plants in north Iraq, kills five,” *Reuters*, July 31, 2016; Greg Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, June 15, 2015.

469 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 64.

470 George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 98.

471 Yoosef Abbaszadah, “KRG’s military help to Kobane from international relations perspective,” *Rûdaw*, January 28, 2015.

472 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 17; Welch, “The organizational process,” 138.

473 Welch, “The organizational process,” 119. Also see: Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 302, 305; Clausewitz, *On war*, 78; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 42.

474 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 13.

behavior.⁴⁷⁵ Still, within the four decision-making steps, the actor might consider the strategic implications of the different foreign policy options, including their effects on (possible) partnerships. Another criticism involved the paradigm's personifying to the government level, including the basic assumption that people behave rationally, which is heavily disputed.⁴⁷⁶ The rational actor paradigm assumes reliable information is available to weigh alternatives and calculate an optimal outcome. Data in the field of foreign policy is almost always blurred, though.⁴⁷⁷ This blur includes differences among actors on what constitutes rational behavior, an issue the paradigm ignores. A Western-based cost-benefit calculation might not hold in the Middle East.⁴⁷⁸

Somewhat paradoxically, given that it concerns the rational actor paradigm, Allison and Zelikow argued that the paradigm 'yield[s] two intuitively evident but powerful propositions.'⁴⁷⁹ These propositions involve either an increase or a decrease in the perceived costs of the alternative. Whereas an increase in perceived costs will probably lead to not choosing that option, a decrease makes it likely that the specific option is preferred. What to do in case of a third possible outcome – neither an increase nor a decrease – Allison and Zelikow did not mention. In their literature review on strategy and rational choice, Allison and Zelikow concluded that states fight when they perceive war as beneficial.⁴⁸⁰ Actors base that calculation on '(1) information (on the basis of which he [the adversary] acts), and (2) interdependence (my best choice depending on his choice).'⁴⁸¹ Other studies have offered more guidance on an actor's threats and opportunities.⁴⁸²

Also heavily contested is the rational actor paradigm's metaphysical realism. Philosophers doubt whether a single reality exists. Perhaps more realities exist. Nevertheless, even if all individuals perceive entities differently, according to metaphysical realism, then that is reality. In theory, reality might not be observable by anyone but still be there. This notion is essential as it offers a framework of objectively observable facts that form the basis of hypothesis testing.⁴⁸³ However, each individual can have a distinctive interpretation of reality. Other fields of study applied this notion by adopting a broad definition of rationality, assuming rational behavior

475 For example: Tuchman, *The march of folly*, 4.

476 Dan Ariely, *Predictably irrational. The hidden forces that shape our decisions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 243-4; Daniel Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, transl. Peter van Huizen & Jonas de Vries (Amsterdam: Business Contact, 2011), 413. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 24.

477 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 26. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 211.

478 *Ibid.*, 144-5. Also see: Said, *Orientalism*.

479 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 25. Also see: Giulia Calabretta *et al.*, "The interplay between intuition and rationality in strategic decision making. A paradox perspective," *Organization Studies* 38:3-4 (2017), 365-9.

480 *Ibid.*, 25, 46. Also see: Keegan, *A history of warfare*, 59.

481 *Ibid.*, 41.

482 For example: Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), xxiv.

483 John Searle, *The construction of social reality* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 149-97.

not to be explicit cost versus benefit calculations but generally acting in a calculated way. In their perception, actors seek the most efficient way to achieve specific goals.⁴⁸⁴ Actors do so by comparing risks versus gains. That methodology does not include weighing factors, basically treating all comparisons equally.⁴⁸⁵ Also, the methodology overlooks that opportunities handled wrongly, might turn into disadvantages.⁴⁸⁶

When applying the rational actor paradigm to ANSAs, the analyst needs to consider that the paradigm not only might be too simple but also needs to consider what is reality and what is rational according to the actor analyzed. These issues are essential when operationalizing the rational actor paradigm.

3.2.3 Operationalizing: cost-benefit

Although operationalization of a paradigm, strictly speaking, is not possible – as it concerns a framework describing a general way of thinking and not a theory with independent and dependent variables – Allison and Zelikow nevertheless formulated general questions as guidance belonging to the rational actor paradigm:

1. ‘What are the objective (or perceived) circumstances that the [actor] conceives as threats and opportunities [...]?’
2. What are the [actor’s] goals [...]?
3. What are the objective (or perceived) options for addressing this issue?
4. What are the objective (or perceived) strategic costs and benefits for each option?
5. What is the [actor’s] best choice given these conditions [...]?’⁴⁸⁷

The questions above incorporate the actor’s perceptions of rationality and reality. They suggest a rational decision-making process.⁴⁸⁸ The first question includes external actors and factors in the analysis, thus addressing uncertainty and ‘strategic interactions.’⁴⁸⁹ For the third question, three general options reflect the possible choices for actors when confronted with any challenge in IR: ‘do nothing, attack with their own forces, entirely delegate conflict to

⁴⁸⁴ Karl-Dieter Opp, *Theories of political protest and social movements. A multidisciplinary introduction, critique, and synthesis* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

⁴⁸⁵ Stone, *Policy paradox*, 236-7, 245.

⁴⁸⁶ Robertson, *How to think like a Roman emperor*, 39-40.

⁴⁸⁷ Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 389-90. Also see: Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 305; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 8, 233.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7, 53-4. Also see: Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 20-1.

⁴⁸⁹ Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 302, 305; Welch, “The organizational process,” 119. Also see: Boonyarat Phadermrod *et al.*, “Importance-performance analysis based SWOT analysis,” *International Journal of Information Management* 44 (2019), 195.

a rebel organization.⁴⁹⁰ A fourth option concerns a combination of either. The remainder of this study refers to these options as hold, attack, delegate, or any combination, respectively. Comparing the cost-benefit analysis of each option leads to the outcome of the decision-making process, at which point the analyst needs to be aware of any bias – in particular, hindsight bias or cultural bias – to avoid wrong assumptions.⁴⁹¹

3.2.4 Reflections

The core of the rational actor paradigm has remained intact despite much criticism as being too simple and occasional additions such as identity or strategic culture. These additions overlapped with the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms. Explicit and structural application of the rational actor paradigm to IS' and the KRI's strategic decision-making is lacking. However, the paradigm does seem appropriate, as the implicit application of the paradigm to both IS and the KRI indicated.

3.3 Organizational behavior paradigm

Whereas the rational actor paradigm assumes an anarchic environment, the organizational behavior paradigm assumes some form of authority that should be able to solve disputes among internal actors and provide security in controlled territory.⁴⁹² The organizational behavior paradigm recognizes that an actor's security 'is primarily a matter of negotiation among executive agencies.'⁴⁹³ Analysts must include these agencies because they produce incentives, constraints, and behavior.⁴⁹⁴ Conversely, the macro-level also influences the meso-level: '[g]lobal factors have affected violent non-state actors' organizational structure, strategy, coherence and longevity'⁴⁹⁵, both causing and facilitating ANSAs.⁴⁹⁶ The organizational behavior paradigm assumes actors to be a conglomerate of different sub-units relevant to a specific field instead of regarding actors as unitary organizations.

490 Salehyan, "The delegation of war," 503. Also see: Chatagnier *et al.*, "The decision calculus," 129; Yao-Li Chuang, *et al.*, "Local alliances and rivalries shape near-repeat terror activity of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and insurgents," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116:42 (2019), 20,902; Kenneth Pollack, "Fight or flight. America's choice in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 95:2 (2016); Pfeifer & Schwab, "Re-examining the state/non-state binary," 437-9; Posen, *The sources of military doctrine*, 14; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 114-5; "State building."

491 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 19-20, 25.

492 Cf. Ezrow, *Global politics*, 15.

493 Perlmutter, *The military and politics in modern times*, 5.

494 Haney, "Structure and process," 101, 112. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 260.

495 Ezrow, *Global politics*, 41.

496 *Ibid.*, 41n1, 44-53. For example: Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 322-6; Naím, *The end of power*, 54-65; Rapaport, "The four waves of modern terrorism," 52-6.

All sub-units create methods to cope with their specific complexity and uncertainty⁴⁹⁷ and will act according to their interests, procedures, and cultures, thus affecting strategic decision-making.⁴⁹⁸ Allison and Zelikow observed that within the organizational behavior paradigm ‘organizational behavior constrain [-s] “rationality.”’⁴⁹⁹ Instead, standard operating procedures (SOPs) guide the decision-makers towards the course of action and not ‘optimal choice.’⁵⁰⁰ The SOPs are the organization’s solution to deal efficiently with frequently recurring challenges based on experiences. Adaptations occur incrementally, and exceptional challenges are ‘attached to the least objectionable solution or else the process breaks down.’⁵⁰¹ According to the organizational behavior paradigm, the process exists of input, which leads through specific sub-actors and their respective SOPs to output, that is, a strategic decision.

The organizational behavior paradigm seems an attractive analytical model to analyze ANSAs’ strategic decision-making, which the rational actor paradigm could not always explain. Analysts considered the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms more appropriate when the precise settings and organizational or domestic interests predominate.⁵⁰²

3.3.1 State-of-the-art: no SOPs

Critics questioned the utility of Allison’s organizational and bureaucratic models⁵⁰³, while other researchers had already observed a lack in the models’ development.⁵⁰⁴ What is essential for this study is that such models are increasingly applied to ANSAs, realizing that they face the same organizational challenges as governmental bureaucracies.⁵⁰⁵ Shapiro, in 2013, used an organizational approach towards terrorist organizations and observed that such groups apply managerial tools similar to that of other, more mainstream organizations.⁵⁰⁶ Terrorism researcher Audrey Kurth Cronin pointed out in 2009 that disagreement within terrorist

497 Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 242-3; Charles Lindblom, “The science of muddling through,” *Public Administration Review* 19:2 (1959), 79-88; Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 73-5. Also see: Cialdini, *Influence*; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 39.

498 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 14; Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 253; Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23; Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 71. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 510.

499 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 156. For example: Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 200.

500 *Ibid.*, 156.

501 Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 87; Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 18.

502 Allison & Halperin, “Bureaucratic politics,” 58.

503 Munton, “The three puzzles,” 142.

504 Paul ‘t Hart & Uri Rosenthal, “Reappraising bureaucratic politics,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 42:2 (1998), 236-7.

505 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 365.

506 Shapiro, *The terrorist’s dilemma*, 2-4. Also see: Jeremy Black, *Rethinking military history* (London: Routledge, 2004), 122; Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 9.

groups can lead to spoiler groups or splinter groups⁵⁰⁷, which significantly affect strategic decision-making. Other research confirmed these internal bureaucratic processes.

Political scientists Daniel Carpenter and George Krause in 2015 introduced the idea of transactional authority: within bureaucracies ‘authority is intrinsically shared among the principal(s) and agent. This means that even if the principal employs a formal mechanism at their disposal to control bureaucratic behavior, this can be offset by agency action.’⁵⁰⁸ Political scientists John Brehm and Scott Gates in 2015 reached similar conclusions exploring ‘dynamic, *dyadic* exchanges between people as the essence of bureaucracy.’⁵⁰⁹ Choosing this approach – focusing on organizations and individuals acting within them – brought both Carpenter and Krause, as well as Brehm and Gates into bureaucratic politics and indicated that organizations do not have either top-down or bottom-up relationships but dynamic relationships that create interdependence and complexity.

Research in 2022 by political scientist Carmen Ho showed that within organizations, bureaucrats tend to take initiatives that benefit the public welfare, not relying solely on political decision-making.⁵¹⁰ Yet, Stephen Biddle in 2021 emphasized the importance of an actor’s internal politics to explain its war-making decisions.⁵¹¹ The findings of Ho and Biddle contradict the assumption that internal entities solely operate according to SOPs and indicate that these internal processes are much more complicated. Recognizing that Western organizations provided input for the organizational behavior paradigm and bureaucratic politics led IR researcher Zhang Qingmin in 2015 to conclude that because of ‘differences in historical, cultural, and political environments, [...] rigidity should be avoided when applying Western models of FPA.’⁵¹² Qingmin here touched on comparativist scholarship in IR, emphasizing the structure of governing mechanisms for unit-level action.⁵¹³ In particular, the field of historical institutionalism has focused on so-called pathways, the effects of early institutional design on long-term decision-making⁵¹⁴, and

507 Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How terrorism ends. Understanding the decline and demise of terrorist campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 67-70. Also see: Freedman, *Command*, 2, 498. Perlmutter, *The military and politics in modern times*, 5.

508 Daniel Carpenter & George Krause, “Transactional authority and bureaucratic politics,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25 (2015), 18.

509 John Brehm & Scott Gates, “Bureaucratic politics arising from, not defined by, a principal-agency dyad,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25 (2015), 456. Italics in original. Also see: Sharon Gilad *et al.*, “Bureaucratic politics and the translation of movement agendas,” *Governance* 32 (2018), 382.

510 Carmen Ho, “Benevolent policies. Bureaucratic politics and the international dimensions of social policy expansion,” *American Political Science Review* 116:2 (2022), 626.

511 Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, 7. Also see: Biddle, “The determinants of nonstate military methods,” 716.

512 Zhang Qingmin, “Bureaucratic politics and Chinese foreign policy-making,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2015), 456. Also see: Wei Ye, “Fragmented soft power. Bureaucratic politics and China’s foreign aid in education to Africa,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (2022), 5-6.

513 Lees, “We are all comparativists now,” 1,104.

514 Hofmann & Yeo, “Historical institutionalism and institutional design,” 306-9; Tangney, “Path contingency,” 37-54.

path contingencies, ‘the mechanism by which institutional legacies and antecedent conditions affect the relative likelihoods of alternative potential governance reforms.’⁵¹⁵ Relevant to the organizational behavior paradigm is that different research confirms the existence of dyadic interactions within organizations and that context matters.

Also relevant to this study is Fukuyama’s 2018 observation that societal changes occurred in the Middle Eastern context of the 2010s, ignited by economic and technological developments, which initiated transformation from a community of villages to a predominantly urban society. Additionally, (social) media presented alternative ways of life that were different from – sometimes contrary to – traditional, local lifestyles. As applied by IS with its interpretation of jihadi-salafism, politicalized religion dealt with the resulting confusion that occurred with the shift and offered guidance on achieving goals. The nationalist account lacked similar guidance but seemed to rely on a zero-sum approach to territory or socio-economic position.⁵¹⁶

Studies on IS and the KRI increasingly indicated multi-level, multi-directional internal and external interactions. Noyes’ 2016 study “Pragmatic takfiris” suggested considering IS ‘a complex organization influenced by myriad variables that span culture, structure, and agency,’ which should be approached as an ‘adaptive organization – rooted in ideological principles while simultaneously invested in its bureaucratic survival – [...] to understand its actions and better anticipate its decision-making.’⁵¹⁷

Terrorism researchers Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Joscelyn in 2022 focused on the phenomenon of strategic learning. They observed ‘a strategic and tactical dynamism,’⁵¹⁸ following the ‘dynamic nature of jihadist groups, including IS.’⁵¹⁹ ‘[S]tates, rival organizations and technology’⁵²⁰ and ‘environmental pressures, new opportunities, intragroup disputes, and other factors’⁵²¹ triggered this dynamic. Ashour reached a similar conclusion in 2021: ‘IS innovated tactics, adapted its operations and alternated between conventional, guerilla and terrorism strategies in mixed terrains (urban, suburban and rural).’⁵²² Strategic studies scholar Ahmed Hashim argued in 2018 that IS ‘innovated in the fields of ideology, organization, warfighting, and strategies of state-formation.’⁵²³ The inconsistencies in the names of IS

515 Tangney, “Path contingency,” 41.

516 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 64-73, 89. Also see: Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 43-4, 87; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 210.

517 Noyes, “Pragmatic takfiris.”

518 Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 380.

519 *Ibid.*, 396.

520 *Ibid.*, 17. Also see: Thomas Hammes, *The sling and the stone. On war in the 21st century* (Saint Paul: Zenith Press, 2006), 288.

521 *Ibid.*, 380.

522 Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 23. Also see: Stanley McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams. New rules of engagement for a complex world* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), 26.

523 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 7, 237.

bureaucratic entities that terrorism researchers Haroro Ingram *et al.* pointed out in 2020 indicate some hierarchy but also ‘structural flux and legion of local peculiarities within an organization.’⁵²⁴ Ingram *et al.* stated that IS benefitted from ‘a mix of top-down and bottom-up factors, which ISIS sought to leverage with the strategic opportunism that is a recurring theme throughout its history.’⁵²⁵ In times of prosperity, it allowed IS to transform to conventional tactics, returning to guerilla and terrorism tactics in times of adversity.⁵²⁶ The transformation fits in a general pattern within conflicts where actors fighting more vigorous opponents tend to apply asymmetric or hybrid tactics simply because they have no other choice if they want to continue the struggle.⁵²⁷ However, such dynamics require adaptive strategic decision-making ‘to empowered subordinates, forming executive teams, closely united around a common understanding of the mission.’⁵²⁸

Studies on the KRI emphasize its internal fragmentation. The International Crisis Group indicated in 2015 that the intra-Kurdish rivalry between the *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Democratic Party; KDP) and the *Yekêtiya Nîştîmanîya Kurdistan* (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan; PUK) remained, each party maintaining their own militia and security agencies⁵²⁹, thus significantly influencing the KRI’s strategic decision-making.

Overall, the organizational behavior paradigm has become more complex as organizations exchange knowledge and experiences internally and externally, thus adapting to changing circumstances and being able to make decisions both independently and for the actor as a whole. These findings reflect the main criticism of the organizational behavior paradigm.

3.3.2 Critical reflections: non-rational

Critics of the organizational behavior paradigm acknowledged that, in some cases, the SOPs might be enabling instead of restraining.⁵³⁰ However, ‘[o]nce planning for operations follows set procedures it becomes dominated by the necessity to have all the right inputs, rather than focusing on the quality and timelines of the outputs.’⁵³¹ Implications of bureaucracies acting as almost independent entities can be enormous, if not disastrous. If a bureaucracy holds itself politically non-accountable, it might work independently.⁵³² From that perspective, international

524 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 247. Also see: Fishman, *The master plan*, 112, 153-5.

525 *Ibid.*, 158-9.

526 *Ibid.*, 304.

527 Lonsdale, “Strategy defined,” 49; Speller, “Introduction,” 8-9; Strachan, *The direction of war*, 21.

528 Anthony King, quoted in: Freedman, *Command*, 494. Freedman cited King within the context of counterinsurgency.

529 “Arming Iraq’s Kurds. Fighting IS, inviting conflict” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2015), 5, 9 Also see: Shapland, “Iraqi Kurds’ aim of statehood stays out of reach.”

530 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 74-5.

531 Freedman, *Command*, 496.

532 Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23.

relations scholar Stephen Krasner labeled the ‘bureaucratic interpretation of foreign policy’ to be ‘misleading [...]; dangerous [...]; and compelling because it offers leaders an excuse for their failures and scholars an opportunity for innumerable reinterpretations and publications.’⁵³³ Krasner seemed to shoot the messenger here, and it remains debatable as to what respect bureaucratic organizations either set the conditions for or undermine a rational decision-making process. A bureaucratic organization might not recognize the more significant policy challenge.⁵³⁴

Relatively simple organizational rules can still lead to complex behavior. Critics stressed restricting organizational behavior, but organizations, in some cases, enable.⁵³⁵ On the other hand, even hierarchical organizations filled with procedures, such as the military, are capable of creative acts or deviation from the routines.⁵³⁶ Another point of criticism is that the underlying assumption appears to be that the sub-actors within both models have conflicting goals.⁵³⁷ Conflicts of interest do not necessarily have to be the case, especially within crises – when the survival of the actor as a whole is a key priority – most if not all, sub-actors might agree on the goals, though not on how to achieve these. According to one critic, the organizational behavior paradigm

‘does not operate at the moment of decision; rather, it explains deviations from ideal rationality at the moment of decision by highlighting the ways in which organizational routines constrain the formation of options, and it explains deviations from perfect instrumentality after decisions are made by revealing how routines affect implementation. Within those constraints, however, [...] [the organizational behavior paradigm] has nothing to say about the decisions themselves.’⁵³⁸

But why should the organizational behavior paradigm be regarded as irrational?⁵³⁹ From a strategic point of view, the paradigm is also rational; it concerns an efficient way to deal with routine activities. Here, the sub-actor decides the most appropriate outcome in a cost-benefit analysis. The paradigm, therefore, might not apply well to incidents beyond routines. Historical cases have shown that some individuals act rationally by intentionally neglecting SOPs.⁵⁴⁰ Historian Don Munton argued that historical evidence suggested that the rational actor paradigm provided better explanations for the Cuban missile crisis (1962). In contrast,

533 Steven Krasner, “Are bureaucracies important? (or Allison wonderland),” *Foreign Policy* 7 (1972), 160.

534 Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 260-1; Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23; Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 87.

535 Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 309-13; Welch, “The organizational process,” 126.

536 For example: Ian Morris, *War! What is it good for? Conflict and the progress of civilization from primates to robots* (London: Profile, 2014), 3-5; Welch, “The organizational process,” 124, 126.

537 Bendor & Hammond, “Rethinking Allison’s models,” 302.

538 Welch, “The organizational process,” 117.

539 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 156.

540 For example: Malcolm Gladwell, *What the dog saw. And other adventures* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009), 357; Morris, *War!*, 3-5; Welch, “The organizational process,” 124, 126.

the organizational behavior and governmental politics paradigms appeared incapable of delivering accurate answers. From this observation, Munton concluded that '[t]he utility of the organizational and bureaucratic models [...], has come into dispute.'⁵⁴¹

Although Munton's argument might be valid for the Cuban missile crisis – Allison's case study in *Essence of decision* – the organizational behavior paradigm has proved its value in other cases by adding to or improving the rational actor paradigm. While most criticism seems normative, the comments that bureaucracies do not exclude complexity or rational behavior are essential to operationalizing the organizational behavior paradigm. Whereas the main line of thought of the paradigm remained intact – that is, sub-entities influencing strategic decision-making – focusing on SOPs appeared obsolete in recent studies, instead applying broader approaches. In particular, in the case of non-Western actors, the use of SOPs to explain strategic decision-making seems inappropriate when operationalizing the organizational behavior paradigm.

3.3.3 Operationalizing: procedures

Allison and Zelikow suggested general questions belonging to the organizational behavior paradigm:

1. 'Of what organizations (and organizational components) does the [decision-making entity] consist [...]'?
2. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs create in producing *information* about international conditions, threats, and opportunities?
3. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs create in generating the menu of *options* for action?
4. What capabilities and constraints do these organizations' existing SOPs establish for *implementing* whatever is chosen?'⁵⁴²

The suggested questions show an overlap with the rational actor paradigm-related questions. In particular, the second question adds internal dynamics to the rational actor paradigm question on threats and opportunities, and the third question adds internal restrictions to the options available. In general, since Allison and Zelikow presented their organizational behavior paradigm, the emphasis on – Western-style – SOPs has disappeared, as an inventory among state-of-the-art research involving the paradigm indicated. An organizational behavior paradigm that recognizes sub-unit idiosyncrasies might be open for cultures that use other means than SOPs. An alternative for SOPs might be the concept of doctrine, which translates

⁵⁴¹ Blatter & Haverland. *Designing case studies*, 3; Munton, "The three puzzles," 142.

⁵⁴² Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 390. Italics in original.

strategy into two main questions based on best practices and lessons learned⁵⁴³: ‘*What* means shall be employed? and *How* shall they be employed?’⁵⁴⁴ Doctrine offers a broader and more feasible approach to ways and means than strict SOPs.

3.3.4 Reflections

Research indicated that IS applied adaptive strategic decision-making, while similar research focusing on the KRI is lacking. The research mainly indicated that IS’ strategic decision-making was adaptive without indicating how that decision-making occurred. Bureaucratic organization and teamwork seem involved in modern-day strategic leadership⁵⁴⁵, but ultimately, the leader bears responsibility.⁵⁴⁶ Strategic leadership and the individuals who make strategic decisions are the focus of the governmental politics paradigm, with its individual-level perspective.

3.4 Governmental politics paradigm

Lacking comprehensive explanations, some authors point out the effect that individuals and their behavior can have on strategic decisions, like declaring war or maintaining peace.⁵⁴⁷ Historically, strategic leadership, either by politicians or military commanders, received much attention.⁵⁴⁸ Yet, within IR, the impact of an individual’s quirks on strategic decision-making has long been neglected. Some scholars pointed out that by incorporating these idiosyncrasies, the governmental politics paradigm’s cognitive approach is a ‘useful corrective’ to the rational actor paradigm because individuals use their belief systems to grasp the complexity of foreign policy.⁵⁴⁹ Here, macro- and meso-level developments influence the micro-level, thus affecting individual behavior. Therefore, some scholars regarded socio-economic class and economic interests as the actual actors in IR⁵⁵⁰: ‘[g]overnments may be in the hands of persons, groups or movements [...] but *states* as such are neither progressive nor reactionary. It is movement and forces that deserve such evaluative judgments.’⁵⁵¹ While acknowledging that global or

543 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 348-50; Kiras, “The historical practice,” 322.

544 Posen, *The sources of military doctrine*, 13. Italics in original. Posen studied military doctrine in state contexts.

545 McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 57.

546 Freedman, *Command*, 494.

547 Rosati, “A cognitive approach,” 68.

548 For example: Clausewitz, *On war*, 100-12; Machiavelli, *De heerser*, 131-4. Also see: Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 357; John Keegan, *The face of battle* (London: Pimlico, 1991), 15-27; John Keegan, *The mask of command* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 2-3; Opp, *Theories of political protest and social movements*, 349-50; Petraeus & Roberts, *Conflict*, 4.

549 Rosati, “A cognitive approach,” 68.

550 Little & Smith, “Introduction,” 1-12; Bart Tromp, *De wetenschap der politiek. Verkenningen* (Leiden: DSWO Press, 1995), 412.

551 Immanuel Wallerstein, “The rise and future demise of the world capitalist system. Concepts for comparative analysis,” in *Perspectives on IR*, 2nd ed., Richard Little & Michael Smith (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1998), 317. Italics in original. For a contrary view see: Fukuyama, *Het einde van de geschiedenis*, 269-70.

supra-state level developments influence persons, groups or movements, the governmental politics paradigm focuses on the key leaders involved in strategic decision-making. In the case of crucial leaders, the micro-level influences the macro-level.

Within IR, the governmental politics paradigm assumes strategic decisions to be the negotiated result of contentious politics among the key individuals. All key individuals involved act according to their assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and experiences⁵⁵², knowing the other frequent participators well.⁵⁵³ The critical characteristic of contentious politics is that no participant controls the outcome.⁵⁵⁴ People with similar preferences in similar situations can make different decisions due to distinctive interpretations of available information and what to do with that information.⁵⁵⁵ Differences in interpretations might also depend on context, as illustrated by the so-called Miles's Law: '[w]here you stand depends on where you sit,'⁵⁵⁶ indicating that the individual's interpretation of a position decides the individual's interests.

The rational actor paradigm typically neglected a cognitive approach within IR analysis, as decision-makers were supposed to act reasonably. As such, there was no urgency to investigate their perceptions and how these influenced the decision-making process: '[a] cognitive approach challenges much of Western thought and practices premised on the assumption of individual rationality,'⁵⁵⁷ stressing that the decision-makers' perceptions of the environment will affect the choices taken. Yet, '[i]n order to describe foreign policy beliefs and images, it is important to determine the relevant policymakers involved in the formulation of policy.'⁵⁵⁸ Compared to the rational actor paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm intends to be a more comprehensive approach that includes the limits of human decision-making capabilities.⁵⁵⁹

Contrary to the rational actor paradigm, the governmental politics paradigm assumes that multiple realities exist based on developments in natural and neurological sciences.⁵⁶⁰ Additionally, some analysts argued that when individuals are studied, understanding the more extensive, macro-level environment in which the individuals behave affects findings on the individuals. The other way around is also valid. To understand a group, one needs to grasp the

552 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 255; Chatagnier *et al.*, "The decision calculus," 127; Gerner, "The evolution of the study of foreign policy," 24; Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 8.

553 Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 88.

554 Welch, "The organizational process," 122.

555 Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 29.

556 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 307. Also see: Rufus Miles, "The origin and meaning of Miles' Law," *Public Administration Review* 38:5 (1978), 399; Welch, "The organizational process," 120.

557 Rosati, "A cognitive approach," 50.

558 *Ibid.*, 60.

559 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 8; Simon, "Rationality in political behavior," 45-6; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 233.

560 Searle, *The construction of social reality*, 149-97.

individuals making up the group.⁵⁶¹ Interpretations of reality and the creation of identities formed the basis of constructivism as a micro-level view of IR.⁵⁶²

3.4.1 State-of-the-art: psychological insights

Despite a history of several decades of research on individuals and their belief systems on IR, political scientist Stathis Kalyvas observed in his 2006 study of violence in civil war that ‘individuals are simply absent from current theories of civil wars.’⁵⁶³ Yet, during the 1950s, researchers developed the social comparison theory, which argued that most people ‘define their identity by comparing themselves to others.’⁵⁶⁴ Additionally, since the 1960s and 1970s, social movement theories have focused on political support and mobilization.⁵⁶⁵ In particular, social movement scholar Ted Gurr’s relative deprivation theory seemed in line with social comparison theory. Gurr explained political mobilization by frustration on either or both the macro- and the micro-level due to an actual situation perceived to be lagging behind expectations.⁵⁶⁶ That frustration can also apply to conflict: ‘[u]ltimately, irregular warfare has at its core a cause based on grievances.’⁵⁶⁷ Continuing on relative deprivation theory, Gurr was also involved in the Minorities at risk project, which created a database on political violence towards populations without states.⁵⁶⁸ While the number of ethnically motivated rebellions since 1990 decreased due to states’ assimilation of minorities⁵⁶⁹, that trend did not occur in the Middle East.⁵⁷⁰ Fukuyama, in 2018, explained political mobilization by identity politics, which during the 2010s took the form of nationalism and politicized religion, as economic and technological developments caused significant societal changes and people searched for guidance. In particular, (formerly) repressed minorities were open to nationalism and politicized religion in search of dignity and sometimes in search of resentment.⁵⁷¹ Research suggested a link between identity and recognition, which needs further exploration.⁵⁷²

561 Martha Crenshaw, “The psychology of terrorism. An agenda for the 21st century,” *Political Psychology* 21:2 (2000), 405. Also see: Opp, *Theories of political protest*, 335.

562 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7; Hinnebusch, “The politics of identity,” 163.

563 Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390.

564 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 63.

565 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 105. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 71-84.

566 Gurr, *Why men rebel*, 322-6. Also see: Ezrow, *Global politics*, 57; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 77, 84-5.

567 Kiras, “Key concepts,” 306.

568 Barbara Harff & Ted Gurr, *Ethnic conflict in IR*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 2-5.

569 Gurr, “Ethnic warfare on the wane,” 53.

570 Cederman, “Blood for soil,” 62.

571 Fukuyama, *Identity*, 56-8, 64-71, 82. Also see: Kiras, “The historical practice,” 322-3; Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 64; John Rawls, *A theory of justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 136-42.

572 Pfeifer *et al.*, “The politics of recognition,” 4.

Fukuyama's identity politics is reminiscent of the collective identity approach, one of four social movement theories that social movement scholar Karl-Dieter Opp in 2009 merged into one dynamic model of ongoing interaction between macro- and micro-levels to explain political mobilization. Based on their shared characteristic of rationality, Opp incorporated the collective identity approach, political opportunity structure, resource mobilization theory, and framing theory into the structural cognitive model. Opp argued that according to the collective identity approach, individuals wish to belong to a group, thus providing input from the micro-level to the macro-level. On the macro-level, the group acts based on possibilities according to the political opportunity structure and available capabilities according to the resource mobilization theory. Macro- to micro-level communication on macro-level decisions influences individuals, according to the framing theory.⁵⁷³ The relevance of the structural cognitive model for strategic decision-making in IR is that it acknowledges that actors internally have to deal with ongoing multi-directional interactions between macro-level and micro-level.⁵⁷⁴

In line with 2023 research by political violence researcher Joakim Kreutz, who focused on ANSAs in southeast Asia and acknowledged suggestions by social movement literature that ANSAs often overlap with civil society movements and organizations⁵⁷⁵, such interactions include other governance too, aimed to create popular support.⁵⁷⁶ Social movement theory contributes to understanding an actor's internal dynamics in IR. However, social movement theory does not explain strategic decision-making. Unlike the governmental politics paradigm, it focuses on general political mobilization instead of key decision-maker's belief systems.

Still, some overlap between the approaches seems to occur. Studying Turkish foreign policy, political scientist Rahime Süleymanoglu-Kürüm in 2021 found 'an extensive correlation between the sociology of elites and the policy-making process as the periods of change in the sociology of elites overlap with the periods of change in Turkish foreign policy.'⁵⁷⁷ Foreign policy analyst Klaus Brummer, in 2017, recognized that the governmental politics paradigm had been applied mainly in American contexts. Brummer tested the model in the German context of consensual democracy when German politics had to decide whether or not to join the anti-piracy mission near Somalia. Brummer found that the two ministers involved agreed on the strategic decision

573 Opp, *Theories of political protest*, 127-303; Karl-Dieter Opp, "Rational choice theory and social movements," in *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*, volume 3, David A. Snow *et al.* (eds.) (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), 1,054. Also see: Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 64.

574 Freedman, *Command*, 2, 430-1, 464-5, 498; Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1.

575 Joakim Kreutz, "Violence and civil society in southeast Asia," in *Routledge handbook of civil and uncivil society in southeast Asia*, Eva Hansson & Meredith Weiss (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2023), 190-3, 198.

576 Cf. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 389-90.

577 Rahime Süleymanoglu-Kürüm, "The sociology of diplomats and foreign policy sector. The role of cliques on the policy-making process," *Political Studies Review* 19:4 (2021), 569. Also see: Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1.

but differed on the implementation of that decision.⁵⁷⁸ IR researcher Feyyaz Çelik, in 2020, used the governmental politics paradigm to highlight the role of perception within decision-making.⁵⁷⁹ Çelik's research aligns with Kirschener's 2015 finding that worries about future security extended intra-state wars. For adversaries to stop fighting, they need to trust their adversaries that they would no longer be a threat to future security. The level of trust relied on the perception of the adversary. The available information about those adversaries influences the perception of the adversary.⁵⁸⁰ Kirschener's research seemed to acknowledge prospect theory, which provides some guidance as it proved that people prefer avoiding losses over pursuing gains.⁵⁸¹ Realizing that human behavior is not necessarily rational according to a cost-benefit calculation makes decision-making processes somewhat unpredictable. Psychologist Scott Atran's 2020 research on dedicated fighters in northern Iraq from 2014 onward, found that

[t]hroughout human history, many of the most effective revolutionaries, and violent extremists, have been "Devoted Actors" driven by faith in their group or values, rather than those striving to be optimal "Rational Actors" focusing on the most cost-effective way to achieve their most realizable goals – however, "bounded" by subjective judgments about payoffs based on limited information – or abnormal and deficient "irrational" actors. (This is not to deny that a complex configuration of disparate psychological, cultural, political and economic factors may be involved, in different ways at different times, in generating extreme political violence).⁵⁸²

Whether people behave rationally remains debated among psychologists, although Atran's findings agree that context is essential.⁵⁸³ The context might also be necessary for identity. IS tried to securitize sectarian identities. However, Middle East researchers Fanar Haddad *et al.* in 2022 found that sectarian identity is not a given.⁵⁸⁴ In general, theories, as mentioned above, might provide explanations, yet in individual cases, the theories do not necessarily have to be correct and need falsification. Illustrative is Atran's view on Middle Eastern strategic decision-making, in which 'normally the leader makes the decisions, but other interested actors

578 Klaus Brummer, "Governmental politics in consensus democracies," *Global Society* 31:2 (2017), 273-4, 290.

579 Feyyaz Çelik, "Foreign policy decision-making in operational overlap. The UK's policing assistance in Afghanistan through the EU and NATO," *European Security* 29:4 (2020), 458-60, 476.

580 Kirschner, *Trust and fear in civil wars*, 15.

581 Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 151; Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, 287-8. Also see: Fukuyama, *Identity*, 85.

582 Scott Atran, "Measure of devotion to ISIS and other fighting groups," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35 (2020), 105. Also see: Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4; Fukuyama, *Identity*, 85; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 151; Kahneman, *Ons feilbare denken*, 413.

583 John Does & Amy Wolaver, "Are we all predictably irrational? An experimental analysis," *Political behavior* 43 (2021), 1,225. Also see: Ariely, *Predictably irrational*, 243-4.

584 Fanar Haddad *et al.*, "The politics of identity and sectarianism," in *The political science of the Middle East*, Marc Lynch *et al.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 199.

do try to influence him, such as presidential advisers, senior military and intelligence officers, key cabinet members, party *apparatchiki*, and foreign ministry officials. As the “bureaucratic politics” model argues [...], each of these actors may propose different policies shaped by their special roles and material interests.⁵⁸⁵

IR researcher Waleed Hazbun in 2015 argued that to understand Middle Eastern politics, ‘one needs to analyze the security interests and policies of state elites while also mapping the rival societal discourses of insecurity: how societal actors perceive threats and understand the security of their community.’⁵⁸⁶

Determining the relevant policymakers involved might prove a considerable challenge⁵⁸⁷, especially if the outline of the ANSA is not clear yet. Without explaining why, concerning IS, Hashim observed that ‘an understanding or analysis of the key personalities involved’ is often overlooked.⁵⁸⁸ When applied, governmental politics paradigm studies tend to focus on the leader or group of leaders to keep research feasible. Examples of such studies include Osama bin Laden’s decision-making as the leader of *al-Qaeda* and Hassan Nasrallah as the leader of *Hezb’ollah*.⁵⁸⁹ A more encompassing approach is Freedman’s 2022 study *Command*, which dealt with the relationships between political and military leaders during armed conflicts since the Second World War. Freedman concluded that decision-making primarily depended first on ‘the interests at stake,’ second ‘whether the decisions were being taken in a dictatorship or a democracy,’ third ‘the quality of command arrangements,’ and fourth ‘the characters and perspectives of individuals mattered.’⁵⁹⁰

The interests at stake reflect the rational actor paradigm, how the actor arranged bureaucracy and management reflects the organizational behavior paradigm and the personalities of decisionmakers involved reflect the governmental politics paradigm, respectively. Freedman further argued that regarding the second factor that he observed – dictatorship versus democracy –, ‘dictatorships, or indeed any excessively rigid command structure, will encourage sycophancy and tolerance of foolish schemes,’ adding that the advantage of democracies ‘lies in their ability to recognize [...] mistakes, learn, and adapt.’⁵⁹¹ Freedman appeared to apply a governmental politics paradigm approach⁵⁹² and implicitly touched upon so-called behavioralist scholarship in IR,

585 Atran, “Measure of devotion to ISIS,” 105. Italics in original.

586 Waleed Hazbun, “A history of insecurity. From the Arab Uprisings to ISIS,” *Middle East Policy* xxiii:3 (2015), 55. For example: Kepel, *Fitna*, 283.

587 Rosati, “A cognitive approach,” 60.

588 Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 74.

589 Mintz & DeRouen, *Understanding foreign policy decision making*, 87, 92, 170.

590 Freedman, *Command*, 493.

591 *Ibid.*, 12.

592 *Ibid.*, 12.

which focuses on the implications of leaders for unit-level action.⁵⁹³ Still, Freedman implicitly applied so-called analytic eclecticism, which promotes a pragmatic approach to IR issues, beyond paradigms⁵⁹⁴, as he adopted elements of all three foreign policy paradigms. Such natural, implicit incorporation of all three paradigms leads to wondering whether analysts can merge them.

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm remained largely the same as described by Allison, with developments in psychology improving analysis and recent research indicating the paradigm is applicable beyond the American context. Despite these developments, the lack of change might indicate the paradigm is not used explicitly for its inherent complexity, which counts as its main point of criticism, as discussed below.

3.4.2 Critical reflections: complicated

Overall, the governmental politics paradigm is considered too complicated. The paradigm requires a lot of detailed information regarding a specific decision before it can draw any conclusion.⁵⁹⁵ First of all, it is essential to map the critical players involved.⁵⁹⁶ Then, for each of the key players, their idiosyncratic belief systems need to be developed to enable an explanation of their decision-making process. Critics of this model also underlined that it wrongly assumes the senior decision-maker to be merely a *primus inter pares*. Similarly, analysts criticized the constructivist interpretation for failing to explain why some identities prevail over others.⁵⁹⁷

Psychological research found that people cannot oversee all possible consequences of their actions, do not acquire a full information position, might have conflicting goals, and sometimes reach a goal by accident.⁵⁹⁸ On the other hand, empirical evidence pointed out that decision-makers might share similar goals.⁵⁹⁹ The level of rationality within this paradigm seems unclear, differing from

593 For example: Davis, "Better than a bet," 476-500.

594 Chernoff *et al.*, "Analytic eclecticism and International Relations," 384.

595 Bendor & Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's models," 301, 314; Rogier de Langhe, "Graham Allison's modellen voor de analyse van internationale betrekkingen. Een pluralistische kritiek," *Ethiek & Maatschappij*, 8:2 (2005), 67.

596 Rosati, "A cognitive approach," 60.

597 Juneau *et al.*, "Neoclassical realism," 9-10.

598 Aya, "The third man," 143-52; Barner-Barry & Rosenwein, *Psychological perspectives*, 238; Simon, "Rationality in political behavior," 45-61; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 233. Also see: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 210; Michael Dobbs, "Why we should still study the Cuban missile crisis" (Washington D.C.: *United States Institute of Peace*, 2008), 3; Bert Klandermans, "The social construction of protest and multiorganizational fields," in *Frontiers in social movement theory*, Aldon Morris & Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 77-103; Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 88-9; Michael Schwarz & Shuva Paul, "Resource mobilization versus the mobilization of people. Why consensus movements cannot be instruments of social change," in *Frontiers in social movement theory*, Aldon Morris & Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 205-23; Jacqueline van Stekelenburg & Bert Klandermans, "The social psychology of protest," *Contemporary Sociology*, (2010), 3; Tuchman, *The march of folly*, 4; Welch, "The organizational process," 133.

599 Bendor & Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's models," 314. For example: Brummer, "Governmental politics in consensus democracies," 273-4, 290.

rational choice-like calculations to including non-rational elements as well.⁶⁰⁰ Decisions might end up non-rational due to the political game behind them. Also, some positions might correlate with specific personality traits.⁶⁰¹ The governmental politics paradigm deals with such individual factors. However, it remains unclear whether it is the organization that molds the individual or whether it is the individual who shapes the organization.⁶⁰² Perhaps it is a reciprocal process. It illustrates that the paradigm lacks conceptual elaboration. Still, some scholars see perspective in an adapted version of the governmental politics paradigm.⁶⁰³ Like the organizational behavior paradigm, analysts consider the governmental politics paradigm more appropriate when the settings are precise and organizational or domestic interests predominate.⁶⁰⁴

3.4.3 Operationalizing: perceptions

Allison and Zelikow suggested general questions belonging to the governmental politics paradigm:

1. *'Who* plays? That is, whose views and values count in shaping the choice and action?
2. What *factors* shape each *player's* (a) perceptions; (b) preferred course of action; and thus (c) the player's stand on the issue?
3. What *factors* account for each *player's impact* on the choice and action?
4. What is the "*action channel*," that is, the established process for aggregating competing perceptions, preferences, and stands of players in making decisions and taking action?"⁶⁰⁵

The challenge with the questions above is to avoid too much complication by making the group too considerable and going into too much detail. Therefore, using the governmental politics paradigm needs an inherent assumption of being incomplete. ANSAs pose a specific challenge, as most operate in obscurity, hiding their strategic decision-makers.

3.4.4 Reflections

Developments in psychological research provide interesting input for the governmental politics paradigm. The paradigm can easily become too complicated as psychological and historical analysis of each individual involved is necessary. In particular, with ANSAs, analysts do not know every key player. Within any organization, differences exist between those in power and

600 *Ibid.*, 304.

601 Welch, "The organizational process," 117-8, 131. For example: Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 239-41; Morris, *War!*, 3-5. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, 3-5, 20-31.

602 Langhe, "Graham Allison's modellen," 67.

603 Ripley, "Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics," 88-9.

604 Allison & Halperin, "Bureaucratic politics," 58.

605 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 390. Italics in original.

those with influence; sometimes, the categories overlap completely, usually only partially. In case of overlap, interactions occur, creating complex systems. These complex systems are the focus of complexity theory, described below.

3.5 Complexity theory

The rational actor, organizational behavior, and governmental politics paradigms are typical reference points for starting foreign policy research.⁶⁰⁶ Applying the paradigms to a single case makes analysts wonder whether they can merge them. Although Zelikow disagreed⁶⁰⁷, Allison suggested they can – perhaps should – be used together:

‘[the rational actor paradigm] fixes the broader context, the larger national patterns, and the shared images. Within this context, [...] [the organizational behavior paradigm] illuminates the organizational routines that produce the information, options, and action. [...] [the governmental politics paradigm] focuses in greater detail on the individuals who constitute a government and the politics and procedures by which their competing perceptions and preferences are combined. Each, in effect, serves as a search engine in the larger effort to identify all the significant causal factors that determine an outcome. The best analysts of foreign policy manage to weave strands from each of the three conceptual models into their explanations.’⁶⁰⁸

Other authors agreed; ‘[t]he interaction/organization model combines the reaction and organizational process explanations into a single model. Prior studies suggested that a combination may be more powerful as an explanatory device than either the international system or foreign policy approach taken separately.’⁶⁰⁹

In his study on violence in civil wars, Kalyvas stated that ‘theories of civil war must incorporate a multilevel analysis, simultaneously accounting for the interaction between rival elites, elites and the population, and among individuals. Failing to do so will distort the analysis and miss the mechanisms that mediate between opportunities and constraints at the center and the periphery.’⁶¹⁰ Incorporating multi-level analysis seems in line with metaphysical realism’s suggestion to combine factors belonging to different levels of analysis to provide a

606 Gerner, “The evolution of the study of foreign policy,” 23; Ripley, “Cognition, culture, and bureaucratic politics,” 86.

607 Allison & Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, 11-2n1.

608 *Ibid.*, 392.

609 Tanter, “International system and foreign policy approaches,” 12.

610 Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 391.

sufficient explanation.⁶¹¹ Some scholars doubt whether it is possible.⁶¹² If the paradigms are complementary, analysts can merge them into a single analytical model in which the different levels are interrelated.⁶¹³ Combining the paradigms into a single analytical model might be possible when adopting metaphysical realism and using the rational actor paradigm to focus on the macro-level, the organizational behavior paradigm on the meso-level, and the governmental politics paradigm on the micro-level. Then, a multi-level, multi-directional analytical model emerges, reminiscent of complexity theory.⁶¹⁴ Conflicts in multi-ethnic societies such as Iraq and Syria require adopting complexity, acknowledging that '[e]very strategic context is unique'.⁶¹⁵ Time, place, and context determine how an actor – either state or non-state – might decide. Uniqueness is the essence of complexity and complexity theory.⁶¹⁶

Lacking encompassing explanations on strategic decision-making by the separate foreign policy paradigms, this paragraph explores complexity theory as a potential avenue, basically merging the traditional IR paradigms. Contemporary complexity refers to so-called complex systems, which share a characteristic known as emergence, roughly described as the aggregate that is more than just the sum of its parts.⁶¹⁷ Many authors on themes such as conflict have implicitly touched on (elements of) complexity theory.⁶¹⁸ Yet, '[e]ven though a spate of books, special issues, and articles have eloquently made the case for "embracing complexity" [...] international relations (IR) scholars have been slow to do so. The profession uses the vocabulary but either forgets the supporting reasoning or rejects it outright as a potential paradigm of IR'.⁶¹⁹ Yet, complexity scholars Amandine Orsini *et al.* emphasized that

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- 611 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 74-5. Also see: Laura Neack *et al.* "Generational change in foreign policy analysis," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 11.
- 612 Guilhot, "The Kuhnian of reason," 6, 16. Also see: Charles Hermann, "Reflections on foreign policy theory building," in *Foreign policy analysis. Continuity and change in its second generation*, Laura Neack *et al.* (eds.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 74-5.
- 613 Mouritzen, "Kenneth Waltz," 76; Rosati, "A cognitive approach," 67. Also see: Dimitriu, "Clausewitz and the politics of war," 679-80.
- 614 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 35; Holland, *Complexity*, 2-6.
- 615 Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 53. Also see: Kiras, "Current irregular warfare," 358-9; Lonsdale, "The study and theory of strategy," 21-3.
- 616 Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1,031.
- 617 Holland, *Complexity*, 2-6, 49-51. Also see: Margaret Wheatley & Deborah Frieze, "Using emergence to take social innovation to scale," *The Berkana Institute* (2006), 3-4.
- 618 Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 25, 35-7, 76, 116-21, 141, 206. For example: Clausewitz, *On war*, 80, 119-21. Also see: Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, nonlinearity, and the unpredictability of war," *International Security* 17:3 (1992-3), 75-7; Black, *Geopolitics*, 272; Cole, "Clausewitz's wondrous yet paradoxical trinity," 43; Freedman, *Command*, 4; Hammes, *The sling and the stone*, 283-4; Jones & Smith, "Return to reason," 952; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 70, 72; Lonsdale, "Strategy defined," 49-50; Lonsdale, "The study and theory of strategy," 26-30; Gary Machlis & Marcia McNutt, "Black swans, wicked problems and science during crises," *Oceanography* 24:3 (2011), 319; Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1013; Prantl & Goh, "Rethinking strategy and statecraft," 443-4; Horst Rittel & Melvin Webber, "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 120-1; Watts, "Clausewitzian friction," 105-23.
- 619 Orsini *et al.*, "Forum. Complex systems and international governance," 1,009.

‘[t]here is no point in exploring complex empirical phenomena with a toolbox favoring actor-centered causality in an artificially confined environment only to satisfy methodological concerns. There is also no need to fully “convert” and apply postmodern complexity theory in situations in which actors are many but not infinite, where causality plays a role but is not unidirectional, and in which emergence is not only a system function.’⁶²⁰

To understand complicated events, analysts should use different avenues.⁶²¹ Complexity theory adopts an approach that events are time, place, and case-specific.⁶²² Some scholars have argued that time and place become less relevant as factors in a developing world where communication and transportation possibilities increase.⁶²³ However, potential adversaries might anticipate and use those same developments.⁶²⁴ Complexity theory views a situation as the result of multiple complex, interacting processes on different levels – using feedback loops – leading to a particular outcome.⁶²⁵ Still, relatively simple ‘order-generating rules’ constrain the systems.⁶²⁶ These imply that ‘a very small difference in the value of initial specification of parameters – quantitative descriptions of the system’s state – can result in very different outcome states of the system across time.’⁶²⁷

Complexity theory provides ‘a framework for understanding which asserts the ontological position that much of the world and most of the social world consists of complex systems and if we want to understand it we have to understand it in those terms.’⁶²⁸ Complexity theory, therefore, is more of a framework – a paradigm – than an actual theory⁶²⁹, resembling the abovementioned paradigms. Complexity theory here largely overlaps with analytic eclecticism, promoting pragmatism in IR, beyond paradigms.⁶³⁰ That very pragmatism can lead to a lack of structure⁶³¹, from which complexity theory and concepts associated with complexity can suffer too.⁶³² Another

620 *Ibid.*, 1,019.

621 Mouritzen, “Kenneth Waltz,” 74-5. Also see: Neack *et al.*, “Generational change in foreign policy analysis,” 11.

622 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 62, 128-49. Also see: Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1; Luttwak, *Strategy*, 219; Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1015-6. Cf. Richard Feynman, “The pleasure of finding things out,” in *The pleasure of finding things out. The best short works of Richard Feynman*, Jeffrey Robbins (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Helix, 1999), 22. Byrne and Callaghan adopted a postmodern orientation to complexity theory.

623 David Alberts *et al.*, “Network centric warfare. Developing and leveraging information superiority” (Washington D.C.: C4ISR Cooperative Research Program, 1999), 19.

624 Cf. Luttwak, *Strategy*, 2

625 Burnes, “Complexity theories and organizational change,” 74; Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 22, 62, 128-49; Holland, *Complexity*, 3; Stone, *Policy paradox*, 97. Also see: Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 390-1.

626 Burnes, “Complexity theories and organizational change,” 74.

627 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 19.

628 *Ibid.*, 8.

629 Burnes, “Complexity theories and organizational change,” 74, 85; Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity Theory*, 8; Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1,010.

630 Chernoff *et al.*, “Analytic eclecticism and International Relations,” 384.

631 *Ibid.*, 390.

632 Osinga, “On Boyd,” 167.

academic field with which complexity overlaps is historical institutionalism, which also addresses feedback mechanisms. Focusing on institutional pathways or path contingencies⁶³³, historical institutionalism has a narrower view than complexity theory, though.

Complexity theory's interactions and feedback loops allow merging paradigms that reflect macro-, meso- and micro-levels. A fundamental assumption of complexity theory is that for complex (social) systems – including actors in IR – linear explanations with a single independent variable or a minimal number of independent variables are not sufficient to understand a reality that is complex too.⁶³⁴ Instead, complexity theory seeks non-linear explanations, assuming 'changes in effects which are disproportionate to the changes in the causal element(s)'.⁶³⁵

Within complexity theory, two subfields have emerged: studies of complex physical systems (CPS) and complex adaptive systems (CAS). CPS studies focus on 'geometric [...] arrays of elements, in which interactions typically depend only on effects propagated from its nearest neighbours'⁶³⁶, whereas CAS studies focus on elements – so-called agents – that are not fixed and show some form of agency in response to interactions with other systems. Agents adapt according to interactions with other agents and the environment, leading to diversity, emergence, and possible examination of alternative options before execution.⁶³⁷ Studies of social systems – like actors in IR – concern CAS studies given human agency. As complexity theory is merely a framework, instead of a theory, it does not provide variables or structure. Analysts using complexity theory should realize that complexity is not a reality but a way to approach observations.⁶³⁸

Overall, '[t]here *are* causes for the events in a complex system, but there are so many causes and so many events linked to one another through so many direct and indirect paths that the outcome is *practically* unpredictable'.⁶³⁹ Thus, decision-making is not only a top-down or bottom-up process but a dynamic in which strategic, operational, and tactical occurrences influence the other levels.⁶⁴⁰

633 For example: Hofmann & Yeo, "Historical institutionalism and institutional design," 306-32; Tangney, "Path contingency," 37-54.

634 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 19. Also see: Snyder, "Anarchy and culture," 9.

635 *Ibid.*, 18. Also see: Holland, *Complexity*, 4; Voss, *Never split the difference*, 114.

636 Holland, *Complexity*, 6.

637 *Ibid.*, 6-36, 44-6, 80.

638 Cf. Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 19.

639 McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 59. Italics in original. Also see: Beyerchen, "Clausewitz," 75-7; Clausewitz, *On war*, 80, 119-21; Gaddis, *Over strategisch denken*, 35-7, 206; Hammes, *The sling and the stone*, 283-4; Ringmar, *History of international relations*, 7; Watts, "Clausewitzian friction," 105-23; Venable, "The result is never final," 122-9. Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 4.

640 Speller, "Introduction," 13-4.

3.5.1 State-of-the-art: implicitly applied

Without explicitly referring to complexity or complexity theory, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations Mark Leonard observed in 2022 the emergence of network-like organizations in addition to – sometimes merging with – hierarchical organizations during the twenty-first century. The nodes of network-like organizations are in constant flux, thus blurring the differences between internal and external and domestic and external.⁶⁴¹ IR scholars Jochen Prantl and Evelyn Goh reached similar conclusions in their 2022 study of strategic diplomacy. Prantl and Goh stated that ‘contemporary international order is best understood as a complex adaptive system, with three key properties: interconnectedness, non-linearity and emergence.’⁶⁴² According to Orsini *et al.*, who in 2020 applied complexity to IR, complex systems in IR are characterized by self-organization, emergence, and adaptation. These characteristics cause non-linear behavior. Proper analysis thus requires a non-linear analytical approach.⁶⁴³ Yet, these observations were nothing new. Political scientist Antoine Bousquet in 2008 observed an increase in adopting non-linear approaches to conflict since the 1970s.⁶⁴⁴ During the 2000s, insurgencies used ‘decentralized networks to good effect against better-equipped forces.’⁶⁴⁵ Former marine colonel Thomas Hammes, in 2008, labeled this fourth-generation warfare, which ‘uses all available networks – political, economic, social and military – to convince the enemy’s decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit.’⁶⁴⁶ In systems like that, ‘power is defined by both profound concentration and by massive distribution,’ yet ‘the more power is spread to the periphery, the more powerful the core must become.’⁶⁴⁷

Kalyvas stated that ‘war is a transformative phenomenon, and civil war even more so. The advent of war transforms individual preferences, choices, behavior, and identities – and the main way in which civil war exercises its transformative function is through violence. In other words, there are several ways in which violence works as an independent variable.’⁶⁴⁸ As conflict is a dynamic activity, ‘theories that assume actors and preferences to be frozen in their prewar

641 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 95, 133-8.

642 Prantl & Goh, “Rethinking strategy and statecraft,” 450. For an alternative approach see: Walter Clemens, ‘Complexity theory as a tool for understanding and coping with ethnic conflict and development issues in post-Soviet Eurasia,’ *International Journal of Peace Studies* 7:2 (2002), 2-4.

643 Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1,010-1, 1,033.

644 Antoine Bousquet, “Chaoplex warfare or the future of military organization,” *International Affairs* 84:5 (2008), 923-5. Bousquet used the term chaoplexity when referring to approaches that used chaos and/or complexity theory.

645 *Ibid.*, 929.

646 Thomas Hammes, “War evolves into the fourth generation,” in *Global insurgency and the future of armed conflict. Debating fourth generation warfare*, Aaron Karp *et al.* (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2008), 42. Also see: Osinga, “On Boyd,” 168-70.

647 Leonard, *The age of unpeace*, 138.

648 Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, 389.

manifestations, and rely on this assumption to explain various aspects of civil wars, such as their onset, duration, or termination, will be biased.⁶⁴⁹

Counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen, in 2010, suggested complexity theory to understand insurgent movements – at the time of writing, focusing on *al-Qaeda*.⁶⁵⁰ Strategic studies scholar James Kiras – like Kilcullen from a counterinsurgency perspective – stated in 2016 that ‘[f]ew campaigns [...] involved monolithic insurgent groups, populations or governments. Petty jealousies, rivalries and struggles for predominance between competing factions shifting allegiances and indifference and incompetence between all three, as well as the practical difficulties of comprehending these, much less dealing directly with them, is the stuff of irregular warfare.’⁶⁵¹ Kiras continued that environments such as Iraq and Syria contain ‘seemingly brutal and indiscriminate violence,’ that ‘reflects the complex tapestry of motivations and uses of political violence at the organizational and local level between numerous competing groups.’⁶⁵² Many studies have tried to explain Middle Eastern ANSAs, implicitly using complexity theory by combining multiple variables into a single explanation, but without explicitly referring to complexity theory or explaining the analytical framework.⁶⁵³ Kiras stressed that complexity applies to almost every irregular war.⁶⁵⁴

Many studies on IS shared not only their focus on external actors and factors concerning IS but also not choosing an integrated approach and focusing on one or a few explanations.⁶⁵⁵ The lack of integration is remarkable, as the many and very different explanations suggest that reality is complex and does not allow simple explanations: ‘[f]rom a complexity point of view there really are no such things as variables which exist outside cases and have causal powers over cases.’⁶⁵⁶ However, some studies reached promising conclusions regarding a ‘perfect storm’⁶⁵⁷ and suggested that the situation is unique in both time and place, as well as context⁶⁵⁸, thus leaving room for a complexity theory approach, using an observed reality from which the analyst constructs a model providing the best possible explanation.⁶⁵⁹

649 *Ibid.*, 389.

650 David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166.

651 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 354.

652 *Ibid.*, 354. Also see: Black, *Military strategy*.

653 For example: Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, “Foreign policy making,” 258; Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 11; Mason, “Strategic depth,” 96-108.

654 Kiras, “Current irregular warfare,” 354, 368-9.

655 For example: Ashour, *How ISIS fights*, 15, 22-3, 198; Richard Barrett, “The Islamic State” (New York: *Soufan Group*, 2014), 4-7, 58; Ghassan Charbel, “While the rest of the world is watching the world cup, we are watching the collapse of Iraq,” transl. Middle East Media Research Institute, *Al-Hayat*, June 13, 2014; David Gardner, “ISIS. Armed and Dangerous,” *Financial Times*, August 14, 2014; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 19; Stern & Berger, *ISIS*, 6-7.

656 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 201.

657 Sarah Canna & Tom Rieger, “Multi-method assessment of ISIL in support of SOCCENT. Subject matter expert elicitation summary report (July-November 2014),” *SOCCENT*, January 2015, 10.

658 For example: Hashim, *The caliphate at war*, 9.

659 Cf. Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 62, 80-5, 128-53.

Political scientist Sara Mustafa, in a 2021 study, focused on timeliness for explaining the KRI's 2017 independence referendum. Mustafa observed that tensions with the Iraqi state and the attack by IS influenced different interacting layers within the KRI, which caused the KRI to announce the referendum in 2017.⁶⁶⁰ Without explicitly referring to complexity theory, Mustafa applied various complexity theory factors, such as multi-level interactions, emergence, fluidity of borders, and timing⁶⁶¹, indicating that such an approach leads to sound explanations. IR scholar Jasmine Gani conducted another study that applied complexity theory. Acknowledging that analysts influence the environment studied, Gani used a complexity approach to the Arab Uprisings and concluded in 2022 that Western academic institutions affected and eventually disrupted the protests. Yet, she observed that 'they have a chance to at least expand the parameters and options of effective foreign policy-making.'⁶⁶²

3.5.2 Critical reflections: no structure

As Gani's research indicated, it is important to notice is that a CAS consists of agents, which sometimes are complex systems themselves. Interaction takes place by a CAS as a whole with another CAS and its environment and its components, which might interact with other elements and their environments, often without a central executive. The interactions occur as input through detectors, usually senses, which are assigned some credit based on experience or knowledge. Interactions of different kinds happen continuously on different levels, where overlap with another CAS occurs. This overlap inherently means that boundaries – or borders, for that matter – are non-existent. Boundaries within complexity theory are mere instruments to describe systems and the activities of systems. Within a CAS occurs 'interpenetration, layering, and multi-directional causality.'⁶⁶³ These processes make modeling complexity difficult, if not impossible unless the model is as complex as reality itself⁶⁶⁴, 'it is nevertheless necessary to try.'⁶⁶⁵

This empirical approach prevents confirmation bias, the risk of focusing on what fits the analyst's preconception, which is a likely risk using either one or more of the established IR paradigms.⁶⁶⁶ Complexity theory, as such, describes reality the best it can, but given the nature of a CAS, it will be unable to predict the future accurately.⁶⁶⁷

660 Mustafa, "Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum," 891.

661 *Ibid.*, 895-904.

662 Gani, "From discourse to practice," 65.

663 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 30-5; Holland, *Complexity*, 4-5, 25-8.

664 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 65. For a contrary view see: Holland, *Complexity*, 9-12, 25, 89-90.

665 *Ibid.*, 37.

666 Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 478.

667 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 82; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 72.

The nature of a CAS has consequences for analysts studying a CAS and for agents within a CAS. Neither the analysts nor the agents possess omnipotence, which limits their analysis and their actions, respectively, by so-called bounded rationality. For analysts, bounded rationality means they cannot conduct exhaustive searches. For individuals, bounded rationality implies they cannot oversee all possible consequences of their actions, do not acquire a full information position, might have conflicting goals, and might sometimes reach a goal by accident.⁶⁶⁸ The concept of bounded rationality implies that reality exists. How agents view reality is a social construction, as agents cannot oversee everything. Therefore, any structure that describes a CAS is a metaphor, but a metaphor that describes a reality. Modeling complexity is capturing reality in a metaphor.⁶⁶⁹ A nice metaphor was used by former air force commodore and strategic studies scholar Frans Osinga when he criticized fourth-generation warfare for its ‘jelly-like character; variable in shape and substance, and refusing to be nailed against the wall.’⁶⁷⁰ The jelly-like character might be true for complexity theory in general. Yet, ‘[t]here is a reality within which all the entities operate, interpenetrate, and mutually and reflexively express causal powers.’⁶⁷¹

For complex systems, the reality is time-, place-, and case-specific.⁶⁷² This implies that the cases in this study are unique, and analysts cannot extend their validity to other cases. It also means that operationalizing complexity theory, strictly speaking, is impossible as it concerns a paradigm and is tricky as no similar cases exist for reference. The solution to come as close to operationalization as possible is to abstract or zoom out, which the following section explores.

3.5.3 Operationalizing: uniqueness

Complex social systems do not constantly exercise power over time; social structures evolve, making these time-sensitive.⁶⁷³ In reality, ‘identical situations rarely, if ever, recur.’⁶⁷⁴ Time itself is socially constructed and relative, depending on the observation frame. Actors are future-orientated, anticipating potential futures that may never become reality.⁶⁷⁵ ‘Recognizing that time is constructed out of and in relation to the real reflects the essence of complexity thinking.’⁶⁷⁶ Similar observations apply to space: ‘not only is space socially constructed, but

668 Romano, “Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking,” 343.

669 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 30-4, 43, 52; Holland, *Complexity*, 4-5, 24-5, 69-70; Orsini *et al.*, “Forum. Complex systems and international governance,” 1,014; Simon, “Rationality in political behavior,” 45-6.

670 Osinga, “On Boyd,” 167.

671 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 45.

672 *Ibid.*, 62, 128-49.

673 *Ibid.*, 50.

674 Holland, *Complexity*, 82. Also see: Luttwak, *Strategy*, xii.

675 Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 142. Also see: Holland, *Complexity*, 86.

676 *Ibid.*, 145.

that in its turn the social is spatially constructed.⁶⁷⁷ Space not only concerns geography but also social networks that interact. In both realms, boundaries are fluid as interactions take place.⁶⁷⁸

Acknowledging time-, space- and context-specific cases, complexity theory analysts work from collected data from reality to draw their conclusions from, not from agent-based simulations or hypotheses. As such, complexity theory views individuals as complex systems, possessing agency individually and collectively, simultaneously being an individual and a group member. Understanding such complex systems only works by recognizing and incorporating the role of reflexive human agents.⁶⁷⁹ It is important to note that '[e]verything in the social world is the product of something done by human beings.'⁶⁸⁰ Sometimes, causes in complex systems cause themselves, either directly or indirectly, for example battlefield momentum. And as everything in the social world results from human agency, this might also include things not done on purpose. A vital consequence of the idea that individuals cause everything in the social world is that researchers themselves influence that social world.⁶⁸¹

For modeling a CAS, it is relevant to consider that (1) 'the behaviour of a CAS is always *generated* by the adaptive interactions of its components,' and that (2) 'the hierarchical structure characteristic of CAS is also generated – particular combinations of agents become agents at the next level up.'⁶⁸² Complexity theory views a situation as the result of multiple complex processes on different levels, leading to a particular outcome. It implies that the outcome is specific for this time and space and might evolve further.⁶⁸³

Acknowledging methodological restrictions, these elements do offer structure and lead to the following sub-questions:

1. What time-specific actors and factors are relevant for the actor's strategic decision-making?
2. What space-specific actors and factors are relevant?
3. What context-specific actors and factors are relevant?
4. Which multi-layered and multi-directional processes/links affect the outcome?

Applying complexity theory might present a promising avenue to merge (elements of) the established IR paradigms, mentioned earlier, and study the conflict between IS and the KRI

677 *Ibid.*, 131.

678 *Ibid.*, 132-3. For example: Lynch, "The end of the Middle East," 61-3. Also see: Said, *Orientalism*.

679 *Ibid.*, 40-1, 180-1, 193, 249.

680 *Ibid.*, 50.

681 *Ibid.*, 65-6, 180-1, 252.

682 Holland, *Complexity*, 32. Italics in original.

683 *Ibid.*, 21. Also see: Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity Theory*, 128-49.

from a multi-directional, multi-layered, and multi-disciplinary perspective. Complexity theory has already been applied quite promising to study IS, focusing on both external and internal factors.⁶⁸⁴ Usually, these studies occurred without explicitly elaborating on complexity theory itself and – in line with most complexity theory social studies – without including psychology in the analysis⁶⁸⁵ or by applying another theory.⁶⁸⁶

Recent observations on IS' multi-level, multi-directional interactions suggest complexity. Occasionally, studies explicitly referred to complexity without mentioning complexity theory. However, they sometimes overlapped with other earlier-mentioned analytical approaches.⁶⁸⁷ Several studies observed a link between complexity and technological developments, as 'new technologies have created an unprecedented proliferation of opportunities for small, historically disenfranchised actors to have a butterfly effect.'⁶⁸⁸ Overall, armed conflict has become 'much more complex, with large and cumbersome armies.'⁶⁸⁹ Additionally, '[i]n modern warfare, there is a complex interplay between political objectives and military options.'⁶⁹⁰ Ingram *et al.* observed 'a mix of top-down and bottom-up factors, which ISIS sought to leverage with the strategic opportunism that is a recurring theme throughout its history'⁶⁹¹, which required adaptive strategic decision-making.⁶⁹² Such observations recognize the need for an appropriate analytical framework.

3.5.4 Reflections

Complexity theory is nothing new. Many of Clausewitz's writings implicitly mention complexity as a phenomenon and form a rudimentary version of complexity theory. The paradoxes that Clausewitz, and later Luttwak, observed within the realm of strategy seem to acknowledge complexity theory as a well-suited approach to analyze strategic decision-making. Consisting of elements of the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm – and probably many other theories and paradigms – complexity theory might provide a suitable overall framework to analyze strategic decision-making.

684 Mabon & Royle, *The origins of ISIS*, 21.

685 Cf. Byrne & Callaghan, *Complexity theory*, 214.

686 For example: Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 22-5.

687 For example: *Ibid.*, 380; McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 60; Noyes, "Pragmatic takfiris."

688 McChrystal *et al.*, *Team of teams*, 62. Cf. Gartenstein-Ross & Joscelyn, *Enemies near & far*, 15; Hammes, *The sling and the stone*, 284; Naim, *The end of power*, 54-65.

689 Freedman, *Command*, 461. Cf. Keegan, *A history of warfare*, 386.

690 *Ibid.*, 513. For example: Fishman, *The master plan*, 112, 153-5.

691 Ingram *et al.*, *The ISIS reader*, 158-9.

692 Cf. Freedman, *Command*, 494.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter started with the observation that no methodological objections exist to studying ANSAs from a foreign policy perspective.⁶⁹³ The absence of methodological objections implies that the analyst can use the rational actor paradigm, the organizational behavior paradigm, and the governmental politics paradigm, whether the analysis concerns state actors or ANSAs, which creates opportunities for comparative research. The difference exists between the paradigms that ask different questions regarding a case. Analysts need to be aware of the opportunities and constraints of each paradigm, choosing the paradigm that best fits their needs or – preferably, as it offers a more complete explanation – use a combination of paradigms. While recent research in line with any of the paradigms tends to adopt elements from the other paradigms, the rational actor paradigm remains the dominant approach within IR, seemingly dominating the study of Middle Eastern ANSAs. The rational actor paradigm's dominance implies that analysts attribute strategic decisions to the entire actor. At the same time, procedural or idiosyncratic explanations sometimes might be more appropriate and have proven their value. Despite being contested, the paradigms can be complementary, that is, part of a single analytical framework that, with its multi-layered and possible multi-directional processes, is similar to complexity theory.

693 Baumann & Stengel, "Foreign policy analysis," 503; Hegghammer, "Resistance is futile," 48, 49-51; Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma*, 4, 63. For example: Masri, "Principles in the administration of the Islamic State"; Reuter, "The terror strategist."