

Chapter 2

In Khong's analysis of the use of analogies in international relations – the “AE” or “analogical explanation” framework – analogies have six applications in determining player X's response to situation Y. Specifically, the analogy helps X determine:

- 1) what is and is not part of Y.
- 2) the stakes involved in Y.
- 3) prescribed and proscribed responses to Y.
- 4) the probability of success of various responses to Y.
- 5) the morality of various responses to Y.
- 6) the risks and costs of various responses to Y.

Khong argues that this AE approach explicates decision-makers' use of analogies more fully than standard approaches to analogies do.

Further, the AE approach was consistent with current theories of cognitive psychology; it followed the general trend of humans coping with ungainly quantities of information (i.e., the real world) by reducing it to simpler, more comprehensible forms (i.e., the analogy). Though cognitive psych suggests a variety of approaches to IR, Khong finds the study of analogies as causal and intervening variable most empirically satisfying. Using cognitive psychology requires punctiliousness about terminology, and therefore “schema” and “analogy” are differentiated: an “analogy” is a comparison of the given case to a specific case in the past, while a “schema” is a comparison with a spectrum of generally similar past cases. Khong asserts that analogies are structurally more influential in foreign policy than in other decision-making areas, even if they are no more common.

Analogies are usually (though not always) misused by decision-makers in IR, for a variety of reasons, and Khong cites a number of examples and surveys to support this assertion. This produces suboptimal decisions, as in the case Khong focuses on, viz. LBJ's 1965 decisions to escalate the ground and air wars in Vietnam. One particularly pervasive problem with analogies is their persistence: because analogies need not fit in every particular, decision-makers can regard evidence against the analogy as being a one-off event and still maintain the possibly false analogy. Also, decision-makers sometimes employ top-down processing: they construct facts to fit their analogy, instead of their analogy to fit the facts.

The sources of analogies used are specific to each situation and decision-maker; formative generational experiences are refracted by idiosyncratic career and personal experiences to determine the analogies used. Usually, too, “ease of recall” of the analogy to the situation is vital, hence more recent situations with more superficial similarities to the present case are most often invoked.

Chapter 3

Khong considers U.S. policy towards Vietnam a particularly valuable test case for his theory because it especially unlikely to conform to his predictions. His justifications for this belief vary from the many and conflicting analogies applied by the pivotal decision-makers to American decision-makers' fondness for using analogies cynically and only for propaganda purposes.

Vietnam has additional value as a case study because there were a variety of options available to policymakers: the decision was more complex than “to go to war” vs. “to not go to war.” This provides additional richness and nuance to the analysis.

Finally, Khong discusses his methodological steps in testing decisionmakers' use of various analogies:

- 1) “identification of the most important analogies,
- 2) “specification of what these analogies ‘teach’ and what constitutes acceptable evidence that their lessons were taken seriously, and
- 3) “documentation of the role of each analogy in the policy process and assessment of how consistent its lessons are with the options chosen.” (p. 58)

Chapter 7

Khong applies his methods in this chapter to the analogy between the Vietnam situation in 1965 and Neville Chamberlain’s situation with respect to Hitler in the 1930’s. This analogy would prescribe the eschewing of appeasement and hence suggest some sort of escalation to prevent Ho Chi Minh and communism from further expansion. This is what Khong considers – on the basis of various letters, interviews, and other primary sources particularly about LBJ and Secretary of State Rusk – to be the most relevant analogy for explaining the U.S. grand strategy. (However, it gives no specifications for the type of escalation that should be undertaken; for guidance on this, Khong thinks policymakers turned to the analogy with the 1950’s conflict in Korea.)

Khong then compares this analysis with four nonanalogical analyses of U.S. policy towards Vietnam in 1965. Containment theory is regarded as unable to explain why the war was limited and did not escalate any further than it did, or why the U.S. chose to get involved in 1965 and not at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. An appeal to a hawkish political-military ideology fails on similar grounds – it is too underspecified to explain the somewhat ambivalent course taken. Bureaucratic politics explanations falter when trying to explain Rusk’s hawkishness and Johnson’s necessarily hawkish “compromise.” Finally, Khong dismisses the ad hoc suggestion that LBJ escalated in Vietnam to save the Great Society for lack of documentary evidence (and, again, inability to explain why the U.S. did not go somewhat further than it in fact did).