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**THE MEDIA IN POLITICAL DECISION – MAKING  
A RATIONAL CHOICE APPROACH**

**A. INTRODUCTION**

The role of the media in foreign policy and the process of decision-making has been studied extensively, mainly with regard to the relationship between media and government (Robinson, 2000; Bennett, 1997; Entman, 1991; Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Although there is a general agreement as far as the media's significant influence is concerned, the existing theoretical framework of the media-foreign policy interrelation remains fairly vague, while there is deficiency in attempting to engage with the role of the media in policy formation.

Moreover, a large body of the related research that has been conducted deals particularly with American foreign policy and the mass media, including war crises and military and humanitarian operations undertaken by the superpower towards weaker states. With the emphasis being placed on the American media coverage of such foreign policy and diplomatic interactions, little exists on the media roles in countries and political interactions outside USA.

The present paper is an attempt to put forward a more consistent version of the media-government relationship and demonstrate an alternative model that integrates the media in the decision-making process in a systematic manner. The objective is to emphasise the strategic quality in the media action in foreign policy issues and also offer an example of that media action in a European country, which is Greece. For the purposes of this paper, I employ a combination of rational choice and game theory in order to create a model of political decision-making that helps integrate the media as well. The model is applied to the decision-making process and the press coverage of a relatively recent Greek-Turkish crisis. Through this application, I have found a close connection between the strategy selections and calculations of the Greek government and the way in which the issue was framed by the Greek press, generating a certain amount of pressure. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and a suggestion regarding the re-evaluation of the existing theories of the media-politicians relations that this model could initiate.

## **B. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Media and foreign policy in the Post Cold War era**

A common point of reference in the study of the media's role in the construction of foreign news is the Cold War, and perhaps more accurately, the changes brought about in the relationship between politicians and the media by the end of the Cold War era (Nacos, Shapiro, Insear 2000; Entman, 2000; Zaller, Chiu, 2000). The ending of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc was accompanied by an increasing development in communications technologies that was bound to alter the existing relationships between media and politicians in the conduct of foreign policy. Examples such as the 'Vietnam Syndrome' or the "CNN Effect" reflect the power inherent in the television images and networks to 'involve' in foreign policy decision-making; that is mainly due to the increased impact on the public's views of certain problems and issues, that is then translated into pressure exerted on officials (Nacos, Shapiro, Insear 2000: 2). For Entman, the end of the Cold War did not mark only the transformation in communications technologies and empowerment of the media, but also the emergence of a less trusting and more hostile public, that has enhanced the media's power on policy, in the name of 'public opinion' (2000: 22). This hypothesis, however, is challenged by the observations of those, who recognise the emergence of further complexities in the new world order, that increase the degree of public opinion manipulation by the world leaders (Nacos, Shapiro, Insear 2000: 3). On a similar basis, Zaller and Chiu (2000) argue that, especially in times of crisis, the media show a tendency to support government foreign policy, therefore favouring Bennett's indexing hypothesis and acknowledging difficulties in the media's effort to 'escape' the governmental news control and report critically.

I would argue that a consistent attempt to measure and demonstrate the media's power in changing policy is made by the theory of the CNN effect. The media's power derives to a large extent from the impact of advanced communications technologies on the flow of information and the 'ability of the first truly global television network to inform the public instantly and continuously of news from anywhere in the world' (Nacos, Shapiro, Insear 2000: 2). This in combination with empathy framed media coverage can facilitate the process of a conflict resolution, when there is a lack of a settled policy on behalf of the officials (Strobel, 1997; Livingston, 1997; Robinson, 2002). The CNN Effect concerns mainly situations of media influence on third-party humanitarian interventions in distant crises and has focused on military operations conducted by USA and NATO for the resolution of crises that have arisen abroad and have attracted media attention.

Although the CNN Effect has systematised a central role for the media in foreign policy, since it recognises a considerable level of power to compel officials to certain decisions, it is not as wide-ranging as it is often claimed. The media's power lies in facilitating Western responses to war, which are limited to

humanitarian objectives, rather than attempts to resolve a conflict (Robinson, 2001: 189). Not to mention that even if television images force governments to consider a possible intervention, it is the perceived threats and expected risks that will drive the decision to intervene (Fachot, 2001: 52).

One can notice a general absence of consensus with regard to the degree of media autonomy in the coverage of the foreign policy issues, which reflects the media's role as semi-independent players in the game for the construction of foreign news; a role that maintains a certain degree of ambiguity in the media's potential to influence policy formation and is further enhanced when the exploitation of the media by officials for political purposes is also taken into account. It is the degree of this ambiguity that the present study attempts to tackle with the employment of the rational choice approach.

### **In Defence of Rational Choice Theory**

George Tsebelis describes rationality as nothing more than an optimal correspondence between ends and means (1990: 18). It is a definition that appears to capture the essence of politics, since as Tsebelis also notes, the relationship between means and ends is inherent in all political processes. However self-evident this view might seem, rationality as a theory is demanding to such an extent that it could even be described as unrealistic. The purpose of this section is to defend the aptness of rational choice theory not as the ideal theory for political analysis but as one that can offer a more systematic approach to the media-politicians relationship.

The theory is often charged for being too idealistic, as it tends to exaggerate both the degree of control and information available to policy-makers/decision-makers. Although it is an efficient tool in explaining decision-making processes in a consistent way, what also needs to be considered is that actors' behaviour is not always as consistent as the theory requires. This paper does not overlook or underrate the theory's deficiencies. However, it defends its effectiveness as an instrument that can serve the purposes of this study.

Rational choice theory recognises a certain degree of consistency in human behaviour, particularly for the achievement of goals. Elster describes rationality as a 'normative' concept, which indicates what action individuals *should* take in order to achieve their objectives. However, he recognises important non-normative applications in the use of rationality, particularly for explanation, prediction and description of the human behaviour (1986: 83). It is those aspects of the theory that this paper endeavours to exploit in an effort to explicate the media's role in political decision-making in a consistent manner. There are actually several existing models of the foreign policy process that presuppose the element of rationality being inherent in the behaviour of nation-states. In this view, it is what governments perceive to be the interests of a state that lead to

rational action. In his classic study of the U.S. foreign policy process *Essence of Decision*, Graham Allison approaches the Soviet and US decisions, to place offensive missiles in Cuba and to proceed with a blockade respectively, as alternatives whose consequences were preferred in terms of the actors' utility function; and he produces a convincing account of how and why each decision was made at a given point of time. In his model called the Rational Actor Model (1971:9-11), governmental decisions are seen as the resultant of evaluating alternatives before they select the one that is expected to advance the state's interests.

Interestingly, it is this same model that O'Heffernan uses in order to build on the relationship between media and foreign policy. Although he does not describe it as a rational interaction, he attempts to integrate the media's role in this rational process of decision-making as inside and outside players. Contrary to Allison's model, which conceptualises the foreign policy process progressing inside of the policy environment while everything else is outside, O'Heffernan attempts to locate the media both inside and outside this environment (1991: 97). If the rational choice approach and Allison's model focus on the political process as an interaction between social and political institutions and these institutions determine the behaviour of the political actors, then seeing the media as part of this institutional environment will ultimately entail a certain degree of influence on the production of political outcomes.

The essence of O'Heffernan's approach lies mainly in the media's incentives and self-interests that drive their action, particularly as outside players. It is an approach that implies a more strategic role of the media in the foreign policy process and a potential influence on national behaviour. As a model it is quite consistent and it brings in the media's own incentives and motivations, as driving forces for their action. The objective of the present paper is to illustrate this strategic nature of the media's role in foreign policy interactions, focusing particularly on the degree of uncertainty they can cause and the impact this can have on the actors' preferences and payoffs.

A common question is whether rational choice theory can be realistic. To adequately answer this, is not an easy task. However, there are certain features in the interaction between media and politicians that render a rational choice approach suitable for the pursuit of a more rigorous theoretical model of this relationship. In most cases the incentives, the interests and the payoffs of the two parties are known to the observer and/or the analyst; and this constitutes crucial information that facilitates the approximation of the calculations required by rational choice (Tsebelis, 1990: 33). One of the advantages of rational choice as a theoretical basis is the focus on the socio-political constraints imposed on actors, which affect the outcomes and payoffs of their decisions. Considering political decision-making as the resultant of the interaction of the actor with such external factors, encourages the approach of each decision not as a mistake but as a deliberate choice (Tsebelis, 1990:39-40). I particularly focus on the media

being among those externalities that influence decision-making and how they assist in justifying why certain decisions are made.

This study will attempt to create the relevant theoretical framework first by modelling the political interaction between Greece and Turkey on the basis of Tsebelis' 'nested game'. The main idea of the game is to organise the action and the decisions made by the involved participants in multiple arenas. That is to say, each decision the two involved governments make is then evaluated not just in terms of its effects on one arena, i.e. the main crisis between Greece and Turkey, but considering the effects it has on other background arenas too. Similarly, the same decision is also an outcome of the effect of actors from the background arenas. There are two key ideas in this approach. Firstly, approaching a Greek – Turkish interaction as a game in multiple arenas, will automatically bring in external forces that, although they operate outside the main arena of the Greek- Turkish interaction, they are likely to influence the decision-making process and be influenced by it as well. This approach creates scope for the media to be located in an arena outside the main interaction and be studied as an externality, which however is likely to influence the decision-making process. The second point is what Tsebelis calls, the logic of the apparently suboptimal choice (1990: 5). The essence of this concept lies in providing a tool for the explanation and justification of what might appear as irrational political decisions. Taking into account that the decision-making process takes place not in isolation but within an area of interrelated arenas and actors, a certain decision that appears as suboptimal, is possible to justify when the external actors and influences from outside arenas are taken into account.

### **C. THE CASE STUDY**

In order to obtain a less abstract and more realistic view of the theoretical model, a recent territorial crisis between Greece and Turkey is employed as a case study.

In January 1996 Greece and Turkey were involved in an unexpected crisis over the sovereignty of a small islet - called Imia-Kardak - located between the two countries. A flag war was initiated when citizens on both sides were involved in a successive placement of their national flags on the islet. The seemingly trivial 'flag war' gave place to a serious conflict with the official demand made by the Turkish government that the Greek flag was lowered. The Turkish Prime Minister Tansou Ciller claimed sovereignty over the islet and invited Athens to a negotiation round, in order to resolve the issue.

For technical reasons, the study focuses precisely on a move/decision made by the Greek government. As an initial response, the Greek side chose to ignore the issue altogether; and to maintain its long-term policy, which was to refrain from any negotiations with Turkey, especially over such a trivial issue. It was only two

days after the initiation of this formal dialogue that the Greek government unjustifiably mobilised its forces. That was a move that escalated the tension and brought the two countries on the verge of war in the Aegean.

The decision was widely received in Greece as a spasmodic and mistaken move. My suggestion is that a rational approach of the crisis itself and the media coverage it attracted can shed light on what mobilised this decision, why it could be deduced as a deliberate option rather than just a mistake and what the role of the media was.

### **The Greek – Turkish game**

The relationship between Greece and Turkey has developed through a series of conflicts over issues including Cyprus, the Aegean Sea, airspace and minority rights. This long-term tension has been a main feature of the policy agenda in both countries and is being treated with significant caution. The two countries have become traditional enemies, and this is an element that signifies the 'familiarity' the two actors have developed in terms of each other's strategic behaviour. It also facilitates the analysis of the actors' decisions making their calculations more predictable.

The territorial rights and the status quo in the Aegean has been a common reason for tension and the 1996 Imia- Kardak crisis represents one of the most recent related incidents. Being more powerful on military terms, Turkey is the side that challenges the status quo to a large extent. Among some of the country's traditional tactics is to create *fait accompli* on a diplomatic basis. It is however described as a rational actor that would not proceed with an attack unless certain that the long term diplomatic and economic payoff will be greater than the cost. (Ifestos & Platias, 1992:186). Turkey sought to change the status quo in the crisis that this paper examines, as well. This would actually place Greece in the position of the defending player. However, which side challenges the status quo is not always as straightforward; and is also one of the reasons why the two countries occasionally have found themselves in conflict. As Jervis explains 'war and conflicts are more likely when both sides believe they are defending the status quo' (Jervis, 1992).

In this study, the focal point is the decision made by the Greek government to escalate the tension and the degree or rationality it embodied. The objective is to present and analyse the crisis as a nested game, or else a game in multiple arenas with the local media involved as well. For this purpose, I will start the analysis with the interaction between Greece and Turkey, which I call Arena 1. The interaction is depicted in the decision tree as shown in Figure 1.