

## Fight-or-Flight or Tend-and-Befriend? Stress and the Political Psychology of Crisis Diplomacy

*Marcus Holmes*

Assistant Professor of Government, The College of William & Mary,  
Williamsburg, VA 23185, United States  
*mholmes@wm.edu*

### Crisis Diplomacy and Stress

As the practice of diplomacy is increasingly conducted under conditions of permanent crisis, understanding the psychological and emotional effects of crisis itself becomes important to conceptualizing the changing nature of diplomatic interactions. Diplomacy is particularly affected by crisis because of crises' effects on diplomacy practitioners, the individuals involved. As Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen put it, '[i]ndividuals are critically important during times of crisis', and the environmental factors affecting individuals in times of crisis, such as time and information constraints, ambiguity and risk have identifiable, and predictable, effects on individuals.<sup>1</sup> One environmental factor in particular, stress, which has long been believed to be harmful for decision-making and detrimental to pro-social behaviours, has witnessed renewed interest from psychologists and neuroscientists. Recent studies indicate a more complex relationship between stress and social outcomes, including *pro-social* behaviours such as trust-building, friendship creation and understanding intentions. This short contribution argues that stress has divergent effects in crisis diplomacy. High levels of stress often result in sub-optimal decisions, but may also increase the likelihood of building trust and understanding intentions. Consequently, the state of permanent crisis may offer new opportunities for leadership, particularly in the exercise of personal diplomacy.

Early research on crisis diplomacy identified stress as a 'central problem' in foreign policy, representing 'the most potent source of disastrous outcomes'.<sup>2</sup> Crisis-induced stress, which is defined as a physiological response to stimuli that disturbs homeostasis and induces coping mechanisms, led to predictable

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1 Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen Jr., *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision-making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 19.

2 James L. Richardson, *Crisis Diplomacy: The Great Powers since the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 16.

problems of misperception, information-processing, evaluation of alternatives, misunderstanding of the adversary's position and intentions, and panicked decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, increasing stress was understood to increase aggression, fuelling the fight aspect of the 'fight-or-flight' response.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, more complex systems of responses have emerged. Jonathan and Stanley Renshon find stress to be 'one of the most important elements of political decision-making', and when policy-makers find themselves in crisis situations, 'poor decision processes' may follow.<sup>5</sup> They note, however, that stress can also aid decision-making by focusing attention and forcing policy-makers to be circumspect in analysing alternatives.<sup>6</sup> As Daryl Press argues, 'in high-stakes military crises, people move beyond the quick-and-dirty heuristics that serve them so well in mundane matters; they model the current situation much more carefully'.<sup>7</sup> Rose McDermott has taken this further, noting that stress needs to be delineated into acute or chronic forms, with acute often eliciting beneficial hormonal reactions, while chronic may decrease decision-making performance.<sup>8</sup> This is a crucial distinction that is often lost in discussions of international crises. If the crisis is a single-play event, we should expect the development of acute stress; if the crisis is perpetual, however, chronic stress may be more likely to develop.

### Trust and Empathy

While existing approaches to stress in international relations (IR) have tended to focus on the information-processing aspects of stress from a monadic

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3 Ole R. Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972), pp. 28-29; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); and Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decision-making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980).

4 Thomas C. Wiegale, 'Decision-making in an International Crisis: Some Biological Factors', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1973.

5 Jonathan Renshon and Stanley A. Renshon, 'The Theory and Practice of Foreign Policy Decision-making', *Political Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2008, p. 512.

6 Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision-making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1977).

7 Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 6.

8 Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004).