

Review 4

Title: The Polythink Syndrome, U.S. Foreign Policy Decisions on 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and ISIS. By Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne (2016). 190 p. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. ISBN: 978-0-8047-9515-9

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The Polythink Syndrome poses to us the question of how it is possible that smart and experienced decision makers can make unwise decisions. It is clearly a must-read because it can give us some insights into the decision-making processes of politics and business. Next to the theory of the Polythink Syndrome, the book offers some concrete recommendations and tools one could use for an optimization of the group process.

Chapter one of the book states that decision-making is not purely rational by nature. To understand the nature of decision-making it is therefore not enough to understand the realist point of view, but also the psychology of the human brain. The starting point of this understanding is the system of the Polythink group dynamic. In this phenomenon, there is a deep disagreement between members of the group about the decisions that need to be taken. Because of these disagreements, the members will not accept the viewpoint of others, and as a result, they will not consider the different viewpoints that exist within the group and they will not benefit from them. As a following of the groupthink idea by Janis, the authors confront us with a new point of view of foreign policy decision-making. They do not consider the concept of Groupthink as the opposite of the Polythink concept. According to them, both can be placed on the other side of a continuum. The chapter gives an overview of symptoms of Polythink, by which people can reflect on their own decision-making in order to check if they are making good decisions. The authors also discuss the causes of polythink and they end their chapter by summarizing the next chapters.

Chapter two goes deeper into the symptoms, causes and consequences of Polythink. The authors explain the term Polythink which is useful for a better understanding of the concept. Poly comes from many, so it means literally, many ways of thinking. They give eight symptoms of Polythink, so that you are able to tell if the group you are in has to be careful about suffering from the Polythink syndrome. The authors explain all of the eight symptoms briefly. Although there is not much space devoted to the explanation, it is very clear and understandable.

Here the authors also link the symptoms of Polythink to those of Groupthink by saying that the last two symptoms i.e. limited review of policy options and no room for appraisal of previously rejected policy options are also symptoms of Groupthink. Further

than just elaborating the eight symptoms of Polythink, Mintz and Wayne also try to explain Polythink. According to the authors, there are five main reasons to explain Polythink. The first one is The Institutional "Turf Wars" explanation. This means that each member of the group will represent the own organization or bureaucracy, and therefore will make the best decision for the own interests. A second way to enable Polythinking is by the political explanation. Because of politics, it is easier for an authoritarian regime to avoid Polythink: this regime does not have to take the opinions of citizens into account. For a democracy, it is much harder to avoid Polythink, because parties represent the people's interest, as well as the national interest. A third explanation of Polythink is a normative one. Members of a group do not necessarily have the same beliefs, people can be either dovish or hawkish. The personal background of all the people in the same group can be different, this leads to different opinions about various things. The fourth explanation is the expert-novice explanation. Novice and experts have different knowledge-based strategies. While novices focus on confirming information and strategies, experts focus on disconfirming evidence and information. The explanation given for Polythink is the distinction between leader and follower. Leaders tend to be reluctant to share information with other group members.

There are also subgroups to be distinguished in the Polythink syndrome. This means that there could be groups that are more to the Left on the continuum (described in chapter one), which means that they are present there or in the middle (Con-Div) whereas the large group is still Polythink. This makes it difficult to obtain a general conclusion within the large group. In this book, the overall idea about Polythink is a negative. However, in chapter two this changes. According to the authors, it is also possible to change the destructive Polythink into a productive Polythink. In this process, group leaders are of the biggest importance. If group leaders are able to positively transform the various opinions into a decision, Polythink can be beneficial. This means that a leader has to take into account all the points of view within a group and then come to one conclusion. An example of productive Polythink is the decision to Surge the U.S. forces in Iraq. Polythink can help to prevent biases. Several biases, as for example wishful thinking, are given by the authors to explain in which way Polythink can help to prevent them. This shows that Polythink, if well used, can have several advantages. The problem with the Polythink syndrome would seem the unproductive nature of it. But also for this problem the authors have found an overview of how to worsen or ease Polythink. They give us some concrete tools, for example, which type of leadership we should adopt. The openness of a leader is very important for productive Polythink. Chapter two concludes by comparing Groupthink and Polythink; it gives an overview of the symptoms, the causes, the consequences and the prevention. By doing this, the authors make the differences between Polythink and Groupthink very clear and visual. This results in a good understanding of the concepts and their functioning within groups.

Chapter three is a more a practical chapter. The chapter is an application of the Polythink syndrome to the 9/11 attacks of 2001 and on Pearl Harbor (1941). Mintz and Wayne state that the attacks, although often compared in the media, are not at all the same. Pearl Harbor was in large part caused by Groupthink. There was a belief that such attacks could not happen to the U.S. Thanks to the stereotypes that existed of the Japanese, they were seen as inferior to the Americans. The groups that existed, interlocking policy groups

were only used to reinforce the perspectives of other groups. There was no critical thinking within the groups. The 9/11 attacks are seen by the authors as very different from the point of decision making. The officials that had to protect the homeland had very differing opinions. There was not enough communication between them, which caused a system where almost no information was shared. There were frequent institutional disagreements and there was no overall idea within the group. The authors then conclude that this is not an example of groupthink, but a clear case of Polythink. The chapter goes further on by explaining why the 9/11 attacks, are also an example of Polythink. However, the authors do not say that it is a perfect illustration of Polythink, because according to the authors every case has some elements that are not entirely Polythink.

The 9/11 attacks are however a very good example of the theory explained in chapter one and two. The starting point of the explanation is the 9/11 commission report made in 2004 that stated that the attacks were made possible because of the communication failures between different parts of the government and security agencies. The authors state that the 9/11 attacks have a lot of symptoms that are unique to the Polythink syndrome. First of all, there were large disagreements between the most important parts of the advisory group. Secondly, there were also leaks and the fear of leaks. The information could not be given to others, because of a fear that the information would be leaked. A third reason for Polythink was the confusion and a lack of communication. There was a lot of information but the various agencies could not share it. Furthermore, there was a lot of intragroup competition, and information was not shared. Fourth there was also a limited review of policy alternatives, objectives, risks, and contingencies. The fifth reason for the Polythink syndrome was the failure to reappraise previously rejected alternatives. Because it is so hard to make a decision, decisions did not get revised afterwards even if they were not very good. The sixth reason for the Polythink syndrome were the framing effects and the selective use of information. The last two symptoms are the lowest-common-denominator decisions and decision paralysis. The chapter concludes by saying that the 9/11 attacks had some Groupthink features, for example, the high level from external threats and the illusion that they would not attack the U.S. Why this is a good example was explained previously by the symptoms. However, there were also institutional limitations. There were a lot of different security institutions, which approached the threats in a different way. This was one of the most obvious facilitators of Polythink. The political concerns were very high at 9/11, security decisions are most of the time not popular with the electorate. Next to political concerns, there were also normative differences, the national behavior is according to the authors a sum of beliefs of actors, which can differ from each other. The experts and novices had a different way of decision-making. Military personnel was against a military action while the civilian advisors were pro a military action. The chapter concludes by saying it was not solely due to Polythink that 9/11 could happen but it did play a key role.

Chapter four, five and six also give an example of cases where Polythink syndrome was present. Chapter four describes the Polythink syndrome in the Afghanistan war, namely the decision to enter the war under Bush and to leave the war under Obama. The authors state that the decision to enter the war was made by groupthink and the decision to leave was made because of Polythink. In the Bush administration, everyone agreed on the decision to enter the Afghanistan war. This was reinforced by the success at the be-

ginning of the war. In response to the Bush administration that was characterized by groupthink, the Obama administration deliberated a long time before taking any actions. We can see that in the decision of the Obama administration has nearly all the eight aspects of Polythink that were mentioned above. The causes of Polythink given in chapter two were all present. There were difficulties between the different institutions, it was hard to get in contact with the president because of several gatekeepers. The president himself, however, was constantly balancing his actions on foreign policy with his political image, which made it hard to make decisions. These decisions were made in a group of advisors who all had different world views, and were also divided on which strategy to maintain. Political advisors were skeptical about more troops on the fields while military advisors recommended more troops. This competition in the administration was enabled by Obama, thinking that this would lead to better decision-making, but actually, sometimes this made it even harder for Obama to manage the group. The authors have used several notes from people in the Obama administration to write the chapter, and state that although there was a Polythink syndrome in the first term of Obama, he tried to avoid and learn from this in his second term.

Chapter five covers the decision making in the Iraq war. Chapter five is one of the most interesting chapters in the book. It speaks about the war in Iraq, and how the entrance, the surge and the withdrawal of the war were all characterized by different group aspects. This is very interesting to see how the continuum shown in chapter one by the authors works in practice. It does not have to be a fixed position on the scale but the position can change during times. The authors see that over time from entrance to surge to eventually the withdrawal, the decision-making went from groupthink to the polythink side of the continuum. The first two (entrance and surge) are only discussed briefly in the chapter. The withdrawal is discussed in greater detail. All the symptoms and the causes of the polythink syndrome are being discussed one for one.

Chapter six deals with Polythink in the Iranian nuclear dispute. This chapter differs from other chapters in the sense that the other chapters mainly speak about war. Chapter six speaks about diplomacy, negotiations and strategy used during the Iranian nuclear dispute. According to the authors, although Obama had promised to restart the relations with Iran, they quickly transformed this promise into sanctions towards Iran. This process was characterized by Polythink. The chapter starts by giving an overview of the situation in Iran. The authors say that Polythink was already present since 1979 between Iran and the U.S. This background information is essential to understand the next part of the chapter. The Obama administration wanted to reopen a diplomatic relation with Iran, but because of the way the administration worked, it led to a Polythink system where allot different voices were heard. Eventually, the decision that was made by the U.S. to deal with Iran was characterized by Polythink. There was not enough solidarity within the administration which led to low communication flows and a lot of confusion. Leaks caused a panic within the administration, for example, the leak that Iran was capable of making an atomic bomb. There were no alternatives in case the diplomatic way would fail, and if there were alternatives they were mostly rejected and never reappraised. The decision that was finally made was chosen because it had the lowest common denominator. A key player in the decision of Iran was the UN Security Council. It was hard to make decisions because the key players within the council (U.S., France, UK, Russia and China) had different

views on how to handle the problems. These contrasts are well described by the authors at the end of chapter six. After looking at the American point of view the symptoms of Polythink in the Israeli decision on Iran are also discussed in short.

Chapter seven addresses some recent challenges. It shows the importance of the concept of Polythink for the U.S. and UN decision-making process but also makes emphasizes the importance of the concept of groupthink. The chapter speaks about the Syria debate, ISIS, the Israeli peace negotiations. The first section dealing with the sanctions by the UN against Syria is very well written with a good structure. According to the authors, the Israeli peace negotiations were also marked by Polythink. Both in the Israeli government as in the Palestinian factions Polythink was present, and this caused the collapse of the negotiations. The third case studied in this chapter is the decision to attack ISIS. The strategy that the government would take against ISIS was not the problem it was the way in which they would achieve these goals that were Polythink in nature.

Chapter eight, the last chapter of the book, shows that Polythink is not just applicable to politics and demonstrates how we can make better group decision-making. The chapter gives us hints of how to transform this Polythink situation into a beneficial one. According to the authors, good decisions can also be made within Polythink. First of all, it reduces some biases discussed in chapter two and secondly the manager of the group has to transform the Polythink into a productive group. The authors give five remedies to Polythink that can help leaders of the group to achieve better decision-making. These five remedies are explained in detail in the next sections.

At the end of the book, the authors give the notes from page 165 until page 174. The references go from page 175 until page 186. And the book closes with the index pages from page 187 to page 190.

Overall the book is extremely valuable because it does not only give new insights on the topic but also makes them clear by giving a lot of examples. This makes it easy and interesting to read.