

Self-deception may seed 'hubris balancing': Study examines irrational actions leading to invasion of Ukraine

November 13 2023



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A new study suggests that self-deception is the key to understanding irrational actions of national leaders in war, as exemplified by Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Strategy underlies the affairs of national leaders, including how they view and interact with other states—but what if such strategy is borne of self-deception? That's the thrust of a novel international relations theory that Ryuta Ito of Hiroshima University has now expanded upon, providing psychological rationalization to explain the irrational acts of national leaders at war.

Ito published his reasoning in the journal [*International Affairs*](#).

"Why did Vladimir Putin decide to invade Ukraine in 2022?" asked Ito, assistant professor in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Hiroshima University. "Some international relations scholars regard it as a preventive war with a strategic rationale in response to NATO's eastward expansion. However, as many other scholars suggest, Putin's decision-making is riddled with various irrationalities, which can be better framed as overbalancing and the classical realist concept of 'hubris'—or overconfidence."

In international relations theory, Ito said, Putin's invasion of Ukraine could be regarded as balancing if the target had aggressive intentions. Instead, the invasion is an example of overbalancing: Ukraine and the West aimed to strengthen defensive positions, but Putin deceived himself into believing the moves were hostile threats to Russia, triggering an "unnecessarily costly and dangerous arms spiral" between Russia and others.

"Introducing self-deception into international relations is essential, because self-deception can explain various important cases of overbalancing within a single conceptual framework," Ito said, noting that other cases include the Hitler's atrocities and the United States' failures with regard to the Vietnam War.

Sir Lawrence Freedman, Professor Emeritus of War Studies at King's

College, London, and a historian and expert in international affairs and foreign policy, first proposed the idea that Putin's self-deception led to his overconfidence. This understanding introduced the evolutionary psychology concept of self-deception into classical realism, the [international relations](#) theory that argues individual states are inherently human-based and, as such, act in their own self-interests.

But, if states act in [self-interest](#) and [self-preservation](#), Ito asked, why do leaders sometimes act in ways that put the state at risk—such as Putin launching an attack against Ukraine? In this study, Ito used this example as a "plausibility probe" to empirically demonstrate that hubris can lead to overbalancing.

"Despite its importance, realists have been unable to theorize hubris on robust foundations because they ignore scientific research on self-deception," Ito said. "In other words, they have not scientifically explained what hubris is and why or how hubris causes overbalancing. This article aims to fill the gaps by constructing a novel balancing concept, namely 'hubris balancing'—irrationally aggressive balancing that is a form of overbalancing, in that it exceeds what is achievable in practice—through introducing self-deception into classical realism."

Self-deception is the psychological mechanism of denying the significance, relevance or importance of opposing evidence and logical arguments, Ito explained. Humans evolutionarily used self-deception to underestimate vulnerability to various risks while overestimating their power over certain events. Such over- and underestimations extend to the importance of groups they belong to and to the abilities of others, respectively.

"In politics, such tribalistic aspects of self-deception often make leaders incite exclusive nationalism to overcome mobilization hurdles," Ito said. "The higher the degree of self-deception, the more exclusionary

nationalism becomes: the stronger the self-deception, the greater the orientation towards ethnic nationalism over civic nationalism."

According to Ito, self-deception becomes a rhetorical tool for political persuasion.

"If leaders can deceive themselves into believing that they are telling the truth, they can effectively persuade others, including in-group and out-group members," Ito said. "More specifically, driven by overconfidence and anger against hostile ideology, leaders often engage in overbalancing by driving exclusive nationalism."

Ito noted that Putin's military invasion is less about rational calculations concerning national interests and more about patriotic impulses to restore Russian historical unity.

"We can infer that rather than a cold geopolitical calculus, as structural realism posits, it was an exclusive nationalism derived from self-deception that was the [driving force](#) behind Putin's war on Ukraine," Ito said.

"The key here is the civic and ethnic divide of nationalism... In the decade leading to the war against Ukraine in March 2022, Putin's self-deception was strengthened to embrace more exclusive nationalism. Thus, the timing of the war is not necessarily a coincidence but more likely the result of the growing manifestation of Putin's self-deception, producing aggressive nationalism."

Next, Ito said he plans to examine other cases typical of hubris balancing, such as Lyndon B. Johnson's administration involvement in the Vietnam War.

"Putin and Johnson are just two of many examples available: self-

deception plays a pivotal role in [international affairs](#), particularly in conflict situations, and is crucial to solving the puzzle of overbalancing," Ito said. Based on the latest psychological findings, this article argues that self-deception is the single essential factor—the overarching cause of overconfidence, anger, and exclusive [nationalism](#)—in explaining deviations from rational balancing behaviors."

More information: Ryuta Ito, Hubris balancing: classical realism, self-deception and Putin's war against Ukraine, *International Affairs* (2023). DOI: [10.1093/ia/iad180](https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad180)

Provided by Hiroshima University

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