

## АКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

UDC 327

### The aging leader: Approaching age as a factor in international relations

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This article goes against the grain of traditional approaches in international relations by claiming that a leader's biological age is a factor in this individual's execution of foreign policy. The traditional logic of political science that has generally been diminishing the impact of a leader's individual features on policy for the sake of institutional procedures needs to be reassessed. A common assumption is that an aging king or president, especially those entering the eighth or ninth decade of their lives, are likely to make prudent, balanced, and wise political decisions due to their rich experience. However, this notion lacks sufficient empirical support from history. The physical "wear and tear" of the aging leader, along with their declining psychological functions, are likely to negatively impact their foreign-policy decisions that may fall under the influence of the leader's information overload, cognitive narcissism, profound stubbornness, as well as their irrational sense of urgency, and their tendency to overcompensate. In democracies, the political tenure of top politicians is limited by constitutional terms or scheduled elections. In authoritarian systems, only the top figure's death or incapacitation become actual "schedulers" of their political tenure. Although a person's advanced age should not disqualify him or her from public office, without institutional checks on the leader's judgements and behavior as well as the critical power of public opinion and the press, the aging authoritarian leader can become unpredictably risky.

*Keywords:* aging leader, authoritarian leader, information overload, political hoarding, cognitive narcissism.

In August 1984, during a routine soundcheck before delivering a radio address, the 73-year-old President Ronald Reagan dropped a joke-bomb: "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We

begin bombing in five minutes” [1]. This unexpected prank did not sit well with the media and the political opposition in Washington. Former Senator and Vice President Walter Mondale, a Democrat, who ran for presidency against Reagan that fall, immediately called his Republican opponent’s behavior irresponsible. Even some Reagan supporters felt uneasy about the apparently bad joke. Across the ocean, the Soviet leaders were predictably furious. An official condemnation was followed by direct warnings conveyed through the government media about the grave danger of re-electing an elderly warmonger to the White House. Four years after this awkward incident, an aging “dinosaur”, as Soviet leader Gorbachev had called Reagan once in an interview, was witnessing a peaceful implosion of the global rivalry and the ending of the Cold War, for which Reagan’s supporters gave him an unequivocal credit. But which Reagan’s side — an aging, “has-been” old man or a wise elderly statesman — was the most important figure in ending the Cold War? And has Reagan’s advanced age had anything to do at all with his important political decisions, especially his foreign policy?

Political scientists and experts in international relations have consistently and for many years downplayed the importance of individual factors in international politics. Several seemingly compelling arguments have been offered.

First, as far as these arguments go, experts studying political science and international relations focus on institutions and institutional decision-making and, therefore, any individual factors, such as an emotional state of the leader, should be considered as “noise” that can be taken into consideration but only as a minor distraction from the analysis of institutional politics and diplomacy [2].

Second, if we assume that psychological factors should play a role in foreign-policy decisions, such factors are few and far between. They can be studied in a limited way to better understand the process of decision making made by individuals and groups. For example, the classical studies of *groupthink* and mistakes related to the decisions of the President Kennedy’s administration during the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1962 served as an example of such studies. Discussions of this case are published and reviewed in most textbooks on international relations published in the United States and the United Kingdom [3].

Third, the most important decisions in foreign policy usually are a result of a multi-layered deliberations. Most decisions take place on several institutional levels, which allows the governments to reduce the impact of irrational decision-making on policy. Foreign policy is supposed to be guided by rational decisions. Any political system, in theory, is supposed to protect itself from irrational political decisions by creating a system of inner checks and balances against capricious decisions of some political leaders.

These assumptions have been contested by several constructivists studying foreign policy, many behavioral economists, as well as political psychologists. Still, most innovative arguments about psychological factors affecting foreign policy decision-making process have been weakened and marginalized by the supporters of more “traditional” approaches to international relations. This paper attempts to go against the grain of traditional approaches by introducing the issue of the leader’s biological age as a factor in a state’s foreign policy. There is a common assumption that aging kings and emirs, presidents, or prime ministers — especially those who are in their seventies or eighties—are likely to make more prudent and intelligent political decisions compared to their younger counterparts. The logic behind this assumption is simple: throughout their careers, political leaders accumulate experience and

wisdom that guides them during the latest stage of their lives in politics and government. But what if this assumption is wrong? What if older leaders are less efficient and less reasonable, but more forgetful, detached, demonstrative, indifferent, stubborn, unpredictable, or even dangerous in their actions than the younger ones?

## The age factor

Across countries and historic periods, the final word in most important political decisions belong to individuals, not to faceless institutions. It is a leader or a designated person who puts their final seal of approval on important decisions, some of which can change history. Although many assume, as it has been already stated, that the mind of a political leader should function in a rational, logical, and comprehensive matter, there is no escape from the stubborn evidence that practically all human functions naturally decline with physical age. Physical aging is akin wear and tear: the skin becomes less elastic, the hair loses its pigmentation, the muscles begin to atrophy, the bones become more brittle, and the efficiency of the cardiovascular system declines. There is an interesting trend in business: Most CEOs of biggest companies in the West tend to retire around the age of 65. This is hardly a capricious corporate custom. Any normal aging process, according to a leading world scholar on aging Warner Schaie, means a host of predictable psychological changes: the decrease of the speed of information-processing, the reduction of working memory capacity, the decline in verbal learning, and the decreased ability to ignore irrelevant information [4]. These and any other functions decline regardless of the person's party affiliation, ideology, or nationality. These declining tendencies tend to be slow in most adults but become increasingly impactful especially during the last two decades of a person's life.

Aging also means a higher probability of illness affecting thinking. Brain maladies such as cerebral degenerative disease or stroke are unusual among the young: they are more common in people over 70. A series of strokes from which the United States' President Wilson's suffered by the end of his presidency, have probably affected his inability to persuade the US Senate to support the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. As a result, the United States did not join the League of Nations. The impact of early Alzheimer's dementia on U.S. President's Reagan's decisions in the end of his tenure has been already discussed in many sources [5]. The Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had serious cognitive problems, such as memory lapses and inability to focus, due to his addiction to sleep medication and excessive alcohol consumption — the problems that all have dangerously exacerbated by his advanced age [6]. President's Joe Biden cognitive difficulties have been linked to dementia, which is a significant decline in cognitive and executive functions due to irreversible changes of the aging brain. These and similar cases stand out because of the apparent (or alleged) underlying brain pathology or identified medical conditions. But what can we say about the effects of normal aging on the leader's ability to make sound decisions, especially in foreign policy?

## Overcompensating

Although observers usually notice many psychological signs of an individual's declining, the aging individual tends to ignore, reject, and even challenge the signs of their aging. Big plans, packed working schedules, and long work hours are still common for

many people entering their seventies and eighties — as if they were to prove that they are irreplaceable. Of course, we know that individuals of the advanced age can accomplish outstanding things. Wolfgang Goethe, the great German poet, completed his historic masterpiece *Faust* when he was 80. Lamarck finished his great zoological book, *The Natural History of Invertebrates*, at 78. The “big three” leaders, Churchill, FDR, and Stalin collectively had 200 years behind them when, in 1945, they together were making the most pivotal decisions about the world’s future. Mother Teresa did not slow down her relentless charitable work before she died at 87. Nancy Pelosi managed the House of Representatives in the United States when she was in her 80s. President Jimmy Carter had a very active and productive post-presidential career well into his nineties. Many most successful private investors no longer run their companies but continue their productive work long after 70. Warren Buffet (born in 1930), Ray Dalio (born in 1949), or Stephen Schwarzman (born in 1947) are easy examples of the most successful and wealthiest investors that come to mind. A person’s advancing age during the metaphorical autumn can sure be a period of great accomplishments.

### The liabilities

However, there is a tradeoff: an aging leader carries a load of unavoidable inner liabilities as a potential for serious strategic errors. This is true that small verbal blunders or even policy missteps of a president or a foreign minister can be corrected by their numerous and younger staffers. Dozing in public (former Zimbabwe’s leader Robert Mugabe had a few such incidents when he was in his nineties) can still take place but it is not that common [7]. Staffers usually protect their aging leaders from being exposed to the public to avoid such embarrassing moments. Yet deficiencies of strategic judgement and tactical decision-making due to aging can be more fundamental and less manageable.

Consider the leaders’ ability to process critical information. Unfortunately, despite all the energy and enthusiasm, an elderly leader tends to gradually lose his or her critical sense of reality and analytical self-assessment. Harold Pollack from the University of Chicago studied this tendency in particularly driven people, like most career politicians are. They, during the process of aging, are increasingly unable to be self-critical and often fail to detect the decline in their cognitive abilities to make good decisions. Their advisers often do not want or simply are barred by the inner circle to tell their bosses the unpleasant truths about the mistakes or capricious decisions, they, the leaders, commit. By withholding their criticisms, most staffers and associates effectively reinforce the aging leader’s uncritical and often wrong judgements about self, their policies, their country’s strategies, and the world in general. The *spiral of silence*, a phenomenon established in communication studies and social psychology means that many unpopular or critical opinions within a group gradually diminish if most members deem such opinions unacceptable or incompatible with the leader’s views [8]. For example, if a country’s leader is convinced that his country is constantly surrounded by foreign enemies, as the three generations of North Korean leaders maintained since the 1940s, then their inner circles, expectedly, silence any view that goes against with this assumption [9].

Throughout history, the expectation that aging as a process was associated with maturity and good judgement. Ancient Romans, according to the historian Martijn Icks, usually preferred an older, seasoned emperor to younger ones. Romans tended to associate a

person's old age with wisdom and dignity, as opposed to the rashness of youth. Emperor Vespasian, according to Icks, deliberately emphasized his mature age in his sculptures to distance himself from Nero, his youthful predecessor. The respect attributed to the leader's many years of life and thus his expected wisdom was common in other historic periods [10]. Yet contemporary research establishes that the advancing age, unfortunately, highlights or even crystalizes the individual's psychological weaknesses and liabilities that emerge during the person's earlier life periods. In short, a person's minor *pet peeves* at 20 easily become his or her major character flaws after 65. A handful of clay becomes a chunk of granite. A person with the propensity for inflexibility at 30 becomes extremely stubborn at 75. A mild attention problem in a 20-year-old aspiring politician transforms into a profound attention deficit in this person becoming president fifty years later [4].

An aging leader in a high office is a problem as delicate and humbling as it is worrying for most unbiased witnesses. One of the prominent features associated with aging is the leader's increasing suspiciousness. Vamik Volkan [11], the prominent biographer of Ataturk writes that the Turkish leader was becoming unusually irritable and unreasonably mistrustful during the late stage of his life, although his illness could have contributed to his psychological problems. Excessive suspiciousness and mistrust of people became Mao Zedong's constant psychological features during his last years as the ruler of China, according to his personal doctor [12]. Stalin in the Soviet Union, as historians report, grew increasingly paranoid during his last three years of life, at the early stages of the Cold War, especially after the Soviets built a nuclear bomb [13]. Robert Mugabe's conspiratorial fanaticism, as his biographers notice, was also growing with age. Some aging world leaders demanded extraordinary and unprecedented measures of self-isolation during the COVID Pandemic in 2020–2022. This is not clear, of course, whether this behavior was caused by excessive cautiousness of these leaders due to their advanced age or whether this behavior was caused by excessive and unreasonable fear of death associated with aging.

## Stubbornness

Another problem of aging is increasing stubbornness. Not only does the leader refuse to perform a certain activity. He often claims about his unwillingness to do so. For example, Russian President Putin publicly boasted that he had no idea how to use a smartphone or the Internet. This episode could have been easily dismissed as a case of eccentricity having nothing to do with the Russian president's aging. And yet it could be quite symptomatic of the "crystallization of stubbornness", which can indicate age-related refusal to leave a person's psychological zone of comfort associated with the past. Not only does stubbornness manifest in the leader's reluctance to learn new gadgets, but also in their reluctance to "think outside the box" and consider new foreign-policy ideas or alternative plans, different from their current course of diplomacy rooted in some old principles formulated decades ago. Richard Lau and David Redlausk emphasized that an aging decision-maker typically uses less memory and less accurate memory [14]. But using less memory also means the leader's propensity to seek less information: they are very happy with the knowledge they already have.

Stubbornness also means dogmatism in political thinking: some political doctrines accepted early in their life become comfortably immovable. What was learned in the leader's youth becomes a pattern that requires no innovation, no critical thinking, and no

additional mental effort. An assumption that the aging leaders of China and Russia have been returning to more authoritarian methods of governance after toying with democracy early in this century, should probably makes sense for the specialists studying aging: securing own personal power today, among other reasons, often means cementing their autocratic mode of thinking and acting — the mode acquired during the early years of their careers in the government of their respected countries in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Rushing with time**

Another psychological problem of the aging leader is their shifting perception of time. Common sense suggests that the older individuals tend to see things in perspective. They, presumably, also prefer to slow down to avoid care-free rushing. Yet researchers argue that the leader's advancing age can, paradoxically, cultivate the deep sense of urgency. As a symbolic flight of the leader from aging, the leader can be attempting grandiose and historically significant projects. According to the political psychologist Jerrold Post [5], an increased and powerful impulse in older politicians to push forward and accomplish their big, long-treasured youth goals was commonplace in history. The scope and the essence of these projects are based on specific political and cultural factors of their time. Mao was 72 when he launched a violent Cultural Revolution in China. Reagan, also at 72, dared to push forward the ambitious, history-changing Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), nicknamed *Star Wars*. The political scientist Angus McIntyre argued that every mature politician after achieving plenty during their tenure, still cherishes a dream of a greater global recognition, like winning a Nobel Prize or something of that kind [15]. Another political scientist Graham Little [16] brings to attention the Dorian Grey syndrome modeled after Oscar Wilde's story of a handsome young man who much admires and envies the just-completed portrait of himself, and wishes that the painting would grow old, rather than he. Likewise, the maturing leader wishes to remain young by means of big social and political projects started during his or her tenure. The world around the leader keeps on changing, yet the "big boss" does not age in their own world, within their own perception. Here hides a problem. Most individuals have only few means to fulfill their prized projects when they get older, and for obvious reasons. A leader who is in power, on the contrary, has the needed resources of the government available to him or her, to achieve a cherished dream. In history, such resources were allocated by Egyptian Pharaohs as gigantic building blocks for pyramids. Sometimes, they are super-sonic missiles, immense spending projects, or military campaigns in foreign countries.

### **Narcissism and political hoarding**

More than a hundred years ago psychiatrists offered the term narcissism to describe the clinical symptoms of excessive vanity and self-admiration of an individual. A generally accepted concept today in modern psychology, narcissism does not necessarily stand for well-defined pathology [17]. Cognitive narcissism, for instance, can refer to a stable pattern of accepting only certain type of information, which confirms the individual's sense of own greatness and importance. The cognitive reality of any powerful political leader is that all the information potentially available to them is nevertheless carefully filtered and distorted by their protective staff. This is happening for several self-serving bureaucratic



and political reasons. Does not really matter, in the United States, Russia, or in China, the Commander-in-Chief is surrounded by close assistants and confidants, who would do everything in their power to protect their boss from challenging or unpleasant news related to the boss' policies. Those in inner circles know what their superior likes and dislikes. Functioning for many years in the same office, the leader is gradually being shaped into a cognitive narcissist: they prefer to receive information that confirms their judgement, affirms their greatness, absolute infallibility, and ultimate wisdom. Their inner circles know what their boss needs to see and what the boss likes to hear. Of course, younger leaders and politicians in democracies, who are restricted by term limits have fewer options to develop such forms of cognitive narcissism.

Cognitive narcissism also means that aging leader tend to increasingly seek out information that fits into their matrix of expectations. Like a stereotypical grandpa whose family shields him from any kind of bad news, in the same way, an aging national leader after years in office prefers to receive mostly positive feedback on everything. Behavioral economists describe the “sunk cost effect” [18] or the person's desire to value a product more after they invested time or energy in it. Cognitive narcissism feeds on this desire. Politicians who spent many years in the office have indeed invested a lot of time and energy in their programs so that they clearly identify the country with themselves. This is a form of political hoarding or assigning a special value to several objects with which they identify. Similarly, an aging political leader develops the belief that he and his country are inseparable: The land, the valleys, the policies, the laws, the agreements, the promises given — everything becomes personalized. President of Belarus Aleksander Lukashenko, who spent in the top office more than a quarter of a century — a record for any country in this century — was ranting and almost crying, in September of 2020, refusing to give away “his” country, as he called it, to the opposition. Political hoarding can also partially predict why Putin in Russia and Xi in China tend to identify themselves emotionally with their states. The infamous *L'état c'est moi* (“I am the state”) allegedly declared by Louis XIV makes sense in this context. He reigned for 72 years. In a similar fashion, when the nominee of the Democratic Party Joe Biden said in September 2020, “I am the Democratic Party,” was it a careless gaffe, which Biden was prone of committing, or was it a manifestation of political hoarding? Identifying oneself with their country can be an important mechanism motivating the leader's commitment to assertive foreign policy. But this process, on the other hand, can also become a dangerous precedent that can reduce the impact of reason and critical thinking, which are crucial in foreign policy.

## Information overload

The advancing age creates another unavoidable psychological obstacle for the leader: an information overload. After spending in the highest office ten, fifteen, or twenty years they almost foreseeably reach the point of emotional and informational exhaustion. They apparently have seen everything; they have met everyone; and they have heard from everyone. Like the members of the famous group *The Beatles* in 1969, who explained why they decided to break up, the person in power feels that there is nothing left to see or hear. The overload means that the leader is very unlikely to take an extra step, to spend an extra hour working, to lose an hour of sleep thinking about a particular policy or a diplomatic solution. By clinging to power, they gradually abandon the sense of mission. They tend

to avoid “unnecessary” press conferences, and their staff obliges them. The associates are also aware about the “do not disturb” invisible sign on the boss’ door. Loneliness becomes a reality. Stalin in the Soviet Union was increasingly and deliberately secluded after he was approaching 70 and after. Mao in China followed the same self-isolation pattern during his last years [12]. Cognitive narcissism, stubbornness, and information overload affect what the leaders see, what they want to see, and how they want to act in foreign policy.

### **It’s democracy, stupid**

The famous phrase coined by the U.S. political strategist James Carville, “It’s the economy, stupid”, became one of the most quoted and paraphrased in U.S. politics since the 1990s [19]. Among its many meanings one is especially important for our case: There is one single factor that affect the outcome of your efforts. “It’s democracy, stupid.” In democracies, presidents, and prime ministers undoubtedly know that their tenure is determined by constitutional term limits or the forthcoming elections. In authoritarian systems, the leader’s death or incapacitation are the only real “schedulers” of their political tenure. Observers notice that seasoned autocratic leaders tend to display an unusual pattern of jealousy rooted in the belief that the young and the more capable are waiting in the wings to take control after the leader is gone. Early in their careers, leaders like Mao in China or Khomeini in Iran did not hesitate to appeal to the young to pack the streets for the sake of strengthening their power. Yet with the years passing, Mao became a stern and forbidding disciplinarian who would not, at least in his angry outbursts, permit the young to triumph.

Growing bitter and jealous toward the young who disagree with the leader’s domestic and foreign policies is a common emotional feature of authoritarian leaders, especially those of age. Perhaps jealousy could have been a reason of why many aging autocratic leaders in the past did not select a clear successor. Neither Stalin or Mao, nor the Yugoslavian leader Tito, who stayed in power for more than 30 years, have clearly designated their political replacements. Maintaining the sense of uncertainty among the members of the inner circle about the “next one” serves two functions, one is an internal the other is an external: The old leader continues to believe in his own irreplaceability and maintains the sense of control over the government and the country. The psychologist Graham Little refers to “political jealousy” as the Don Juan pattern in autocratic leaders: they first embrace an heir apparent and provoke exaggerated expectations only to grow disillusioned with the pick and then cast off the individual to toy with the next candidacy [16]. Of course, in democratic systems, the top leader replacement is determined by law, like in Turkey, when following the death of Ataturk, the presidency was legally assumed by the prime minister. The aging and ill Ataturk hoped to keep his country democratic and predictable in its international behavior.

And this is one of the most important conclusions of this paper. There is a difference between a leader’s aging in democracy, on the one hand, and aging in an authoritarian system, on the other. An aging leader in the democratic society may not do anything he or she capriciously intends to take on. First, there are term limits in the office, which are respected. Second, there is the separation of powers. Even in such strong presidential republics like the United States or France, president’s power is heavily checked. The power of the independent press is hugely important in democracy too. Authoritarian systems are



different. There, the reality of individual decisions is often cannot be or may not be limited by institutional curbs. Of course, getting older is a vulnerability of any authoritarian leader: having no legal means to remove them from the office, people tend to revolt and there were numerous examples of this in history. People in authoritarian systems know that new elections, if they are held, are likely to be unfree or they will be rigged to clear the way to the next autocrat. In democracy, people have the chance to change their top political figures relatively frequently. As researchers Raul Berton and Sophie Panel acknowledge, strong institutions that are clearly conceived to control the leader reduce the impact of their personal characteristics on citizens [20]. In authoritarian systems a revolt often remains the only options for a decisive political change. History, again, knows too many examples of this kind.

More than two hundred and twenty years ago, a 65-years old George Washington declined a third term in office, favoring new political ideas and new solutions coming from a younger leader. Of course, a person's advanced age even under the presence of a few mild impairments or expected cognitive slowdowns should not disqualify them from public office. But without institutional checks on the leader's judgements and behavior, without the power of public opinion and the press, the aging authoritarian leader may often become unpredictably risky. Or predictably dangerous in the eyes of other countries.

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