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# The power of human beliefs over the state's behaviour in world politics: An in-depth and comparative case study

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**Yong-Soo Eun**

## Abstract

This article argues that IR researchers concerned with the causation of state behaviour need an approach that posits a human agent as an important analytical category in its own right, thereby treating the specific factor (i.e. political beliefs) of human agents as an end in itself. In order to provide a check on the plausibility of this cognitive-individualist thesis, the article undertakes an in-depth study of a case that constitutes a tough test for that thesis. In addition, a further testing of the argument for the power of human political beliefs over the state's external behaviour proceeds through a case comparison analysis.

## Keywords

foreign policy, political beliefs, political psychology

## Starting assumptions and central arguments

The real agents in states' external actions are not states but, rather, individual human beings acting on behalf of those states. These human agents – national leaders and key policymakers – cannot be approximated as rational actors who have the same behavioural motivation in international relations. Therefore, the analyst concerned with the causation of state behaviour needs to consider the actual individual policymakers involved, and examine how structural conditions are perceived by them and what their beliefs are that underlie these perceptions. Only then can we offer a more precise explanation of the state's external behaviour. Let me clarify these points further.

First, as Daniel Little (1991: 183) has noted, I hold that we ought to accept what he calls 'trivial' individualism, that only individuals 'act' in the literal meaning of the term. In Jerel Rosati's (2000: 47) words, 'to say "the United States intervened" is part of our everyday language. [Yet] in reality, countries do not act; people act.' If the state's actions operate through individuals, then the causal mechanisms we need to provide to build a valid explanation of actions must pass through specific

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individuals. To repeat, states do not have interests or preferences or beliefs; people do. One may conflate individual policy-makers' interests with states' ones with the notion of the 'national interest', yet this is a fundamental impediment to advancing our understanding of international relations because policy-makers define what is in the 'national interest' from their own perspectives. All leaders do not think about power in the same way and, furthermore, interests vary according to individual leaders, let alone according to states.

Second, building upon the insights of cognitive scholarship in the social sciences, I maintain that if individuals perceive and simplify the reality of the world based on their subjective beliefs, and that they tend to fit incoming information into their beliefs, we should expect nothing different from a nation's policymakers. Put otherwise, it is believed here that a national leader also takes a short cut based on the existing central beliefs held by him or her when it comes to information-processing and decision-making. This process of filtering is, to an extent, inescapable, especially by top policymakers responsible for making the state's policy. Without 'a mechanism to filter information', they would simply be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data confronting them (Larson, 1994: 18). Although decision-makers may believe that they are being rational and strictly impartial, in a very real way, their rationality is 'bounded' (Simon, 1985: 297). Because of the sheer volume of data confronting them, the role of the central beliefs held by key policymakers may be more significant than that of ordinary people. In this vein, foreign policy analysts who work according to cognitive theory note that the central beliefs about the nature of politics and about the strategy of political action held by national leaders are a major source of their behaviour and, by extension, states' behaviour on the world stage (Holsti, 1962; George, 1969; Walker, 1997; Rosati, 1987; Larson, 1994; Young and Schafer, 1998; Walker et al., 2003; Malici and Malici, 2005). In Robert Jervis's (1976: 28) words, it is 'impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the leader's beliefs about the world and their images of others'. Matthew Hirshberg's (1993) work on 'stereotype' and 'bias' persuasively demonstrates that political beliefs held by national leaders have a powerful impact on their behaviours: it illustrates that political leaders strive to avoid cognitive dissonance through selective perceptions, reinterpretation and under- or overestimation of the incoming information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. Stephen Benedict Dyson's comprehensive analysis (2009:46) of Margaret Thatcher shows that Thatcher's 'cognitive architecture shaped her behaviour, and to a large extent British foreign policy...' In short, the central political beliefs – that is to say, core views on the nature of political and social life and images of other political partners or opponents (other states or their leaders in the context of international relations) – held by individual national leaders can have a significant influence on their actions and decisions as regards how their respective nations should behave in world politics.

My argument is that we must give due attention to individual human agents (national leaders) – in particular, their political beliefs, which are often 'minimized, ignored, or assumed away' by structure-oriented or rationalist approaches (Rosati, 2000: 45) – in order to fully explain why states behave as they do on the world stage. This analytical position can be referred to as cognitive individualism. Furthermore, I maintain that this cognitive-individualist thesis deserves special attention in the study of foreign policy *regardless of* whether our focus is on great powers or on weak powers.

However, the mainstream argument in IR posits that we can best account for the foreign policy actions of states, *especially* those of small/weak states<sup>1</sup> by examining structural factors surrounding those states (be it the balance of material power from the realist perspective or the economic ties between states from the liberalist angle). It assumes that domestic- and individual-level determinants will be less salient when studying the behaviour of a weak state because 'external constraints are more severe and the international situation is more compelling' (Elman, 1995: 173). The related reasoning here is this: since weak states are more preoccupied with

survival than are the great powers and thereby ‘feel the effects of anarchy more presciently’ (Browning, 2006: 671), international constraints will override domestic interests, internal political struggles and the characteristics of particular decision-makers in weak states; as such, ‘the international environment will be more important in an analysis of small state rather than great power foreign policy’ (Rosenau, 1966: 47–48; Waltz, 1979: 194–195; Snyder, 1991: 317–318; Paul, 1994: 176–177).<sup>2</sup> Michael Handel (1981: 57) observes:

[T]o a large extent, small states research concentrates its efforts on the level of structurally determined behavior patterns. All authors, to some degree, start from the assumption that the structural attributes of smallness [weakness] are by far the most important, if not the only, criteria that determined weak states’ foreign policy.

In her comprehensive survey of the literature on weak states, Miriam Fendius Elman (1995: 175) notes that ‘the scholarly consensus views small state behavior from a state-centric perspective in which foreign-policy outputs are a response to external constraints’. A more recent study concurs with this observation saying: ‘In many discourses and debates, weak states are treated as objects of international relations, rather than subjects. Their foreign policies are taken to be reflexive of fluctuations in the balance of power’ (Browning, 2006: 671–672). In other words, the ‘scholarly consensus’ in IR holds that there is little need to take domestic and individual-level factors as important causal variables of *weak* state behaviour in world politics (Elman, 1995: 178). Its explanatory assumptions do not include the role of individual policymakers: they are assumed as ‘utility maximizers’ rationally responding to external stimuli and the environments around them – such as, the weak state’s position in an international system or its interaction with stronger powers. In this context, it is often argued that when it comes to explaining weak state behaviour international/structural approaches ‘should suffice’ (Snyder, 1991: 317–318, emphasis added), and that including individual-level factors in the analysis of weak state behavior would ‘only detract from an already satisfactory explanation based on the state’s position in the international system’ (Elman, 1995: 172, emphasis added).

### **South Korean involvement in Iraq: a tough test for the cognitive-individualist thesis**

In light of this ‘scholarly consensus’, a weak state’s<sup>2</sup> foreign policy action poses a hard test for my central argument, which emphasizes the importance of the role of individual human agents in explaining a state’s foreign policy behaviour *regardless of* whether our focus is on great powers or on weak powers. Since the received wisdom in IR holds that a weak state’s external behaviour can be adequately explained with reference to external/structural factors and environments, a structural approach should have a little difficulty in explaining a weak state’s foreign policy behaviour (Elman, 1995: 173–180). If I can show that individual policymakers substantially matter in a weak state’s foreign policy action – which is a case where the ‘scholarly consensus’ would expect individual-level influences to play only a limited role, *if at all* – then strong credibility for the cognitive-individualist thesis will be established. Methodologists agree that ‘by eliminating the most likely alternative theory or explanation, we increase the credibility of our theory or explanation much more than we do by eliminating alternatives at random’ (Sartori, 1970; Eckstein, 1975; George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2008).

In this spirit, I focus on a weak state’s foreign policy action, particularly its reaction to a great power. In this regard, South Korea’s behaviour towards the US-led Iraq War has been carefully

selected as a case to be examined. Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, the Korean government had already declared its support for US intentions as regards its military campaign in Iraq and announced that South Korea would dispatch troops to Iraq to assist the US (Roh, 2003a). Yet the Korean government proposed to send non-combat troops to Iraq in response to the US call for the dispatch of combat forces. Going a step further, Roh Moo-hyun, then Korean President, set forth his guidelines on Korea's involvement in the war stating that the Korean troops to be sent to Iraq would 'independently carry on the humanitarian mission under their own operational control' (Roh, 2003b). Not surprisingly, several key US government officials, including Donald Rumsfeld, then-US Secretary of Defense, expressed dissatisfaction with the Roh guidelines saying that: 'We [the US government] are still waiting for an official confirmation from the Korean government' (quoted in Kim, 2004: 154). Nevertheless, the Korean government made its final decision to send non-combatants, assigned to work for humanitarian missions under their own operational control.

The instance of South Korea's participation in the Iraq War subsumes two questions: first, why did South Korea decide to support and join the US-led war against Iraq (Why not rather oppose the war?); and, second, why did South Korea then send non-combatants, not allowed to work under the US command, in response to the US request for combat forces (Why not active cooperation with the US)? The first question seems easily explicable by the structural attributes of South Korea. South Korea is a relatively weak state and has maintained a military alliance with the US over five decades. The country has traditionally benefitted from pro-US alignments in terms of assuring its security and maintaining the stability of the Korean peninsula where Pyongyang has continued to attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. There are thus good strategic reasons for South Korea, to support the foreign policy behaviour of the US in the sense that doing so can encourage the US to continue to shoulder the burden of South Korea's security (for similar observations, see Kim S-h, 2003; Lee, 2006). In addition, one can assume that South Korea supported the Iraq War in order to maintain good relations with the US so that it could continue to obtain the economic interests generated by economic ties with the US (for a fuller exposition of the line of this assumption, see Keohane and Nye, 1977; Papayoanou, 1996). The economic relationship that the United States and South Korea have maintained is a typical asymmetrical interdependent relationship in which bilateral economic relations are far more important for Korea than the converse. In short, South Korea's support for the US-led war in Iraq as such can be explained by reference to structural constraints and incentives.

The following questions then arise: why did South Korea send non-combatants, assigned to work for humanitarian missions under their own operational control, in response to the US appeal for combat forces? Can we continue to resolve this puzzle with international/structural approaches? Or, to what extent are domestic-level approaches useful in answering the why-question?

## **An overview of existing theoretical approaches in the field of IR**

### *Structural approaches*

*The international distribution of material power.* First of all, Waltzian balance-of-power realists' predictions that weaker states will resist or balance against more powerful states, particularly against 'hegemony', in a 'self-help' international system (Waltz, 1979, 2000; Levy, 2004; Levy and Thompson, 2005) does not match with the empirical outcome that South Korea joined the US-led war against Iraq (i.e. its bandwagoning behaviour towards the US); hence, the balance-of-power theory, which is 'one of the most influential theoretical ideas in international relations' (Wohlforth et al., 2007: 155), is not useful in mapping out causal paths that are consistent with

the outcome of the policy behaviour under consideration.<sup>3</sup> If classical balance-of-power theory is to hold true for the case in question, South Korea should have *not* supported and joined the US-led war against Iraq in any form whatsoever. Furthermore, power preponderance theory, utilized by another group of realist scholars (e.g. Wohlforth, 1999; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008; Campbell, 2009) posit that weaker states will reconcile themselves to the dominant state-led (American-led in the case of contemporary global politics) status quo to ‘shield’ themselves from the dominant power’s capabilities or to maximize their national interests by climbing on the ‘bandwagon’. Their hypothesis, however, appears to be greatly weakened as an explanation for Korea’s deployment of non-combatants in the face of what the world’s sole superpower, America, had specifically requested.

*International institutions and economic interdependence.* Much the same can be said of the liberalist approach in IR: it has little or limited explanatory power in accounting for South Korea’s complex policy choice. First of all, it is a well-known fact that the roles of the international institutions concerned, such as the United Nations, in the 2003 Iraq War were feeble (for more on this point, Franck, 2003). This impugns the utility of liberal institutionalism in which international institutions are treated as independent variables having significant impact on state behaviour in terms of formulating preferences and choices (Keohane, 1984; Milner, 1992). Also, although we can relatively easily link the factor of (asymmetrical) economic interdependence with the account of South Korea’s support for the US war in Iraq, the question of what moved South Korea to send non-combatants, not allowed to work under US command, in response to the US appeal for combat forces cannot be fully answered by the logic of economic liberalism.

*Social identity.* Likewise, social constructivism, which challenges the predominant rationalist mode of analysis, arguing that rationalists – including both realists and liberals – ignore or downplay the role of ideas and ‘social norms’ in international relations (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002), is short of answering why South Korea behaved as it did in relation to the Iraq War. In effect, there were virtually *no* socially-shared ideas or discourses in South Korea as regards the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq or democratization in the Middle East; and President Roh made no comment on the military threats of Saddam Hussein’s regime towards South Korea or the United States before he decided to support the US<sup>4</sup> while the Bush administration had already begun actively pressing for military intervention in Iraq since the September 11 attacks, asserting that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction and thus presented an imminent threat to the US and to the world community. Considering this, South Korea’s decision (to support the US, yet on its own terms) is puzzling within constructivism’s core proposition that socially and historically shared and constructed ‘identity and norms determine what aims and methods (e.g., realist or liberal) are thought appropriate responses [of states]’ (Miyagi, 2009: 349).

### *Domestic-level approaches*

*Public preferences.* The civil society of South Korea was polarized with regard to whether Seoul should send troops to help the US war in Iraq. This was reflected in a number of opinion polls conducted by various newspapers and TV networks. The results of the polls clearly indicate that both approval and disapproval rates were never preponderant. For instance, the opinion poll conducted by MBC, one of the major TV networks in South Korea, on 25 March 2003 shows that 47.5 per cent of the pollsters favoured the idea of sending Korean troops to Iraq, while an almost equal percentage of respondents (47.7 per cent) opposed that idea. In addition

to the issue of whether to deploy troops in Iraq, the public also manifested divided opinions on the troops role: roughly 45 per cent were opposed to Korean combat forces participating in the Iraq War, while about 43 per cent were in support of the dispatch of the combatants (Kim, J-h, 2003). In brief, Korean public opinion showed a clear division and neither side could be said to be predominant in Korea's social 'mood'. Put another way, there was no domestic consensus as to what role South Korea should play in the war in Iraq, *let alone* whether to send troops to Iraq. This indicates that public opinion is not the decisive factor that influenced the Korean decision in question.

*Bureaucratic politics.* The two main government agencies involved – the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade – were, indeed, supportive of the idea of sending a large number of combat forces to Iraq and of getting the Korean military unit to work closely with the US combatants. Nevertheless, Roh set forth his guidelines on Korea's involvement in the war stating that the country would send non-combatant troops to Iraq, and that they would 'independently carry on the humanitarian mission' (Roh, 2003a, 2003b). Soon after Roh expressed his preferences (in November 2003), the cabinet approved the Troop Dispatch Consent Bill (in December 2003), which fully reflected Roh's guidelines; this was passed through the National Assembly as it was (in February 2004). In effect, a number of senior members of Roh's staff whom I have interviewed, such as Yoon Young-kwan, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, confirmed that South Korea's actual policy towards the US Iraq War mirrored Roh's direct instruction.<sup>5</sup> What this implies is that an explanation based on bureaucratic politics is not plausible in the case of South Korea's policy towards the Iraq War.

In sum, the question of why South Korea reacted *as it did* to the US requests/actions poses a puzzle for a number of theoretical approaches in IR. In particular the South Korean case confounds the logic of the structural approaches, such as neo-realism and neo-liberalism, which suggests that structural or contextual factors can adequately account for a weak state's external behaviour. Viewed in this light, the Korean case is appropriate for testing the utility of the cognitive-individualist approach put forward here. That is, if I can show that agential factors – such as individual political beliefs held by the national leader concerned – operate as a potent causal variable even in this instance where 'the scholarly consensus' would expect that this would not be the case, then the usefulness of the cognitive-individualist approach can be recognized.

## **Tracing the causal impact of political beliefs: Roh and his Iraq decisions**

In order to establish whether cognitive factors operate as an indispensable causal variable in the instance of South Korea's actions, I will first examine what the core political beliefs held by President Roh were and how he perceived the situation at hand through a qualitative content analysis of Roh's public and private statements. The use of his statements as the prime data for inferring his personal beliefs can be justified by the fact that Roh was not a polished orator - he was famous for making statements without the notes prepared by speechwriters (for Roh's style of speech, see Choi, 2007). Then I will undertake 'congruence' procedure (George, 1979; Larson, 1994: 28-29) based on document analysis so as to determine whether his political beliefs were consistent with his decisions on South Korea's reactions toward the US was in Iraq. In this way, the impact of his beliefs (a specific cognitive factor) on South Korea's (a weak state's) policy toward the United States (a dominant power) is identified. Before tracing his beliefs and its

impact, however, we must first be clear about the role that Roh played in the government policy-making processes.

Roh, Moo-hyun was Korea's 16th President, serving from February 2003-February 2009. In the Korean political system, the President assumes primary responsibility for the formation and execution of the nation's foreign policy. The presidential form of government is structured so that the President is chairman of the Cabinet, head of the National Security Council, and supreme commander of the armed forces. Although South Korea had been substantially democratized since the late 1980s, there has been little change (or challenge) to the predominant role that Korean Presidents play in deciding the foreign policy of the government.

Margaret Hermann's studies (1989, 2001) show that when a single individual has the power to make the choice concerning how a state is going to respond to a foreign policy problem, he or she tends to become 'the decision unit' and acts as 'a predominant leader' (Hermann, 1989: 363). Although Roh delegated responsibility to his advisers as regards gathering information relating to the Iraq War, there is no evidence that he ceded any authority for committing the resources of the government and making choices for the government. As noted, the Korean Defense and Foreign Ministries were, indeed, supportive of the idea of sending a large number of combat forces to Iraq and of getting the Korean military unit to work closely with the US combatants. Yet Roh preferred to dispatch non-combatant troops who would 'independently carry on the humanitarian mission.' Soon after Roh expressed his preferences/guidelines, the Cabinet approved the Troop Dispatch Consent Bill, which fully reflects Roh's preferences; this was passed through the National Assembly as it was. One commentator criticized Roh for having 'centralized' policymaking processes and paying 'little heed to governmental agencies, think tanks, and advisers' when he made his decision on troop deployment (Kim, 2005: 15).

To use the leadership styles categorized by Hermann and her colleagues (2001), it can thus be said that Roh acted as a 'predominant leader' especially in relation to Korea's Iraq policy. As such it is not only reasonable but also necessary to focus on the personal beliefs of Roh, rather than those of other political leaders, such as Ministers, presidential advisors or members of the National Assembly. The question is, then, what were his personal beliefs about the nature of political or social life? To find out, I will first briefly explore his early childhood and young adulthood, and professional and political careers.

Born on 6 August 1946 in a small farming village in Gimhae, Gyeongsangnam-do, a province on the south-east coast of Korea, Roh was one of five children, and the hardships endured by his family led him to espouse the values of hard work and self-reliance.

Upon graduation from high school in 1966, he worked at a small company for a short while quickly made soon a decision to become a lawyer as a means of securing a comfortable life. At that time, passing the bar examination was considered to be the top achievement in Korea, ensuring a life of wealth, honour and influence in society. After passing the national bar examination in 1975, he became a district court judge in the city of Daejeon in 1977. However, just several months later, he resigned from that position when he 'discovered that judges were not able to maintain judicial independence under the authoritarian military-influenced [Park Chung Hee] regime'. Ultimately, he resigned his judgeship and opened his own law office in 1978.

Not long thereafter, his work brought him into contact with a case of human rights abuse, and in 1983, when South Korea was under military dictatorship, he defended two students who had been arrested for studying leftist theories. This case became a seminal event for his personal direction. Recalling the case in which he defended the students who had been detained and tortured for possessing banned literature, he said: 'When I saw their horrified eyes and their missing toenails, my



comfortable life as a lawyer came to an end ... I became a man that wanted to make a difference in the world' (Choi, 2007: 439).

From then on Roh became a human rights lawyer defending pro-democracy and human rights activists and advocating on behalf of persecuted labour organizers and human rights victims. He opposed the autocracy in place at the time in South Korea; participated in pro-democracy activities and was one of the leaders of the pro-democracy movement, 'June Struggle', in 1987 against the dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan.

After being involved in the pro-democracy movement, he entered politics in 1988 and was elected to the 13th National Assembly. In the National Assembly, he played an active role as a member of the Labor Committee and quickly made his mark with his questioning of the government over corruption allegations. In the nationally televised parliamentary hearing on the corruption charges and accusations of human rights abuses against the top government officials of the authoritarian Chun Doo-hwan regime, Roh, then a novice legislator, instantly became nationally renowned as a tough-talking and liberal reformist parliamentarian.

Roh seemed destined for a stellar career, but in the years that followed, he surprised everyone by making unexpected decisions. In 1995, he was invited to be the running mate of a leading candidate in the mayoral race in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. However, he chose to run for mayor of Busan, the heartland of Korean conservatism, because he 'wanted to break the corrosive regional politics that divided the nation between the rival south western and south eastern regions' (2003). Twice in a row, Roh ran for office in Busan in the south east as the candidate of the United Democratic Party, which had its power base in the south west. It was a risk no politician had ever attempted to take before or since, except Roh himself again in 2000.

It seems clear, then, that Roh put a high value on human rights, reform and self-determinism (for a similar observation, see Choi, 2007: 410). The fact that Roh held such beliefs is also evidenced by his various remarks and speeches made before and after he came to office. The statements below clearly show that his *personal* beliefs are linked with his views of the *international* issues facing South Korea. At the first presidential debate, held on 4 December 2002, he said:

I will renegotiate Korea's SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement, governing the legal rights and behaviour of the American troops stationed in South Korea] ... The SOFA agreement should be amended in a more equal manner ... If I become president, *I will definitely correct our chronic attitude of accepting American demands without criticism.* (quoted in French, 2002a: 9, emphasis added)

At the second presidential debate, Roh also said: 'The anti-Americanism is not a big deal, and it should not be a taboo in Korea ... I saw no point in going to Washington just to have my picture taken' (quoted in Kim, 2004: 154). In a similar vein, he made comments about North Korea and the US on 18 December 2002, one day before the presidential election: 'If the United States and North Korea start a war, we will stop it' (quoted in French, 2002b: 1). This comment was indeed read by the Korean public as implying that South Korea would take a neutral position. Chung Mong-Joon, who had been a key political supporter of Roh, denounced his remark, saying, 'The United States is our ally. We cannot take a neutral position' (French, 2002b). Indeed he abruptly withdrew his support for Roh on the same day that Roh made the comment.

Let us examine other statements that Roh made for different audiences over time and across situations to enhance objectivity of the cognitive use of beliefs as well as look for the consistency of Roh's beliefs. In this light, let us consider a public speech that Roh made *after* he was officially elected president. He stated:

We must have dialogue not only with North Korea but also with the US.... Now the Republic of Korea must take a *central* role ... I believe the 50-year-old [South Korea–US] alliance, virtually unchanged since the end of the Korean War in 1953, must mature and advance. (Roh, 2005a: emphasis added)

This statement clearly shows that Roh was still reform-minded, putting a high value on independence and self-determinacy. Another speech by Roh reveals that he also still focused on human rights advocacy. Talking about the North Korean nuclear issue in his interview with CNN of 28 January 2003, he said:

I also don't like the attitude of North Korea ... I myself as having experience as a human rights lawyer have some issues with North Korea's deplorable human rights practices. I think Chairman Kim Jung Il [of North Korea] is responsible for this (Roh, 2003c).

In addition to reading Roh's public statements, it is also worth examining the private statements that he made after he took office, in a bid to infer his personal beliefs (especially to distinguish rhetoric from his beliefs). In this respect, an article in *TIME Magazine* that reports the interviews with one of Roh's key policy advisers deserves our attention in that the adviser mentioned what Roh *privately* said concerning relations with the US:

He [Roh] said to me that he wants to convince the US that Korea is no longer the weak, post-war country that some people envision it to be. [Then the adviser added] The US needs to meet him [Roh] halfway. (Quoted in Spaeth, 2003)

Let us consider another statement that Roh made for a different audience at a different time. On 13 May 2003, just before Roh made his first visit to Washington for a summit meeting with Bush, he openly stated in a news conference that: 'Given the kind of economic development we have achieved here in the last decades, the notion that we deserve more regard and greater respect is fully justified' (Roh, 2003d). While taking part in a discussion on economic growth at a ministerial-level meeting, Roh also stated:

We have to become *self-reliant*.... We should not be afraid. Independent military power should be discussed openly, and we have to assume the responsibilities accompanied by it. Each and every citizen will have to endure a little economic hardship during the process.... *Mental strength must be based on pride*. (Roh, 2005b, emphasis added).

Cognitive scholarship shows that in answering questions such as how much control or mastery the leader in question believes one can have over historical developments, observers can capture the leader's core beliefs about the nature of politics (see George, 1969, 1979; Young and Schafer, 1998). Talking about human history, Roh emphasized:

Reflecting on world history, we realize that when pioneers responded faithfully to the call of history and shed sweat and blood, humanity progressed, but when the people failed to do so, they were put on a path to doom.... *What you think and do today will determine the future of humanity* (Roh, 2004, emphasis added).

He added later:

History that moves forward and history that repeats itself; these two forces are evenly distributed in the world at the start of the 21st century, and it is the order that surrounds North East Asia. So, where do we go? Let us take one side. The decision not to go backwards but instead to move forward is ours to make.

*Depending on what we do, this even balance can be broken and lead history along a path of progress. This must be our belief. It is true that the rules of history are difficult to go against, but those numerous rules of history were made by men ... so as not to repeat the history of suffering.... It is up to the choice of the Korean people. The Korean people are already capable.* Now all we have to do is choose the correct strategy. (Roh, 2006a, emphasis added).

In summary, analyzing Roh's public and private statements made for different audiences over time and across situations very clearly illustrates that he was a firm believer in self-determinism, and favoured greater autonomy from the United States than South Korea had hitherto enjoyed: a leading American commentator remarked that South Korea 'has now become one of the Bush administration's biggest foreign policy problems' (Weisman, 2003: 1). In addition, given his personal experience as a human rights lawyer before entering politics and his continuous efforts and actions to promote human rights throughout his political career, it is also clear that he was a firm advocate for human rights and humanitarianism.

Thus, if we consider Roh's political beliefs and values and concentrate on the content of South Korea's commitments to the US war in Iraq, we will be able to answer why South Korea reacted to the US request *as it did*. In other words, the unanswered question that has remained thus far is at last answered when the beliefs held by Roh are considered. This observation becomes more convincing when we recall the fact that there was no public consensus in Korea as to what role South Korea should play in the Iraq War while the two main government agencies concerned were supportive of the idea of sending a large number of Korean combat forces. At the special lecture at the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry of 28 March 2006, Roh, indeed, explicitly revealed that the South Korean decision was his decision based on his views:

I tried to cut back and confined the number and the role of our troops based on what I believed to be the best for Korea ... and finally ended up dispatching about 3,000 non-combat soldiers in the midst of talks of dispatching 5,000 or 10,000 combat soldiers. (Roh, 2006c)

From what has been investigated so far, it should be clear by now that it was the pre-existing *personal* beliefs held by Roh – who played the role of a predominant leader in the formulation of the government's foreign policy – that exerted a significant causal influence on how South Korea acted towards the United States.

If this be the case, however, some might still question the generalized causal effects of the factor of political beliefs across a range of cases, saying that the research undertaken here is just an initial plausibility probe with a single case study. In order to offer an additional validity check for the argument put forward here, the following section will discuss a comparative case.

## **A case comparison: Australia**

As Alexander George and Andrew Bennett (2005: 25, 50, 81) have noted in their seminal work on case study methodology in the social sciences, confident estimates of causal effects are possible in 'controlled' comparative research designs, such as the comparison of 'most similar' cases. 'Most similar' cases are cases that 'are similar in all of their independent variables except one and differ in their dependent variable'. Where two cases are different in outcome but similar in all but one independent variable, the inference can be made that this variable contributes to the variant outcome.

In order to implement the method of the comparison of most similar cases here, this article needs to examine a case/instance associated with the type of phenomenon of which the case already studied is a member (namely, weaker states' reactions to the US-led war in Iraq). Given that the purpose of the case comparison is a further testing of my argument for the power of human political beliefs in the state's external behaviour, there is also a need to select and investigate, among the weaker states involved in the Iraq War, a particular state: (i) whose policy towards the Iraq War is very different from South Korea's; (ii) and which was made under international structural constraints and opportunities very similar to those faced by South Korea. If I show that there is a marked difference between the political beliefs held by the national leaders of South Korea and the particular state that meets the aforementioned two conditions, and that each of the political beliefs is consistent with their respective nations' actions towards the US-led Iraq War, then a confident statement as to the causal power of political beliefs can be made.

In this light, Australia's decision regarding the Iraq War has been chosen as a case to be examined and compared. Both Australia and South Korea reacted to the same phenomenon (i.e. the 2003 Iraq War), yet the way in which Australia became involved in the war was markedly different from the involvement of South Korea: whereas the South Korean government sent non-combat troops assigned to work for humanitarian missions under their own operational control after the US had requested combat forces working under US command, the Australian government led by John Howard had approved prior to the US invasion of Iraq the involvement of senior Australian Defense Force personnel in US Central Command deliberations on detailed operational planning for military action against Iraq. Immediately prior to the outbreak of war, around 2000 soldiers from the navy, army and air force, including 500 Special Forces and three Australian Navy ships, were dispatched to support the US war against Iraq by the Howard government (Kevin, 2004).

However, the international structural conditions in which Australia was enmeshed at that time were much the same as those with which South Korea was confronted. Specifically, similar to the South Korean-US security relations, Australia has also maintained a military alliance with the US over five decades; Australia has obtained benefits from the alliance in terms of enhancing its security against regional challenges (Dibb, 2003: 16). With regard to economic relations with the US, Australia also was under similar conditions to those pertaining in South Korea when it made the decision to make a commitment to the US war in Iraq: Australia, as with South Korea, has a substantial trade relationship with the US, but the bilateral economic relationship is an asymmetrical one in which Australia is far more dependent on the US than the US is on Australia (ADFAT, 2001: 8–10).

Moreover, just as South Korean public opinion is not the cause of the government's policy behaviour towards the war in Iraq, the public opinion in the Australian case is not a decisive factor in its government's 'absolute commitment' to the war either (McPhail, 2007: 3): the majority of the Australian public opposed the war. Moreover, a group of 43 former government officials including not only the opposition Labor party members, but also Liberal Party members attacked Howard's Iraq policy calling for 'a more honest and balanced' approach (Kelly, 2006: 7). Under such political-social contexts Howard, nonetheless, decided to provide Washington with one of the most substantial combat force contingents. In addition, as was the case with President Roh, Prime Minister John Howard acted as 'a predominant leader' in making his government's final foreign policy decisions. Many observers comment that although Howard was reputed to encourage discussion, what he actually demanded and expected was 'unswerving loyalty and solidarity at all times' with regard to his decisions (Barns, 2003: 123; Debats et al., 2007: 246–247). This view is supported in the observation of Henderson (1998: 5), a former member of Howard's staff, who has said that 'he [Howard] dislikes personal argument and dissension'.

Taken as a whole, it can be said that South Korea and Australia have been surrounded by very *similar* international and domestic political-social conditions in relation to the US Iraq War. However, as noted, the ways in which they supported the war (i.e. the content of the commitments to the United States) were considerably *different*. A question to be raised is: what made the difference between South Korea's and Australia's actions towards the US? Put differently, why was such an active and wholehearted commitment made by the John Howard government?

## John Howard political beliefs and his Iraq decisions

As before, I will first examine Howard's personal experiences, and the pertinent remarks and speeches he made in order to infer his central beliefs about political and social life, and views on other political actors/counterparts concerned with his foreign policy. In particular, the fact that Howard was not a polished orator – he has tended to speak 'off the cuff' from notes, rarely using prepared speeches – ensures to a greater degree the objectivity of the use of his public statements (Henderson, 1998: 20).

John Winston Howard was Australia's 25th prime minister and served from 11 March 1996 until 3 December 2007, the second-longest prime-ministerial term after Robert Menzies. He was born in the Sydney suburb of Earlwood on 26 July 1939, the youngest of the four sons of Lyall and Mona Howard. The family owned and operated a garage near the Dulwich Hill railway station and lived in nearby Earlwood, in Sydney's inner west, where the Howard family attended the Methodist church every Sunday. Howard's parents were strong supporters of Robert Menzies' conservative Liberal Party. In an interview in 1984, Howard recalled: '[M]y family believed very strongly in the traditional values of society – they were very pro-monarchy and pro-the family and so forth – and conservative elements of our society' (quoted in O'Brien, 1985: 82–83).

Later, as Prime Minister, Howard (1998) himself acknowledged that his parents had significant influence on his social beliefs saying, 'I brought to my job the values that I learnt from my parents.' John Howard entered parliament as the Member for Bennelong in May 1974. In November 1975, he took his first portfolio as Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs in the Coalition government of Malcolm Fraser and Doug Anthony. John Howard was then Treasurer from 1977 until the Fraser government lost office in 1983. Leader of the Opposition from 1985 to 1989, and again from 1995, John Howard became Prime Minister following the Liberal–National Party Coalition's victory in the 1996 federal election.

Before coming to office, in an interview in 1984, Howard indeed revealed a great deal about his beliefs about politics, and his view of Australian society.

I have an *instinctive* distrust of people who play too fast with grand visions. There have been a few rather perfidious examples of that in history, and I am unconvinced by some of the grand vision politicians, I really am.... [T]he Liberals are the natural governing party because *Australia is basically a very conservative country*. (Quoted in O'Brien, 1985: 83–84, emphasis added)

These views have remained with him, and expressed throughout his political career. For example, in the debates over same-sex marriage, Howard (2004a) voiced his fear that Australian judges would engage in social engineering by recognizing overseas same-sex marriages, arguing that such marriages were not compatible with Australian values, including religious ones 'that we so clearly owe to our Judeo-Christian heritage' (Johnson, 2007). Howard has also said in an interview with a local newspaper that 'Asians from former British colonies find it easier to integrate into Australian society' (quoted in Johnson, 2007: 198).

It is clear that he had a conservative world view, being sceptical about visionaries and disposed to preserve existing conditions and institutions, or to restore traditional ones, and to limit change. Howard's conservative political perspectives are naturally linked with an idea of the status quo and with sensitivity to *existing* power resources in the context of the state's foreign relations, which in turn leads to his 'absolute commitment' to the Australian alliance with the US (McPhail, 2007: 3). Indeed, the US alliance has been, as Garran (2004: 21) observes, 'the touchstone of Howard's foreign policy as far back as the mid 1980s'. One commentator notes that Howard has had an '*emotional respect* for the importance of the relationship with the US' (Debats et al., 2007: 236, emphasis added). In this vein, it is understandable why he sought, upon coming to office, a 'rebalancing' of Australia's foreign policy to correct what he saw as an excessive emphasis on Asia – by merging Asia into the 'Asia-Pacific', and by creating a stronger relationship with the US (Howard, 1995).

More fundamentally, Howard's fervent support for the preservation of Australia's alliance with the US derives from his beliefs about and perceptions of Australian national identity. As seen above, Howard has emphasized several times the Anglo-Celtic heritage and values of Australia. The beliefs are linked with his conception of the importance of the Australian-US relationship. In Howard's own words: 'Australia and America are close friends *because above all we have similar values*. In the end, the thing that binds nations together more than anything else is *the commonality of their values*' (Howard, 2003: emphasis added).

On the other hand, the relationships with Asia have often been described by the Howard government in a more businesslike, pragmatic tone, with the emphasis placed upon 'mutual respect' (ADFAT, 2003: 72). Acknowledging the continuing move away from the previous government's policy of Asian engagement, the Howard government's White Paper also contains, according to Gyngell (2003: 63), 'an instructional tone as well as a pragmatic note' in reference to the Asian region. This, indeed, is the one that corresponds to Howard's own views of Australian identity and regional roles. In a 1999 interview with Fred Brenchley, a veteran journalist, conducted in Indonesia (not in Europe or the US), Howard characterized Australia as 'a medium-sized economically strong regional power leading a peacekeeping force, the deputy sheriff to the United States'. Then he went on to say that: '[W]e are defending the values we hold as Australian. We are willing to be in dispute with our nearest neighbour to defend those *values ... as a European Western civilisation with strong links with North America*' (Brenchley, 1999: 22–23, emphasis added).

Howard's strong views that see Australia as a Western country with Western values, and his beliefs about the closeness between Australia and the US in terms of shared values, have been reinforced by his first-hand experience of the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, and are reflected in his reaction to it: 'Australia will provide all support that might be requested of us by the United States in relation to *any action* that might be taken' (Howard, 2001a: emphasis added). This was a promise that Howard had made before he spoke to Bush; also, at the time of making this promise, there was no formal request from the US administration (Kevin, 2004: 318–320). Replying to the question raised in a press conference that points out that Australia had not been requested to provide military aid, Howard said: 'It is very important at a moment like this that America knows that she's got friends like us' (Howard, 2001a).

This is a typical remark based on his pre-existing political beliefs that the US and Australia are 'close friends because above all we have similar values' (Howard, 2003). In a radio interview he expressed the view that 9/11 is 'not just an attack on the United States ... it's an attack on all of us' (Howard, 2001b). The attack could be 'on all of us' only in terms of shared values, since Australia's territory had not been attacked. From the start, Howard saw the attack as an assault on liberty, democracy and the common heritage that united the Anglo-American-Australian world. Howard articulated this vision with conviction, saying 'the assault was upon the way of life that we hold

dear *in common with the Americans*' (Howard, 2001c: emphasis added). He could not have been more explicit. It was a statement about his beliefs:

My instinctive reaction [to the 11 September attack] was a product of my political views. It seemed to me to be the most *natural* thing in the world to have an alliance with America, knowing the history of the relationship. (Quoted in Debats et al., 2007: 245, emphasis added)

In sum, John Howard has long maintained conservative ideas as to political and social life and upheld positive images of the US based on cultural similarity. Howard repeatedly emphasized throughout his political career the common values that Australia shares with Britain and America. Here if such beliefs of Howard are related to the issue of Australia's involvement in the US-led war against Iraq, then we realize that Australia's active and wholehearted commitment to the US war in Iraq is a reflection of his pre-existing political beliefs. What this indicates is that his political beliefs have acted as a causal factor of his decision. This observation becomes more convincing if we recall that the majority of the Australian public opposed the Iraq War and many other political elites in Australia did *not* side with Howard's conceptions of Australian identity. Howard's attitudes toward Australia's national identity distinguish him not only from Keating, a former Labor Prime Minister, but also from Malcolm Fraser, a former Liberal Prime Minister (Ayres, 1987). Nevertheless, John Howard aligned Australia so closely with the policies of the US on the basis of his strong beliefs in the idea that Australia and America are close friends sharing common values; and he faced no party or governmental constraint in expressing, in words and policy, his deeply held views about the alliance with the US. In their study on the Howard government's structure, Donald Debats and his colleague (2007: 247) conclude that 'from all the accounts we have had, he [Howard] faced no reservations from his senior foreign policy advisors ... Howard was ... a relatively free agent in the government decision-making processes to act on his convictions'.

## Conclusion

The findings of the in-depth comparative study show that a weaker state's behaviour vis-à-vis a dominant state cannot be fully accounted for merely by focusing on the features of the international system or on the relations between a weaker state and a dominant state although the 'scholarly consensus' in IR assumes that international/structural explanations should 'suffice', and that including individual-level factors in the analysis of weak state behaviour would only 'detract from an already satisfactory explanation based on the state's position in the international system'. What this suggests is that we need to posit the political beliefs of human agents involved as a significant causal factor of (weak) state behaviour. In particular, this suggestion is validated through the cases examined constituting a 'tough test' for the cognitive-individualist thesis. What is more, based on the empirical evidence discovered through the case study, it can be said that weak states would behave differently even in very similar international and domestic environments if the weak states' political leaders act as 'predominant' leaders in the formulation of the government's foreign policy and have different political beliefs.

Certainly, this conclusion is neither to imply that the state's external actions occur due only to individual (human) factors, nor to suggest that those actions can be fully explained solely in terms of the actions and intentions of individual human agents. There can be no doubt that the state's actions in world politics always derive from multiple factors (including structural variables) operating in combination (Neack, 2003; Hudson, 2007). Here, what this research

demonstrates and highlights is that the cognitive factors associated with individual human policymakers should not be ‘minimized, ignored, or assumed away’ in the study of state behaviour *irrespective of* whether our focus is on great powers or on weak powers. As discussed earlier, however, a number of IR researchers have tended to accept a set of theoretical assumptions based on structuralism, which privileges structural or contextual factors and of necessity marginalizes the autonomy of the state’s personnel (human agents) in analysis and explanation – especially as regards weak state behaviour. It also bears mention that although recent ‘neoclassical’ realist writings acknowledge the role of policymaking executives, their emphasis is on the positions that policymakers occupy rather than on the individual characteristics or beliefs of the policymakers who hold those positions. As such, cognitive and individualist attributes have, indeed, ‘been mostly *missing*’ from neoclassical realist scholars’ actual accounts of foreign policy (Tang, 2009: 802, emphasis added). Rather, neoclassical realist analyses still take the state’s relative material power as their ‘chief independent variable’ (Rose, 1998: 151).

In other words, although the value of a cognitive-individualist approach should be obvious – given the empirical evidence generated through the comparative analysis of the cases that constitute a tough test for the cognitive-individualist thesis – it has not always received the attention it deserves in the study of the state’s behaviour on the world stage. In this vein, it seems appropriate to conclude this article by recalling Richard Snyder and his colleagues’ observation made more than four decades ago: what we ought to do in an attempt to search for a satisfactory answer to the question of why a state behaves the way it does is to ‘rid ourselves of the troublesome abstraction “state”’ (Snyder et al., 1962: 65).

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### Notes

1. When the term ‘small’ appears in the text, it should be understood to mean ‘small’ in terms of material power rather than size. More importantly, building upon Laura Neak’s insights (2003: 126–7), small/weak state is defined here in relative terms. That is, a state is not small or weak per se, but only “in relation to” other bigger/stronger states.
2. By contrast, mainstream IR theorists assume that individual-level factors, such as decision-makers’ personalities or bureaucratic politics, will necessarily play a greater role in an explanation of great power foreign policy because great powers are faced with ‘a lower level of external threat’ (Rosenau, 1966: 47–48) in comparison to weak states and thus have ‘more options for action’ (Snyder, 1992: 317–318).
3. However, this does not imply that the balance-of-power theory is strongly undermined – as it may still explain other cases very well – but only that a refinement of the theory (e.g. a clear identification of the *specific* conditions under which its propositions are likely to be true or false) is needed.
4. My investigation (a keyword-based search) of all of the articles published by five major newspaper companies in South Korea from January 2000 to March 2003 shows that the Iraq War discourse (e.g. Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass destruction, militant Islam, human rights abuses in Iraq, etc.) began to appear, although not noticeably so, in Korea in December 2002, only two months before the 2003 Iraq War. In effect, the discourse related to the war in Iraq that pervaded South Korean society at that time did not concern Iraq or Saddam Hussein, but rather the relationship between South Korea and the United States (e.g. ‘pro-American diplomacy’ versus ‘self-reliant diplomacy’). The investigation is based on the data gathered from the Korea Press Foundation web database (available at: <http://www.mediagaon.or.kr/jsp/>)



search/SearchKindsResult.jsp# (accessed 15–20 October 2010)) and CHEONG WA DAE, The Office of President, South Korea (available at: [http://16cwd.pa.go.kr/cwd/kr/archive/archive\\_list.php?meta\\_id=speech](http://16cwd.pa.go.kr/cwd/kr/archive/archive_list.php?meta_id=speech) (accessed 15–20 October 2010)), respectively.

5. A series of elite interviews were conducted in Seoul, South Korea between 15 June 2009 and 28 July 2009. I interviewed 12 former top civil servants who worked for the Roh administration. Their affiliations include: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; and the Ministry of National Defense; and the National Security Council in Korea. Because the interviewees, with the exception of Yoon Young-Kwan, requested anonymity, their names are not given in the text.
6. The sources of the data related to Roh's early life and career experience draws heavily on the Presidential Archives of Korea, 'Biography of the 16th President of Republic of Korea' (in Korean), CHEONG WA DAE, The Office of President. Available at: <http://16cwd.pa.go.kr/cwd/en/pub/president/cnt02030101.html> (accessed 20 November 2010).

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