FOCALISM. AN INTRODUCTION

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Abstract
Visionaries envision. Teachers teach. Leaders lead. But each has a need for conceptualisation and verbalisation in order to build up their capacity to gather audience, impact present time and forge the future.
This essay is about alternative theoretical and practical skills, which could be of use for nurturing minds and wills towards academic endeavours with benefits for betterment of societies through foreign policy and international relations. But if proven of quality and relevance, it should also be about a personal mark on IR studies, enough to qualify its proponent as author.
Therefore, I have enlisted a series of past contributions with the goal of showcasing the need for what I call ***Focalism***. Also, I have used one classic and deciding example of focalist making of IR, applied to one of the most impressive feats of diplomacy and belligerence ever achieved: Zhuge *Hidden Dragon* Liang' s diplomatic mission at the court of Sun Quan, and the subsequent victory of their joint army of 50,000 over the invading northern forces of Cao Cao of 1,000,000.

Keywords
Cao Cao; focalism; hegemony neural limits; recurrent mindset; reptilian brain; Zhuge Liang

1.INTRODUCTION

Focalism is not the traditional kind of theoretical thinking based on left, centre or right ideological positioning. Focalism is about what matters the most and drives outcomes.

Etymologically, it starts with ***Focal*** as origin and trigger of the most important and recurrent ideas related to decision-making and doing.

Focal point, idea, belief, sentiment, feeling, fear, pleasure, reason, centre, vision are all included as potential representations of what Focalism means, based on accounts of History.

Focalism is about old and new, good and bad, balanced and irrational, conscient and oneiric, coherent and disjointed, memorable and fleeting.

When applied to International Relations it should be used as a tool for understanding victory and defeat, achievement and failure, positive and negative, at larger scale than the usual realm of domestic politics.

Focalism is the emerging theory I am putting forward for testing in an effort to surpass personal academic limits and insert a red lining into my past contributions. It speaks of hegemony and expansionism as leitmotif. Applied to current Russian foreign policy it means Putinization, both as impactful driver for the restoration of *the Third Rome* under the autocratic leadership of President Putin, and spillover effect on other ambitious leaders keen on re-enacting glorious, golden ages of dominance.[1]

It refers also to the hegemonic past but seen as catalyst for sovereign restoration of powers. A focal and recurrent topic in English foreign policy since the defeat in the Hundred Years' War, sovereignism has been linked to being two-folded as *insular*, outside European ruinous powerplays, and *global* through sea power.[2]

[1] For details on how I used Focalism on Russian foreign and security policy, see: Angliţoiu (2018 and 2022).

[2] For my focalist take on post-Brexit British foreign and security policy, see Angliţoiu (2021a). When applied to other state actors it should be understood as keenness to avoid sharing of responsibilities, risks and costs in regional concerts of power, while nonetheless seeking bigger, even global role, with the help of newer technologies, strategies and tactics.

It analyses *secret* as must-have stake in domestic and international politics. Applied to the EU, it serves as the blueprint for the deepening of it in the last and most significant area of sovereign transfer of power to a super-federal, trans-national centre: intelligence.[1]

It brings forth the driver for an expanded use of security beyond its standard meaning in political and military affairs. In this regard, Focalism is depicted as able to use security as the *ultimate word* for the mystery and duality of politics of being both accountable as public policy, and secretive as the motherboard of doing it without properly explain it or face legal consequences. That is how reason of state appeared in the Westphalian world of hegemonic quest. But when mixed with newer, trans-federal policies like EU Competition or FDI screening, the result is a joint use of economics (market share, control of mergers and acquisitions, abuse of dominant position, predatory practices, welfare of consumers, dual-use items, supply chains resilience, core values subversion by malign investments etc.) and politics through the use of Copenhagen School's reformation of security.[2]

Focalism is meant as a toolkit for understanding both decision-making and action-doing. Science has evolved throughout the ages and has become sciences, including those of the mind. The neuro-sciences are very popular these days, being quite the money-makers for the practitioners who promote them by training of public servants and corporate personnel alike.

My approach is not competent to delve inside but will use some of their concepts in order to argue.

The human brain is of course under study, and its two main components, the old and the new brains, have been very much related to *Security* by these new sciences. Human personality has been defined and redefined: either you are a rationalist or an empathiser, a harmoniser or a rebel, systemiser or a disrupter, new words have been accepted, at least, by the alternative, wiki-like dictionaries in recognition of the evolution of such sciences about the neural life of humans.

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[1] On the link between public policy priorities and focalist use of secret intelligence, see Angliţoiu (2014).

[2] For the expansion of economic security seen through focalist lenses, see Angliţoiu (2021b).

Great scientists of the past, Aristotle and Hegel (for instance), have tried to tackle essential issues like time, wisdom, pattern, recurrence, thesis, antithesis and synthesis. But in the end, to have and to hold and to endure in politics is about each actor's capacity to focus on what to think, understand, communicate and do. Schooled or not, trained or not, wise or self-confident, unilateralist or multilateralist, the humans engaged in politics have to focus. Not constantly, but nonetheless doing it. And that is what matters the most: the repetitive centre of important, must-have, essential, vital or whatever. And this drives us back to the aforementioned connection of Security to the old and new brains.

Security, with capital letter, because it is this common and overused word that has come to represent quite the magical concept for almost everything hard to explain but decisive, especially in high-politics.

Thus, is not the new brain but the old, *reptilian* one, which connects us to the most security-related actions and reactions of humans. Basic needs, instincts, primary actions and reactions are all related to the reptilian brain of survival.

The new brain of evolution, outcome of education and personal development matters but it is constantly superseded by the reptilian brain when dealing with ultimate positioning about a must-have thing.

It is beyond the goals of this article and skills of its author to re-write the theory and practice of International Relations. But Focalism will draw the reader's attention towards the importance of self-observance, discipline and hybris.

Since the days of early history writing, both Chinese and Greek scholars had been committed to explanation of the past, especially of expansion, hegemony, rivalry, victory and failure. Throughout time, but especially in the modern and contemporary ages of Science, politics, polities and policies have been analysed in order to capture the essence of personality-power mix. It is this author's scientific creed that regardless of all attributes of knowledge, when the fateful moment comes the decision-maker is focused on few ideas and values. Not all of history is representative for a focused mind and body but the quintessence of human/political personality is to be embedded in selective glimpses and episodes. Hence the recurrence studied by the scholars to whom I pledge my allegiance: Arnold Toynbee and Neagu Djuvara.

When such a speculative brand of Philosophy of History meets International Relations, the result could be Focalism, meaning an interest in pointing out what motivates especially the most ambitious, action-driven leaders at state, regional, continental, global levels.

Abstract words like *form*, *substance*, *essence*, *structure*, *universal and persistence* have been dealt with by Plato, Aristotle, Kant or Wittgenstein. But neither[1] of them was directly involved in successfully impacting political life and international relations, the closest nonetheless being Aristotle with his tutoring of Alexander Macedon, *the Great*.

"The totality of existing states of affairs is the world" makes one of Wittgenstein's key ideas. *Facts*, *things*, *reality*, *world* have defined his Picture theory of language. But when compared to Talleyrand's Memoirs, Kissinger's Diplomacy, Brzezinski's Grand Chessboard, or Gaddis' Grand Strategy, the reader is puzzled by the prosaic of International Relations as the by-product of *prioritization of adversity*.

Focalism deals not only with *ambition*, *honour, prestige* and *eagerness to be successful* but also with *anxiety* as focal element of not losing the already achieved level of power or the promise of it. Therefore, especially when dealing with anarchy[2], prioritization of adversity is my take on the famous adagio "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", leading to the following adaptation of it: *Of my enemies, the less of an enemy who is more of an enemy to my most of an enemy is my friend*. The validity of such conclusion is nonetheless circumstantial and time-related because such a kaleidoscope of statuses is fluid and shifting. As seen throughout ages but also within the same historical process[3] or even phenomenon, it is not necessarily about a recalibration of the classic balance of

[1] Plato had three failed stints as visiting advisor to a famous family of tyrants of the Greek classic world, Dionysius I and II of Syracuse, from which he barely managed to escape alive despite his diligence as how-to guide to becoming a philosopher-king.

[2] E.g. the post-Bayazid I Ottoman and regional age of rivalry between his sons, analysed in a joint chapter with my Father, Prof. Gheorghe Angliţoiu (2021)

[3] E.g. the seven Wars of the Diadochi fought by the generals of Alexander Macedon for his succession, in shifting alliances

power[1] but a change of priority for the decision-maker or broker based on who has become or tends to be more or less challenging or adversarial in the selfish quest for importance and ultimate dominance. It has to do with a mix of rational planning, ambition and stress of the unknown taking recurrently the centre stage of neural focus.

A great political idea, at least in the mind of the decision-maker in International Relations, with the potential of being "ideal", could be the Platonist *universal form* awaiting correct transposition in reality. Aristotelian *essence versus universal* or not, International Relations are not autonomous of political humans making them. Also, states as main actors of International Relations are less institutions/primary substances and more *people-centric and being*. "L'état c'est **moi"** and "après **moi/nous** le déluge" may be short depictions of absolutist rule/image of it. But linked with so many other proofs of verbal or practical (need of) grandeur, History of International Relations appears more as large scale (if successful) transpositions of a few focused facts or things, than the Wittgenstein-like "sum-total of reality is the world".

In conclusion, Focalism could be defined as the theory and practice of thinking, communicating, deciding and doing based on a *primary centre* as the top/main reason, representation and goal of power.

The focal centre consists of points and it is usually recurrent, brief in description and easy to use. It could be subject to change when matters of security determine or affect the success of achieving, maintaining or justifying the use of power. Focalist decision-making can use temporary and/or pseudo-focal points meant to opportunistically conceal or preempt the real focal centre, thus protecting the inner self of reasoning, impulse and belief.

On a side note, it should also be emphasized the relevance of *great destiny* and *good fortune* for Focalism. Usually disregarded by the mainstream IR theories, the irational has nonetheless been a constant presence in the focal centre of many leaders. Believing in fate and playing a high stakes political card by trusting Lady Luck have shaped international relations in some of the most

[1] Which does not exist per se but it is only a neural construct, and not compulsorily the same for each stakeholder.

crucial moments of hegemony seeking. Choosing an auspicious date by consulting an oracle, reading the signs of the future by trusting the divination of a mage or seer, seeking illumination, absolution and immortality from a holy man, building up resources by enroling an alchemist, talking to the dead by the interplay of a medium, making human sacrifices in order to appease the gods on advice from high priests, or simply drawing lots and appointing commanders on perception of being favoured by the divine have all been around since humans have sought to dominate others, especially at the vast scale of international relations. Truly believing or faking it in order to please and persuade the crowds, the use of irational has often made leaders predictable in the eyes of their better informed rivals, and prone to indecision, over-confidence, fatalism, suspicion, misjudgement and overall error.

2.CASE STUDY

Few moments in History can overpass the episode that I chose for my focalist argument.

Let us go back in time to the end of the Han dynasty[1], around 208 AD. The realm of *the Middle Kingdom* is being in a state of almost permanent conflict and anarchy since the outbreak of the Yellow Turban Rebellion a quarter of century before. The falling Han emperors are under the control of court officials and provincial warlords, and thus unable to impose by themselves "the mandate of Heaven" – the legal and religious basis of their rule.

By 208 AD, Prime Minister Cao Cao has risen to the top of Han political hierarchy by placing young emperor Xian under his tutelage. No one seems to stand in his way to supremacy, with the exception of a lower member of the

[1] The descent of the Han dynasty into warlordism and *ad-hoc* states with their own foreign and security policies will become a cyclical pattern for later dynasties, comparable also to other Asian jurisdictions where stratocracy will react violently to civilian control over administration and security sector on behalf of *the Son of Heaven* (e.g. the Sengoku period in Medieval Japan). For an overall historical assessment of the second age of the Han dynasty, see de Crespigny (2017).

House Han – Liu Bei. Described by the main historical and literary sources (*The Records of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) as the *Imperial Uncle*, this minor Han[1] official embarks upon a mission of *restoration* of the imperial rule.

Lucid, driven, frugal, humane and resilient, he manages to bring by his side three warriors of extraordinary martial prowess who will become famous under his leadership[2], plus one strategist, the celebrated *Hidden Dragon*, Zhuge Liang.

In the end, it will prove to be a long war between two strategists, Cao Cao and Zhuge Liang. Cao Cao may be the villain in the Han-sympathetic chronicles, but should also be remembered as one of the most important commentators of Sun Tzu.

As the story goes, Cao Cao is focused on subduing any opposition to his emerging rule, being quite successful at it. His methodical drive to hegemony had seen him emerge victorious against overwhelming odds, and by 208 AD was in position to claim dominance. *His focal point is to be supreme leader no matter the costs*. Being only the descendant of a Han official, he cannot ascend the throne but only act as lord chancellor and imperial guardian of sorts. He has made the emperor bestow upon him important titles and the mandate to bring the whole of China back into the fold. Almost no one seems to resist him anymore. Even Liu Bei, despite the memorable bravery of his three generals, is on the brink of total defeat after a series of tactical losses and withdrawals against the bulk of Cao Cao's army of one million soldiers.

Pinned against *the Great River* (Yangtze)[3], Liu Bei has only one card left to play in this power struggle of his: to appeal to the political and military benevolence of Sun Quan, the leader of Wu (South-East China), dubbed as the *Caitiff-Suppressor*

[1] Despite his insignificant upbringing, Cao Cao will also be one of the most important Sun Tzu's *Art of War* commentators and a talented poet. For his most comprehensive non-Chinese modern biography, see de Crespigny (2010).

[2] Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhao Yun. Later on, together with Huang Zhong and Ma Chao they will represent Liu Bei's *Five Tiger Generals*.

[3] His defeat at Dangyang could be considered one of the first examples of use of the *Responsability to protect* principle, Liu Bei shielding with his rear-guard, at huge cost, the retreat of civilians loyal to him.

but in fact, at that time, a third-generation leader of famous heritage but unknown leadership prowess.

Enter Zhuge Liang, courtesy name Kongming. A reclusive and underestimated "legalist" scientist living in a hut nearby the mythical Mount Wudang, the birthplace of Taoist martial arts, Zhuge Liang was insistently sought after by Liu Bei, who three times famously tried and failed to recruit his counselling services. Finally, after a testing last visit, Liu Bei managed to persuade him. In an age when at the other end of the political map, in Rome, a short-lived reign[1] within the Severus dynasty would be focused on a different kind of vital priorities, Liu Bei strove to follow the long established Confucianist tradition of enrolling scholars as strategists, meaning the top advisory/administrative/military position of the apparatus.

During this fateful meeting, a strategic plan was to be unveiled by Zhuge Liang, and embraced by Liu Bei and his followers as the focal point of their political struggles. *The Longzhong Plan* targeted the establishment of the future Shu Han state, based on the central-western provinces of Jing and Yi. The inception of such a base would have contained Cao Cao expansion from the central-north and would have created an opportunity for a pincer alliance with Sun Quan.

So it was about one last effort to stop Cao Cao. Zhuge Liang embarked on a dangerous diplomatic mission to try and rally Sun Quan to their cause. But before proceeding any further, it should be showcased how truly dangerous envoy missions where back then when nothing could guarantee safe passage and personal security of the emissary. It was all about gambling on the success of the diplomatic mission. Otherwise, death, torture, mutilation or imprisonment could await the designated diplomat.

Cao Cao had anticipated such a move and sent to Sun Quan a courteous but powerful message meant to intimidate the regional chieftain and bring him into smart submission by inviting him to join forces and crush rebellious Liu Bei.

[1] Elagabalus (218-222 AD), controversely described by Dio Cassius as focused on changing his gender by offering half of his empire to the surgeon who would do it. Beyond typical senatorial elements of *damnatio memoriae*, Dio Cassius' contemporary depiction of such a ruler highlighted the stark difference between a role-model head of state using *gravitas,* and a capricious hedonist.

Both aforementioned sources depict the strong impression that message bore onto Sun Quan.

This is the setting for Zhuge Liang's arrival at Sun Quan's residence in Chaisang. He is not alone but joined in effort by one of Sun Quan's advisors and generals, Lu Su, who acts as willing intermediary. The sources do not state it clearly, but the events show him at odds with Sun Quan's top advisor, Zhang Zhao. Noteworthy it is also the fact that Zhuge Liang's older brother, Zhuge Jin, to whom he bore a genuine respect, was also an important advisor to Sun Quan.

Three episodes will define Zhuge Liang's presence at Sun Quan's court: his debate with Sun Quan's senior advisors, his private meeting with Sun Quan, and his subsequent visit to the volatile but talented Zhou Yu – Sun Quan's favourite general.

The most vivid and detailed description of Zhuge Liang's dialogue with Sun Quan's court comes from the literary version of the events - The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Renowned for his elegance of speech and outfit, Zhuge Liang uses nonetheless an offensive rhetoric (based on honour, loyalty, bravery and wisdom) meant to quickly quell the arguments of Sun Quan's present advisors, all of them, with the exception of Lu Su, supporting the option of an alliance with Cao Cao.

The upper, even more surprising notch of Zhuge Liang's behaviour comes when confronted with the prospect of being thrown to prison as a consequence of his persistence in pleading for the rebuttal of Cao Cao promise of alliance to Sun Quan. Mentioned only in The Records of the Three Kingdoms, this moment shows a violent Zhuge Liang drawing his sword and killing Cao Cao'e emissary and thus placing Sun Quan ('s court) at potential fault: would an ever-suspicious Cao Cao believe that Zhuge Liang and not the host Sun Quan was responsible for such a killing?! But Sun Quan's prompt reaction saves Zhuge Liang who is sparred of prison and murder charges.

The private audience episode reflects once more the mastery of Liu Bei's strategist: by focusing on the reverence of Wu leader for "the most wonderful

man of the day"[1] and his geopolitical anxiety, Zhuge Liang emphasizes understanding for the impossible situation Sun Quan was faced with, in the context of the mortal danger of Cao Cao's invasion in the case of an alliance with Liu Bei. Therefore, *per a contrario*, Zhuge Liang, underlines the special destiny of his master Liu[2] (Bei) as honourable descendant of House Han, whose only choice is self-sacrifice, in comparison with a Sun (Quan). The implicit irony at the status of such an abulic heir of another prestigious house induces Sun Quan to leave the throne hall meeting in a status of nervousness and loss of face. Dispared, Lu Su, who constantly had advised Zhuge Liang to refrain himself from mentioning the size of one million of Cao Cao's army, only for the latter to do exactly the opposite, questions him about the reason of doing so by unnerving his host, the one on whom hanged everything in balance. The reply will be memorable: because despite the fact that I know how to defeat Cao Cao, I was not asked to share it. The follow-up is history: urged by Lu Su, a calm and optimist Sun Quan grants Zhuge Liang a private audience, on which occasion he is told the key to victory: to attack as soon as possible Cao Cao's forces which were tired, dispersed, unacclimatised and lacked experience in naval warfare.

Zhuge Liang visit to Zhou Yu brings forth another layer of his persuasion by putting the onus on the host to defend the honour of his wife, Xiao Qiao - a famous beauty. By focusing on Cao Cao's eagerness to invade Wu as a pretext to succeed in collecting the most beautiful women to himself, particularly the sisters Qiao, Zhuge Liang provokes a reluctant Zhou Yu into action to defend both his role as invincible commander in chief, but also the alpha male status of a concupiscent yet devoted husband. This episode is of particular importance when compared to the later military rivalry between Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang, the obsessive-compulsive nature of the Wu military leader being allegedly

[1] In the words of Huang Gai, the other advisor opposing the prospect of an alliance of Wu with Cao Cao. Sun Quan himself will begin his discussion with Zhuge Liang by quoting Lu Su's appraisal of the latter as "genius".

[2] The surname of Han emperors since the founding father Liu Bang, of peasant origin

exploited again by the skillful stratagems of *the Hidden Dragon*, a civilian commander with no personal fighting experience.[1]

Therefore, by identifying, exacerbating and using the focal points of Wu hierarchy, Zhuge Liang[2] is ultimately successful in bringing Sun Quan into an alliance with his master, Liu Bei, against all odds. Cao Cao invasion of the South will end up in failure, the battle of the Red Cliffs being one of the most spectacular and surprising military defeats ever.

The alliance between Liu Bei and Sun Quan will prove to be a contextual and fragile one after Cao Cao's retreat. Each of the three will harbour ambitions for supremacy, and regardless of their rhetoric will contribute through their goals and actions to the demise of the Han dynasty in 220 AD and its formal replacement by three splinter states - Cao Wei, Shu Han and Eastern Wu.

In the end, another master of Focalism, Sima Yi, the antagonist strategist to Zhuge Liang, will manage by knowledge, skills, foresight and patience to secure the defeat and subordination of the three imperial lines, which had emerged with the demise of the Han dynasty. Thus, the descendants of Cao Cao, Liu Bei and Sun Quan, the founding fathers of the three kingdoms, will fail to secure endurance and will succumb to Sima Yi's sons and nephews in their drive to create between 263-280 AD a new, unifying dynasty – the Jin...

[1] The interactions between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu are marginally documented by *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* but extensively augmented and dramatized in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. They are significant in order to highlight the overall impact that history mixed with literature of large circulation and appreciation could have on readers of political and military exploits, serving as focalist imaginary tool to bolster strategic thinking and mentality. For an authoritative work on the complicated relationship between Shu Han and Wu, prior and after their formal establishment, see de Crespigny (1990).

[2] Only a few of his works, written in Taoist canon, have been translated in European languages and therefore he has remained quite unknown or was wrongly attributed pieces not written (entirely) by him (most notably the Thirty-Six Stratagems). See his chapter *The Way of the General* in Zhuge (2013).

3.EPILOGUE

The critics of such an example could point out its uselessness for the post-modern international society based on norms and not on whims of "heroes" and "villains".

But such a historical example of classic imperial China is once again relevant because after more than one "century of humiliation", *the Middle Kingdom*, albeit under communist rule, is once again eager to dominate world affairs, this time at planetary scale. The Western thinking, which took some time to get accustomed to the Kremlin mindset in the Cold War, has mostly ignored or underestimated Peking's revival, and is less equipped to understand Chinese quest for supremacy whose origins, ideology and political imaginary date back to at least 500 years before the first European large scale empire.

It is therefore advisable for Western decision-makers and planners to better understand and use Focalism with Chinese lenses in order to pivot and cope with the insecurity of losing primacy.[1] A global age of warring states or three hyper-kingdoms[2] is at stake, and if History is to be listen to, we will be needing all the Zhuge Liang-s of the world in order to mitigate the risk of falling into a new dark age of aggression, supremacy and disrespect for ordinary lives and freedoms.

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[1] I would select in this respect Lee Kuan Yew, capable in a style pertaining to old Chinese strategists to mix pragmatist theory and practice for the survival, reform, development, posturing, relevance and overall success of his city-state Singapore, in between competing "big fish" powers. See Allison & Blackwill (2013).

[2] The United States, China and Russia. Early signs of the second Trump Administration indicate a potential *Kissinger in reverse* stratagem meant to decouple Russia from China, by appeasing Putin and confronting Xi Jinping. Such an option could have little chances of success taken into account the joint stakes that Putin and Xi have to prioritize the West as *most of an enemy* but could lead instead to severe frictions between the American and European pillars of the Transatlantic link. Moreover, the ego-based display of ultimate vision by Trump, promoter of a *new golden age* for America, could see *the new Rome* of Washington DC caught in between zig-zagging isolationism and interventionism with no clear conception and use of vetted and checked democratic powers.

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