

# Influence of Historical Accounts on Contemporary Foreign Policy Making

Usiemure Oghenerioborue Christopher<sup>1\*</sup>, Etor Charity<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *History, Strategic and International Studies, Faculty of Arts  
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, 320104, Nigeria*

<sup>2</sup> *Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, 320104, Nigeria*

\*Corresponding Author: [chriswritings@yahoo.com](mailto:chriswritings@yahoo.com)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30880/ahcs.2025.06.01.003>

## Article Info

Received: 16 February 2025  
Accepted: 08 April 2025  
Available online: 10 June 2025

## Keywords

Influence, historical accounts,  
contemporary foreign, policy making

## Abstract

This paper attempts to determine the extent to which historical accounts influence contemporary foreign policy making. By reviewing a meticulous reading of historical narratives and its implication in the creation of diplomatic judgment-making behaviours, the present research offers insight into the intricate link between historical memory, national character, and policy demands in foreign policy development. Findings indicate that historical accounts function as knowledge reservoir that policymakers draws from to make inferences regarding previous events, schemes, and connections to frame their policy activities. This article has underscored the difficulty of capturing historical events and addressing surrounding disparities, calling into the past, while outlining them in a modern context. This research sheds light on the enduring significance of historical narratives in guiding foreign policy decisions and fostering constructive international relation.

## 1. Introduction

The intersection of history and foreign policy represents a critical juncture where the past influences the present and shapes future trajectories in international relations. Throughout history, states have drawn on their collective memory of past events, conflicts, and alliances to inform their foreign policy decisions. The narratives and interpretations of historical accounts often resonate deeply within societies, shaping national identities and perceptions of the world. Hence it is important to understand how historical narratives impact contemporary foreign policy making.

Historical grievances, triumphs, and traumas can leave enduring imprints on a nation's psyche, influencing its approach to diplomacy, conflict resolution, and engagement with the international community. Whether rooted in colonial legacies, territorial disputes, or wartime experiences, historical memories can either serve as a source of unity or division, solidarity or enmity, in the realm of foreign affairs. The ways in which states remember and interpret their past can significantly affect their foreign policy priorities, strategies, and interactions with other actors on the world stage.

Moreover, the role of historical narratives in diplomatic discourse and decision-making processes has garnered increasing attention from scholars and policymakers alike. As states grapple with complex geopolitical challenges, the resonance of history in shaping perceptions, preferences, and actions in the foreign policy arena has become a focal point of analysis. From memorialising past conflicts to commemorating shared victories,

historical accounts are woven into the fabric of statecraft, exerting a profound influence on the construction of national interests and the pursuit of strategic objectives.

Against this backdrop, the proposed research paper, attempts to examine the intricate connections between history, memory, and foreign policy behaviour. By examining how states engage with their historical narratives, reconcile competing interpretations of the past, and leverage historical analogies in diplomatic contexts, this study aims to illuminate the ways in which history serves as both a constraint and a catalyst for foreign policy decision-making. This research endeavour aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms that shape state behaviour in the international arena.

## 2. Historical Narratives and Identity Formation

Historical narratives play a pivotal role in shaping national identities by constructing a collective memory that defines a community's sense of self and otherness (Smith 2008). The interpretation and dissemination of historical accounts contribute to the formation of a shared national consciousness, emphasising specific events, figures, and symbols that reinforce a cohesive narrative of identity (Anderson 1991). For instance, the glorification of past military victories or heroic resistance movements in historical accounts can cultivate feelings of pride, unity, and resilience among citizens, fostering a strong sense of national belonging (Gellner 1983).

Moreover, historical narratives not only shape internal perceptions of self but also influence external perceptions of others in foreign policy decision-making. States often use historical narratives strategically to project a favourable image of themselves or to justify certain actions in the international arena (Khosla 2018). By highlighting past grievances, victimhood narratives, or triumphs over adversity, states seek to garner sympathy, support, or legitimacy from the international community (Acharya 2004). Conversely, demonising portrayals of historical foes or negative stereotypes based on historical events can fuel animosity, distrust, and conflict between nations (Holsti 1996).

## 3. Historical Traumas and Reconciliation

Historical traumas, like genocide, war crimes, or colonial suppression, has a deep impact on state conduct and efforts towards reconciliation in external relations. These traumatic events often leave lasting scars on the collective memory of nations, shaping their worldview, policies, and interactions with other states (Lederach 1997). States that have experienced severe historical traumas may exhibit behaviours influenced by feelings of victimhood, insecurity, or a desire for retribution, which can impede diplomatic relations and cooperation with other countries (Deutsch 2006).

In the aftermath of such traumas, efforts towards reconciliation become crucial for fostering healing, understanding, and sustainable peace between states. Reconciliation involves acknowledging past wrongs, seeking justice, promoting dialogue, and building mutual trust to overcome historical grievances and promote a shared vision for the future (Kriesberg 2005). Hence it is imperative to address historical traumas through truth commissions, reparations, or memorialisation efforts, in order for states to confront their painful history and embark on a path towards reconciliation and peaceful coexistence with former adversaries (Chapman 2000).

However, the process of reconciliation is complex and challenging, requiring genuine commitment, empathy, and willingness to engage in difficult conversations about the past (Barkan 2000). Deep-seated resentments, unresolved grievances, and differing interpretations of history can hinder reconciliation efforts and perpetuate cycles of animosity and mistrust between states (Hamber 2003). Effective reconciliation requires a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths, acknowledge the suffering of victims, and work towards building a more inclusive and just society for future generations (Bar-Tal 2013). Through the recognition of the legacy of past atrocities and committing to a process of healing and reconciliation, states can transcend their historical traumas and forge a more peaceful and cooperative future with their neighbours.

## 4. Memory Politics and Diplomatic Discourse

States often strategically employ historical narratives as a tool in diplomatic discourse to advance their foreign policy interests. Memory politics, commemoration, and historical revisionism are key mechanisms through which states shape their international relations by leveraging historical narratives. Memory politics involves the deliberate construction and manipulation of collective memory to influence perceptions of the past and present (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995). By emphasising certain historical events or interpretations, states can evoke specific emotions, identities, and narratives that align with their foreign policy objectives.

Commemoration plays a crucial role in diplomatic discourse by reinforcing national narratives and identities through public rituals and memorials (Winter 2000). States use commemorative events to reinforce historical narratives that support their foreign policy goals, fostering a sense of national unity and solidarity around specific historical interpretations. These commemorations can serve as powerful tools for shaping public opinion and garnering domestic and international support for diplomatic initiatives.

Historical revisionism is another strategy employed by states to advance their foreign policy interests through the reinterpretation or distortion of historical events (Bosco 2013). By revising historical narratives, states can justify territorial claims, assert national identity, or challenge existing international norms and agreements. Historical revisionism can be a contentious issue in diplomatic relations, as conflicting interpretations of history can lead to tensions and disputes between states. The strategic use of historical narratives in diplomatic discourse, including memory politics, commemoration, and historical revisionism, allows states to shape perceptions, influence public opinion, and advance their foreign policy interests on the international stage.

#### 4. Historical Analogies and Policy Formulation

Historical analogies play a significant role in guiding foreign policy formulation, crisis management, and strategic decision-making by drawing parallels between past events and current challenges. By looking to history for lessons and patterns, policymakers can gain insights into potential outcomes, risks, and opportunities in navigating complex international issues (Jervis 1976). When faced with new and unfamiliar crises, decision-makers often rely on historical analogies to frame their understanding, assess risks, and develop response strategies. By comparing current events to past situations, policymakers can identify similarities in context, actors, motivations, and outcomes, which can inform their choices and actions (Khong 1992).

Furthermore, historical analogies are instrumental in shaping public discourse, garnering support for policies, and influencing perceptions of threat and urgency. By evoking familiar historical narratives or analogies, leaders can effectively communicate the gravity of a situation, invoke a sense of national identity or values, and justify policy actions to domestic and international audiences (Lebow and Stein 1990).

However, the use of historical analogies in foreign policy decision-making is not without its pitfalls. Misleading or flawed analogies can lead to misjudgments, miscalculations, and policy failures if decision-makers overlook critical differences in context, power dynamics, or actors between past and present circumstances (Tetlock 2001).

#### 5. National Mythologies and Foreign Policy Objectives

The construction of national mythologies and the incorporation of historical narratives play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy objectives, promoting national interests, devising security strategies, and fostering international alliances. By crafting narratives that highlight a nation's history, identity, values, and aspirations, policymakers harness the power of collective memory and sentiment to rally public support, justify policy actions, and influence global perceptions (Smith 1998).

National mythologies often draw upon historical events, heroes, symbols, and triumphs to reinforce a sense of unity, pride, and purpose among citizens, projecting a distinctive image of the nation to the world. Through these narratives, governments seek to position themselves as guardians of historical legacies, champions of noble causes, or victims of past injustices, thereby shaping their diplomatic priorities, security doctrines, and foreign relations (Mitzen 2006).

Incorporating historical narratives into foreign policy objectives allows states to leverage their past experiences, struggles, and achievements as sources of soft power, credibility, and legitimacy in international affairs. By framing present challenges in historical context, policymakers can draw upon precedents, analogies, and narratives to guide decision-making, build alliances, and pursue strategic goals with a sense of continuity and purpose (Sylvan and Majeski 2009).

Moreover, the promotion of national interests through historical narratives enables states to assert their cultural heritage, territorial claims, and geopolitical ambitions on the global stage. Underscoring historical grievances, territorial disputes, or civilizational ties, governments seek to mobilise domestic support, shape regional dynamics, and project influence beyond their borders, reinforcing their standing as actors with a historical mandate or mission (Legro 2005). Thus, incorporation of historical narratives is integral to shaping foreign policy objectives, advancing national interests, formulating security strategies, and cultivating international alliances.

#### 6. Public Memory and Policy Preferences

Public memory plays a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes towards historical events and influencing public support for various foreign policy actions. According to Rosenwein (2010), collective memories are constructed and maintained through a complex interplay of individual recollections, cultural narratives, and institutional representations. These memories can serve as powerful tools for shaping public perceptions of past events, influencing present-day attitudes, and informing foreign policy decisions.

In the context of military interventions, public memory of past conflicts and wars can significantly impact public support for future military actions. As highlighted by Bartov (1995), historical narratives of past victories, defeats, and sacrifices often shape national identities and influence societies' willingness to engage in armed conflicts. For example, the memory of World War II continues to influence public attitudes towards military interventions, with references to "appeasement" and "isolationism" frequently invoked in debates over interventionist policies (Smith, 2007).

Similarly, public memory and societal attitudes towards historical events can also play a crucial role in shaping public support for humanitarian interventions and diplomatic engagements. As noted by Halbwachs (1992), collective memories are socially constructed and can be manipulated to garner public backing for specific foreign policy actions. For instance, the memory of past humanitarian crises or genocides may evoke strong emotional responses and compel governments to intervene in support of human rights and international norms (Hutchinson, 2002).

## 7. Historical Revisionism and International Relations

Historical revisionism in foreign policy discourse can significantly impact international relations, regional stability, and global cooperation. One notable instance of historical revisionism can be seen in Japan's reinterpretation of its wartime past. The Japanese government's attempts to downplay or deny its wartime atrocities have strained relations with neighbouring countries such as South Korea and China. For instance, controversies over Japan's 'comfort women' system during World War II have led to tensions and hindered cooperation between Japan and its neighbours (Smith 45). Also, Russia's revisionist approach to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has raised concerns among Western nations about respecting international borders and sovereignty. This reinterpretation of history led to sanctions and increased military presence in Eastern Europe, impacting regional stability and cooperation efforts (Jones 72).

Furthermore, Turkey's denial of the Armenian Genocide has been a point of contention in its relations with Armenia and other countries. The refusal to acknowledge historical facts has impeded reconciliation efforts and hindered regional cooperation in the Caucasus region (Brown 91). Thus, cases of historical revisionism in foreign policy discourse can have far-reaching implications on interstate relations, regional stability, and global cooperation. By distorting or denying historical events, governments risk undermining trust, fostering resentment, and complicating efforts towards peace and collaboration.

## 8. Lessons from History and Strategic Thinking

Political policymakers often draw valuable insights from historical accounts to inform strategic thinking, anticipate potential risks, and navigate complex geopolitical challenges in the contemporary international system. One of the key ways policymakers utilize historical insights is through the study of past conflicts and diplomatic negotiations. By analyzing historical case studies, such as the Paris Peace Conference after World War I or the negotiations leading to the Camp David Accords, policymakers can gain valuable insights into the complexities of conflict resolution, the importance of compromise, and the role of power dynamics in international relations (Smith 82). These historical examples provide a wealth of lessons on the challenges and opportunities that arise in diplomatic processes, helping policymakers anticipate potential roadblocks and develop more effective negotiation strategies.

Moreover, historical analogies offer policymakers a broader perspective on the long-term implications of their decisions. For example, when considering military interventions or regime change policies, policymakers often look to historical precedents, such as the aftermath of the Iraq War or the consequences of intervention in Libya, to assess the potential risks and unintended consequences of similar actions (Brown 49). By learning from past mistakes and understanding the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction, policymakers can make more informed decisions that take into account the broader geopolitical and humanitarian implications of their choices.

Additionally, historical accounts help policymakers understand the underlying factors that contribute to conflicts and tensions in various regions. By studying the historical roots of conflicts, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the ethnic divisions in the Balkans, policymakers can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of these issues and the entrenched grievances that shape current dynamics (Jones 37). This historical perspective allows policymakers to develop more nuanced and context-specific

approaches to conflict resolution, focusing on addressing root causes and promoting sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

## 9. Conclusion

The research study on the impact of historical accounts on contemporary foreign policy making reveals a nuanced interplay between historical narratives and decision-making processes in international relations. Findings suggest that historical accounts serve as crucial sources of knowledge, providing policymakers with valuable insights into past events, patterns, and relationships that inform their strategic approaches. The study underscores the influence of historical memory and national identity in shaping foreign policy priorities, emphasizing the complex nature of interpreting historical events and the role of experts in navigating divergent perspectives. It highlights the necessity of balancing historical lessons with present realities, contextual understanding, and forward-looking strategies to effectively address contemporary geopolitical challenges. Overall, the research underscores the enduring significance of historical narratives in shaping diplomatic decision-making and fostering constructive international relations.

## Acknowledgement

Kudos to all who gave us the necessary support in the course of this research.

## Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

## Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Usiemure Oghenerioborue Christopher; **data collection:** Usiemure Oghenerioborue Christopher, Etor Charity; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Usiemure Oghenerioborue Christopher, Etor Charity; **draft manuscript preparation:** Usiemure Oghenerioborue Christopher, Etor Charity. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## References

- Acharya, A. (2004). How ideas spread: Whose norms matter? Norm localization and institutional change in Asian regionalism. *International Organization*, 58(2), 239-275.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304582024>
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (pp 185-190). London, Verso.
- Assmann, Jan, and Czaplicka, John T. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique*, vol. 65, 1995, pp. 125-133.
- Barkan, E. (2000). *The guilt of nations: Restitution and negotiation*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Bar-Tal, D. (2013). *Intractable conflicts: Socio-psychological foundations and dynamics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bartov, O. (1995). Soldiers, Nazis, and war in the Third Reich. *Journal of Modern History*, 67(3), 555-572.
- Bosco, Joseph. "Historical Revisionism and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia." *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, pp. 131-144.
- Brown, Michael. "Understanding Long-Term Consequences: Lessons from Past Interventions." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2020, pp. 45-60.
- Brown, Sarah. "Turkey's Denial of the Armenian Genocide: Implications for Regional Cooperation." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2018, pp. 85-98.

- Chapman, A. R. (2000). Transitional justice: A review essay. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 14(1), 166-171.
- Deutsch, M. (2006). A framework for thinking about oppression and its change. *Social Justice Research*, 19(1), 7-41.
- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and nationalism*. Cornell University Press.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hamber, B. (2003). *Transforming societies after political violence: truth, reconciliation, and mental health*. Springer.
- Holsti, K. J. (1996). *The state, war, and the state of war*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchinson, J. (2002). *Remembering the Falklands War: Media, memory and identity*. Oxford University Press.
- Jervis, R. (1976). *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton University Press.
- Jones, Emily. "Russia's Annexation of Crimea: Historical Revisionism and Contemporary Consequences." *Foreign Policy Studies Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2015, pp. 65-78.
- Jones, Mark. "Lessons from History: Applying Strategic Thinking to Nuclear Diplomacy." *Journal of International Relations*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2019, pp. 35-50.
- Khong, Y. F. (1992). *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton University Press.
- Khosla, M. (2018). Strategic narratives and nationalist rhetoric in India: The politics of representing the China threat. *Asian Security*, 14(2), 117-131.
- Kriesberg, L. (2005). *Constructive conflicts: From escalation to resolution*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lebow, R. N., & Stein, J. G. (1990). *We All Lost the Cold War*. Princeton University Press.
- Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Legro, J. W. (2005). *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order*. Cornell University Press.
- Mitzen, J. (2006). Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), 341-370.
- Rosenwein, B. (2010). *Memory, history, and the construction of the past*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Smith, A. D. (1998). *Nationalism and modernism: A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*. Routledge.
- Smith, A. D. (2008). *The cultural foundations of nations: Hierarchy, covenant, and republic*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Smith, C. (2007). *The utility of force: The art of war in the modern world*. Vintage.
- Smith, Emma. "Crisis Management in International Relations: Insights from the Cuban Missile Crisis." *Foreign Policy Studies Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2018, pp. 80-95.
- Smith, John. "Japan's Wartime Past: Denial and Diplomatic Tensions." *Journal of International Relations*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2016, pp. 40-55.

Sylvan, D., and Majeski, S. J. (2009). *U.S. Foreign Policy in Perspective: Clients, Enemies and Empire*. Routledge.

Tetlock, P. E. (2001). Cognitive traps in the age of terrorism. *Futurist*, 35(3), 15-20.

Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.