

The Freud's Trap in International Politics

Chen Yu*

[Abstract] [Purpose/significance] Sigmund Freud, the founder of the school of psychoanalysis, developed the concept of “repetition compulsion,” which suggests that individuals may unconsciously re-enact past traumatic experiences. This paper seeks to explore the applicability of Freud's concept of repetition compulsion in the field of international politics. [Method/process] This paper introduces the concept of the “Freud's Trap” in international relations, examines relevant historical and contemporary cases, analyzes the negative impact of the Freud's Trap, and explores the possibility of the state escaping from the Freud's Trap. [Result/conclusion] Freud's Trap, characterized by repetitive behaviors exhibited by states, pose a significant challenge to global stability and progress. In the future, further research and study on this topic will be necessary to fully understand the Freud's Trap and find effective strategies to overcome it.

[Keywords] International Politics Freud's Trap Repetition Compulsion

On October 16, 2023, Chen Yu, a Chinese scholar, wrote the outline and first draft of this paper using ChatGPT3.5, a chatbot program developed by OpenAI, USA. After that, Chen Yu carefully revised and finalized the paper. Undoubtedly, although ChatGPT made a great contribution to this paper, Chen Yu is the originator of the concept of "Freud's Trap".

The current bloody conflict between Palestinians and Israelis is a strong argument for the existence of the Freud's Trap in international politics.

1 Introduction

Sigmund Freud, the founder of the school of psychoanalysis, developed the concept of “repetition compulsion,” which suggests that individuals may unconsciously re-enact past traumatic experiences. This paper seeks to explore the applicability of Freud's concept of repetition compulsion in the field of international politics. By examining the behaviors exhibited by states, we demonstrate the existence of Freud's trap in which states are often trapped in a cycle of repetitive behaviors, even when these behaviors prove counterproductive or even detrimental to their own interests.

To illustrate the relevance of the Freud's trap in international politics, this paper will examine both historical and contemporary cases. The historical analysis will focus on the dynamics of the Cold War, while the contemporary analysis will examine the cycle of conflict in the Middle East, U.S. interventionist tendencies and

* E-mail: thestrategist@sohu.com。 ORCID: 0000-0002-8457-6757。

the persistence of territorial disputes driven by nationalism.

Understanding the consequences and implications of the Freud's trap in international politics is critical to developing effective strategies for escaping these repetitive behaviors. By recognizing and addressing the underlying psychological factors that drive repetition compulsion, states have the potential to break free from the Freud's trap.

Finally, this paper argues that the concept of repetition compulsion as developed by Freud can be applied to the field of international politics. Freud's trap, characterized by repetitive behaviors exhibited by states, pose a significant challenge to global stability and progress. By revealing the psychological motivations behind these behaviors, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of the dynamics of international relations and to contribute to the discussion of alternative ways out of the Freud's trap.

2 Repetition Compulsion in Psychology

According to Freud, repetition compulsion is an unconscious drive that compels individuals to recreate and relive traumatic experiences. By reenacting these experiences, individuals hope to find a resolution or a sense of mastery over the traumatic event. However, this compulsion often leads to the perpetuation of negative patterns and behaviors.

In psychology, repetition compulsion can manifest in various ways. For example, individuals may find themselves repeatedly entering into abusive relationships, even though they have previously suffered from such relationships. Similarly, individuals may engage in self-destructive behaviors, such as substance abuse or risky activities, as a means of reenacting past traumas and attempting to gain control over them.

3 Historical Examples of Repetition Compulsion in International Politics

Case study: Cold War dynamics and the arms race

The Cold War era provides a historical example of repetition compulsion in international politics, particularly in the context of the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

1. the recurring pattern of arms buildup and proxy conflicts

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a repetitive pattern of arms buildup and proxy conflicts. Both superpowers sought to outdo each other in terms of military capabilities, leading to a dangerous and costly arms race. This pattern involved the development and deployment of increasingly

advanced and destructive weapons, such as nuclear weapons, as each side sought to maintain a strategic advantage.

In addition to the arms race, the Cold War was characterized by numerous proxy conflicts, where the United States and the Soviet Union supported opposing factions in various countries. These proxy conflicts often mirrored the larger Cold War dynamics, with each side supporting local actors who represented their respective ideologies and interests.

2. Psychological motivations behind these repetitive behaviors

The repetition compulsion in the arms race and proxy conflicts of the Cold War can be attributed to several psychological motivations. Firstly, there was a deep-seated fear and mistrust between the United States and the Soviet Union, fueled by ideological differences and the perceived threat to their respective national security. This fear and mistrust drove both sides to engage in a cycle of arms buildup, as each sought to deter the other and ensure their own security.

Additionally, there was a psychological need for dominance and superiority. The United States and the Soviet Union both sought to assert their global influence and establish themselves as the dominant superpower. This need for dominance led to a constant competition to outdo each other in terms of military capabilities, resulting in the perpetuation of the arms race.

Furthermore, the repetition compulsion in the proxy conflicts can be attributed to a desire for influence and control. Both superpowers sought to extend their spheres of influence and promote their own political ideologies, leading them to support opposing factions in various countries. This desire for influence and control, combined with the fear of losing ground to the other side, perpetuated the cycle of proxy conflicts.

In conclusion, historical examples such as the arms race during the Cold War illustrate the manifestation of repetition compulsion in international politics. Psychological factors, including fear, mistrust, and the desire for dominance and control, contribute to the perpetuation of these repetitive patterns. Understanding these psychological motivations is crucial for devising strategies to break free from the Freud's trap and promote global stability and progress.

4 Contemporary Examples of Repetition Compulsion in International Politics

A. Case study 1: The cycle of conflict in the Middle East

The Middle East has long been plagued by a cycle of conflict, with recurring patterns that seem to defy resolution. This case study provides a prime example of repetition compulsion in international politics, as states in the region continue to engage in the same patterns of behavior, perpetuating a cycle of violence and instability.

1. Recurring patterns of conflict and failed peace efforts

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as a prominent example of the repetition compulsion in the Middle East. Despite numerous attempts at peace negotiations and the signing of various agreements, the conflict remains unresolved, with intermittent bouts of violence and hostility. The Oslo Accords in the 1990s, for instance, were initially hailed as a breakthrough in the peace process, but subsequent events demonstrated that the underlying issues and grievances were not adequately addressed, leading to a resumption of violence and a return to the status quo. In fact, in October 2023, a new round of bloody conflict erupted between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Similarly, conflicts in the region, such as the Arab-Israeli wars, have followed a repetitive pattern. Each cycle of conflict is marked by initial hostilities, followed by a temporary ceasefire or peace agreement, only to be followed by renewed tensions and violence.

2. Psychological factors contributing to the repetition of these patterns

Psychological factors play a significant role in perpetuating the repetition compulsion in the Middle East. Deep-seated grievances, historical traumas, and a sense of collective identity and victimhood contribute to the perpetuation of conflict. Both Israelis and Palestinians have experienced significant traumas and losses throughout their history, which have become deeply ingrained in their collective memory and identity.

These unresolved traumas and grievances create a psychological need for revenge, justice, and a sense of superiority or dominance. This need drives the parties involved to engage in repetitive behaviors, such as acts of violence, retribution, and resistance, as a means of seeking resolution or asserting their perceived rights and interests.

B. Case study 2: The United States and interventionist tendencies

The United States has a long history of interventionism in international politics, with a pattern of repeated interventions in different regions of the world. This case study provides an example of repetition compulsion in contemporary international politics, as the United States continues to engage in similar patterns of behavior, despite the mixed results and consequences of past interventions.

1. Repeated patterns of intervention in different regions

The United States has engaged in repeated interventions in different regions of the world. These interventions have taken various forms, such as military interventions, covert operations, and economic sanctions.

Despite the mixed results and consequences of these interventions, the United States continues to engage in similar patterns of behavior, as if compelled to repeat the same mistakes and failures of the past.

2. Psychological factors driving these interventionist behaviors

Psychological factors play a significant role in driving the United States' interventionist behaviors. One key factor is the belief in American exceptionalism

and the responsibility to promote democracy and human rights around the world. This belief has led to a sense of moral obligation to intervene in other countries' affairs, even when it may not be in the best interest of the United States or the countries involved.

Another psychological factor is the fear of threats to national security, such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the spread of authoritarianism. This fear drives the United States to engage in preemptive interventions and to support authoritarian regimes that align with American interests, as a means of maintaining stability and security.

Furthermore, there is a sense of historical trauma and guilt associated with past failures to intervene. This trauma creates a psychological need to intervene in situations where human rights abuses are occurring, as a means of preventing similar atrocities from happening again.

C. Case study 3: Nationalistic tendencies and territorial disputes

Territorial disputes and nationalist rhetoric are another example of repetition compulsion in contemporary international politics. Recurring territorial conflicts and disputes over national identity suggest a compulsion to reenact past traumas and assert dominance over perceived threats.

1. Recurring territorial conflicts and nationalist rhetoric

Territorial disputes are a recurring theme in international politics, with conflicts over borders, sovereignty, and resources leading to tensions and violence. One example is the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

Nationalist rhetoric often fuels these conflicts, with each side asserting its own historical and cultural claims to the disputed territory. This rhetoric creates a sense of identity and belonging, which can become deeply ingrained in the collective memory and psyche of the involved parties.

2. Psychological factors contributing to the repetition of these disputes

Psychological factors play a significant role in perpetuating territorial disputes and nationalist rhetoric. One key factor is the need for identity and belonging, which is often tied to territorial claims and historical narratives. This need drives the parties involved to assert their claims and defend their perceived rights and interests, even at the cost of violence and conflict.

Another psychological factor is the fear of losing ground and the desire for dominance and control. Territorial disputes often involve valuable resources and strategic locations, which can create a sense of competition and rivalry between the involved parties. This fear and desire for dominance can lead to a perpetuation of the conflict, as each side seeks to maintain or expand its territory and influence.

Furthermore, there is a sense of historical trauma and victimhood associated with past territorial losses and conflicts. This trauma creates a psychological need for retribution and a sense of justice, which can perpetuate the cycle of conflict and lead to a compulsion to reenact past traumas.

In conclusion, contemporary examples such as the cycle of conflict in the

Middle East, the United States' interventionist tendencies and territorial disputes fueled by nationalist rhetoric illustrate the manifestation of repetition compulsion in international politics. Psychological factors, including beliefs in exceptionalism, fear of threats to national security, sense of identity and belonging, fear of losing ground, and historical traumas and grievances, contribute to the perpetuation of these repetitive patterns. Understanding these psychological motivations is crucial for breaking free from the Freud's trap and promoting global stability and progress.

5 Consequences and Implications of the Freud's Trap

A. the negative impact of repetition compulsion in international politics

Repetition compulsion in international politics has significant negative consequences and implications. By repeating past patterns of behavior, countries often find themselves trapped in a cycle of conflict, intervention, and territorial disputes, which perpetuates instability and hinders global progress.

1. Escalation of conflicts and violence

Repeating past patterns of intervention and territorial disputes often leads to an escalation of conflicts and violence. As countries engage in repetitive behaviors, tensions rise, trust erodes, and the chances for peaceful resolution diminish. This can result in prolonged conflicts, increased human suffering, and the loss of countless lives.

2. Undermining trust and cooperation

Repetition compulsion undermines trust and cooperation among nations. When countries repeatedly intervene in the internal affairs of others or engage in territorial disputes, it creates a sense of mistrust and suspicion. This lack of trust hampers the ability to build strong diplomatic relationships and collaborate on shared global challenges.

3. Wasting resources and diverting attention

Engaging in repetition compulsion behaviors often wastes valuable resources and diverts attention from pressing global issues. Countries may invest significant resources in military interventions or territorial disputes, draining funds that could be better used for development, healthcare, education, and other essential needs. Moreover, the focus on repetitive behaviors distracts from addressing urgent global challenges such as climate change, poverty, and pandemics.

B. the potential for breaking free from the Freud's Trap

Breaking free from the Freud's Trap in international politics requires a conscious effort to recognize and address the underlying psychological motivations driving these behaviors. While challenging, it is not impossible to overcome these patterns and adopt alternative approaches to international relations.

1. Increased self-awareness and reflection

Countries must engage in self-reflection and increased self-awareness to recognize the repetitive patterns they are trapped in. By acknowledging the

psychological factors driving their behaviors, countries can begin to question and challenge these motivations, opening the door to alternative approaches.

2. Embracing diplomacy and dialogue

Countries can break free from repetition compulsion by prioritizing diplomacy and dialogue as the primary means of resolving conflicts and addressing disputes. Instead of resorting to military interventions or nationalist rhetoric, diplomatic negotiations and peaceful dialogue can foster understanding, compromise, and mutually beneficial outcomes.

3. Promoting multilateralism and global cooperation

To overcome repetition compulsion, countries should prioritize multilateralism and global cooperation. By working together through international organizations such as the United Nations, countries can address global challenges collectively and find solutions that benefit all parties involved. This approach reduces the likelihood of repeating past mistakes and promotes a more inclusive and equitable global order.

In conclusion, the negative consequences of repetition compulsion in international politics are evident in the escalation of conflicts, erosion of trust, and wastage of resources. However, breaking free from the Freud's Trap is possible through increased self-awareness, embracing diplomacy and dialogue, and promoting multilateralism. By adopting these strategies, countries can mitigate repetition compulsion behaviors and work towards a more peaceful and cooperative global order.

6 Conclusion

This paper introduces the concept of the Freud's Trap in international relations, examines relevant historical and contemporary cases, analyzes the negative impact of the Freud's Trap, and explores the possibility of the state escaping from the Freud's Trap. In conclusion, this paper argues that the Freud's Trap, characterized by repetitive behaviors exhibited by states, pose a significant challenge to global stability and progress. In the future, further research and study on this topic will be necessary to fully understand the Freud's Trap and find effective strategies to overcome it.