

The 'Security Dilemma' and South Asian Nuclear Relations: India-Pakistan

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JAMES GILGRIST, JAN 22 2008

Of all the dilemmas in world politics, the security dilemma is quintessential. It goes right to the heart of the theory and practice of international politics. (Wheeler and Booth 1992, p. 29)

The term Security Dilemma was first used by John Herz in 1951 to explain a situation that has long been understood in international politics. Through history its conception has evolved and its application has broadened. The basic premise nevertheless is the same in that it is a “dynamic ‘action-reaction’ cycle with insecurity breeding insecurity” (Wheeler and Booth 1992, p. 32). Patrick Morgan (2007) describes how the term is most commonly used in international politics to describe a situation where a government arms itself to increase its security but as a result scares other governments into arming as well, the net result being decreased security for all. Traditionally the theory has been employed in this way, at the inter-state level, however contemporary literature has applied its core concepts to facilitate the understanding of similar dynamics and the intra-state level. At the intra-state level it has been used to understand internal conflict such as ethnic conflict and also at the individual level to explain how personal security can be impeded as an inadvertent result of a state’s pursuit for increased national security, from terrorism for example. As well as having a number of applications the Security Dilemma has a number of different conceptions or definitions. This paper will begin by reviewing the existing literature on the Security Dilemma. It will then see whether the security dilemma can be applied to the India-Pakistan conflict with regards to their nuclear relations.

The situation that the Security Dilemma explains has long been recognised. Thucydides wrote at the time of the Peloponnesian wars that it was the “growth of Athenian power, which terrified the Lacedaemonians and put them under the necessity of fighting” (Brunt 1963, p. 13). John Herz (1951 cited Collins 1997) claimed that the Security Dilemma was also at work in the 19th century colonial competition in which the European powers competed for power and influence. In the 20th Century the Security Dilemma was perhaps most notably developed as a framework for understanding the dynamics at work in the Cold War superpower bi-polarity.

Often statesmen are unaware of the Security dilemma, but Posen (1993, p. 104) argues that even when they are aware of it “the nature of their situation compels them to take the steps they do”. The situation referred to here is anarchy. Herbert Butterfield, writing at the time of John Herz, felt that the Security Dilemma was behind all inter-state conflict. He used the term ‘Hobbesian fear’ to explain the cause of what he termed a “condition of absolute predicament or irreducible dilemma” (Butterfield 1951 cited Wheeler and Booth 1992, p. 35) ‘Hobbesian fear’ is used as shorthand to refer to Thomas Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’. This is “a state of perpetual war of every individual against everyone else” (Warburton 2006, p. 66). In the absence of a powerful sovereign, or Leviathan, peace and security cannot be realised. Herz felt that the Security Dilemma was fuelled by the self-help nature of the anarchical international system as opposed to the pessimistic view of it being the product of self-interest and flawed human nature that characterises classical realism. Jervis echoes this opinion by stating that the causes are rooted in “the anarchic setting of international relations...[not in] human psychology nor in a flaw in human nature” (1976, p. 62). He explains that “the central theme of international relations” and therefore of the Security Dilemma “is not evil but tragedy” (1976, p. 66).

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Wheeler and Booth (1992) offer definitions of both 'security' and 'dilemma', and then combine the two to form a definition of Security Dilemmas as "situations which present governments, on matters affecting their security, with a choice between two equal and undesirable alternatives" (1992, pp. 29-30). Alan Collins (1997) explains that it is this lack of a desirable outcome that creates a sense of hopelessness for states, whether they are aware of it or not. This alone is not sufficient however to encapsulate all that is at work in the security dilemma.

Barry Posen defines the Security Dilemma as a situation where "what one does to enhance one's own security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure" (1993, p. 104). This suggests that the actors involved harbour benign intentions since their only objective is to enhance their own security. Wheeler and Booth (1992) differentiate between inadvertent and deliberate Security Dilemmas as a way of explaining whether a given situation exhibits either benign or malign intent. Jervis (1976) also highlights this issue by suggesting that governments must decide whether they are in a deterrence situation or a spiral model situation. Only the spiral model explains the dynamics at work in the Security Dilemma as it deals with "unintended and undesired consequences of actions [that are] meant to be defensive" (Jervis 1976, p. 66). This characteristic of benign intent on the part of the participants is one of the three characteristics that Collins argues constitutes the Security Dilemma in its 'original' sense. The hopelessness of a states situation, or what Collins refers to as the choice between "self-defeating/paradoxical policies", described above, is another of the three characteristics. The third characteristic, this paper argues, is what generates the Security Dilemma; it is the ambiguity of each other's intentions or what Wheeler and Booth call 'unresolvable uncertainty'.

Wheeler and Booth (1992, p. 31) stress that "security dilemmas of whatever variety are comprised of *dilemmas of interpretation...and then dilemmas of response*". It is this issue of interpretation over which participants exhibit 'unresolvable uncertainty'. Even in a cooperative engagement it is impossible to know for sure the other's intentions, be them hostile or defensive, and therefore it is often considered most prudent to plan for the worst. However, this approach has a tendency for being self-fulfilling. If one infers that the other is posturing defensively it cannot infer this will enduringly be so. The result is often mutual suspicion and mistrust. Since the result of the Security Dilemma is an ever worsening spiral of mistrust and self fulfilling insecurity the importance of this initial inference must be paramount. Wheeler and Booth (1992) stress that if a state perceives a threat accurately they are not facing a Security Dilemma but a security problem. According to the principles outlined above, a government in this situation would be in what Jervis terms a 'deterrence situation'. However, it is virtually impossible for a state to know for sure the nature of their predicament. When states first encounter one another they have no reason to feel threatened by each other. As Wendt (1992, p. 405) states "social threats are constructed [they are] not natural". Wendt uses the example of aliens visiting earth to show that even though there is no reason for us to feel threatened by them the tendency is to plan for the worst by putting the military on alert. This view is contestable when applied to states however because a first encounter will invariably be accompanied by preconceptions of some sort. Roe (1999, p. 186) thus states that "we may sometimes begin our relationship in a security dilemma". There are number of ways in which these preconceptions might manifest themselves to intensify the propensity for worst-case forecasting. For example states may adhere to different political or economic ideologies, or have a history of hostilities. Wheeler and Booth (1992) distinguish a number of what they call 'permanent aggravating factors' to explain how the security dilemma can be exacerbated by pre-determined factors. If the intentions of a potential adversary are misinterpreted the dilemma is set in motion. If one state increases its military another state might feel that they are taking the safe option by doing the same, which could inadvertently alarm the first state and hence set an arms race in motion. Due to the fact that the Security Dilemma is socially constructed and that it is this first inference of one another's intentions that sets the Security Dilemma in motion, it seems plausible that it can be mitigated. However due to the constraints outlined above this is often very difficult. Jervis (1978, p. 170) states that "the security dilemma cannot be abolished, it can only be ameliorated". For now we can offer a more holistic conception of the Security Dilemma encompassing the factors discussed above, as an inadvertent tragedy of misperception, underpinned by benign intent, leading to escalating insecurity. One situation in contemporary international politics where a Security Dilemma could be considered to exist is between India and Pakistan.

Since India gained independence in 1949, and India and Pakistan were subsequently partitioned, the two countries have gone to war three times. The second of these led to the creation of an independent Bangladesh. The potential destabilising effect of this ongoing conflict in the most densely populated region of the world is of great concern.

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Moreover the intensity of concern has been exacerbated in light of both parties becoming nuclear states as the potential 'fall-out' from a full scale conflict is now significantly enhanced. The result of such sour relations between these two nations can only lead to increased mistrust and uncertainty of intentions. In May 1998 the two countries received international condemnation for back to back nuclear tests, igniting fears of a nuclear arms race. Pakistan's conventional armed forces are significantly inferior to those of India and it has a weaker industrial and economic base capable of sustaining a conventional campaign. This potentially gives impetus to their decision to become an overtly nuclear power. A nuclear deterrent could potentially level the playing field. Ahmed (2000) argues that there is a "misplaced belief" in the value of this deterrence as it actually has the adverse effect of decreasing Pakistani security. Moreover, the lack of a mutual understanding as existed between the Cold War superpowers lessens the validity of this deterrence.

The inception of Pakistan's nuclear programme can be traced back to the 1960s when India's nuclear infrastructure began to expand. The actual decision to opt for nuclear weapons came after Pakistan's defeat and dismemberment in the 1971 India-Pakistan war. (Ahmed 2000, p. 782)

Here we can see the Security Dilemma in operation. Pakistan feels that by establishing its nuclear capability it can increase its security. India's nuclear test in 1974 was the next crucial milestone. Thereafter Pakistan responded by adopting a policy of nuclear ambiguity, justified by them on the grounds of an Indian threat. Ahmed (2000) explains that the same applies to their retaliatory response of conducting nuclear tests in 1998. The Sharif government emphasised that "Pakistan's failure to respond in kind would have made it vulnerable to its aggressive, hegemonist neighbour" (p. 782). Pakistan's decision to test in the wake of Indian tests might have been partly the result of a failure amongst the international community to punish India. Ahmed (2000) stresses that the Pakistani response intensified the opinions of those in India who advocated overt weaponisation and thus if India subsequently chooses to deploy its weapons systems Pakistan will be pressured to follow suit. Here we see the characteristic of the Security Dilemma that Wheeler and Booth highlight regarding "a choice between two equal and undesirable alternatives". We can see at work in this exchange the dynamics of the Security Dilemma. Both states are seeking enhanced security but the resultant action-reaction cycle of insecurity breeding insecurity achieves the complete opposite.

It could be argued that the motivations driving the two nations differ in some respects. Although India has good reason to feel insecure about Pakistan, its aspirations are far grander and its superiority over the latter is blatant.

"China is already there as a global power, India aspires to become one and Pakistan is nowhere in the picture...One may argue that an arms race may still exist in some form or the other between India and China, but the same in the case of India and Pakistan makes no sense at all." (Alic and Roul 2006)

China is estimated to have between 300 and 600 nuclear warheads (BBC 2003), which needs to be considered as an influence behind India's nuclear aspirations. Should bi-lateral tensions escalate between India and Pakistan, the worst result for Pakistanis virtual annihilation given its nuclear and conventional inferiority. Furthermore, as Pakistan's faltering economy struggles to sustain an expensive nuclear programme, internal security is likely to be increasingly undermined. It is partly this that leads Ahmed (2000, pp. 791-792) to argue that for Pakistan "the best way to ensure national security is to abandon an untenable nuclear competition with India".

One of the main problems in operationalizing the Security Dilemma is that "the writer purports to know the 'reality' of the situation which the actors themselves were unable to see" (Roe, p. 187). In other words it concerns epistemology. We can never claim to 'know' the security dilemma exists for sure, but we can offer a probable account of its existence by looking at relationships such as that of India and Pakistan. It would seem that in contemporary international relations where security challenges are posed in many new guises and on levels above and below that of traditional state orientated analysis the framework for understanding that the Security Dilemma offers is still of relevance. Wars today have however become less rational and the potential costs far greater, whilst cooperative behaviour seemingly more prevalent. Perhaps though it is still "too soon to say that the security dilemma is a historical anachronism [but] equally...too soon to say that it is an 'inescapable reality'" (Wheeler and Booth 1982, p.

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