Is the Security Dilemma an Inescapable Reality or Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

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Introduction

Within international relations (IR) theory, the security dilemma is often perceived as an uncontrollable spiral of insecurity. The dilemma occurs between sovereign states that are unsuccessful in defining their own insecurities and conveying their rationale for defensive posturing within the anarchic international system.[1] The states are not deliberately trying to cause strife between each other; however, the diplomatic steps both states make for increased security gains can result in the escalation of conflict and the catastrophic possibility of war.[2] A conservative, classical realist perspective tends to frame the security dilemma as an inescapable reality. The reality is based upon states acting rationally and their genuine concern for power being the required element for a state to defend itself.[3] This essay does not discount the more traditional, classical realist position; however, it will argue a more nuanced neorealist (structural) perspective that the security dilemma has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and while states may never truly escape this reality, they may effectively mitigate issues surrounding the security paradigm. This argument is presented through three distinct sections within this essay: The first section outlines the intricacies of the security dilemma as a way of understanding this situation of insecurity. The second section claims that the security dilemma *is* a self-fulfilling prophecy, while the final section will reinforce the aforementioned claim by addressing how states are unable to escaping the security dilemma.

The Security Dilemma

In 1950, John Herz stressed the role of uncertainty about the intent of states under weak international authority. The fear that states hold remains constant and creates perceptions that pre-emptive (or offensive) attack is a safer, more preferable course of action than cooperation (defensive). This tragic paradox helps realists explain why wars materialize even despite all parties' desire for a peaceful resolution to conflict.[4] Herz went on to define the security dilemma as,

…a structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening.[5]

Moreover, Robert Jervis believes that the security dilemma is the key to understanding how states with fundamentally compatible goals, mainly peace and survival, still end up in conflict and in extreme circumstances, war. He stresses that the security dilemma is also driven by the fact that even if another possibly contentious state "is benign today, it can turn malign in the future".[6] This conundrum leads many states to assume the worst-case scenario and build military might for defence in a competitive manner.[7] Classic and often referenced scenarios demonstrating the security dilemma have been the issues surrounding the Cold War,[8] post-Cold War Europe[9] and United States (US) Nuclear policy.[10]

Early realist scholars believed states had to be aggressive to survive. Thomas Hobbes, being a particularly pessimistic early realist thinker, believed that the strong will always dominate the weak, and that without tangible

power, the weak have nothing to prevent this domination from occurring. [11] Nearly half a century later, John Mearsheimer takes this perspective even further, asserting states that are only seeking self-preservation often have no other option besides reducing the relative power of states seen as potential threats.[12] Moving beyond human nature as being inherently aggressive, Herz maintains that the primary causal factor for conflict is a state's determination to survive, which leads it to seek the acquisition of more power.[13]

Conversely, Charles Glaser contends that states are purely security seekers, whose efforts to maintain security may threaten another's sovereignty. In this case, the security dilemma only exists when states are not aware of the other states' motives or intentions.[14] While this defensive realist perspective appears to negate the realist concept of states seeking power, it still acknowledges the security dilemma as a self-imposed reality.[15] Glaser acknowledges the theory's use within IR for scholars attempting to understand many of the world changing historical events.[16] To deny the security dilemma is to deny a realist's interpretation of human nature.

To encompass the both of the divergent realist ideas on a state's hostile or protective nature, Jervis presents the offensive-defensive theory. The theory focuses on the games played between powerful states, in which offensive states always try to obtain more power and defensive states only seek enough power to remain safe.[17] His theory covers four scenarios of differing behaviours, measuring divergent levels of insecurity concentration between states. He argues that while the anarchic nature of the international system is resolute, the security dilemma itself can change with relation to time and space. This affects the attractiveness states feel towards using a more cooperative or competitive strategy for illuminating state insecurities.[18] The most dangerous behaviours in his model lead great powers, once *status quo*, to change over time and become aggressive. This can lead to the build-up of arms to counter-balance against the one another, as well as creating an environment with little to no cooperation, thus reinforcing this paper's claim.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy

Sociologist Robert Merton described a self-fulfilling prophecy as, 'a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true'.[19] The security dilemma becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for a state when that state is unsuccessful in appropriately defining its security situation within the anarchic international system. The state's behaviour, while perceived internally as rational vis-à-vis another state's actions can unnecessarily provoke another state into a build-up of arms, thus causing the very threat it was seeking to deter.[20]

Richard Copeland explains that the self-imposed security dilemma occurs due to rational thinkers within state governments acting upon worst-case assumptions. This position reinforces this essay's central argument, as competitive state actors who consistently engage in hard-lining, 'rational' behaviours are in essence acting irrationally to cause a security dilemma. He deems this as irrational counter-balancing, which can lead to protracted conflict, and is difficult for institutional frameworks to resolve.[21] For example, during the Cold War, rising Soviet defence spending prior to 1955 made the Soviet Union appear to be generating a military force capable of exploiting any US vulnerabilities. However, as Jervis notes, it is conceivable that the excessive Soviet spending and arms indicated great fear of the US.[22] Regardless of how the Soviet intentions were meant to be perceived, the US assumed the worst and increased its own excessive military structure.[23]

This superficial self-fulfilling prophecy of counter-balancing is dangerous. When a state decreases an opponent's security by bolstering its own, the act itself can have negative consequences, which leaves both less secure than before.[24] The two states become even less secure because there is now a mutual hostility that has emerged between them as well as increased military capabilities. A state should not seek military advantages based on a notion of ill –conceived motives from a potential rival. This unnecessary build-up of military forces imbues states in a competition of power. The dilemma is that efforts to increase one's security unilaterally in an anarchic, self-help world actually create incentives for other countries to increase their military power, leaving no state more secure than they were before. Consequently, if other states begin to feel threatened and begin to increase their relative power, then the international system becomes a system wide arms race to secure each state's own interests and effectively becomes dangerously less secure than it was before.[25]

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) enlargement will serve as an example to demonstrate the dangers of counter-balancing. As NATO expanded into the former Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, it increased the Russian Federation's angst and insecurity about NATO's motives and intentions, regardless of NATO's rhetoric about increasing defensive capacity. This fuelled Russia's insecurities and placed Eastern European NATO partners at a heightened threat of Russian incursion.[26] Moreover, the recent referendum or annexation of Crimea (legality and historical narratives debate aside) can be viewed as Russia's attempt for territorial expansion for securing its people, military bases and providing strategic depth against NATO on its borders. However, Russia's actions and tacit support for the Crimean separatist movement have increased military tensions and reinvigorated political rhetoric discussing the onset of another cold war.[27]

An Inescapable Reality

The security dilemma is an unfortunate reality. As Robert Schweller states, 'insecurity and the use of force are enduring attributes of the self-help international system'.[28] Where one state increases its relative security, it reduces the security of other states. The acquisition of power by both defensive and offensive states to counter-balance creates an inescapable possibility of violent conflict between states.[29] Moreover, Dale Copeland reinforces this paper's claim that the security dilemma cannot be escaped. His argument debates Glaser's claim that purely defensive states can end the aggressive spiral.[30] However, Glaser's argument does not account for states that protect their resources, allies and foreign interests. It merely discusses a state's need to secure its own territorial integrity.[31] Therefore, defensive states can postpone or mitigate the security dilemma but they cannot escape it. Eventually all great powers will need to project an offensive capability into a desired region to deter potential threats to their interests abroad.[32]

This paper's estimation of the dilemma being inescapable is not entirely accepted among IR scholars. Differing from Glaser's hopeful outlook on state motivations preventing a dilemma, other IR theorists debate the existence of the security dilemma altogether. Schweller argues that the neorealist security dilemma does not exist, but is a superficial ideology- 'the security dilemma is *always* apparent, not real'.[33] If there is an aggressive state whose motivations lie in expansion, then responding with military build-up and alliance forming is a justified response, not a dilemma.[34] If no states are seeking expansion or making manoeuvres that would appear at face value to threaten another state, then the security dilemma would be mitigated. Nevertheless, this fading of the dilemma itself is not possible when powerful states are required to make military mobilisations to acquire resources, if even only for domestic use.

An example of how the security dilemma is spiralling between states contemporary politics is the frequent mobilisation of Japanese and Chinese Air Force jets to defend against incursions into the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) Islands. Both states are claiming ownership over the islands and as China increases its defence spending and encroachments on assets within the South and East China Seas, Japan has been building alliances. [35] Of the alliances Japan is forming, China worries most about India and other Asian states co-operating, which will fuel Chinese insecurities of an anti-China coalition encirclement. This geopolitical strangle on China may motivate China to develop greater military might and build new alliances leading to an increased security dilemma, not a mobilization against an aggressive state. Worse, the situation could lead to military conflict between the states, even when both are defending resources they both deem necessary for state security. If one state abandons its claims over the Senkaku Islands, the predicament will be mitigated, though the reality that both Japan and China engage in this counter-balancing act is evidence to support the claim that even in the modern era the security dilemma is inescapable.

Conclusion

Over the last century IR theorists have frequently used the security dilemma to explain states' actions and power politics. The debate whether the security dilemma is an escapable self-manifestation of a state's insecurities or a reality based on the constant nature of state actors still rages on – even amongst realists. This essay, in hybrid sociological fashion, has argued that the security dilemma *is both* a self-fulfilling and an inescapable reality. While states can maintain defensive positions in order to bypass or mitigate the negative effects of the security dilemma, this only postpones the inevitable. The security dilemma is inescapable and transcends securing a state's sovereign

territorial borders. Japan's militarisation in defence of crucial territory and resources appears defensive; however, China interprets those defensive actions as threatening, and *vice versa*. Even if a state acts in pure defence of its territory, the powerful states will have to protect non-territorial resources for their state systems to survive. While the studies of power politics and realism are somewhat despairing, the varied realist perspectives and the security dilemma's theoretical framework are still relevant lenses for understanding contemporary IR issues.

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[30] Copeland, pp. 441-450.

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