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Security Dilemma

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A security dilemma is a situation where the actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, which leads to a decrease rather than an increase in the state's security. Some scholars of international relations find that the security dilemma is the most important source of conflict in international relations. They argue that in the international realm there is no legitimate monopoly of violence – i.e. there is no world government - and as a consequence each state must take care of its own security and survival. For this reason the primary goal of states is to maximize their own security. Even if states focus solely on this goal and have no intention of harming others, many of the actions taken by states to increase their own security – e.g. weapons procurement and the development of new military technologies - will decrease the security of others. Decreasing the security of others does not automatically place the state in a dilemma, but because of the anarchic structure, other states will follow suit, if one state arms. They cannot know whether the arming state will use its increased military capabilities for attack in the future. For this reason they will either choose to increase their own military capabilities in order to reestablish the balance of power, or they will launch a preemptive attack in order to prevent the arming state from upsetting the balance in the first place. If they choose the first option, the result may be a security spiral. A security spiral is an action-reaction process, where two states are tied in an armaments race with each state responding to increases in weapons procurement and defense expenditure by the other state leading them both to arm more and more heavily. This may lead to war in the long run. If they choose the last option, military conflict will be imminent.

The logic of the security dilemma was first described Herbert Butterfield in 1949. The term was coined by John Hertz in 1950. Although the logic seems to fit particularly well with the security competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, proponents of the term do not see it as tied to a specific historic era. Rather it reflects the fundamentally tragic nature of international life: state actors strive for peace and stability, but end up in military conflict. Thus, even if all states are status quo powers wishing only peace and

security, war may occur, because of the fear and insecurity following from the anarchic structure of the international system. This focus on the effect of international anarchy on the behavior of states is typical of so-called structural realism – sometimes termed neorealism – which posits that the international system is a self-help system, where states must focus on their own interests in order to maximize their chance of security and survival. In particular, the security dilemma logic is central to so-called defensive realism. Proponents of defensive realism argue that states seek to maximize their chance of security and survival by maintaining their position in the international system, not by expansion. Still, scholars working within alternative theoretical traditions have discussed how the security dilemma logic looks from their perspective and utilized their own theoretical insights to suggest how we might move beyond the security dilemma logic and create a more peaceful world.

A large number of International Relations scholars have applied and developed the logic of the security dilemma. Some of the most prominent security dilemma scholars are Robert Jervis, Barry Posen and Charles Glaser. From a more critical stance, the security dilemma logic has been explored by among others Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler. Recent research on the security dilemma has applied the logic to most regions of the world and resulted in a proliferation of more fine-grained distinctions between different types of security dilemmas.

Some scholars of international relations argue that all states face a security dilemma all of the time, but most of them agree that the intensity of security dilemmas tend to vary over time and space. The literature on international relations points to different sources of variation in the security dilemma. Security scholars such as Stephen Van Evera, argue the intensity of the security dilemma depends on the ease of conquest. If conquest is easy, states will typically face an intense security dilemma, because the risk of military defeat is raised every time a competing state adds to its military capabilities. Conversely, if conquest is difficult the security dilemma is ameliorated, because other states may add to their military capabilities without posing a direct offensive threat. If we are able to tell the difference between offensive and defensive weapons, states may even signal their benign intentions by deploying defensive weapons. Other states will know that they have acquired weapons not to attack, but to defend. Offense and defense dominance vary over time and space depending on a number of factors including geography, military technology and military doctrine.

Also, regime type may affect the intensity of the security dilemma. Although democracies often go to war, they rarely go to war against other democracies. When two autocracies face each other or when a democracy and an autocracy face each other, security spirals

sometimes spin out of control, because each side interprets the move by the other side as potentially threatening. But this is rarely the case when two democracies face each other. Two characteristics of modern, stable democracies explain why. First, the policy processes in liberal democracies is fairly transparent, even when viewed from outside the country. Parliamentary debates are usually open to the public – sometimes even televised – and political parties outside government, mass media and interest groups ensure that few government decisions of any importance are taken without scrutiny and public debate. Second, democracies usually have rules and regulations preventing them from rushing into war. Some policies are made extraordinarily difficult thereby binding the policy makers and signaling to the outside world that decisions cannot be taken without prior warning. Both of these characteristics of modern liberal democracies reduce uncertainty, and thereby ameliorate the security dilemma. As summed up by Charles Lipson '[B]ecause democracies have more accurate perceptions of each other, they are better able to cooperate, build trust and avoid war' (Lipson 2003: 72).

Other scholars argue that the security dilemma is largely irrelevant, because international conflict is not the result of status quo powers seeking to maximize security, but of revisionist powers seeking to maximize power. If all states are status quo powers, these critics argue, then military conflict would be extremely rare, because the world would consist of status quo-powers eager to signal their benign intentions. But this is not the case: states wishing to expand their power at the expense of others are the most important source of military conflict in international relations, not the uncertainty and insecurity of status quo powers.

Today, military conflict between states is less frequent than throughout most of the world's history. At the same time conflict related to weak and failed states is now a major source of instability in many parts of the world. Some scholars argue that even though this development seems to fit uneasily with the idea of unitary state actors stuck in a security dilemma in an anarchic international system, the basic logic of the security dilemma may still be applied. For instance, Barry Posen, analyzing ethnic violence between ethnic groups in collapsing Yugoslavia in the early 1990s finds that Serbs and Croats experienced a security dilemma in an emerging anarchy where each group had to take care of its own security. Brian Job extends the applicability of the security dilemma even further by discussing how a similar logic applies to weak Third World states unable to provide security for their own citizens and sometimes even constituting a threat to parts of the population.

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See also Arms Race, Balance of Power, Cold War, Deterrence, Realism in International Relations, Security and Defense Policy, Strategic (Security) Studies, War and Peace.

Further Readings

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