Can the security dilemma explain actual conflicts?

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Despite unrealistic assumptions about actors' behaviour, can the concept of the security dilemma be used to explain actual conflicts? Illustrate on at least one example.

The concept of the *security dilemma* describes how it is possible, given the "existential uncertainty" which the condition of international anarchy produces amongst states, for violent conflict to arise between two or more actors even when neither has malign intentions towards the other[1]. Although the idea appears in text as far back as the fifth century BCE in the writings of the Greek intellectual Thucydides, the term only entered the academic lexicon after John Herz concretised it in his 1950 treatise *'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma'* **[2]**. In the decades since then, a number of scholarly works, most notably by Robert Jervis, Ken Booth, and Nick Wheeler, have drawn attention to the ontological significance of the security dilemma[3]. Indeed, Booth and Wheeler argue that it is a foundational concept which "goes right to the heart of the theory and practise of international politics"[4]. Nevertheless, if the security dilemma is now ubiquitous in the contemporary study of the states-system, its implications have certainly not resulted in theoretical or prescriptive parsimony. Whereas *offensive-realists* such as John Mearsheimer contend that international anarchy and *'Hobbesian Fear'* predispose states to perpetual confrontation, thinkers from diverse scholastic backgrounds have challenged the fatalistic logic of security-competition models, instead emphasising the ameliorative potential of human agency and *inter-state regimes***[5]**.

This essay will demonstrate that, although the occurrence of certain wars can be attributed to the operation of the security dilemma, a number of socio-structural factors limit the likelihood of such an extreme outcome.

The narrative will be divided into three constituent parts. The first section will examine the theoretical underpinnings of the security dilemma. Section two will look at the Anglo-German naval race in order to assess whether these conceptual abstractions can be applied to actual conflicts. The final section will consider the various mitigating factors which moderate the deleterious effects of the security dilemma.

Anarchy, Uncertainty, and the Security Dilemma

Different epistemological approaches to international relations engender very distinctive scenarios and outcomes. As such, in order to properly understand the nature, importance, and context, of the security dilemma, it is pertinent to situate the concept in the wider framework of *Structural Realism* – the school of thought from which the term originated, and which has generated the most voluminous literature on the subject.

According to realists, the character of the international sphere is determined not by human biology or anthropology, but rather by the absence of an overarching central authority. "The requirements of state action" observes Kenneth Waltz, "are imposed by the circumstances in which all states exist"[6]. In this anarchical environment it is impossible for decision-makers to deduce with absolute certainty the intentions of others[7]. As a consequence, each state must rely on its own devices to pursue what it perceives to be in its rational self-interest – generally understood to be the attainment of existential security and the maximisation of relative power vis-à-vis other states[8]. To illustrate the endemic behavioural bias towards rivalry in the international system, Jervis appropriates Rousseau's *parable of the stag'*, drawing a parallel between the mind-set of the story's hunters and that of modern nation-states. If the men cooperate to ensnare and slay the stag, they will all eat in good measure. But if one leaves his post to go in pursuit of

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a rabbit – which provides inferior sustenance – the stag will successfully flee and the remaining huntsmen will be left hungry. Since each person is liable to harbour doubts about whether *everybody* in the entourage will cooperate, collaboration appears to be the least advantageous option[9]. Unit-level variations thus have a nominal systemic impact, meaning that, unless a global hierarchy emerges, international interaction will conform to predictable, conflictual patterns[10].

It is in the glare of this constellation of anarchy (*the condition in which the world exists*) and uncertainty (*the axis upon which it turns*) that the deep logic of the security dilemma becomes apparent. Nonetheless, to fully appreciate how the structure of the international realm can compel two status-quo powers *unintentionally* towards conflict, two derivative dynamics relating to *perception* and *misperception* must be considered. First, actors are perennially and inescapably confronted by what philosophers have commonly referred to as the *'other minds problem'*. In essence, policymakers in one state are never able to entirely ascertain the true motivations and objectives of their counterparts in other states[11]. The mutual anxiety and mistrust which this gives rise to is compounded by a second, material problem – the inherent symbolic ambiguity of weaponry. Thomas Schelling points out that the meaning of a weapon is derived solely from the metaphysical plane[12]. In a nomadic community, for instance, a rifle can be a vital means of providing food, yet it can also be used "to spray bullets across a school in a mad killing spree"[13]. As the stakes involved in issues of national security strike at the very core of a state's raison d'être, the difficulty of distinguishing defensive and offensive capabilities necessarily encourages decision-makers to "prepare for the worst", even if they themselves bear no aggressive intent[14]. It is worth quoting Herbert Butterfield at length on this matter:

*"…you know yourself that you mean him no harm, and that you want nothing from him save guarantees for your own safety; and it is never possible for you to realise or remember properly that since he cannot see the inside of your mind, he can never have the same assurance of your intentions that you have."**[15]**

For students of the security dilemma this predicament – one which is informed by irresolvable uncertainty, the subjective, rather than objective, appraisal of other actors' capabilities and intentions, and the need to respond in kind – is a precursor to the materialisation of what Booth and Wheeler call the *security paradox* and Jervis labels the *spiral model*. Because statecraft is impelled by *fear* under anarchy, two perfectly peaceable governments may still interpret each other's self proclaimed defensive postures as being motivated by offensive aspirations. In a hypothetical scenario, if *State A* procures a new weapons system, the rational-consistency of realism and the security dilemma suggests that *State B* should counteract such a move, explaining its new stance with reference to *State A's* original conduct. *Knowing* that its initial decision was wholly defensive in nature, *State A* will become suspicious of *State B* and thus react accordingly. *State B* faces the same dilemma of interpretation and response, and so it continues *ad-finitum*. Whilst each state begins with a non-aggressive desire to increase its own security, the chosen course of action to bring about such an outcome actually leads to mutual insecurity[16].

In the jargon of *Strategic Studies*, this is known as an *action-reaction cycle* and its implications for the explanatory usefulness of the security dilemma, and international relations in general, are significant. For if the potency of the international system to propel peacefully disposed nations into a "vicious circle of security and power accumulation" is so great, then history should be littered with countless examples of security-dilemma inspired wars[17].

The Security Dilemma *In Extremis*: Anglo-German Relations (1898-1914)

In spite of the existence of a number of inter-state hostilities which fulfil such criteria, one particular case has preoccupied modern scholars of international relations, security, and history – namely the Anglo-German naval race of the early twentieth century.

Commonly recognised to have begun with Admiral Tirpitz's now famous 1897 request for a substantially expanded *Kaiserliche-Marine*, it is often cited as one of the principal antecedents which brought both countries to loggerheads in 1914[18]. The initial German resolution to augment their comparatively diminutive fleet had little, if anything, to do with Britain. Kaiser Wilhelm II was largely stirred by a self-protective desire to provide insurance against the possibility of a prospective adversary blockading the logistically crucial Hanseatic coastline, and was under no illusions as to the benefits of purposefully upsetting the delicate *Balance of Power* which existed in Europe at the

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time[19]. Nevertheless, due to the existential condition of inexorable uncertainty, the British were utterly incapable of perceiving this. In view of the fact that "economic and military preparedness designed to hold what one has is apt to create the potential for taking territory from others", policymakers in Whitehall ascribed an array of aggressive intentions to Germany's shipbuilding programme, ranging from the disruption of British trade to, somewhat ridiculously, a wholesale Teutonic invasion of the British Isles[20]. And thus an arms race was set in motion even though no conflict of interest truly existed in the first place. In classic security dilemma fashion, each subsequent move and countermove – calculated as they were to *improve* the security situation – was interpreted by the other side as evidence of harmful intent[21]. At no point were politicians in Berlin or London able to put themselves in their opposite number's shoes. Indeed, the Germans were oblivious to the potential for their defensive policy choices to be unfavourably misconstrued, whilst the British "overlooked what the Germans knew full well; in every quarrel with England, German colonies and trade were…hostages for England to take"[22].

Watching from across the Atlantic, President Theodore Roosevelt summed up this quandary with a sense of irony only a third party can possess:

"The Kaiser sincerely believes that the English are planning to attack him and smash his fleet. As a matter of fact, the English harbour no such intentions, but are themselves in a condition of panic terror lest the Kaiser form an alliance against them with France or Russia, or both, to destroy their fleet and blot out the British Empire from the map! It is as funny a case as I have seen of mutual distrust and fear bringing two peoples to the verge of chaos"[23].

Jack Snyder contends that it was the above dilemma more than anything which persuaded German defence-planners to prepare a two-front preventative attack, as they feared it was the "only alternative to encirclement"[24]. Although one must be careful not to treat the Anglo-German naval race in isolation from wider events, it is palpable that the whirlpool of reciprocal mistrust which fed and sustained it contributed considerably to the breakdown in relations between two previously disinterested *Great Powers,* and consequently to the eruption of war.

Mitigating Factors: Context and Agency

And yet, if this disconsolate vision of international relations is so compelling, and meaningful inter-state cooperation therefore an elusive mirage, then the question must be asked, why "are we not all dead?"[25]

Although historically evident, instances wherein the security dilemma results in armed conflict appear to be quite rare. Indeed, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the term has been too readily and broadly applied to explain wars which on closer inspection have perceptibly discrete causes. The founding father of the concept, John Herz, made a concerted effort to differentiate between the emergence of hostilities amongst actors with benign temperaments and those wars which flow directly from "policies that go beyond security proper". Invoking the actions of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, he noted that when a regime has obviously expansionist tendencies, leaders in other nations do not face a dilemma of interpretation or response[26]. More recently, Shipping Tang has criticised Barry Posen's hypothesis that ethnic-conflict in the Balkans during the early-1990s was inadvertent, charging that both the Croats and Serbs harboured deeply rooted malign intentions towards one another[27]. That is not to say that security dilemmas which produce *conflicts of interest* are uncommon – there is a preponderance of literature which convincingly demonstrates that inter-state tensions as varied as the early-Cold War, the fall-out over the Strategic Defence initiative, and Argentine-Brazilian nuclear enmity, fit this mould[28]. So, it is clear that in most cases there must be extenuating factors preventing the security dilemma gaining enough momentum to proceed towards its notional extremity.

As Jervis points out, anarchy and uncertainty are not the only variables to take into account when discussing the propensity of states to fall victim to the security dilemma and *spiral model*. In an article written for *World Politics* in 1978, he added nuance to the tragic image of international relations by introducing two critical ideas – a) the relative costs of exploitation and b) the offence-defence balance.

First, the geographical, technological, structural, and economic, context in which social-units exist fundamentally

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alters decision-makers attitudes in relation to cooperation and *'defection'*. A participant in the *Stag Hunt* who is starving will undoubtedly view the benefits of staying at their post very differently to a colleague who has already consumed a hearty luncheon. Similarly, if a state has defensible borders, a generously proportioned land mass, allies in abundance, and a well-protected military infrastructure, then its capacity to trust others and ignore indefinite and outwardly isolated signs of danger will be greatly enhanced[29]. Academics of a more liberal or constructivist leaning go as far as to suggest that this creates a space in which state bureaucracies develop *security dilemma sensibility*, gradually coming to understand each other's counter-fear[30]. In turn, this permits the evolution of a set of integrated international institutions, communities, and regimes, which establish the "avoidance of force in the settlement of disputes" as a paradigmatic norm[31]. It is arguable that the longevity of trans-national groupings such as the European Union and NATO, wherein "militarised security competition appears to have been *transcended* indefinitely", verifies such thinking[32]. Second, the ever shifting nexus between technical advancement, topography, and strategy, plays an important role in determining the incentives states have to act on their shared interests. When defence is widely *perceived* to have the advantage over offence, most states can inexpensively offset regional arms build-ups, therefore making accommodative settlements much easier to reach. When the converse is true, as it was in the years preceding the *Great War*, the common "fear of a surprise attack" is high, and the security dilemma is at its "most vicious"[33].

At this juncture, it is also pertinent to raise a third related issue which a number of thinkers have explored – the impact of the *thermonuclear revolution* and models of deterrence on the conduct of statecraft. Because defence against a nuclear attack is essentially impossible, if two states acquire invulnerable warhead delivery platforms, they gain the ability to annihilate the other side under any circumstances, thereby leaving neither with an incentive to exacerbate a crisis or launch a pre-emptive strike[34]. Somewhat counter-intuitively, a situation of *Mutually Assured Destruction* opens the door to "policies of mutual accommodation", with both sides necessarily required to consciously rest "their security on each other's vulnerability"[35]. The almost primordial fear which the prospect of Armageddon arouses amongst statesmen thus encourages the development of a more cautious and empathetic mindset than *'kill or perish'* conceptions of the security dilemma allow for[36].

Conclusion

In light of the anarchical structure of international politics and the corresponding condition of existential uncertainty, it is inevitable that unintended *conflicts of interest* will emerge amongst security-seeking status-quo states. However, anarchy is not as fatalistically deterministic as offensive-realists assert. Despite the existence of empirical evidence which confirms that such a state of affairs can indeed eventuate in a spiral of mistrust, arms competition, and *violent conflict*, as in the case of the Anglo-German naval race, a number of psycho-material factors limit the frequency of such catastrophic resolutions.

The complex interplay between military technology, the offence-defence balance, subjective context, and international norms, curtails the severity of the security dilemma in most circumstances. Crucially, defensively oriented states are by their very nature less susceptible to bouts of paranoia in their relations with one another. This ensures that a) these states are more likely to avoid creating a security paradox in the first place and b) if they do, attempts at signalling reassurance are more prone to be successful.

To a certain extent then, the security dilemma is what states make of it[37]. This has far-reaching repercussions, not just for the discipline of *International Relations*, but for the formulation of foreign policy itself. It is to be hoped that those in the corridors of power grasp this fact and act on it with the utmost expediency, lest this century repeat the bloody tragedy of the previous one.

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