

"If you were to use the Security Dilemma to understand world politics, what hypotheses would you derive from the mechanism, and what threats to its external validity would you consider most relevant?"

The security dilemma seems susceptible to the same criticisms that Gilpin (1988) makes of the theory of hegemonic war. It is either (in its strong form) contradicted by history or (in its weak form) too vague to make specific predictions. The treatment by Jervis (1978) seems to be the most realistic, but the aptness of his taxonomy depends upon our ability to accurately assess the offense/defense balance and distinguish between offensive and defensive force postures. While the security dilemma readily leads us to the hypothesis that states will respond to the military expenditures of other states with military expenditures of their own (H1), a cursory inspection of history reveals that this is only sometimes the case. Ultimately, the greatest threat to the external validity of this derived hypothesis lies in the internal validity of the security dilemma itself.

Herz (1950) calls "the security dilemma of politically unintegrated units" (163) a fundamental condition of the international system, a "fundamental social constellation" wherever anarchic international societies exist.¹ Because no state can ever feel entirely secure from attack, they are each led to enhance their own security, despite the fact that this will "render...the others more insecure and compel...them to prepare for the worst" (157). He suggests that reactions to the security dilemma take the broad forms of political realism and political idealism (158), and he holds out the hope that these approaches can be combined into an approach he calls "realist liberalism" (178), which would understand the world like a realist yet strive for the goals of an idealist. What Herz calls political realism is more thoroughly set out by Morgenthau (1948), who argues that universal moral principles ought not to be applied to the actions of states (166). Though he does not cite Machiavelli, his argument is virtually identical.

The security dilemma seems initially like yet another phenomenon that is ubiquitous and so can explain nothing (Waltz 1959). If all states at all times are subject to the security dilemma, how can it explain why war happens some of the time but not all of the time? Herz has given us a clue: the perceptions and the reactions of states to the behavior of others appear to be crucial. Jervis (1978) usefully disaggregates these perceptions and reactions into four classes. He states

¹ Interestingly, Herz argues only that anarchy has been common throughout history, not that it has been universal (157).

the security dilemma more precisely: “many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others” (169). Jervis identifies two significant variables that mediate the salience of the security dilemma in policy: the offense/defense balance and the capacity to distinguish between offensive and defensive force postures. In cases where force posture is indistinguishable but offensive weapons are thought to have an advantage, the security dilemma looms large because states are unable to infer their competitors’ intentions from their actions. Where posture is indistinguishable but defense dominates, the security dilemma is salient but can be avoided because states will invest primarily in defensive weapons. Where force posture is distinguishable and there exists an offensive advantage, states favoring the status quo will be able to distinguish themselves from expansionists. Where distinguishable force posture combines with a defensive advantage, states can still distinguish themselves and will additionally be able to invest heavily in defensive weapons, deterring conflict.

Glaser (1997) adds two elements to Jervis’s taxonomy – the “extent of the adversary’s greed” and the “adversary’s unit-level knowledge of the state’s motives” (174). He argues that Jervis had relied on misperceptions to explain behavior, and he seeks to show that even in the absence of misperceptions the security dilemma still operates. It seems to be a mistake to assert that a rational state would not be subject to misperceptions (“Whether or not states suffer from significant misperceptions, we need to analyze how a rational state would act...” (175)). However, he makes a powerful point: that the explanatory and predictive value of the security dilemma “depends on the extent to which states suffer from psychological, bureaucratic and political biases”. Research on such biases over the past two decades has been extensive (see, e.g. Yahri-Milo 2014), and recent findings indicate that bilateral (dyadic) security considerations may dominate systemic concerns in determining state behavior (James 1995).

Gilpin (1988) gives a theory of the security dilemma among hegemons inspired by Thucydides. He argues that such hegemonic war is fundamentally distinct from other categories of war, and that hegemonic wars transform the structure of the international system and result in a remolding in its own image of the vanquished by the victor (601). Like Thucydides, he bases his claim on the perennial character of human nature, but also links it to concerns about the international system. Gilpin also makes the important point that the beliefs of Spartans and Athenians mattered much more than the actual distribution of capabilities (605). However,

Gilpin seems much less cautious than Thucydides. He argues that in the course of the Peloponnesian war, “the basic issue in the contest became the structure and leadership of the emerging international system and not merely the fate of particular city-states” (601). This is hard to reconcile with the relentless chauvinism described by Thucydides. In addition, Gilpin never addresses the fact that his allegedly hegemonic war was occurring under the watchful eye of a state power (Persia) that was orders of magnitude more powerful than either of the combatants, and that it was ultimately the resources provided by satraps in Sardis that allowed Sparta to prevail at Aegospotami. Finally, the indicators of hegemonic war that Gilpin sets out do not seem to be present in all of his canonical examples. Perhaps this is just as well – Gilpin evaluates the theory of hegemonic war and concludes that it cannot make falsifiable predictions (605).

Do states inevitably arm for war in the presence of rivals who are themselves arming for war? Tilly (1990) argues that they do, and further that this process of armament is responsible for the emergence of the modern European state (11). Tilly argues that the pursuit of war and military capacity led to the emergence of modern nation states, but that these emergent states were fundamentally epiphenomena, orthogonal to the more serious and pressing goal of surviving armed conflict. However, Spruyt (1994) argues that sovereign states became dominant not because they excelled in war but because they were better able to mobilize resources and preferred to deal with other sovereign states capable of making credible commitments (155-158). It is unclear whether Spruyt’s argument is incompatible with Tilly’s, as Spruyt never disputes war’s central role in spurring the development of state capacity. Rather, Spruyt enlarges the scope of the security dilemma by reminding us that other social organizations (like the Hansa) are likewise interested in survival.

The security dilemma seems to be compatible with a wide range of state behavior. We might be inclined to say that this breadth of behavior defies attempts to predict state behavior on the basis of the security dilemma alone. Jervis (1978) makes substantial progress in setting out the circumstances under which states will behave as the security dilemma predicts. However, Jervis also reveals the central and vital role played by beliefs about capabilities (and beliefs about beliefs). Once a phenomenon becomes social in this way, characterized by strategic interaction, the layers of belief inherent in any explanation render purely verbal descriptions of

behavior incredible. Such interactions must be modeled to be properly understood. Two things seem certain: the security dilemma underdetermines behavior, and behavior consistent with the dilemma's predictions is open to equifinality explanations. As such, the external validity of any hypotheses we derive from the security dilemma as stated by these authors seems to be imperiled by the weak internal validity of the security dilemma itself.

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