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Between Fear and Strategy: How Inescapable is the Security Dilemma?

Abstract

This paper provides a scholarly discourse on the lasting importance and theoretical complexity of the security dilemma in international relations. Taking inspiration from classical realism, neorealism, and social constructivism, it extrapolates the dual dimensions of the dilemma in terms of interpretation and response, signifying the process in which uncertainty and fear can enforce self-reinforcing spirals that lead to an arms race and mistrust among states. The paper further tries to evaluate how to mitigate or transcend the security dilemma through the mechanisms of offense-defence differentiation, mechanisms of signalling, and the evolution of interpersonal understanding among states. By comprehending the discourse around weapon categorization, reliability of signalling, ontological meaning for states, and trust formation, the paper challenges the fatalistic perceptions and proposes that agency, identity establishment, and joint security measures can decrease insecurity. Conclusively, the paper argues that the security dilemma is primarily escapable.

Keywords: Security Dilemma, Signalling, Anarchy, Realism

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Title

Between Fear and Strategy: How Inescapable is the Security Dilemma?

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- Theoretical Framework
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Abstract

This paper provides a scholarly discourse on the lasting importance and theoretical complexity of the security dilemma in international relations. Taking inspiration from classical realism, neorealism, and social constructivism, it extrapolates the dual dimensions of the dilemma in terms of interpretation and response, signifying the process in which uncertainty and fear can enforce self-reinforcing spirals that lead to an arms race and mistrust among states. The paper further tries to evaluate how to mitigate or transcend the security dilemma through the mechanisms of offense-defence differentiation, mechanisms of signalling, and the evolution of interpersonal understanding among states. By comprehending the discourse around weapon categorization, reliability of signalling, ontological meaning for states, and trust formation, the paper challenges the fatalistic perceptions and proposes that agency, identity establishment, and joint security measures can decrease insecurity. Conclusively, the paper argues that the security dilemma is primarily escapable.

Introduction

The immense significance of the security dilemma cannot be overlooked at any given time frame of recorded human history. While discussing international relations, the security dilemma is one of the paramount issues that signify the conflicts across the world. It encompasses the paradox that represents the conundrum that states might find themselves in without any hostile intent in relation to each other, but can still go through a dangerous spiral of conflict, which sometimes might not be a direct conflict, but can represent an arms race, for instance (Sørensen, 2007). While I attempt to answer the question that has been put forward in this paper, it is necessarily crucial to develop an understanding of the security dilemma by describing the premises that surround the inception of this phenomenon. Such that the international order is deemed to be anarchic in its nature and there is no such contention on the action or presence of a higher eternal power that can limit the intentions of the state in its actions (Garver, 2002; Mitzen, 2006). Furthermore, at any given instance, the states that provide an outlook that is deemed to be pacifist or pleasant might crucially change their intentions and appear to be hostile without any such threatening cautions. This gives birth to the 'inherent existential uncertainty' in the international system and leads us towards the security dilemma (Butfoy, 1997).

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The uncertainty in international order would further lead to create an impact on the state's intentions to enhance its securitization by embracing methods which can be either strategic or material in terms of making alliances or gathering advanced weapons system that would portray offensive advantages adopted by the state to the actors on international stage (Mitzen, 2006). One must note the fact that the adoption of these measures might not necessarily be offensive to other states, but it would at least give an appearance that might be offensive to other states. By the natural essence of these offensive measures adopted by a single state, the securitization of other states would be compromised, and they would make efforts to take such measures as well, causing a 'self-reinforcing spiral' (Collins, 2004; Glaser, 1997; Jervis, 1978). This illustrates the fact that the methods adopted by the state to increase its securitization result in decreasing the security of the state and tend to be 'self-defeating'. Interestingly, this spiral has no ends as the start had no visible motive to occur, but it would cause defensive states to move towards situations that might lead to unwarranted war (Tang, 2009). This analysis helps us to understand that offensive or defensive approaches adopted by a state may yield the same result of a tragic, never-ending spiral. However, the security dilemma finds its fundamental blocks in the inherent tenets of human psychology that are represented in the international order in the form of uncertainty and fear (Butterfield, 1951; Garver, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

If we further bifurcate the inherent uncertainty that leads towards the inception of the security dilemma, there are two distinguished factors that come upon this analysis. The first one mainly involves the dilemma of explaining the security-driven actions of a particular state and the dilemma of the reaction that is given in response to those actions (Collins, 2014). Hence, in such a dilemmatic scenario, any state which starts to increase and strengthen its security measures will cause the security dilemma to worsen and a responsive state that becomes aware of the dilemma shows the policy of restraint might become susceptible to attack by avoiding the security measures and hence puts itself at risk of a possible invasion from the aggressive power in the region (Butfoy, 1997). Therefore, any strategies deployed by the state to strengthen its security by the use of 'diplomatic signaling' mechanisms would result in worsening the security (Wiseman, 1989; Montgomery, 2006).

Furthermore, the intensity with which a state adopts to develops its security measures can also prove to be particularly important as the definition of optimal level of security might be subjective for states. In an ideal scenario, even if some states agree on a certain level of security measures to be implemented, any state would be acceptable to the fact that the other states possess the same intensity of security measures as they possess (Kertzer, Brutger, & Quek, 2024). There is a further interesting insight on this mechanism where states with geopolitical vulnerabilities might opt for more defensive strategies than their regional competitors (Posen, 1993). As the opportunity for creating a fair ground for play might put them at great disadvantage and keep them vulnerable to attack. Jervis, in this regard, brings us to a reasonable conclusion by arguing that the strategy of plainly reproducing the security measures of another state might be detrimental to the state's own existence (Jervis, 1978).

In a hypothetical situation where all the states in a region are conscious of the existence of a security dilemma, the present might not necessarily constitute a solution to the problem (Mamasoliev, 2024). This would try to confuse states and would lead to unintentional consequences by illustrating the restrictive behavior of the states as an aggressive measure that cannot tell the difference between a peaceful intention and the aggressive nature of the state (Collins, 2004). Furthermore, the threat that any group of states that have come to an understanding that the states would peacefully coexist with each other due to mutual bonding might take any simple move from the other states as an act of aggression and would become relatively less tolerant (Tang, 2009). Henceforth, the display of intentions for any state becomes very crucial and can lead to worsening of the security dilemma, as it might be uncertain whether the intentions are clear or not. In the same regard, the security dilemma is not responsible for explaining the acts of states that have an aggressive approach towards one another (Glaser, 2024). Regardless of states that seek security for their defense, these states do not live in a state of fear and uncertainty, and are very much aware of the intentions of their regional competitors, whereas the

security dilemma is not required to explain the aggressive approach that these states adopt (Wheeler, 2008).

While extrapolating the literature on the security dilemma with reference to its inescapable nature, it can be noted that it has been linked with structural realism, where the focus is on the anarchy and uncertainty in the international system (Collins, 2000; Snyder, 2002). The conceptual framework that explains the security dilemma can be traced back to the 1950s, where Herz and Butterfield established the theoretical foundations of the concept. Herz had been dominantly pessimistic about any such scenario of evading the security dilemma and strengthened the case for its inescapable nature by highlighting it as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the 70s and 80s, Jervis and Glaser had a significant influence on the subject matter by putting a great emphasis on the offense-defense balance that revolved around the degree of separation that offensive and defensive strengths in modifying the security dilemma (Wheeler, 2008). The separation of the paradox from the uncertain nature of the international system was developed by Booth and Wheeler. Whereas one of the most important contributions was made by Adler and Barnett by their proposition of security communities as a solution to the security dilemma, which had a great influence on the social constructivist approach of Wendt (Capie, 2000).

Research Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this paper is based on a qualitative approach that aims to crucially investigate the security dilemma with a keen focus on the inescapable nature of the phenomenon within the scholarship of international relations. There are numerous primary and secondary sources that have been employed for the purpose of data collection. The primary sources include academic interviews, discussions, and expert opinions on international relations and the security dilemma. The secondary sources used in the research are based on the relevant literature from peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings. The research methodology further develops itself based on various theoretical frameworks such as offense-defense balancing, security community model, and ontological security, based on the findings of influential international relations theorists. The comparative analysis based on these theoretical frameworks allows us to evaluate the extent to which the security dilemma is escapable, while considering the threats posed by structural uncertainties in the international world order. Furthermore, the paper provides a strategic approach by taking into account the analysis of real-world applications of the theoretical frameworks that are discussed by providing an analysis of the intricacies that are involved in the behavior of the state in security competition in the international order (Yildirim, Yildirim, & Erdogan, 2024).

Escaping the Security Dilemma: Neorealist Insights and Pathways for Resolution

While the paper further argues on the inescapable nature of the security dilemma, it is essential to understand the most crucial aspect of the security dilemma that finds its roots in structural realism at the crossroads of offensive and defensive neorealist thought. John Mearsheimer, under the offensive neorealist tradition, highlights the fact that the international system is based on a mechanism that appreciates the aggressive behavior of states, and they must be interventionist in order to ensure their survival in an anarchic world order (Montgomery, 2006). The best mechanism to survive is to have strong offensive capacities and build them over time so they can pose a threat to other states (Hiim, Fravel & Trøan, 2023). His explanation provides a reasoning that argues that, in fact, there is no security dilemma that exists exclusively because the motives and intentions of the states are well known to all the actors that are present in the world order; therefore, the idea of obtaining offensive capacities is necessary for states to survive. By taking this perspective into consideration, we can come closer to the fact that the neorealist interpretation offered by Mearsheimer is quite distinct compared to the literature that is present on the subject matter while answering the question of whether the security dilemma is inescapable (Glaser, 1997). This argumentation, in essence, gives a 'fatalist' understanding which doesn't even try to provide an answer to escaping the security dilemma.

While analyzing the literature review on the question, Booth and Wheeler are particularly essential in terms of providing a reasonable explanation based on three key aspects, which can be termed as "fatalistic, mitigating, and

transcending solutions" (Campbell & Di Salvatore, 2021). For fatalistic solutions, we can describe Mearsheimer's neorealist offensive realist explanation of the security dilemma, which stresses the fact that states don't have a genuine option of choosing to escape the dilemma (Booth & Wheeler, 2008). Furthermore, the mitigating solutions can be described in light of the offense-defense balance explained by Jervis and Glaser. For the transcending solutions, the security communities approach adopted by Adler and Barnett is particularly crucial in understanding whether the security dilemma is inescapable or not. The paper would only make use of the mitigating and transcending solution to the security dilemma to explain that the security dilemma, in fact, is escapable (Booth & Wheeler, 2008).

There are several factors that can have an impact on the universal nature of the security dilemma, according to Tang, such as the nature of offense and defense in the international order (Tang, 2009). The separation of offense from defense in terms of understanding it is very crucial because if this distinction is not drawn, it can worsen the security dilemma. Due to the limited distinction between offense and defense, states will not be able to convey their intentions. Further analysis on this point reveals the fact that if the offensive capacities of a state are stronger than the state would be victorious in wars in a very decisive manner. Hence, states that take the first strike in wars are at a considerable advantage in winning the war and securing their existence. According to Jervis, this action deteriorates a state's dilemma of response because they are involves in the estimation of starting a war or defending themselves. In either case, they could have either won a war or lost by engaging in offensive or defensive actions (Jervis, 1978). Furthermore, there is an interesting observation in this regard that holds immense significance, that argues that balance of power between offense and defense can be controlled, and the defense can be strengthened by the use of modern advancements in the field of military or by imposing weapons controls treaties between states thereby enhancing a country's dilemma of response (Tang, 2009).

Arms Race and the Signaling of Strategic Intentions

Furthermore, a state that had been part of security dilemma, preparing for an offensive war would reveal its intentions easily because of the fact that it would require significantly a greater amount of time to prepare which would provide other states with the opportunity to prepare themselves for a defensive approach and develop a system that can help to counter any such measures of aggressive war mongering by an aggressive state (Lynn-Jones, 1995; Lieber, 2000). The reaction to an offensive state by a defensive state would provide some considerable advantages, such as the signaling of intentions by the magnitude and the mechanism adopted by the aggressor to attack. Furthermore, it also provides the aggressive state with an opportunity to enhance its weapons system by maybe initiating an arms race in the region because the defensive state had made efforts to counter the aggressor state's initial efforts (Tang, 2009). Therefore, in this regard, states in the contemporary international system can engage in a mechanism of acquiring defensive weapons and restrict themselves from gaining offensive weapons. These efforts would help to lessen the dilemma of response and interpretation as the uncertainty in the international system is countered by making the intentions of acquiring the weapons very clear to other states (Jervis, 1978).

In any case, the intentions of states become evident with no fear of attack based on weapons. The outcomes of actions in this scenario become very foreseeable. In the very same context, there is still an impeding point which revolves around the categorization of weapons that the states acquire (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998). Types of weapons differ based on their speed, range, and impact, and can be characterized as either offensive or defensive based on that. For instance, nuclear weapons might be characterized as defensive weapons with their ability to eliminate the offensive state (and the defensive state as well). Also, offensive weapons have higher speed and mobility, which can generate an attack that can strike the target by surprise. Furthermore, relatively weak states also engage in an arms race to acquire weapons to strengthen themselves (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998; Glaser, 1997).

Subjectivity in Weapon Characterization and Its Implications

However, the offense-defense balance can also be rebutted on a couple of grounds, and the security dilemma might still prove to be inescapable. There

are considerable problems in calculating the intensity of offense-defense balance, but the argumentation also proves to create a distinction between offense and defense of a state which can be a line that is hard to draw provided the structure if the international order and the uncertainty that revolves around its fundamental basis (Nilsson, 2012). Furthermore, weapons are deployed with a strategy that encompasses their use, and they can rarely be used without a proper strategy initiated as part of their use (Yoder & Haynes, 2025). It is difficult to categorize a weapon as either offensive or defensive, as some weapons that might portray their use as offensive might in fact be defensive and vice versa (Tang, 2009).

The most common analogy presented in this context is used by Regehr, which highlights the use of sword and shield (Regehr, 2003). A sword is an offensive weapon, whereas a shield is a defensive weapon, but when they are used together, the interpretation of the shield is also different. Moreover, for instance air defense systems although have a defensive outlook but they can also be characterized as offensive weapons as they counter enemy's advancements and may pave way for the state to make further infringement as part of an offensive maneuvering, Tang's analysis also revolved around the very same premise that most of the scholars on the subject matter agree with the fact that the offensive or defensive nature of the weapons cannot be characterized at all and is largely subjective (Tang, 2010). Hence, the characterization of weapons is largely dependent on the intentions of the state that deploys them, and it makes no effort to curb the uncertainty of the international system (Collins, 2004).

From Structural Uncertainty to Social Transformation

Apart from the classification of weapons as offensive and defensive and their impact on the uncertainty, there is also very little evidence to support the claim of differentiating the military strategy of the state. Defensive mechanisms adopted by states can often be significantly crucial for their existential well-being and self-interests. Garver points out the significance of buffer zones in this regard, where they might be a source of vulnerability for one state but a buffer zone for another state (Garver, 2002). Take the examples of Tibet and China, for instance, as the strategic importance the region holds for China. It is necessarily evident that some states that might have defensive attitudes can tend to provide an outlook that might seem expansionist, thereby giving rise to alarming uncertainty for other states in the region (Mearsheimer, 2006).

The mechanism of offense-defense balancing or differentiating does not necessarily help us to escape the security dilemma. There is a basic premise of the security dilemma that remains intact, and there is no solution that seems to be provided for that by adopting these mechanisms, which is structural uncertainty (Wulf, 2025). The solution to that can be reasonably found in such a way that the alteration to the structure that produces that uncertainty is transformed. In this regard, the social constructivist school of thought in international relations provides us with a very reasonable inference to escape the security dilemma with a warrant of its claims (Cottey, 2025). Alexander Wendt highlights the fact that anarchy is a social structure that is formed through the relationships that are developed by states in their interaction with one another (Wendt, 1995). He described anarchy not as a product but a relationship that is generated among states, which is the result of the identities of the states in that process of international and the identities can evolve over time (Glaser, 1997; Bellamy, 2004).

Wendt argues that the international system might be anarchic in its nature, but anarchy should not be restricted by a definition of structural uncertainty. The social culture of the anarchic world order is a product of relations that exist between the states; The states in the international order can develop a mutual understanding by being interdependent on each other and by discussing valuable insights in various matters. Henceforth, the social structure that constitutes anarchy needs to be transformed in order to provide a better understanding of escaping the security dilemma (Wendt, 1992; Wendt, 1995).

From Conflict to Cooperation: Adler and Barnett's Security Community

The approach adopted by Adler and Barnett in terms of the security community can be ideally used in this regard to look for a solution to the security dilemma (Adler & Barnett, 1998). They argue that the states can look forward to a mechanism of cooperation in order to overcome the existing norms and provide

an understanding of new structural norms that can change the social construct. Defensive states might be able to maintain their identity and security by opting for the new norms that are established by states. States would hence be involved in not only defending themselves but also the agenda of the community they are part of as well. In any scenario, if there are states that do not timely take any sort of confidence in eh structure of the community might revert to fulfilling the new norms over the passage of time if the community is sustainable (Bellamy, 2004). The communities that coexist in such a mechanism as an amalgam of states would give birth to a collective identity or a security community. The security community provides an understanding of a common coexistence mechanism that defines the international stage might be set for socialization, whereas the community is based on the mechanism to stay together effectively without conflict (Collins, 2004).

A security community can be further strengthened by institutionalization, which can develop a sort of structural presence in the international order. These institutions, over the passage of time, will continue to transform and evolve in the form of a collective society which might have a different value than the states that constitute them. Security communities of contemporary times are a product of postmodernism and reflect the economic and political might that they hold, surpassing the previous conflictual situation in terms of security dilemmas in various regions across the globe (Jervis, 1982). These security communities create a pathway for uncertainty to be overcome by redefining the value of the international system and constituting an authority that deals with uncertainty in terms of the collective community (Sørensen, 2007).

Conclusion

There is, however, a considerable amount of trust that is required by states to be taken initially until the institutions are strengthened and trust among states is developed. It might be possible that some states might seek defection, which might be a significant possible outcome. This can be understood in such a way that the ethos of the security community has always remained the same, but the defecting state in fact loses its sense of identity. Another possible threat can be the formation of security community blocks across the globe, which might give birth to a new security dilemma, but at least a mechanism has been developed that can help to take in more states into its influence and resolve the dilemma. Thus, the security dilemma is escapable to a great extent.

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