

THE SECURITY DILEMMA: SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY OR INESCAPABLE REALITY?

CLÉMENTINE EMERIAU

INTRODUCTION

The security dilemma is considered to be a cornerstone of the realist approach to International Relations, and is thus defined in realist terms. It refers to states' unavoidable behaviour of self-help in the face of uncertainty (created by the anarchic structure of the international system) which often results in a continuous accumulation of power, and a simultaneous failure to increase the states' level of security (Tang, 2009: 9). A famous example of the security dilemma is the Cold War arms race between the USA and the USSR, whereby both superpowers, by repeatedly increasing their respective military capabilities, gradually appeared more threatening to the other to the point of being on the brink of war. However, the theory behind the security dilemma is far from being undisputed. On the one hand, some claim it is an inescapable reality, a naturally occurring behaviour in international politics which has been, is, and will always materialise itself (Mearsheimer, 2014: 35-36). On the other hand, there are claims it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, merely occurring because expectations of its existence constrain behaviours to align with the theory, and which can potentially be reversed (Collins, 2014: 3). In today's context of International Relations, the security dilemma has become a self-fulfilling prophecy which can be, if not escaped, at least transcended. Firstly, problematic approaches and assumptions surrounding the security dilemma will be

explained. Secondly, the self-fulfilling logic of the security dilemma will be analysed. Thirdly, the ways in which the security dilemma can be deactivated and transcended will be explored. Finally, a general conclusion will be formulated.

PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE SECURITY DILEMMA

Here, the assumptions of an anarchic system and its resulting uncertainty will be explored, before moving on to the problematic amalgam made by some scholars between the security dilemma and the security paradox. Firstly, although it is assumed by realist scholars that the international system is anarchic by nature, the reality of the modern geopolitical landscape is closer to that of a managed, standardised anarchy. This means that although international politics are still centred around supposedly equal nation-state units, the types of interactions between these states greatly differ from pre-First World War dynamics (Collins, 2014: 8). More precisely, due to the economic, social, and other interdependencies between modern states, interactions in the international system are highly regulated (e.g. trade agreements, International Humanitarian Law, various conventions) (Bluth, 2011: 5). As such, the type of free-for-all behaviours that one could expect to occur in a purely anarchic structure are in fact largely avoided. One could think of the relatively unchanged borders as the result of

expansionist warfare since the end of the Cold War, with a few exceptions (Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights in 1981; Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014). Thus, one of the underlying assumptions of the security dilemma (i.e. the anarchic structure of the international system causes the security dilemma) is challenged: if the international system is not structured by pure anarchy, why would it always give rise to pure self-help, power accumulating behaviours such as the security dilemma?

Secondly, although it is assumed that the uncertainty of others' intentions leads to the security dilemma, it is misplaced certainty, rather than uncertainty, which triggers the security dilemma into action. According to Herz (1951: 7), the security dilemma occurs because a state cannot know the intentions of other states with certainty. In other words, uncertainty about others' motives, and more precisely whether they are benign or malign, leads to security dilemma dynamics. While it is true that a state cannot know another's objectives with complete certitude, uncertainty could lead to security dilemma dynamics when it is assumed that others' intentions are malign, just as it could lead to passivity when it is assumed that other's intentions are benign (Mitzen and Schweller, 2011: 9). Therefore, the security dilemma arises from a state's biased, pessimistic assumption about the other state's intentions, rather than from uncertainty of intentions. In the words of Mitzen and Schweller (2011: 34), the security dilemma is caused by "delusional beliefs of persecution and harm, that is, by misplaced certainties of external danger", a default assumption for malign intentions. These negative assumptions are then reinforced with

each new interaction between the two states, so that uncertainty is replaced by misplaced certainty (i.e. the other state has malicious intent), which becomes the new norm of interaction (Collins, 2014: 8). This raises a question about another concept closely linked to the security dilemma, namely, uncertainty: is there not an alternative to misplaced certainty when coping with uncertainty?

Finally, there is a problematic tendency among scholars to equate the security dilemma with the security paradox. The security dilemma, as defined by Booth and Wheeler (2008: 4), consists of two levels of dilemmas. First, a dilemma of interpretation: should a state interpret another state's development of military capabilities as offensive or defensive? And second, upon deciding on the first dilemma, a dilemma of response: assuming the initial interpretation of intentions was faulty, should the state respond by developing its own military capabilities, thereby risking generating mutual hostility, or should it not react and risk becoming exposed to coercion? The dilemma of response can then give rise to a security paradox or spiral, whereby states respectively accumulate power to increase their own security, entrenching themselves in an arms race, resulting in decreased security, and risking conflict (Collins, 2014: 3). While some scholars (Butfofy, 1977: 2; Snyder, 1984: 2) wrongly equate the two aforementioned concepts, the security paradox is only one possible outcome of the security dilemma. This faulty amalgamation is due to misplaced certainty, whereby the dilemma of interpretation is always answered in negative terms (i.e. the other state is offensive), compelling the dilemma of

response to be answered negatively (i.e. reacting aggressively, sparking mutual hostility), thus resulting in the security paradox being the standard outcome. As long as misplaced certainty is present, the relationship between the security dilemma and the security paradox resembles a self-fulfilling prophecy: (inaccurate) negative expectations force states into the security paradox. Hence, the initial curse of states, the security dilemma, is diffused into a new curse, the security paradox, and the two concepts are viewed as one.

SELF-FULFILLING LOGIC OF THE SECURITY DILEMMA AND PARADOX

Here, the self-fulfilling prophecy will be defined and analysed, before considering its reversal. Firstly, it is necessary to define exactly what a self-fulfilling prophecy is before analysing its manifestation with regards to the security dilemma. According to Jussim (2019: 1), a self-fulfilling prophecy is the “process through which an originally false expectation leads to its own confirmation”. This is absolutely in line with security dilemma and paradox dynamics; fixed and irrational pessimistic expectations become routines, and lead to the perpetuation of conflictual outcomes: the security paradox. Unlike realist scholars claim, anarchy and uncertainty are not what supports the security dilemma, rather, it is the sustained misplaced certainty of others’ malign intentions. In other words, as Booth and Wheeler (2008: 73) phrase it, “pessimistic predictions can become self-fulfilling prophecies as governments apply worst-case thinking and related policies”.

Secondly, the metamorphosis of the security dilemma into a self-fulfilling security paradox has interesting consequences for the dilemma itself. Namely, it has already been escaped. As Hopf (2010: 11) explains, “decision-makers rarely need to choose between options because in most cases one single option comes to mind”. This absence of choice and agency is antithetic to the definition of a dilemma, which presupposes a difficult choice between two (usually undesirable) options. Given misplaced certainty in the self-fulfilling prophecy, it appears that the security dilemma has been escaped for a consistent, persistent choice for its worst outcome: the security paradox. This allows for a rejection of the view that the security dilemma is an inescapable reality; rather, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, it is fortunately possible to reverse the negative self-fulfilling prophecy into a positive one. Indeed, just as negative expectations lead to the perpetuation of negative outcomes, positive expectations will lead to the perpetuation of positive outcomes. As Booth and Wheeler (2008: 297; 257) explain, it is possible to turn this “vicious circle of security and power competition” into a “virtuous spiral of trust” and cooperation. There are many examples of this occurring in international politics, including Western European states after the Second World War (Booth and Wheeler, 2008: 257), or Sri Lanka and India after their independences (De Silva, 2015: 16). The subsequent section will detail the ways in which the self-fulfilling prophecy can be reversed, and thus the security dilemma transcended.

SECURITY DILEMMA DEACTIVATION AND TRANSCENDENCE

Here, a three-step approach to reversing the self-fulfilling prophecy will be provided. Firstly, in order to defuse misplaced certainty, decision-makers must engage in security dilemma sensibility. Security dilemma sensibility refers to an explicit reflection upon security dilemma dynamics, a recognition that one's own defensive behaviour could be viewed as offensive, and a questioning of preconceptions about others (Booth and Wheeler, 2008: 4; Collins 2014: 9). Examples of security dilemma sensibility are numerous: Gorbachev at the end of the Cold War, Sadat's empathy for Israeli fears (Collins, 2014: 10), Brazil and Argentina defusing a nuclear security dilemma (Wheeler, 2009: 9). Through security dilemma sensibility, misplaced certainty can be offset and a first move toward trust building is made.

Secondly, once security dilemma sensibility is undertaken, there needs to be efforts at building trust. Indeed, trust building represents a better alternative to misplaced certainty when coping with uncertainty (Wheeler, 2009: 8). It requires an initial "leap in the dark", as it is closely related to uncertainty and vulnerability (Collins, 2014: 10). In order to have more reassurance and minimise the risk of initiating a trust relationship, states can make use of their intelligence and diplomatic apparatuses. Indeed, intelligence can be used in order to check whether or not others are keeping their promises, while diplomacy can help communicate benign intentions (Pashakhanlou, 2018: 10; 12). When trust is built through repeated reassuring interactions, the security paradox is indefinitely escaped, and the security dilemma loses its salience.

Finally, once initiated, it is important to bind the trust relationship with more than words. In order to cement the trust between states, together they must develop organisations (e.g. NATO, UN), institutions (e.g. International Monetary Fund, World Health Organisation), and synergies (e.g. joint military exercises, trade agreements). By becoming interdependent, states further reduce uncertainty about others' intentions by simultaneously increasing the cost of offence and incentives for cooperation. The formalisation of interactions and trust can be done in many ways: treaties (Pohl, 2013: 17), organisations (Waltz, 2000: 22), trade agreements, joint low-level military exercises, cultural diplomacy (Murphy, 2010: 16), bilateral summit meetings (De Silva, 2015: 10). To summarise, as Booth and Wheeler (2008: 298) put it:

"The ultimate insurance against war [...] lies in political community, not nuclear threats. Predictable peace comes through norms, institutions, laws, multilevel social interaction, trust-affirming commitments"

In the transcender logic (Collins, 2014: 7), these formalised interactions reshape the very structure of the international system from anarchy to managed anarchy, under which international cooperation, or at least peaceful cohabitation, replaces spiralling competition. Since today's international system is one of managed anarchy it can be said that the security dilemma, once considered the norm, has already become the exception. In this way, the self-fulfilling prophecy becomes one of cooperation and interdependence, and the security dilemma is transcended, serving as a

reminder of a past, detrimental *modus operandi*.

CONCLUSION

Taking the preceding arguments into consideration, we have seen that concepts of anarchy and uncertainty in the international system, which make the security dilemma an inescapable reality, are not as clearcut as they seem to be. Instead, misplaced certainty has assimilated the dilemma and the paradox, turning the security dilemma into a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, through the management of anarchy and the institutionalisation of trust, the self-fulfilling prophecy can be reversed, and the security dilemma can be transcended, relegated to the status of distant memory. Naturally, the self-fulfilling cooperative prophecy may not be immortal, and the breakdown of managed anarchy and international institutions could lead to the resurgence of the initial, competitive self-fulfilling prophecy. There is thus a significant, alarming interrogation as to when and why such a disruption could occur, and whether this disintegration of cooperation would trigger the beginning of a Third World War.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Booth, K. & Wheeler, N.J. 2008, *The security dilemma: fear, cooperation and trust in world politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Bluth, C. 2011, "The security dilemma revisited: a paradigm for international security in the twenty-first century?: Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007)", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 15, no. 8, pp. 1362-1377.
- Butfoy, A. 1997, "Offence-defence theory and the security dilemma: The problem with marginalizing the context", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 38-58.
- Collins, A. 2014, "Escaping a security dilemma: Anarchy, certainty and embedded norms", *INTERNATIONAL POLITICS*, vol. 51, no. 5, pp. 561-576.
- De Silva, S. 2015, "Balancing, Bandwagoning or Hedging? Independent Ceylon's Reaction to Regional Hegemony", *South Asian Survey*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 189-209.
- Herz, J. H. (1951). *Political realism and political idealism, a study in theories and realities*. [Chicago], University of Chicago Press.
- Hopf, T. 2010, "The logic of habit in International Relations", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 539-561.
- Jussim, L. (2016). *Self-fulfilling prophecy*. [online] Encyclopædia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/self-fulfilling-prophecy>. [Accessed 31 Oct. 2019].
- Mearsheimer, J.J. 2014, *The tragedy of great power politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, New York, N.Y.
- Mitzen, J. & Schweller, R.L. 2011, "Knowing the Unknown Unknowns: Misplaced Certainty and the Onset of War", *Security Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 2-35.
- Murphy, A.M. 2010, "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise", *Asian Security*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 1-27.
- Pashkhanlou, A. 2018, "Intelligence and diplomacy in the security dilemma: gauging capabilities and intentions", *INTERNATIONAL POLITICS*, vol. 55, no. 5, pp. 519-536.
- Pohl, B. 2013, "Neither Bandwagoning nor Balancing: Explaining Europe's Security Policy", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 353-373.
- Snyder, G.H. 1984, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics", *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 461-495.
- Tang, S. 2009, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis", *Security Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 587-623.
- Waltz, K.N. 2000, "Structural Realism after the Cold War", *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 5-41.
- Wheeler, N. 2009, "Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World: More Trust May Be Better", *INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 428-445.