

Is the Security Dilemma Inescapable?

Introduction

Within the realist international relations theory, the security dilemma is considered to be a spiral of uncertainty wherein “steps pursued by states to bolster their security have the effect of making other states less secure.”¹ Highlighting the “theoretical and practical horizons it opens up,” Booth and Wheeler affirm that “thinking about the security dilemma gets to the heart of the central questions of security studies more profoundly than do even the traditional canons of concepts such as ‘war’, ‘strategy’, ‘conflict’ and the rest.”² To discuss the title question, this essay will first look at the theoretical underpinnings of security dilemma and the claims about it being inescapable. Then, it seeks to elucidate that even though security dilemma has become ubiquitous in the study of nation-states, various arguments can be made that security dilemma is not irrepressible.

Defining the Security Dilemma

It was in the post-WWII period that the proper theorization of the security dilemma concept started. John Herz and Herbert Butterfield developed the theory separately in the early 1950s, followed by Robert Jervis in the 1970s. Different theoreticians placed differing emphases on what they believed to be the sources and ingredients of the dilemma. Butterfield attributed the definitive origin of the security dilemma to the ‘Hobbesian fear’ of every state about other states that exacerbates suspicion and distrust.³ But Herz and Jervis both moved away from this notion of security dilemma based on human nature. For them, it is a structural notion that takes root in the “lack of an international sovereign” in international politics.⁴ They separately elaborated that the activities of states enhancing their security within an anarchic international politics would elicit trepidation in other states and ensure a vicious circle of insecurity, power competition, and conflicts.⁵

Shing Kang critically examined the original conceptions of the security dilemma by Butterfield, Herz, and Jervis, and gave a more rigorous notion rooted in the essential characteristics of security dilemma. Three aspects that Kang found quintessential in the security dilemma are – “anarchy (which leads to uncertainty, fear, and the need for self-help

¹ Robert Jervis, ‘Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?’, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 36–60.

² K. Booth and N. Wheeler, *Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 134.

³ Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), 19-22.

⁴ Robert Jervis, ‘Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma’, *World Politics* 3, no.2 (1978): 169.

⁵ J. H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 275, and Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma”, 169.

for survival or security), lack of malign intention on both sides, and some accumulation of power (including offensive capabilities).⁶ The notion of security dilemma has variably been used to explain “why wars can happen even among states that seek nothing more than their own security.”⁷ Figure 1 explains the causative connection between anarchy and the security dilemma and the eventual conflicts.

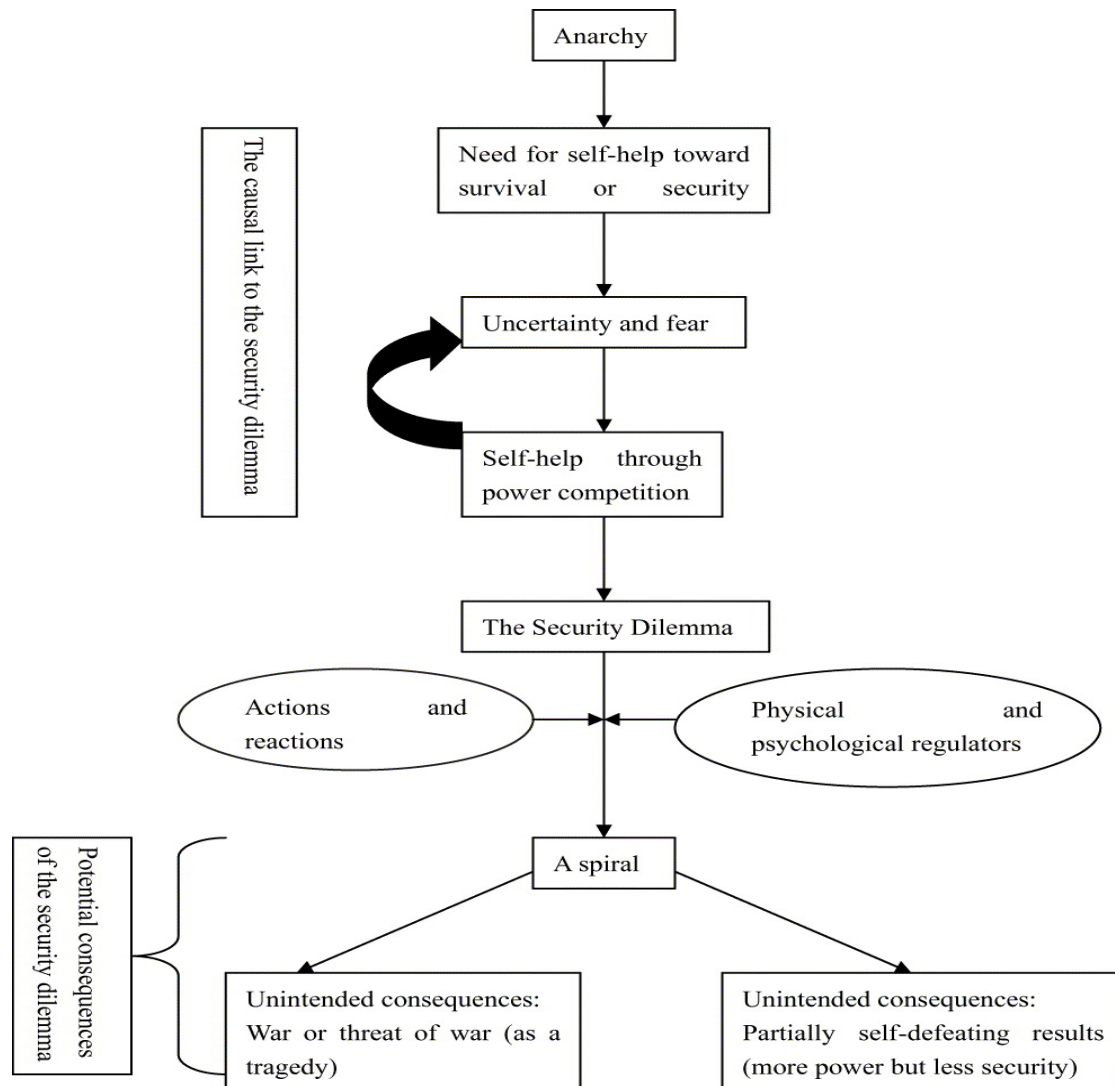


Figure 1⁸

Game theory offers an explanatory framework to understand the security dilemma of actors in international relations. The Prisoner's Dilemma suggests that “reward for unilateral non-cooperation exceeds the benefit from mutual cooperation,” and thus rational actors working

⁶ Shiping Tang, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict: Toward a Dynamic and Integrative Theory of Ethnic Conflict', *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 514.

⁷ Randall L. Schweller, 'The Logic and Illogic of the Security Dilemma and Contemporary Realism: A Response to Wagner's Critique', *International Theory* 2, no. 2 (2010): 289.

⁸ Tang, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', 515.

towards their self-interest are stuck in an antagonistic game and must outcompete the other.⁹

Dilemma becoming an intractable paradox

Booth and Wheeler expanded the notion of a security dilemma to a “security paradox” characterised by “a two-level strategic predicament.”¹⁰ Firstly, there’s a “dilemma of interpretation” which requires the policymakers to interpret other states’ motives, intentions, and capabilities.¹¹ Secondly, once interpretation is appropriately done, comes the “dilemma of response” regarding what would be the most rational riposte to the growing anxiety.¹² They have claimed that the security dilemma is inescapable because decision-makers of a state always face an “unresolvable uncertainty” in their minds about their rivals’ actions.¹³

Realism and Security Dilemma

Amidst the stirring fluctuations of the Cold War, the security dilemma concept had colonized a principal territory in realist theories. Realists state that “international systems are decentralized and anarchic” and each state must depend on itself (self-help system) to seek what it comprehends to be its rational self-interest – their survival and existential security.¹⁴ Despite agreeing on the anarchic nature of international politics, different realist schools have divergent thoughts on security dilemma.

Inescapable Security Dilemma

Offensive realists like John Mearsheimer find the “dilemma of interpretation” to be absolute that can never be reduced. Mearsheimer contends that “states can never be certain about other states’ intentions” and he underpins the fatalistic dynamics of world politics by stating that “intentions can change quickly, so a state’s intentions can be benign one day and hostile the next.”¹⁵ As there is no end to the “dilemma of interpretation,” there can be no end to the “dilemma of response.” Mearsheimer believes, for a state, the “ultimate aim is to be the hegemon” to ensure security, but since “no state is likely to achieve global hegemony, the world is condemned to perpetual great-power competition.”¹⁶ His suggestion of a revisionist

⁹ Glenn H. Snyder, “Prisoner’s Dilemma” and “Chicken” Models in International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1971): 66–103.

¹⁰ Booth and Wheeler, *Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics*, 4-9.

¹¹ Ibid, 4-5.

¹² Ibid, 4-5.

¹³ Ibid, 27.

¹⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979), 88-90.

¹⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2014), 31.

¹⁶ Ibid, 2.

“power maximisation” and seeking power as both a means and end of a state leads to the conclusion that the security dilemma is inescapable.¹⁷

Escapable Security Dilemma

Defensive realist Kenneth Waltz argues against power maximisation, believing that “in anarchy, security is the highest end” and suggests that states must maximize their security through defensive strategies.¹⁸ Defensive realists argue that “the international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions” and therefore uncertainty can be reduced as “the states should pursue military, diplomatic, and foreign economic policies that communicate restraint.”¹⁹ In particular, Charles Glaser believes that different security-seeking states should be able to recognise and treat each other as security-seekers, try to maintain the relative status quo, and prevent complications that offensive realists portend.²⁰ This points to how the “dilemma of interpretation” can be solved and subsequent response can also be tempered, thereby security dilemma can be mitigated.

Another defensive realist, Jervis, reveals that there are two critical agents of the dilemma: the discernability of defensive from offensive weapons and “whether the defence or the offense has the advantage.”²¹ Jervis says that if “defensive weapons are easily distinguishable from offensive weapons” and if the “defence has the advantage over the offense”, there is not going to be an inevitable security dilemma.²²

	OFFENSE HAS THE ADVANTAGE	DEFENSE HAS THE ADVANTAGE
OFFENSIVE POSTURE NOT DISTINGUISHABLE FROM DEFENSIVE ONE	1 Doubly dangerous	2 Security dilemma, but security requirements may be compatible.
OFFENSIVE POSTURE DISTINGUISHABLE FROM DEFENSIVE ONE	3 No security dilemma, but aggression possible. Status-quo states can follow different policy than aggressors. Warning given.	4 Doubly stable

¹⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 36.

¹⁸ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 128.

¹⁹ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited’, *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000): 129.

²⁰ Charles L. Glaser, ‘The Security Dilemma Revisited’, *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (1997): 185.

²¹ Jervis, ‘Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma’, 186-87.

²² *Ibid*, 211.

Figure 2²³

Escape from Dilemma

For Booth and Wheeler, the security dilemma is not a result of the “actual intentions and capabilities” of a state, but because of the ‘other minds problem’ by every state.²⁴ This problem is the existential condition faced by decision-makers of one state not being able to completely know the minds of their counterparts in other states.²⁵ But, we have had many opportunities opening up through diplomacy that have enfeebled this trap caused by information asymmetry. Schelling and Halperin have mentioned the role of arms control agreements in “the recognition of the common interest, of the possibility of reciprocation and cooperation even between potential enemies with respect to their military establishments.”²⁶ Arms control agreements like the New Start Treaty that reduces offensive arms²⁷, nuclear-weapons-free zones, export control regimes, etc, have endeavoured to reduce the uncertainty and consequently eclipse the security dilemma.

Whilst realism focuses exceedingly on confrontation, conflict, war, and liberalism, with its more optimistic approach, it strives to create peace and cooperation in the world. Liberal thinkers reject the position taken by the realists and work towards enabling the escape from security dilemma by trying to reduce or eliminate the anarchy in international politics.

In the context of the European Union, neo-functionalism led to the development of a supranational authority with pooled sovereignty.²⁸ The EU does not necessarily come within the notion of ‘anarchy,’ as the members are under properly framed supranational authority.²⁹ All the EU member countries are formally independent nation-states, yet they are deeply integrated politically, economically, and socially; Karl Deutsche’s concept of the security community is very much relevant in the case of EU, where states do not resort to force as a means of resolving issues thereby further reducing grounds for security dilemma.³⁰ The EU has allowed ameliorating security dilemma as it has played an effective function in aiding

²³ Ibid, 211.

²⁴ Booth and Wheeler, *Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics*, 27.

²⁵ Ibid, 27.

²⁶ Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), 2.

²⁷ “New START Treaty”, United States Department of State, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/new-start/>.

²⁸ Georg Sorensen, ‘After the Security Dilemma: Challenges of Insecurity in Weak States and Dilemma of Liberal Values’, *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 3 (2007): 360.

²⁹ Ibid, 360.

³⁰ Ibid, 360.

“cooperation by increasing transparency among states, “signalling” intentions, and ultimately reducing uncertainty.”³¹

Along the same path, English School thinker Hedley Bull asserts that, despite anarchic global reality, an “international society” of states does exist where a group of states are “conscious of common interests and common values” and are “bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.”³² These institutions in the international society work towards better communication between states and adherence to rules which reduces the presumptions of the security dilemma.

Besides the assertion that mitigating anarchy can reduce the likelihood of the security dilemma, other suggestions have been made to transcend the dilemma. Michael Doyle declares that democratic governments “exercise “restraint” and “peaceful intentions” in their foreign policy.”³³ Doyle says that “a ‘zone of peace’ based on common moral foundations” and attitudes is formed by democracies that share “mutually beneficial ties of economic cooperation and interdependence.”³⁴ Thus, for democracies bonded together by trust, the security dilemma, if any, is benign and could be alleviated.

Through the Prism of Critical Studies

The end of the Cold War that compelled the increased importance of critical accounts in the discipline of International Relations has resulted in a broadening and deepening of our understanding much beyond the traditional notions. Paul Roe claims that “with several different formulations apparent in international relations literature,” the security dilemma also might be regarded as an ‘essentially contested concept’.”³⁵

While realists underpin anarchy as the inception point of the self-help system, constructivist Alexander Wendt rejects this conclusion by stating that “self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy.”³⁶ He says, “we do not begin our relationship... in a security dilemma,” and rejects the realist construction of an inevitable security dilemma as a natural corollary of anarchy.³⁷ Constructivist understanding is that the states acquire

³¹ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton University Press, 1984), 92-98.

³² Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1977), 13.

³³ Michael W. Doyle, ‘Liberalism and World Politics’, *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1151.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 1156-1161.

³⁵ Paul Roe, *Ethnic Violence and the Societal Security Dilemma* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

³⁶ Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 395.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 400.

identities not just based on the “distribution of power,” but the “intersubjective understandings and expectations.”³⁸ He points to the understanding that “500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons. The British are friends and the North Koreans are not.”³⁹ Wendt claims that “the identities and interests that constitute relations of enmity are alterable by new understandings.”⁴⁰ He says that states need not always have “worst-case assumptions about the other's intentions,” but through reciprocal interactions between states, we can create “relatively enduring social structures” that can eventually redefine interests and identities and therefore help escape the security dilemma.⁴¹

Copenhagen School, conceiving security within the analytical framework of “securitisation,” defines security as a social construction.⁴² Ole Waever regards security as a “speech act,” which allows state actors to present and dramatize an issue as being of supreme priority and thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures in the name of security.⁴³ This points to how the security dilemma is contextual and political, not an objective reality.

Barry Buzan reveals another dimension of security when he emphasizes it as also being a regional phenomenon.⁴⁴ He challenges the state-centric notion of security when he talks about “regional security complexes” in which the security of a group of states is interdependent and cannot be considered separately from one another, thereby promoting cooperation and making the security dilemma irrelevant.⁴⁵

Conclusion

There is an overwhelming emphasis on the security dilemma in realist international relations theory, with many asserting its real-world inescapable nature to be indisputable. But scrutinizing a wider set of referents and questions within security studies challenges traditional contentions. Neorealism has been alleged to be fixated upon neopositivist reductionism that ignores diverse methodological possibilities. So, it is intellectually inconsistent and inaccurate in a dynamic ecosystem.

³⁸ Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It’, 397.

³⁹ Alexander Wendt, ‘Constructing International Politics’, *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 73.

⁴⁰ Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It’, 407.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 404-406.

⁴² Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁴ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991), 190.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Therefore, we must accept that anarchy, unlike what Mearsheimer contends, does not play a fatalistically deterministic role. Today, states are no longer the only security providers. Despite empirical evidence pointing to arms race and conflicts in today's world, a 'complex interdependence' among various state and non-state actors is a more accurate depiction of the world.⁴⁶ The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us that a fixation on state security-based security dilemma is not only unreasonable but also dangerous. Thus, sustained political cooperation, social interaction, and building of trust based on common security interests ensures that underlying uncertainties can be mitigated, and the security dilemma becomes escapable.

Nitin Menon is an engineer by education and an educator by passion with a keen interest in geopolitics and diplomacy.

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⁴⁶ Robert O Keohane and Joseph S Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Longman, 2004), 22.

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