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Security Dilemma

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In international relations theory, the *security dilemma* refers to the difficulty of increasing a state's security without simultaneously (and inadvertently) decreasing the security of other states. Coined by John H. Herz in a 1950 article, the term has become an integral part of explanations of how peace-seeking states may blunder into arms races, crises, or wars. For example, a state may seek to increase its own security and deter outside aggression by building up arms. A neighboring state, witnessing the buildup, will misinterpret the move as preparation for future aggression; feeling threatened, it will attempt to increase its own security by acquiring arms. The first state's suspicions about its neighbor's belligerence are confirmed, leading to an arms race, increase in tension, or war. Conflict in this case is a product of mutual misperceptions and miscommunications that arise not only from the cognitive failures of policy makers but also from the inherent difficulty of credibly conveying peaceful intentions while building up arms or establishing buffer zones. In the domestic realm, as Robert Jervis points out, people can seek to increase their security in ways that do not threaten others—for instance by putting bars in their windows or avoiding high-crime areas. Sovereign states, on the other hand, rarely have such options available to them. What Herz called the “tragic implication” of the security dilemma is that uncertainty and fear about the intentions of other states can lead to war even when all sides are desperate to avoid one.

Several factors can mitigate the dangers associated with the security dilemma and help induce cooperation among states. One is the recognition that the dilemma exists in the first place. Failure to recognize it as such leads to two related problems. First, statesmen will not realize that their own attempts to increase security—even if done for genuinely peaceful reasons—will inevitably threaten other states, despite all assurances to the contrary. Second, they will fail to recognize that other states may arm because they fear attack, seeing their attempts instead as symptoms of aggression. A state that genuinely sees itself as peaceful, and assumes that others do as well, will wrongly conclude that any objections to their own arms buildup must mean that those who object are belligerent. The difficulty here lies in credibly conveying what the policy makers may take for granted: that outsiders should not feel threatened by the state's attempt to increase its security. Of course, merely recognizing this problem does not eliminate the dilemma. Even if policy makers recognize that others may simply be trying to increase their own security, and even if they take into account how their own attempts to do so may be misperceived by others, they cannot rely on the promises and sworn good intentions of others to maintain their security. The problem becomes not a failure of communication or empathy, but instead a failure to credibly commit to peaceful intentions in the absence of an external enforcer. (A functioning collective security system is thus another factor that can make the security dilemma more or less acute. A state will feel less threatened by a neighbor's arms increases if it believes that collective security agreements will deter potential aggressors. In this case the security concept takes the role of an external enforcer.)

In certain situations, an acute awareness of the security dilemma can actually increase the chances of conflict. This happens if aggressors are perceived to be misunderstood security seekers. Hitler's belligerence in the 1930s was initially met with little resistance precisely because European statesmen were intensely aware of the possibility that Germany was merely acting as a security-seeking status quo power. The fact that the security dilemma was felt to be less acute after World War I than beforehand did not prevent the outbreak of another global conflict.

In a foundational 1978 article, Robert Jervis argued that two factors are crucial in determining the severity of the security dilemma. One is whether offense has the advantage over defense; the other is whether an offensive posture can be distinguished from a defensive one. The

security dilemma is more acute when offense holds the advantage and conquest is relatively easy. When offense has the advantage, a nation eternally poised on the brink of foreign conquest will be more suspicious of others, is more likely to interpret moves by others as aggressive, and is constantly tempted to attack preemptively when facing a threat (real or perceived) lest it be attacked first. In a world of offense dominance, ambiguous signals are more likely to be interpreted as threats, and crises more likely to escalate because of mutual insecurity. Relatively secure states, by contrast, can take a more leisurely view of threats. States that do not feel as readily threatened by their neighbors—due to geographic isolation, for instance—will not feel the need to cajole or threaten others to safeguard their own security. Britain's foreign policy in the 19th century, especially as contrasted with the foreign policy of continental states, reflects this distinction. Unlike Austria, surrounded by great powers and vulnerable to internal unrest, Britain could afford to take a more relaxed view of minor disturbances and revolutions within the European state system. Geography is thus an important factor in determining whether offense or defense has the upper hand; in a world of impregnable border defenses the security dilemma is greatly ameliorated. Oceans, mountains, rivers, and buffer zones all serve to ease the security dilemma by giving advantage to the defense.

In a world of total offense dominance, the only sure way for even peace-seeking states to increase security is through preemptive aggression and expansion. In such a world, even a small increase in one's own security can threaten others. On the other hand, in a world where defense dominates, where it is easier to protect or hold territory than to conquer or destroy it, even large increases in a state's security will only slightly decrease the security of others. When conquest is impossible, spiraling arms races are readily perceived as inefficient, insecurities associated with international anarchy are ameliorated, and unnecessary conflict can be avoided. Offense dominance, by contrast, greatly increases what Thomas Schelling called the "reciprocal fear of surprise attack," increasing the incentives for arms races in the long term, and incentives for preemptive or preventive first strikes in the short term. Technology, therefore, is another factor that determines whether offense has the advantage over defense. When offense is believed to possess technological superiority, as was the case before World War I, there is a greater incentive to strike first in order to preempt a potentially debilitating attack. Although the origins of World War I remain a subject of vigorous academic debate, the mistaken belief in offense dominance among European statesmen of the time is often cited as one of its major causes. According to this line of thought, the Franco-Prussian war instilled in policy makers the belief that the next conflict would be short, cheap, and decisive, its outcome favoring the aggressor rather than the defender. Thus the run-up to World War I created incentives for spiraling arms races, and once war seemed inevitable, all sides had a strong temptation to act preemptively.

Because nuclear weapons render defense impossible, mutually assured destruction paradoxically resembles a world where defense dominates. The incentives for a first strike disappear, because the attacking state ensures its own destruction through retaliation (provided that a second-strike capability is maintained). Defense becomes relatively cheap, and the security dilemma becomes less acute. It is for this reason that some academics and policy makers view mutually assured destruction as an effective and credible instrument of peace among security-seeking states.

The second factor mitigating the dangers of the security dilemma, according to Jervis, is the difficulty in distinguishing defensive weapons from offensive weapons. If it can, a state can increase its own security without threatening the security of others. The use of purely defensive weapons or fortifications allows others to differentiate between aggressors and

security seekers. In practice, however, such distinctions are extremely difficult to make. A fortress built for purely defensive reasons can still be used to shelter offensive forces or serve as a forward base for attacks, especially if built close to the border.

The emphasis on offense-defense theory within the environment of a security dilemma shifts the emphasis from considerations of pure power to considerations of military capability. As Charles Glaser argues, focusing on military capabilities can explain state behavior ignored or contradicted by theories that focus only on power. While anarchy remains a constant, the variation in the amount and intensity of cooperation across space and time becomes easier to explain when examining the relationship between offense and defense under the security dilemma.

Although the concept of the security dilemma originated within international relations theory, the term has since been applied in explaining ethnic conflicts and civil wars within states. In the same way that uncertainty about the intentions of other states may lead a state into unwanted conflict, uncertainty and the accompanying fear of other groups can lead to spirals of intrastate violence in those situations in which the central government is unable to provide security (such as in failed multiethnic states), thus replicating the condition of anarchy on a domestic scale.

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See Also

- [Anarchy in International Relations](#)
- [Offense/Defense Dominance](#)
- [Prisoner's Dilemma](#)
- [Realism in International Relations](#)

Further Readings

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