Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma  Robert Jervis

I. Anarchy and the Security Dilemma.  Anarchy exists when there is no international authority to enforce laws.  Anarchy encourages behavior that leads states to be worse off; unless each state thinks others will cooperate, they will not cooperate.  Two issues:

a. States may be committed to the status quo, but cannot bind themselves and their future leaders to the same path.

b. States often seek to control resources or land outside their own territory to protect their possessions.

c. Establishment of physical or ideological buffer zones to allay a threat often presents a threat and causes interference in other state affairs.

A. Expansion of power brings an expansion of responsibilities, which requires greater power.

B. The Security Dilemma: Many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decreases the security of others.  State leaders who fail to understand this dilemma cause it to worsen.

II. What Makes Cooperation More Likely?

a. The costs of being exploited.  Fear of being exploited most strongly drives security dilemma. The easier it is to destroy a state, the greater the reason for it to join a larger and more secure unit or be suspicious or attack at the slightest provocation.  The lower the costs of exploitation, the easier security is to attain; the less vulnerable a state, the more likely it is to cooperate.  The cost of exploitation is the loss of sovereignty.

b. Subjective security demands.  The more states value their security, the more likely they are to be sensitive to even minimal threats (and demand a high level of arms).  States that are predisposed to see threats or adversarialness react more strongly and quickly.  High security requirements make it difficult to capitalize on a common interest (and set off spirals), while low security requirements run the risk of conciliation.  A state can be relaxed about increases in another’s arms if it believes there is a functioning, collective security system.  The security system is insoluble when each state fears that many others are likely to join in its attack.

c. Gains from cooperation and costs of a breakdown.  The main consequence of quick, severe action is the sacrifice of potential gains from cooperation.  The greater these costs, the greater the incentive for cooperation.  Domestic and unpredictability costs of war must be weighed.  Economic gains from big states are rarely sufficient to prevent war, and gains from cooperation can be increase if each side comes to value the other’s well-being positively.

e. Gains from exploitation.  The lower the possible gains from exploitation, the greater the chances of cooperation.  Keep in mind that both victory and defeat can set off undesired domestic changes within a state.
f. The probability that the other will cooperate. States have to concentrate on making cooperation more attractive, and states should understate the gains they would make if they exploited the other. The option to defect, however, must appear credible.

g. Geography, commitments, beliefs, and security through expansion. Defending the status quo often means protecting more than territory (norms, respect, pride, etc.). A common belief is that, if the adversary is secure, it will be emboldened to act against a state’s own interests, and make that state believe it must take the war to the other state’s homeland.


a. Two crucial variables: whether defensive weapons and policies can be distinguished from offensive ones, whether defense or offense has the advantage.

b. Offense-Defense balance. Security Dilemma becomes vicious when commitments, strategy, or technology dictate that the only route to security lies through expansion. Status-quo powers must act like aggressors. States must decide whether to attack, defend, spend money on offense or defense, to strike first or absorb. Diplomacy loses its edge when pressed for time in forming alliances. Offense gives one side the advantage. When defense is dominant, wars are likely to become stalemates and can only be won at enormous costs (trench warfare). Blitzkrieg tactics proved appropriate to get out of a defense-based stalemate. The security dilemma became less powerful after WWI.

c. Technology and Geography. Factors that determine whether offense or defense has the advantage. Railroad construction, for example, and oceans. Borders are not always stable. When weapons are highly vulnerable, they must be employed before they are attacked. Nuclear weapons…result in an impossible defense, a triumph of deterrence. Security is cheap and easy to achieve in the form of second-strike capability; security rests on each side’s beliefs that the other would prefer to run the risks of total destruction.

d. Offense-Defense Differentiation. Weapons and policies that protect the state can also provide the capability for attack. Status-quo states with extensive commitments must worry about attacks on third parties as well. No cooperation or passive resistance is a form of defense, as is guerilla warfare. Weapons and strategies that depend on surprise for their effectiveness are almost always offensive. SLBMs, by definition are defensive, retaliatory weapons. In a nuclear conflict, superiority matters because of the possibility of limited, gradual, controlled strikes. Increasing SLBMs is not necessarily menacing.

Four worlds – P. 211. The first world is worst, and the 4th world is doubly safe.

- First World: Worst for status quo states. Offensive posture not distinguishable from the defensive posture, and offense has the advantage.
- Second World: Offensive posture not distinguishable from the defensive posture, Defense has the advantage. (Security Dilemma, but security requirements may be compatible).
- Third World: Offensive posture distinguishable from Defensive, Offense has Advantage (no security dilemma, aggression possible.)
- Fourth World: Offensive posture distinguishable from Defensive, Defense has the Advantage === MOST STABLE!