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The Interdependence of Security and Perception

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Abstract

It will be argued that perception cannot be disconnected from the question 'what is the threat,' and thus perceptions are a necessary feature of any security equation. There are parties who would argue that it is only the actions and capabilities of actors which can be used to calculate threat, and in isolation perhaps this is true. A picture will be presented, of a system in which societies, both state and sub-state, act and react in a form of repeated 'game.' The 'game' played however necessitates assessment of a 'security' situation in a situation of imperfect information. Perceptions may be shaped or altered, or reliance upon them reduced through signalling or the development of norms and institutions, but perceptions will always be a fundamental feature of a society's decisions related to security.

The quest for security emanates from the ‘Hobbesian fear’ which Realists would argue is a permanent feature due to the anarchical nature of international society. It is however not solely states which seek security, indeed this is a feature of human interactions from the individual level right up to the global. The question of what is required to gain security is inextricably linked with what the threat to security actually is, and what indeed this end state of ‘security’ actually entails – security of what and from what. To ascertain if and how perception feeds into this equation we must first work towards a definition, or at least elucidation, of what is being secured, who is securing it and what is the threat.

The Nature of Security.

Manunta¹ attempted to define ‘security’ as a state to aim to achieve – that of being secure. In practice he argued that actual security can be affected by action taken to reduce insecurity and by perceptions of ‘worries or dangers,’ that which in a philosophical sense security entails the freedom from. Security is thus defined in a very dynamic sense, where in a given situation (S_i) the security of an ‘asset’ (A) is a function of the ‘threat’ (T) to that asset which its ‘protector’ (P) perceives and the actions taken to mitigate the threat. Thus;

$$S_i = f(A, P, T)$$

If we are to apply this concept outside the purely theoretical, we must look at what each of these parts actually means in reality. The ‘asset’ may be traditionally seen as a state and its boundaries or interests. This however gives a needlessly narrow view of security, and the view taken by the Copenhagen School² of societal security is far more relevant to the conflicts in the contemporary international system where it is not always useful or comprehensive if we only discuss inter-state military threats. They contend that where state threats are conceived mainly in terms of military, political, economic or environmental, states must also take account of the threats to societies within that state most often in terms of threats to their identity. With the concept of societal security we can see that the asset may not be simply a boundary or national interest, but possibly the identity of a group and its ability to guard and express this. As seen in the Northern Ireland conflict the two societies have distinct cultures which they guard fiercely. They will resort to violence to protect aspects such as the tradition of parading and the ability to educate children in their respective cultures. In this case the asset may also be the protector, which would account for the deeply personal nature of the perceived threat from each society by the other.

Perceptions of Threat - Capability and Intent.

Manunta’s equation introduces threat to the concept of security and it is in this aspect which we can see how perception fits in and becomes an

inextricable component. Threat comprises two aspects; capability (C) and intent (I). The equation now looks thus;

$$S_i = f(A, P, (C+I))$$

At the state level capability is usually fairly simply and accurately gauged. Conventional force strengths can be roughly assessed through intelligence gathering possibly aerial photography, known arms sales and troop movements or through international agreements. Capability is a far more important factor at the societal level since it is largely dependent upon group cohesion, labelled by Posen as 'groupness.'³ The cohesion of a group is however very difficult to gauge and depends upon a number of factors, but essentially is a measure of a society's ability to act as a single, directed unit. Using the example of Yugoslavia we can see that the capabilities of the Serb and Croat societies were influenced by a range of other factors⁴. The political geography of the situation and the presence of 'islands' of the population of one society within the geographical bounds of another reduce the ability of one society to protect its irredenta. The presence of allies within external to the state is also a factor in societal security. The First World War was transformed from local to global by the complex expectations of outside intervention particularly that Serbia could rely upon the similarly Orthodox Soviets for support. At the societal level during the early stages of Yugoslavia's disintegration the Muslim Croat population hoped that they would gain sympathy with the Germans,⁵ and were quick to emphasise this potential to the Serbs, thus influencing the Serbian perception of Croatian strength.

The intentions of a state or group are similarly fundamental to the calculation of threat. Otto von Bismarck was extremely effective at moderating the perceptions of the intent of a newly united Germany during the 19th century. Despite massive capability, intentions were not seen to be threatening, and thus the united power was not perceived as a significant threat. It could be argued that the opposite is happening in the Far East at present with Japan, which previously was not constitutionally capable of offensive military action. While military forces were solely for defence, intentions were clear and benign and so despite massive capability, threat was minimal. Now however the forces may be perceived as offensive, and thus capability is far more important as a gauge of threat since intentions may no longer be perceived as benign.

An assessment of the intentions of a society are however far more subjective and amorphous. The main issue is that the perceived intentions may actually bear no relevance to those actually intended, even if the true intentions of a society could be uniformly and accurately gauged. Many societies have terrifying oral histories, as seen in the case of the long Croat-Serb history of conflict set within an historically warlike region at the interface of the Habsburg and Turkish empires. The main way to gauge the intentions of a group would be through its political statements. These are however not always coherent or accurate, and are often exaggerated and politicised for the friendly audience. It is thus very easy, especially at the societal level, for political statements to significantly increase perceptions of malign intent. In an interstate situation it may be easier to

use established norms and institutions which will be discussed later, to reduce the reliance upon perception in the calculation of intent and capability, but at a societal level this is very difficult. Without a strong government which is able to represent all societies the reliance upon perceptions in the calculation of threat is far greater.

Perception and the spiralling 'security dilemma.'

The concept of the 'security dilemma' was first expounded by Butterfield and Herz⁶ a key concept is that of a cycle of action and reaction by groups in a state of uncertainty. The actions of one group, in trying to increase its security, cause a reaction in another group, which, in the end decreases the security of the first. Collins highlights the tragedy of the security dilemma;

'It is one of the tragic implications of the security dilemma that mutual fear of what initially may never have existed may subsequently bring about exactly that which is feared most.'⁷

Jervis⁸ distinguishes between two models of the security dilemma. The first is the 'spiral' model, where there is misperception of benign intentions by both parties, and the perception that the security of each is non-commensurate with the security of the other. The other is the 'deterrence' model where the security dilemma is a correct response to an aggressive intension. Although the spiral model and indeed the concept of the security dilemma have been developed primarily to analyse inter-state dynamics, the case studies of violence in Yugoslavia and Transylvania will be used to show that it is equally applicable to intra-state conflict where perceptions are relied upon even more for assessment of capability and intent.

The security dilemma must never be seen as a static concept. The nature of capabilities and intentions may change over time but also may give incentives for either preventive or pre-emptive action. The spiralling security dilemma will become particularly intense and at some point likely to move to outright conflict if the conditions outlined below are evident. These conditions are equally applicable to the intensity of the societal security dilemma, but will take on a more diverse nature. When offensive and defensive forces are more or less identical, states are unable to signal their defensive intent or limited objectives. Opponents have to assume that intentions are malign, or risk being ill prepared in this eventuality. In the societal example of Transylvania the introduction of own language education was similarly a defensive measure, but was not perceived as such. The manipulation, exaggeration or politicisation of oral histories further compounds the likelihood of actions to be offensive. In certain circumstances offensive action may also have significant advantages over defensive action. If the protection of irredenta would prove very difficult, as with the Serbs marooned in Croatian and Muslim territory, then there is a strong first mover advantage. This is compounded if there is an emergence of organized bands of violent individuals, and this could spark overt conflict. Posen argues that the way in which the UN intervenes to

‘keep the peace’ actually favours offensive action. The UN primarily negotiates cease-fires, and the first mover is likely to be in a stronger position at this point. The process of rearmament and expectations about outside intervention or support can present one side with a ‘window of opportunity.’⁹ Since for societies cohesion is a fundamental factor in the ability to take action, the ideological and military ‘arming’ of a society may take time and differ between groups, so presenting a fleeting window of opportunity.

Ultimately the security dilemma is readily adapted to analysis of the sub-state or societal level. The misinterpretation of culture, history, politics and education can lead to a situation where societies, ‘...defend culture with culture.’¹⁰ The perceptions of one group’s intentions are seen to threaten the societal security of the group. For example in Transylvania the restoration of own language education by the Hungarians was seen as vital for the maintenance of Magyar culture and identity within the region, it was however perceived by the Romanians as a measure to threaten the primacy of the Romanian language, and as a prelude to federalism and outright secession.

Perception, intentions and the nature of the international system.

Mechanisms have developed within the international system to signal intentions and to moderate the need for threat calculations to be based solely upon perceptions. Realists would argue that in an international system which is truly anarchical states can only make judgements of threat can only be based upon a state’s actions or upon its capabilities. Since a state will never keep a promise which is not in its interests, no judgement can be made as to intent through the normal methods of looking at interactions and agreements. If we were to look at a ‘Game Theory’ analysis we could see that the Realist regards the game of attaining security as a single game played between two players which have no way of signalling their intent, thus the default position will always be one of mistrust with a focus upon capability. Thus for a realist;

‘The links between the states’ restraint and their immediate self-interest are direct...Trust is limited and provisional, and the use of coercion or force is acceptable provided it is cost-effective.’¹¹

Democratic peace theorists however view the international system as more of a repeated game, and that through the norms and institutions of a liberal democracy intention may be signalled, thus reducing the need to rely upon perception. There is also the capability in a repeated game to punish opponents if they do not adhere to their stated intentions. If we are to take a societal view of security it is essential that we look at interactions within the system like those of a repeated game. Societies have long and often bloody histories regarding the other actors in the system, and to ignore these would be to simplify the theory to the point of rendering it irrelevant to the vast majority of security calculations.

The Democratic Peace Theory itself is not an uncontroversial piece of work. It contends that liberal democratic states do not fight each other, the link however, between the 'liberal democratic' and the lack of wars is not clear. It is important to note however that liberal democracies are actually more aggressive towards perceived non-democracies, and that states going through the process of democratisation are actually among the most vulnerable to conflict. Despite these caveats it is still useful to look at the relationship between mature democracies and see how states' intentions are signalled to reduce the reliance upon perception in the assessment of threat and the resulting security dilemma. Domestically democracies have institutions which require popular consent. The path to war is argued to be slower as a result of the need to get popular or parliamentary approval for funding and deployment of troops. This increases the opportunity for diplomacy and the chance of compromise or solution. Democracies also develop norms of behaviour around the non-violent solution of conflict and respect for views expressed through the institutions of the state. Farnham¹² argues that these norms and institutions raise expectations of behaviour by the international system. Democracies thus agree to a non-violent bounded competition with each other. In this way the security dilemma faced by a democratic state relies far less upon perceptions of intention. It is assumed that there is a respect for territory, and that parties will attempt to resolve conflicts through non-violent means. The institutions of the international system also enable states to signal their intentions so that over-reaction is less predominant. Since democracies are not always driven to conflict where there is a dispute with a non-democratic state it could be argued that the ability to signal benign intentions accurately is more important to moderating the security fears of the opponent, with less emphasis upon democracy itself. Farnham¹³ suggests that it was only after the Munich crisis signalled Hitler's unlimited intentions and lack of respect for bounded competition and international norms, that Roosevelt realised that he would not be able to negotiate with the German leader, despite his authoritarian behaviour up to that point.

At the societal or sub-state level these mechanisms are not well developed and may be compounded by a weak or inactive state. Groups are severely limited in their ability to signal accurately and there is no assumption of 'bounded competition.' Where the possessor is also the asset - the people are protecting their culture or language - bounded competition cannot exist. To threaten the asset is to threaten the very core and identity of its protector. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that with the post cold war decrease in strong governance and emphasis upon interstate relations, weak states are less able to control or moderate the societal security dilemmas which its constituent cultural groups face.

The international system with its norms and institutions could be described as a mature anarchy. Within a state there should also be institutions through which groups can signal their intentions and security fears. However if the state mechanisms are weak as in Transylvania and Yugoslavia, or indeed if the security of one group actually requires the insecurity of another as arguably the situation in Northern Ireland is, then the ability of the state to moderate the 'spiral' security dilemma is severely

limited. Thus the calculation of both capabilities and intentions are far more reliant upon perceptions at the societal level.

The enduring centrality of perception.

Manunta's definition of security has formed the foundation for the way in which perception stands at the very heart of calculations of security. Threat perception comprises knowledge of the opponent's capability and intentions. Realists would argue that perception is largely irrelevant since threat is simply a function of capability and actions. If we see the international system in this way as purely a single game interaction we deny the effect of history and past interactions and expectations. At the societal level this explanation is particularly insufficient. The security dilemma is not just a state phenomenon, and applies equally to societies with a state, particularly if that state is weak. The ability of states or societies to signal benign intentions and reduce the reliance upon perceptions is key to the mitigation of the security dilemma. This is however far more difficult at a sub-state level since there is not an established mechanism or level of trust.

Perceptions remain a fundamental component of security calculations and although the reliance upon them may be reduced it cannot be removed. Misperception of benign intentions lies at the heart of the security dilemma and is especially problematic at the societal level.

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⁴ Posen, B., *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵ Posen, B., *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶ Roe, P., *Op cit.*, p. 58.

⁷ Herz, J., quoted in Collins, A., *The Security Dilemmas of Southeast Asia*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2000), p. 3.

⁸ Roe, P., *Op cit.*, p. 63.

⁹ Posen, B., *Op cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Roe, P., *Op cit.*, p. 68.

¹¹ Farnham, B., 'The Theory of Democratic Peace and Threat Perception', in *International Studies Quarterly* (2003) 47, p. 405.

¹² Farnham, B., *Ibid.*, p. 396.

¹³ Farnham, B., *Ibid.*, p. 399.