Skepsi

Coping with the Security Dilemma: A Fundamental Ambiguity of State Behaviour

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Abstract

The wording of international treaties, the language and actions of statesmen are often ambiguous, even controversial. But there is a different, more fundamental ambiguity underlying international relations; one that is independent of human nature or the cognitive limitations of decision makers but instead results from the correct adjustment of state behaviour to the uncertainties of an anarchical international system.

Due to the anarchical nature of the international system — the lack of a sovereign — states can only rely on their own strength for self-defence. But self-protection often threatens other states. If a state purchases armaments, even if it claims not to have aggressive intents, there is no sovereign to enforce these commitments and there is no way of being certain that the purchasing state is telling the truth, or that it will not develop such intents in the future. The so-called security dilemma has a number of effects on state behaviour. First, states often worry about implausible threats (see e.g. British defence plans against a possible French invasion in the 1930s) and/or get caught in arms races. Second, states develop an inherent mistrust in the language of the other, requiring commitments to be firm and unambiguous in order to be credible, since ambiguity invites conflicts and renders cooperation more difficult.

Still, on the one hand, instead of a world of constant mistrust, we register instances of institutionalized inter-state cooperation. On the other hand, states often choose to make commitments that are deliberately ambiguous and outperform more transparent commitments.

This paper seeks to explain how states are trying to cope with the ambiguity that is the security dilemma by both signalling peaceful intents in order to facilitate cooperation and deliberately using ambiguity in their discourse. The analysis will rely on a number of examples taken from the Cold War where superpower confrontation was resolved through either of these means.[1]

Keywords:

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[1]   This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

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The wording of international treaties, the language and actions of statesmen are often ambiguous, or controversial. But there is a different, more fundamental ambiguity underlying International Relations (IR). This ambiguity is independent of human nature or the cognitive limitations of decision makers but instead results from the correct adjustments of state behaviour to the uncertainties of an anarchical international system.

According to the realist mainstream of strategic studies, due to this anarchical aspect of the international system, states can only rely on their own strength for self-defence. But self-protection often threatens other states. For example, if a state purchases armaments, even if it claims not to have aggressive intents, there is no supranational sovereign to enforce these commitments, and there is no way of being certain that the arming state's leaders are telling the truth, or that they will not develop aggressive goals in the future. This phenomenon, the so-called security dilemma has a number of effects on state behaviour. First, states often worry about implausible threats and/or get caught in arms races.[2] Second, states develop an inherent mistrust in the language of the other, requiring commitments to be firm and unambiguous in order to be credible, since ambiguity invites conflicts and renders cooperation more difficult.

Still, on the one hand, instead of a highly conflictual international political system, we register instances of institutionalized inter-state cooperation. On the other hand, in security dilemma-like crises states often choose to make commitments that are deliberately ambiguous and sometimes even supersede more transparent commitments. This paper seeks to explain how states are trying to cope with the ambiguity that is the security dilemma and why they still rely on ambiguous language in their relationships, even though they are aware of the risks involved.

The article is organized as follows: the first section presents an overview of the security dilemma, focusing on its inherent ambiguities derived from the limitations of the human mind and the indistinguishability of offensive and defensive weapons. The second section offers examples for how the negative effects of the dilemma can be mitigated, based on a rational choice representation of the dilemma. In the third section, an example of deliberate ambiguity in the discourse of statesmen caught in security dilemma-like scenarios will be presented: the failed cooperation between Dwight Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev. Through this example, the paper shows how ambiguity can lead to failed cooperative policies, and, curiously, why

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[2] Realist thinking presupposes an objective-subjective dichotomy of threats, i.e. that there are objectively identifiable threats to state security in the 'real world', independent of the subjective perceptions of statesmen. Based on this distinction, with hindsight, analysts can judge whether the threat was 'real' or not.

such seemingly counter-productive language might still be a perfectly rational policy tool. As a conclusion, the paper offers a way to combine these two facets of ambiguous language in order to provide a better understanding of security dilemma-like conflicts.

1. The security dilemma

As is the case with many notions in International Relations, the security dilemma lacks a clear, universally accepted definition. However, numerous scholars of security agree that the phenomenon is one of the pervasive problems of IR[3] — Herbert Butterfield, who first conceptualized the security dilemma, even claims that it is the key variable the dynamics of international conflicts can be explained with.[4] Though critical approaches often question the validity and usefulness of the concept, the security dilemma is still a crucial variable in contemporary realist thinking about security.[5] But what exactly does the contested concept of security mean in this realist context? For realists and for the purpose of this paper, security means the absence of threats, meaning that one is free from danger and feels secure.[6] The referent object of this traditional framework is of course the state. Threats are existential (threats to sovereignty), come from other states and can be countered through military means.[7]

With security defined, it is useful to continue with the word 'dilemma' to offer a useful definition of the security dilemma for the purpose of this analysis. The word 'dilemma' itself implies choice, namely a difficult choice between equal, mutually exclusive alternatives. In ethics, often the outcome is seen as negative, irrespective of the alternative chosen. In the previous example the dilemma would mean that no matter which position state A takes towards state B's weapons acquisition (i.e. interpreting it as an act of aggression or as a purely defensive measure), it may still be wrong. If state B was aggressive, but state A thought it was not, state A can be overrun by B's army. If state B was not aggressive, but state A armed itself thinking the opposite, the two states can get caught in an arms race or even war. Thus, the security dilemma is primarily a dilemma of interpretation about the intentions, motives and capabilities of others.[8] Once the 'type' of the other states (i.e. aggressor or status quo/security seeker) has

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[3]   See for example the work of Robert Jervis, Paul Roe, Charles Glaser or Ken Booth.

[4]   Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 20.

[5]   See e.g. Randall Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, no. 3, 1996.

[6]   Steve Smith, 'The Contested Concept of Security' in *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, Ken Booth (ed.) (London: Lynne Rienner, 2005), p. 21.

[7]   For more on realism and security see Sean M. Lynn-Jones, 'Realism and Security Studies', in Craig A. Snyder (ed.) *Contemporary Security and Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 53–77.

[8]   Ken Booth and Nick Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 4.

been decided upon, the response is practically automatic:[9] if the state sees the other as an aggressor, it will arm itself; if it sees the other as a status quo power, it will signal peaceful intentions.[10] The dilemma of interpretation can be traced back to two constitutive elements of the security dilemma: uncertainty and the ambiguous symbolism of weapons.

1.1. Uncertainty: Ambiguity of motives and intentions

The limitations of the human condition make it impossible to know with absolute certainty the intentions and motives behind another person's actions. In the international arena, military preparations lead to 'an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another as to whether those [military] preparations are for defensive purposes only (to enhance [the state's] security), or whether they are for offensive purposes (to weaken [the other state's] security)'.[11] Due to the ambiguity of intentions, aggression can neither be excluded, nor guaranteed.

States try to resolve the uncertainty by 'rules of thumb' that largely correspond to IR's traditional levels-of-analysis.[12] Classical Realists like security dilemma pioneers Herbert Butterfield and John Herz reach back to a Hobbesian state of nature of greedy and fallible individuals, and offer a solution on the individual level: as all individuals have the potential to harm, cooperation is too risky and one should 'kill first or be killed'. Neorealists also advise states to opt for the worst, but due to systemic reasons. For them, anarchy and self-help in the international system force states to assume the worst: even if statesmen would realize the predicament they are in and would wish to cooperate, anarchy and self-help still would compel them not to enter into a cooperative agreement in fear of being cheated or taken advantage of. The third approach, the so-called liberal tradition looks for a solution on the domestic level: so-called 'overall national evaluative capabilities' — for example think tanks or intelligence agencies — interpret the actions of other states. Although these domestic institutions/groups are often plagued by parochial interests and may even contribute to an increase in international tensions; nevertheless, they represent a plausible solution for coping with the uncertainty of motives and intentions of other states.

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[9] This article relies on the mainstream aggressor-security seeker dichotomy of state types. Note that attempts have been made to create a more comprehensive and nuanced taxonomy, see e.g. Charles Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models', *World Politics*, vol.44, no.4, 1992.

[10] Booth and Wheeler mistakenly conceptualize the dilemma as a two-stage choice scenario: in their interpretation, if a state interprets the military posture of another state as that of an aggressor, it may still try to reassure it.

[11] Paul Roe, *Ethnic Violence and the Societal Security Dilemma* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 9.

[12] Ibid., Introduction.

1.2   Weapons: ambiguity of capabilities

The other important constituting element of the security dilemma is the inherent ambiguous symbolism of weapons. Arms are essentially ambiguous in nature, as Robert Jervis notes, 'Unless the requirements for offence and defence differ in kind or amount, a status quo power will desire a military posture that resembles that of an aggressor. For this reason others cannot infer from its military forces and preparations whether the state is aggressive'.[13] Simply put, offensive and defensive weapons are hard — some say impossible — to distinguish. Apart from immobile fortifications, practically all armaments (e.g. tanks, jet fighters) can be used both for defending and attacking a territory, and with the advent of nuclear weapons that are primarily deterrent weapons, this distinction appears even less tenable.[14] Thus, the inability of leaders to ascertain accurately intentions from the nature of the armaments of another state alone aggravates the uncertainty about the other's mind.[15]

1.3.   Unintended consequences

Once the arms purchase of another country has been interpreted as an act of aggression, the interpreter state will communicate resolve and arm itself, too. Thus, a spiral of hostility may ensue, leading to arms races, even to war. What is striking about these security paradoxes is that the consequences were unintended by the security seeking state: though it was only seeking to defend itself, its military preparations were interpreted like those of an aggressor. The resulting arms race then decreases the overall level of security in the system. These unintended consequences of the security dilemma, resulting from the action-reaction dynamics of arms races, are what Herbert Butterfield calls the tragic element of international conflict. He warns us that '[t]he greatest war in history could be produced without the intervention of any great criminals who might be out to do deliberate harm to the world. It could be produced between two Powers both of which were desperately anxious to avoid conflict of any sort'.[16]

Though the literature on the security dilemma is dominated by writings on the security paradox, as Booth and Wheeler note, the outcome of a security dilemma can also be positive.

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[13] Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the security dilemma', *World Politics,* 30 (1978), p. 169.

[14] Apart from the indistinguishability of defensive and offensive weapons, Jervis (1978) also adds another variable underlying the ambiguity of weapons: the offence defence balance. The so-called offence-defence theory argues that if offensive weapons have the advantage over defensive weapons (meaning that for the same amount of resources, more territory can be gained than defended), wars become more likely; while the opposite would make the system more prone to peace (see e.g. Lynne-Jones 1995). Combined with the indistinguishability of the very same weapons, the situation becomes more ambiguous.

[15] Due to this peculiar characteristic of weapons, many scholars conceived the security dilemma in terms of capabilities. However, as Booth and Wheeler (2008) note, military doctrines are also important.

[16] Quoted in Booth and Wheeler, p. 7.

Their example for such a scenario is the end of the Cold War, when U.S. President Ronald Reagan interpreted Gorbachev as a security seeker, leading to cooperative actions between the two superpowers and finally, to the end of the arms race. What is interesting about this case is that the action-reaction dynamics of the Cold War arms race could be reversed by a previously outspoken anti-Communist U.S. President. Due to the discussed inherent ambiguities of the security dilemma; there is nothing inevitable in neither the positive, nor in the negative outcomes. But as the above example shows, human agency is central in security dilemma situations, offering one important variable that is able to ameliorate the problem, a variable Booth and Wheeler call 'security dilemma sensibility'.[17] Security dilemma sensibility is 'an actor's intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others. In particular, it refers to the ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one's actions may play in provoking that fear'.[18]

1.4. Categorization

Booth and Wheeler organize the security dilemma literature along three *a priori* logical positions: fatalists, mitigators and transcenders.[19] Although these ideal types do not correspond to schools in the sense the word is used in IR, they can still roughly be equated with Classical Realism, Neorealism and Idealism/Constructivism respectively.[20]

Fatalists believe that insecurity cannot be escaped in international politics and thus the security dilemma is the *modus operandi* of the system. While classical Realists explain the inevitability of the dilemma with the human condition, Neorealists find the roots of the problem in the anarchical nature of the system that compels states to always opt for the worst.

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[17] Booth and Wheeler.

[18] Note that due to the still pervasive uncertainties of the predicament, even if both statesmen are security dilemma sensible, a security paradox may still occur. In some cases, security dilemma sensibility might be misconceived, impossible to operationalise, or can lead to unsustainable mitigator practices. Hence Booth and Wheeler (2008) argue that it still a necessary but not sufficient condition for building trust.

[19] Booth and Wheeler.

[20] While idealists believe that mutual hostility can be superseded by interstate cooperation, some constructivists (e.g. members of the Copenhagen School like Barry Buzan) question the very essence of the security dilemma when arguing for an intersubjective notion of security, thus rendering the whole concept of 'unnecessary conflict' meaningless. Others, like famous constructivist Alexander Wendt, argue that anarchy itself is also inter-subjectively constructed, thus it does not necessarily act as a source of a dilemma, as realists argue. Thus, in terms of their approach to mitigating and the eradicating the security dilemma, idealism and constructivism, these otherwise competing theories of IR can be grouped together.

Though mitigators — exemplified by defensive Neorealists and members of the English School[21] — still believe that human nature may be flawed and that the security dilemma cannot be eliminated from the anarchical system, they claim that at least the dilemma's most dire outcomes, war, politico-military crises and arms races can be avoided. Unlike offensive realists, mitigators believe that anarchy informed by rules, norms and institutions also introduces a certain level of predictability into the international system, which could bring security to the actors involved.[22] Security is still the primary concern of states, but does not come from fatalist logic, but the construction of a society of states. As means of constructing a society of states, mitigators look towards dialogue (primarily the institution of diplomacy) and the construction of norms (mainly international regimes) as ways of countering the dynamics of fear and insecurity.

It is important to note that some Neorealists — exemplified by the pioneering work of Robert Jervis — argue that the security dilemma dynamics cannot fully be explained by systemic constraining variables, such as anarchy alone. Though still committed to structural realist ontology, Jervis emphasizes the presence of psychological modifying variables, such as cognitive biases. Such variables in an actual security dilemma scenario may modify the perceptions of policy makers, possibly forcing them to misperceive the actions of other states and/or make suboptimal policy decisions.[23] Source of such psychological factors are, of course, the very limitations of the human mind upon which the security dilemma concept was originally was based. The presence of these modifying variables can of course distort the expected outcomes of mitigatory policies, as will be discussed later in this analysis.

The third stream of literature, that of the so-called transcenders, attacks the predetermined nature of the security dilemma. Proponents of such critical thinking on security find the existing conceptualization of the so-called human condition and anarchy itself problematic; and claim that traditional insecurities can be transcended by the extension of moral and political community globally — human society on a global scale can become whatever it wants to be.[24]

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[21] Defensive Neorealists believe that security can only be maximized by defensive measures. According to authors like Robert Jervis, the offensive realist idea of aggression as a means of maximizing power (greater power meaning more security) would have adverse consequences.
On the English School's approach to international politics see e.g. Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 6, 2000, pp. 395-422.

[22] Booth and Wheeler, pp. 14–15.

[23] Robert Jervis *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976) Chapter 3: 'Deterrence, the Spiral Model, and Intentions of the Adversary'

[24] See e.g. Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 391–426.

Though ideal types, all three approaches are rooted in practice. As the mitigator logic (i.e. that goals of states can be maintained through institutions and norms, e.g. international law; not just through mere power politics) corresponds to the current international system and the conceptualization of security put forth in this chapter, the article will rely on this ideal type as the starting point for analysis.

2. Mitigation

For mitigators, anarchy permits a degree of shared security to be achieved through the development of international regimes through reassurance and cooperation. But how is this possible, given the uncertainties of interstate relations?

The security dilemma and international conflict have been analyzed through several theoretical approaches, ranging from political psychology to rational choice theory. Defensive realists — advocates of mitigation — have attempted to formalize the dilemma through game theory.[25] Robert Jervis, one of the most prominent analysts, emphasizes the international system's 'unforgiving' nature in his work: even if cooperation seems possible, the costs of miscalculation about the motives and intentions of the other are just too great, given that a single defection may mean the fall of a whole state.[26] This description of the dilemma corresponds to the logic of a simple prisoner's dilemma game (PD, for the graphic representation, see Figure 1.), where defecting on others yields the highest payoff, leading to a single Nash equilibrium where everyone defects. This outcome leaves the players in a position that is Pareto-inferior (i.e. there exists an outcome, where both players are better off) to mutual cooperation. The question for analysts and statesmen is then the following: if the security dilemma truly resembles the PD, then how does one make players cooperate?[27]

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[25] See e.g. Snyder, Glenn H. 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics' *World Politics*, Vol. 36. No. 4 (Jul. 1984), 461–95 or Andrew Kydd, 'Trust, Reassurance and Cooperation', *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 2. Spring (2000), 325–57.

[26] Robert Jervis, 'Security Regimes', *International Organization*, Spring (1982), 359.

[27] As Robert Axelrod (1984) found out, most arms races resemble not a single, but an iterated version of the PD where players interact in subsequent rounds. In this game, cooperative strategies like tit-for-tat yielded higher payoffs than defection. Nevertheless, the question of how to make cooperation more likely remains.

Player A

FIGURE 1: MATRIX REPRESENTATION OF A TWO-PLAYER PRISONER'S DILEMMA GAME, YIELDING A SINGLE NASH EQUILIBRIUM OF DEFECT-DEFECT. PAYOFFS REPRESENT A RANKING OF THE POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

Naturally, it is sensible to depart from game theoretical answers as they often present simple and compelling interpretations of complex decision problems. In the simple PD game, as Jervis argues, cooperation can be furthered if the payoffs of the game are altered.[28] In a PD game, cooperation becomes more likely when mutual cooperation is only slightly less attractive than exploiting the other, being exploited is only slightly worse than mutual competition and when mutual competition is far worse than mutual cooperation. These suggestions are not reserved to abstract mathematical analyses: empirical examples exist where analogous actions were actually taken. Historically, such changes to the original structure of the security dilemma 'game' were achieved by so-called security regimes, like the Vienna Concert or the Soviet-American *détente*.

Jervis defines security regimes as 'those principles, rules, and norms that permit nations to be restrained in their behaviour in the belief that others will reciprocate';[29] it is 'a form of co-operation that is more the following of short-run self-interests'.[30] In this framework, states are still rational egoists (they follow their own interests and do not care about others' payoffs), thus cooperation only occurs if they see it as their long term interest. He identifies four preconditions for a security regime to be created: great powers must show willingness and support (all great powers support the status quo and agree that any change should be arrived at cooperatively); governments must believe that others place the same value on cooperation and security; no individual states must assume that it can only be secure by making others insecure; and finally, war and unilateral pursuit of security must be seen as too costly.[31] Once a regime is formed, it offers a code of conduct for interstate relations, increasing mutual security by reassurance and

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[28]   Jervis, *Cooperation*, p. 170.
[29]   For an alternative approach to international regimes see Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[30]   Jervis, *Security Regimes*, p. 357.
[31]   Ibid, pp. 360–62.

cooperation. The benefits of long term cooperation become more secured and defection (e.g. wars among member states) gets penalized, thus becoming more costly. Importantly, even if a member state defects once, the other states may continue to cooperate with it if it abides by the rules of the regime.

International politics within a security regime resembles an iterated version of the PD game, where players (member states) face each other for longer periods of time — i.e. they replay the same game over and over again. In such a game, non-cooperative strategies (defection) yields lower expected utilities than in a single shot game, while mixed strategies like tit-for-tat (first cooperate then mirror the other player's move) yield higher payoffs. If the game also has negative and/or positive incentives and has rules for guiding player behaviour in case of a single transgression by a player (basically a rule for forgiveness), cooperation becomes much more likely than in the simple version of the game. However, though theoretically security regimes are able to mitigate the dilemma, in practice they can only be effective on the medium run and often fail due to mistrust among the players.

Another possibility for making cooperation more likely lies in decreasing mistrust among states, i.e. resolving — or at least mitigating — the ambiguity of motives and intentions. This can be done by credibly communicating peaceful intent, or in game theoretical terms, signalling 'type'.[32] The problem with signals is that, due to the inherent uncertainty (both cognitive and systemic), signals may be dismissed as 'cheap talk' (i.e. signals that do not come with any costs for the sender). To make signals credible, crisis bargaining theorists came up with the concept of costly signalling.[33] In a so-called reassurance game, costly signals are 'signals designed to persuade the other side that one is trustworthy by virtue of the fact that they are so costly that one would hesitate to send them if one were untrustworthy'.[34] Trust here is 'a belief that the other side is likely to be trustworthy and will therefore want to reciprocate cooperation rather than exploit it'.[35] Formally, trust is the probability, assigned by the receiver to the sender, of the sender's being a cooperative player. The closer the probability is to 1, the higher the level

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[32] If a player does not know the other player's payoff for outcomes, he or she is dealing with incomplete information. In such situations, the player is uncertain about the future actions of other players, making the construction of a strategy difficult. Games of imperfect information are modeled by assuming that the other player is one of several 'types', e.g. he or she is either cooperative or non-cooperative. The player then assigns a probability to each type and adjusts his or her strategy according to which type he or she is dealing with. For more on modeling games of incomplete information see for example James Morrow, 'A Rational Choice Approach to international conflict' in *Decision-making on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate*, Nehemia Geva and Alex Mintz (eds.), (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997).

[33] See e.g. Kydd (2000)

[34] Kydd, p. 326.

[35] Ibid, p. 326.

of trust towards the sender.[36] In international politics, a costly signal can be, for example, withdrawing/reducing forces, lifting embargos or admitting wrong. If a signal is unilateral or not contingent on the adversary's initial response and if it is irrevocable, it is more likely to generate trust in others.

As we could see from this theoretical representation, in terms of as simple game, of how the security dilemma can be mitigated, building trust for cooperation to ameliorate tensions caused by the dilemma favours unambiguous, costly signals. All other signals can be dismissed as cheap talk, or even thought to be merely masking harmful intent. Given this requirement of avoiding unintentional arms races and wars, it is puzzling why statesmen still often rely on intentionally ambiguous discourse in such situations. As an illustration, in the next section I will present an example from the Cold War (the failed *rapprochement* between Khrushchev and Eisenhower in the late 1950s) where — contrary to the logic of reassurance games — ambiguous signals were used within the arms race security paradox. Naturally, ambiguous signals (i.e. signals that may decrease the level of trust, depending on their interpretation) are by virtue 'cheap talk' signals. It is thus important to see what underlying dynamics may compel security dilemma sensitive statesmen like Dwight Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev to resort to actions that may in fact worsen the spiral of mistrust.

3. Ambiguous signals in the Cold War arms race

The Cold War is perhaps the most classic example for a security dilemma as the two superpowers were drawn into a vicious circle of arms racing and mutual mistrust. For analytical reasons, the Cold War is also important because its structure resembles that of an iterated PD: the two states were facing each other in several 'games' (crises and attempts at cooperation) where they could decide either to cooperate or to defect. This iteration, along with the fact that the threat of nuclear war makes coordination essential, gave the conflict a stable structure, guiding the expectations of leaders on both sides, and eventually enabling Gorbachev and Reagan to break out of the spiral by choosing cooperation and reassuring signals instead of mistrust and hostility.[37]

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[36] Kydd also draws attention to the so-called 'margin of safety', beyond which costly signals may be exploited if the other side is indeed aggressive. To avoid the signals being exploited, the sender could wait for reciprocation from the received that would start a spiral of trust building.

[37] In contemporary studies, dynamics of the Cold War are often explained through the mistrust between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, see e.g. Karin M. Fierke *Changing Games, Changing Strategies: Critical Investigations in Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). According to these scholars, there was nothing inevitable in the Cold War: orthodox views that explain the source of the conflict with aggressive Soviet goals in Europe and the irreconcilability of the two ideologies just mirror the enmity constructed in the postwar years on the elite decision maker level. Such works contribute to the stream of literature emphasizing the tragic character

Though the conflict often seemed desperately antagonistic, the cooperative record of the Cold War is not all blank: the two superpowers managed to sign cooperative agreements that restricted nuclear testing and nuclear defences, banned intermediate nuclear weapons or restricted the proliferation of atomic weapons. On the other hand, as Deborah Larson notes, the two superpowers failed to limit the construction of Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs), and only managed to agree on the status of Germany in the 1970s.[38] Also, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. could never truly agree on actually reducing the number of nuclear weapons — cooperation was only achieved in limiting the number of such arms. Given the security dilemma sensibility of some leaders, and the willingness of both sides to limit their wasteful military spending, the large number of these 'missed opportunities' is striking.[39]

From a pure rational choice perspective one could still argue that these cases are not really failures at all, since the two sides were involved in a zero-sum game where cooperation is by definition impossible. However, such an approach would be too simplistic as it neglects the fact that even if the global Cold War conflict itself could be modelled as a zero-sum game, issues such as the question of Berlin and halting the arms race offer common gains for both sides: lower military spending and decreased military presence in Europe with a neutral Germany. To explain why common gains were attained in some instances but not in others, the psychological variables that are an inherent feature of the human condition and feature heavily in the security dilemma as conceptualized both by Booth and Jervis can be invoked. As an illustration, a brief summary of the failed cooperation between Eisenhower and Khrushchev on the Berlin issue and a limited test ban treaty will be offered.

Viewed through a social psychological lens, one of the primary sources of failures is again the fact that even when interests overlap, leaders often draw incorrect inferences about the motives and intentions of others. Ambiguous language contributes to missed opportunities by breeding misunderstandings and consequentially mistrust. Curiously, however, it can also be a kind of rational policy. To understand why Cold War leaders might choose even though they support a cooperative outcome based on credible signals ambiguity — as did both Eisenhower and Khrushchev — the paper will look both below and beyond the analytical level of bilateral talks on the two issues. It presents two complementary explanations for the use of ambiguous signals using examples from the Cold War to illustrate their relevance for the missed

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of security dilemma scenarios: if conflict may result form mistrust i.e. a misinterpretation and exaggerated perception of hostility, then reassurance becomes crucial in avoiding security paradoxes.

[38] Deborah Welch Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[39] 'Missed opportunities' refers to counterfactuals where cooperation did not occur, even though both sides wanted it.

opportunity under scrutiny: two-level games (moving below the state level) and partial security regimes (going on the systemic level). Though both theories are rooted in rational choice, they represent an analytical move beyond game theoretical illustration and invoke variables that are outside of the PD game, i.e. variables that influence the preferences and beliefs of the players of PD-like games.

3.1. Eisenhower and Khrushchev: a missed opportunity

Already from the early years of the Cold War onwards, both sides were claiming to be champions of international peace and leaders were repeatedly challenging each other to prove their peaceful intentions through deeds not words. As parity grew between the two camps, cooperation became both more imperative and more likely. Leaders had a number of methods at their disposal to make the other cooperate: persuasion, coercion, and accommodation.[40] Although often useful, coercion is not capable of building trust, and persuasion could easily be dismissed as cheap talk. Thus costly signalling was focused on accommodation, i.e. unilateral concessions to increase the other's security. Examples for such signalling are again numerous, perhaps the most emblematic being the failed attempt at settling the German question and nuclear testing during President Eisenhower's second term.

With his power consolidated in 1957, Khrushchev wanted to stabilize the status quo in Europe and cut defence spending to produce more consumer goods. Hence, he called for a meeting in 1959 as the peak of a steady process for cooperation on the German issue and a test ban. The General Secretary started a diplomatic offensive of trust building with unilateral force reductions and withdrawal, a unilateral ban on nuclear testing and a call for the adoption of the Rapacki plan for a nuclear free zone in Central Europe. As records now clearly show, Eisenhower also wanted an agreement, as he was aiming for a balanced budget, and wanted to be remembered as a peace builder.[41] To these ends, he wanted to halt the arms race. However, due to his mixed record of dealing with Khrushchev (e.g. dismissing previous force reductions as cheap talk), Eisenhower's rhetoric was ambiguous: while endorsing test bans and halting the arms race, he nevertheless gave orders to carry out the infamous U2 mission that set an end to the process. Though signalling peaceful intentions with the above costly signals, Khrushchev's language was also ambiguous: following the launch of Sputnik in 1957, he constantly

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[40] See Paul Bennett, *The Soviet Union and Arms Control – Negotiating Strategy and Tactics* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

[41] Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*, p. 1.

emphasized that Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) cancel the American deterrent and gave a number of fiery anti-American speeches domestically.

3.2. Ambiguity as rational policy: two-level games and partial security regimes

As the theory of two level games argues, statesmen engaged in international negotiations are not isolated from domestic influences as they try to satisfy both their international partners and their local constituency (even in non-democratic regimes) at the same time.[42] However, these goals often contradict each other. One action that seems rational on the international level may be irrational on the domestic level, leading to a loss of support for the statesman. To manage international negotiations, statesmen often pit the two levels against each other and argue for concessions domestically by explaining their limitations in the international arena ('we have to do this, or we will suffer losses in export'), or rely on domestic opposition as an argument for preferential treatment internationally ('you have to give me more, or I will not be able to ratify the agreement at home'). Of course, since the politician is maximizing his own utility, he may misrepresent the preferences of his or her domestic constituency and the international partners for greater leverage. However, as the two levels are often not isolated from each other, the politician often relies on ambiguous language for political manoeuvring.[43] In the case of the failed rapprochement during the late 1950s, Khrushchev had to rely not only on ambiguity to satisfy the Americans expecting costly signals but also his local hard-core opposition and the Soviet populace that could have interpreted concessions as a sign of weakness. Similarly, President Eisenhower had to deal with the mounting 'missile gap' hysteria in the U.S. (partly fuelled by Khrushchev's ambiguous rhetoric): even though the summit meeting in Paris was supported, the American people demanded a harder stance in defence issues and better intelligence on the Soviet ballistic missile programme.[44] Though this ambiguity was necessitated by the structure of the conflict on both sides, it nevertheless contributed to the failure of the negotiations as it decreased the trust on both sides.

Looking beyond the bilateral talks on Germany and the test ban, we have to go back to the security regime theory as both issues can be regarded as the 'infant phases' of so-called partial security regimes — regimes between states with their own codes of conduct that only cover

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[42]   See e.g. Robert D. Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games' *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1988) pp. 427–60.
[43]   See Benjamin I. Page, 'The Theory of Political Ambiguity', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Sep. 1976), 742–52.
[44]   Larson, ch. 3.

certain issue areas.[45] Though partial security regimes in their mechanism correspond to regular security regimes, state behaviour in issues outside the regime are still subject to the dynamics of anarchy and self-help. The partial nature of cooperation between the two superpowers again invites ambiguity: although issues covered by the regime require cooperation and generate reassurance, issue areas outside the regime are still at the same time subject to conflict and hostilities. This is the reason Booth and Wheeler provide for the failure of *détente* in the late 1970s: because the superpowers did not agree on rules for conducting their policies in the Third World (the Basic Principles Agreements of 1972/3 were too vague), aggressive policies limited to the developing countries such as Afghanistan were still seen as acceptable. However, the mistrust such policies generated eventually set an end to the partial regime that was détente.[46] Thus, cooperation under partial regimes may succumb to interstate conflict outside the targeted issue areas.

4. Conclusion: costly signals vs. rational ambiguity

As demonstrated in the previous section, attempts at cooperation under the security dilemma are subject to certain dynamics that challenge costly signals and invite ambiguous discourse. Though ambiguity seems to be a rational course of action in two-level games (enabling greater leverage on both levels), as well as in partial security regimes (allowing seemingly contradictory actions), it can easily contribute to failed cooperation as we have seen in the case of the Khrushchev-Eisenhower talks. In such cases, inconsistent and ambiguous state rhetoric acts as noise, interfering with costly signals aimed at increasing trust.[47] If a state wants to communicate peaceful intent (e.g. make a conciliatory move) in one area, it should be careful that actions in other areas do not interfere with the costly signal. Mixing types of signals in an uncontrolled manner is confusing and may compel the other side to interpret the signal as nothing more than cheap talk, disguised to be costly.[48]

Though costly signals are a potential means for counteracting the ambiguity of security dilemma scenarios and furthering cooperation, actors inclined to make them can be subject to other dynamics that favour cheap signals, such as signals that are deliberately ambiguous. Paradoxically, rational behaviour in both respects may eventually decrease trust due to the psychological variables at work, as it happened in the discussed historical example. The

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[45] See Joseph Nye, 'Nuclear Learning and U.S.-Soviet Security Regimes', *International Organization*, 41:3 (1987), 371–402.

[46] Booth and Wheeler

[47] Larson, p. 30.

[48] For example, President Kennedy simultaneously called for arms control and initiated a huge arms build-up at the beginning of his presidency.

emphasis on this paradox within this paper is however not a critique of rational choice approaches to the security dilemma but is, rather, intended to draw attention to psychological variables that help us explain the pitfalls and potential failure of costly signalling. These variables need to be incorporated in rational choice analyses in order not only to understand better security dilemma scenarios but also to facilitate effective costly signalling for future decision makers. Though a simple game-theoretical-analysis only requires signals to be measurably costly, in reality, the language of the signal is equally important: how the signals are communicated determines whether they can *at all* be interpreted as costly, thus as capable of building trust. Rational choice as a versatile methodological toolset is capable of incorporating psychological variables in its models in order to increase the analytical value of rationality-based theories of the security dilemma. Following the logic that Jervis puts forth in his book *Perceptions and misperceptions…*, namely a careful attention to variables that modify beliefs and perceptions in conflict situations, a more comprehensible analytical framework can be constructed.

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