Introduction to the Security Dilemma

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How More Security Can Increase Insecurity

Thus arises the security dilemma! A militarily weak state faces greater risk from opportunistic neighbors. To deter other states from attacking, a state may strengthen its military to become a more difficult target. Yet, a state's military buildup may be perceived as offensive preparation rather than defensive, thus incentivizing other states to increase their own military capabilities to deter stronger states.

What Is The Best Defence?

The security dilemma manifests itself in two ways: offensive and defensive buildup. States may increase their offensive military capabilities to deter others from attacking. A defining characteristic of war is reciprocity. If state A attacks state B, state A must concern itself with the potential retaliatory damage state B can inflict. As such, an increase in state B's offensive capabilities may serve as a deterrent against potential attack by state A. Offensive development can also signal escalation or the desire to use military capabilities aggressively in the future, exacerbating the security dilemma.

Defensive buildup is also a manifestation of the security dilemma. If state A attacks state B, state A must concern itself with the feasibility of overcoming state B's defences. State B can develop its defences to make it more difficult and costly for an aggressor to succeed, increasing state B's security and solving its security dilemma. Defensive buildup does not necessarily signal aggressive intent, thus easing the security dilemma. However, both offensive and defensive buildup can exacerbate the security dilemma because they signal the desire to be prepared for conflict.

The Future of East-Asian Security

The security dilemma can partially explain defence budget increases in the APAC region, as states seek to deter others. Though paradoxical, increases in defence budgets signal a desire to guarantee territorial security in uncertain times. Even so, the security dilemma is only a piece of this very complex puzzle that goes beyond the region and extends into global security politics.

Further Reading Recommendation

Liff, A. P., & Ikenberry, J. (2014). Racing toward tragedy? China's rise, military competition in the Asia Pacific, and the security dilemma. International Security, 39(2), 52-91. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24480583

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