

BOOK REVIEW

The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics

Ken Booth and Nicolas J. Wheeler

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REVIEWED by Swapna Kona

Reviewer Profile

Swapna Kona studies the politics of South and Central Asia. Her work centers on the deconstruction of political processes and the move away from democratic discourses and towards securitised tendencies. Presently, she is working on a monograph on the political representation of women in the Afghan National Parliament as part of the *Scholar of Peace* Fellowship awarded to her by WISCOMP. Kona is also an Associate Fellow at the Center for Land and Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

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“The security dilemma should have a privileged place, for it is an old and brilliant concept for new and dangerous times”, write the authors of *The Security Dilemma*. In the first comprehensive detailing of the theories and logics of the concept of security dilemma in international politics, this book is immensely significant. Indeed, Ken Booth and Nicolas Wheeler appreciate security dilemma as a precept that now occupies an inevitable place in political theorizing, and perhaps always has, implicitly. The imperative to embolden this voice is taken on by the book.

The book is divided in four parts – anarchy, society, community and the future. The section on anarchy landscapes *insecurity* as a concept. Exploring what they call “the logic of anarchy, the theme of tragedy”, the authors differentiate a security paradox from the security dilemma. Having so established a context, they lay out the three logics of the security dilemma as fatalist, mitigator and transcender. While examining the fatalist logic, Booth and Wheeler cautiously characterize it as being problematic because of its deterministic tendencies. It is emphasized, however, that even this deterministic fatalist logic “in practice” avoids embracing the logic of offensive realism. Grotius, Kant, Rousseau all form part of the narrative, although Kant’s cosmopolitan perspective finds more room for agreement on a broader theoretical canvas.

Further on, a review of Herz’s and Butterfield’s work is essential in the first part of the book and is enlightening. John Herz, who first used the term security dilemma, has also contributed the foreword to the book. British historian Hebert Butterfield, also a pioneer in the field, is championed in his work on “absolute predicament”, a term he used to describe what essentially a situation of security dilemma was. Together, their work on uncertainty as the dynamic determining state behaviour makes for an interesting comparative. Progression to the logic of uncertainty *in extremis* results in the logic of offensive realism. Hence, offensive-realist thinker John Mearsheimer is discussed at length with his impact on policymaking - “he turned the certain uncertainty of internal policies into the strategic predictability of offensive realism”, say the authors. Interestingly, Mearsheimer’s security dilemma sensibilities posited against defensive-realism proponent Kenneth Waltz’s semantic notions are interpreted as pre-conditions foreshadowing neo-realist strategic thinking.

The symbolism of weapons and that of national security, in tandem are elaborated, especially with the aid of Robert Jervis’s extensive work on offence-defense paradigms and spiral-deterrence models. Much of the analogy is

produced with the help of Kremlin-White House imagery of each other during the Cold War. The part on threat assessment touches upon ambiguous symbolism, the deduction of political intentions and the failure of intelligence gathering. Additional writing on the organizational culture of intelligence is most helpful and achieves its objective of alerting us to the “power of fear”. Cold war symbolism is skilfully employed to drive the point home.

The section on fear is intriguing at best and alarming at worst – not because it breaks the narrative in any way, but because it stops shockingly short of spelling doom. Quoting Carey Robin on fear as the “justifying language of public life” steers attention to the pressing issues of ideological fundamentalism – a situation that precludes a dilemma, per se, thus pillaging the theory in the face of contemporary political scenarios beset with non-state actors. Theoretically speaking, such ideological fundamentalism and lack of a security dilemma “open up space for human agency to do more than simply try to survive the game of nations”. This infuses political violence with a new light and hints at the possible demise of choc-a-bloc security dilemma theorizing. The book is induced with a violent idea and forces the student of international relations theory to sit back and think out the exceptions to the rule – the (unbelievable) lack of a security dilemma as a situation of insecurity.

Having, thus, experienced a jolt to theoretical bravado, the reader is then faced with the generous logic of mitigation. Whilst the promise of security regimes comes under scrutiny, the verdict is uneasy. The entire second part of the book explores the “potentiality for mitigator policies to ameliorate the security dilemma”. Whilst the constructivists are seemingly on to it, they never quite get there, presupposing what must be worked out. Alexander Wendt and the English School are divergent voices colliding with those of defensive realism. Ideas of identity dominate constructivist discourse but do not concretize a monolithic outlook on the security dilemma.

The book then moves onto an exposé of the actual practice of security regimes through explorations of the Concert of Europe, super power détente following the Cold War and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime. But before that, there is the urgency of norms and how regimes collapse. Time cycles are hinted at with the imminent question being “Is it the shadow of the past, anxieties about the present, or the fear of the future that exercise most leverage on policymaking?” Thus, the praxis of norms, regimes and policymaking illustrates the “fragility of international cooperation”. No need to despair, however, as the Great Mitigation of the Gorbachev-Reagan Era points out. For the goal of common security to be achieved, or even visualized, there is only the need for the “modalities of mitigation” to be laid down. These are done at length in this section of the book.

Discussed next is the transcender logic, which removes security from a utopian high horse and makes it attainable. Yet, transcender theories are critiqued as

having “mono-casual” understandings and worse, being reductive in their thinking. Distinction is sought between cooperation and trust and between escaping and transcending uncertainty. While the ideas of collective security, functionalism and security communities waddle on both sides of the cooperation and trust fence, they do not address the differentiation head-on. Similarly, it is clear that transcender theories fail at their task of transcending uncertainty too – they build their arguments on the theoretical premise of *already* having escaped uncertainty. Uncertainty, the authors argue is inevitable, thus making these theories inadequate to addressing the problem of the security dilemma.

In the chapter on transformation, the authors take on ideas – “the idea of empire is in vogue again, (that of) world government is not”, they say. The end of war, history, capitalism and patriarchy are all ends to structures. From Marx to Fukuyama, the centrality of structures to theorising on security dilemma (or the lack thereof) is brought to the fore distinctly through the discussion of unexamined premises in their work. As the authors themselves put it, “Structured transformers have to meet the challenge of their security dilemma because they have too readily assumed predictable peace. This is the fallacy of the last (structural) move”.

A much-awaited account of the “elusive concept of trust” finds itself explicitly stated in the following chapter. Clearly, the utility of the properties of *trust* to the realm of security dilemma theorizing is the underlying narrative of the book. To arrive at it finally is relieving. Unpacking the relation between trust and uncertainty shows how mutually implicated they are “because trust always develops under conditions of uncertainty and never entirely escapes it”. Thus, a “leap in the dark” is then required to move from talk of mistrust (as in the fatalist logic) to trust as a problematique (in mitigator logic) and finally to trust as “the possibility of transcending the worst forms of uncertainty in favor of more liveable ones” (in transcender logic). This process then opens doors for reconciliation and embeds trust. WISCOMP’s Athwaas program in Kashmir and the Derry Peace and Reconciliation Group and Woman’s Conciliation program in Northern Ireland are employed as illustrations of how civil society actions stem out such embedded trust in actual practice.

The final section of the book, broadly titled “The Future” is the most intriguing. While the early promise of security dilemma as a defining concept did not fructify then, the authors are keen (as in this book) to see the development of the early theorizing on this concept. Indeed, they describe best the intent of this book as offering “... original insights, new definition, different vocabulary, a priori set of categories for concealing insecurity and a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the security dilemma”. While the present environment is by no means salutary for the facilitation of international cooperation, such a “crisis of trust in existing institutions and leaders” must be remedied. For that to happen, one must arrive at a broadly agreed-upon

understanding of the security dilemma as a concept that envisages state behavior in times of insecurity, non-state behavior as the “unexpected unpredictable” and makes space for other “dangers of the unexpected”.

The three logics that weave the book together have clear policy implications. In the future, these logics as organizing lenses become essential to the predictability of state behavior. The true merit of the book, quite obviously, lies in its presentation of the security dilemma as an essential part of the policymaker’s toolkit of the future, rather than as a brilliant but fossilised position on international politics.

Moreover, the theory itself is well thought out and the book lays out a blueprint for future theorizing in the field – in that it brings together strands of thought on security from its many leading thinkers. Nonetheless, there is no attempt at consensus-building but on identifying points of parallelism that could become a larger unified bulwark of security dilemma theorizing.

The book is a receptacle for all about security dilemmas and Hobbesian fear makes room for Lockean palatability as effortlessly as Morgenthau and Thucydides coexist. Determinate theorizing is uncharted territory for the concept of security dilemma. This book articulates the pensiveness of the authors, who seem perplexed by the lack of attention to this clearly obvious necessity to international relations theorizing and successfully take the initiative in making amends. Well thought-out chapterization makes the book immensely accessible while the lack of simplification keeps the symbol-hunters away – this book is not the answer to security dilemmas nor does it claim to be. Instead, it is fundamental reading for anyone looking to grasp the parameters of security dilemmas or familiarize themselves with the actual repercussions of such a situation. The vast referencing to events of the 20th century are helpful and rescue the book from becoming a theoretical camp-straddling misadventure that talks about what all others have not thought about.

Surely, “uncertainty as the starting point to thinking about world politics” has promise for the political student. Similarly, the politics of peace are inevitable in the contemporary scenery of visible donor action in a war-ravaged comity of nations. If the “disappointing and violent dimensions of world politics” are to be surpassed, then “the risks of embedding trust (as) the path to peace and security” must be adopted.

Security dilemma theorizing does both – it reconstructs the problematic of war on the one hand and it deals with the underlying faultlines of history on the other. By doing this, it brings strategic thinking into the foray of theoretical exploration. Policymaking is thus, directly impacted. As Mitrany is quoted in the book, “the historic task of our times is not to keep nations peacefully apart but to bring them actively together”; the ability of security dilemma theorizing

on trust-building is consequential. In making the concept visible again, so is the book.
