Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," in *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167-214.

In short

The security dilemma arises as states take measures to augment their security that other states perceive as being detrimental to theirs. This spawns reactive behavior that ultimately undermines the security of all involved, and makes war more likely. Jervis concedes that differences among states, especially in the priority given to security in relation to other domestic concerns and the degree of threat perceived, will impact the severity of the security dilemma, by shaping the costs associated with the sucker's payoff. Geography, commitment to particular beliefs, and technology also impact the degree to which the security dilemma prevails. Specifically, the offense-defense balance and the ability to differentiate between offensive and defensive strategies alter the likelihood of spiraling security-related behavior.

Central question

What makes cooperation more likely in this sad, sad world where the security dilemma prevails?

Central hypotheses

It is possible for states to alter the actual and perceived incentives to cooperate and defect in order to alleviate the likelihood of spiraling behavior related to the security dilemma. Where it is easier to defend one's own territory than it is to attack that of another, the security dilemma will be less severe, because defense dominance protracts wars and makes them more costly. Moreover, where it is easier to distinguish between offensive and defensive weaponry (that is to say, in what Sol refers to as the "land of make of believe"), the security dilemma is less severe.

How he makes his argument

Jervis frames his discussion of the potential costs perceived via the security dilemma in game theoretic terms, first comparing the quest for security to Stag Hunt. He points out three major complications to Stag Hunt posed by international interactions—the inability of states to credibly commit to the status quo for the long haul, the propensity of states to seek to buttress their security by going after resources outside of their territorial bounds, and the possibility that a state will preemptively interfere in another state's domestic politics in order to head off possible conflict. In the face of these problems, Jervis believes that the potential for spiraling international weapons build-ups can be alleviated by: (1) increasing the gains accrued through mutual cooperation or decreasing the cost of being the sucker, (2) decreasing the gains accrued from being a unilateral defector, and (3) increasing each side's expectation that the other will cooperate. States in desperate situations are most likely to defect, because they are least able to absorb the sucker's payoff. Even the high costs of war and significant gains from cooperation can create a Chicken game, whereby each state has an incentive to appear willing to defect in order to extract concessions from the other. There is a related danger associated with signaling cooperative behavior by understating the gains of exploitation or overstating the gains from cooperation or the costs of mutual defection—this increases the ability (and the incentive) of another state to threaten defection. Inspection devices can reduce the immediate exigencies of the security dilemma by providing warnings of developing defection (since arms build-ups don't happen overnight). Essentially, they would reduce uncertainty not only about state behavior, but also enable states to make clearer signals about their intentions over the longer term.

Technology and its costs determine the types of state behavior that are possible. For instance, the costs of offensive versus defensive strategies determine the likelihood that a state will engage in aggressive behavior. The said costs are associated not only with the actual money spent acquiring the ability to enact those strategies, but also with the consequences of the strategies themselves. For example, the ability of a state to put away its opponent with a preemptive move creates an incentive to strike first, which aggravates the security dilemma (by creating more immediate costs). Additionally, geographic factors, such as the difficulty of attacking an island as opposed to an artificially-created border, affects the severity of the security dilemma. The ability to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons (and the existence of weapons that can be used only for one or the other) enables security-seeking (as opposed to power-maximizing) states to signal their non-aggressive intentions by developing only defensive weapons, and by making it obvious when a state develops offensive intentions. Complications in this scenario include states with extensive commitments to defend the security of other states (forcing them to act aggressively) and the fact that aggressor states require defensive weapons as a springboard to effective offensive weapons.

Jervis ends his paper with a discussion of nuclear weapons, noting that while ICBMs might be used both for offensive and defensive purposes, SLBMs are largely defensive, even if the most efficient protection of vulnerable SLBM sites requires anti-submarine capability that could be perceived as offensive. Even in a world of SLBMs, where one state's build-up of defensive nukes would not necessarily engender counter-build-up by another state, Jervis argues that the possibility of limited nuclear warfare makes the size of nuclear arsenals matter. Thus, while nuclear weapons do increase the costs of wars, they do sufficiently alter neither the offense-defense balance, nor the ability to differentiate between offensive and defensive strategies, so as to eliminate the security dilemma.