

How Threat Assessments Can Become Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

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ABSTRACT

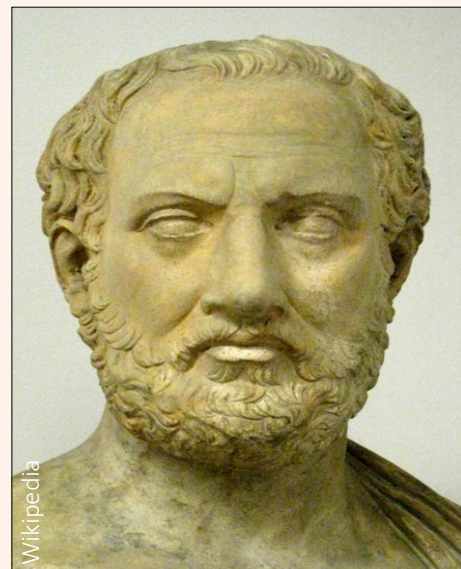
According to the author, the security dilemma is an unfortunate reality, perhaps an enduring feature of the self-help international system. He explains that threat assessments exist in part because of the security dilemma, and these assessments can become self-fulfilling prophecies. This happens because of the limitations in the assessment of capability and political intent of a state, given the lack of information or transparency, the need to make judgments to fill in the informational gaps, biases on the part of the analysts, and misperceptions of words or actions. The impact of these factors on threat assessments influence states to move towards conflict, either due to factors of internal power politics or, they are caught in a spiral of misperceptions with the other party towards seemingly endless counterbalancing. However, the author highlights that it is not in the interest of states or international relations to see these prophecies become inevitable. Rather, all states should work together towards a peaceful and prosperous global world order, despite the apparent anarchy. He also suggests the improvement of intelligence analysis and reducing misperceptions as ways to break the self-fulfilling cycles.

Keywords: Diplomacy; International Relations; Peacekeeping; Analysis; Data

INTRODUCTION

Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC with surely no expectation that it would be relevant today, 20 odd years into the 21st century. In 2015, Graham Allison wrote how potential conflict could emerge in modern times between a superpower United States (US) and a rising power China—the Thucydides Trap referred to an apparent tendency towards war when a rising power threatens to displace an existing great power as an international hegemon.¹ While Allison's work has been contested by many, not least by Harvard political scientist Joseph S. Nye, it at least lends credence to the belief that states are very much heavily influenced by fear where a Hobbesian state of nature still exists today, given the anarchic international order where there is no single higher authority governing states and the relations between them.² Driven by fear, and desiring to survive in this anarchy, states make threat assessments to size each other up, developing intelligence that drives not only military policy but most instruments of state power. However, dependence on assessments is problematically loaded with unknown consequences because assessments are essentially intelligent guesses—the epistemological conundrum is at the core of producing accurate assessments.³ What happens then when a state

guesses wrong? At best, the consequence is trivial, and peace is maintained. At worst, said state sees aggression towards herself, and acts in defiant defence. In response, does the opposing state immediately seek de-escalation towards peace, or does she respond in turn with elevated aggression? History has shown that many states, clouded in the fog of fear, spiral towards hostility and eventually war.⁴ The intelligence that sought to make states more prepared for war ended up causing war instead, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁵



Plaster cast bust of Thucydides in the Pushkin Museum.

In this essay, the author will first evaluate threat assessments—why they are necessary, and what their limitations are. Next, he will examine how threat assessments become self-fulfilling prophecies through two methods—power politics and spiral doctrine. Finally, the author will offer a perspective of threat assessments as useful tools towards peace, rather than increasing hostility.

EVALUATING THREAT ASSESSMENTS

*Si vis pacem, para bellum*⁶ is taken seriously by states, hence the sophisticated military and intelligence machinery that all states possess comes to the fore.⁷ Consider the structural realist position, where conflict is bound to arise from the anarchic, self-help international system. Having no true hegemon in control of the global world order means that all states are at risk of conflict with all other states.⁸ Survival is the order of the day with states designing their instruments of national power not just for prosperity but also security.⁹ With no state expected to be fully transparent about both their insecurity and capabilities, security dilemmas emerge, often perceived as an uncontrollable spiral of insecurity. Even though states do not deliberately try to cause strife between each other, however, the diplomatic steps states make for increased security gains can result in the escalation of conflict, leading to the possibility of war.¹⁰ Dilemmas grow from uncertainty, which Herz argues, plays a big role in how states behave under weak international authority, where one state's attempts to enhance her security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as threatening.¹¹ Within this context just set, states would want to maintain an edge over their potential adversaries, and project an operational posture that is not only relevant but ready. Implicit is the need to make assessments of current and future threat environments.¹²

Intelligence is thus crucial to ameliorate security dilemmas by reducing uncertainty, allowing states to not only adjust their own security positions, but more accurately judge the positions of others. Threat assessment can broadly cover two areas—capability and political intention.¹³ Both areas have their own inherent challenges. For capabilities, states guard their capabilities as secrets close to their chests. All militaries have sophisticated, security infrastructures to not only

protect operational information but ensure that members of their forces are impossible to compromise. With that comes the epistemological conundrum—the validity of the information obtained can never be guaranteed given that one cannot confirm its truth with the source.¹⁴ Assessing political intention can be even more challenging, given that it is intimately linked to human thought and behaviour.¹⁵ One cannot be certain that a supposedly hostile state is acting deliberately, presenting a façade, or what is perceived has been interpreted correctly.¹⁶ Adding to the complexity in assessment for both areas is the nature of the threat assessment. Given that perfect information is hardly ever available, analysts must combine empirical evidence with reconstruction and judgements.¹⁷ An assessment of a state's ability to use capabilities, or the reasons behind why the capability was acquired, is a judgement call, an environment in which the analyst operates in. Threat assessment is thus indeed difficult, and its effectiveness limited. Thus, when states assess threats, there is a tendency to misperceive and miscalculate.¹⁸ Taking US-China relations as an example, Arif argues that misperception in threat assessments not only triggered conflict between the two powers but went further to trigger further tension and competition.¹⁹ Despite a Chinese white paper published in 2005 titled China's Peaceful Development, outlining China's commitment to peaceful growth, China failed to understand that the US saw Chinese behaviour as threatening, and sought to respond in kind by 'rebalancing' against the Chinese.²⁰

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Having dealt with the need for threat assessments and their limitations, the author next explores how these threat assessments lead to actions that reinforce or exacerbate the threat, creating a self-fulfilling loop.

HOW THREAT ASSESSMENTS BECOME SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Defining Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Sociologist Robert Merton defined self-fulfilling prophecies as ‘a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true.’²¹ In simpler terms, the original action meant as a response to a fear caused a reaction that reinforced the fear even more. Bjork argues that security dilemmas become self-fulfilling prophecies when a state unsuccessfully defines its security situation within the anarchic international system.²² Tang further explains that the state’s behaviour, while perceived internally as rational in comparison with the adversary state, can unnecessarily provoke said adversary state into a build-up of arms, thus causing the very threat it was seeking to deter.²³ Copeland adds that this self-fulfilling prophecy is self-imposed due to rational thinkers within state governments acting upon worst-case assumptions.²⁴ Arif’s work on US-China relations mentioned earlier exemplify this, showing that US ‘rebalancing’ efforts did not tame the Chinese, but instead caused them to be more aggressive.²⁵ The Cuban Missile Crisis was also a great example of this, given how American nuclear installations in Turkey, meant to deter the Soviets, instead influenced the Soviet nuclear installations on Cuba. If not for calm and rational heads prevailing, the dilemma could have resulted in the most destructive inter-state conflict known to man. Additionally, Jervis also argues that during that Cold War period, rising Soviet defence spending prior to 1955 made them appear to be prepared to exploit US vulnerabilities, when in fact it reflected a great fear of the US, and resulted in US assuming the worst and increasing its own excessive military structure.²⁶ Given that threat assessment is imperfect, it is no surprise that one-sided perceptions, or perhaps history has shown them to be misperceptions, have contributed to actions that not only exacerbate the security dilemma, but can reinforce the fears that the actions sought to placate in the first place.

Power Politics Reinforcing Threats

In relation to the security dilemma, power politics can bring about threat assessments and behaviours that inadvertently lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.²⁷ Power politics refers to the impact of

distributions of power and national interest on the causes of war and stability, where national self-interest is prioritised over the interests of other nations.²⁸ With internally motivated interests at the core of belief, threat assessments can be politically manufactured to serve domestic political interests as opposed to being based on a real threat.²⁹ To further consolidate political power, aggressive responses will follow security threats. Vasquez argues that the dominance of this belief created structures and conditioned actors to react aggressively, almost defining the strategic culture of the state.³⁰ Thus, states exhibiting power politics-based behaviour move closer to war when faced with threats. This contradicts the intent of conducting threat assessments in the first place, meant for enhancing security, not propagate belligerence. An example of this would be North Korea, where the Kim regime not only uses security threats to justify autocratic and totalitarian control over the population, but also responds to them with aggression and hostility, resulting in more sanctions by both US and China. For Russia, manufactured threat assessments are a boon for the military as it cements their need for large budgets, capabilities and benefits the consolidation of political power.³¹ Finally, Iran uses security threats, especially from Israel and the US, as justification for increased nuclearisation, leading to more sanctions by the US, reinforcing the original threats. While these countries are caught in self-fulfilling prophecies, the leaders of these countries may see this as desirable rather than problematic.

Spiralling Towards Conflict

Robert Jervis’ work *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* provided two models to explain how war emerged from misperceptions—the ‘deterrence’ and the ‘spiral’ models.³² Contrasting with power politics covered earlier which is expressed internally, Jervis’ models deal with the external realm, particularly on how states perceive each other. In the deterrence model, the defending state misperceives that the aggressive state would back down when appeased, yet the aggressive state seeks to take advantage of the perceived weakness and pushes for more concessions, leading to the breakout of war.³³



North Korean People's Army BTR-80-vehicles on parade.

In the spiral model however, the misperception occurs on both sides—both aggressor and defender overestimate each other. The first misperception is that when states arm, they do so to undermine the security of others through hostile intentions. States who observe their adversaries arming therefore seek to arm themselves in response, creating a cycle of mutual hostility.³⁴ The second misperception is that states who arm defensively misjudge that others will see them as defensive as well. Instead, other states see this as a hostile act. Misperception and overestimation occur back and forth, resulting in a spiral towards conflict, self-reinforcing and self-fulfilling, resulting in two states in a dyadic relationship of mutual hostility.³⁵ The spiral is perpetuated because the other side's military preparations in response are interpreted as confirmatory evidence of their worst fears.³⁶

Given that threat assessment is imperfect, it is no surprise that one-sided perceptions, or perhaps history has shown them to be misperceptions, have contributed to actions that not only exacerbate the security dilemma, but can reinforce the fears that the actions sought to placate in the first place.

Bjork argues that this superficial self-fulfilling prophecy of counterbalancing is dangerous, leaving both states less secure than before.³⁷ What amplifies the danger is that we will have two states with increased military capability that are increasingly hostile to each other. States enter a competition of power, where efforts to increase one's security unilaterally in an anarchic, self-help world creates incentives for other countries to increase their military power, leading to a world that is less secure than before.³⁸ If other states follow suit, an international arms race ensues, creating a world spiralling towards greater insecurity.³⁹ Bjork demonstrates the danger of this counterbalancing through North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) expansion into Eastern Europe, the former Soviet sphere of influence. NATO's rhetoric of increasing defensive capacity fell on deaf Russian ears, fuelling Russia's insecurities, causing an increased threat of Russian incursion upon NATO's Eastern European partners.⁴⁰ Adding to the spiral was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, reflecting Russia's desire for territorial expansion and greater strategic depth against NATO, causing increasing military tensions, further worsening the threat perception by NATO. Another example of a spiral is the threat of Chinese expansionism into the South China Seas. Bjork gives the example of China and Japan, both vying for control of the contested Senkaku (or Diaoyu) islands.⁴¹ As China increases its defence spending and incursions, Japan has been steadily building alliances and strengthening its amphibious forces. With Japan forming alliances with India and

other Asian states, China fears an anti-China coalition encirclement, motivating it to develop greater military might and build new alliances. Shifting to the Scarborough shoal, China's incursions into the area has not only led to increased military deployments into the area by the Philippines, but also a strengthening of ties between the Philippines, the US and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in response. Increased US presence will only motivate the Chinese to respond in kind. It is not difficult to ascertain how destabilising and less secure the world becomes when states get stuck in their self-fulfilling prophecies.

In the next section, the author proposes some mitigating measures to prevent threat assessments from becoming self-fulfilling prophecies, for the assessments to fulfil their intended outcome of enhancing peace and security, rather than promoting destabilisation.

BREAKING THE SELF-FULFILLING CYCLE

Any reader of *Leviathan* should take away Hobbes' position that man ultimately fears violent death the most, seen as the greatest evil, and thus to overcome the anarchic condition, man should form political communities bounded by natural laws.⁴² If Hobbes posits that peace is the answer, then surely self-fulfilling prophecies are not completely unavoidable and threat assessments can be used as a tool towards peace rather than war. Jervis explains that if indeed

self-fulfilling prophecies are true all the time, then there would be no way for de-escalation as any clarification of misunderstandings would be interpreted as weakness, thus encouraging even more bellicose behaviour from the other party.⁴³ To that end, we must seek ways to at least mitigate, if not prevent, threat assessments becoming self-fulfilling prophecies.⁴⁴

As faith in the international system is very much determined by the strategic behaviour of great powers, the relations between US and China are perhaps the most significant feature of international relations today.

Improving Intelligence Analysis

Chareonsri suggested three improvements, specific to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) but applicable generally, to improving the quality of threat assessments.⁴⁵ Firstly, to apply greater analytical rigour to overcome the inherent challenges. He suggests the usage of Devil's Advocates to make the assessments more robust



President Kennedy meets in the Oval Office with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, 18th October, 1962.

and uses the Crowe Memorandum as an example of how an alternative perspective might have helped prevent the conflict between Britain and Germany pre-World War I, given the rebuttal written by Thomas Sanderson in 1928.⁴⁶ Secondly, to express empathy for the adversary, and consciously avoid ethno-centric bias. In addition, he suggested the use of refutation to scrutinise hypotheses rather than confirmation.⁴⁷ Finally, he suggested that states invest in human capital and training to ensure that they develop the best analysts possible, and that they are enabled to make independent assessments.

Reducing Misperceptions

A single-prong approach to reducing misperceptions by simply seeking to improve the quality of threat assessments is naive, and the author suggests that equal emphasis be placed on seeking to build trust and confidence between states.⁴⁸ Trust and confidence between state leaders at the highest level had already proven to prevent mutually assured destruction, where Kennedy's trust in Khrushchev's desire to avoid nuclear war resolved the Cuban Missile Crisis. Trust and confidence also form the foundation of the ASEAN's desire to realise an ASEAN Security Community.⁴⁹ Co-operation amongst ASEAN members have already paid dividends through the effectiveness of the ASEAN Co-ordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management and the Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communication Centre. High-level meetings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting further seek to strengthen the relations between ASEAN neighbours. These measures help to ameliorate concerns between neighbours when individual states increase their defence spending, avoiding alarm that might spiral down a path of distrust, fear, and hostility.⁵⁰ As aptly suggested by Arif, more intense and clear communication can break the spiral of conflict, so

perhaps 'it is time for Beijing and Washington to build a more direct channel of communication as one built by Kennedy and Khrushchev during the height of the Cold War.'⁵¹

CONCLUSION

The security dilemma is an unfortunate reality, perhaps an enduring feature of the self-help international system.⁵² The need for threat assessments exists in part because of the security dilemma, and these assessments can become self-fulfilling prophecies. This is due to the limitations in the assessment of capability and political intent of a state, given the lack of information or transparency, the need to make judgments to fill in the informational gaps, biases on the part of the analysts and misperceptions of words or actions. The impact of these factors on threat assessments leads them to influence states to move towards conflict, either due to internal power politics factors, or caught in a spiral of misperceptions with the other party towards seemingly endless counterbalancing. To that end, the author has tried to show how threat assessments can be self-fulfilling prophecies. However, it is not in the interest of states or international relations to see these prophecies become inevitable. Rather, all states should work together towards a peaceful and prosperous global world order, despite the apparent anarchy. In this essay, the author has suggested the improvement of intelligence analysis and reducing misperceptions as ways to break the cycles. As faith in the international system is very much determined by the strategic behaviour of great powers, the relations between US and China are perhaps the most significant feature of international relations today.⁵³ The world waits with bated breath as to whether the spiralling of relations between the two superpowers will continue and end in disastrous conflict, or whether rational sensibilities will prevail.

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