Working Paper No.1996/1

AMELIORATING THE SECURITY DILEMMA: STRUCTURAL AND PERCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO STRATEGIC REFORM

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Canberra
April 1996

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry

Butfoy, Andrew, 1958 –
Ameliorating the security dilemma: structural and perceptual approaches to strategic reform.

ISBN 0 7315 2433 0.

I. Australian National University. Department of International Relations. II. Title. (Series: Working paper (Australian National University. Dept. of International Relations); 1996/1.)

327.17

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DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

According to the international relations literature, the security dilemma poses a significant threat to peace. Much of the literature goes on to suggest that an obvious way to mitigate this threat would be to shift planning towards non-offensive defence. Despite having some merit, there are a couple of weaknesses with the approach. First, it tends to be rather abstract and mechanistic: it tends to be based on the idea that the security dilemma is a product of the structure (rather than the political flux) of the international system. Second, the scope for non-offensive defence to be translated into policy appears to be very limited. In order to move the debate forward, there is a need to focus on the ‘socially constructed’ nature of the security dilemma. After all, the security dilemma is not universally relevant: it represents only one dimension of the security relationships between some states at particular periods. This suggests that the phenomenon is contingent on political factors and thus might be better dealt with by a greater emphasis on the development of international strategic regimes. These regimes would build on, but not be limited to, the insights of the structural arguments provided by advocates of non-offensive defence; in addition they would also place considerable stress on perceptual and contextual changes in the international strategic environment.
Introduction

International security is threatened by a diverse range of phenomena. These include ethnic strife, the proliferation of arms, and the clash of national interests. Underlying some of these threats is the exacerbating effect of the ‘security dilemma’. The security dilemma describes a condition in which efforts to improve national security by strengthening defence capabilities have the effect of appearing to threaten other states thereby provoking military counter-moves; this can lead to a net decrease in security. For example, pressures for arms racing might build up and help create a strategic, political and psychological climate in which war becomes increasingly thinkable.

This paper examines the nature of the security dilemma and discusses how it might be ameliorated through reform of strategic planning. Four arguments are presented. First, the relevance of the security dilemma across the international system is somewhat patchy (both historically and geographically). In other words, this dilemma is prominent in only a limited number of interstate relationships. Second, a distinction needs to be made between essentially structural and essentially perceptual approaches to dealing with security issues. Structural reform emphasises far-reaching restrictions on military capabilities; perceptual measures focus more on adjusting the political context for, and subjective meanings of, military planning (here much of the emphasis is on the ‘packaging’ of military deployments). Third, perceptual approaches are likely to have a greater constituency than structural measures. Fourth, building on the previous arguments, there may be considerable scope for the security dilemma to be mitigated through the further evolution of international regimes.

Part one of the paper looks at the sort of factors which produce and exacerbate the security dilemma. Part two outlines ways in which the problems associated with this dilemma might be handled by restructuring military postures; here the debate on non-offensive defence (NOD) is revisited. Part three examines how the security
The dilemma might be mitigated by addressing perceptual and contextual issues; this part of the study develops the idea of ‘non-threatening defence’ (NTD). Part four draws on this discussion to deepen and qualify our understanding of the security dilemma.

**The security dilemma**

*Conventional accounts of the dilemma*

The security dilemma helps to define one of the many difficult choices facing some governments. On the one hand, they can relax defence efforts in order to facilitate peaceful relations; the problem here is that they may thereby make their country more vulnerable to aggression. On the other hand, they can strengthen defence preparations, but this can have the unintended consequence of undermining long-term security through exacerbating international suspicions and reinforcing pressures for arms racing. The result of all this could be to lock states into a form of competitive military planning which squeezes out the prospects for the diplomatic resolution of conflicts. These factors could, theoretically, push states into an unwanted armed conflict. It is often argued that this is just what did happen in World War I; indeed, the case of 1914 is often taken to be paradigmatic of the workings of the security dilemma.\(^2\)

The security dilemma is underpinned by the ambiguous signals which commonly emanate from military planning. According to Nicholas Wheeler and Ken Booth, the dilemma exists when,

the military preparations of one state create an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another as to whether those preparations are for ‘defensive’ purposes only (to enhance its security in an uncertain world) or whether

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they are for offensive purposes (to change the status quo to its advantage).³

According to this line of reasoning, this dilemma can occur despite the best intentions of governments. Robert Jervis has suggested that this is especially so when the requirements for defence and offence are similar. In such circumstances, 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. States therefore tend to assume the worst.⁴

Unfortunately, almost any significant defence effort can usually be seen to have a potentially threatening aspect to it.

This apparently inherent aspect of the international system can be exacerbated by particular types of policy. For example, it may be fuelled by especially clumsy planning which unintentionally worsens fears on the part of neighbours. Or deliberate security dilemmas⁵ can be created with the aim of instilling concern and doubt in the minds of others. In both inadvertent and deliberate cases the behaviour of one state can produce uncertainty in the minds of a neighbour. This uncertainty encourages neighbours to play ‘better safe than sorry’ and, again, assume the worst.

All of this has prompted Jervis to argue that, ‘the security dilemma can not only create conflicts and tensions but also provide the dynamics triggering war’.⁶ In a similar vein, Thomas Schelling linked the security dilemma to the war-inducing ‘reciprocal fear of surprise attack’; to illustrate this he draws on the domestic analogy of an armed householder’s discovery of an armed burglar:

Even if he prefers just to leave quietly, and I wish him to, there is danger that he may think I want to shoot, and shoot first. Worse, there is danger that he may think that I think he means to shoot. Or he may think that I think he thinks I want to shoot. And so on. ‘Self-defense’ is ambiguous, when one is only trying to preclude being shot in self-defense.⁷

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⁵ The expression is from Wheeler and Booth, ‘The Security Dilemma’, p. 31.

⁶ Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, p.67.

Here the structure of the situation pressures both parties into shooting even though neither may want to do so (both may in fact desperately want to avoid bloodshed).

None of this comes as a surprise to Neo-Realists. Neo-Realists tend to define international relations largely in terms of an anarchic system in which sovereign states compete for advantage in an international balance of power. Neo-Realists argue that the very structure of international relations pushes states into the sort of ‘self-help’ defence policies which make the security dilemma almost inevitable. Further, they claim that the scope for managing this dilemma is very limited indeed. One reason for this is the mutually reinforcing impact of ‘worst-case analysis’ and traditional beliefs in the efficacy of offensive military operations. It is now necessary to look more closely at these two factors.

**Worst-case analysis as a factor in exacerbating the security dilemma**

Defence planners are often encouraged and trained to assume the worst of the intentions and military capabilities of potential enemies. This is understandable; after all, in the event of war the stakes are about as high as it is possible to make them. Understandable, but, perhaps, not always for the best if translated into policy. ‘Playing safe’ becomes translated into ‘preparing for the worst’; assuming the worst can sometimes help pave the way for the worst to occur. According to Jack Snyder, this is precisely what happened with the implementation of the German war plan (the so-called Schlieffen Plan) in 1914:

> Perhaps the most common criticism of [this plan] is that it made the fear of a two-front, general war in Europe a self-fulfilling prophecy...The Schlieffen Plan prepared for the worst case [that is, concurrent German war against both Russia and France] in a way that ensured that the worst case would occur. 

Worst-case analysis can be fuelled by ignorance. It is easy to assume terrible things when the other side is paranoid about secrecy and when one’s intelligence systems are partially blind. As Richard Ned Lebow has noted:

> The less that is known about the qualities of the other side’s weapons, the greater the tendency to assign high values to them in order to be on the ‘safe side’. In dynamic analyses, this bias can be further compounded by the choice of a war scenario that is particularly favourable to the enemy...[This could be] a situation in which the other side had gained a

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9 Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, p.115.
significant head start with its mobilization. Rigging the scenario in this way results in an extremely threatening picture of the strategic balance.

When worst case analysis is used by both sides, it means that they will interpret a situation of strategic parity as one of imbalance favouring their adversary.\(^\text{10}\)

The role of ignorance is not always simply related to poor intelligence. It can also be fostered and manipulated by individuals or groups searching for political or bureaucratic advantage. For example, in a domestic political climate charged with nationalism, there may be deliberate efforts to stir-up and exploit public paranoia about the military capabilities and aggressive proclivities of ‘blood enemies’.\(^\text{11}\)

The worst case for most planners would be a situation in which: (a) the putative opponent has a propensity for aggression; (b) it is prudently assumed that defending forces will run into ‘Murphy’s law’; (c) it is assumed that the supposed enemy will perform well; (d) there are costs in delaying defence readiness, along with an expectation that readiness might be hampered by political factors; (e) the enemy perceives the military balance to be *favourable, but moving in an unfavourable direction*, fostering a ‘now or never’ attitude to war planning; and (f) military factors are believed to favour offensive operations.

*Offence dominance as a factor in exacerbating the security dilemma*

Offence dominance describes a condition in which military technology and doctrine give the offence clear and, other things being equal, decisive advantages over the defence.\(^\text{12}\) Military doctrine, plans and force structures tailored to the dominance of the offence over the defence can aggravate crises. If potential enemies each believe that the best form of defence (and deterrence) is preparing to attack, it is easy to see how they could be locked into a vicious circle of mutually reinforcing suspicions—especially given the likelihood of subsequent arms racing in offensive military capabilities.

Some analysts would go further and suggest that relatively narrow strategic calculations along these lines can help push a country’s political decision makers across the threshold from peace to war. Stephen Van Evera has argued that: ‘War is


\(^{11}\) A similar point has been made by Posen, see ‘The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict’, p. 107.

far more likely when offense appears easy and conquest seems feasible...'.  

13 This train of thought often has a rather mechanistic quality to it. Take, for example, Robert Jervis' statement that when offence has the advantage over defence, 'attacking is the best route to protecting what you have; status-quo states will therefore behave like aggressors'.  

14 Sean Lynn-Jones, echoing Jervis, endorses the view that,

international politics will become more competitive and less peaceful when the offense-defense balance shifts towards the offense...[In] a world where there is an offensive advantage expansionist grand strategies will be more common, states will adopt offensive military doctrines, arms races will emerge, foreign policies will be more confrontational, crises will be frequent...balancing will be more rapid and vigorous...  

15 But one does not have to swallow the whole argument here to see that offence dominance can make life difficult. The central problem, in terms of international security, with a condition of offence dominance is that it promises to reward aggression while it threatens to penalise reliance on the defence.

Another way that offence dominance could, in theory, lead to war is by making misperception and mistakes more likely. As late as 1990 one advocate argued that non-offensive defence was 'urgently required' for NATO because of this factor.  

16 Here the case for structural change was based on the idea that offensively configured and indoctrinated NATO naval forces operating off the Soviet coast could inadvertently create a situation in which shots were fired; this could, it was claimed, all too easily lead to escalation to nuclear devastation.  

17 In such a condition of offence dominance one might expect military forces to become 'trigger happy'.

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14 Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', World Politics, 30:2 (January 1978), p. 211 (emphasis added). For a further example of the mechanistic nature of this sort of analysis, consider the following quote from p. 195: 'Borders across which an attack is easy tend to be unstable. States living within them are likely to expand or be absorbed. Frequent wars are almost inevitable...'. This does not seem be very helpful in explaining contemporary North America or Western Europe. Nor does the suggestion that, given offence dominance: 'Cooperation among status quo powers will be extremely hard to achieve' (p. 211).


Again, it is not necessary to accept the plausibility of this particular scenario in order to appreciate the general point: it is difficult for a country to be reassured about its security when a neighbour with which it is in political conflict bases its defence plans on offensive strategies which are, in turn, reflected in high levels of war readiness. Thus the development of offence dominance, especially when mirrored in worst-case analysis and high pressure peacetime military activities, could magnify the conflict, exacerbating effects of the security dilemma.

One last point needs to be made here. Objective assessments of the offence-defence balance tell only part of the story. As Snyder has shown, subjective understandings of the issue are more consequential. Thus erroneous perceptions of offence dominance were much more influential in 1914 than were correct judgements of the defence dominance provided by trench warfare and machine guns. Despite the objective conditions, decision makers behaved as if the offence had the advantage.

The security dilemma in context

So much for conventional accounts of the security dilemma. It is now necessary to explore the concept a little further. The obvious starting point here is an examination of the phenomenon’s roots. The security dilemma arises from a complex interplay between three factors:

(a) the inherently violent and destructive potential of military capabilities;
(b) the nature and implications of international anarchy;
(c) the politics of identity and interests.

The first two factors make it very painful and costly for any government to get its security policies wrong; this has usually put a premium on ‘conservatism-as-prudence’. The third factor has often pivoted around nationalism and the related reinforcement of the state-centric view of international relations.

Within Neo-Realism and related perspectives\(^\text{19}\) there is a temptation to reify each of these three factors; this has the effect of fixing their content in analytical terms. For example, all states are viewed as essentially similar and unchanging, especially in terms of their behaviour on the international stage. This leads, among other things, to the idea that the security dilemma is simply part of the furniture of interstate affairs. Security relationships which appear to fit with Neo-Realist expectations, and which partly hinge on the security dilemma (for example, Snyder, \textit{The Ideology of the Offensive}, for example, pp. 214–16.

\(^{18}\) Here it is worth reflecting on the fact that many people who ostensibly reject Neo-Realism—such as some advocates of non-offensive defence—appear, paradoxically, to base some of their logic on assumptions which bear a striking resemblance to the theory (for example, with regard to structural modes of explanation).
Israel/Syria, US/Soviet Union during the Cold War, France/Germany in the first half of this century), are taken to exemplify the nature of international relations. Other sorts of relationships, such as those between Australia and New Zealand, contemporary France and Germany, or the United Kingdom and the United States, are asserted to be aberrations or irrelevant as far as general theory is concerned.

But the ‘exceptions’ prove that the often implied universal (and objective) nature of the security dilemma is false. And the dismissive attitude taken towards relationships which do not fit the model is pernicious. One of the problems with Neo-Realist accounts is that they tend to ignore or marginalise the extent to which the above mentioned factors, (b) and (c), can be in flux. The fact is that the political meaning of anarchy, as well as a state’s sense of place and security, can change. More particularly the degree of trust and sense of common interest in the international system is neither fixed nor uniform. There are clearly some interstate relationships where the security dilemma has been escaped, simply does not exist, or where it carries very little weight. Indeed, the absence of such a dilemma may be viewed as almost a defining feature of ‘security communities’ of the sort represented by (for example) Australia–New Zealand, and most of the European Union. Within these communities war between members is not on the agenda whatever their objective military capabilities might be.20

This can be further illustrated by looking again at worst-case analysis. There is nothing inevitable about this sort of phenomenon. Even conservative defence planners have to make choices between types and degrees of ‘worst’ case scenarios. Objective worst-case analysis is often ignored if it is premised on politically implausible scenarios. For example, an objective worst case for an Australian or British conventional defence planner would be a US invasion; no other country has the military capabilities to be able to confidently take over these states. An attempted US invasion in the 1970s would have been far more difficult to handle for London than a Soviet attack on British forces in Germany; similarly, the threat posed to Australia by, say, four US carrier battle groups and half the US Marine Corps would dwarf a conventional threat from any regional country (or any plausible regional coalition). The reason why UK and Australian strategists do not lose any sleep over US invasion capabilities should be obvious: political factors make this ‘threat’ look like a silly basis for national security planning.

In other words, capabilities are not looked at in a political vacuum. Indeed, perceptions of threat may sometimes have a rather nebulous association with objective assessments of military hardware. Due to ideological or cultural factors some poorly armed states may be seen as greater threats than some other, better

armed, states. As Stephan Walt has argued, states act to ‘balance against threats rather than against power alone’.21

Thus the security dilemma describes an abstraction of part of the relationship between some states at particular moments. In other words, the relevance of this phenomenon is uneven across the international system; it reflects the flux of international politics more generally. This is because the security dilemma is a social construction,22 not an automatic product of the shape of the international system. The sense of threat associated with any given set of military plans is provided by a mix of military and non-military factors which are not always structurally determined. These factors include: historical and mythological memories; contemporary and evolving domestic political cultures; the evolution of international norms; and expectations of the future. The role of the security dilemma will be, to various degrees, hostage to developments in each of these areas.

A structural solution? Non-offensive defence revisited

For the sake of this discussion, structural approaches to strategic reform will be seen as covering a spectrum of measures running from comprehensive disarmament to the reconfiguring of traditional military postures. Comprehensive disarmament will not be examined here because it is Utopian and because a consideration of its merits is peripheral to the particular argument developed in the paper. Perhaps the most obvious way of employing structural reform to ameliorate the security dilemma is to eschew those military capabilities which are most suitable for military aggression.23 The de-emphasising of offensive capabilities has attracted a range of labels, including non-offensive defence.24 Here, following some German thinking on the subject, I shall define NOD quite narrowly as: a military posture which clearly demonstrates a structural incapacity for engaging in strategic

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22 Wendt, ‘Constructing International Politics’.
23 Some Neo-Realists might advocate nuclear proliferation here. Measured proliferation, it has been argued, could spread the advantages of deterrence. According to this line of thought, in some circumstances nuclear weapons serve to hose down the security dilemma.
offensives. By this I mean a deliberate, explicit and unambiguous effort to eschew the capabilities and plans for engaging in sustained large scale offensive operations outside of the national territory. In this paper NOD is to be distinguished from non-threatening defence. NTD is defined as *defence planning that is not reasonably perceived as provocative or threatening by any plausible opponent.*25 Thus, while NOD is defined in objective structural terms, NTD is defined in essentially subjective and perceptual terms. (It is important to note that with regard to NTD these perceptions concern intent and political assessments of the probability of armed conflict; here I am not referring to perceptions of the defence-offence balance.)

The intention in NOD is to create an environment which heavily favours defensive military operations and which makes offensive strategies expensive and ineffective. Here there are two key reference points. First, the military aim is fairly simple: to deny territory to an attacker. The second key reference point is that states should be incapable of engaging in offensive operations which might overwhelm the territorial, maritime and aerial defence efforts of its neighbours.

Most approaches to NOD assume that some types of weapons are more suited to defence than offence, although advocates would not normally push the point too far. Jonathan Dean has noted that proponents of NOD,

believe that although individual weapons systems can obviously be used for offensive or defensive purposes, it is possible to distinguish between offensive force configurations—emphasising mobility and range—and defensive force configurations—emphasising firepower, with limited mobility and range.26

As Dean adds: ‘Defence stronger than offence would...result...from an organisation of forces designed to fight defensively in a particular situation’.27

**The case for non-offensive defence**

Much of the case for NOD can be broken down into two related arguments: that it reduces the chances of war; and that it provides a superior form of defence. Of these, the first is by far the greatest claim and requires the most attention here. Advocates of NOD believe that modifications in military planning will feed back into political context in a direct and straightforward manner. It is argued that NOD can be seen as a form of confidence-building between neighbours. States

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25 Here I am tempted to use the term ‘non-provocative defence’. This expression sums up the sentiment I want to convey; however, it has been used so loosely in the literature (often synonymously with NOD) that, for the purposes of this paper, it is left to one side.

26 Dean, ‘Alternative Defence’, p. 64.

implementing NOD can reassure neighbours, help produce a more benign political environment, and reduce incentives to base defence planning around (for example) readiness for pre-emptive strikes.

It is argued that in some circumstances particular diplomatic relationships might be so frayed and delicate that, under conditions of offence dominance, a misreading of the military situation could provide the ‘last straw’ for those deciding policy. With NOD this last straw would not be present. NOD would, in theory, make even the worst case seem not so bad. Thus, in the event of fractious relations between neighbouring states, NOD could help in crisis avoidance or, failing this, crisis management.

A primary aim of NOD concepts is to supersede, or at least mitigate, the security dilemma. As Anders Boserup has argued,

[NOD] approaches security from both a military and a political standpoint. Militarily, it proposes to preserve defense capabilities undiminished. Politically, it would attempt to eliminate the sources of hostility and arms competition and build a climate of trust in which further arms reductions and detente can take place...

Boserup adds that NOD ‘is much more than a means to fend off an aggressor; it is also a political instrument specifically designed to undermine hostility’; it is, he continues, a ‘tool which each side can use to undermine militarism on the other side by denying it the benefit of a credible enemy’.28

Supporters of NOD believe that the approach offers an objectively superior strategy. This belief helps underpin faith in NOD as a deterrent: if defence dominates, why would any one attack? The argument for the defensive efficacy of NOD is based on two claims. The first of these is that defence is the stronger form of war. Defending forces often have significant advantages over attacking forces. Defenders have more to fight for, and more to lose, than invaders. This could be expected to give their performance an extra edge. Defenders are normally less reliant on extended supply lines; at the same time the invader’s logistic system could be expected to provide a series of vulnerable targets. Defenders do not have to expose themselves as much to enemy fire; they can maximise the use of concealed and/or fortified positions. Defenders have greater familiarity with the terrain; they can more easily set up ambushes. Advocates of NOD suggest that, when suitably harnessed, these advantages are overriding. The second claim is that trends in modern technology favour the defence. Modern, high-technology offensive weapons (such as aircraft carriers, the latest heavy tanks and fighter-bombers) are very expensive, difficult to maintain and difficult to employ in an optimum way.

Moreover, it has been argued, these weapons systems are vulnerable to relatively cheap precision guided munitions such as anti-ship, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft missiles.  

Non-offensive defence assessed

NOD has been subjected to strong criticism; some of this has important implications for the claims made by theorists of the security dilemma. For instance, one argument against NOD rests on the assertion that it cannot enhance the prospects for peace because military planning does not cause war. For example, Dan Reiter has attacked a central plank of the literature on the security dilemma by showing that ‘preemptive wars almost never happen’; governments are generally not pushed into war by assessments of military balances. More plausible explanations of war causation place the blame on human nature, domestic political conditions, cultural predispositions, and ideological factors; when the issue is seen in this light, assessments of the offence-defence balance seem secondary. Thus the claim that simply changing defence planning can reduce the chances of war looks, to critics, overly abstract and far too removed from the substance of international political life.

The generalised argument that NOD can dramatically lessen the probability of armed conflict betrays a somewhat one-dimensional understanding of conflict. On this note, it is worth offering a further illustration of how some analysts go about reading the connection between military capabilities and diplomacy. In 1992, Bjørn Møller asserted that if the deployment of the US Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI, or ‘Star Wars’) went ahead, ‘it would become a matter of considerable urgency for its opponent to prevent this, whence an incentive for a preemptive strike’. The idea that Moscow would launch World War III because Washington had somehow got close to making SDI ‘work’ displays a breathtakingly weapons-centric and mechanistic view of international relations. There is remarkably little evidence for this type of assertion.

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29 Webber, New Defence Strategies for the 1990s, p. 5, in addition, see pp. 152–4; also, see John Mearsheimer, Conventional Deterrence (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 190.
31 For example, it has been claimed that liberal democracies do not fight each other; this claim is made without regard to issues of force structure.
33 Many other examples of this one-dimensional view of war causation could be given. For instance, during the Cold War some strategic analysts assumed that East–West strategic stability was delicate and vulnerable to shifts in military technology. This
But what of the more measured claim that offensive military postures can, in some circumstances, be considered a contributory cause of war? For example, it has often been argued that the ‘cult of the offensive’ was a strong contributory factor in the origins of World War I. War plans and attitudes which stressed the putative advantages of massive offensive operations provided part of the framework for the disastrous political decision making in 1914. But, critics would say, it is more plausible to suggest that the strategies of 1914 were created by the political climates of the time. Marc Trachtenberg has noted that: ‘When one looks at a broadly based phenomenon as German imperialism, it is difficult to see a technical judgment about the balance between offense and defense on the battlefield as a major driving force’.35

On the other hand, however, the argument that military planning merely reflects political relationships is an overstated and implausible cliché. For one thing, the ownership of particular sorts of military capability can shape the will to use it. The availability of offensive weaponry (and/or perceptions of offence dominance) might reinforce a frame of mind which lends itself to military adventurism. This provides part of the explanation for, to take just five examples, the German decision to roll the dice in 1914, the escalation of American intervention in Vietnam during 1965, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the US invasion of Panama in 1989, and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Another point is that arms racing is very likely to aggravate whatever underlying political tensions might exist between neighbours. This aspect of the theory of the security dilemma is very credible—one might say glaringly obvious.

More generally, it seems reasonable to believe that if the diplomatic climate between two states deteriorated, it would be preferable in terms of war-avoidance if military planning were based on NOD, rather than hair-trigger counter-offensives or even (worst of all) pre-emptive offensive attacks. Perhaps offensive strategies did not, in a deep sense, cause World War I, but they certainly did not help the search for a peaceful solution. While political pressures might force a slide towards war, it seems daft to encourage military planning which reinforces the trend.

What about NOD’s merits as a deterrent? Again it is not sensible to give an abstract categorical answer. Deterrence works, if it works at all, in the minds of the would-be attacker. It is not simply a function of capabilities or strategies. The simple, if bland, answer is that in some cases NOD might deter and in other cases it might not.

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34 On a similar note, see Reiter, ‘Exploding the Powder Keg Myth’.
35 Trachtenberg, History and Strategy, p. 67.
Jervis has noted that, ‘excessive military optimism is frequently associated with the outbreak of war’.\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps, when faced with an aggressive neighbour, the best policy is to make sure the neighbour’s worst-case analysis is very alarming. For instance, persuading a government that it would be opening itself to massive attacks if it started an aggression might indeed have a sobering effect. Jervis has shown that ideas aimed at de-escalating arms races, and defusing the security dilemma, rest on a different logic to that which usually underpins deterrence.\textsuperscript{37} After all, when deterrence is deemed necessary it is because the dominant threat to peace is seen to be an aggressive government—\textit{not} an arms race. Indeed, drawing on the well-worn analogy of the 1930s, engagement in an arms race may seem necessary to reinforce peace. The problem, in terms of reforming defence planning, is deciding whether, and how much, deterrence is needed.

Insofar as one can make a general point here, it seems plausible to argue that an optimal deterrent—assuming it was required in a particular relationship—\textsuperscript{38}—would probably rest on a mixture of ‘punishment’ strategies (the threat to cause disproportionate damage to an attacker by, for example, long-range heavy bombing) and ‘denial’ strategies (the demonstration of a capability to hold ground). Such a mix could be seen as producing a synergistic effect and it can also be rationalised as a prudent hedging of bets.

Can NOD provide an effective defence? The question is important because the answer to it is directly relevant to the likelihood of the strategy being adopted and to the degree of deterrence that could be expected to inhere in the strategy. The answer, however, has to be hedged with qualifications. The efficacy of NOD is heavily context-dependent. Issues of political culture, geography, and level of threat are all relevant to deciding whether a particular strategy is optimal. Some countries, such as Switzerland, seem ideally suited to implement NOD; others, such as Israel and Singapore, seem to be less well-placed to employ the strategy. And, contrary to the NOD ‘line’, it is certainly not self-evident that large offensive weapons systems (such as heavy bomber squadrons, armoured divisions, and aircraft carriers) are dinosaurs. Proponents of NOD might not like these things, and they might believe them to be destabilising, but they have not disproved their strategic viability.


\textsuperscript{37} Jervis, \textit{Perception and Misperception in International Politics}, pp. 58–113.

\textsuperscript{38} Quite often deterrence is not needed. (For example, Sweden does not need to deter Norway, South Africa does not require a deterrent against Namibia, and so on.) I would argue that there is no longer a deterrent relationship between Moscow and Washington—to claim differently would be to suggest that if the US were to disarm next week it would be attacked by Russia soon after (and vice versa), a suggestion I find somewhat unconvincing.
Earlier it was suggested that the case for NOD as a superior strategy for war fighting was based on two propositions: that defence is the stronger form of war and that trends in technology favour the defence. These propositions carry a degree of plausibility and may, in some circumstances, be true. But neither are iron laws of strategy. There is considerable counter-evidence available to sceptics. For example: the defeat of the defence-minded (but very large) French army by German blitzkrieg in 1940; the success of the Israeli military's strategy of 'offensive-defence' in 1967 and 1973; and the destruction of Iraqi defence positions by the aggressively conducted American-led offensive of 1991.

Unless a clearer case for the defensive and deterrent efficacy of NOD can be established, its contribution to the amelioration of the security dilemma appears likely to remain essentially academic and secondary.

**Perceptual approaches to strategic reform**

It seems that, for the most part, politicians and officials are unlikely to find NOD appealing. By contrast, ideas of non-threatening defence (NTD) have a greater constituency: they can be based on a conceptual framework which is more permissive and flexible; they permit a large degree of compromise between traditional and novel strategic postures; there is relatively little pressure for the wholesale revision of force structures and defence budgets. Compared to NOD, NTD does not demand a radical degree of strategic self-denial. What it does require, however, is a serious attempt to dampen-down the security dilemma and defuse the potentially inflammatory impact of worst-case analysis.

Furthermore, this sort of approach cannot be dismissed as Utopian. Indeed, to some extent non-threatening defence is already seen in many quarters as conventional wisdom. (Here the cooperative strategic measures associated with the ending of the Cold War can be viewed as pivotal. The positive use of arms control, confidence building measures, and the radical reshaping of East–West strategic perceptions provided even hard-headed strategic planners with a very significant learning experience.)

**A framework for policy development and assessment**

What follows is a set of criteria for judging the degree to which defence planning meets the requirements of an idealised NTD posture. This is a set of reference points, not a prediction of strategic developments. The task here is to avoid

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39 In this rebuilding of the East–West frame of reference the place of military power was radically altered. It was not simply Moscow's surrender, or reductions in firepower, which moved events; it was a readiness to rethink the strategic mindset. Many of the so-called givens of strategic analysis were either brushed aside or made to look anachronistic and silly.
predicting or proposing abstract blueprints for defence planning (which will probably be ignored anyway) while not retreating to an ‘anything goes’ approach. In practice, this is quite simple to do; it is largely a matter of taking concepts like cooperative security and common interests seriously—rather than using them as fig-leaves for ‘business as usual’. Seen in this light the following six criteria stand out as more-or-less obvious (although not necessarily easy to achieve).

(i) **Responsible nuclear custodianship.** The sort of custodianship I have in mind here has five aspects to it. First, the example set by the United States and Russia in deciding not to aim their nuclear missiles at each other is one that should be followed by all nuclear states. Such a move might not be particularly significant in technical or strategic terms (targets can be assigned to missiles quite quickly), but it is important on the level of perceptions. Second, states should de-emphasise the role of nuclear weapons. Third, controls over the deployment and potential use of weapons should be maximised. The employment of safeguard doctrines/technology should be stressed, possibly in an internationally cooperative fashion. Fourth, we should move towards the internationalisation of nuclear decision making. This would not multiply the number of ‘fingers on the button’, rather it would increase the number of ‘feet on the brakes’. Fifth, to perpetuate the legitimacy of the non-proliferation norm (and to meet their commitments to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty), nuclear weapons states should keep open the idea that complete nuclear disarmament is both desirable and achievable at some time in the future.

(ii) **Non-threatening deployments of conventional military forces.** Deciding whether particular deployments are threatening is likely to be highly dependent on assessments of both diplomatic context and military capabilities. In some circumstances it may be fairly easy to determine whether a particular deployment is motivated by an effort to intimidate and threaten. For example, it would have been very hard, and quite perverse, to have viewed the 1990 Iraqi military build-up outside Kuwait as defensive. In other instances deployments may be open to different, perhaps conflicting, plausible interpretations. In yet another set of cases a move to forward deploy offensive military capabilities (which would go completely against the grain of structural definitions of NOD) may be both eminently sensible from a

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40 The term ‘responsible nuclear custodianship’ comes from Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Nuclear War* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1993), especially chapter eight, pp. 255–86. The meaning I give the term is, however, not identical to that given by Blair; in this study I employ a broader sense of the notion. This broader notion overlaps with some of the points to be found in, for example, the following: Barry Blechman and Cathleen Fisher, ‘Phase Out the Bomb’, *Foreign Policy*, 97 (Winter 1994–95), pp. 79–95; Michael MacGwire, ‘Is There a Future for Nuclear Weapons?’ *International Affairs*, 70:2 (April 1994), pp. 211–28.

41 One step here could be the modification of international law. For example, the first-use of nuclear weapons should be explicitly outlawed. At a deeper level, particular nuclear materials might be handed over to the partial custody of, for example, an expanded International Atomic Energy Agency.
genuinely defence point of view and clearly non-provocative. The key determinant here, of course, would be political circumstances.

(iii) **Making offensive military operations conditional on UN approval.** The use of offensive military power in foreign interventions is intrinsically difficult to rationalise in terms of any tight definition of NTD. This is partly because of the obvious fact that any such operation is bound to seem provocative to somebody. Certainly, unilateral interventions of the sort conducted by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1980, or the United States in Panama in 1989, cannot be reconciled with any worthwhile notion of NTD. These sorts of operations have all the hallmarks of traditional Great Power bullying. Yet, there may be occasions when intervention is legitimate—indeed, at times it may appear to be a necessary condition for the development of a more peaceful world. For example, intervention may be called for in the name of humanitarian relief or collective security. In these cases the best way forward would be to make intervention conditional on UN approval.

(iv) **The fostering of confidence and security-building measures (CSBM) regimes.** A defence posture is only non-threatening if it is seen that way. It follows that defence planners need to take special care to assess how their plans are being perceived by neighbours. This does not mean that external perceptions should necessarily determine policy. There is no requirement here for a pacific state to have its defence policy determined by bellicose neighbours. Nevertheless, the idea of NTD does call for efforts to evaluate and be sensitive to external interpretations of defence planning. This would help decision makers provide appropriate reassurance to regional neighbours and reduce mutual reliance on worst-case analysis. A common theme here is likely to be transparency.

(v) **Enhancing transparency.** Defence policies attuned to NTD would be relatively open. This transparency can have many facets. It could include such things as periodic supervised inspections of naval and air bases, the promotion of dialogue, and the publication of selected defence documents.

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42 A possible instance of this might be Canberra’s decision to deploy F–18s to the north of Australia. Seen in the abstract this might be interpreted as highly threatening to Indonesia; seen in terms of the evolution of Australian defence policy, and given the direction of Australian foreign policy, the move can be plausibly presented as a sensible and non-threatening deployment.

43 Questions of precedent will probably be quite important in framing the interpretation of particular deployments. Does the deployment represent a continuation of the status quo? Or is it an incremental shift in capabilities—if so just how consequential is this shift likely to be if it is continued? Does it reflect a sharp break in past practice? Is the deployment part of an ‘action–reaction’ phenomenon? Is the surrounding political atmosphere ominous? Another factor to consider here is the degree to which the particular deployment reflects purely national purposes as opposed to (say) UN arrangements and concerns.

(vi) Sensitivity to regional factors. Perceptual measures can only be operationalised if they are made relevant to context. In practice, this context is likely to be dominated by regional geographical, historical, cultural and political factors. For most states regional circumstances will shape whether military planning is deemed threatening.

An important aim of these measures would be to take strategic assessments further beyond ‘bean-counting’ and closer towards the investigation of context and intent.

At this stage a brief point ought to made about the notion of ‘strategic culture’. Advocacy of NTD is, after all, a call for change in the way military power is viewed; it is not simply about tinkering with defence plans. Strategic culture consists of the ideas and beliefs that shape official thinking about military power. For NTD to take hold, it will be necessary to encourage a culture which tempers traditional military thinking with the demands of an unevenly interdependent world in which offensive war has been largely delegitimised. Ultimately, perhaps, this sort of shift in thinking will have to take root in the particular domestic socio-political context of different states. Among other things, this suggests that we should expect a good deal of variation in both the degree of acceptability of NTD thinking and the sort of NTD postures likely to emerge. Interacting with this domestic, ‘organic’ factor is the role of international regimes—dealing with, for example, arms control. Regimes obviously have a place in shaping the context for defence decision making as well as moulding perceptions of the role of military power.

**Strategic reform and the security dilemma**

*Radical structural reform as politically naive*

The chances of NOD being adopted generally are extremely poor. Discussing the logic of NOD, therefore, is almost like counting the number of angels on a pin-head. The reasons for the poor prospects for NOD are as follows: the apparently inherent difficulty of achieving a structural incapacity for attack; the general scepticism about the claims made for the efficacy of the strategy; and the probable reluctance of many governments to commit themselves to the idea. This last point seems especially true of those states which pose the greatest threat to international security.

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46 This difficulty is often directly related to geopolitical circumstances. For example, efforts by regional states to defend maritime territorial claims in East Asia are difficult to distinguish from efforts to establish or reinforce offensive capabilities.
States committed to maintaining aspects of the international status quo (such as the United States, United Kingdom and France—and perhaps increasingly Japan and Germany) also seem rather unlikely to adopt NOD. There are three reasons for this. First, these states will continue to reserve the right to unilaterally use power projection to advance national interests. Second, these states will probably continue to see a responsibility to enhance international stability through collective military measures; these measures will no doubt continue to include some degree of power projection. Third, bureaucratic and conceptual inertia will take its toll of any effort to introduce a radical change of strategic direction in states with a tradition of strong, outwardly oriented, armed forces. For many countries, especially the US, the adoption of NOD would require an extraordinary degree of strategic (and geopolitical) self-denial, as well as enormous efforts at military restructuring. In addition, the fostering of NOD overseas would, if it were to achieve any credibility, require the radical redirecting and curtailing of large sections of the international arms trade. Both measures would require enormous changes in the domestic political and bureaucratic power structure in Washington and beyond. Such changes seem unlikely in the foreseeable future.47

Similarly, the signs are that regional NOD regimes may be very hard to achieve where they are most needed. In a region like the Middle East a NOD regime would require the complete transformation of Israeli air and armoured forces (as well as the verifiable elimination of its nuclear weapons). Similar demands would fall on some Arab states such as Syria. It is difficult to see how NOD can be fully operationalised in 'hard cases' like the Middle East and South Asia without a sea change in the political climate—at all levels of society. In the meantime, it seems far more likely that governments in these regions who wish to pursue the relative demilitarisation of their diplomacy will attempt to opt for comparatively permissive notions of NTD.

In addition to all of this, there is an additional domestic political factor to consider. For most communities deterrence of attack is accorded a higher priority than planning to defeat invasion. Threatening to harm an attacker can be made to seem more deterrence-oriented, and more politically palatable, than, say, laying minefields around one's own towns. In short, turning the country to be defended into a potential battlefield is likely to win less votes than threatening to strike hard at any attacker's home base.

The prospects for non-threatening defence

Few, if any, governments would argue against the general notion of non-threatening defence. Also, the prospects for the further spread and development of

47 And, in the unlikely event of such a US conversion, the spectre of destabilising adjustment will be raised in places like Korea.
NTD-like policies appear to be fair. Four reasons stand out here. First, there seems to be a near universal acceptance of the idea that war between the major industrial powers is obsolete and virtually unthinkable. Second, it is said that decreasing salience is being attached to ideological differences. These two factors suggest considerable scope for states to build on areas of common ground in the security sphere. Third, consensus is relatively easy to achieve when the issue at hand—such as NTD—is defined elastically. Fourth, various regional CSBM and security dialogue initiatives have already been launched; their further development (which looks likely) would suggest that the constituency for NTD may be large and growing.48

Some significant qualifications need to be made here, however. There are, obviously, considerable (probably insurmountable) obstacles to the universal acceptance of a uniform model of NTD. It is clear that not everyone means the same thing when they use rhetoric which implies approval of non-threatening strategic postures. For example, none of the nuclear weapons states has yet endorsed the range of policies which fall under the definition of responsible nuclear custodianship provided above. In addition, in some regions the constituency for NTD may be limited to relatively narrow sections of élite opinion; this could make progress in the area hostage to changes in public mood. Moreover, nearly all countries want to keep open the option of unilateral military intervention. It does not seem realistic to imagine the United States, Israel, India, or most other states, giving the United Nations a substantive veto over their use of offensive military force.

Even if every one accepted the logic and desirability of NTD, the effort to translate the idea into practice might not erase doubts in the minds of some governments as to what exactly is motivating the policies of its neighbours. There are bound to be disagreements about exactly how to interpret particular defence postures—especially in regions marked by political tension and a history of conflict. This is partly because the defence requirements of states will vary so much (as a consequence of, for example, geography). One state’s plausible defence requirements can all too easily remain another state’s defence problem. In other words, the security dilemma is likely to remain a factor in relations between some states.

The limits of non-threatening defence

NTD is clearly not a panacea. Uttering the mantra of NTD will not make strategic planners obsolete. This section will outline four additional caveats necessary to a balanced evaluation of the ideas presented earlier. First, NTD might take the heat out of a security dilemma, but this phenomenon is only one threat to security. Poland in 1939 would not have been made secure by adopting NTD; nor would any other efforts to tackle the security dilemma have been at all relevant to Warsaw. The Poles were not faced with a genuine security dilemma; there was no real doubt about whether German intentions were benign or aggressive. Poland had a relatively clear security problem which was not meaningfully exacerbated by any changes in Warsaw’s defence planning.

Second, the use of NTD rhetoric, and even the operationalisation of cooperative military planning, does not necessarily lift strategy out of the realm of power politics. For example, it is easy to imagine a scheme for a cooperative, ostensibly non-threatening, security regime in the Asia-Pacific region which is essentially driven by perceptions of a need to ‘contain’ China. This could look, to China, like a new gloss over old-fashioned balance of power machinations. In some circumstances we may get a form of tacit alliance conducted in the anodyne name of cooperative security. This does not necessarily mean the result will be bad policy, but it does mean we should be aware of how new concepts can be, or be seen to be, co-opted by old agendas. This phenomenon may be especially evident in efforts to steer the arms control agenda in directions which, among other things, preserve Western strategic advantages whilst attempting to hold back the strategic development of states deemed hostile to Western interests. One must always be aware of who, in particular cases, is defining just what ‘non-threatening’ amounts to.

Third (a related point), in practice it might be difficult to distinguish some ostensibly NTD postures from traditional approaches. Very few governments have ever described their defence planning as threatening in the past; this makes it easy to claim that identical or very similar policies can now be described as non-threatening. Lacking a clear, objective structural definition leaves the idea of NTD wide open to inadvertent or contrived conceptual muddle; this, in turn, suggests a ready recipe for political manipulation, not to mention hypocrisy.

Fourth, in terms of building confidence and enhancing reassurance, transparency can be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, there will be cases when it can help dispel some of the alarm fuelling worst-case analysis. On the other hand, transparency might have the effect of confirming, or even magnifying, worst-case analysis. For example, a transparency regime could bring to light the fact that a

particular neighbouring country had a much larger stock of anti-ship missiles than was previously thought to be the case. This might lead to increased uncertainty over the neighbour's motives and overwhelming political pressure to match the newly revealed capabilities. Hence pressure for an arms race. Sometimes ignorance, or at least lack of publicity, may help dampen such pressures. In addition, having all its military capabilities exposed to outside view might help undermine the reassurance provided to a government by orthodox defence planning. Defence policy is, after all, essentially about providing insurance in the event of failures of trust and diplomacy. The compromising of defence plans will not always benefit the cause of either reassurance or strategic stability. There are, therefore, limits to the degree of transparency that can or should be expected.\footnote{For example, it might well be considered grossly inappropriate to reveal the following sorts of information: intelligence sources; submarine patrol routes and missions; and the precise number of torpedoes and anti-aircraft missiles held at particular bases.}

**Whither the security dilemma?**

Defence measures aimed at ameliorating the security dilemma can be categorised according to type (for example, structural or perceptual) and according to likely relevance. For example: in what circumstances could we expect NOD to be (a) irrelevant, (b) dangerous, and (c) helpful? The answer to the first part of the question seems fairly obvious: adjustments to military planning will probably have an insignificant impact on political relations between members of a security community. Thus there seems little need for a CSBM or NOD regime between (say) Canada and the United States, or France and Britain. The answer to the second part of the question is less clear-cut. Movement towards NOD may be dangerous when it is seen by aggressive adversaries as either misconceived or as a sign of weakness. This may be so even if there is an objective condition of defence dominance. True, in such circumstances the defender should be able to resist invasion—but this is not the same as saying that the defender will be able to deter attack. Indeed, because (as discussed earlier) NOD and orthodox notions of deterrence rest on different logics, the defender's rejection of offensive capabilities might encourage aggression.

The real value of strategic reform aimed at the security dilemma probably lies in areas of international politics marked by neither security communities nor unqualified bellicosity. In other words, the biggest gain from change (in terms of mitigating the security dilemma) is likely to come from adjustments to the strategic planning of neighbours who are suspicious, and who believe war is a medium-to-long term possibility, but who are not rabidly hostile. Here the prospects for sensible management of the security dilemma may well be enhanced by the progressive intervention of external powers—in terms of facilitating dialogue and
arms control, for instance. Here novel forms of strategic thinking might interlock with unfolding notions of identity and interests in positive ways. To put this point slightly differently, the contingent nature of the security dilemma can, within limits, be exploited in ways which support the case for the partial demilitarisation of international relations. Although these limits will be largely determined by political factors, there may be cases where one could expect positive feedback, or spillover, from adjustments (structural and/or perceptual) to military planning.\textsuperscript{51}

**Conclusion**

Most accounts of the security dilemma suggest that it is simply a consequence of the anarchic nature of international politics. The stress has usually been on how states should better cope with this ‘natural’ feature of international life. This has led to an academic interest in the merits of de-emphasising offensive military capabilities. But this academic interest has generally not been translated into the world of operational planning. Very few governments have been interested in abandoning offensive capabilities.

But recently there has been real, if patchy, official interest in ways of packaging these capabilities so as to reduce the chances of inadvertently producing or exacerbating conflict. Some aspects of NTD are, therefore, being taken very seriously, at least on the level of declaratory policy. On the other hand, however, on the operational level, there is a risk that, in some cases, we may end up with little more than old wine in new bottles.

One way forward is to explore hybrid solutions which combine perceptual measures (along the lines of non-threatening defence) with incremental adjustments to force structures (a form of quasi non-offensive defence). This can be made to appeal to the gradualist instincts of officials: for example, structural adjustments could be made conditional on movement towards NTD. In addition, it offers a relatively clear sense of direction for reform. The aim would be to build stepping-stones towards the transformation of the strategic context for diplomacy. This would require a continuing inter-relationship between progressive approaches to strategic analysis and regime development.

This, in turn, means we should avoid working within the strait-jacket of narrow theories (such as Neo-Realism and its offshoots)\textsuperscript{52} which assume that the nature of world politics is obvious and fixed. Instead, closer attention ought to be

\textsuperscript{51} Two additional points need to be kept in mind here: the idea that bellicose states would implement strategic reform of the sort discussed in this paper is a contradiction in terms; and it is naive to think that adjustments in military planning can necessarily make enemies trust one another.

\textsuperscript{52} See note 19.
given to the complexities and flux of world politics. Although the structural aspects of international politics identified by Neo-Realism can significantly constrain policy choice, they do not define the full context for decision making, nor do they determine the substance or consequences of policy choices. This openness in the nature of international security offers significant scope for strategic innovation and reform. One reason for measured optimism when looking at the security dilemma is that this last point has already been accepted by more officials than many academics seem prepared to acknowledge. In this limited sense practice has already overtaken theory.
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