Psychology and Security: Enduring Questions, Different Answers

By Robert Jervis

I have been interested in politics, especially international politics, for as long as I can remember. The times in which I grew up and my personal surroundings were permeated by politics. I was born in 1940, so the end of World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War were topics of dinner-table conversation. The fact that my family was deeply interested in politics and, like most middle-class New Yorkers, quite liberal, ensured that what the political parties were doing would also receive a great deal of attention. Although I was not old enough to worry about the relationship between policy and scholarship, I was always gripped both by trying to figure out why events were unfolding as they were, and what the United States should do about them.

Indeed, the central IR question of my youth remains one of my primary concerns today, although my views about it are, I hope, more sophisticated and definitely less certain. In the late 1940s, the pressing US foreign policy issue was how to explain the increasing tensions between the United States and the USSR—what the United States should do to cope with what was generally perceived as threatening Soviet moves without getting into a war. The main debate was over whether an arms buildup and a stiff diplomatic position on the one hand, or conciliation on the other (or, of course, a well-designed combination), would achieve the best results. At the time, and for many years thereafter, I inclined toward the former position.

It may not have been a coincidence that my interest in the subject deepened during the Eisenhower years. In that period, Democrats criticized the administration for maladroit diplomacy, including missing opportunities for negotiation, as well as for neglecting American military strength. In retrospect, both claims are questionable, and I wonder if my budding foreign policy preferences were influenced by partisanship and my desire to join fellow Democrats in finding as many grounds as possible to criticize the Republicans.

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Over the subsequent years, I have given different answers to the question of whether the Cold War was motivated by each side’s drive for security in an anarchic and uncertain world (the security dilemma), but have been consistent in my belief that the question is important for both theory and policy—and not only in this case. Indeed, the fundamental question that I think we need to start with when analyzing or seeking prescriptions for most foreign policy disputes is whether the hostility is a reflection of underlying conflicts of interests, or whether it is at least in part a self-fulfilling prophecy, created by each side’s attempt to gain security. Of course, it is rarely as simple as one thing or another. States can have sharply conflicting goals but the reason may be precisely a search for security. Thus one of the main explanations for why Japan felt it needed to dominate Asia in the 1930s (the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” as the Japanese called it) was that Japanese leaders sought economic self-sufficiency, something that was needed to protect the country in what was seen as a likely future war with the West. In one way, this was a security dilemma: Japan needed control over the raw materials that were lacking in the island in order to feel secure, and the United States and Britain were loath to let Japan control China and Southeast Asia. But to say that this situation was a security dilemma implies that the combination of an understanding of the other side’s position and good statesmanship would have allowed the conflict to be avoided, or at least not to have led to war. Yet in this case, it is far from clear that this was true. Conceivably, the West could have convinced Japan that war was avoidable if Japan pursued what the West considered reasonable policies, making an acceptable arrangement possible. Even in retrospect, though, it is hard to think of ways in which Japan could have been made secure or its assumptions about likely future conflict could have been changed, rooted as they were in the previous history of Western domination of China and a refusal to treat Japan as an equal.

In similar fashion, it is quite possible that neither greater hostility nor greater conciliation on the part of the United States would have brought the Cold War to an end—a peaceful end—sooner. As long as the Soviet economy grew and its leaders had faith in its system, they would not have quietly accepted American domination even if the United States had followed a policy less yielding than the one it did. On the other hand, greater conciliation might have produced temporary détente, but the emphasis must be on temporary: I believe Soviet leaders would have sought to expand their influence as long as the United States retained its capitalist ideology, which was by definition hostile, and as long as they saw opportunities to hasten the trajectory of history toward its pre-determined end in the “triumph of communism.”
Nevertheless, it makes sense to ask how a conflict could be ameliorated or ended, and whether the two sides’ objectives really are irreconcilable. Of course, it can be more complicated than that, and goals may be reconcilable in theory, but not given the constraints of the real world; or they may be reconcilable at some points during a conflict, but not at others. These questions come up with regard to the pressing issues now facing the United States and its allies on the one hand, and Iran and North Korea on the other (not that the answers are necessarily the same in the two cases). Iran denies that it is seeking nuclear weapons, but for the purpose of this article, let us assume that it is. The question, then, is why these two countries want nuclear weapons: are they seeking to increase their regional influence (something the United States is pledged to resist) or are they largely driven by the desire for security, in significant measure, against perceived American threats (a goal the United States could accept)? Other motives are possible as well, most obviously domestic politics and the seeking of status and prestige. One can argue that looking at motives should be secondary because the United States’ concern is how the behavior of these countries will be affected by their gaining (or in the North Korean case, increasing) a nuclear stockpile. A focus on consequences rather than motives would point to the possibility that a country could be motivated by the desire to expand, but on gaining nuclear weapons could discover that it cannot behave differently, or even that it must be more cautious now that it is the potential target of a nuclear attack. Conversely, a country might initially seek only security, but once it has nuclear weapons, its ambitions might grow. But whether we try to assess motives or predict consequences, what is crucial here is whether a conflict can be ameliorated and the nuclear weapons program brought to an end by measures of conciliation, cooperation, and security guarantees. If so, sanctions and threats are likely to increase the other side’s drive to acquire nuclear weapons because they will be taken as indications that the United States is indeed a menace and must be deterred.

Barring a happy ending to the US interaction with Iran and North Korea, we are likely to debate the causes of the failure for years to come, just as we still debate not only the Cold War, but the origins of World War I. Part of the reason is that the nature of the interaction can change over time, most obviously as attempts to reach agreement fall apart, such as with North Korea. Here we clearly see how perceptual dynamics can compound the security dilemma, and perhaps put a solution beyond reach. The United States believes that North Korea reneged on its agreements of 1994 and 2005. There is much to this, but American officials do not appreciate the extent to which their country also reneged, especially on the 1994 bargain. In international as in individual behavior, actors want to think well of themselves, and they can rarely give an objective account of their own actions, particularly those that could be seen by others as harmful or indicating bad faith. Leaders might be better off if they were more cynical, which would enable them to see that despite good intentions, they, like all mortals, often behave badly.

This last point links to two others that extend beyond the security dilemma: emotion and ideology. Marc Trachtenberg explains that in the course of his study of history and international politics, he came to see that “the logic of a system based on
power, a system where emotion and ideology did not play a dominant role, accounted for a lot more than I had imagined.” My own studies have moved me in the opposite direction, although this is in part a function of our different starting points. In my early views, emotion and ideology counted for very little; I kept my focus on power and logic, as modified by the cognitive limits on human rationality. When I wrote Perception and Misperception in International Politics in 1976, I drew on the previous decade’s work in psychology, which, partly in reaction to the psychoanalytic approaches of the 1930s and 1940s, had banished emotions from human thought. I should have realized at the time that this was a blinkered view of life, but did not. As my thinking evolved, however, and the more I looked at the Cold War, the more I saw a large role for ideology. More importantly, I began to follow the trend in psychology in moving away from an exclusive focus on cognition. As later work in psychology remedied this deficiency, and I thought more about some of the processes I had observed, I saw a much larger role for emotions as well, especially the need for people to avoid confronting painful value trade-offs, something I had earlier attempted to shoehorn into purely cognitive terms.

In fact, it is often too painful for decision makers to fully confront the harm they have done to others, or the extent to which their behavior might convey untrustworthiness. So it is not surprising that each side attributes the breakdown of agreements to the other’s bad faith and misbehavior. This refusal to see oneself in a negative light is of a piece with the tendency to avoid sharp value trade-offs. Psychological comfort is gained at the cost of distorting reality.

The foreign policy errors that follow are legion. To take just one of the most recent and consequential examples, in 2002 and early 2003 members of the Bush Administration could not bring themselves to realize that the occupation of Iraq was likely to be long and costly because doing so would have brought home to them the obstacles in the way of the venture on which they were embarking. Feeling, as I believe they did, a high sense of threat—even if many of us disagreed—they brought their assessments of other factors such as the likely course and consequences of the occupation into line in order to gain psychological and political support for their position.

The role of emotions and resulting biases in perception contribute to the very different perspectives with which countries view the world and each other. Occasionally, international politics is described as similar to a game of chess. Yet there is much deception in international relations. Realizing this, others have employed the analogy of poker. But I think a much better analogy can be found in the Japanese short story and movie Rashomon, which vividly portrays scenes perceived very differently by the multiple participants in them. Likewise, international relations practitioners perceive few interactions in the same way as their counterparts. Furthermore, decision makers are slow to comprehend that others do not necessarily see the world and them as they do. The security dilemma can be explained in part by the fact that actors often live in very different perceptual worlds.

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This propensity extends beyond security, and indeed at its extreme can throw into doubt the fundamental notions about interaction that are the foundations for both deterrence theory and the security dilemma. Internally generated impulses can override external stimuli; internal preoccupations can drown out a concern for what others are saying and doing. This means that, as Marxists and others have observed, the deep roots of a state’s foreign policy can lie in its domestic economic, social, and political system. The desire of democratic leaders to gain and retain power can guide foreign policy; concentrated and well-organized interests can trump or constitute the national interest; struggle and compromises within the bureaucracy can shape the information and options displayed to leaders, and in parallel, guide the way a policy is implemented. The external world is glimpsed only dimly and in distorted form, and states may be reacting more to themselves than to others. Although deterrence theory and the security dilemma interpret arms competition differently, they both see states reacting to what others are building and doing. Indeed, states always justify their foreign policy in those terms. But this may be more of a rationalization—sometimes without leaders being aware that this is the case—and the driving forces may be lodged within the state’s own political economy.

Political scientists and policy makers on the one hand and historians on the other seem to have developed different perspectives on this point. Retrospective accounts by the former, although not denying the importance of the external world in determining a state’s foreign policy, stress the power of domestic pressures and the complexities of hammering out policies in the bureaucracy. Indeed, it is surely a truism that the US government spends at least as much time negotiating with itself as it does negotiating with other countries—and the domestic struggles seem even more bitter. These accounts by political scientists and the participants themselves—without denying all role for international interactions—nevertheless imply that they are almost always muddled and muddled. By contrast, in recent years many historians have argued against the older tendency to write national histories of foreign policies, opting instead for multi-archival research and transnational histories. These perspectives are of great value for focusing on interactions across borders, but in their quest to avoid national parochialisms may miss the extent to which countries and policies are parochial.

Motivated biases and domestic sources of foreign policy combine so that a leader’s need to absolve his or her policies and country from responsibility for a course of action that could potentially go wrong can lead to the belief that other states will not be influenced by that action. Thus, returning to an aspect of the security dilemma, leaders compelled to increase their country’s arms will often believe that other countries will not feel threatened by this because the state’s benign intentions are clear beyond doubt. The responsibility for any arms race, therefore, will lie in the other state’s misperceptions. Similarly, those who urge a belligerent policy will often respond to the argument that this might lead to war by claiming that such an outcome will occur only if the other state wants it, and that if the other state is indeed bent on asserting its position by force of arms, conciliation cannot avert a conflict anyway. If this analysis is correct—and sometimes it is, as with Hitler—then the internally generated impulses on the opposing side are too deep and powerful to be deflected and therefore a belligerent
policy may be the right one. But the fact that this argument has often been used as a justification for foreign policy should make us suspicious.

As this discussion implies, it is hard for political scientists to know when to take decision makers’ beliefs and claims at face value. On the one hand, it is too easy—and condescending—for us to use hindsight to assert that we can readily penetrate decision makers’ political facades in order to understand their true motives. On the other hand, professed beliefs often are rationalizations to serve political and psychological ends.

Professed beliefs can also be the result of an inability to fully think through an ambiguous and complex situation, and to find a good way to reach foreign policy goals. Historians may be more sensitive to this than political scientists, since they are trained to unravel the odd ways in which events unfold and to expect historical ironies. Let us take some examples from the Nixon administration’s foreign policy—not to imply that he and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were particularly blind, but, to the contrary, to argue that even people with such skills and experience often find that their policies work themselves out in surprising ways.

From the start, Nixon and Kissinger understood four truths: the Johnson administration’s arms control plans could lead to a prohibition of missile defense systems without reining in weapons that could attack strategic nuclear forces, a combination that would leave the United States—and perhaps the USSR—vulnerable to a first strike; the United States had major advantages in technology, and controls here probably were not in the American interest as well as being very difficult to implement; there were links between arms control negotiations and the general status of Soviet-American relations; and the rigid but porous nature of the American bureaucracy required foreign policy to be led from the White House, with much of it kept secret from the government as well as the public. These understandings produced dramatic foreign policy successes, but in some cases took the country toward outcomes that Nixon and Kissinger had feared, and in other cases produced desired results but through unanticipated channels.

Nevertheless, the Nixon administration ended up following much of the arms control path of the Johnson administration before it, agreeing to ban effective missile defense while leaving unrestrained the ability to attack strategic forces. The result would have been American vulnerability had the administration’s pessimistic assessments of Soviet capabilities and intentions been accurate. They were not, however. The administration was then saved from its worst nightmare not by intelligent policies, but by the fact that it had misjudged the adversary. Part of the problem stemmed from excessive secrecy and centralization. In his last-minute negotiations at the Moscow summit, Kissinger agreed to what he thought was a minimal expansion of the size of Soviet missile silos without understanding that this would in fact permit a new generation of much more deadly missiles, something the experts on the SALT delegation would have told him had he been willing to keep them informed.

The other major irony here was that while Nixon and Kissinger were correct about the linkages among various disparate issues in Soviet-American relations, they got the main factor wrong. They believed that arms control was more important to
the USSR than it was to the United States, and that the administration could therefore demand certain behavior from the USSR in other areas as the price for an arms control agreement. But as it turned out, the Soviets did not cooperate, especially in putting pressure on North Vietnam as the United States wanted, and in the end it was the SALT negotiations that improved Soviet-American relations and allowed for progress elsewhere, most notably over Berlin.

US policy regarding the division of Germany showed a similar pattern of misreading the situation. At the start of the administration, Nixon and Kissinger were confronted with troubling frictions generated by the West Germans’ desire to solidify their political connection to West Berlin. Without great significance in itself, this conflict was at best a distraction from Nixon’s broader foreign policy agenda, and at worst could lead to a crisis with the Soviet Union. Nixon and Kissinger also worried that West German Chancellor Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik of seeking improved relations with the USSR and East Germany could increase East German leverage over West Germany and erode its ties to NATO. Both the desire to deal with the immediate issues at hand and the need to maintain some influence, if not control, over West German policy led Nixon and Kissinger to proceed with negotiations over Berlin and German borders. Their goals were to stall, limit possible damage, and prevent Brandt from becoming too independent. Much to their surprise, however, they found that far-reaching agreements were within reach. Working more closely with the West Germans than they ever believed possible, Nixon and Kissinger succeeded in ending the tensions which had previously made Berlin and Germany the obvious and perhaps the only way World War III might have started (it is now clear, I believe, that Khrushchev’s placing missiles in Cuba was largely motivated by his desire to put pressure on the United States over Berlin). Furthermore, the increased economic ties between West Germany and its neighbors to the east led not to the latter gaining leverage over the former, as Nixon and Kissinger had feared, but to the Eastern countries becoming so dependent on Western capital that they lost much of their freedom of action.

Vision is of course easier with hindsight, but I think it is also easier for those who lack responsibility for policy. Politically and psychologically, leaders cannot afford to look at all sides to a question as academics do, to contemplate all the ways in which their policies could fail or produce unintended consequences, or to feel the full pain of sacrificing some deeply held values in order to gain in other areas. Scholars look with approval upon leaders who are clear-sighted, but while such people may resemble the desired image we have of ourselves, they may not actually produce the best policies.