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Introduction: Revisiting the security dilemma through the lens of India–China relations

Rajesh Basrur, Anit Mukherjee , and T. V. Paul

ABSTRACT

This introduction explains the rationale for this special issue of Asian Security. It begins with a short discussion about the relevance and the utility of the term “security dilemma” in international relations. The concept, which emerged during the Cold War, has since been used extensively to describe India–China relations. This special issue attempts to add to our understanding of the India–China relationship as well as to contribute to enriching the theoretical literature in a number of ways. First, it represents the first detailed effort to present a set of analyses that encompasses theory, history, and the full spectrum of strategic issue areas to explain the dynamics of a key contemporary inter-state relationship involving China and India. Second, the analysis reveals the complexity of security dilemma politics by highlighting how states respond to their predicament in different ways. Third, this special issue draws attention to an area that has been largely neglected in the literature: the relationship between the security dilemma as a concept and domestic politics. Finally, a case can be made that a security dilemma-type response in a situation that does not demand it may actually create a dilemma where none existed before. These and other complexities are abundant in this collection of articles. The chapter concludes by summarizing the main arguments presented by the contributors to this special issue.

The term “security dilemma” captures a central feature of inter-state relations. In essence, it highlights the risk of war or intense rivalry between states that are essentially defensive: in the anarchic states system – where there is no regulator and hence mistrust is ubiquitous – a state’s efforts to strengthen its security tend to generate insecurity in others, which can lead to an action-reaction process of spiraling tensions and, in some instances, war.¹ The strategic interaction problem is that actions one considers as defensive in the area of arming are viewed as offensive by states most affected by them. A variety of approaches address this subject. The concept is used as both an explanation of state behavior and an outcome in world politics. Much of this literature was developed during the Cold War for analyzing the competitive relationship between the US and the USSR and the dynamics of their spiraling arms race. The security dilemma problem generates a number of unanswered puzzles. When does it occur? Why are all inter-state relationships not characterized by a security dilemma? Why do states in intense rivalries experience the highest level of security dilemma? More importantly, when does a security dilemma start and how does it develop from a nascent to a mature level? In addition, can we think of asymmetrical security dilemmas involving two unequal powers, as the impact is often felt more intensely by the weaker side? Can there be a region-specific security dilemma? Finally, is it useful to examine dyadic, triadic, and quadrilateral security dilemmas involving two, three, or four states and clusters within these relationships?

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The theoretical literature does not focus to any great degree on specific relationships in Asian strategic politics. But some effort has been devoted to investigating India–China relations from this perspective.² The latter has focused on two questions. First, is a security dilemma critical to understanding the relationship? Most analysts believe there is, though there are differences over assessment of its intensity. In a recent work, Frederic Grare has argued that “the most likely trigger for a maritime conflict between the two nations would result from a security dilemma arising from Chinese naval deployment in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal.”³ However, David Brewster (see footnote 2) disagrees with the assessment that there is a security dilemma between the two, although he restricts his analysis to the Indian Ocean. Second, is the security dilemma the same or similar in intensity for both countries? Most authors either assume it is or do not consider the point. But some say it is not. Sankhya Krishnan and Shashank Joshi argue that the dilemma is much stronger for India than for China. Weaker parties can also magnify security dilemma challenges, as Pakistan does with India. This asymmetry in security dilemmas is rarely captured in the literature.

This special issue attempts to add to our understanding of the India–China relationship as well as to contribute to enriching the theoretical literature in a number of ways. First, it represents the first detailed effort to present a set of analyses that encompasses theory, history, and the full spectrum of strategic issue areas to explain the dynamics of a key contemporary inter-state relationship involving China and India. Second, the analysis reveals the complexity of security dilemma politics by highlighting how states respond to their predicament in different ways. Given the constraints on its financial capacity, India has focused on a combination of limited internal and external balancing to augment its military, economic, and political position.⁴ The former includes the beefing up of its military capabilities and infrastructure development, the latter a series of strategic partnerships, chiefly with the United States and Japan. In contrast, China, lacking strong partners, has focused on internal balancing via a conventional buildup in the border regions and Tibet, and naval power projection to counter what it sees as the potential threat from India and its partners, particularly in the Indian Ocean region. It has additionally resorted to external balancing through its partnership with Pakistan, though this has limitations given the political uncertainties to which that country is perennially subject. Third, this special issue draws attention to an area that has been largely neglected in the literature: the relationship between the security dilemma as a concept and domestic politics. This opens up an area that, on the face of it, seriously undermines security dilemma-based theory; but it may as yet be premature to draw this conclusion. At the minimum, a pathway is opened up for future investigations that ought to deepen our understanding of a complex phenomenon. Finally, a case can be made that a security dilemma-type response in a situation that does not demand it may actually *create* a dilemma where none existed before. This shows that the relationship between securitization and security dilemma is yet to be fully understood. These and other complexities are abundant in this collection of articles.

Collin Koh examines the maritime strategies and capabilities of China and India in detail. In his view, the security dilemma at sea stems from a genuine conflict on their disputed land frontier. The inherently ambiguous character of the maritime domain makes the perceptions of each central to the threat it sees emanating from the other. A key finding is the asymmetrical nature of the two security dilemmas: as noted previously, states caught in a security dilemma may react very differently to their situation depending on their specific positions in the international system. The Indians have responded to the dilemma primarily by external balancing; the Chinese mainly by internal balancing. Overall, Koh’s analysis directs our attention to the complexity of the security dilemma as a concept and underscores that it is not a simple one involving a straightforward competitive spiral between adversaries.

Yogesh Joshi and Anit Mukherjee bring out another aspect of the security dilemma: that a state may respond to changes in its threat perception by means of a fundamental alteration of its military strategy. They begin by discussing the sources of change in the intensity of a security dilemma. These changes can be material (power distribution, the offense–defense balance and offense–defense differentiation) as well as ideational (motivations and perception). In the India–

China case, Indian policymakers have experienced an intensification of the dilemma arising from the enhancement of China's capability as well as perception of its intent. As a result, Indian strategy has undergone a fundamental shift from deterrence "by denial" to deterrence "by punishment." This is evident from its doctrinal reformulation and shifts in capabilities with respect to all its three military services: the army, the air force, and the navy. The article echoes Koh's view that the intensification of the security dilemma in one theatre of conflict (land) can lead to a response in another (sea).

Sinderpal Singh's article examines contemporary perceptions and the corresponding responses of Southeast Asian states vis-à-vis India–China maritime competition. Specifically, it explores the cases of Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These countries provide useful cross-comparisons as, bilaterally, all three states relate uniquely to China and the maritime disputes in the South China Sea on the basis of two structural conditions – their formal security relationship with the US and whether they are a claimant state in the South China Sea dispute. This illuminates the effect of the India–China security dynamic on third countries and in sub-regions. As Singh points out, all three states perceive, in varying degrees, the need for external balancing, to respond to the growth of Chinese power. While the US remains the primary security guarantor, these three states also view India–China competition as another site for various levels of external balancing against China.

Srinath Raghavan is skeptical of the utility of the security dilemma as an analytical tool for understanding the dynamics of India–China relations. His review of the strategic history of the relationship downplays the applicability of the concept. It argues, on the other hand, that at important junctures, both sides have preferred to negotiate or at least avoid confrontation. At other times, the rise or fall of tensions has been driven by the exigencies of domestic politics or by straightforward balance-of-power considerations. Raghavan holds that India and China have not been – and are not today – status quo states, but are expansion-oriented rising powers. His analysis leans toward the notion that the security dilemma applies only to security-seeking states and not to expanding or – to use Glaser's awkward term – "greedy" ones. However, Raghavan does not entirely reject the concept of security dilemma. He recognizes its potential to emerge as a significant factor in India–China interactions and argues that, while the relationship may not be driven by a security dilemma today, it could emerge and therefore policies typically designed to "dampen" a security dilemma would benefit the relationship. This article highlights the different views that exist on this subject and add to our understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon.

The four articles we have summarized here do not, strictly speaking, constitute a debate between those who see utility in the concept of the security dilemma and those who do not. The authors were not asked to enter into a debate; besides, their analyses are not focused uniformly on the same facets of strategic behavior. The divergence of opinion, however, does problematize a hitherto largely uncontested concept and compel us to think more carefully about it. The articles that do find it useful also bring out important nuances, for instance that the security dilemma (or indeed, the response to it) is not necessarily the same for the states experiencing it; and that a security dilemma may originate in one military domain and impact significantly on another. The article that is skeptical does not argue that the concept is wholly irrelevant but stresses that policy responses to a misperception that a security dilemma exists are still policy relevant: they might produce a security dilemma that does not yet exist. These contributions are thus a valuable addition to a relatively sparse literature on a long-standing concept, especially in terms of its application to the Indo-Pacific. They both help refine the concept and give us insights into the dynamics of a key strategic relationship of our times.

Notes

1. Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*

- 50, no. 1 (October 1997): 171–201; John Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214; Shiping Tang, “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Security Studies* 18 (2009): 587–623.
2. David Brewster, “Beyond the ‘String of Pearls’: Is There Really A Sino-Indian Security Dilemma in the Indian Ocean?” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 10, no. 2 (2014): 133–49; John W. Garver, “The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations,” *India Review* 1, no. 4 (2002): 1–38; Jonathan Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” *Journal of Security Studies* 32, no. 6 (2009): 811–40; Shashank Joshi, “China and India: Awkward Ascents,” *Orbis* 55, no. 4 (2011): 558–76; Sankhya Krishnan, *India’s Security Dilemma vis-à-vis China: A Case of Optimum or Sub-Optimum Restraint?* (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 2009); David Scott, “Sino-Indian Security Predicaments for the Twenty-First Century,” *Asian Security* 4, no. 3 (2008): 244–70. See also T.V. Paul, ed. *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalization Era* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018).
 3. Frédéric Gare, *India Turns East: International Engagement and U.S.-China Rivalry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 34.
 4. For India’s hard and soft balancing efforts, see T.V. Paul, *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 136–139.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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