



Determining De-Escalation: Effect of International Security Perceptions on the Probability of War



Victor Weifang Xu and Caroline Robbins

Department of Political Science, *Florida State University*, Tallahassee, FL

Abstract

Arguably one of the most vital studies within the realm of international affairs is the study of why states go to war. In efforts to preserve peace within the modern era, scholars have fiercely debated several theories of what causes war, desiring to better understand how to reduce the risk of war. Emerging from these studies are three competing hypotheses of the causes of war: the deterrence theory, the spiral model theory, and the steps-to-war theory. Through this study, we hope to find which of these theories is the most effective when explaining aggressive state behavior and public support for war. In order to test this, a survey experiment was developed based on a hypothetical conflict between mainland China and Taiwan where mainland Chinese respondents responded to their perceptions of threat within other states' behavior. These perceptions were measured in order to determine if military actions from other states [in particular the United States] affected their likelihood to support more hawkish measures in retaliation. In addressing these factors, we hoped to gain a better understanding of the role costly signals play in preventing or instigating conflict and thus reflecting back on which theory of the causes of war provides the most relevant explanation. From these results, we aim to encourage a development of policy which would be consistent with the prevailing theory to reduce the likelihood of global conflict.

Introduction

The study of the causes of war has been a practice among international relations scholars since the dawn of the discipline. Scholars hope to provide an accurate theory of what drives states to aggression in order to limit it and pursue an era of peace. Emerging after the Cold War era were three central theoretical explanations for the causes of war: deterrence theory, the spiral model, and the steps-to-war hypothesis. Each of these theories provides an explanation for the causal mechanisms of war. These models have been rigorously tested across decades of study, and the present research aims to find which is most effective for explaining the onset of war.

1. Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory was one of the first to emerge in the study of the Cold War and served as the central focus of many scholars of war. Deterrence theory argues that an increase in military capability or displays of resolve are the key factor in preventing war (Schelling, 1996). This is because these actions such as increasing arms expenditures, joining military alliances, and engaging in displays of military power are examples of "costly signals," or actions that clearly communicate a state's willingness and ability to go to war. As potential attackers see these signals, they are less likely to go to war with the state sending them because they understand the cost of war will likely be very high -and states usually do not want to engage in costly wars.

2. Spiral Model Theory

The spiral model of war developed in response to deterrence theory. The spiral model expands on the concept of security dilemma, wherein states will increase their military capabilities defensively and other states will perceive this action as an offensive measure, leading them to increase their own capabilities in response (Jervis, 1976). Building on this misperception, states will continue to view the actions of others as offensive and their own as a defensive response, resulting in the increase of capabilities "spiralling" out of control and into conflict as one state finally engages the other. Under this model, the theory is that as states increase their capabilities, it will not deter but rather increase the possibility of war due to state insecurity.

3. Steps-to-War Theory

The steps-to-war theory build upon the proposed relationship established in the spiral model theory. Through the studies of each of the escalating factors, scholars found that each variable played an additive role in increasing the level of conflict. Thus, as states took more of the "steps" in either sending the signals or cultivating their image, the possibility of war increased (Senese, Vasquez, 2005). The most important of these factors was if there was a territorial dispute present, and each subsequent step after -such as military alliance formation, previous conflict with the antagonistic states, and arms races- did not necessarily have to occur in a set order, but their presence increased the possibility with each one identified.

Methods

To better understand the potential causes for war, we wanted to test these hypotheses in the form of an assessment of public opinion. Given that the central driving mechanism behind support for war is perception, it is vital to understand the influence of each potential costly signal or "step" on its receiver. Our study examined the reaction of 1,500 mainland Chinese respondents to a hypothetical scenario where the US increased its involvement with Taiwan. They were asked to what degree they viewed the actions as aggressive, how much of a cost they believed each action held for the country sending the signal, and their willingness to support open conflict against that state in retaliation. The independent variable was the US military actions taken towards increasing involvement in Cross-Strait relations (alliance formation, arms sales, and joint military exercises). The dependent variable was then public support for military actions against Taiwan.

The goal in measuring these manipulations was to assess which causal theory provides the best explanation. If deterrence theory is the most accurate, the actions of the US would be seen by mainland China as demonstrations of US resolve in the Cross-Strait Conflict and decrease mainland Chinese public support for military action. If spiral model is accurate, there would be an increase in public support for war because the US's actions will be viewed as aggressive and result in a security dilemma spiral. If the steps-to-war theory is accurate, then there would be an increase in public support for war with each action the US takes because it will be perceived as aggressive.

H1: The US military intervention decreases mainland Chinese public support for military actions against Taiwan by increasing the perception US resolve for engaging militarily (Deterrence).

H2: The US military interventions increases mainland Chinese public support for military actions against Taiwan by increasing mainland Chinese hostility toward the US (Spiral Model).

H3: The US military interventions increases the mainland Chinese public support for military actions against Taiwan by increasing mainland Chinese perception of US aggression and increasing mainland Chinese hostility with each added action (Steps-to-War).

Security Dilemma Spiral

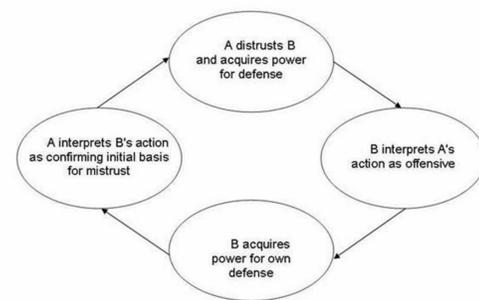


Figure obtained from "Outline Prisoners' Dilemma Security Dilemma Structural realism (Waltz)."

This model displays the Security Dilemma concept, which the Spiral Model theory is based on, illustrating the cyclical nature of perceptions of offensive and defensive power.

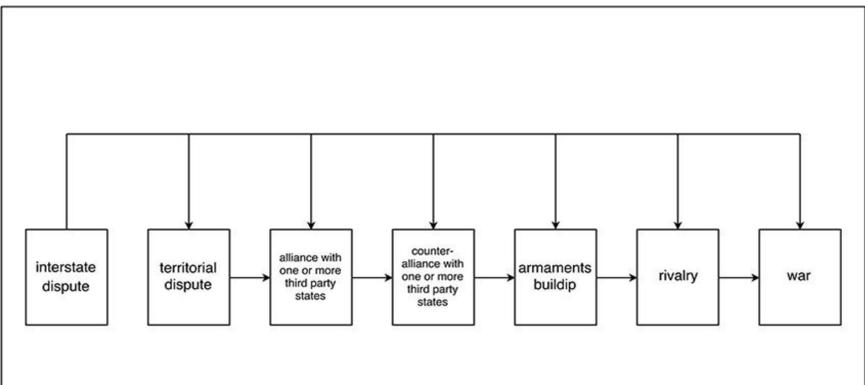


Figure obtained from James, P. (2017). Clarifying causal mechanisms in international relations. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

This model displays the Steps-to-War hypothesis, demonstrating how each action taken by the state builds the level of tension until there is an outbreak of conflict.

Results

The results of this study have yet to be finalized as the survey is still in development. Given the nature of the study, careful consideration must be paid to the wording of the vignettes and questions as war is a sensitive subject. Changing of even a few phrases can drastically influence how respondents view a scenario.

While the results are still in development, we expect public opinion to mirror the steps-to-war hypothesis more than any other explanation. This is due to previous studies which have shown the public tends to see military actions as threatening, and supports increasing their own state's military power in response in order to not appear weak. Additionally, several studies have shown the prevailing theory to be steps-to-war, as it provides a clearer structural framework of how conflict can escalate versus just a vague security dilemma. It acts as a more reliable explanation of the causal mechanisms of war and expands on how the events leading up to war tend to increase public perceptions of insecurity with each "step" taken. There is always the potential for a different outcome to arise, although it is unlikely based on prior literature.

Projected Conclusion: The steps-to-war model (H3) will be favored by the public, as they will be more likely to see the military actions of the US as a threat and want to increase their capabilities in similar ways to emphasize their desire for state security.

Finally, we hope that this study will provide a meaningful and intentional exploration into the potential causes of war. By understanding how wars start, better policy can be developed to prevent their onset in the first place. Providing insight into how the public views costly signals and "steps" of aggression can help states better communicate and cooperate with one another. They can better understand which frameworks are received as hostile and which are acknowledged as purely defensive. States can then communicate their intentions more clearly and avoid potential ambiguity that could spiral into a conflict neither party wants. Even if the implications are not as far reaching into policy as the researchers might hope, the study still provides necessary insight into the nature of international affairs and the role public opinion plays in its continued development.

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