

Jervis tries to explain how one state perceives the other state's intentions. He emphasizes the danger of misunderstandings and the consequent importance of states' making their intentions clear. He illustrates the debate of deterrence versus the spiral model. He also identifies causes and consequences of misperceptions of the other state's intentions.

Deterrence is a state's displaying the ability and willingness to wage war. Jervis argues that states often go to extremes because moderation and conciliation are apt to be taken for weakness. In this view, the world is tightly interconnected. What happens in an interaction influences other outcomes as each state scrutinizes the others' behavior for indications of interests, strengths, and weaknesses. This view often rests on the belief that the other side's aims are unlimited.

The spiral model has its roots in the anarchic state of international relations. There are four points to be made. First, statesmen realize that, even if others currently harbor no aggressive designs, there is nothing to guarantee that they will not later develop them. So we find that decision-makers, and especially military leaders, worry about the most implausible threats. Second, the lack of a sovereign in international politics permits wars to occur and makes security expensive. Most means of self-protection simultaneously menace others. Third, states that seek security may believe that the best, if not the only, route to the goal is to attack and expand. Fourth, the drive for security will produce aggressive actions if the state either requires a very high sense of security or feels menaced by the very presence of the other strong states. According to this model, when states seek the ability to defend themselves, they get too much and too little – too much because they gain the ability to carry out aggression; too little because others, being menaced, will increase their own arms and so reduce the first state's security. Others cannot infer from military forces and preparations whether the state is aggressive; therefore, states tend to assume the worst. Arms races are only the most obvious manifestation of this spiral.

The psychological dynamics also explains how spiral model works. The state always assumes that the arms of others indicate aggressive intentions, so an increase in other's military forces make the state doubly insecure. However, the state does not view itself in this way. A peaceful state knows that it will use its arms only to protect itself, not to harm others, and it assumes that other states are aware of this. Therefore, the inability to see the implications of its specific actions limits the state's appreciation of the degree to which its position and general power make it a potential menace. Also the state would interpret the other state's military expansion or hostility as aggressive, which would lead to expansion of conflicts beyond the necessary level indicated by an analysis of the objective situation. The psychological dynamics is different from the security dilemma argument. Security dilemma states that an increase in one state's security can make others less secure, not because of misperception or imagined hostility, but because of the anarchic context of international relations.

Operationalization and Empirical Evidence. The deterrence theorists worry that aggressors will underestimate the resolve of the defenders, whereas the spiral theorists believe that each side will overestimate the hostility of the other. Policies that flow from deterrence theory: development of potent and flexible armed forces; a willingness to fight for issues of low intrinsic value; avoidance of any appearances of weakness, spiral theorists would argue, would heighten tensions and create illusory incompatibility. On the other hand, the behavior advocated by the spiral theorists: attempts to reassure the other side of one's nonaggressiveness; the avoidance of provocations; the undertaking of unilateral initiatives, would, according to deterrence theory, be likely to lead an aggressor to doubt the state's willingness to resist.

Counterargument of the spiral model: the spiral model does not work in the case that statesmen look to the future, seek to manipulate the levels of tension and hostility in order to reach their goals, and frequently succeed.

Counterargument of the deterrence theory: hostility can be self-defeating, and conciliation does not always lead to further demands. Appeasement often works, even when there are major conflicts between the countries. For example, Britain made many concessions to the US at the turn of the century to cement American friendship.

Two kinds of misperceptions

I. A common misperception is to see the behavior of others as more centralized, planned, and coordinated than it is. A proposition derived from this argument is that actors will tend to perceive the behavior of subordinates and agents of the other side (e.g. ambassadors, low-level officials) as carrying out the other's official policy. Actors then underestimate the degree and frequency of violations of the spirit and letter of instructions. This leads to almost disastrous outcomes as raised in Jervis' story. Such misperceptions tend to occur if the two sides are in conflict. Part of the explanation is that actors who are cooperating usually have detailed information about each other.

The misperception about the other's unity has three consequences. First, taking the other side's behavior as the product of a centralized actor with integrated values, inferring the plan that generated this behavior, and projecting this pattern into the future will be misleading if the behavior was the result of shifting internal bargaining, ad hoc decisions, and uncoordinated actions. Second, the effectiveness of attempts to influence the other's policy will be reduced because the importance of internal conflict will be underestimated.

Third, illusory incompatibility is created because duplicity rather than confusion is perceived when the other's policy is inconsistent.

II. Another misconception is that actors exaggerate the degree to which they play a central role in others' policies. This leads to three propositions. First, when the other behaves in accord with the actor's desires, he will overestimate the degree to which his policies are responsible for the outcome. Second, when the situation is fluid, there is a less pronounced tendency for the actor to overestimate his potential influence. Third, when the other's behavior is undesired, the actor is likely to see it as derived from internal sources rather than as being as response to his own actions.

The conclusion of all these misperceptions is that awareness that these beliefs are frequently wrong should cause the decision-makers to hesitate before affirming them in any particular case. This is especially important because many of these misperceptions lead to an overestimation of the other side's hostility.