

EPIS **BASICS:**

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECURITY DILEMMA

In EPIS Basics, our authors explain basic knowledge of international foreign affairs and security policies. This encompasses basic theories, organisations and events. This series is presented in depth here in the magazine. You can also find other smaller contributions on our Instagram page

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signals tension in the East, as defence budgets in the Asia-Pacific region are rising to record levels. China's defence budget increased by 7.2% over 2024's budget, Japan's by 9.4%, and others following not far behind. Why does it look like states are preparing for war despite claims to seek peace? One explanation lies in the desire to deter threats and ensure national security - paradoxically fuelling insecurity. This is known as the "security dilemma".

How More Security Can Increase Insecurity

To understand the security dilemma first requires acknowledging anarchy in the international system. The international system, the space in which states interact with one another, is not governed by a higher power that can enforce its will. The system is characterized by state sovereignty, whereby states are free to act as they wish. As such, the international system is said to be anarchical in nature, where each state prioritises its own interests and security. In this system, it is up to the state to guarantee its security, meaning it will increase military capabilities as it sees necessary to protect itself and its citizens. Thus arises the security dilemma! A militarily weak state faces greater risk from opportunistic neighbors. To deter other states from attacking, a state may strengthen its military to become a more difficult target. Yet, a state's military buildup may be perceived as offensive preparation rather than defensive, thus incentivizing other states to increase their own military capabilities to deter stronger states.

What Is The Best Defence?

The security dilemma manifests itself in two ways: offensive and defensive buildup. States may increase their offensive military capabilities to deter others from attacking. A defining characteristic of war is reciprocity. If state A attacks state B, state A must concern itself with the potential retaliatory damage state B can inflict. As such, an increase in state B's offensive capabilities may serve as a deterrent against potential attack by state A. Offensive development can also signal escalation or the desire to use military capabilities aggressively in the future, exacerbating the security dilemma. Defensive buildup is also a manifestation of the security dilemma. If state A attacks state B, state A must concern itself with the feasibility of overcoming state B's defences. State B can develop its defences to make it more difficult and costly for an aggressor to succeed, increasing state B's security and solving its security dilemma. Defensive buildup does not necessarily signal aggressive intent, thus easing the security dilemma. However, both offensive and defensive buildup can exacerbate the security dilemma because they signal the desire to be prepared for conflict.

The Future of East-Asian Security

The security dilemma can partially explain defence budget increases in the APAC region, as states seek to deter others. Though paradoxical, increases in defence budgets signal a desire to guarantee territorial security in uncertain times. Even so, the security dilemma is only a piece of this very complex puzzle that goes beyond the region and extends into global security politics.

Further Reading Recommendation

Liff, A. P., & Ikenberry, J. (2014). Racing toward tragedy? China's rise, military competition in the Asia Pacific, and the security dilemma. *International Security*, 39(2), 52-91. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24480583>