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# Outline of a New Theory of Attribution in IR: Dimensions of Uncertainty and Their Cognitive Challenges

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## Introduction

Uncertainty, or incomplete information, is a fundamental fact that makes life interestingly frustrating and frustratingly interesting. Not surprisingly, uncertainty has occupied a central place in social sciences, including international politics.<sup>1</sup>

In international relations (IR), uncertainty is not just a theoretical jargon that lumps together our ignorance. Rather, uncertainty underpins a pressing and enduring challenge for statesmen and students of IR—the challenge of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 3; Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling Realisms', *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1997), pp. 445–477; James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1995), pp. 379–414; Andrew Kydd, 'Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other', *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1997), pp. 114–155; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); David M. Edelstein, 'Managing Uncertainty: Beliefs about Intentions and the Rise of Great Powers', *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2002), pp. 1–40; Robert Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem', *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2006), pp. 169–203; Brian C. Rathbun, 'Uncertain About Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2007), pp. 533–557; Shiping Tang, 'Fear in International Politics: Two Positions', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2008), pp. 451–470.

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understanding the (immediate and deeper) causes behind other states' behavior (and non-behavior). While statesmen tend to rely on some gut feeling to gauge the forces behind other states' moves, students of IR have tried to import the social psychology literature on attribution to build a framework for understanding other states' behavior. Unfortunately, the social psychology literature on attribution provides only limited mileages for addressing uncertainty in IR. As a result, existing discussion on attribution in IR suffers from some crippling deficiencies.

In this article, I seek to move IR's discussion on uncertainty over others' behavior forward by outlining a new theory of attribution for IR.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, I emphasize that there are several dimensions to this problem of uncertainty and each dimension poses a somewhat different challenge for our cognition. I also highlight that our psychology has predisposed us to commit important biases in perceiving these dimensions, almost unconsciously. Next, I underscore that these different dimensions interact with each other and thus constitute a system that exhibits system effects.<sup>3</sup> These system effects pose an even greater challenge for our cognition because our brain has not been wired to think systemically.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, I argue that these different dimensions and their interactions may pose different cognitive challenges in different—for international politics, conflictual, or cooperative—situations. Our lack of appreciation of these different and yet interacting dimensions and the challenges they posed individually and interactively has caused much confusion in existing IR literature.

Before I proceed further, however, several important caveats are in order. First, although the theory outlined here points to specific hypotheses that can be tested both experimentally and empirically, I can only provide a more systematic and rigorous test for the specific hypotheses empirically elsewhere. This article takes the first step of outlining the theory (summarized in Table 1), although it does present some evidences from both IR and social psychology, somewhat anecdotally.

Second, because we are talking about IR, I take in-group and out-group identities as given in the discussion below, assuming that individuals have internalized an in-group versus out-group identity that has been solidified

<sup>2</sup> By explicitly limiting the domain of the theory proposed here to IR, I am implying that our attribution operates differently in different domains (esp. survival versus mating). Of course, the most critical force that shapes this kind of domain-specificity has been social evolution. The differences in attribution (and other psychological traits) between the two sexes when it comes to mating have been extensively documented by adherents of Evolutionary Psychology (EP).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> A. K. Shah and D. M. Oppenheimer, 'Heuristics Made Easy: An Effort-Reduction Framework', *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 134, No. 2 (2008), pp. 207–222; Gerd Gigerenzer and Daniel G. Goldstein, 'Reasoning the Fast and Frugal Way: Models of Bounded Rationality', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (1996), pp. 650–669.

Table 1 Outline of a New Theory of Attribution in IR

Items	Situations		
	Conflictual relationships, with or without actual conflict at hand	Ambiguous relationships (can go either way)	Cooperative relationships/building cooperation
Capabilities	When we are much more powerful than the other side, we may underestimate the other side's capabilities. Otherwise (i.e., when we are roughly equal or less powerful than the other side), we tend to overestimate the other side's capabilities.		In general, we tend to underestimate others' capabilities to contribute to collective welfare
Resolve	Similar to our estimate of others' capabilities.	We tend to ignore this dimension when relationship is ambiguous.	We tend to underestimate others' resolve to stick with their end of the bargaining.
Interest	We tend to neglect, ignore, discount or de-legitimate others' interests.		
Intentions	We tend to exaggerate others' malign intentions but discount others' benign intentions.		
External environment	When others' behaviors are desirable, we tend to emphasize the external constrain they face: they have behaved well because they have to; When others' behaviors are undesirable, we tend to de-emphasize the external constrain they face: they have behaved badly because they are inherently bad.  Our general tendencies when coping with uncertainty facilitate conflict while hinder cooperation.		

during the course of social evolution after a long history of ‘us-versus-them’. Group identities, most prominently embodied in ethnocentrism, profoundly shape our perception, attitude, and behavior toward other individuals and groups, depending on whether they belong to our in-group or an out-group.<sup>5</sup>

Third, although I imply that insights from interpersonal interactions can be extrapolated somewhat into intergroup interactions, I am deeply aware of the interpersonal-intergroup discontinuity<sup>6</sup> and that there are distinct dissimilarities (and similarities) between perceiving individuals and perceiving

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Levine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behaviors* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972); Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Marilyn B. Brewer, ‘The Role of Ethnocentrism in Intergroup Conflict’, in S. Worchel and W. G. Austin, eds., *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986); J. C. Turner, M. A. Hogg, P. J. Oakes, S. D. Reicher and M. S. Wetherell, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Tim Wildschut and Chester A. Insko, ‘Explanations of Interindividual-Intergroup Discontinuity: A Review of the Evidence’, *European Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 18, No.1 (2007), pp. 175–211.

groups.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, we shall firmly reject a purely individualistic approach toward intergroup relations, often espoused by 'rational choice' theorists. I cite studies at the interpersonal level simply because *some* lessons from interpersonal level can be extrapolated to group level. Moreover, as a growing number of social psychologists have recognized—and I concur, the way forward is to move away from the dichotomy of person versus group and think that individuals make decisions as individuals within groups.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, although I focus on the cognitive challenges posed by uncertainty, I shall explicitly stress that other than psychological factors, there are other factors (e.g., political, budgetary, and strategic) that can cause our cognition to go astray, resulting in 'motivated biases'. These motivating factors, often by interacting with the psychological biases discussed here, add still another layer of challenges to our understanding others' behaviors. I focus only on the psychological challenges posed by uncertainty for the sake of manageability.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. After delineating the five principal dimensions of uncertainty over others' behavior, the next section argues that existing literature on attribution in IR and social psychology is inadequate for the task of understanding actors' behaviors. The third section underscores the universal challenges posed by these dimensions. The fourth section stresses the situational challenges posed by these dimensions—the profound asymmetry in explaining others' behavior between a conflictual situation and a cooperative situation. The fifth section provides evidences that we usually do not get things right when doing attribution, drawing from both psychology and IR literature. The sixth section explores the consequences of our failure to get things right. The seventh section draws theoretical implications. A brief conclusion follows.

## Uncertainty and the Inadequacy of Attribution Theory in IR

The principal dimensions of uncertainty can be first divided into two broader categories: internal and external.<sup>9</sup> There are four dimensions within the internal category: capability, intention, interest, and resolve. Capability is a state's overall war fighting capabilities in a conflictual relationship or a general conflict, or its immediate war fighting capabilities in a

<sup>7</sup> David L. Hamilton and Steven J. Sherman, 'Perceiving Persons and Groups', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1996), pp. 336–355; Robert P. Abelson, Nilanjana Dasgupta, Jaihyun Park and Mahzarin R. Banaji, 'Perceptions of the Collective Other', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1998), pp. 243–250.

<sup>8</sup> Ivan D. Steiner, 'Paradigms and Groups', in Leonard Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10 (San Diego: Academic Press, 1986), pp. 173–220.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the five principal dimensions underscored here, in IR there have been other notions that are related to uncertainty (e.g., reputation, credibility, trustworthiness). I refrain from discussing them here.

localized conflict. In cooperation, however, a state's capability is the amount of help it can offer (e.g., military, financial, medical). An actor's resolve is its determination to fulfill its commitments, either as threats in conflict or as contribution in cooperation. An actor's intentions are his 'preferences over strategies' for reaching his goals.<sup>10</sup> For discussion in IR, we generally differentiate intentions into two categories: benign or malignant. A state is malignant if it intentionally threatens others, and a state is benign if it does not.<sup>11</sup>

An actor's interest is its goals, whether immediate or long term. Interest is thus an actor's 'preference over outcomes'.<sup>12</sup> Because motive is 'an impulse that causes one to act in a particular manner', or 'an emotion, desire, physiological need, or similar impulse that acts as an incitement to action',<sup>13</sup> we often call an actor's immediate interests his motives or treat motives and interests as equivalent.<sup>14</sup> For structural IR theories, states pursue abstract goals ranging from security, power, satisfaction, prestige, etc.<sup>15</sup> In the real world, however, states pursue not only tangible goals such as territory, monetary gains, voting power (in international organizations), etc., but also intangible and elusive goals such as honor, prestige, reputation, and credibility, etc.

We generally label the external dimension of a state's behavior as its 'external environment' or 'strategic environment'. Under this label, we lump together many factors that are outside a state's boundary, and they may include a state's geographical environment, its relative position in a region or the whole international system, the presence or absence of allies, allies' strength and weakness, opponents' strength and weakness, etc. The overall nature of the international system (i.e., different anarchies) and major trends of international politics (e.g., globalization) constitute as critical dimensions of the external environment under which states operate.

Understanding the capabilities, interests (motives), intentions, resolves, and external environment behind others' behaviors is a process of

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 48–49; Robert Powell, 'Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate', *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1994), pp. 313–344.

<sup>11</sup> Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), chap. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Powell, 'Anarchy in International Relations Theory', pp. 313–344.

<sup>13</sup> *American Heritage Dictionary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 447; *Online Farlex Dictionary*, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/motive>.

<sup>14</sup> See Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models', *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1992), pp. 497–538; Evan Braden Montgomery, 'Breaking out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty', *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2006), pp. 151–185.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help', *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1994–95), pp. 50–90; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

attribution (and cognition). Unsurprisingly, IR theorists have been keen to import the social psychology literature on attribution and cognition to IR. The importation of attribution and cognition was first ably accomplished by Robert Jervis in one of his seminal works.<sup>16</sup>

The 1960s to 1980s was the golden age of attribution research in social psychology, producing some of the most prominent literature and labels such as the 'fundamental attribution error (FAE)'.<sup>17</sup> Much of IR theorists' importation of attribution was based on this earlier literature on attribution. Yet, as pointed out many social psychologists themselves,<sup>18</sup> this earlier literature on attribution suffers from some crippling conceptual errors and operational problems. Indeed, as Malle<sup>19</sup> incisively pointed out, much of the existing mainstream attribution literature does not even address the challenges of explaining behavior per se because it has conflated attribution (i.e., explaining behaviors as a specific type of social outcomes) with explaining social outcomes even though these two tasks have fundamental differences despite some seemingly similarities.<sup>20</sup> Worse, when it does address attribution, it has mostly taken attribution to be a task of explaining behavior with (internal/dispositional) traits or (external/situational) factors (see below).

More recently, Malle and his colleagues<sup>21</sup> have developed a new theory of attribution. Malle's new theory first divides behavior into two large categories: unintentional and intentional. For unintentional behaviors (e.g., instinctive behaviors), our explanation tends to be straightforward: We simply state the cause, and go no further. For intentional behaviors, our attribution

<sup>16</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; see also Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War*; Janice Gross Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat', *Political Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1988), pp. 245–271; Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> For good reviews, see Edward E. Jones and Richard E. Nisbett, 'The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behavior', in Edward Jones, et al., eds., *Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior* (Morristown: General Learning Press, 1972), pp. 79–94; Harold H. Kelley and John Michela, 'Attribution Theory and Research', *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 31 (1980), pp. 457–501; Daniel T. Gilbert and Patrick S. Malone, 'The Correspondence Bias', *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117, No. 1 (1995), pp. 21–38.

<sup>18</sup> See Daniel T. Gilbert and Patrick S. Malone, 'The Correspondence Bias', pp. 21–38; John Sabini, Michael Siepmann, and Julia Stein, 'Target Article: The Really Fundamental Attribution Error in Social Psychological Research', *Psychological Inquiry*, Vol. 12 (2001), pp. 1–15.

<sup>19</sup> Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 5–27.

<sup>20</sup> Hereafter, attribution denotes 'explaining behavior'.

<sup>21</sup> Bertram F. Malle, 'How People Explain Behavior: A New Theoretical Framework', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1999), pp. 23–48; Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction*; Bertram F. Malle, 'Attributions as Behavior Explanations: Toward a New Theory', in D. Chadee and J. Hunter, eds., *Current Themes and Perspectives in Social Psychology* (St. Augustine: The University of the West Indies, 2007), pp. 3–26.

falls into two modes: reason explanation and causal history of reason. The former can be understood to be 'shallow' attribution: we simply present *proxy* reason for others' behavior. The latter is the more sophisticated or 'deeper' attribution: we go further back and bring personal experience and cultural factors into the explanation.<sup>22</sup>

In IR, we are mostly concerned with intentional behavior simply because states do not act by instincts as individuals often do. Moreover, in IR, we are mostly engaged with both shallow and deep explanation of others' behavior. Thus, the more recent development in attribution theory in social psychology may hold more promises for students of IR. Yet, even with the more recent progresses,<sup>23</sup> existing literature on attribution in social psychology suffers from two key deficiencies, from IR's point of view, at the very least.<sup>24</sup>

First, the attribution literature in social psychology uses two overlapping dichotomies to denote the possible causes behind actors' behaviors, dispositional versus situational, internal (or personal) versus external.<sup>25</sup> Although many take internal equivalent to dispositional and external equivalent to situational,<sup>26</sup> these two dichotomies do not overlap with each other perfectly. For instance, a state may have a weak regime, and this is internal. Yet, this situation is situational not dispositional, in a strict sense. Indeed, although Jones and Davis<sup>27</sup> took intentions (motives/interests and intentions) to be dispositional, this cannot be true under most circumstances because as we all know, actors' motives/interests and intentions can change. Hence, not all internal are dispositional.

Meanwhile, a state's geographic environment is external, but this environment is close to be 'dispositional' in the age of territorial state. Hence, although perhaps most external cannot be 'dispositional', not all external is situational. The dichotomy of dispositional versus situational is thus essentially invalid even as a heuristic device when it comes to behavioral

<sup>22</sup> Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior*, chap. 4. Malle's theory actually identifies a third mode of explaining intentional behavior called 'enabling factor explanations' (pp. 109–111). From the perspectives of the theory advanced here, this 'enabling factor' mode is not an independent mode of attribution because all attributions of behavior assume some enabling factors behind an intentional behavior implicitly, if not explicitly. Moreover, Malle's theory, though very elaborate, is too much into linguistics and thus far removed from real-world IR situations. This again testifies that students of IR need to move beyond attribution theory from social psychology.

<sup>23</sup> See Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior*.

<sup>24</sup> There are other fundamental problems associated with the attribution literature than what students of IR have been most familiar with, but I can only address them elsewhere.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to these two dichotomies, there is also the dichotomy of stable vs. unstable introduced by Bernard Weiner. I ignore this dichotomy because it may not be very relevant for intergroup relations.

<sup>26</sup> See Glenn D. Reeder and Marilyn B. Brewer, 'A Schematic Model of Dispositional Attribution in Interpersonal Perception', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (1979), p. 61; Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics*.

<sup>27</sup> Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, 'From Acts to Dispositions: The Attribution Process in Person Perception', in L. Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 2 (San Diego: Academic Press, 1965), pp. 219–266.



attribution, and the dichotomy of internal versus external should be preferred.<sup>28</sup> After all, there are few things that are dispositional in strict terms: most things are situational.

Moreover, even if we adopt the dichotomy of internal versus external, the attribution literature in social psychology provides only limited mileages for understanding international politics. This is so because the dichotomy of internal versus external is still too crude for understanding actors' behaviors. Indeed, social psychologists often collapse motives (goals/interests) and intentions into intentions<sup>29</sup> and actors' capabilities, resolve, and external constraints into 'enabling factors'.<sup>30</sup> As students of IR, however, we have to divide 'internal' into four dimensions even if we have to lumps together many dimensions unsatisfactorily under the label 'external/strategic environment' simply because capabilities, intention, interest, and resolve are critical for understanding others' strategic behaviors.

Second and no less fundamentally, the literature on attribution in social psychology has very minimal role for group dynamics, largely due to the domination of individualism as a paradigm in social psychology.<sup>31</sup> Thus, although it is clear from the 'minimal group paradigm' that group dynamics tend to be very robust,<sup>32</sup> most attribution theorists tend to ignore the impact on attribution of group dynamics, with some of the latest work being no exception.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, attribution in IR is almost always under the spell of group dynamics. Indeed, social psychology itself has produced ample evidence that ethnocentrism interacts with attribution to exacerbate and reinforce attribution errors or biases, producing what Pettigrew called 'the ultimate attribution error',<sup>34</sup> often under minimal group presence.<sup>35</sup> In real-world international politics,

<sup>28</sup> Bertram F. Malle, 'How People Explain Behavior', pp. 23–48; John Sabini, Michael Siepmann, and Julia Stein, 'Target Article', pp. 1–15. In IR literature, Jervis (*Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, chap. 2) uses the dichotomy of internal versus external whereas Mercer uses the dichotomy of dispositional and situational.

<sup>29</sup> Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, 'From Acts to Dispositions', pp. 219–266.

<sup>30</sup> Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior*; Bertram F. Malle, 'Attributions as Behavior Explanations', pp. 3–26.

<sup>31</sup> Ivan D. Steiner, 'Paradigms and Groups', pp. 173–220.

<sup>32</sup> Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior', in W. Worchel and W. G. Austin, eds., *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), pp. 7–24.

<sup>33</sup> Bertram F. Malle, 'How People Explain Behavior', pp. 23–48; Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior*; Bertram F. Malle, 'Attributions as Behavior Explanations', pp. 3–26; John Sabini, Michael Siepmann, and Julia Stein, 'Target Article', pp. 1–15.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas F. Pettigrew, 'The Ultimate Attribution Error: Extending Allport's Cognitive Analysis of Prejudice', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1979), pp. 461–476; Miles Hewstone, 'The "Ultimate Attribution Error"? A Review of the Literature on Intergroup Causal Attribution', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1990), pp. 311–336.

<sup>35</sup> Because ethnocentrism is essentially egocentrism at the group level, everybody is ethnocentric (or nation state-centric): only the degree of our ethnocentrism varies.



one can only be more confident that ethnocentrism (as embodied in ethnocentrism and group identity) and attribution often go hand-in-hand.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is imperative for students of IR to reject a purely individualistic approach toward attribution and to understand attribution in IR in light of group dynamics, most prominently ethnocentrism.<sup>37</sup> As becomes clear immediately below, ethnocentrism pervasively and profoundly impacts our attribution regarding others' behaviors, and it is impossible to grasp attribution in IR without taking ethnocentrism into consideration.

Therefore, merely drawing from existing social psychology literature is not sufficient for understanding the complexity of international politics. IR scholars should move beyond what social psychology has to say about attribution, and this essay takes a step toward such a direction. What I have to say below is thus as much a contribution to the IR literature as a contribution to the social psychology literature.

## Universal Challenges for Our Cognition

The various dimensions of uncertainty pose important challenges for our cognition. These challenges can be understood to reside at three levels. The first two levels are universal; whereas the third is situational. This section discusses the universal challenges, leaving situations challenges to the next section.

### Universal Challenges I: Independent Challenges

Among the four internal dimensions of uncertainty, capability is perhaps the least problematic in terms of detection, for two interrelated reasons. First, although misjudgment about others' capability does occur (see below), capability can be more readily observed. Second, capability changes more slowly, say, compared to interests and intentions: an actor must build up his capability over time whereas he can change his interests and intentions overnight. This fact gives others more time to observe an actor's changing capabilities.

As a general rule, uncertainty about another actor's resolve generally weighs in only when we are already in a conflictual or cooperative situation with another actor: we usually do not consider others' resolve unless we want to do something against or with them. Resolve poses more difficulties

<sup>36</sup> Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics*, chap. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960). Indeed, the very first experiment that demonstrates FAE by Jones and Harris (Edward E. Jones and Victor A. Harris, 'The Attribution of Attitudes', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1967), pp. 1-24) contained a fairly evident group dynamics: subjects were to attribute the motives behind others' essays about Fidel Castro, shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis!

for our cognition than capability does, but probably less than intentions and interests do. Because resolve is often a function of capability (plus interest, intentions, and the external environment), resolve too cannot change that easily as interests and intentions can (see below). Resolve, however, should be able to change more easily than capability due to some other psychological factors (e.g., anger and hatred provoked by others' actions), as Lebow<sup>38</sup> has emphasized.

A malignant state does not really care about other states' intentions. For a benign state, however, uncertainty about others' intentions poses a problem from the very beginning whenever it seeks to forge a sound security strategy toward another state. For a benign state, if it mistakenly takes a malignant state to be a benign state, it risks of being taken advantage by the malignant state. In contrast, if a benign state mistakenly takes a benign state to be a malignant state, it may exacerbate the security dilemma between itself and the other benign state, eventually ending up in an unnecessary arms race and conflict.<sup>39</sup> More critically, reading others' intentions is a trickier business than gauging others' resolve: it requires the patience of signaling reassurance and reading others' responses to one's reassurance gestures.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, intentions can change faster than (and with) capability and resolve. As such, uncertainty over others' intentions poses a unique problem, and this explains the centrality of uncertainty over intentions in IR.<sup>41</sup>

Others' interest is perhaps the second least problematic in terms of detection: Most states take others' vital and core interests (e.g., territorial integrity) as self-evident. Yet, our gauging others' interests—especially beyond others' vital interest—is subject to a severe double standard.<sup>42</sup> Largely due to our ethnocentrism, we tend to legitimize, if not glorify, our interests and our pursuit of them while de-legitimizing others interests and their pursuit of them. Hence, we take our interest to be legitimate, restrained, and modest, but others' interests to be illegitimate, ambitious, and greedy. We also identify our own interests to be more critical, if not vital, to us than the

<sup>38</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, chap. 3; Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help'; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chaps. 2 and 3; Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, chap. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, chaps. 7 and 8; Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, chap. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Shiping Tang, 'Fear in International Politics: Two Positions', see also the discussion below.

<sup>42</sup> S. Oskamp, 'Attitudes toward U.S. and Russian Actions: a Double Standard', *Psychological Reports*, Vol. 16 (1965), pp. 43–46; Richard D. Ashmore, David Bird, Frances K. del Boca, and Robert C. Vanderet, 'An Experimental Investigation of the Double Standard in the Perception of International Affairs', *Political Behaviors*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1979), pp. 123–135; Ifat Maoz, Andrew Ward, Michael Katz, and Lee Ross, 'Reactive Devaluation of an 'Israeli' vs. 'Palestinian' Peace Proposal', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2002), pp. 515–546.

other side's interests to him. Consequently, we take our pursuit of our interests as civilized, status-quo oriented, justified, prudent, and benevolent, whereas others' pursuits of their interests as uncivilized, revisionist, unjustified, greedy, and aggressive.

In addition, we almost always take our own honor, prestige, reputation, and power as our legitimate interests, but rarely do we take others' honor, prestige, reputation, and power to be their legitimate interests. Moreover, while we tend to take our sunk cost (e.g., blood and treasure shed, reputation staked, honor engaged) as something to be recovered while any tiny gain that was just gained as possessions to be defended,<sup>43</sup> we rarely consider others' sunk cost and new gains as their newly gained interests to be defended. In short, there is a strong lack of empathy as a manifestation of ethnocentric bias among statesmen.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, when it comes to understanding others' interests, we suffer from a profound double-standard mentality. This double-standard also applies to both conflictual and cooperative situations, although much more robustly in the former.<sup>45</sup>

The external environment is immensely complex: even gauging our own external environment is a daunting challenge for our brain, not to mention gauging the external environment in which others operate. Worse yet, because our brain tends to operate in an effort-saving mode,<sup>46</sup> our brain tends to cope with this task in simplistic ways (see the discussion below).

## Universal Challenges II: Systemic and Dynamic Effects

The five dimensions of uncertainty do not operate independently and statically. Rather, they constantly interact with each other as a dynamic system: different dimensions interact with each other and change each other.

Change in capabilities often changes definition of interests: higher capabilities tend to lead to more expansive or ambitious definitions whereas lower capabilities the opposite. Put it differently, just as we tend to marginalize those things that we cannot cope with as Jervis<sup>47</sup> noted earlier, we tend to dwell on things that are within our reach (or we think they

<sup>43</sup> This dynamics is connected to the 'loss aversion' as captured by prospect/framing theory. See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk', *Econometrica*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1979), pp. 263–292. For a review of prospect/framing theory in IR, see Jack S. Levy, 'Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), pp. 87–112.

<sup>44</sup> Janice Gross Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', pp. 249–251, 253; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 309–314.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, this double-standard mentality is so powerful it also applies even to our allies ('they are still others!'), although to a less extent than to our (potential) opponents.

<sup>46</sup> A. K. Shah and D. M. Oppenheimer, 'Heuristics Made Easy', pp. 207–222.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 372–378.

are within our reach). This notion, long emphasized by realists, contains at least some dose of truth.

Changes in goals or interests often result in changes of preferences for strategies: in Machiavelli's words, 'ends justify means'. More expansive goals demand bolder and, often, more aggressive, strategies. Changes in intentions drive changes in capabilities, not just in total military power, but in the nature of military capabilities. Malignant intentions demand more offensive capabilities whereas benign intentions demand less: Germany under Hitler had consistently prioritized offensive military capabilities over defensive ones whereas Britain and France had more-or-less done the opposite.<sup>48</sup>

Intentions and resolve interact with each other too: what kind of strategies a state prefers depends on how willing it is to fight for some goals.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, resolve is a function of goals, capabilities, external environment, and intentions. When Hitler was relatively weak (around 1936), he was prepared to back down during the re-militarization of the Rhineland if Britain and France had stood firm. After 1938, however, Hitler became increasingly difficult to deter: he was willing to take much greater risk to achieve his evil design because he believed that he would have won. Moreover, his growing ambitions drove him to be more determined in pursuing them.

Meanwhile, all four internal dimensions interact with the external environment, together or independently. A state may have a more inflated definition of interest (or goals) when supported by its allies, and vice versa. Likewise, a state's (real or imagined) capability and thus its resolve in crisis will be bolstered by real or imagined support from its allies. The case of Austria-Hungary versus Serbia before World War I was a classic case: the *carte blanche* from Kaiser William II obviously made Austria-Hungary more resolute (and ambitious). During the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese's resolve to fight to the end would be hard to sustain if the Soviet Union and China did not support its cause.

When strategic opportunities (e.g., power vacuum) are deemed to be favorable, a previously benign state may be enticed to expand (hence, opportunistic expansion) thus becoming a malignant state.<sup>50</sup> And if its expansion

<sup>48</sup> Douglas Porch, 'Military 'Culture' and the Fall of France in 1940: A Review Essay', *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2000), pp. 157–180.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 48–49.

<sup>50</sup> It must be emphasized that opportunistic expansion cannot be 'automatic'. Moreover, an opportunistic expansionist state is still a malignant state, and to label these states as security-seeking states (which means benign state for many) as Glaser and Taliaferro have done is misleading. See Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models', pp. 497–538; Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help', *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1994–95), pp. 50–90; Jeffery W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2000–01), pp. 152–158.

happens to succeed, it will increase its capability and its increasing capability may come back to push it into a more expansive definition of its interest and reinforce its resolve to expand.

The relative distribution of power between us and other states constitutes not only part of the external environment for our and their behavior but also part of the (external) environment for states' attribution effort. Thus, when others are weaker than us, we believe that they have no intentions to cooperate: they cooperate merely because they have to, not because they are benign. When others are equal to or stronger than us, we believe that they have little interest to cooperate because they are malign or at least determined to squeeze us.

At the same time, a state's capabilities and intentions can change its external environment: a powerful state with malignant intentions can end up in having more opponents and/or only allies that bandwagon for profit or protection,<sup>51</sup> whereas a weak state with benign intentions is more likely to get more sympathetic allies, with many states with intermediate capabilities and ambiguous intentions laying between.

Another aspect of systemic effects is even more pressing: capability (as part of state's power) is an integral component of states' interests or goals. Almost every statesman takes power to be an (immediate) goal, and each believes that others will do the same. At the same time, as noted above, although we take both our own sunk cost and new gains as our 'acquired' interests, we do not take others' sunk cost and new gains as their 'acquired' interests. As such, we tend to ignore the impact of this interaction between power and interests.

Because the five dimensions interact with each other and thus constitute a system, their interactions generate systemic effects that cannot be gauged by adding them up: we have to gauge them with a systemic approach.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, because our brain tends to operate in an effort-saving mode, our brain tends to think non-systemically. This disinclination to think systemically is more than what has been captured under the rubrics of 'heuristics' or 'schematic thinking' in standard social psychology literature.<sup>53</sup> The combination of systemic effect generated by the five dimensions of uncertainty and our disinclination to think systemically poses a much greater challenge for our cognition than we have admitted so far.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bring the Revisionist State Back in', *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1994), pp. 72–107.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects*.

<sup>53</sup> Richard E. Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings in Social Judgement* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

## Asymmetrical Situational Challenges for Our Cognition: Conflictual versus Cooperative

Much of IR's understanding of attribution remains under the shadow of the widely known FAE, populated by social psychologists in the 1960s to 1970s.<sup>54</sup> FAE basically argues that we tend to project more dispositional properties into others' behaviors although others' behaviors have been driven by both dispositional and situational factors. Although in their major reformulation of Heider's<sup>55</sup> theses, Jones and Davis<sup>56</sup> mentioned that perceivers' attribution is heavily influenced by situations in which perceivers are in; this key insight has never been adequately developed.<sup>57</sup> Social psychologists have certainly emphasized whether a behavior is desirable and undesirable from the actor's and perceivers' point of view constitutes a key situational environment for the perceivers' attribution.<sup>58</sup> Yet, they have consistently neglected another key dimension: in real-life situations, whether the perceiver is in a (potential) conflictual or cooperative relationship or situation with the actor, in addition to whether the behavior in focus is desirable or undesirable for the actor and the perceiver, critically shapes our explanation of others' behavior.<sup>59</sup>

The new theory outlined here re-emphasizes that our reading into the relative weight of external constraints behind others' behaviors is heavily influenced by the situations in which we find we are in. More importantly, it stresses that for IR and our social life general, we are mostly concerned with

<sup>54</sup> Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, 'From Acts to Dispositions', pp. 219–266; Edward E. Jones and Richard E. Nisbett, 'The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behavior', pp. 79–94; Lee Ross, 'The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process', in L. Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, pp. 173–220; for a more recent discussion of this bias, see Daniel T. Gilbert and Patrick S. Malone, 'The Correspondence Bias', pp. 21–38.

<sup>55</sup> Fritz Heider, 'Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 51 (1944), pp. 358–374; Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1958).

<sup>56</sup> Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, 'From Acts to Dispositions', pp. 219–266.

<sup>57</sup> Indeed, in an important reformulation of the FAE, Ross (Lee Ross, 'The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings') noted that social psychologists too tend to underestimate the weight of situations in driving our behavior.

<sup>58</sup> Fritz Heider, 'Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 51 (1944), pp. 358–374; Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1958); Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, 'From Acts to Dispositions', pp. 219–266. Indeed, Fritz Heider explicitly noted that our needs drive our attribution and differentiated good behaviors vs. bad behaviors and good actors vs. bad actors. He also referred to Fauconnet's discussion on (assigning) responsibilities. This argument immediately points to an evolutionary explanation for our mental operational modes, although not in the more familiar Evolutionary Psychology type. See Fritz Heider, 'Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality', pp. 358–361.

<sup>59</sup> One of the reviewers suggests that the relationship problem is an identity problem (enemy vs. friend). I think this is only a matter of labeling. I leave the readers to decide which label to prefer.



whether a situation is conflictual or cooperative: getting such situations right is crucial for our survival and mating success.

At group level, we are foremost concerned with our group survival. This concern for group survival has biased our brain toward perceiving more danger rather than more security. As such, our cognition operates differently between a conflictual situation and a cooperative situation, often markedly so (see Table 1 for a summary). In other words, there is a marked asymmetry in the challenges posed by the various dimensions of uncertainty between a cooperative situation and a conflictual situation.<sup>60</sup>

Regarding others' interests and intentions, our cognition seems to operate roughly the same from a conflictual situation to a cooperative situation. As noted above, when it comes to others' interests, we tend to neglect, ignore, discount, or de-legitimate others' interests while doing exactly the opposite for our own interests.

Meanwhile, when it comes to intentions, we tend to overestimate others' malign intentions but discount others' benign intentions, regardless the situation. At the interpersonal and intergroup level, the most direct evidence indicating such an asymmetry comes from 'hostile/sinister attribution bias' in children and adults: We have a general tendency to attribute hostile/sinister intentions to others' hindering thus undesirable behaviors, even though those behaviors may be totally unintentional or at least their intentionality is ambiguous.<sup>61</sup>

At the intergroup level, 'sinister/hostile attribution bias' often operates in the form of 'reactive devaluation'. In negotiations, we tend to suffer from 'reactive devaluation' of others' conciliatory proposals. When their opponents did offer compromises and concessions, seasoned negotiators consistently devalue those compromises and concessions, judging them to be insufficient and mostly driven by situational factors (especially by negotiators' toughness) rather than by opponents' desire to compromise or

<sup>60</sup> The fact that our cognition operates asymmetrically has been firmly established in social psychology, often known as the asymmetry between 'false positive' and 'false negative'. A related phenomenon has been the well-established 'negativity bias' that negative experiences tend to stay with our memory longer and stronger than positive ones. For reviews, see Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs, 'Bad Is Stronger than Good', *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2001), pp. 323–370; Paul Rozin and Edward, B. Royzman, 'Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2001), pp. 296–320.

<sup>61</sup> Kenneth A. Dodge, Gregory S. Pettit, Cynthia L. McClaskey and Melissa M. Brown, *Social Competence in Children*, Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, Vol. 51 (1986), pp. 1–85; R. M. Kramer, 'Paranoid Cognition in Social Systems: Thinking and Acting in the Shadow of Doubt', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1998), pp. 251–275; R. M. Kramer and D. M. Messick, 'Getting by With a Little Help from Our Enemies: Collective Paranoia and its Rule in Intergroup Relations', in C. Sedikides, J. Schopler and C. A. Insko, eds., *Intergroup Cognition and Intergroup Behavior* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), pp. 233–255.

intentions to cooperate.<sup>62</sup> When a peace proposal that was actually proposed by Israelis was presented to Israeli Jews and pro-Israel Americans as a proposal from Palestinians, the proposal was viewed unfavorably (i.e., 'the proposal is biased in favor of Palestinians'). When the same proposal was presented to Israeli Jews and pro-Israel Americans as a proposal from Israelis, however, it was viewed as favorably and 'even-handed'.<sup>63</sup> Finally, from real-life cases of international politics, Jervis<sup>64</sup> and Larson<sup>65</sup> uncovered abundant evidences that in confrontational inter-state relationships, decision makers generally attribute the causes of desirable outcomes (e.g., compromise) to their own effort while the causes of undesirable outcomes to others' malign intentions.

In conflictual situations, we tend to overestimate others' capabilities to do harm, when others' capabilities are roughly the same as or higher than ours. Thus, Britain and France overestimated Hitler Germany's military capabilities,<sup>66</sup> even though (with hindsight) it was better for Britain and France to fight Hitler before 1938 rather than a year later when they did so only half-heartedly.<sup>67</sup> After the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, major European powers consistently overestimated French power although by then France had already begun its long relative decline versus Prussia that had increasingly come to shadow the European Continent.<sup>68</sup>

There are exceptions, of course. There may be two causes behind our underestimating others' capabilities (and therefore resolve). In some cases, the gap between the two sides' capabilities is so immense that it becomes easy for the superior side to be overconfident. The case of MacArthur in the Korean War, United States in Vietnam, and US invasion of Iraq in 2003 were cases of the kind of hubristic underestimation of others' capabilities (and therefore resolve). In other cases, those who underestimate opponents' capabilities (and resolve) are 'mutants': their egos (and ambitions) drive them to underestimate others' capabilities and become certain of a quick and decisive victory. In other words, many miscalculations are motivated

<sup>62</sup> Lee Ross and Robert Ward, 'Psychological Barriers to Dispute Resolutions', in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 27 (San Diego: Academic Press, 1995), pp. 255–304, esp. 275–8.

<sup>63</sup> Ifat Maoz, Andrew Ward, Michael Katz, and Lee Ross, 'Reactive Devaluation of an 'Israeli' vs. 'Palestinian' Peace Proposal', pp. 515–546.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 343–355.

<sup>65</sup> Deborah W. Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust: US-Soviet Relations during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Layne, 'Security Studies and the Use of History: Neville Chamberlain's Grand Strategy Revisited', *Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2008), pp. 397–437; Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, 'The Preventive War that Never Happened: Britain, France, and the Rise of Germany in the 1930s', *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2007), pp. 32–67.

<sup>67</sup> W. Murray and A. R. Millett, *A War To Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>68</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. xx–xxxiii.

biases.<sup>69</sup> Napoleon's invasion of Russia and Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union were cases of the second kind. Either way, as Blainey<sup>70</sup> had long noted, leaders' underestimation of opponents' capabilities (and therefore resolve) had often led to war. Of course, the two causes are not mutually exclusive and they can reinforce each other when both are present.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast, we tend to underestimate others' capabilities (and resolve) to help in cooperation regardless the relative distribution of power between us and others. Between two allies, both sides tend to doubt that the other side can contribute that much and worry that one has to do much of the heavy lifting by himself. This bias will be especially severe when the gap between the two sides' capabilities is not that large: each side worries that the other side may want to take a free ride.

As noted above, uncertainty about another state's resolve generally weighs in only when we are already in a conflictual or cooperative situation with another state. Similar to the logic of perceiving others' capabilities in a conflictual situation, we generally do not underestimate others' resolve in conflict when the capability of one's opponent is roughly equal to or more than one's own, even if the other side had backed down last time.<sup>72</sup> The United States did not underestimate Soviet's resolve to stand firm in various standoffs during the Cold War although the later had backed down in most crises between the two superpowers.<sup>73</sup>

In contrast, when the capability of one's opponent is much less than that of one's own, one is likely to underestimate the opponent's resolve. MacArthur underestimated China's resolve to intervene in the Korea War because he did not believe that China's military could possibly put up a fight with his superiorly equipped army. Similarly, Israel dismissed the possibility of an attack by Egypt in 1973 because it believed that Egypt would only attack if Egypt could attack Israeli airfield.<sup>74</sup> This explains why leaders who

<sup>69</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981); Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, pp. 97–100; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*.

<sup>70</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

<sup>71</sup> The 'Rubicon theory of war' operates on a different phase of crisis. After a leader made a decision toward war, he/she became more confident that his chosen path would lead to a positive outcome. See Dominic D.P. Johnson and Timothy A. Tierney, 'The Rubicon Theory of War: How the Path to Conflict Reaches the Point of No Return', *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), pp. 7–40. As such, he/she refuses to reconsider and lets his/her decisions take him/her into war. Quite evidently, I focus mostly on attribution (and deliberation) before a decision for war.

<sup>72</sup> Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics*; Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Shiping Tang, 'Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict', *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2005), pp. 34–62.

<sup>73</sup> Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>74</sup> Janice Gross Stein, 'Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence: the View from Cairo', in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 34–35; Janice Gross Stein, 'Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence: the View from

believe in the (rough) logic of rational deterrence theory tend to underestimate their opponents' resolve to initiate challenge, as Lebow and Stein<sup>75</sup> wittily have noted.

When seeking cooperation, uncertainty about others' resolve (i.e., their determination to fulfill their promises to cooperate) operates before the actual accord to cooperate can be struck, and this doubt of others' resolve to honor their side of the bargain is an important obstacle against cooperation, as Fearon<sup>76</sup> suggests. Within an alliance, each side worries that the other side may abandon the alliance when facing pressure or inducement from an adversary,<sup>77</sup> even though wedging via coercion rarely succeeds and even selective accommodation faces difficulties in real-world politics.<sup>78</sup>

When perceiving a potentially unfriendly/hostile signal in an already somewhat conflictual relationship, we tend to reduce the weight of the environment under which the other side made the move. In other words, when others' behaviors are undesirable, we tend to de-emphasize the external constraints they face: they have behaved badly because they are inherently bad. Most critically, we rarely consider the possibility that it is us that made them suspicious and thus they are now reacting to our previous not-so-friendly moves. The ignoring of this possibility is a major cause why states often cannot unwind the vicious dynamics of a spiraling security dilemma.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast, when perceiving a potential friendly signal from another state, we tend to exaggerate the external constraint under which it made the move. The other side made the conciliatory move because it had no other choice, given the external environment. In other words, when others' behaviors are desirable, we tend to emphasize the external constraints they face, especially if we can attribute the external constraints to our pressure: they have behaved nicely because we made them. Thus, during the ending days of the Cold War, most key US decision makers consistently believed that Gorbachev was compelled to give in by US pressure and that the possibility that Gorbachev was a real reformer was admitted only much later.<sup>80</sup> The phase of the Cold War after Khrushchev took power within the Soviet

Jerusalem', in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence*, pp. 60–88.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, esp. pp. 325–328.

<sup>76</sup> James D. Fearon, 'Bargaining, Enforcement, and International Cooperation', *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (1998), pp. 269–305.

<sup>77</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics', *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1984), pp. 461–495; see also Yoichi Funabashi, *Alliance Adrift* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999) for evidences.

<sup>78</sup> Timothy Crawford, 'Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2011), pp. 155–189.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy', pp. 497–538; Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, chap. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Deborah W. Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, chap. 8.

Union was at least partially driven by this dynamics: key US decision makers were not prepared to believe that Khrushchev might really want 'peaceful co-existence' with the United States and its allies, Soviet's communist ideology notwithstanding.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, these biases and errors noted just above have been so pervasive that we often fall into them when explaining others' behaviors, even with plenty of hindsight. When others' behaviors are desirable (from our own point of view), we attribute the major cause (as external causes) to ourselves and give little credit to others' internal drivers. When others' behaviors are undesirable (from our own point of view), we attribute the major cause to others' malign intentions and canny tactics (as internal causes). Thus, both Bitzinger<sup>82</sup> and Wohlforth<sup>83</sup> insist that Gorbachev was merely pressured to come to terms with the West: his ideational makeup has no major role in shaping his decisions.<sup>84</sup>

The difference between a conflictual situation and a cooperative situation is most stark when it comes to estimating the credibility of others' threats and the credibility of others' reassurance signals. From the literature on costly signaling in conflict (esp. deterrence and compellence), the credibility of a state's threat is a function of the state's (military) capability, interest, resolve, and situational constraint, all as perceived by the state's observer(s).<sup>85</sup> More formally,  $C_T$ , the credibility of a state's threat in its

<sup>81</sup> Melvin P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Deborah W. Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, chap. 3.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Bitzinger, 'Gorbachev and GRIT: Did Arms Control Succeed Because of Unilateral Actions or in Spite of Them?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1994), pp. 68–79.

<sup>83</sup> William Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 19, 1 (1994–1995), pp. 91–129.

<sup>84</sup> For a critique of these readings, see Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 369–376. On this front, I shall note that there are some striking similarities between explaining behaviors and explaining outcomes: we attribute great weight to our own actions and little weight to others' actions when outcomes are positive (or desirable) from our own point of view, and we do the exact opposite when outcomes are negative (or undesirable). Thus, because the Cold War ended in U.S. favor, pundits in the United States explained the outcome mostly with U.S. behaviors (e.g., William Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War'). In contrast, in light of the supposedly losing of relative influence by the United States to China in Southeast Asia, many pundits attribute it mostly to China's 'charm offensive' and the possible evil design behind it (e.g., Josh Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Robert Sutter, 'China's Rise: Implications for U.S. Leadership in Asia', *Policy Studies*, Vol. 21 (Washington: East-West Center Washington, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> In a conflictual situation, the other side has already been assumed to be malignant. In other words, our estimation of the probability that the other side intends to do us harm becomes 1.

opponent's mind, is determined by the equation below:

$$C_T = f\left(\frac{\text{A state's military capability} \times \text{Interest} \times \text{Resolve}}{\text{The situational constraint faced by the state as perceived by its opponent}}\right)$$

From the literature on costly signaling in seeking cooperation, the credibility of a cooperative behavior (i.e., a reassurance gesture) is a function of its cost, risk (i.e., potential loss if the gesture is not reciprocated), potential gain (e.g., savings in resources regardless whether the other side reciprocates or not plus other benefits when the other side reciprocates), and situational constraint faced by its sender (i.e., the degree that the reassurance signal is driven by situational necessity), again all as perceived by its receiver. More formally, the credibility of a reassurance signal,  $C_A$ , is determined by the following equation:

$$C_A = f\left(\frac{\text{the attempt's cost} + \text{risk} - \text{the attempt's gains, all as perceived by the receiver}}{\text{the situational constraint faced by the initiator as perceived by the receiver}}\right)$$

From these two structurally different equations, it becomes apparent that we tend to overestimate the credibility of others' threatening signals (because the items in the numerator are in multiplication), unless one or more components within the credibility of others' threatening signals (i.e., capability, interest, and resolve) become extremely small. In contrast, we tend to underestimate the credibility of others' reassuring signals (because the items in the numerator are in addition and subtraction). In real practice, we tend to underestimate the credibility of others' reassuring signals even more because we tend to discount the cost and the risk that the other side may bear while exaggerating the potential gains that the other side may gain. In contrast, we tend to overestimate the credibility of others' threatening signals even more because we tend to minimize the situational constraints behind the other side's threatening signals.

The contrast between our attribution in a conflictual situation and our attribution in a cooperative situation is fundamentally underpinned by the psychology of fear for our survival that produces biases that have been variously labeled as 'hostile attribution error', 'sinister attribution bias', or 'paranoid cognition'.<sup>86</sup> The whole dynamics heightens and maintains our alertness toward potential dangers and preventing us from easily falling

<sup>86</sup> Kenneth A. Dodge, Gregory S. Pettit, Cynthia L. McClaskey, and Melissa M. Brown, *Social Competence in Children*, pp. 1–85; Kenneth A. Dodge and Daniel R. Somberg, 'Hostile Attributional Biases among Aggressive Boys Are Exacerbated under Conditions of Threats to the Self', *Child Development*, Vol. 58, No.1 (1987), 213–224; R. M. Kramer, 'Paranoid Cognition in Social Systems', pp. 251–275; R. M. Kramer and D. M. Messick, 'Getting by With a Little Help from Our Enemies', pp. 233–255.



complacency. In the world of (individual and group) survival, the motto is 'better safe than sorry'.<sup>87</sup>

A key point that needs to bear in mind is that while the psychological dynamics adds an inherent dynamics to conflict and cooperation, conflict and cooperation also come back to impact our perception. As a confrontation drags on, both sides increasingly come to see each other as incurably aggressive and fall back to a simpler (i.e., psychologically simplifying) focus on capability and resolve with essentially fixing each other's goals as illegitimate and intentions as malignant,<sup>88</sup> as the Cold War vividly illustrated.<sup>89</sup> As a result, both sides become uninterested in each other's goals and intentions, but only capabilities and resolve. Only after a conflictual situation has ended (with some animosity lingering on) will states slowly begin to view each other as not necessarily inherently aggressive and become interested in each other's goals and intentions again.

## Evidences That We Usually Do Not Get Things Right

In this section, I provide evidences that we usually do not get the dimensions of uncertainty right, without any pretense that I can get all the things right and get all wrongs righted. I first present evidences from IR theoretical literature, showing that many IR theorists have often failed to get the dimensions of uncertainty right. I then present evidences from real-world politics, relying mostly on secondary literature for now.

### Getting the Challenges Wrong: Evidences in IR Literature

While we IR scholars tend to believe (egocentrically) that we usually get things more right than policy makers, this is not always the case. The errors that IR scholars commit can be grouped into three broad categories, consistent with the three levels of cognitive challenges posed by the various dimensions as noted above.

#### *Conflating the Dimensions or Deploying the Dimensions Inconsistently*

Perhaps the most obvious fault among IR theorists has been that many have failed to distinguish and deploy these five dimensions consistently in their discussions.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Shiping Tang, 'The Social Evolutionary Psychology of Fear (and Trust): Or why is international cooperation difficult?' paper presented in the 49th Annual Convention of International Studies Association in San Francisco, March 26–29, 2008.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 64–65; Shiping Tang, 'Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict', pp. 50–54.

<sup>89</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, chap. 12; Sergei Zubov and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>90</sup> I address the problems of game models of war and peace in detail in section V below.

For instance, Schweller<sup>91</sup> treated motivations and intentions as interchangeable, noting: 'the term 'intentions' commonly refers to the plans and goals of an actor'.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Barros and Imlay<sup>93</sup> asserted that Chamberlain was unsure of Hitler's intentions even though Chamberlain was really unsure of Hitler's ambition for much of the time before Munich (see also below). These authors have conflated intentions with goals (ambitions).

In a recent attempt to sort out the notions of uncertainty, Rathbun<sup>94</sup> correctly noted that uncertainty for realism and rationalism means 'the lack of information states have about the intentions, interests, and power of those they are interacting with'. Yet, when discussing the rational choice approach (hereafter, RCA) in IR toward uncertainty,<sup>95</sup> Rathbun, like Macdonald<sup>96</sup> before him, failed recognize that RCA works have been mostly interested in uncertainty over capabilities and resolve while fixing others' intentions as malignant and thus marginalizing (if not assuming away) uncertainty over intentions, a point that Fearon<sup>97</sup> could not have made more explicit.

Others, despite differentiating motives from intentions, do not deploy the two things consistently. For instance, Montgomery<sup>98</sup> claimed to use 'motives' and 'preferences' to denote states' preferences over goals whereas 'intentions' states' preferences over strategies. Yet, Montgomery was not entirely consistent: he often talked about 'the primary way a state can reveal benign motives' and 'a benign state to demonstrate its motives',<sup>99</sup> 'revealing its benign motives',<sup>100</sup> 'uncertainties over others' motives and the fear that it may exploit any concession', and 'reveal their motives'.<sup>101</sup> In all these places, motives should be replaced by 'intentions'.

Most prominently, complaining that Jervis's<sup>102</sup> elaborations on the spiral model and the deterrence model focused only on states' intentions and gave insufficient attention to states' motives for expansion, Glaser<sup>103</sup> insists that

<sup>91</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 38.

<sup>92</sup> See also Randall L. Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1996), pp. 103–104; Andrew Kydd, 'Sheep in Sheep's Clothing', pp. 126, 152.

<sup>93</sup> Andrew Barros and Talbot C. Imlay, 'Correspondence: Debating British Decision Making toward Nazi Germany in the 1930s', *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2009), p. 276.

<sup>94</sup> Brian C. Rathbun, 'Uncertain About Uncertainty', pp. 537, 541–545.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', pp. 379–414.

<sup>96</sup> Paul K. MacDonald, 'The Virtue of Ambiguity: A Critique of the Information Turn in IR theory', Unpublished manuscript, Columbia University, 2002, pp. 5–7.

<sup>97</sup> James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', p. 381.

<sup>98</sup> Evan Braden Montgomery, 'Breaking out of the Security Dilemma', p. 153, footnote 9.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*.

<sup>103</sup> Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy', pp. 499–508.

we should pay equal attention to intentions and motives. Glaser thus introduces a supposedly more fine-grained differentiation of states' motives along two dimensions. By combining these two dimensions of motive (greedy versus not greedy, and always-secure versus insecure), Glaser claims that states can then be categorized into four types, thus providing the spiral model and the deterrence model with a much more fine-grained explanatory power and generating more calibrated prescriptions for states' military strategies. Glaser's dichotomy of always-secure states versus insecure states is simply invalid because all states are insecure under anarchy, according to structural realism to which Glaser submits.

Worse, the first dimension within Glaser's framework hinges on whether a state is interested in non-security expansion: A state is a greedy state if the answer is yes and a not-greedy state if the answer is no. Hence, the dichotomy of greedy versus not-greedy state is not about motives (understood as goals) but essentially re-captures the dimension of intentions, thus adding only two new labels without adding much real benefits.

Moreover, Glaser<sup>104</sup> too often put 'benign' and 'malign' in front of motives/motivations and goals. Yet, according to structural realism to which Glaser submits, states' preference over goals is given by the anarchical nature of international politics.<sup>105</sup> In other words, structural realism assumes states' preference over goals to be fixed: all states seek security as a minimum.<sup>106</sup> Because power remains an important pillar for security, and power and security interact, it is impossible to draw a sharp line between seeking security and seeking power.<sup>107</sup> As such, seeking power does not necessarily mean malign intentions and seeking security does not necessarily mean benign intentions. *For structural realism, therefore, states' motives or goals are normatively neutral*, and only intentions or preferences over strategies can be malignant or benign. As such, only adjectives before intentions can be deployed to differentiate and label the two basic types of states, that is, malignant states versus benign states. With all these drawbacks, Glaser's extension of the security dilemma and the spiral model adds much confusion rather than more fine-grained explanatory power.<sup>108</sup>

### *No-systemic and Non-dynamic Understandings*

Because the five dimensions of uncertainty constitute a dynamic system, we need a systemic and dynamic approach for understanding them.<sup>109</sup> Unfortunately, most of us have generally stayed with a non-systemic and

<sup>104</sup> Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists', pp. 60, 67–68, 70.

<sup>105</sup> Robert Powell, 'Anarchy in International Relations Theory', pp. 313–344; see also Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 42.

<sup>108</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism*, chaps. 1 & 2.

<sup>109</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects*.

non-dynamic approach toward uncertainty. Such a non-systemic and non-dynamic approach toward uncertainty is misleading and unhelpful: it robs much of the explanatory power possessed by the changes with the five dimensions.

A manifestation of non-systemic thinking toward uncertainty is to single out one or two dimensions as explanatory variables and dismiss others. Thus, Anne Sartori<sup>110</sup> reasoned that China's inability to fulfill its pledge to attack Taiwan in the 1950s just before the Korea War—that is, China was caught bluffing, greatly weakened the credibility of its threat to intervene in the Korea War. As such, major US decision makers would not take China's threat to intervene to be credible. She thus dismissed the possibility that most US decision makers dismissed China's threat because they underestimated China's capabilities to wage war. Yet, it is more plausible to believe that US decision makers' underestimation of China's fighting capabilities was the more crucial factor in their dismissal of China's threat, *even if* they were induced to dismiss China's warning due to China's bluff over Taiwan.<sup>111</sup> After all, 'threats are credible when—and only when—they are backed by sufficient power and serve clear interests'.<sup>112</sup>

A typical expression of a non-dynamic approach toward uncertainty is that we tend to believe that once we label a state as a particular type, the label should stick whatever happens afterwards. Thus, Glaser<sup>113</sup> insisted that an opportunistic expansionist state, which is a malignant state (at least momentarily), is still a security-seeking state (or more precisely, a benign state) as long as its expansion is driven by security without noticing that all states seek security under anarchy. Operating on the same logic, many have tried to identify a situation as a security dilemma and then assume that it will remain so when in the real world, the situation can shift from a security dilemma to a spiral and back. As such, many tend to ask whether a conflict had been driven by a security dilemma rather than whether the conflict had shifted from security dilemma to a spiral and then war.<sup>114</sup> In both cases, the possibility that a state (or a situation) can change from one type to another back and forth was neglected. Many theorists seem to have forgotten that labels are just heuristic tools, and they do not and should not always stick, simply because all five dimensions can change. In other words, the types

<sup>110</sup> Anne Sartori, 'The Might of the Pen: A Reputational Theory of Communication in International Disputes', *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2002), pp. 137–140.

<sup>111</sup> As MacArthur put it, 'If they [the Chinese] tried to get down to Pyongyang, it would be the greatest slaughter.' Also, Sartori found no direct evidence that linked U.S. decision makers' reading into Taiwan with their reading into Korea.

<sup>112</sup> Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility*, p. 143.

<sup>113</sup> Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy', pp. 497–538; Charles L. Glaser, 'The Security Dilemma Revisited', *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (1997), pp. 171–201.

<sup>114</sup> Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, chaps. 2 and 3.

(or ‘identities’) of states can change, as noted,<sup>115</sup> long before constructivism becomes fashionable.<sup>116</sup> By assuming a label for a state will stick forever, some realism theorists have made realism theories of state behavior unnecessarily static.

A prominent outcome of non-systemic and non-dynamic thinking that has the most influence on IR theorists (and statesmen too, see below) has been that we tend to emphasize the possibility that intentions can quickly change—from benign to malign *but not the other way around*.<sup>117</sup> In other words, we are quick to believe that another state has changed from benign to malignant, but very reluctant to reverse our image of that state even if a state’s intention has changed from malign to benign. Yet, logically, there is no reason why a state cannot change from malignant to benign just as quickly as it changes from benign to malignant, say, as a result of leadership change. The history of the Cold War provided ample examples that leadership change can effectively change a state’s nature: Soviet Union under Gorbachev had been very different from Soviet Union under Stalin and Brezhnev.<sup>118</sup> After the Cold War, one can certainly argue that the United States became a malignant state after Bush and the neo-cons took power, and Obama has now brought the United States back to a benign state.

### *Not Grasping the Different Challenges in Conflict and in Cooperation*

A much more serious problem has been our failure to recognize that the various dimensions of uncertainty may pose different challenges for our cognition when we are in different situations—that is, conflictual, ambiguous, and cooperative—with another state. Indeed, many existing works explicitly or implicitly assume that the challenges posed by the different dimensions of uncertainty are the same across situations.

Most strikingly, Douglas Gibler<sup>119</sup> assumes that ‘a violation of a defense pact creates the same reputation for dishonesty as the violation of a non-aggression or neutrality pact’. Yet, a violation of a nonaggression or neutrality pact is much worse than a violation of a defense pact: the latter merely signals that the partner may be irresolute, but the former signals that the (supposedly) partner or friend is really a malignant state. Indeed, Gibler immediately writes: ‘violations of neutrality or nonaggression treaties

<sup>115</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 45–84.

<sup>116</sup> See also Robert Jervis with Thierry Balzacq, ‘The Logic of Mind: Interview with Robert Jervis’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2004), pp. 559–563.

<sup>117</sup> This is an immediate prediction from the psychology of fear: our cognition is heavily skewed toward insecurity/fear but away from security/complacency/trust. For a more detailed discussion, see Shiping Tang, ‘The Social Evolutionary Psychology of Fear (and Trust): Or why is international cooperation difficult?’

<sup>118</sup> Deborah W. Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*; Melvin P. Leffler, *For the Soul of the Mankind: U.S., Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, appendix I.

<sup>119</sup> Douglas M. Gibler, ‘The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2008), p. 437.

often constitute more blatant abuses of treaty terms than ignored defense pacts since these types of violations often result from one state attacking an alliance partner'. But then he still insists treating them equally anyway.

Likewise, Gregory Miller<sup>120</sup> sought to challenge Mercer's<sup>121</sup> thesis that reputation for resolve may not count that much in conflict by studying reputation for resolve to honor one's obligation in business alliance (as a form of cooperation). Apparently, Miller believed that insights on reputation in cooperation (e.g., business alliance) can be straightforwardly transplanted to reputation in (international) conflict.

## Getting Things Wrong: Evidences from the Real World

With hindsight, it is easy to tell that statesmen had often got things wrong when it comes to understanding others' behaviors. Since many have dealt with this topic extensively and insightfully,<sup>122</sup> I shall just mention a few key aspects, highlighting especially the contrast between perception in a conflictual situation and perception in a cooperative situation.

Statesmen consistently overestimate others' malign intentions, especially in conflictual situations, so much so that Jack Levy<sup>123</sup> asserted that this overestimation constitutes the 'most common form of misperception'. During the Cold War years, key US policy makers (e.g., Kennan, Nitze, Truman) strongly believed that the Soviet Union was really bent on a destruction of the capitalism society. They thus believed that Korean War (as well as the Vietnam War) was a Soviet-designed test of American resolve rather than a war mostly powered by nationalism rather than communism.<sup>124</sup> From the other side, Soviet leaders also exaggerated US malignant intentions to destroy the Soviet Union.<sup>125</sup> Not surprisingly, much of the Cold War history has been a sad story of escalating arms race, numerous proxy wars, and missed opportunities for forging cooperation.<sup>126</sup>

When trying to fathom Egyptian President Nasser's move of nationalizing the Suez canal, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden took Nasser to be another Hitler-like dictator rather than a pan-Arab nationalist with a

<sup>120</sup> Gregory, D. Miller, 'Hypotheses on Reputation: Alliance Choices and the Shadow of the Past', *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2003), pp. 40–78.

<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics*.

<sup>122</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War*; Jack S. Levy, 'Misperceptions and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems', *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1983), pp. 76–99; Janice Gross Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', pp. 245–271.; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*; Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics*; Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility*.

<sup>123</sup> Jack S. Levy, 'Misperceptions and the Causes of War', p. 88.

<sup>124</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), chap. 4; Melvin P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*.

<sup>125</sup> Sergei Zubov and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*.

<sup>126</sup> Deborah W. Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*; Melvin P. Leffler, *For the Soul of the Mankind*.



domestic and regional audience to impress. Fixing such an image on Nasser made it impossible for Eden to consider a possible compromise with Nasser.<sup>127</sup>

Statesmen also tend to overestimate their opponents' capabilities and (thus) resolve when the two sides' capabilities are roughly equal. In the crucial years of 1936–1938, when France and Britain could have launched a preventive war against Nazi Germany, they consistently overestimated Germany's power and thus resolve.<sup>128</sup> As a result, both countries were reluctant to confront Hitler when he was most vulnerable and irresolute.<sup>129</sup>

The early period of Cold War presented another classic case. Examining the saga of 'Missile Gap' in 1957–1961, Jonathan Renshon showed that US leaders consistently overestimated Soviet Union's capabilities, '[imagining] their opponents to be stronger, more powerful, more aggressive, and more dangerous adversaries than they are in reality.'<sup>130</sup> Paul Nitze, when drafting NSC-68, overestimated Soviet Union's growing absolute capabilities while holding US capabilities steady, thus also overestimated Soviet Union's relative capabilities, when in fact a more optimistic assessment of the relative power between the United States and the Soviet Union should still hold even in light of Soviet Union's atomic bomb and the success of China's revolution a year earlier. The two superpowers also overestimated the other side's resolve to challenge one's own side, while simultaneously fearing of losing their own reputation for resolve after backing down or compromise.<sup>131</sup>

Due to ethnocentrism (or more specifically, lack of empathy), statesmen often justify that one is reasonable to fear others but others are not reasonable if they fear oneself. Hence, Dean Acheson argued that the Soviet Union had no reason to fear NATO but the United States and its allies did have reason to fear the Soviet Union, and that China should have nothing to fear when the United States was marching toward the Yalu River but that the United States were correct to fear Soviet Union and China's expansionism.<sup>132</sup> Similarly, John F. Kennedy thought that the Bay of Pigs invasion was just a butchered plot but that Khrushchev's deployment of

<sup>127</sup> Janice Gross Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', p. 249.

<sup>128</sup> Both countries, however, under-estimated Hitler's ambition. This might be a motivated bias, due to the memories of the First World War. To their credit, by 1936, both British and French decision makers were sure of Hitler's malignant intentions. For a detailed discussion, see Christopher Layne, 'Security Studies and the Use of History'.

<sup>129</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, 'The Preventive War that Never Happened', pp. 48–58; see also the discussion below.

<sup>130</sup> Jonathan Renshon, 'Assessing Capabilities in International Politics: Biased Overestimation and the Case of the Imaginary "Missile Gap"', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2009), p. 116.

<sup>131</sup> Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics*; Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility*; Shiping Tang, 'Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict', pp. 34–62.

<sup>132</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 67–74.

missiles to Cuba was provocative and aggressive; whereas Khrushchev read the situation exactly the opposite.<sup>133</sup>

In sharp contrast, statesmen are prone to underestimate their allies' capability, interest, and resolve to contribute to their collective welfare. Thus, Japan had harbored a fear of 'Japan Passing' ever since Nixon went to China without notifying Japan (the 'Nixon shock'); many Japanese statesmen doubt America's commitment to the United States–Japan alliance and fear that the United States would ditch Japan in favor of China or some other Asian countries when time is ripe.<sup>134</sup> The whole dynamics of fear of abandonment in alliance politics reflects the work of underestimating allies' capabilities, interest, and resolve to contribute to the alliance.<sup>135</sup>

Moreover, the two sides in a burgeoning cooperative relationship almost always tend to believe that the other side has chosen to cooperate because it has been compelled to do so, usually due to one's unrelenting pressure.<sup>136</sup> Thus, when India and China had their initial rapprochement in the late 1980s to early 1990s, both sides believed that the other side was essentially compelled to cooperate due to external pressure: for China, it was the diplomatic isolation after 1989, for India, it was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both sides discounted the fact that there had been persistent calls for reconciliation in both countries after their short but bloody war in 1962.<sup>137</sup> Likewise, major US decisions makers were very reluctant to admit that the Soviet Union had chosen to cooperate with the West because the Soviet Union under Gorbachev was a really a very different state.<sup>138</sup>

The early years of the Cold War (1945–1950) perfectly illustrate the process of gradually moving toward a capability and resolve-based planning system. From NCS-20/4 under George Kennan to NSC-68 under Paul Nitze,<sup>139</sup> US perception of the Soviet Union increasingly focused on capabilities and resolve, while fixing Soviet Union's interests and intentions as incurably aggressive. External constraints were also discounted: 'The Kremlin is able to select whatever means are expedient in seeking to carry out its fundamental design.'<sup>140</sup> And the Soviet Union under Stalin reasoned like a mirror image.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 309–314.

<sup>134</sup> Yoichi Funabashi, *Alliance Drift*.

<sup>135</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics'.

<sup>136</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 343–349.

<sup>137</sup> Jing-dong Yuan and Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, *China and India: Cooperation or Conflict* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

<sup>138</sup> Deborah W. Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, chap. 8.

<sup>139</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, esp. chaps. 2–4.

<sup>140</sup> S. Nelson Drew, ed., *NSC-68: Forging the Strategy of Containment, with analyses by Paul H. Nitze* (Washington, D. C.: National Defense University, 1993), p. 44.

<sup>141</sup> Sergei Zubov and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*.

## Consequences of Our Getting Things Wrong

Because the overall policy impact of our getting dimensions of uncertainty wrong is clear-cut, I shall focus on the theoretical consequences of our getting things wrong. I show that our failure to get the dimensions of uncertainty right has entailed serious pitfalls for our understanding of some of the most important issues in IR. Sometimes, our discussion has degenerated into outright incoherence and inconsistency.

### Probability versus Possibility?

An influential formulation that seeks to differentiate offensive realism and defensive realism (and other non-offensive realism theories) is Brooks<sup>142</sup> 'probability versus possibility'. According to Brooks, offensive realism (or more accurately, structural realism for Brooks) is a theory driven by possibility, whereas defensive realism is a theory driven by probability. Unfortunately, Brooks does not explicitly differentiate the various dimensions of uncertainty when it comes to discussing probability and possibility. He thus fails to recognize that offensive realism too is a probabilistic theory when it comes to estimating other states' capabilities, interest, resolve, and external environment. Offensive realism is a possibilistic theory *only* when it comes to estimating others' intentions.<sup>143</sup> As such, offensive realism is both possibilistic and probabilistic, not just possibilistic.<sup>144</sup>

Following Brooks's formulation, Taliaferro<sup>145</sup> praises Copeland<sup>146</sup> for resolving the possibility versus probability problem in gauging others' behavior (and thus synthesizing offensive realism and defensive realism) and classifies Copeland's theory as a defensive realism theory. Taliaferro's praise for Copeland and his misunderstanding about the divide between offensive realism and defensive realism is too caused by a failure to grasp the various dimensions of uncertainty.

Although Copeland<sup>147</sup> initially identifies the uncertainty about others' present and future intentions as an important driver of his theory and seems to have accorded this uncertainty over intentions a central place in his theory, he eventually concludes that whether a state decides to launch a preventive war is determined by its perception of the nature of the relative decline (the speed of the decline, the depth of decline; the inevitability of decline); and whether the preventive war is winnable as conditioned by the

<sup>142</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling Realisms', pp. 445–477.

<sup>143</sup> Shiping Tang, 'Fear in International Politics'.

<sup>144</sup> Because most realism theories assumes states to be strategic or 'rational' actor, and many understand 'rational' to be acting according to probability, with possibility being an extreme expression of probability, Brooks' formulation seems extreme for many. I thank Andy Kydd for discussion on this issue.

<sup>145</sup> Jeffery W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited'.

<sup>146</sup> Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

systemic distribution of power (i.e., polarity). Once again, a state's calculus for preventive war is a purely cost-benefit calculation (although a more sophisticated one) that involves capability, resolve, and external constraints, and the uncertainty over other state's intentions has no role whatsoever in the state's calculation. Thus, although Copeland's theory of preventive war is a theory driven by probability, his theory is a quintessential offensive realism theory. This is so because whether assuming the worst over others' intention is a genuine demarcation line between offensive realism and all other non-offensive realism theories: offensive realism does whereas all other non-offensive realism theories do not.<sup>148</sup> Taliaferro's praise for Copeland's resolution of the possibility versus probability problem in gauging others' behavior thus turns out to be much kudos for nothing, and Taliaferro's understanding about the divide between offensive realism and defensive realism is misleading.<sup>149</sup>

### Obsession with Intentions and Structural Offensive Realism

There is no doubt that uncertainty over others' intentions should occupy a central place in IR.<sup>150</sup> Yet, some students of IR might have gone too far in their overemphasizing uncertainty over intentions while marginalizing other dimensions. More critically, many have fallen into a fixing and static understanding about states' intentions that ignores the possibility that a state can change from malignant to benign just as quickly as it can change from benign to malignant. And because intentions can change *from benign to malignant* but not the other way around, states are better off by making the worst assumptions over others intentions. As a result, offensive realism is the way to go. This overemphasis of others' future (malignant) intentions and then asserting that assuming the worst over it is the logical or rational choice is an unstated but indispensable bedrock assumption of structural offensive realism as espoused by Mearsheimer<sup>151</sup> and Copeland<sup>152</sup>: It is 'the sixth element' of offensive realism.<sup>153</sup> And it is this worst assumption over others' intentions, rather than other factors such as how to divide gains and signal benign intentions, that pushes offensive realism to deny the possibility of cooperation under anarchy, besides temporary alliances when facing a common threat.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>148</sup> Shiping Tang, 'Fear in International Politics'.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*; Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, chaps 1 and 6.

<sup>150</sup> Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliance*; Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy', pp. 497–538; Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists'; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*; Brian C. Rathbun, 'Uncertain About Uncertainty', pp. 533–557; Shiping Tang, 'Fear in International Politics', see also Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior*.

<sup>151</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

<sup>152</sup> Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*.

<sup>153</sup> Shiping Tang, 'Fear in International Politics'.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 465–466.

This offensive realism stand, however, rests on questionable ground. It fails to admit that intentions usually do not change (from benign to malign or the other way) overnight. More often than not, intentions change due to changes in a state's leadership, capabilities, and goals. This provides other actors with time for gauging the actor's intentions. Most importantly, *even if* a state changes its intention from benign to malignant, it can only pose a real threat after some substantial changes in its (offensive) military capabilities. While Hitler had perhaps long been a murderous psycho, Germany under Hitler did not become a serious threat to other states until perhaps 1936–1938.<sup>155</sup> The delay gives other states a chance to observe the state's behaviors (including its military capabilities and postures), gauge its intentions, and then design their policies toward the state accordingly.<sup>156</sup> When these measures are possible, assuming the worst over others' intentions (and thus fixing our image of their intentions) is not always the best bet. Most critically, it is a logical jump from uncertainty over others' intentions to assuming the worst over others' intentions. For offensive realism to have a firmer foundation, offensive realists have to find a better place to anchor their theories.

### From Incomplete Information to the Commitment Problem

Another outcome that is mostly underpinned by our failure to get the various dimensions right has been exemplified by the 'incomplete information'-based models of war.<sup>157</sup> These models typically assume that with complete information, there will be no conflict. Yet, clearly, there is another possibility: when one finds out that the other state is essentially an incorrigible offensive realism state (i.e., Nazi Germany under Hitler), one will actually fight simply because surrendering is not an option. And in inter-ethnic politics, conflict breaks out because one or both sides are malignant and the other side or both sides know that rather than because both sides are uncertain of each other's intentions. Thus, not only complete information does not necessarily prevent war, but complete information over one side's malignant intentions may actually start a war.<sup>158</sup> Likewise, when one or both sides are certain of the other side's resolve to stand firm, war may also break out. With these drawbacks, game models of war based on

<sup>155</sup> Christopher Layne, 'Security Studies and the Use of History'; Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, 'The Preventive War that Never Happened'.

<sup>156</sup> Indeed, although by no means easy, other states may take measures to influence the domestic politics of the target state so that a Hitler could not gain or hold power in that state.

<sup>157</sup> James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', pp. 379–414. Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>158</sup> Paul K. MacDonald, 'The Virtue of Ambiguity: A Critique of the Information Turn in IR theory'; Robert Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem'; Jennifer Mitzen and Randall Schweller, 'Knowing the Unknown Unknowns: Misplaced Certainty and the Onset of War', *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2011), pp. 2–35.

incomplete information sometimes produce 'a poor account of prolonged conflict, and they gave a bizarre reading of the history of some cases'.<sup>159</sup> Clearly, only if we unpack the various dimensions of uncertainty, can we eliminate the odd conclusion that complete information will eliminate war that has pervades the 'incomplete information' literature on war.

Still another influential formulation of getting the various dimensions wrong has been 'the commitment problem', first coined by Fearon.<sup>160</sup> Monica Toft's<sup>161</sup> emphasis of 'time horizon' has the same undertone: time horizon is a problem only because all of the five dimensions can change.

This notion of 'commitment problem' confuses rather than clarifies. First, by assuming that motivations (as goals, greed or desire for conquest, according to Fearon) do not change,<sup>162</sup> one assumes away a bread-and-butter problem in international politics—whether couched as 'the commitment problem' or uncertainty over motivations. Not surprisingly, when motivations are assumed to be fixed while intentions are assumed away (or somewhat replaced by 'the commitment problem' that is perennial),<sup>163</sup> the security dilemma that Fearon one time tries to engage largely disappears because the security dilemma critically depends on the possibility that states' intentions can change for the worse.<sup>164</sup>

Second, Fearon noted that the commitment problem is fundamentally driven by actors' incentives to cheat or defect even if a cooperative deal is struck and this commitment problem is what really prevents states from reaching compromises although war is evidently costly. Yet, he failed to explain why states should change their mind when a deal is struck (i.e., to cheat) and prefer a different (i.e., confrontational) strategy. And this is the heart of the problem.

Third, as Gartzke<sup>165</sup> pointed out, when Fearon's logic was pushed into its logical outcome, there should be no stop of warfare since the commitment problem is perennial: we shall have constant war or preparation of war, until at least we have ended up in regional empire. Moreover, because the commitment problem is perennial, the best way toward security is to launch preventive war whenever it is profitable. Yet, even in Africa, where 'artificial states' abound due to Western colonialism, states have fought very few wars

<sup>159</sup> Robert Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem', p. 170, see also pp. 172–176.

<sup>160</sup> James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', pp. 379–414, esp. 401–409; see also Robert Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem'.

<sup>161</sup> Monica Duffy Toft, 'Issue Indivisibility and Time Horizons as Rationalist Explanations for War', *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2006), pp. 34–69.

<sup>162</sup> James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', p. 401.

<sup>163</sup> Of course, in the real world, an actor's intentions can change even when motivations remain constant.

<sup>164</sup> Randall L. Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status Quo Bias' pp. 91–121; Andrew Kydd, 'Sheep in Sheep's Clothing'; Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, chap. 2.

<sup>165</sup> Erik Gartzke, 'War Is in the Error Term', *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1999), pp. 567–587.



to change their boundaries.<sup>166</sup> Fearon thus has to completely ignore the fact that in numerous cases of territorial disputes in which the commitment problem should be the most severe according to his logic, many compromises were struck and states have stayed with these compromises. In addition, states have another option: they simply freeze and push back their disputes.

Finally, by assuming states (or their leaders) to be risk-averse or risk-neutral,<sup>167</sup> Fearon assumes away a quasi-sufficient cause of war (or why some states will not stick with their part of the bargain): they are risk-receptive. When somebody like Hitler is running a state and if the state happens to have already gained some significant capabilities, such a state will cause war. And although extreme cases like Hitler may be rare (thank God), risk-receptive leaders may be less rare than Fearon has anticipated: when leaders face a possible loss of honor and prestige, they can become quite risk receptive, as Lebow has argued.<sup>168</sup>

Powell<sup>169</sup> sought to drive the commitment problem further home, contending that Fearon's three 'rationalist' explanations of war can be ultimately collapsed into the commitment problem: war is thus only a commitment problem. Yet, his attempt does not resolve the problem of uncertainty: indeed, it (re-)collapses the various dimensions of uncertainty. Whereas one can still faintly detect motivations, intentions, resolve, and capability in Fearon's formulation, in Powell's formulation one finds only the label of 'the commitment problem'. Powell's taking war only as a commitment problem has thus obscured, if not totally eliminated, uncertainty over others' intentions from states' calculations.<sup>170</sup> While overemphasizing intentions distorts our understanding of IR, eliminating intentions is much worse: it blinds us to the most critical component of uncertainty in real international politics.

Fundamentally, labeling war as a commitment problem does not add much insight: it merely re-labels the problem of uncertainty in a not so terribly interesting jargon.<sup>171</sup> In the end, by marginalizing, if not eliminating, uncertainty over intentions, formal or informal RCA models end up in taking a position that is strikingly similar to the offensive realism stand. For these theories or models, war should be avoided only when it is

<sup>166</sup> Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>167</sup> James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', p. 388.

<sup>168</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, chap. 7.

<sup>169</sup> Robert Powell, 'War as a Commitment Problem'.

<sup>170</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 58–67.

<sup>171</sup> Paul K. MacDonald, 'The Virtue of Ambiguity', pp. 19–23 made argument that are somewhat related to what I advance here, noting that when pushed to its logic conclusion, models of war and peace based on incomplete information are really driven by the 'old' problems of 'interests' and 'power'.

unprofitable.<sup>172</sup> Yet, as noted above, such a stand rests on a shaky foundation. Worse, empirical facts fly in its face: states after 1945 have achieved much cooperation. And offensive realist and RCA theorists could only implicitly or explicitly assert that very few compromises have been achieved in world politics, either due to uncertainty over intentions or commitment problems.

### Munich Enduring or Getting Munich Wrong?

The tragedy of Munich, in which Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier backed down in front of Hitler's demand to annex Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland, is forever associated with the infamous term, 'appeasement'. The association of appeasement with Munich has in turn made Munich one of the most powerful and most invoked thus abused images in international relations. Arguably, the Munich analogy has impacted generations of decision makers.<sup>173</sup> For many, Munich symbolizes that an aggressor can easily hide his true (and malignant) intentions and thus competitive policies are always preferable over seeking cooperation.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, because an opponent will be emboldened by cooperative gestures (that is, reassurance signals), cooperation (through compromise) is always dangerous. As such, competition is always the preferred policy.

Differentiating the five dimensions of uncertainty sheds new lights on and clarifies several erroneous interpretations of Munich. Essentially, Munich has three possible interpretations, and only one of them supports the notion that malignant intentions are easy to hide. The other two interpretations actually point to the exact opposite. The first interpretation is that the Munich tragedy resulted because Chamberlain did not recognize Hitler's malignant intentions. The second interpretation is that Chamberlain was not sure of the exact extent of Hitler's ambition and resolve, although he recognized Hitler's malignant intentions. This interpretation does not support the claim that malignant intentions are easy to hide, and it centers on Chamberlain's uncertainty over Hitler's *scope* of expansion and *resolve* for expansion, rather than his *intentions* to expand. To take this interpretation to be equivalent to the first interpretation is to commit the error of conflating intentions with interest or resolve. The third interpretation is that the Munich tragedy resulted not because Chamberlain was unsure of Hitler's malignant intentions or the exact extent of Hitler's greed although he recognized Hitler's malign intentions, but rather because (he believed) Britain and France lacked the military capabilities and thus the resolve to resist Hitler in

<sup>172</sup> Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; see also Shiping Tang, 'Fear in International Politics'.

<sup>173</sup> Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War*; Christopher Layne, 'Security Studies and the Use of History'.

<sup>174</sup> David M. Edelstein, 'Managing Uncertainty'.

Munich.<sup>175</sup> Again, this interpretation does not support the claim that malignant intentions are easy to hide.

Recent empirical works have convincingly demonstrated that as early as 1934, and certainly by 1936, when Hitler had re-militarized Rhineland, most French and British decision makers, including none other than Chamberlain himself, had concluded that Germany posed a grave threat to European peace. Although Layne<sup>176</sup> and Ripsman and Levy,<sup>177</sup> Barros and Imlay<sup>178</sup> differ on the exact causes of British 'appeasement' policy toward Hitler, they agree on a key point that the both France and Britain recognized the clear and present danger posed by Hitler as early as 1933 and certainly by 1936 the latest.<sup>179</sup> By the time of Munich, French and British leaders had zero uncertainty about Hitler's aggressiveness and resolve (to go to war), although uncertainty on the scope of Hitler's ambition still abounded. By any measure, uncertainty about Hitler's intentions was not a major cause of the Munich tragedy. In other words, Britain and France might have failed to stand firm against Hitler for a variety of reasons; *but failure to recognize Hitler's malignant intentions and the threat posed by him was not one of them.* While Hitler recognized the value of concealing his true intentions; he was never as good at it as Edelstein<sup>180</sup> believed him to be. Indeed, as Kissinger<sup>181</sup> noted earlier, when facing a revolutionary power like France under Napoleon, the usual error is not getting its intentions wrong, but underestimating its ambition (i.e., interests) and resolve to go to war.

Many thus have misinterpreted Munich as a case indicating that malignant intentions are hard to detect. These misinterpretations have prolonged some myths about Munich. A key outcome of these misinterpretations has been the hidden assumption behind offensive realism that because intentions are inherently difficult to gauge, states are better off by assuming the worst over others intentions and taking all compromises as 'appeasement'.<sup>182</sup> The Munich myth has thus powerfully prevented states from seeking cooperation

<sup>175</sup> With hindsight, Britain and France would have been better off by fighting in Munich rather than a year later when they did half-heartedly (W. Murray and A. R. Millett, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War*). Obviously, a more sound explanation is a combination of the second and third interpretations.

<sup>176</sup> Christopher Layne, 'Security Studies and the Use of History', pp. 404–405.

<sup>177</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, 'The Preventive War that Never Happened', p. 150.

<sup>178</sup> Andrew Barros, and Talbot C. Imlay, 'Correspondence', pp. 173–182.

<sup>179</sup> See also David M. Edelstein, 'Managing Uncertainty', p. 29.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problem of Peace, 1812–1822* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 2–3.

<sup>182</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 163–164; David M. Edelstein, 'Managing Uncertainty', Randall L. Schweller, 'Managing the Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory', in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 14; Randall L. Schweller and William Wohlforth, 'Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War', *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2000), p. 81.

via reassurance even though cooperation is as much a means of self-help as competition.<sup>183</sup>

## Theoretical Implications: Down with the Structural (Realism) Orthodoxy!

The most obvious implication from the preceding discussion is that we need to differentiate the various dimensions of uncertainty, approach them systematically and dynamically, and deploy them consistently to make our discussion clear, consistent, and useful: We cannot afford to retain too much ambiguity about uncertainty. In addition to this implication, our discussion has at least one key implication for theorizing IR.

Regarding states' motives or goals, classical realists from Thucydides to Morgenthau and Wolfers gave states (as collectives of individuals) a great deal of freedom to choose, from security, power, domination, to prestige and vanity.<sup>184</sup> After Waltz's<sup>185</sup> structuralism revolution, however, most realists and their critics accept the notion that states seek survival as the minimalist assumption with power being a means thus an intermittent goal toward security.<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, for most post-Waltz realists, goals (or motives) and intentions are somewhat independent of each other: motive is structure-driven (i.e., dictated by anarchy), whereas intentions are unit-level driven.<sup>187</sup> Thus, while every state wants more power and security; different states pursue the two goals with different (i.e., benign or malignant) strategies.

This Waltz-inspired orthodoxy is a useful heuristic device for theorizing state behavior and structural outcomes, up to a point.<sup>188</sup> Yet, this orthodoxy

<sup>183</sup> Charles L. Glaser, 'Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help'; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*; Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time*, chap. 5. Indeed, the enduring myth that Munich means that one has to stand firm earlier on because others' intentions are inherently to gauge reflects the power of the social evolutionary psychology of fear: we inherently pay more attention to negative events because we want to prevent a repeat of such events. For a more detailed discussion, see Shiping Tang, 'The Social Evolutionary Psychology of Fear (and Trust): Or why is international cooperation difficult?'.

<sup>184</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*.

<sup>185</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>186</sup> Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*; Jeffery W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy', pp. 128–161; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

<sup>187</sup> Robert Powell, 'Anarchy in International Relations Theory', pp. 313–344; Jeffery W. Taliaferro, 'Security Seeking under Anarchy', pp. 128–161; see also Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 91–92; Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy', pp. 497–538, esp. 499–502.

<sup>188</sup> Benjamin O. Fordham, 'The Limits of Neoclassical Realism: Additive and Interactive Approaches to Explaining Foreign Policy Preferences', in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 251–279.

is only a 'useful fiction',<sup>189</sup> not a 'miracle maker', to paraphrase MacDonald.<sup>190</sup> Because this orthodoxy is merely a 'useful fiction', it is ultimately debilitating and misleading for our effort to understand the real world and thus should be firmly rejected.

To begin with, although many believe that it is anarchy that dictates uncertainty over others' intentions, there is no inherent link between anarchy and uncertainty over others' intentions. Uncertainty over others' intentions is everywhere, including our daily life under a hierarchical state.

More critically, in the real world, states want not only abstract security and power, but more often than not, real material and symbolic stuff such as specific territory, measurable monetary gains, explicit voting share, face, prestige, and honor. Thus, in the real world, the abstract notion of security and power as goals is of only limited help for grasping states' actual motives. Statesmen (and everybody else) want to know that the other state wants this or that thing, not just some abstract thing such as 'security' or 'power'. Maintaining that states seek power and/or security robs much explanatory power for state behaviors that is inherently possessed by states' interests, embodied in Machiavelli's axiom (i.e., 'ends justify means'). Obviously, different goals often demand different capabilities, intentions, and resolve.

For understanding actual state behavior, we thus have to go down to states' specific interests. Clearly, it is impossible to understand why both North Korea and North Vietnam were so determined to achieve national reunification if we merely hold that states seek security and power. We need to admit that both Kim Il-sun and Ho Chi-minh were fierce nationalists and had a strong sense of destiny, and both men were leading two states that were powerfully driven by fervent nationalism, heralded by the rise of modern nation state and nationalism. Likewise, it is close to impossible to understand why American elites took North Korea's invasion of South Korea and North Vietnam's infiltration into South Vietnam as threat to America's national security without grasping that the enemy image of 'communism bloc' was already constructed before the two conflicts. Counterfactually, if American elite had constructed these two wars as war of national reunification, then they would have felt much less compelled to intervene.

An adequate understanding of state behavior, which is the professed aim of neoclassical realism, thus cannot continue to heed this structural

<sup>189</sup> Indeed, Waltz (*Theory of International Politics*, pp. 91–2) himself could not have been more explicit with the instrumental necessity of his assumptions, calling it 'a radical simplification made for the sake of constructing a theory.'

<sup>190</sup> Paul K. MacDonald, 'Useful Fiction or Miracle Maker: The Competing Epistemological Foundations of Rational Choice Theory', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (2003), pp. 551–565.

orthodoxy.<sup>191</sup> Indeed, rather than assuming the question away by assuming that states seek security and power, explaining motives (or interests, goals) as a major driver of states behavior should be a major task for students of IR. Without some understanding about what concrete goals drive states, there is no way that we can develop an adequate understanding of state behavior. Realists such as Glaser<sup>192</sup> and Schweller<sup>193</sup> made a good start in trying to bring all kinds of motives into the picture. But this is not enough. With Wolfers<sup>194</sup> fundamental insight that national security has an objective side and a subjective side, we must bring Copenhagen School and social constructivism into the picture. States' interests are not given by structure but rather constructed by elite (and to a much less extent, by the public) through speech acts in discourses.<sup>195</sup> And in this process, cultural factors can be readily brought into the picture, because social psychologists have demonstrated convincingly that cultural factors do influence social cognition, including attribution.<sup>196</sup> In this sense, the Copenhagen School and social psychology represent not (only) a challenge but a much needed rescue for structural realism (and structural constructivism) because they provide us with a channel for understanding states' interest.

Meanwhile, a key challenge for the psychological study of IR is to link psychological factors with big issues. On this front, constructivism's emphasis on identity and identity changes is an obvious trial field. Yet, much of the constructivism literature too has been very structural for years, ignoring psychological factors altogether. Unfortunately, whereas realism as a mostly materialism approach can somewhat afford to ignore the real processes of ideational change and ideas' transformational power in human society, constructivism cannot while preaching ideas' transformational power. Structural constructivism (without psychology) is thus an oxymoron. We need to bridge the gap between macro social (material and ideational) changes and psychological changes. Moreover, for all the processes emphasized by the Copenhagen School, social constructivism, and social psychology, from (de-)securitization, social learning, construction, to group identity, a key channel for them to influence states' definitions of goals and strategies is through domestic politics. Hence, to adequately

<sup>191</sup> For a recent collection of neoclassical realism works, see Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, State, and Foreign Policy*.  
<sup>192</sup> Charles L. Glaser, 'Political Consequences of Military Strategy', p. 507.

<sup>193</sup> Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for Profit', pp. 72–107.

<sup>194</sup> Arnold Wolfers, 'National Security' as an Ambiguous Symbol', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (1952), pp. 481–502.

<sup>195</sup> Ole Weaver, 'Securitization and De-Securitization', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz, eds., *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86.

<sup>196</sup> Richard E. Nisbett, Kaiping Peng, Incheol Choi, and Ara Norenzayan, 'Culture and Systems of Thought: Holistic Versus Analytic Cognition', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 108, No.2 (2001), pp. 291–310.



understand others' behavior, constructivism too needs to get down to domestic politics.

The structural orthodoxy has been a useful instrument for some limited tasks, it provides at best an incomplete and at worst a distorted picture of international politics. For 30 years, it had its run, but now it is time for us to make a decisive break with it.

## Conclusion: Attribution beyond IR

Uncertainty has rightfully occupied a central place in IR and the broader social sciences. In IR, a significant proportion of the existing discussion on uncertainty has been often underpinned by the social psychology literature on cognition, especially attribution. Yet, despite some recent important progress, the social psychology literature on attribution remains unsatisfactory for understanding real-world politics. The social psychology literature generally does not differentiate the five dimensions noted above, not to mention considering the dynamic interactions among the different dimensions. Moreover, situations of attribution in social psychology are experimentally controlled and they tend to be much simpler than real-world situations. As a result, existing discussion on uncertainty in IR tends to be under-differentiated, non-systemic, and static.

In this article, I advance a new theory of attribution in IR. The new theory advanced above also contributes to the broader social psychology literature on attribution in several ways. First, it lays out a more fine-grained picture of the various drivers of behavior. Second, it points to an approach toward attribution that integrates individualism and collectivism by acknowledging the simple fact that much of our attribution is conducted by individuals in the shadow of group dynamics. Third, it calls for a more systemic and dynamic approach toward attribution that brings individual and collective history, identity, and discourse into the discussion.

For a long time, IR theorists have not been shy in borrowing from the psychological literature. Unfortunately, the dialogue between social psychology and political sciences or sociology has mostly been a one-way affair: social psychologists have almost exclusively drawn inspirations from each other. Yet, social psychologists have a lot to gain by learning from and cooperating with political scientists and sociologists because the latter knows a lot about how individuals, from key decision makers to voters, think and act in *important* real-life situations. We thus need psychologists to draw from IR and the broader political sciences and sociology literature. After all, social psychology cannot expect to mature by working exclusively with college sophomores.

In order for the dialogue between social psychology and political sciences or sociology to become a two-way affair, we also need IR theorists (and

other social scientists) to formulate psychological theories that can be tested not only empirically but also experimentally. Only by doing so can IR theorists also contribute to social psychology, theoretically. This article takes a step in such a direction.<sup>197</sup>

<sup>197</sup> Lebow's recent reformulation of prospect theory points to a similar direction, see Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*.