

# Fear in International Politics: Two Positions

SHIPING TANG<sup>1</sup>

*S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University*

There are two—and only two—fundamental positions on how to cope with the fear that is derived from the uncertainty over others' intentions in international relations (IR) literature. Because these two positions cannot be deduced from other bedrock assumptions within the different IR approaches, the two positions should be taken as an additional bedrock assumption. The first position, held by offensive realism, insists that states should assume the worst over others' intentions, thus essentially eliminating the uncertainty about others' intentions. The second position, held by a more diverse bunch of non-offensive realism theories, insists that states should not always assume the worst over others' intentions and that states can and should take measures to reduce uncertainty about each others intentions and thus fear. These two different assumptions are quintessential for the logic of the different theoretical approaches and underpin some of the fundamental differences between offensive realism on the one side and non-offensive realism theories on the other side. Making the two positions explicit helps us understand IR theories and makes dialogues among non-offensive realism theories possible.

Fear for one's survival or fear of death (hereafter, fear) is the most fundamental psychological trait that biological evolution has endowed most high vertebrate species, including the *Homo sapiens*.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, fear has occupied a prominent place in the science of international politics since its very beginning.

---

<sup>1</sup>Shiping Tang is Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The author thanks Rajesh Basur, Robert Jervis, Andrew Kydd, Richard Ned Lebow, Gerald Geunwook Lee, two anonymous reviewers, and Jennifer Sterling-Folker of *International Studies Review* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. Special thanks go to Ned Lebow for sending a chapter of his unpublished book manuscript. Beatrice Berger provides excellent research assistance on the bibliography. The usual disclaimer applies.

<sup>2</sup>I use fear to specifically denote fear for one's survival (or security) that is partly underpinned the uncertainty about others' intentions (see below). This is important because many have used fear to refer things other than fear for survival. I thank Ned Lebow for reminding me to emphasize this point. Emphasizing that fear is the most fundamental psychological trait of *Homo sapiens* does not mean that fear is the dominant motive all the time: Interest and honor can certainly overtake fear to become the more important motive behind an individual or a state's action. Rather, I am arguing that even behind those behaviors with a strong interest- or honor-based motive, fear lurks just beneath. For a popular account about the psychology of fear, see De Becker (1997). For in-depth reviews on the evolutionary psychology of fear, see Öhman and Mineka (2001), Barrett (2005), and Duntley (2005). For an earlier importation of the psychology of fear into international politics, see Jervis (1976:372–378). Finally, although many have treated fear as part of "human nature," I refrain from engaging this literature because this literature remains under-developed. Elsewhere, I argue that human behavior is driven by factors at three different levels and that these factors also interact with other. As such, it is misleading to talk about "human nature" per se without first defining the three levels. The existing literature has yet to recognize this complex picture. For a recent review on "human nature in IR, see Mercer (2006). For a good history of the fear as a political idea in general, see Robin (2004). I do not deal with the manipulation of fear by actors for mobilization one's own population or coercing others. A good historical study of manipulating fear for "domestic mobilization" is Christensen (1996).

Thucydides (1954[~431 BC]:1.23) asserted in a much quoted passage, “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.” Moreover, Thucydides (ibid: 1.75) gave fear the leading position among the “three Great Things (fear, honor, and interest)” through the voice of Athenian speakers to the Spartan assembly: “It was the course of events which first compelled us to increase our power to its present extent: fear of Persia was our chief motive, though afterwards we thought, too, of our own honor and our own interest.”<sup>3</sup>

Fear is literally littered in Machiavelli’s *Princes* (1997[1532]), although he talked about fear in both international and domestic politics.

Thomas Hobbes (1982[1651]:xiii, 185–186, 188), re-discovering the “three Great Things” from ancient Greeks, treated appetite/gain/interest, fear/safety/security, and honor/prestige/glory as the three fundamental drivers of human behavior, although he failed to recognize that fear is the more fundamental of the three and our appetite for power is partially driven by our desire to overcome fear.<sup>4</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr (1960[1932]:18, 41–42) identified “will-to-power” as a means toward the ends of “will-to-survive (or live).” For Niebuhr, seeking power reflects men’s attempt to cope with fear, although he admitted that will-to-power and will-to-survive can be difficult to differentiate from each other.<sup>5</sup>

Herbert Butterfield (1951) and John Herz (1951) concurred with Niebuhr’s insight that our appetite for power is partially driven by our desire to overcome fear: individuals or states resort to the means of accumulating power because they fear each other. Butterfield and Herz further recognized an unfortunate and fundamentally tragic outcome of this dynamics. As two sides accumulate more power—which inevitably includes some power to harm each other, they actually generate more fear between them. This predicament is a security dilemma—the drive toward security ends in more insecurity.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Jervis (1976: chapter 3) underscores that fear, once aroused as a function of uncertainty about others’ intentions, can acquire a life of its own and become a powerful driver of the security dilemma and spiral. Fear, often reinforced by other psychological factors (for example, nationalism), leads a state to discount another state’s conciliatory gestures and adopt unnecessary hard-lined policies. As such, a spiral driven by a security dilemma can drive two states that have no intention to harm to each other into actual conflict, an unintended, self-defeating, and tragic result.

Kenneth Waltz (1979:105–106, 109, 165) attributes the source of fear to the structure of international politics. According to the now standard structural realism logic, because there is no central authority to enforce benign behavior (or cooperation) and intentions can change, states must fear the possibility that others may intend to do harm. For structural realism, one’s fear is a function of one’s uncertainty about others’ intentions and power.

<sup>3</sup>See also ibid, 1.76. Thucydides of course was not alone in emphasizing fear. Others included Socrates (through Plato), Plato, and Aristotle. I do not deal with the interaction between fear and other motives, including reason, which most Greek philosophers identified as an instrument to constrain other motives. For a more recent discussion, see Lebow (2006); and idem, unpublished book manuscript.

<sup>4</sup>Fear of death also drives human’s longing for immortality, although the latter is also partially driven by greed. For fear and immortality in Thucydides and Hobbes, see Ahrens Dorf (2000).

<sup>5</sup>Niebuhr, of course, adopted “will-to-power” from Friedrich Nietzsche. Critically, whereas Nietzsche treated “will to power” as a goal, Niebuhr treated “will to power” as the means toward the goal of survival. In contrast, Morgenthau’s *animus dominandi* was a more faithful adoption of Nietzsche’s “will to power” (Morgenthau 1946:16, 165–184). For a discussion on Nietzsche’s influence on Niebuhr and Morgenthau, see Craig (2003:10–11, 34, 54–58).

<sup>6</sup>Much of the existing literature on the security dilemma has not been rigorous enough. I elaborate on the security dilemma more rigorously and extensively elsewhere.

Because of the centrality of fear, how to cope with fear naturally becomes a central question in international politics.

In this article, I make it explicit that there are two—and only two—fundamental positions on how to cope with fear in international relations (IR) literature. The first position, held by offensive realism, insists that states *should* (and do) assume the worst over others' intentions, thus essentially eliminating the problem of uncertainty about others' intentions. The second position—held by a more diverse bunch that includes defensive realism, neoliberalism, and constructivism—insists that states *should not* (and do not) *always* assume the worst over others' intentions and that states can and should take measures to reduce uncertainty about each others intentions and thus fear.<sup>7</sup>

I further contend that these two positions cannot be deduced from other bedrock assumptions within the different theoretical approaches. As such, the two positions should be taken as an additional bedrock assumption in the different theoretical approaches. Most importantly, these two different assumptions are quintessential for the logic of the different theoretical approaches and underpin some of the fundamental differences between offensive realism on the one side and non-offensive realism theories on the other side. Making the two positions explicit thus helps us understand IR theories and the debate among different theoretical approaches.

The rest of the article is constructed as follows. I begin by revealing the two positions and their variants within the IR literature. I then underscore the critical role of the offensive realism position in driving the logic of offensive realism and the role of non-offensive realism position in driving the logic of non-offensive realism theories, respectively. Finally, I discuss the implications of these two fundamental positions. A brief conclusion follows.

### Coping with Fear: The Two Positions and Its Variants

In IR literature, there are two—and only two—positions on how to cope with the fear derived from the uncertainty over others' intentions: an offensive realism position and a non-offensive realism position.

Offensive realism holds that states should (and do) assume the worst over others' intentions. Offensive realism asserts that this worst-case assumption over others' intentions is absolutely necessary because states are inherently aggressive. Structural offensive realism holds that states become inherently aggressive due to anarchy (for example, Mearsheimer 1994–95:10n24, 2006:120),<sup>8</sup> whereas human nature offensive realism holds that states are inherently aggressive because *Homo sapiens* have an insatiable appetite/lust for power/dominance and/or prestige/glory (for example, Morgenthau 1946; Machivelli 1997[1532]). These two variants of the offensive realism position differ from each other only superficially (Brooks 1997:449–450).<sup>9</sup>

Despite important differences among them, *all* non-offensive realism theories reject the notion that states are inherently aggressive. As such, all non-offensive realism theories reject assuming the worst over others' intentions when trying to cope with the fear derived from the uncertainty over others' intentions and fear. Non-offensive realism theories argue that assuming the worst over others' intentions is irrational, unsustainable, and counterproductive, although they do admit that states may often assume the worst over each others' intentions due to fear,

<sup>7</sup>While there are other major theoretical strains or schools in international relations, the claim that there are only two positions on fear still holds because one of the two stands (that is, the offensive realism stand) is unconditional and the other (that is, the non-offensive realism stand) is conditional.

<sup>8</sup>For structural offensive realism, anarchy causes fear and demands the worst-case assumption over others' intentions for coping with fear. Here, one can smell logic circularity.

<sup>9</sup>As a matter of fact, Hobbes (1982[1651]) came close to combine these two positions together.

thus ending up in exacerbating fear (that is, fear is self-reinforcing). Non-offensive realism theories further argue that states can deploy a variety of means to reduce the uncertainty over others' intentions, thus alleviating their fear of each other (see below).

Alternatively, the two assumptions can also be framed as two opposite answers to the question whether there are any genuine benign states out there. For non-offensive realism theorists, there are, if not many (Wendt 1992; Glaser 1994:60, 67, 71–72; Jervis 1999). For offensive realists, there are few, if any (Mearsheimer 2001:29, 34).

Finally, the two stands can also be understood as two opposite answers to the problem of common or collective interest. The offensive realism stand holds that there is very little common interest among states except when states face a common enemy (Mearsheimer 2001:51–53; see also Wolfers 1951:40). The non-offensive realism stand holds that there is common interest among states even when they are not facing a common enemy, although different non-offensive realism approaches differ on how much common interest exists among states: defensive realism sees some common interest among states but not sure how much, whereas both neoliberalism and constructivism see quite a bit (see the discussion on cooperation below).

The differences between the two stands can be made more explicitly by writing the two stands a bit formally.

For calculating  $p_T$ , the probability that a state may pose threat against oneself (thus one's fear), non-offensive realism theories deploy the following function:<sup>10</sup>

$$p_T = f(\text{a state's offensive capabilities} \times \text{its resolve to do harm} \\ \times \text{its intentions to do harm})$$

In contrast, offensive realism assumes the worst over others' intentions (to do harm), thus making the probability of a state's intentions to do harm equal to one. Alternatively, offensive realism can argue that a state's intention is a function of its offensive capabilities—that is, a state will do harm when it believes it can prevail in a conflict (Mearsheimer 2001:43–45).<sup>11</sup> Either way, offensive realism writes the function for calculating  $p_T$  as the following:

$$p_T = f(\text{a state's offensive capabilities} \times \text{its resolve to do harm}).$$

With these two equations, it becomes clear that a widely accepted formulation of the differences between these two positions is underspecified thus misleading.

Brooks (1997:447–450) contends that offensive realism urges states to plan and act according to possibility, whereas defensive realism urges states to plan and act according to probability.<sup>12</sup> For Brooks, acting according to the worst-case scenario is equivalent to acting according to possibility, whereas not acting according to the worst-case scenario is equivalent to acting according to probability. Taliaferro essentially concurs: “Offensive realism assumes that the always-present possibility of conflict conditions states' behavior...Defensive realism assumes that the subjective probability of conflict conditions states' behavior.” (Taliaferro 2001:146; see also 152–158, esp. 153, 155) For these two theorists, the critical difference between the two positions is a question of possibility versus probability.

This formulation is under-specified thus misleading for two reasons.

<sup>10</sup>Hence, non-offensive realism theories do admit the possibility that an actor is benign simply because it is not powerful enough to be aggressive (for example, Wolfers 1951:48).

<sup>11</sup>Because one's resolve to do harm is essentially determined by its calculation of its probability of prevailing, one can further argue that one's resolve to do harm is also determined by its capabilities. For the discussion here, resolve can be ignored.

<sup>12</sup>Brooks also (mis-)labeled offensive realism as neorealism.

First, this formulation fails to recognize that offensive realism is also a probabilistic theory when it comes to estimating other states' capabilities and resolve. Offensive realism is a possibilistic theory *only* when it comes to estimating others' intentions.<sup>13</sup> As such, offensive realism is both possibilistic and probabilistic, not just possibilistic.

Second, even for a genuine benign state, the possibility that the other side may be malignant is always in the background of its calculation, and this possibility is something to be guarded against. In other words, even a genuine benign state reacts to possibility. Benign states, however, do not automatically assume the worst over others' intentions. Rather, they take measures to gauge others' intentions and act according to their estimation of others' intentions. Thus, non-offensive realism theories are also both possibilistic and probabilistic, not just probabilistic.

As such, there is no problem of possibility versus probability between offensive realism and non-offensive realism theories unless one specifies that the problem is about how to cope with the uncertainty over others' intentions.

### *The Offensive Realism Stand in Literature*

For offensive realism, states have to assume the worst over others' intentions. As such, when a state surveys its security environment, the probability that other states will pose a threat is a function of their capabilities (and resolve), conditioned by the other factors that can limit the exercise of their offensive capabilities (for example, polarity, geographical factors such as a large body of water, domestic politics). For offensive realism, when a state believes that it can do harm to you, it will—not just may.

All proponents of offensive realism, classic or modern, subscribe to this fundamental position, explicitly or implicitly.

Shang Yang (~390–339 BC), an important advisor to King Hui of the Kingdom of Qin (which eventually unified the heartland of today's China and formed the first Chinese empire in 221 BC), expounded the first explicit statement of the offensive realism position. For Shang Yang, states are inherently aggressive, and their aggressiveness is limited only by their capabilities: "In today's world, the powerful conquers, the weak defends...States with ten thousand chariots inevitably choose to conquer, and only states with only one thousand chariots defend." (Shang Yang ~390–339 BC:vii)<sup>14</sup>

Writing after Shang Yang, Kautilya in ancient India promulgated roughly the same doctrine of offensive realism in his *Arthashastra*. For Kautilya, not assuming the worst over others' intentions is a grave sin (Boesche 2003:18–19).

Applying neoclassical economics, Robert Gilpin (1981: chapter 1, 94–95) explicitly argued that war is purely a problem of cost–benefit calculation, which is largely determined by relative capabilities.

Despite emphasizing that domestic politics often limit states' exercise of their capabilities, Fareed Zakaria (1998:20) nonetheless asserts: "the best solution to the perennial problem of the uncertainty of international life is for a state to increase its control over that environment through the persistent expansion of

<sup>13</sup>Because most realism theories assumes states to be strategic or "rational" actor (for example, Mearsheimer 1994–95:10, 2001:21–22), and many understand "rational" to be acting according to probability, with possibility being an extreme expression of probability, Brooks' formulation seems extreme for many (for example, Copeland 2001:214–215). I thank Andy Kydd for discussion on this issue.

<sup>14</sup>While Thucydides wrote before Shang Yang and conveyed the same message through Athenian's voice (Thucydides:5.89), it is difficult to classify Thucydides. For an interesting discussion on reading Thucydides, see Welch (2003). All translations of the work of Shang Yang (*Shang Jun Shu* or *The Books of Lord Shang*) are mine. An earlier translation of *The Books of Lord Shang* by J. J. L. Duyvendak (London: Probsthain, 1928) is available electronically from: [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/duyvendak\\_jjl/B25\\_book\\_of\\_lord\\_shang/duyvlord.rtf](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/duyvendak_jjl/B25_book_of_lord_shang/duyvlord.rtf).

its political interests abroad—but only when the benefits exceed the costs.” Here, Zakaria implicitly assumes the worst over states’ intentions: a state will expand when it feels that it can, with its calculations being conditioned only by international and domestic constraints.<sup>15</sup> And a bit later, Zakaria (1998:32) states it explicitly: “The classical realist contention that a nation’s relative capabilities determine its intention is a simple, powerful hypothesis.”

More recently, Mearsheimer (2001:45; emphasis added) advances the clearest statement of the offensive realism position. He writes, “The level of fear between great powers varies with changes in the distribution of power, not with assessments about each other’s intentions...*When a state surveys its environment to determine which states pose a threat to its survival, it focuses mainly on the offensive capabilities of potential rivals, not their intentions...Intentions are ultimately unknowable, so states worried about their survival must make worst-case assumptions about their rivals’ intentions.*” (See also Mearsheimer 2006:120) For Mearsheimer, while states’ behavior is conditioned by the amount of fear that they have for each other and the amount of fear varies; the amount of fear varies only according to the distribution of power, not according to others’ changing intentions.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, in addition to the more explicit statements mentioned above, some proponents of offensive realism have advanced the assumption implicitly. For instance, Machivelli (1997[1532]:18–19) noted, “There is no secure way to possess them [other states] other than ruin.” In a similar vein, Labs (1997:11) asserts, “states will seek to maximize relative power because they cannot be sure when or where the next threat will arise.” Obviously, a worst-case assumption over others’ intentions lies beneath both statements.

### *The Non-Offensive Realism Stand in Literature*

Non-offensive realism theories believe that states are not inherently aggressive: there are genuinely benign states out there although the exact number of such states is unknown. Non-offensive realism theories thus warn against assuming the worst over others’ intentions, on either instrumental or moral grounds or both. They further argue that because fear is a function of uncertainty about others’ intentions, states should and can try to alleviate their fear of each other by reducing uncertainty through reassurance or other means (Glaser 1992, 1994–95; Wendt 1999:357–363; Kydd 2005:16–18; Montgomery 2006; Tang 2007).

Jervis (1976:64–65) was perhaps the first to recognize the danger of assuming the worst over others’ intentions, identifying the assumption as a major factor that exacerbates the security dilemma/spiral (see also Wheeler and Booth 1992:40). Along the same line, Charles Glaser (1997:197–198) explicitly warns against thinking according to worst-case analysis: “The core logic of the security dilemma makes clear that worst-case analysis can be self-defeating.” Richard Betts (1978:74) similarly warns, “Operationalizing worst-case analysis requires extraordinary expenses, its risks being counterproductive if it is effective (by provoking enemy countermeasures or preemption) and it is likely to be ineffective because routinization will discredit it.”

From a more moral perspective, Robert Keohane (1993:282) argues that if states do let mere possibilities determine their behavior, “they would behave like paranoids, to their cost.” Without differentiating offensive realism from defensive realism, Alexander Wendt (1992:404) rejects assuming the worst over others’ intentions: “[Offensive] realists would probably argue that each should act on the basis of worst-case assumptions about the other’s intentions, justifying such an attitude as prudent in view of the possibility of death from making a

<sup>15</sup>For a similar interpretation of Zakaria’s logic, see Lynn-Jones 1998:161–162.

<sup>16</sup>For another reading into the variation of the level of fear in Mearsheimer’s theory, see Lee (2002–03:200n14).

mistake...However, society would be impossible if people made decisions purely on the basis of worst-case possibilities. Instead, most decisions are and should be made on the basis of probabilities..." More recently, Wendt (1999:107–109, 281) explicitly deems the worst-case assumption over others' intentions as undesirable because it generates a self-fulfilling prophecy of competitive self-help. Even Jervis (1999:44) now dismisses zero-sum calculation—which is equivalent to the worst-case assumption—as "implausible."

In addition to explicitly rejecting the worst assumption over states' intentions, non-offensive realism theories' also reject the assumption implicitly. This is most evident in their discussion on cooperation under anarchy.

All non-offensive realism theorists believe that cooperation under anarchy is possible (for example, Jervis 1978, 1988, 1999; Keohane 1984; Wendt 1992; Glaser 1994–95). The optimistic stand on cooperation critically depends on rejecting the worst assumption over states' intentions. This is best illustrated by their embracing of Robert Axelrod's logic of cooperation as part of their argument (Axelrod 1984).

For instance, when Jervis (1988:319) asserts that game theoretical modeling of cooperation with (repeated) prisoner's dilemma game captures the essence of international politics (that is, anarchy, the security dilemma, and the combination of common and conflicting interests), he clearly has Axelrod's work in mind. Likewise, Keohane's discussion of cooperation heavily relies on Axelrod's work (Keohane 1984: chapter 5; see also Axelrod and Keohane 1985). Finally, when contending that states can interact to achieve a cooperative identity and thus (re-)make anarchy, Wendt (1992:416) also relies on Axelrod's work, especially the winning strategy of "tit-for-tat."

In *Evolution of Cooperation*, Axelrod (1984) explores the strategies for achieving cooperation among egoistic individuals via a computer tournament, and he assumes a world of egoistic individuals without central authority as the environment of the tournament. While Axelrod (1984:3–4) believes that this setting captures some important aspects of international politics,<sup>17</sup> his setting clearly cannot capture the essence of an offensive realism world in which all or most states are malignant. In Axelrod's world, players are just egoistic but not aggressive (and they cannot become aggressive), and they face no danger of death. By suggesting that this picture captures the essence of international politics, Axelrod implicitly assumes that players are not inherently aggressive and rejects the worst-case assumption over others' intentions.

Looking more closely, modeling the problem of cooperation as (repeated) prisoners' dilemma game necessitates rejecting the notion that states are inherently aggressive. The PD game explicitly assumes some common interest between the two players. Yet, between two malignant states, there is no real common interest among players other than when facing a common threat (Mearsheimer 2001:52–53). As such, in an offensive realism world in which all or most states are malignant, there are few, if any PD games, only deadlocks.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, by embracing Axelrod's logic as a critical foundation for building their respective theories of cooperation in international politics, all non-offensive

<sup>17</sup>Axelrod (1984:3–4, 150–154) clearly had international politics in mind when he wrote his book, as indicated clearly in his introduction and his discussion on deterrence.

<sup>18</sup>Indeed, Axelrod's enterprise cannot even capture the essence of a defensive realism world in which most states are benign or defensive realist states. Even in a defensive realism world, states face the problem of life and death. In contrast, in Axelrod's tournament, players do not face the problem of life and death. Axelrod's insights thus cannot be directly applied to international politics. Moreover, Axelrod's enterprise models cooperation and conflict among egoistic individuals, not among egoistic groups such as ethnic groups, nations, or states. Yet, interactions among groups often have very different dynamics from those among individuals (for an earlier review, see Tajfel 1982).

realism theorists implicitly reject the notion that states are inherently aggressive or the worst-case assumption over others' intentions.

### **The Offensive Realism Position in Action**

In this section, I show that the worst-case assumption over others' intentions is essential for the logic of offensive realism. Without it, much of the offensive realism logic cannot operate.

#### *Mearsheimer's (Magic) "Sixth Element"*

Mearsheimer claims that his theory is based on only five bedrock assumptions.<sup>19</sup> After admitting that "none of these [five] assumptions alone dictates that great powers as a general rule should behave aggressively toward each other," Mearsheimer then asserts, "when the five assumptions are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard to each other." (Mearsheimer 2001:30–32; see also Mearsheimer 1994–95:10–11)

Yet, logically, it is impossible for Mearsheimer to deduce that states must resort to offensive behaviors from his five bedrock assumptions.

Once the assumption that states are inherently aggressive or the worst-case assumption over others' intentions—dictated by anarchy according to Mearsheimer—is inserted into Mearsheimer's framework, however, offensive behaviors become logically necessary. When other states are assumed to be inherently aggressive, to sit still and wait for others to strike (that is, to adopt a defensive strategy) is equivalent to suicide: even if you are more powerful than other states, they will accumulate their capabilities (through growth and conquest) while you sit and then come back to strike on you. In a world full of inherently aggressive states, you either conquer and expand or be conquered and expended.<sup>20</sup>

This worst-case assumption about others' intentions is vital for Mearsheimer to make the jump from uncertainty about others' intentions/fear to necessary aggression. This is most evident in Mearsheimer's defense of his theory: "[S]tates cannot discern the intentions of other states with a high degree of confidence. Moreover, it is almost impossible to know the future intentions of other states. Therefore, leaders have little choice but to assume the worst case about other great powers' intentions." (Mearsheimer 2006:120; see also 121–123, 231–234) This worst-case assumption over others' intention is Mearsheimer's sixth assumption, his "Sixth Element."

Below, I highlight two cases in which the worst-case assumption over others' intentions does the magic trick for Mearsheimer's theory.

#### *The Security Dilemma*

The worst-case assumption over others' intentions is what allows Mearsheimer to stuff the security dilemma, long believed to be the exclusive privilege of defensive realism, into his offensive realism.<sup>21</sup>

Jeffrey Taliaferro (2000–01):131, 136 argues that whether a theory admits the security dilemma is an important demarcation line between offensive realism and defensive realism: the former denies, whereas the latter admits, the existence of the security dilemma. Yet, Mearsheimer not only admits that the security

<sup>19</sup>Mearsheimer's five bed assumptions are: (1) the international system is anarchic, (2) states inherently possess some offensive military capabilities, (3) state can never be certain about other states' intentions, (4) survival is the primary goal of states, and (5) states are rational actors (Mearsheimer 2001:30–31).

<sup>20</sup>Here, the logic of preventive war becomes all too apparent. See below.

<sup>21</sup>The security dilemma has been dubbed, *inter alia*, "a staple of defensive realist analysis" and "the ace in the hole" of defensive realism (Schweller 1996:116; Kydd 1997:116). Undoubtedly, the security dilemma is central to the logic of defensive realism (Glaser 1994–95:54).



dilemma is an intractable and prevalent feature of international politics, but actually turns the security dilemma to bolster his offensive realism, claiming: "The security dilemma...reflects the basic logic of offensive realism." (Mearsheimer 2001:35–36; see also Mearsheimer 2006:121)

Sensing there must be something wrong in Mearsheimer's usurpation of the security dilemma, Glenn Snyder (2002:155–157) charges that Mearsheimer has bended the security dilemma into his offensive realism without realizing that the security dilemma does not really fit with his offensive realism (see also Stirk 2005:288, 299). Specifically, Snyder charges that because the security dilemma requires both sides to be benign to exist and yet all states are aggressive in Mearsheimer's world, there is no security dilemma in his world, only a lot of security competition.

This criticism is relevant, but it does not get to the heart of the problem.

Facing such a superficial attack, Mearsheimer has an easy defense. Mearsheimer (2006:121–123) claims that since he does not assume states to be hostile against each other *at the very beginning*, but only argues that states are driven to be hostile against each other by the combinations of his five bedrock assumptions (perhaps plus the logic of the security dilemma), his understanding of the security dilemma is fully consistent with Herz's understanding of the concept.

Because a security dilemma ceases to operate as soon as one or both states become aggressive (Schweller 1996),<sup>22</sup> the security dilemma exists extremely briefly in Mearsheimer's world: According to Mearsheimer (2001: chapter 2) all states quickly realize that aggression is the only viable means toward security. Because the security dilemma exists extremely briefly in Mearsheimer's world, Mearsheimer is then free to prescribe behaviors that are diametrically opposite to what non-offensive realism approaches will prescribe for coping with the security dilemma.

Non-offensive realism theories see the primary implication of the security dilemma as that states can alleviate the security dilemma through reassurance and cooperation. Here, their rejection of assuming the worst over states' assumption is also crucial (see below). If states are assumed to be inherently aggressive, there is no rationale to try cooperation because other states are surely to take advantage of your benign behaviors: the worst-case assumption about others' intentions will render the security dilemma un-ameliorable. Only if one believes that other states are not inherently aggressive (that is, the other side may be benign), can one consider the option of alleviating a possible security dilemma via reassurance cooperation.

In contrast, Mearsheimer (2001:34, 40–42) argues that the primary implication of the security dilemma is that aggression is the only rational behavior. When states believe that their security requires aggressive behaviors, they have to intentionally threaten each other. Consequently, conflict of interest among states is inherently irreconcilable, and little can be done to alleviate the vicious relationship—which is not a genuine security dilemma—between them. Under such a situation, the only viable means to achieve security is to try to *escape from* it by eliminating all other states (that is, becoming a world empire), or at least becoming a regional hegemon when the first option is impossible.

Obviously, the key here is that Mearsheimer has smuggled in the worst-case assumption over others' intentions as his sixth assumption (Mearsheimer 2001:45; see also Mearsheimer 2006:120). The worst-case assumption over others' intentions allows Mearsheimer to assert that his employment of the security dilemma does not contradict Butterfield and Herz, and more importantly, that security dilemma actually supports the basic logic of offensive realism.

<sup>22</sup>Herz (1961:234n5) first pointed out that when facing a Hitler, there is no security dilemma.

In summary, Mearsheimer can only claim that the security dilemma actually reflects the basic logic of offensive realism because any genuine security dilemma will be quickly turned into a false security dilemma in his world. As such, the security dilemma has a distinctively superficial value in Mearsheimer's theory. After all, by insisting the worst-case assumption over others' intentions, Mearsheimer also eliminates the uncertainty over others' present and future intentions that is indispensable for a security dilemma to operate (Butterfield 1951; Herz 1951; Jervis 1976: chapter 3).

Indeed, in his earlier works (for example, Mearsheimer 1990:11–12, Mearsheimer 1994–95:9–12), Mearsheimer was “implicitly arguing that the security dilemma does not exist or at least that it should never constrain states,” (Glaser 1997:195–196) and his offensive realism operates just fine then.<sup>23</sup> As long as Mearsheimer admits the worst-case assumption over others' intentions, his logic of offensive realism can flow: his deployment of the security dilemma in his theory is thus an unnecessary rhetorical exercise.

### *The Time Horizon*

The worst-case assumption over others' intentions is also what allows Mearsheimer to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable contradiction over the problem of time horizon in his theory.

According to Mearsheimer (2001: chapter 2), because states believe that conflict can happen any time (that is, conflict is inevitable), they must have a very long time-horizon when preparing for conflict. At the same time, however, states must also have a very short time-horizon when considering whether to forge cooperation: States will forego cooperation with other states in order to prevent any possible loss in relative power that may be used against them in a future conflict. Obviously, there is a contradiction over the problem of time-horizon here (Lee 2002–03).<sup>24</sup>

Yet, once the worst-case assumption over others' intentions is taken into account, this seemingly irreconcilable contradiction disappears. Because states are inherently aggressive, one must constantly prepare for the inevitable conflict by accumulating more and more power. And precisely because one must constantly prepare for the inevitable conflict by accumulating more and more power, one must forsake cooperation if another state is set to gain relative advantage from a possible cooperation. A state thus has the strange mix that it heavily discounts future when planning for the present cooperation but simultaneously acts with a very long time horizon when planning for the future conflict: it is bipolar. But this bipolarity is totally logical when a state assumes the worst over others' intentions: a state's (both short-term and long-term) fear for its survival demands short-term rejection of cooperation whenever it may lose (relative) power. Mearsheimer (1994–95:11, 2001:33) puts it well: “If a state loses in the short run, it might not be around for the long haul.”

Once again, the worst-case assumption over others' intentions is what resolves the seemingly contradiction on the problem of time-horizon in Mearsheimer's theory. “[Offensive realism's view] that states heavily discount the future follows not from the anarchic nature of international system per se, but rather reflects the theory's assumption that states are shaped by the mere possibility of conflict and hence seek to be prepared for all contingencies regarding the short-term use of force by potential rivals.” (Brooks 1997:450)<sup>25</sup> In fact, this problem of time-horizon can be only resolved by the worst-case assumption about others' intentions. The “Sixth Element” did the magic trick again.

<sup>23</sup>Similarly, while Zakaria (1998) cites Jervis' seminal paper on the security dilemma (Jervis 1978), the security dilemma has no role in Zakaria's theory.

<sup>24</sup>Brooks (1997:450–455) came very close to detect this contradiction too.

<sup>25</sup>For shortcomings of Brooks' formulation, see the discussion above.

### Summary

Mearsheimer's offensive realism thus vitally depends upon the worst-case assumption over others' intentions: the assumption does the magic trick in driving the logic of his offensive realism and allows him to jump from anarchy to rational aggression.<sup>26</sup> The worst-case assumption over others' intentions is his sixth bed-rock assumption, his (magic) "Sixth Element."

### *The Logic of Preventive War from Thucydides to Copeland*

Preventive war is war that is mostly propelled by one's fear that it is better to fight now than later because one's capabilities are now in relative decline versus one's potential opponents (Levy 1987).

Thucydides (1954[~431 BC]:1.23) first alluded to the logic of preventive war: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." Since then, various offensive realists have either advocated for preventive war or advanced the logic of preventive war. Again, it can be shown that the worst-case assumption over others' intentions underpins the logic of preventive war, although often implicitly.

Shang Yang expounded the first explicit statement on preventive war. For Shang Yang, because states are inherently aggressive and their aggressiveness is limited only by their capabilities, states have either to expand or be expended. In such a world, only (preventive) war can prevent war. "To prevent war with war is just." (Shang Yang ~390–339 BC:xviii). Likewise, Kautilya argued that states must expand and attack whenever an opportunity arises because all states are inherently aggressive (Boesche 2003).

The logic of preventive war is just beneath the surface of Mearsheimer's theory. Mearsheimer (2001:34–35) writes, "The claim that states maximize relative power is tantamount to arguing that states are disposed to think offensively toward other states, even though their ultimate motive is simply to survive...The best way to ensure security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibilities of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system."<sup>27</sup> Because every opportunity of expansion and conquest is a valuable chance for accumulating relative power and a state can never know how much relative power it will need in the future, a state should seek and grab every possible (real or imagined) opportunity of expansion and conquest to increase its relative power versus other states in the system. Thus, when Mearsheimer's logic is pushed to its logical conclusion, *every war in his offensive realism world is a preventive war*. Because every state can potentially become a formidable opponent, trying to eliminate other potential competitors and becoming a universal empire or at least a regional hegemon is the only secure way toward security.

Dale Copeland advances a sophisticated theory of preventive war. Initially, Copeland (2000:4) identifies the uncertainty about others' present and future intentions as an important driver of his theory, and the uncertainty seems to occupy a central place in his theory. Eventually, however, he 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 systemic distribution of power (that is, polarity). Once

<sup>26</sup>Mislabeling offensive realism as neorealism, Brooks (1997:449) similarly noted, "Although this worst-case/possibilistic view is only an assumption, it plays a pivotal-although usually unrecognized-role in neorealist theory." Brooks did not elaborate further.

<sup>27</sup>Mearsheimer's logic must also mean that even non-great powers have aggressive intentions: they are not aggressive simply because they lack (offensive) capabilities, not because they are benign.

again, a state's calculus for preventive war is a purely cost-benefit calculation (although a more sophisticated one), and the other state's intentions have no role what so ever in one's calculation.

As such, Copeland also contends that states' aggressiveness is strictly determined by their estimation of their probabilities of prevailing in the conflict, which is ultimately determined by material factors that constrain their exercise of their offensive capabilities. Copeland thus also implicitly assumes the worst over others' intentions. His position is no different from Mearsheimer's position that one's level of fear is almost exclusively determined by others' offensive capabilities or Zakaria's position that a state's aggressiveness is conditioned only by its leaders' perception of relative power (Zakaria 1998:20-22; Mearsheimer 2001:45).

In contrast, because non-offensive realism theories reject assuming the worst over others' intentions, they essentially reject the logic of preventive war, unless under extreme circumstances.<sup>28</sup> Non-offensive realism theories believe that preventive war is usually irrational and counterproductive for three operational reasons. First, the perceived window of opportunity that underpins the rationale for launching a preventive war may be false. If so, launching a preventive war may prove to be self-defeating. Second, launching preventive war without providing conclusive evidence that another state is going to attack imminently carries heavy diplomatic costs: a state that does so will not be able to gain allies in the future because other states will deem the state as not only fundamentally unreliable as an ally but also inherently threatening (Lebow 1984; Reiter 1995:25-28, 33).<sup>29</sup> Third, because defense usually holds advantage over offense (Snyder 1985:158; Van Evera 1999), it is better for a state to defend than to attack for the sake of its security.

### The Unifier among Non-Offensive Realism Theories

Because non-offensive realism theories are a diverse bunch, they often disagree vehemently without recognizing the commonalities among them. I now show the three major non-offensive realism theories are united on at least one front: all of them reject the worst-case assumption over others' intentions.

Admittedly, some defensive realists might have implied a worst-case assumption over others' intentions carelessly. For instance, although Waltz ultimately came down as a defensive realist (Labs 1997:8),<sup>30</sup> he seems to suggest that *anarchy alone* dictates "a strong sense of peril and doom" (Waltz 1979:109), thus hinting that anarchy dictates the worst-case assumption over others' intentions.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Snyder and Diesing (1977:188) noted: "The anarchic nature of the international system... induces a conservative tendency to think of the future in the worst possible or worst plausible cause terms." Finally, Barry Posen (1993:46n3)

<sup>28</sup>A benign state may consider preemptive strike when it is almost absolutely sure: (1) it is facing an incorrigibly aggressive state and the latter is close to attack (At this point, it is difficult to tell whether the war is preventive or preemptive, or both), (2) the first strike advantage is potentially enormous, (3) the relative power of the benign state is in rapid decline comparing to the offensive realism state. Because these circumstances will be hard to come by (Britain and France when facing Hitler's Germany before 1939 was perhaps the only case in modern time), a benign state rarely launches preventive war. I address this problem of preemptive war in detail elsewhere.

<sup>29</sup>Hence, resorting to preventive or preemptive war must also mean that a state discounts the (future) utility of alliance (Snyder 1985:160-161). Such a stand is again more consistent with offensive realism (Mearsheimer 2001:29). See also the discussion above.

<sup>30</sup>For instance, Waltz (1979:109n), like Jervis (1988:319), also believed that the Prisoner's Dilemma game captures much of the essence of international politics.

<sup>31</sup>Thus, many noted that Waltz "straddles the defensive-offensive realism fence." (Labs 1997:8) For other criticisms of Waltz's inconsistencies, see Zakaria (1992:194n43, 1998:29-30) and Wendt (1999:104-107, 249). For conflicting interpretations of where Waltz stands between offensive realism and defensive realism, see Snyder (1991:12n36) and Kydd (2005:14n14).

stated that “the emergence of anarchy forces leaders to focus on military potential, rather than on intention. As such, the difficult problem of intention is treated as ‘a capabilities problem’.”

Meanwhile, non-realism theorists generally tend to conflate offensive realism and defensive realism, failing to appreciate the two realisms’ fundamentally different stands on whether states should assume the worst over others’ intentions.

For instance, countering Mearsheimer’s offensive realism thesis against international institutions, Keohane and Martin (1995:43–44) wrote: “Realist security arguments [...] often rely on worst-case analysis. Realists contend that in an uncertain, anarchic world, states must assume the worst, particularly about others’ intentions, when making policy choices.” Similarly, Wendt (1992:404) argued that “realists would probably argue that each should act on the basis of worst-case assumptions about the other’s intentions,” and that “states make worst-case assumptions about each other’s intentions under the security dilemma.” (Wendt 1995:73) Wendt’s mistake was then repeated by Paul Roe. “Neorealist writers claim that the anarchical nature of the international system forces states to assume a worst-case scenario.” (Roe 1999:185) “The logic of the security dilemma assumes a worst-case scenario which provokes an action-reaction dynamic between the parties involved.” (Roe 2004:283) None of these critics of realism bothered to notice that Jervis (1976:64–65) and Glaser (1997:197–198) have explicitly warned against the danger of assuming the worst over others’ intention under a security dilemma.

Once the two positions on how to cope with the fear derived from the uncertainty over others’ intention are made explicit, it becomes clear that the three major non-offensive realism approaches are unified by a fundamental common stand: All three approaches reject assuming the worst over others’ intentions. Moreover, their common stand is also crucial for their logic—it makes their logic possible (although not necessarily coherent and consistent). If states are assumed to be inherently aggressive, the logic of these non-offensive realism theories cannot operate. This is most obvious when it comes to these approaches’ stand on common interest and cooperation.

Let’s begin with defensive realism. For defensive realism, there is real and significant common interest between two benign states, such as avoiding arms race and unnecessary war (Jervis 1999:44–50). As such, when facing a fellow benign state, a defensive realist state can cooperate with it to alleviate the security dilemma, although cooperation under the security dilemma is difficult (Jervis 1978; Glaser 1994–95). Even when facing a state with its intention unknown, a benign state can signal its own benign intention and gauge the other state’s intention through reassurance and cooperation-building (Glaser 1994–95; Kydd 2000, 2005; Tang 2007).

Here, in order for states to initiate some kind of signaling or cooperation, a state must not assume the worst about others’ intentions. Instead, it must believe that the other state *may* be benign and thus it makes sense to find out (whether the other side is really benign) through costly signals (Kydd 2005). If a state assumes the worst over others’ intentions, it will not try cooperation or reassurance. Hence, if defensive realism admits the worst-case assumption over others’ intentions, its logic for reassurance and cooperation cannot operate.

Neoliberalism argues that states can set up international institutions to facilitate and regulate cooperation among them. Yet, if states assume each other to be inherently aggressive, they will not even initiate cooperation. When states assume each other to be inherently aggressive, they are denying of the existence of real common interest among them. Moreover, knowing that the other side will surely take advantage of your cooperative gestures makes any cooperative gesture irrational (and potentially very risky). As such, there will be no repeated

cooperation, and cooperative institutions cannot form. Rejecting assuming the worst over others' intentions is crucial for neoliberalism's core logic.

Constructivism argues that states' identity is malleable (Wendt 1992). Yet, when states assume each other to be inherently aggressive, they are essentially fixing each other with an identity of "predator," and they will not try to—thus cannot—alter each other's "predator" identity. Thus, if constructivism admits the worst-case assumption over others' intentions, its whole logic cannot operate because no (re-)construction of identity among states will be possible. Moreover, like neoliberalism, constructivism sterling also explicitly or implicitly assumes much common interest among states (Sterling-Folker 2000:105–110), and the presence of common interest is prerequisite for any state to try cooperation. Once again, rejecting assuming the worst over others' intentions is crucial for constructivism's core logic.

Fundamentally, non-offensive realism theories are united against the offensive realism position that states are inherently aggressive, and *they merely differ on how best to cope with uncertainty and fear*. Defensive realism stresses cooperation through costly signaling of benign intentions or reassurance (Glaser 1994–95; Kydd 2000, 2005; Tang 2007). Institutionalism emphasizes institutions for facilitating and enforcing cooperation (for example, Keohane 1984; Axelrod and Keohane 1985). Constructivism accentuates changing states' identities and forging a common/cooperative identity (Adler 1991; Wendt 1992). Yet, these different approaches for coping with fear should not and, indeed cannot, be mutually excluding. For one thing, it is simply difficult to see how cooperative institutions can emerge without some reassurance-driven cooperation *beforehand*, and it is even more difficult to image how a common and cooperative identity can emerge without some cooperative institutions *beforehand*.<sup>32</sup> Thus, when properly understood, non-offensive realism approaches are more similar and interconnected than their proponents have been willing to admit. As such, a dialogue among them is not only possible but also potentially profitable.

Indeed, some convergences among non-offensive realism approaches are already apparent. While most defensive realists still do not give much weight to institutions in facilitating and enforcing cooperation (for example, Glaser 1994–95; Kydd 2005; Montgomery 2006), some institutionalists are now emphasizing that in addition to the function of providing information, reducing transaction cost, stabilizing expectations, facilitating commitment, detecting and collectively punishing (thus also deterring) defections, international institutions also facilitate signaling and reading intentions.

Examining the early history of the Cold War, Seth Weinberger (2003) emphasizes that working inside the framework of the United Nations, the United States were able to credibly signal its benign intentions toward Stalin's Soviet Union and to read Stalin's malignant intentions. Examining the attempt to end ethnic conflict in southern Philippines, Hoddie and Hartzell (2005) pointed out that negotiating possible post-conflict institutions is an important venue for former foes to signaling their benign intentions and commitment to a lasting post-conflict settlement. Finally, Ikenberry (2001) argue that international institutions are better means of exercising American power. By channeling power through institutions, the United States after World War II has been exercising strategic restraint, thus making its overwhelming power less threatening and more assuring to other states in the system. As a result, other states are more willing to work with the United States, rather than try to balance against its overwhelming power.

These contributions from institutionalists all point to the same theme that international institution is just another—although a "nicer" kind—instrument

<sup>32</sup>Sterling-Folker (2000:110–113) makes the same point, insisting that neoliberalism has an inherent possibility of identity transformation (for the good, of course).

of statecraft for coping with fear (Jervis 1999:53–58). As such, these “instrumental” institutionalists’ stand on institutions has very little difference from some defensive realism’s stand on institutions: the differences between neoliberalism and defensive realism have been vastly exaggerated (Jervis 1999:45).

Unfortunately, constructivism has not produced that many strong empirical studies to support its core argument that identity can be re-shaped to end and prevent conflict: “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt 1992). Most of the existing studies labeled either as culturalist or constructivist merely emphasizes that ideas shape policies, and they are not enough to support constructivism’s core claim that anarchy can be (re-)made through reshaping identity. This lack of strong empirical studies for its core claim should worry constructivists because it may turn out to be constructivism’s Achilles’ heel: a research approach without much empirical support for its core claim eventually degenerates.<sup>33</sup> Here, perhaps examining the process of reconciliation between two former rivals may be a good place for constructivism to get started.<sup>34</sup> Because rivalry is the most intense type of international conflicts that anarchy produces and the two states in the conflict harbor deep antagonism against each other (Goertz and Diehl 1993; Thompson 1995), reconciliation between former rivals should be a hard test for the constructivist claim. If constructivists can demonstrate that states can indeed remake the rivalries into a durable foundation of structural peace and identity-reshaping is an integral part of the process, constructivism would then have built a compelling case for its core claim that anarchy can be (re-)made. At the very least, if two states can transform their relationship from outright hostility to durable peace while the international system remains anarchic; offensive realism’s stand that conflicts inevitably follow from anarchy will be seriously undermined. More likely than not, constructivism may also find out that two former foes can only overcome the fear (and hostility) for each other and finally re-construct a new identity and relationship by a combination of reassurance, tentative cooperation, and institutionalization of (repeated) cooperation.

### Implications

Making the two positions more explicit helps us understand some of the important debates in IR theory.

In the debate on cooperation, offensive realism contends that cooperation, other than temporary alliance when facing a common threat, is extremely difficult, if not impossible because of states’ concern for relative gains, the temptation to cheat, and the high cost of being cheated (Grieco 1988; Mearsheimer 2001:51–53).<sup>35</sup> In order to sustain his argument that cooperation is impossible under anarchy, Mearsheimer further denies that benign intentions can be signaled (Mearsheimer 2006:231–234). Yet, this whole exercise is superficial and redundant for offensive realism.

When states are assumed to be inherently aggressive, there is no rationale to even try cooperation unless facing a common threat. When the other side is

<sup>33</sup>Sadly, many leading proponents of constructivism have been content with the increasingly unproductive debate on purely ontological and epistemological terms.

<sup>34</sup>Reconciliation is the process through which former opponents reshape their hostile relationship into a stable peace (Akerman 1994).

<sup>35</sup>Waltz (1979:105) first stressed that states’ concern for relative gains from cooperation will make cooperation difficult, if not impossible. Waltz’s statement was a bit deceptive. By stating “when faced with the possibility of cooperation for mutual gain, states that *feel insecure* must ask how the gain will be divided” (Waltz 1979:105; emphasis added), he seems to imply that *some* states (those that feel secure) will not be concerned with relative gains. Yet, because states can never feel completely secure under anarchy, his statement *must* mean that *all* states must always be concerned with relative gains (Schweller 1996:102). Schweller (1996:109–110), a self-proclaimed offensive realist, called the debate on relative versus absolute gain “artificial.” A recent survey among IR scholars ranked this debate as the most unproductive debate in the past two decades (Peterson, Tierney, and Maliniak 2005:27–28).

inherently aggressive, it will surely defect and take advantage of your nice gesture. Meanwhile, because you are also aggressive, you will not initiate cooperation in the first place. As such, it is only natural that cooperation is highly unlikely—if not totally impossible—in an offensive realism world. Moreover, when states are assumed to be inherently aggressive, states have no benign intentions to signal to begin with and no states will be so insensible to even try signaling benign intentions. By the same token, no states will be naïve enough to believe in others' signals of benign intentions. As such, in an offensive realism world, there is little rationale and room for signaling benign intentions or reassurance (Montgomery 2006:155; see also Kydd 2005:183)

For offensive realism, therefore, there is really no need for pondering the problem of dividing gains from cooperation or denying that benign intentions can be signaled. The "Sixth Element" of assuming the worst over others' intentions has all these issues covered, plain and simple.

Non-offensive realism theorists try to undermine offensive realism's logic by countering that states can overcome their concern for relative gains when military technology favors defense and by designing institutions to reduce the temptation to cheat (Powell 1991; Keohane 1993; Glaser 1994–95:70–76; Keohane and Martin 1995:44–46). These counterarguments, despite being valid and interesting, are also superficial. More importantly, non-offensive realism theorists are debating on offensive realism's terms. Unless non-offensive realism theorists explicitly reject the offensive realism position that states are inherently aggressive, they cannot really counter offensive realism's argument that cooperation under anarchy is extremely difficult, if not totally impossible. Cooperation can become a viable means for self-help only when states are not inherently aggressive. *All the factors that can facilitate cooperation can come into play only if states are not assumed to be inherently aggressive.*

Making the two positions more explicit also helps us grasp the contribution (or no contribution) by some theorists. For instance, Taliaferro (2001) praises Copeland's theory of dynamic differentiation and war for resolving the problem of possibility versus probability, and he further classifies Copeland's theory as a defensive realism theory (Taliaferro 2000–01:135). Yet, like other offensive realism theories, Copeland's theory too has no place for a probabilistic stand on other states' intentions: other states are assumed to be aggressive when they can and there is no possibility that they may remain benign when they are capable of doing harm. Because Copeland (2000) merely stated that his theory is probabilistic when it comes to estimating states' (relative) capabilities but not their intentions, Copeland never has a problem of possibility versus probability over the problem of intentions. Taliaferro's praise for Copeland's theory thus turns out to be much kudos for nothing (Taliaferro 2001:152–158), and his classification of Copeland's offensive realism theory as a defensive realism theory is based on misunderstandings.

In a recent attempt to sort out the different connotation of uncertainty in different IR approaches, Rathbun (2007) asserts that neorealism (and offensive realism) takes uncertainty about others' intentions as fear whereas other approaches (that is, rationalism, cognitivism, and constructivism) do not. This notion is incorrect. Realism maintains that uncertainty about others' intentions partly underpins fear, but uncertainty about others' intentions is not equivalent to fear (see above). More importantly, Rathbun's formulation implies that other paradigms do not have fear. This is simply untrue: fear features prominently in all the paradigms he examined. Obviously, "mistrust" as defined by Andrew Kydd (2005:5, 12–18), whom Rathbun (2007:541–545) classified as a rationalist even though Kydd himself admitted that his approach is essentially a neoclassical defensive realism approach (Kydd 2005:13n13), is simply fear. Moreover, the first formulation of coping with fear through costly signaling of benign intentions



was advanced by a psychologist named Charles Osgood (1962) and a sociologist named Amitai Etzioni (1962), not by a rationalist named Thomas Schelling (1960, 1966) as Rathbun assumed. Schelling discussed costly signaling of resolve in conflict with the other side's intentions already assumed aggressive but not costly signaling of and reading benign intentions toward cooperation.

Worse, failing to grasp the fundamentally different two positions on how to cope with fear, Rathbun holds that fear must be removed from Glaser's contingent realism—which is defensive realism—in order for signaling to have a chance. As such, Rathbun (2007:536, 540n5) asserts that signaling and screening is unimportant for realism as a whole due to fear about other's intentions. This formulation cannot be more wrong. Without fear—which is partially underpinned by the uncertainty about others' intentions, there is no need for signaling (benign intentions) and screening (that is, learning). Only for offensive realism which assumes the worst over others' intentions, will signaling and screening be unimportant. Mearsheimer 2006:121–123, 231–234; see also Montgomery 2006:155; Kydd 2005:183. For all other non-offensive realism approaches, signaling and learning is crucial for learning about others' intentions and calculating one's own moves (Tang 2007; see also above).

Finally, making the two positions more explicit also sheds some interesting light upon the meaning of anarchy. Many have suggested that anarchy dictates states to assume the worst scenario over each other's intentions, but this is simply an assertion. One cannot logically prove that anarchy *per se* dictates states to adopt or reject the worst-case assumption over others' intentions: There is *no* inherent link between anarchy and adopting or rejecting the worst assumption over others' intentions (Glaser 1994–95:51; Brooks 1997:449).<sup>36</sup> Anarchy merely makes uncertainty about others' intentions or fear more intractable than under hierarchy.

The two positions on how to cope with fear are differences of assumption rather than differences of logic, and no amount of deductive logic can prove one assumption is more valid than the other. The validity of these two assumptions can only be resolved by an “empirical duel”: does international politics provide more support for the offensive realism's stand or the non-offensive realism stand? (Brooks 1997:448–449, 473).

A potential solution to this difference of assumption is to take the worst-case assumption over others' intentions as a product of social construction with anarchy merely providing the permissible environment for the construction process to take place rather than dictating one assumption over the other (for example, Wendt 1992). For instance, Jervis (1976:64–65) noted that states tend to assume the worst about others' intentions only when (they believe) they are *already* in a conflictual relationship. Similarly, I implied that states are especially prone to assume the worst when they are *already* into actual conflicts (Tang 2005:50, 54).<sup>37</sup> These two authors suggest that the worst-case assumption over others' intention is conditional rather than absolute and that it is not *driving* conflict but actually *driven* by conflict.

Perhaps even more interesting is that taking the worst-case assumption over others' intentions as a product of social construction may eventually lead us to adopt a social evolutionary approach toward the problem of uncertainty over others' intentions and fear in international politics. After all, our fear is a product of our evolutionary past, both biologically and socially.<sup>38</sup> Hence, I advance

<sup>36</sup>As such, the meaning of anarchy, long argued to dictate a lot of things, needs to be more rigorously re-interpreted. For similar calls, see Wendt (1992) and Powell (1994:314).

<sup>37</sup>My earlier formulation covers worst-case assumptions on capability, resolve, and intention, thus is somewhat under-specified. Snyder and Diesing's (1977:185–189) formulation might have a similar undertone.

<sup>38</sup>I thank an anonymous review for remaining me to make this point more explicitly.

a social evolutionary resolution of this problem elsewhere (Tang forthcoming). I show that our world was really an offensive realism world in which the worst-case assumption over others' intentions was justified and necessary, but it had evolved into a defensive realism world in which the worst-case assumption over others' intentions has become unnecessary and counterproductive. Thus, offensive realism's stand was the right stand for a bygone era of offensive realism world, whereas non-offensive realism stand is the right stand for the present defensive realism world, although a more-or-less rule-based future may already be in the making.

### Conclusion

How to cope with fear, which is partly underpinned by the uncertainty about others' present and future intentions, is a central question in international politics. I underscore that there are only two positions on this question. Offensive realism asserts that states have to assume the worst over each other's intentions; whereas non-offensive realism theories reject assuming the worst over each other's intentions. I also show that these two positions reflect differences of assumption, and that they are not inherent to the logic of anarchy (even if there is one).

The exposition here echoes Robert Powell's (1994:314) earlier observation that many differences in arguments in international politics are the result of implicit and unarticulated assumptions. Making the two stands more explicit clarify many areas of confusions and help us understand many important debates in IR. Making the two stands more explicit also help us see the common ground among non-offensive realism approaches. As a result, a more fruitful dialogue among non-offensive realism approaches becomes possible and even desirable, if not urgent.

### References

- ADLER, EMANUEL. (1991) Cognitive Evolution: A Dynamic Approach for the Study of International Relations and Their Progress. In *Progress in Postwar International Relations*, edited by Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford. New York: Columbia University Press.
- AHRENDORF, PETER J. (2000) The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy. *American Political Science Review* 94:579–593.
- AKERMAN, ALICE. (1994) Reconciliation as Peace-building Process in Postwar Europe. *Peace and Change* 19:229–250.
- AXELROD, ROBERT. (1984) *Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.
- AXELROD, ROBERT, AND ROBERT KEOHANE. (1985) Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions. *World Politics* 38:226–254.
- BARRETT, H. CLARK. (2005) Adaptations to Predators and Preys. In *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, edited by David M. Buss. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- BETTS, RICHARD K. (1978) Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable. *World Politics* 31:61–89.
- BOESCHE, ROGER. (2003) Kautilya's *Arthashastra* on War and Diplomacy in Ancient India. *Journal of Military History* 67:9–38.
- BROOKS, STEPHEN G. (1997) Dueling Realisms. *International Organization* 51:445–477.
- BUTTERFIELD, HERBERT. (1951) *History and Human Relations*. London: Collins.
- CARIG, CAMPBELL. (2003) *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Neibuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- CHRISTENSEN, THOMAS J. (1996) *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- COPELAND, DALE. (2000) *The Origins of Major War*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- COPELAND, DALE. (2001) Theory and History in the Study of Major War. *Security Studies* 10:212–239.
- DE BECKER, GAVIN. (1997) *The Gift of Fear*. New York: Norton and Company.

- DUNTLEY, JOSHUA D. (2005) Adaptations to Dangers from Human. In *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, edited by David M. Buss. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- ETZIONI, AMITAI. (1962) *The Hard Way to Peace: A New Strategy*. New York: Crowell-Collier.
- GILPIN, ROBERT. (1981) *War and Changes in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GLASER, CHARLES L. (1992) Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models. *World Politics* 44:497–538.
- GLASER, CHARLES L. (1994–95) Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help. *International Security* 19:50–90.
- GLASER, CHARLES L. (1997) The Security Dilemma Revisited. *World Politics* 50:171–201.
- GOERTZ, GARY, AND PAUL F. DIEHL. (1993) Enduring Rivalries: Theoretical Constructs and Empirical Patterns. *International Studies Quarterly* 37:147–171.
- GRIECO, JOSEPH. (1988) Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism. *International Organization* 42:485–507.
- HERZ, JOHN. (1951) *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- HERZ, JOHN. (1961) *International Politics in the Atomic Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- HOBBS, THOMAS. (1982 [1651]) *Leviathan*, edited by C. B. Macpherson. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- HODDIE, MATTHEW, AND CAROLINE HARTZELL. (2005) Signals of Reconciliation: Institution-building and the Resolution of Civil Wars. *International Studies Review* 7:21–40.
- IKENBERRY, G. JOHN. (2001) *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- JERVIS, ROBERT. (1976) *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- JERVIS, ROBERT. (1978) Cooperation under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics* 30:167–214.
- JERVIS, ROBERT. (1988) Realism, Game Theory, and Cooperation. *World Politics* 40:317–349.
- JERVIS, ROBERT. (1999) Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate. *International Security* 24:42–63.
- KEOHANE, ROBERT O. (1984) *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- KEOHANE, ROBERT O. (1993) Institutional Theory and the Realist Challenge after the Cold War. In *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate*, edited by David A. Baldwin. New York: Columbia University Press.
- KEOHANE, ROBERT O., AND LISA L. MARTIN. (1995) The Promise of Institutional Theory. *International Security* 20:39–51.
- KYDD, ANDREW. (1997) Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other. *Security Studies* 7:114–155.
- KYDD, ANDREW. (2000) Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation. *International Organization* 54:325–357.
- KYDD, ANDREW. (2005) *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- LABS, ERIC J. (1997) Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims. *Security Studies* 6:1–49.
- LEBOW, RICHARD NED. (1984) Windows of Opportunity: Do States Jump Through Them? *International Security* 9:147–186.
- LEBOW, RICHARD NED. (2006) Fear, Interest and Honor: Outlines of a theory of International Relations. *International Affairs* 82:431–448.
- LEE, GERLAD GEUNWOK. (2002–03) To Be Long or Not to Be long—That Is the Question: The Contradictions of Time-Horizon in Offensive Realism. *Security Studies* 12:196–217.
- LEVY, JACK S. (1987) Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War. *World Politics* 40:82–107.
- LYNN-JONES, SEAN M. (1998) Realism and America's Rise. *International Security* 23:157–182.
- MACHIAVELLI, NICCOLO. (1997[1532]) *The Prince*. Translated & edited by Angelo M. Codevilla. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- MEARSHEIMER, JOHN J. (1990) Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War. *International Security* 15:5–56.
- MEARSHEIMER, JOHN J. (1994–95) The False Promise of International Institutions. *International Security* 19:5–49.
- MEARSHEIMER, JOHN J. (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton.
- MEARSHEIMER, JOHN J. (2006) Interview. *International Relations* 20:105–123.
- MERCER, JONATHAN. (2006) Human Nature and the First Image: Emotion in International Politics. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9:288–303.

- MONTGOMERY, EVAN BRADEN. (2006) Breaking out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty. *International Security* 31:151–185.
- MORGENTHAU, HANS J. (1946) *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- NIEBUHR, REINHOLD. (1960[1932]) *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- ÖHMAN, ARNE, AND SUSAN MINEKA. (2001) Fears, Phobias, and Preparedness: Toward an Evolved Module of Fear and Fear Learning. *Psychological Review* 108:483–522.
- OSGOOD, CHARLES A. (1962) *An Alternative to War or Surrender*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- PETERSON, SUE, MICHAEL J. TIERNEY, AND DAN MALINIAK. (2005) *Teaching and Research Practices, Views on the Discipline, and Policy Attitudes of IR Faculty at US Colleges and Universities*. Unpublished Manuscript. Williamsburg, VA: Reves Center for International Studies, William Mary College.
- POSEN, BARRY. (1993) The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict. *Survival* 35:27–47.
- POWELL, ROBERT. (1991) Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory. *American Political Science Review* 85:1303–1320.
- POWELL, ROBERT. (1994) Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate. *International Organization* 48:313–344.
- RATHBURN, BRIAN C. (2007) Uncertainty about Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory. *International Studies Quarterly* 51:533–557.
- REITER, DAN. (1995) Exploring the Power Keg Myth: Preemptive Wars Almost Never Happen. *International Security* 20:5–34.
- ROBIN, COREY. (2004) *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ROE, PAUL. (1999) The Intrastate Security Dilemma: Ethnic Conflict as a 'Tragedy'? *Journal of Peace Research* 36:183–202.
- ROE, PAUL. (2004) Which Security Dilemma? Mitigating Ethnic Conflict: The Case of Croatia. *Security Studies* 13:280–313.
- SCHELLING, THOMAS. (1960) *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- SCHELLING, THOMAS. (1966) *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- SCHWELLER, RANDALL L. (1996) Neorealism's Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma? *Security Studies* 5:91–121.
- SHANG, YANG. (~390–339 BC) *Shang Jun-shu* [The Book of Lord Shang]. Available on web at: <http://ipe.gzu.edu.cn/blqs/dbook/dbook1/t01/fa04j.pdf>.
- SNYDER, JACK. (1985) Perceptions of the Security Dilemma in 1914. In *Psychology and Deterrence*, edited by Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- SNYDER, JACK. (1991) *Myths of Empire*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- SNYDER, GLENN H. (2002) Mearsheimer's World: Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security. *International Security* 27:149–173.
- SNYDER, GLENN H., AND PAUL DIESING. (1977) *Conflict among Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- STERLING-FOLKER, JENNIFER. (2000) Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neoliberal Institutionalism Compared. *International Studies Quarterly* 44:97–119.
- STIRK, PETER. (2005) John Herz: Realism and the Fragility of the International Order. *Review of International Studies* 31:285–306.
- TAJFEL, HENRI. (1982) Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. *Annual Review of Psychology* 33:1–39.
- TALIAFERRO, JEFFREY W. (2000–01) Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited. *International Security* 25:128–161.
- TALIAFERRO, JEFFREY W. (2001) Realism, Power Shifts, and Major War. *Security Studies* 10:145–178.
- TANG, SHIPING. (2005) Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict. *Security Studies* 24:34–62.
- TANG, SHIPING. (2007) Correspondence: Uncertainty and Reassurance in International Politics. *International Security* 27:193–197.
- TANG, SHIPING. (2008) Social Evolution of International Politics: Mearsheimer to Jervis. *European Journal of International Relations* (forthcoming).
- THOMPSON, WILLIAM R. (1995) Principal Rivalries. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39:195–223.
- THUCYDIDES. (1954[~431 BC]) *The Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex Warner. London: Penguin Books.
- VAN EVERA, STEPHEN. (1999) *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- WALTZ, KENNETH N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- WEINBERGER, SETH. (2003) Institutional Signaling and the Origin of the Cold War. *Security Studies* 12:80–115.
- WELCH, DAVID A. (2003) Why International Relations Theorists should stop reading Thucydides. *Review of International Studies* 29:301–319.
- WENDT, ALEXANDER. (1992) Anarchy Is What States Makes of It. *International Organization* 46:391–425.
- WENDT, ALEXANDER. (1995) Constructing International Politics. *International Security* 20:71–81.
- WENDT, ALEXANDER. (1999) *Social Theories of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WHEELER, NICHOLAS, AND KEN BOOTH. (1992) The Security Dilemma. In *Dilemma of World Politics*, edited by John Baylis and Nicholas Wheeler. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WOLFERS, ARNOLD. (1951) The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference. *World Politics* 6:39–63.
- ZAKARIA, FAREED. (1992) Realism and Domestic Politics. *International Security* 17:177–198.
- ZAKARIA, FAREED. (1998) *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.