

- On the one hand, they can relax defence efforts in order to facilitate peaceful relations; the problem here is that they may make their country more vulnerable to attack.
- On the other hand, they can strengthen defence preparations, but this can have the unintended consequence of undermining long-term security by exacerbating international suspicions and reinforcing pressures for arms racing. The result can be military conflict, and many commentators have argued that a paradigmatic example of the security dilemma led to the First World War (1914–18).
- It is important to note that the security dilemma arises primarily from the alleged structure of the international system rather than the aggressive motives or intentions of states. This structural basis is intensified by the understandably conservative inclinations of defence planners to prepare for the worst and focus on the capabilities of their rivals rather than rely on their nonthreatening intentions. Ignorance and competition among different branches of the armed forces for government funds can fuel worst-case analysis.
- Thus while the structure of the international system must be seen as a fundamental precondition for the security dilemma, its intensity is a consequence both of the inherently violent nature of military capabilities and the degree to which states perceive others as threats rather than allies. Since these two factors are variable over space and time, the intensity of the security dilemma is very unevenly distributed among states.
- It is worth noting how each of them can vary. First, the intensity of the security dilemma varies depending both on the degree to which one can distinguish between defensive and offensive weapons, as well as the relationship between them.
- Other things being equal, and acknowledging that weapons can be used offensively and defensively, some types of weapons are more suited to defence than offence. Defensive force configurations emphasise firepower with limited mobility and range (e.g. anti-tank missiles), and offensive configurations emphasise mobility and range (e.g. fighter-bombers).
- Advocates of what is called non-offensive defence believe that the security dilemma can be muted by the adoption of force configurations that are least likely to provoke countermeasures by other states. In part this depends on the degree to which defensive military technology is superior to offensive capabilities. If potential enemies each believe that the best form of defence (and deterrence) is preparing to attack, it is not difficult to see how they could be locked into a vicious circle of mutually reinforcing suspicions.
- Second, the intensity of the security dilemma varies depending on the political relationship between states. Capabilities should not be examined in a political vacuum. The degree of trust and sense of common interest in the international system is neither fixed nor uniform. There is no security dilemma between Australia and New Zealand because neither state considers the other a threat to its national security.