

Chapter 2 ~ Decisions Under Uncertainty: Theories and Practice in Security Studies

Chapter Summary

Security measures are designed with the rational actor in mind. Good security measures focus on predicting perpetrators' responses and preventing perpetrators from achieving their goals. Discussions about security are made under conditions of uncertainty. Two types of uncertainty exist—measurable and unmeasurable uncertainty. Measurable uncertainty includes objective risks and implies the calculability of a threat. Unmeasurable uncertainty exists when risk calculations cannot address the threat; in these cases, the threat is unmeasurable.

The pursuit of security is examined through the lens of realism and liberalism. Realism posits that nations exist in an anarchic self-help system characterized by mutual distrust. In this system, states seek to increase their relative power position at the expense of other states. By contrast, liberalism holds that the international system creates opportunities for both conflict and cooperation; according to this theory, international institutions help reduce conflict between states. The mistrust and lack of mutual cooperation that exists between states has been depicted in games. These games provide insights into opponents' strategic choices. Uncertainty of actions and even misplaced certainty can lead (and has led to) conflict; misplaced certainty, for example, was a primary driver for the Iraq war. In response to uncertainty and undeterrable threats, states have taken preemptive action. These measures are legally justified only if they meet certain basic criteria. Even though it is considered as a justified measure according to international law (as long as the criteria for its use are met), there are drawbacks to engaging in preemptive action. Greater transparency and accountability in current preemptive practices is required.

Precautionary responses have been taken against security threats. Such actions are based on the precautionary principle. Extreme versions of the precautionary principle have been included in political discourse; the use of them in security practices, however, is indefensible. Precautionary measures should only be taken after the dangerous impact of a threat has been identified, it has been determined that the risk cannot be calculated with scientific certainty, and all available data was accessed before using precautionary measures. Notwithstanding these restrictions, precautionary measures have been implemented that do not meet these criteria.

Key Points to Cover in Lecture

Perpetrators as Rational Actors

The Perils of Uncertainty

- Realism
- Liberalism
 - Games: Understanding Strategic Decisions

Certainty Also Matters: The Pitfalls of Misplaced Certainty

The Problems with Preemption

- Targeted Killings: Justified Preemptive Strikes?

Ushering in the Age of Precaution

- Errors in Decision Making in Response to Uncertainty: Lessons from Psychology

Discussion Questions

1. How is the pursuit of security viewed through the lens of realism and liberalism?
2. What are the pitfalls of misplaced certainty in security decisions?
3. Is preemption problematic? Why do you think so?