

Putting ourselves in the shoes of our enemies

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A sweltering hot Friday afternoon in Aberystwyth was the setting for a research skills workshop organised by the DDMI and the postgraduate run Security Research Group of the Department of International Politics. Fortunately, our important topic, the ‘Nuclear Security Dilemma in Northeast Asia’ (details of the programme can be found on the DDMI’s web site) generated more light than heat thanks to the gathering of diplomats, academics, and researchers who shared their diverse ideas and views. Held under the Chatham House rule (a copy of the rapporteur’s report will be posted in the next few days on the web site), the workshop provided an excellent model of academic/practitioner engagement – a key mission of the DDMI since its founding over a half a century ago. Academics and PhD students with considerable knowledge of Northeast Asian security issues, shared their thinking about North Korea’s motives and intentions with those whose daily responsibility it is to make such assessments as part of the policy-making process.

Academics, it might be argued, have the luxury of thinking outside the box in a way that is not open to diplomats and policy-makers who have to apply worst-case thinking because there are no guarantees about the current and future intentions of potential adversaries. As one participant put it, ‘if North Korea has the capability and you can hedge against it, would it be imprudent not to?’ Neville Chamberlain and his disastrous policy of appeasement can always be wheeled out to remind those who might be inclined to best-case the motives and intentions of others as to the dangers of misplaced trust. But playing it safe in this way ignores the possibility that others might be arming out of fear and not malevolence. And if both sides are arming out of fear and mistrust, the result could be a vicious circle of power and security competition which no one wanted. One seasoned contributor to the workshop argued that what motivated the North Koreans in their nuclear ambitions was ‘fear- fear of the United States, fear of China, and fear of Japan’. Yet others with experience of the diplomatic world maintained that North Korea had nothing to worry about because it knew the United States and South Korea would never attack it. But the DPRK has not been so easily reassured. The central problem here, as Robert Jervis argued over three

decades ago, is the inability of policy-makers to 'recognize that one's own actions could be seen as menacing and the concomitant belief that the other's hostility can only be explained by its aggressiveness' (Jervis 1976: 75). The danger is that if the White House believes that the DPRK knows that the United States is not a threat, Pyongyang's arming must indicate aggressive intent.

Jervis's vital argument about the psychological dynamics that fuel mistrust between governments built upon and developed the contribution of the British historian Herbert Butterfield who was the first to draw attention to the pernicious consequences of benign self-images. Writing in 1951, Butterfield pointed out that diplomats 'may vividly feel the terrible fear that [they] have of the other party, but [they] cannot enter into the [others] counter-fear, or even understand why [they] should be particularly nervous'. He went on to say that it is 'never possible for you to realise or remember properly that since he cannot see the inside of your mind, he can never have the same assurance of your intentions that you have'. This is the security dilemma (a key research area of the DDMI) which confronts all groups in a condition of anarchy (defined as the absence of a central authority) and it arises from the existential condition of uncertainty that characterises all human relations. The negative consequences of groups and individuals failing to enter into the counter-fear of others is exacerbated if decision-makers operate with benign self-images which blind them to how their actions and behaviour might be seen as threatening by others. What is more, the converse of a benign self-image is the attribution of a malign image to the character and actions of adversaries – Ken Booth and I call this 'ideological fundamentalism' in our forthcoming book *The Security Dilemma*. Governments which operate with such a mindset are blinded to the possibility that the other side might have legitimate grievances and security interests.

The security dilemma that faces governments with peaceful intent is whether to risk a trust-building move in a world where there can be no guarantees about the current and future intentions of others. Trust is easier when there is a margin of safety, but trust only exists in conditions of uncertainty. Even if actors can enter into the counter-fear of others, they might be so fearful that acting on this will place them in a vulnerable position should their trust prove misplaced, that they feel unable to take such risky leaps of trust. This situation seems to

characterise the nuclear stand-off on the Korean peninsula. Should we assume the worst about Pyongyang's motives and intentions and prepare for a showdown before they become too strong? Or does such a path risk a terrible war - perhaps one in which nuclear weapons might be used? Given the costs and risks of such a conflict, surely the prudent course lies in trying to reassure rather than provoke the regime in Pyongyang.

Diplomats and policy-makers need to understand how their adversary might be acting out of fear (remembering that ambition is sometimes in play), including crucially, the role that their own actions may play in provoking that fear. This was the challenge thrown down by Butterfield, and it is what guides the DDMI's new project on 'Trust-Building in Nuclear Worlds'. Our workshop on 4 May was the first in a series aimed at exploring with practitioners the possibilities of exercising empathy of this kind, and it remains to be seen whether the United States and North Korea can find the imagination to take the leaps of trust that might lead to the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

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Further Reading

Bleiker, R. (2005) *Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Booth, K. and Wheeler, N.J., *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (forthcoming Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

Butterfield, H. (1951) *History and Human Relations*, London: Collins, pp. 9-37.

Collins, A. (2000) *The Security Dilemmas of Southeast Asia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Glaser, C. L. (1990) *Analysing Strategic Nuclear Policy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jervis, R. (1976) *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Johnston, A. I. (2004) 'Beijing's Security Behaviour in the Asia-Pacific: Is China a Dissatisfied Power?', in J. J. Suh, P. J. Katzenstein and A. Carlson (eds), *Rethinking Security in East Asia*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 34-97.

Kydd, A. H. (2005) *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Suh, J. J. (2006) 'Producing Security Dilemma out of Uncertainty: The North Korean Nuclear Crisis', Mario Einaudi Centre for International Studies, Cornell University, October 2006.

Links

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/research/DDMI/ResearchSDDandNNPR.html>

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/research/DDMI/ResearchTrust-building.html>

<http://disarmamentinsight.blogspot.com/>