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Explaining Escalation: The Security Dilemma in Three Contemporary International Conflicts

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Abstract
This paper analyzes the security dilemma through a comparative qualitative study of three conflicts: Russia–Ukraine, Israel–Palestine, and Thailand–Cambodia. Despite differences in geography, scale, and actors, all three cases show how mistrust, misperceptions, and defensive actions perceived as offensive drive cycles of escalation. The Russia–Ukraine conflict illustrates a systemic dilemma, shaped by identity, sovereignty, spheres of influence, and NATO expansion. The Israeli–Palestinian case highlights the limits of the framework in asymmetric conflicts, where overt hostility reduces the role of misperception. The Thailand–Cambodia dispute demonstrates how symbolism and identity can escalate a minor territorial dispute into a broader national conflict. Overall, the study confirms the security dilemma as a valuable explanatory tool in International Relations, conditioned by identity, asymmetry, and hegemonic ambitions.

Keywords
Security Dilemma; Realism; Russia–Ukraine; Israel–Palestine; Thailand–Cambodia; Identity Politics; International Affairs

INTRODUCTION

International conflicts have long been central to the study of International Relations, with scholars seeking to understand why rivalry, mistrust, and violence persist despite repeated attempts at cooperation. One of the most influential frameworks for explaining this phenomenon is the security dilemma, first articulated by Herz (1950) and later developed by Jervis (1978). In an anarchic system, where no overarching authority guarantees security, defensive measures such as military buildups or alliances are often perceived as offensive threats. These misperceptions can trigger spirals of escalation even when no aggression was intended initially.

The research problem addressed in this study is how the security dilemma manifests across different types of conflicts, systemic, asymmetric, and symbolic, and whether its explanatory power is universal or requires contextual adaptation.

The objective of this paper is to apply the security dilemma framework to three distinct yet illustrative cases: the Russia–Ukraine war, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the Thailand–Cambodia dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple. Through a comparative qualitative analysis, the study identifies both shared dynamics of mistrust and escalation and important variations shaped by identity, asymmetry, and hegemonic ambition.

The significance of this research lies in bridging theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature. By juxtaposing a great-power rivalry (Russia–Ukraine), an asymmetric confrontation

(Israel–Palestine), and a symbolic territorial dispute (Thailand–Cambodia), the study demonstrates both the universality of the security dilemma and the necessity of contextualizing it. This contributes to realist debates while offering practical insights into why peace remains elusive in conflicts driven less by material stakes than by identity, mistrust, and power politics.

This study argues that while the core mechanism of the security dilemma is universal, its primary driver varies across contexts: misperception dominates in systemic great-power rivalries, explicit hostility shapes asymmetric conflicts, and ontological insecurity drives symbolic territorial disputes. By identifying these context-dependent drivers, the study offers a typological refinement of the security dilemma, showing that its escalation mechanisms differ in predictable ways that single-case studies cannot reveal. This comparative perspective contributes to ongoing debates by demonstrating that the security dilemma is not merely adaptable but structurally differentiated across conflict types.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative qualitative case study approach to examine the dynamics of the security dilemma in three conflicts: Russia–Ukraine, Israel–Palestine, and Thailand–Cambodia. The cases were deliberately selected using a most-different systems design. Although they differ significantly in scale, geography, and the actors involved, each demonstrates how defensive measures intended to ensure survival can be interpreted as offensive threats. This diversity allows broader generalizations about the applicability of the security dilemma across contexts. The most divergent system design was explicitly chosen to test the framework under highly divergent conditions: systemic great-power rivalry, asymmetric confrontation, and symbolic identity-driven dispute, thereby assessing the theory's robustness and adaptability.

Case selection follows three explicit criteria. First, each conflict involves a territorial dispute with high symbolic and identity value. Second, identity-driven narratives and historical claims shape state behavior beyond material or strategic calculations. Third, all three cases exhibit visible manifestations of the security dilemma, in which defensive measures are perceived as offensive threats. The cases were selected because they are ongoing or have recently escalated, allowing the dynamics of the security dilemma to be observed in real time rather than reconstructed retrospectively.

The Russia–Ukraine war represents a systemic confrontation characterized by great-power politics, identity, spheres of influence, and hegemonic ambitions. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict exemplifies an asymmetric case, where one actor is a recognized state and the other a fragmented non-state entity with limited international recognition. The Thailand–Cambodia dispute illustrates how symbolism and national identity, rather than material resources, can escalate into interstate rivalry. Together, these cases provide analytical leverage for testing both the universality and adaptability of the security dilemma framework.

This research is grounded in realist theory, as the security dilemma is itself a core realist concept that explains conflict escalation under conditions of anarchy and uncertainty. The cases examined involve persistent insecurity, power asymmetries, and external alliances, making realism particularly well-suited to analyzing how states interpret threats and respond through security measures. Taken together, defensive and offensive realism provide a framework capable

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of explaining both restraint and expansion as rational strategies, allowing the study to move beyond normative judgments toward causal analysis.

The research draws primarily on secondary sources, including articles, books, policy papers, and official documents. Relevant international treaties, United Nations resolutions, and International Court of Justice rulings are used to contextualize the legal and institutional dimensions of the conflicts. Scholarly contributions on realism, the security dilemma, and regional politics provide the theoretical foundation.

The study proceeds in three stages. First, each case is analyzed individually, focusing on historical background, contemporary developments, and the logic of the security dilemma. Second, the interplay between defensive and offensive realist dynamics is explored within each conflict. Finally, a comparative synthesis identifies common patterns and significant differences, highlighting the roles of identity, asymmetry, external alliances, and the limitations of international law.

In this comparative design, the dependent variable is the escalation of the security dilemma, manifested through reciprocal defensive measures and the deterioration of diplomatic relations. The independent variables influencing this escalation are: 1) identity politics and symbolic attachment to territory, 2) power asymmetry between actors, and 3) involvement of external alliances or great powers.

Data for all three cases were derived from qualitative content analysis of policy documents, official statements, academic publications, and international legal sources, including United Nations resolutions and International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings. In particular, the analysis draws on the ICJ Judgment in the *Temple of Preah Vihear* case (Cambodia v. Thailand, 1962) and its Interpretation Judgment (2013).

Coding involved identifying empirical indicators, such as military deployments, treaty violations, symbolic claims, political speeches, and media discourse, and assigning them to one of three analytical variables. To ensure reliability and analytical transparency, a qualitative codebook was developed prior to the analysis. The codebook specified concrete empirical indicators for each variable. *Perceived threat* was identified through references to military deployments, mobilization, changes in force posture, and security doctrines. *Mistrust* was coded through instances of failed negotiations, withdrawal from or violation of agreements, institutional breakdowns, and explicit accusations of bad faith. *Identity and territorial symbolism* were identified through symbolic claims, historical narratives, references to sacred or nationally significant territory, and the rhetorical framing of disputes in political speeches and official discourse.

Empirically, these indicators were recorded using frequency-based qualitative counts across the analyzed material. For each case, coded segments were grouped by variable, allowing comparison of the relative prominence of threat perception, mistrust, and identity narratives. Although the study does not aim at quantitative measurement, the relative frequency and recurrence of indicators provided a systematic basis for cross-case comparison. All source material, including policy documents, United Nations resolutions, ICJ rulings, academic literature, and official statements, was reviewed twice using this coding scheme. Although a single researcher conducted the coding, consistency was ensured through iterative comparison of coded segments across cases, with revisions documented in a structured coding memo. This procedure enhances replicability and minimizes subjective drift during data interpretation.

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To ensure analytical coherence across the three case studies, the relationships among these variables are structured through a conceptual comparative matrix. Identity-driven territorial claims and historical narratives shape perceptions of threat, power asymmetry determines the strategic options available to each actor, and external alliances either amplify or mitigate the perceived security costs of escalation. These three independent variables interact to influence the dependent variable, the escalation of the security dilemma. In other words, when identity intensifies mistrust, asymmetry enables coercive strategies, and alliances reduce the perceived risks of escalation, defensive actions are more likely to be interpreted as offensive, generating conflict spirals.

As with any qualitative study, certain limitations must be noted. The analysis relies primarily on secondary sources, which may reflect the biases or framing of existing scholarship and policy debates. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of ongoing conflicts, particularly in Ukraine and the Middle East, means that developments occurring after the completion of this research may alter specific details. However, they are unlikely to undermine the broader theoretical insights. Nonetheless, this study contributes by juxtaposing systemic, asymmetric, and identity-driven conflicts within a single analytical framework, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the variations of the security dilemma across different levels of analysis.

Several alternative cases were considered during the research design process, including China–Taiwan (systemic rivalry), India–Pakistan (asymmetric dyad), and Greece–Turkey (symbolic territorial dispute). These cases were ultimately excluded because they introduce additional confounding factors, such as nuclear deterrence, stable dyadic rivalry structures, or NATO-related institutional constraints, which would complicate the typological clarity of the analysis. In contrast, the three selected cases, Russia–Ukraine, Israel–Palestine, and Thailand–Cambodia, represent distinct ideal types, allowing the study to isolate the primary mechanisms of the security dilemma across systemic, asymmetric, and symbolic contexts. An additional advantage of these cases is their contemporary relevance. All three conflicts are ongoing or have recently escalated, providing access to updated empirical material and enabling the dynamics of the security dilemma to be observed in real time rather than reconstructed retrospectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The security dilemma has become one of the central analytical tools in international relations, firmly rooted in the broader school of structural realism, or neorealism. Unlike classical realism, which attributes state behavior to human nature or anthropological drives, structural realism emphasizes the constraining influence of the international system's anarchic structure. Kenneth Waltz's "Theory of International Politics" (2010) is often credited with crystallizing this perspective, highlighting how the absence of a central authority compels states to prioritize survival and act with caution. In this view, the systemic pressures of anarchy, rather than leaders' personal choices, are decisive in shaping state conduct.

The anarchic system creates an environment of uncertainty. While states can be confident about their own intentions, they can never be certain of others'. This uncertainty is magnified by the dual-use nature of military capabilities, as what is built for defensive purposes can easily be interpreted as offensive preparation. Thus, when one state enhances its military strength for self-protection, others may perceive this as a threat, prompting reciprocal buildup.

The result is the well-known "spiral model" or "security paradox" (Jervis 1978), in which mutual suspicion and misperceptions transform defensive behavior into drivers of escalation and arms races.

Within structural realism, defensive and offensive variants provide distinct interpretations. Defensive realism, associated with Kenneth Waltz and Robert Jervis, contends that states are primarily motivated by the imperative of survival. In this framework, the absence of trust and the dominance of self-help explain why even defensive actions often trigger cycles of escalation. Offensive realism, by contrast, as articulated by John Mearsheimer, Kier Lieber, and Fareed Zakaria, posits that states cannot be content with mere survival. Instead, they are driven to maximize their relative power, expanding militarily and politically to ensure long-term security, even at the expense of destabilizing the system.

The issue of alliances is central to both approaches. States may choose balance-of-power strategies, forming coalitions to counter rising threats (Mearsheimer 2010), or they may adopt bandwagoning behavior, aligning with stronger states in search of protection and benefits. Scholars like Stephen Walt (1987) emphasize that balancing is more common, as it better serves states' survival. Glenn Snyder (1997), however, argues that alliances remain inherently unstable, shaped by shifting interests, territorial ambitions, and ideological cleavages. This instability often produces fears of defection or abandonment, further reinforcing the logic of the security dilemma.

Contemporary geopolitical dynamics add complexity to these debates. The growing influence of China, for instance, has altered regional balances of power and indirectly intensified conflicts elsewhere, as noted by recent Western policymakers (Blinken and Drury 2024). Such developments illustrate how external actors can exacerbate existing dilemmas, reinforcing mistrust and escalating disputes far beyond their local origins.

There remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the application of structural realism and the security dilemma framework across conflicts of varying scale and nature. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on great-power rivalries, particularly the Russia–Ukraine war since 2014 and 2022. However, these studies rarely place such systemic confrontations in dialogue with either symbolic, identity-driven disputes or asymmetric conflicts involving non-state actors. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is often analyzed through lenses of colonialism, nationalism, or religious identity, while the Thailand–Cambodia dispute has been chiefly studied from legal and bilateral perspectives. Both, however, have seldom been integrated into broader theoretical debates on the security dilemma.

This paper seeks to address this gap by extending the applicability of structural realism to three different regional contexts: great-power rivalry (Russia–Ukraine), asymmetric confrontation (Israel–Palestine), and a symbolic, identity-driven dispute (Thailand–Cambodia). Through comparative analysis, the study demonstrates how mistrust, alliances, and perceptions of threat can escalate conflicts regardless of territorial size or material stakes. By bridging these diverse cases, the paper contributes to the underdeveloped body of comparative research on the universality of the security dilemma. It highlights the necessity of contextual adaptation in analyzing contemporary conflicts.

While realism provides the primary framework for explaining escalation in all three conflicts, alternative theoretical perspectives offer valuable complementary insights. Constructivism emphasizes that state behavior is shaped not only by material threats but also by

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identity, historical narratives, and the symbolic meanings attached to territory. In this view, insecurity emerges not merely from the anarchic structure of the international system but from how actors perceive one another and construct threat narratives (Wendt 1992). Accordingly, the security dilemma can escalate even in situations where no material military threat objectively exists.

Similarly, institutional liberalism argues that even under anarchy, international institutions can reduce uncertainty and mistrust by increasing transparency, facilitating communication, and creating expectations of stable behavior (Keohane 1984). Institutions serve as platforms through which states share information, clarify intentions, and monitor compliance, thereby reducing the risk that defensive actions will be misinterpreted as aggressive. From this perspective, the security dilemma is not inevitable: cooperative arrangements, legal commitments, and confidence-building measures can mitigate perceived threats. The failure of institutions, therefore, is analytically significant, not because institutions lack authority, but because actors do not fully trust the institutional framework to constrain the other side.

A related constructivist contribution comes from Mitzen (2006), who introduces the concept of ontological security, the need to preserve a stable and continuous sense of national identity. In such cases, conflict escalation may occur not because of tangible military threats but because compromise is perceived as an existential challenge to collective identity. This dynamic is evident in disputes in which symbolic narratives, sacred spaces, or historical memories dominate decision-making, as in Jerusalem or at the Preah Vihear temple, where territorial concessions would undermine deeply embedded identity narratives.

These perspectives do not contradict realism but reveal the multidimensional nature of security dilemmas: fear may be structurally generated, but identity and institutional weakness determine how that fear escalates into conflict.

RUSSIA–UKRAINE: HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

Ukraine, the second-largest country in Europe after Russia, encompasses approximately 603,000 square kilometers and has a population of about 44 million. Its size, population, and geopolitical positioning make it a central actor in European affairs. Russia, by contrast, is the world's largest country and dominates the Eurasian continent both territorially and strategically. The vast scale and geopolitical weight of both states ensure that their conflict is not merely regional but has global ramifications across political, economic, and security domains.

The roots of the Russia–Ukraine conflict lie in a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. The two nations share longstanding ties, particularly through their Orthodox Christian heritage, which has shaped deep cultural and religious connections. Kyiv, often referred to as "the mother of Russian cities," carries symbolic significance comparable to that of Moscow and St. Petersburg. According to the 2001 census, approximately eight million ethnic Russians resided in Ukraine, mainly in the southern and eastern regions. Conversely, large numbers of Ukrainians have historically lived and worked in Russia, reflecting centuries of migration and mutual integration (Mandel 2016). This shared historical and cultural fabric has shaped contemporary tensions and continues to influence the conflict's dynamics. At the same time, overlapping claims of identity have become a central fault line in the confrontation.

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Russia, already the largest state in the world with vast natural resources and territory, has limited material incentive for geographic expansion. Its actions are instead driven by identity politics, hegemonic ambitions, and the desire to maintain influence over its near abroad. During the Soviet era, Ukraine held a prominent position as one of the largest and most strategically significant republics, playing a crucial role in agriculture, defense industries, and military capabilities. It also hosted key strategic assets, including the Black Sea Fleet and part of the nuclear arsenal. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine declared independence and sought to become a sovereign state. Its post-independence trajectory has been shaped by attempts to balance closer integration with Western institutions, such as the European Union and NATO, while managing historically close ties with Russia. These competing orientations have reflected internal divides: western regions, predominantly Ukrainian-speaking and nationalist, generally favor European integration, whereas eastern regions, with larger Russian-speaking populations, tend to advocate closer ties with Moscow (Harris 2020).

The 2014 Revolution of Dignity marked a watershed moment. The ousting of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych prompted Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where Russian-backed separatists clashed with Ukrainian forces. This event represented the first annexation of European territory since World War II. In February 2022, Russia escalated the conflict by launching a full-scale invasion aimed at overthrowing President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government, which had increasingly aligned with Western powers (Charap and Priebe 2023). President Vladimir Putin framed these actions within a broader narrative of defending ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, portraying intervention as a duty to protect "compatriots" and reclaim "historic Russian lands."[1]

Multiple attempts at conflict resolution have been pursued, including the Minsk Protocol, Minsk II, the Normandy Format agreements, and the Steinmeier Formula. Nevertheless, none have produced a durable peace. The 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership, intended to safeguard territorial integrity and prevent hostile use of territory, expired following the 2014 war.

For Russia, NATO enlargement into former Soviet territories has been a persistent source of resentment. Moscow has claimed that post-Cold War assurances against NATO expansion were violated, interpreting NATO's eastward enlargement as a strategic humiliation (Clem 2018). This perception has significantly shaped Russia's aggressive posture toward Ukraine.

The conflict has also attracted intense external involvement. The European Union and NATO have implemented sanctions against Russia and provided training, aid, and defensive equipment to Ukraine (Davis 2016). The United States has played a leading role, supplying political, military, and economic support (Charap and Priebe 2023). The United Nations has engaged diplomatically, but divisions within the Security Council, exacerbated by Russia's veto power, have limited its effectiveness. Germany and France, both through the EU and the Normandy Format, have engaged in repeated mediation efforts, while Turkey has occasionally

[1]By invoking the imperial-era term *Novorossiya*, Putin sought to legitimize territorial claims and mobilize nationalist sentiment. His rhetoric has consistently denied Ukrainian distinctiveness, asserting instead that Ukrainians are essentially Russians (Schwirtz et al. 2022). These miscalculations, particularly the assumption that Ukrainians would not resist, proved pivotal in shaping the course of the war (Solchanyk 2023). Putin further sought to delegitimize Ukraine's leadership, branding Zelenskyy's administration as neo-Nazi and calling for Ukraine's "demilitarization," framing the invasion as defensive rather than expansionist.

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positioned itself as a broker. Poland and the Baltic States have consistently advocated strong support for Ukraine, providing aid and lobbying for harsher sanctions against Russia. Belarus, by contrast, has openly supported Moscow.

The multiplicity of external actors not only globalizes the conflict but also reinforces the security dilemma, as defensive measures by one side are consistently interpreted as threats by the other. In contrast to the Russia–Ukraine case, where the security dilemma escalates into a systemic confrontation, the Israel–Palestine conflict demonstrates a persistent asymmetric dynamic.

ISRAELI–PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: ROOTS AND REALITIES

This section moves from describing events to analyzing the mechanisms behind escalation. The eruption of large-scale violence in October 2023 once again underscored the protracted and deeply entrenched nature of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Hostilities reignited when Hamas, the Islamist movement governing the Gaza Strip since 2007, launched a coordinated attack on Israeli territory. In an interview with Lebanon's LBC television on October 24, 2023, senior Hamas leader Ghazi Hamad reaffirmed the group's uncompromising stance: "Israel is a country that has no place on our land" (Pacchiani and Bachner 2023). Israel's response was immediate and forceful, involving ground operations in Gaza, a narrow enclave of just 365 km^2, and resulting in extensive civilian casualties in one of the most densely populated territories in the world. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu encapsulated the government's framing of the crisis, stating: "The Bible says that 'there is a time for peace and a time for war.' This is a time for war" (Abrams 2023).

The Gaza Strip is home to around two million Palestinians, giving it one of the highest population densities globally. Alongside the West Bank, Gaza constitutes the core of the Palestinian territories, where roughly five million Palestinians reside today. Political division compounds the humanitarian crisis: since the 2007 schism, Hamas has exercised de facto rule in Gaza, while Fatah and the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas govern parts of the West Bank (Spitka 2023). Beyond these territories, millions of Palestinians live in Israel or as refugees in neighboring states, reflecting the conflict's longstanding displacement dimension.

The roots of the conflict lie in overlapping nationalisms and colonial legacies. Under the British Mandate (1920–1948), contradictory promises to Jews and Arabs sowed enduring grievances. The Holocaust intensified Jewish demands for a homeland, culminating in mass immigration despite Arab opposition. The 1947 UN Partition Plan proposed the creation of separate Jewish and Arab states; Jewish leaders accepted it, while Arab leaders rejected it (Mock et al. 2012). Following Britain's withdrawal in 1948, the declaration of the State of Israel sparked the first Arab–Israeli war, inaugurating decades of violence, displacement, and contested sovereignty.

Successive wars and uprisings deepened divisions. The 1967 Six-Day War and 1973 Yom Kippur War reshaped territorial realities and regional geopolitics. The First (1987–1993) and Second Intifadas (2000–2005) revealed the persistence of Palestinian resistance and Israeli countermeasures, while more recent clashes in Gaza, including Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009), the 2012 conflict, and Operation Protective Edge (2014), reinforced the cyclical pattern of

violence. The 2023 escalation fits this trajectory of recurring clashes, unresolved grievances, and failed diplomacy.

Repeated peace efforts, from the Oslo Accords (1993) to the Annapolis Conference (2007) and the Kerry Initiative (2013–2014), have failed to produce a final-status settlement (İşleyen 2015). The persistence of violence despite diplomatic initiatives highlights the difficulty of reconciling existential narratives and mutually exclusive claims to land. The conflict's asymmetric nature further complicates resolution: Israel is a fully recognized and militarily dominant state, while Palestine remains partially recognized, politically fragmented, and institutionally weak. This indicates that regional and international dimensions remain decisive. In 2012, the UN General Assembly granted Palestine non-member observer state status (Ahmed 2021), strengthening its participation in global forums without full membership. Arab states continue to express rhetorical and diplomatic support, but normalization agreements between Israel and Gulf states, such as the UAE and Bahrain, reflect shifting regional priorities (Lintl 2018). Iran positions itself as a patron of Hamas, while Saudi Arabia balances support for Palestinian aspirations with strategic competition with Tehran.

Global powers also shape the conflict. The United States remains Israel's strongest ally, providing military aid and diplomatic backing, while Russia maintains ties with both sides. The European Union advocates a two-state solution but struggles to exert meaningful influence. Turkey acts as a vocal supporter of Palestinian rights, providing humanitarian aid and diplomatically challenging Israel.

In sum, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict exemplifies the persistence of intractable disputes shaped by overlapping nationalisms, religious symbolism, and external interventions. Its asymmetric character, pitting a recognized state against a fragmented and partially recognized actor, complicates the traditional logic of the security dilemma, making cycles of violence likely to continue until fundamental questions of sovereignty, recognition, and statehood are addressed.

A different pattern emerges in the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, where symbolic prestige, rather than military leverage, drives escalation.

THAILAND–CAMBODIA CONFLICT: IDENTITY, SYMBOLISM, AND GEOPOLITICS

Unlike Russia–Ukraine, where misperception dominates escalation, and Israel–Palestine, where explicit hostility drives insecurity, the Thailand–Cambodia dispute is fueled primarily by symbolic identity pressures. Although Thailand and Cambodia have long been recognized as sovereign states, their bilateral relationship has repeatedly been strained by territorial disputes, most prominently over the Preah Vihear Temple (Wagener 2011). Perched atop the Dângrêk Mountains near the border, the temple and its surrounding 4.6 km² of contested land represent only a fraction of the 803-kilometer frontier between the two countries. However, the symbolic, cultural, and political weight of the dispute far exceeds its limited geographic scale.

For Cambodia, Preah Vihear is not merely a religious monument but a cornerstone of national identity. Built in the 11th century under King Suryavarman II, it embodies the architectural and civilizational achievements of the Angkorian Empire (Touch 2009). Following independence, Cambodia claimed the temple as part of its cultural patrimony. Today, it remains a site of pride, a marker of historical continuity, and a driver of tourism revenue. Challenges to

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Cambodian sovereignty over Preah Vihear are therefore interpreted as existential affronts to Khmer civilization and dignity (Croissant and Chambers 2011).

Thailand, by contrast, views the temple as an integral part of its own historical and cultural heritage. Once under Siamese control, the area was ceded to French Indochina through the 1904 demarcation and 1907 treaty. Since Cambodia's independence, Thai leaders and nationalist movements have periodically contested Cambodian sovereignty, framing their claims as matters of historic justice, cultural symbolism, and national pride rather than material interest (Croissant and Chambers 2011).

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) sought to resolve the dispute in 1962, awarding sovereignty over the Temple of Preah Vihear to Cambodia based on the accepted boundary map and Thailand's prior conduct, which the Court interpreted as implicit recognition of Cambodian sovereignty (International Court of Justice 1962; Ciorciari 2014). However, the ruling did not clearly delimit the surrounding border area and therefore did little to resolve the conflict permanently. As a result, the temple has remained a flashpoint, with violence erupting in 2008 when Thai soldiers entered the disputed vicinity. Nationalist rhetoric in both countries, often mobilized for domestic political gain, has further exacerbated tensions and entrenched mutual hostility. The dispute re-escalated in the mid-2020s following renewed border incidents, including armed clashes and landmine-related casualties.

Beyond bilateral grievances, the conflict has acquired broader geopolitical resonance. Thailand's traditional alignment with the United States and other Western allies contrasts with Cambodia's deepening ties to China, which provides military and economic support (Cuasay 1998). These rival alignments have internationalized the dispute, transforming it from a localized quarrel into a stage for great-power competition in Southeast Asia. Such external involvement reduces the likelihood of bilateral compromise, as both states derive political and strategic support from powerful patrons.

International organizations have attempted to mediate the dispute, but with limited success. Cambodia has repeatedly sought international involvement, including a request to the ICJ in 2013 for an interpretation of its 1962 judgment. In its interpretation judgment, the Court reaffirmed that sovereignty over the Temple of Preah Vihear belongs to Cambodia and clarified that the promontory on which the temple is situated also falls under Cambodian sovereignty, while leaving broader border demarcation issues unresolved (ICJ 2013). Thailand, however, has continued to insist on bilateral negotiations, while internal divisions have similarly constrained ASEAN's mediation efforts. The resulting stalemate underscores the limitations of international institutions in resolving disputes rooted in identity, nationalism, and prestige, where compliance with legal rulings is often subordinated to domestic legitimacy and symbolic politics.

RUSSIA–UKRAINE CONFLICT: SECURITY DILEMMA DYNAMICS

Russia and Ukraine, once integral parts of the Soviet Union, initially separated peacefully, with agreements on cooperation and friendship. Their deep cultural and religious ties, particularly within Orthodox Christianity, complicate the narrative of enduring antagonism (Averre 2016). Nevertheless, these overlapping identities have become fault lines, transforming shared heritage into a source of rivalry rather than unity. Unlike the Israel–Palestine case, where

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explicit hostility replaces uncertainty, the Russia–Ukraine conflict follows the classical spiral model of the security dilemma, driven primarily by threat inflation and misperception.

The conflict demonstrates the classic logic of the security dilemma, in which misperceptions and communication failures generate cycles of escalation. Since 2014, Russia has justified its actions as the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, but Ukraine has consistently interpreted these claims as pretexts for expansion. Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists have deepened mistrust, while Ukraine's perception of Russia as an aggressor has locked both parties into reciprocal suspicion (Harris 2020). Defensive measures by one side are perceived as offensive by the other, creating a spiral of insecurity.

This dynamic shows that Russia interprets Ukraine's westward orientation, especially toward NATO and the EU, as an existential threat to its sphere of influence. Ukraine, conversely, sees Russia's growing militarization as a direct attack on its sovereignty (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018). This has triggered parallel arms buildups, with each side perceiving itself as acting defensively while interpreting the other's behavior as offensive.

From the perspective of offensive realism, Russia's annexation of Crimea and sponsorship of separatist movements reveal not only defensive anxieties but also ambitions for regional hegemony. These actions highlight Moscow's drive to secure dominance in its near abroad. Ukraine's response, however, aligns more closely with defensive realism: by escalating militarily and seeking protection through NATO and EU partnerships, Kyiv frames its survival as dependent on external guarantees. Together, these moves perpetuate a balance-of-power logic in which Russia seeks to expand its influence while Ukraine seeks protection.

Hegemony lies at the core of the conflict. Russia insists on preserving a sphere of influence over former Soviet states and asserts its role as a great power that cannot be marginalized by the West (Clem 2018). Ukraine, by contrast, aims to reduce dependency on Russia by anchoring itself in Western institutions. Both sides rationalize their strategies as matters of national interest, but the outcome is an intensification of mistrust and a widening security dilemma that increasingly involves outside powers.

From a defensive realist lens, Ukraine perceives Russia's growing military footprint, both within occupied territories and on its borders, as an existential threat to its autonomy. This compels Ukraine to strengthen its defenses and deepen cooperation with NATO and the EU. What might be framed as a strategic choice is, in practice, a survival imperative. The involvement of external actors amplifies this logic: Ukraine interprets Western support as essential to sovereignty, while Russia views it as confirmation of encirclement.

ISRAELI–PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: THE SECURITY DILEMMA

To move beyond descriptive narratives, this section applies the security dilemma framework to show how actions motivated by defensive concerns are perceived as offensive, escalating the conflict. The Israel–Palestine case illustrates how the security dilemma operates even in an asymmetric conflict. Israel perceives Palestinian mobilization or territorial consolidation as a security threat, prompting defensive measures that Palestinians interpret as offensive domination. Conversely, Palestinian diplomatic or armed resistance is read by Israel as existential hostility, reinforcing the belief that no credible commitment to peace exists. Defensive

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actions on both sides thus reproduce a feedback loop driven not by aggressive intent, but by fear, mistrust, and identity-based claims to territory.

The causal mechanism is straightforward: fear of vulnerability produces militarization; militarization increases fear; and increased fear generates further militarization. Measures that Israel defines as defensive, such as the security barrier, checkpoints, and settlement expansion, are interpreted by Palestinians as territorial encroachment and proof that negotiations are meaningless. Each side interprets the other's defensive actions as offensive, reinforcing the dilemma.

The conflict illustrates the complexity of the security dilemma in an asymmetric context. Israel is a recognized state, whereas Palestine lacks full UN membership, though many states and international organizations recognize it. Additionally, Palestine is politically fragmented: Hamas controls Gaza, while the Palestinian Authority exerts limited governance in parts of the West Bank. This division complicates the application of the security dilemma framework.

At its core, the conflict is shaped by mutual perceptions of threat and insecurity. Both sides interpret each other's actions as hostile, generating cycles of mistrust and escalation. Unlike other cases, however, misperception plays a lesser role: Hamas has openly declared its objective of destroying Israel, leaving little ambiguity regarding intent (Spitka 2023). Consequently, Israeli defensive actions are not merely misread as offensive; they are often responses to explicitly hostile rhetoric and behavior.

The central mechanism here is explicit hostility rather than misperception, challenging the traditional assumption that ambiguity over intentions is necessary for the security dilemma to operate. This makes Israel–Palestine a crucial corrective case, revealing a variant of the dilemma driven by overt adversarial commitments.

The absence of reliable communication channels further exacerbates insecurity. With Hamas designated as a terrorist organization by Israel, opportunities for dialogue are minimal. Historical grievances, wars, displacement, and competing national narratives entrench mistrust, reinforcing the logic of the security dilemma. Defensive measures, such as military buildups or blockades, are perceived as preparations for aggression, deepening insecurity.

An arms race dynamic also characterizes the conflict. Israeli efforts to maintain regional military superiority are mirrored by Palestinian armed groups' attempts to acquire weapons and assert resistance. This mutual militarization fosters what can be described as security interdependence: each actor's measures to safeguard its security undermine the other's, producing a cycle of escalation.

From an offensive realist perspective, Israel prioritizes military superiority not only as a defensive necessity but also as a means of deterrence and regional dominance, historically demonstrated in actions such as the Six-Day War of 1967. Preemptive strikes remain a central element of Israeli doctrine. Palestinians have also acted offensively, most notably through the 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, aimed at shifting the balance of power and reinvigorating the Palestinian question amid growing normalization between Israel and Arab states.

From a defensive realist perspective, both sides act primarily to ensure survival. Israel frames its preemptive actions and military buildup as essential to national security in the face of existential threats. Palestinians portray armed resistance as a struggle for national liberation and self-determination, countering what they perceive as occupation and oppression (Canetti et al.

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2019). While their strategies differ, both actors justify their actions as defensive responses to existential insecurity.

Ultimately, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict remains trapped in a cycle of violence with little prospect for resolution. The October 2023 escalation and its aftermath demonstrate that hostilities not only persist but also intensify with each round. The humanitarian situation in Gaza underscores this reality: the targeting of densely populated areas, the blockade of essential goods, and large-scale civilian casualties constitute clear violations of international humanitarian law. However, the international community has largely been unable to enforce compliance. The repeated paralysis of the UN Security Council, particularly due to vetoes by major powers, highlights the structural weakness of global institutions in restraining violence and protecting civilians. This inability reinforces the logic of the security dilemma, as both sides continue to rely on force rather than trust, law, or diplomacy to guarantee their survival.

Although this analysis relies predominantly on secondary sources, triangulation across academic research, policy documents, and official statements helps mitigate interpretive bias.

The central mechanism in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is not misperception but explicit hostility, which challenges the traditional assumption that ambiguity over intentions is necessary for the security dilemma to operate. As such, Israel–Palestine represents an important corrective case, revealing a variant of the dilemma driven by overt adversarial commitments rather than uncertainty.

THAILAND–CAMBODIA DISPUTE: SECURITY DILEMMA DYNAMICS

Misperceptions of intent primarily fuel the security dilemma between Thailand and Cambodia. For Thailand, Cambodia's claims over the Preah Vihear Temple represent not merely a territorial dispute but a challenge to its national prestige and historical legitimacy. The temple symbolizes the legacy of the Siamese Empire, and Cambodian assertions of sovereignty are perceived as undermining Thailand's status in the region (Singhaputargun 2015). Conversely, Cambodia interprets Thailand's actions as direct threats to its territorial integrity and national identity. For Cambodians, the temple embodies Khmer civilization, and any challenge to its sovereignty strikes at the heart of cultural pride and historical continuity (Touch 2009).

This differs sharply from the other two cases: unlike Russia–Ukraine (systemic rivalry) and Israel–Palestine (asymmetric hostility), escalation here is rooted less in material threats and more in ontological insecurity linked to symbolic territorial claims. This mutual attachment transforms a minor territorial issue into an identity-driven conflict. In an anarchic environment marked by distrust, defensive measures, such as border militarization, are often perceived as offensive provocations. Steps intended to secure sovereignty are reinterpreted as preparations for aggression, reinforcing the classic spiral model of the security dilemma, where defensive moves accelerate mutual suspicion and escalation.

From the lens of defensive realism, both states prioritize survival and sovereignty. Cambodia, fearing Thai encroachment, has bolstered its border defenses, while Thailand has mirrored these measures. Each side interprets the other's buildup as threatening, creating a spiral of insecurity. The case exemplifies how actions meant for self-preservation can be misperceived as hostile, deepening mistrust.

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At the same time, offensive realism provides insight into Thailand's rejection of international rulings, including the 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision, and its preference for bilateral negotiations. Such behavior signals an ambition to assert regional dominance through military strength and strategic alliances. Similarly, Cambodia's alignment with China, which provides significant economic and military support, illustrates a reactive form of offensive realism. By fortifying its defenses and seeking international backing, Cambodia not only safeguards sovereignty but also enhances its regional leverage (Cheunboran 2021).

External alliances further complicate the dispute. Thailand, traditionally aligned with the United States and Western powers, pursues a balance-of-power strategy to maintain regional influence. Cambodia, meanwhile, has adopted a bandwagoning approach, aligning with China to strengthen its position against Thai dominance. These rival alignments transform the dispute from a bilateral issue into part of a broader geopolitical contest, making resolution more elusive.

The conclusion that international law has failed in this case is not based on the absence of legal norms or adjudication, but on the gap between legal rulings and behavioral outcomes. Although the International Court of Justice awarded sovereignty over the Temple of Preah Vihear to Cambodia in 1962 and reaffirmed key elements of that judgment in 2013, these decisions did not prevent repeated militarization, armed incidents, or renewed escalation around the disputed area. Thai military deployments in the vicinity of the temple after the judgment, the outbreak of violence in 2008, and subsequent border incidents demonstrate that legal clarification alone did not alter security behavior on the ground.

Moreover, compliance with international legal rulings has been selective and politically conditioned. While both Cambodia and Thailand formally acknowledge the authority of international law, their actions have been shaped primarily by relative power, domestic legitimacy, and alliance considerations. Thailand, relying on its military capabilities and strategic partnerships, has resisted external enforcement and insisted on bilateral negotiations, thereby limiting the practical impact of judicial rulings. ASEAN's inability to enforce or mediate compliance further illustrates how institutional mechanisms lack coercive capacity when nationalist prestige and sovereignty claims dominate. Taken together, these patterns indicate that international law functioned as a normative reference but failed to constrain security-driven behavior, reinforcing balance-of-power dynamics and sustaining the security dilemma.

When compared with the Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Palestine conflicts, the Thailand–Cambodia case illustrates how even disputes over small tracts of land can escalate into existential struggles when identity and national symbolism are at stake. Unlike the material stakes of the Russia–Ukraine confrontation or the pronounced asymmetry of the Israel–Palestine conflict, the primary driver in this case is prestige and heritage. However, the outcome is similar: a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust and insecurity. Ultimately, escalation stems less from territorial stakes than from competition over narrative dominance.

KEY COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

To move from case-specific insights toward a comparative analytical synthesis, the findings from the three conflicts are presented jointly below. To avoid descriptive overload, this section focuses only on variables directly linked to the security dilemma. The study confirms that the security dilemma operates as a universal yet contextually variable mechanism across Russia–

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Ukraine, Israel–Palestine, and Thailand–Cambodia. Despite differences in geography, scale, and actors, all cases demonstrate that actions taken in the name of survival, military buildups, alliances, or defensive measures were consistently interpreted as offensive threats, fueling mistrust and escalation. Misperceptions of intent and communication failures were central across contexts, whether in the ambiguity of Russian motives, the contested symbolic ownership of the Preah Vihear Temple, or entrenched hostility between Hamas and Israel.

Beyond mistrust and security measures, external alliances significantly shape escalation dynamics. NATO support for Ukraine and Russia's opposition to Western expansion transformed a bilateral struggle into a systemic confrontation. Similarly, Cambodia's reliance on China and Thailand's ties to Western allies globalized a localized dispute, while the Israeli–Palestinian conflict remained heavily influenced by US, Russian, and regional interventions. In all three cases, alliances amplified insecurity, intensifying the spiral of escalation.

The analysis also highlights the persistent weakness of international law and institutions. The 1962 ICJ ruling on Preah Vihear, repeated UN resolutions on Palestine, and bilateral treaties between Russia and Ukraine provided legal frameworks but lacked enforcement. Outcomes were ultimately dictated by relative power and strategic interests, confirming realist assumptions about the primacy of material capabilities over juridical commitments.

At the same time, important differences emerge. The Thailand–Cambodia dispute revolved around a symbolic territory of only 4.6 km², yet identity and prestige elevated it into a national struggle. The Russia–Ukraine war represented a systemic great-power confrontation over hegemony and spheres of influence. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict differed further in its asymmetry: one side is a recognized state with superior capabilities, while the other is fragmented and only partially recognized. Moreover, while misperception dominates in the first two cases, intent in Israel–Palestine is less ambiguous: Hamas openly declared hostility toward Israel, and many Palestinians interpreted Israeli policies as evidence of permanent domination.

The Israel–Palestine case demonstrates that the security dilemma can escalate even when intentions are explicit rather than ambiguous, revealing a theoretically significant variant of the classical spiral model. This finding qualifies the model by showing that uncertainty is not always a prerequisite for the dynamics of the security dilemma.

Although each conflict appears territorial on the surface, the findings show that none are primarily about land. Russia, already the largest state in the world, does not require additional territory; Gaza's 365 km² is strategically insignificant but symbolically existential, and Preah Vihear is a small site elevated to national significance. These results underscore that the security dilemma is driven not only by material stakes but also by identity, sovereignty, and perceptions of survival.

The comparative findings are summarized in Table 1, which illustrates the causal linkages between mistrust, alliance dynamics, and escalation outcomes across the three conflicts. This table demonstrates that escalation intensity is not determined by territorial size or material value, but by how identity narratives and alliance structures shape perceived threats.

Table 1: Comparative Causal Dynamics of the Security Dilemma (Source: Author's own depiction)

Case	Driver of Mistrust	Role of Alliances	Escalation Outcome
Russia–Ukraine	Perceived NATO threat + identity (Russia's civilizational claim)	NATO/EU amplifies threat perception	Full-scale war (high escalation)
Israel–Palestine	Sacred identity + existential narratives	US/regional actors sustain an imbalance	Cyclical asymmetric escalation
Thailand–Cambodia	Symbolic prestige (Preah Vihear temple)	Weak mediation by ASEAN	Limited militarized standoffs

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the Russia–Ukraine, Israeli–Palestinian, and Thailand–Cambodia conflicts demonstrates that the security dilemma is both universal and adaptable. Despite differences in geography, scale, and actor symmetry, the exact underlying mechanism persists: defensive measures intended to ensure survival are consistently interpreted as offensive threats, generating spirals of mistrust and escalation. Importantly, while all three conflicts appear territorial, they are not fundamentally about territory. Russia, already the largest state in the world, does not seek land but influence and recognition of identity. The Gaza Strip is too small to alter Israel's strategic depth, yet it embodies existential questions of sovereignty and statehood. The Preah Vihear Temple dispute involves only 4.6 km^2, yet its symbolic significance elevates it into a matter of national pride. These cases illustrate that power, mistrust, and identity politics, not material resources, are the deeper drivers of insecurity.

External alliances further amplify the dilemma, embedding local disputes within broader geopolitical rivalries. NATO's support for Ukraine, US patronage of Israel, and China's backing of Cambodia exemplify how global actors can reinforce insecurity rather than mitigate it. Meanwhile, the repeated failure of international law and institutions, from UN resolutions on Palestine to ICJ rulings on Preah Vihear, underscores the dominance of power politics over legal commitments in an anarchic world order.

This paper contributes by linking theoretical debates on the security dilemma with underexplored empirical cases, bridging a gap in comparative literature. By juxtaposing a systemic great-power rivalry, an asymmetric state–non-state confrontation, and a symbolic identity-driven dispute, the study demonstrates the universality of the security dilemma while showing that its manifestations are context-dependent. It highlights that misperceptions are not always the central driver; in some cases, explicit hostility or symbolic stakes take precedence.

In doing so, the study enriches both theory and practice: it extends the applicability of realism to conflicts often excluded from mainstream analysis, while offering insights into why peace remains elusive. The enduring lesson is that insecurity is not merely the product of arms and territory but of perceptions, mistrust, and identity. As long as these deeper drivers remain unresolved, the security dilemma will continue to shape international politics across diverse contexts. This study demonstrates that the security dilemma operates not only in material power rivalries but also in symbolic, identity-driven disputes.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis relies on qualitative case comparisons, which, while rich in context, limit the ability to generalize findings

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across all conflicts. Second, the selection of three cases, while diverse, cannot capture the full range of security-dilemma dynamics in different regions, especially in conflicts involving nuclear powers or highly institutionalized settings. Third, the study primarily examines state-centric and symbolic disputes, leaving limited room to explore internal or transnational security dilemmas, such as insurgencies or cyber conflicts. Finally, while efforts were made to assess both material and identity-driven drivers, access to primary sources and reliable data remains constrained in some contexts, particularly Gaza and Preah Vihear, which may affect the depth of empirical insights. Future research could address these limitations by conducting broader comparative studies, employing mixed-methods analyses, and expanding fieldwork to strengthen and validate the findings.

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