To what extent can states mitigate the impact of the security dilemma?

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Abstract: This paper takes a theoretical approach to the question 'to what extent can states mitigate the impact of the security dilemma,' using the theories of structural realism and constructivism to both explain the security dilemma and its impact and suggest ways in which states can overcome it. To do so, it will systematically analyze, both theoretically and practically, the strategies of military reassurance, categorizing offensive weaponry, increasing transparency between states through communication and building economic and cultural relationships, and finally the pursuit of international agreements. It will evaluate the effectiveness of each method before concluding that the strategy of pursuing and actively supporting supranational agreements is the one with the most potential to mitigate the impact of the security dilemma.

Keywords: International Security, Theory, Realism, Constructivism, States, Military, Multilateral, Co-operation.

Introduction

The security dilemma is defined as a "two-level strategic predicament in relations between states" in which the first level refers to the interpretation of the military intentions and capabilities of states; the second referring to the subsequent rational response of other states to the perceived threat.[1] This dilemma, due to the nature of global anarchy, often results in a security paradox: states strive to increase their own security but, by doing so, inadvertently or otherwise, decrease the relative security of other states.[2] This results in a spiral of security-insecurity with states desperate to maintain their own security.

This paper uses the theories of structural realism, encompassing both offensive and defensive realism, and constructivism to illustrate the security dilemma and discuss to what

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[1] Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.
[2] Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *The Dictionary of World Politics* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

extent states can unilaterally or multilaterally mitigate its impacts. Structural realism argues that the security dilemma exists due to states being in a constant state of mistrust due to the nature of anarchical society and competition for security, resulting in an inherently unstable international system. In contrast, constructivism suggests that the security dilemma is socially and culturally constructed, and its effects can therefore be mitigated once all states recognize the socially constructed character of their relations and the perceived threats to their security.[3]

This paper will first discuss the nature of anarchical society, the structural realist and constructivist views on it and how the security dilemma originates. It will then analyze the ways in which the dilemma can be mitigated, firstly through military reassurance, then categorizing offensive and defensive weaponry, increasing transparency of state intentions through effective communication, and finally through the pursuit of international agreements and the encouragement of increased cultural exchange and understanding. It will ultimately conclude that states can mitigate the impact of the security dilemma most effectively through transparent and honest international agreements provided that these are consistently and visibly supported by actions on the ground in order to engender trust in their intent.

Realist Theory

The international political system is considered to be anarchical in the sense that there is "no overarching central authority above the individual collection of states".[4] Structural realism is a revised realist theory developed by Waltz which suggests that anarchy, together with states' military capabilities, define the nature of international politics, resulting in a political arena characterized by uncertainty and mistrust.[5] Offensive realism interprets this as states having to unilaterally assure their own security on a self-help basis by increasing their

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[3] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992).

[4] Tim Dunne and Brian Schmidt, "Realism", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. John Bayliss, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 101.

[5] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979).

military capabilities relative to that of other states with the ultimate goal of hegemony.[6] This hypothesis assumes that states will always prioritize their own national security, exploiting the weaknesses of other states in order to maintain or better their own military position. For example, Jervis uses the game theory analogy of the stag hunt to demonstrate how, despite a group of 'states' cooperating to catch a deer, the outcome in which all would be equally well-off, one state is willing to compromise the aim of the group and divert its efforts to single-handedly catch a rabbit, resulting in it gaining a better relative position than other states.[7]

This concept, however, relies on the assumption that an "increase in military strength leads to an increase in security" which is not always the case.[8] Military advantage in this instance can often be self-defeating as it encourages other states to increase their own capabilities, in turn decreasing the relative security of the first state.[9] Defensive realism, on the other hand, argues that states wish to maintain their position in international society by adopting moderate security-seeking policies in order to maximize their security without threatening their neighbors.[10] However, due to the nature of anarchy, states even moderately strengthening their military capabilities undermines trust and results in security-seeking states questioning whether their intentions are purely defensive and consequently mirroring their capability build-up in order to maintain their own security. This drives an arms race with the first state further increasing its military capabilities per The Spiral Model: a sequence of positive feedback with states increasing their military capabilities to counter the growing threat they perceive from others.[11] Liff and Ikenberry refer to this process as a "costly and potentially disastrous action-reaction sequence" where the ultimate outcome is "growing

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[6] John Mearsheimer, "'Back to the Future': Instability in Europe After the Cold War", *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 12.
[7] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma", *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978).
[8] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 182.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 126.
[11] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

insecurity for all".[12] This is largely due to states misinterpreting or distrusting the actions of others due to a lack of effective communication and appreciation of how their build-up of military capabilities contributes to an atmosphere of mutual fear and uncertainty. Mitzen argues that it is this uncertainty and mistrust between states that "generates the tragedy of world politics, where a world of security-seekers can be a world at war".[13]

Constructivist Theory

Constructivism, in contrast, draws on critical theory, emphasizing the effect normative as well as material structures can have on state relations.[14] Although constructivism shares a number of realist assumptions concerning anarchy and international politics, such as states having a fundamental wish to survive, it diverges in its view that self-help, power politics and consequently the security dilemma do not directly follow from the existence of an anarchic plain. In particular, Wendt argues that "if we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure", suggesting that it is how states respond to anarchy which results in them acting in realist terms.[15]

Furthermore, Wendt's Social Theory of International Politics (1999) directly contradicts the structural realist views of Waltz by suggesting that the security dilemma is simply a 'social structure' ultimately driven by states' national identities and their wish to preserve them.[16] These identities shape the interests and resulting actions of states and relations between them through their understanding and perceptions of 'self' and 'other'.[17] Wendt therefore believes it possible to at least partially mitigate the security dilemma by

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[12] Adam Liff and Gilford Ikenberry, "Racing Toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma", *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014): 54, 22.

[13] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 342.

[14] Christian Reus-Smit, "Constructivism", in *Theories of International Relations,* ed. Scott Burchill, and Andrew Linklater (London: Red Globe Press, 2013).

[15] Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it," 394.

[16] Michael Barnett, "Social Constructivism", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 166.

[17] Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 94.

recognizing the differing identities of states as this will, in turn, protect their interests and shape their actions.[18] He also argues that it is 'shared ideas' and assumptions of states which cause the security dilemma, as its concepts "only become meaningful in terms of the shared understandings that actors give them".[19] Wendt is supported by Gramsci in his argument that these shared beliefs are consequently highly resistant to change as they become cemented in reality due to states believing the structures to be a "natural and inevitable" characteristic of anarchy and the protection of national identity.[20]

The security dilemma can consequently be considered as a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby states collectively believe they have to act in their own interests to maximize their own security, creating and propelling the dilemma further. However, Wendt stresses that this can be mitigated to an extent if states "collectively change their social ideas", thereby undermining the cause of the dilemma.[21] For example, the Cold War is a notable case of a socially constructed conflict with Wendt arguing that it only existed due to the United States and the Soviet Union sharing a belief that they were mutual enemies as a result of their opposing ideologies.[22] He argues that this "helped constitute their identities and interests…confirm(ing) to the other that they were a threat".[23] The sudden peaceful conclusion to a conflict that "seemed like it had become set in stone" also supports Wendt's theory.[24] This was an unexpected outcome for realists as it contradicted structural realist theory in that, once both sides believed and accepted that the conflict was over, it was in fact over.[25] That said, the current conflict in Ukraine has its roots in the threat perceived by Russia

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[18] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[19] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 135.
[20] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 195.
[21] Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 94.
[22] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 187.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics,* 375.
[25] John Baylis, "International and Global Security", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 235.

from the extension of the democratic ideology to former Soviet states following the fall of the Soviet Union. This has been compounded by the expansion of NATO as a defensive alliance between states feeling threatened by Russia. As such, it is a perfect illustration of constructivism in that the expansion of a defensive alliance is perceived as aggression by Russia, if only as a means of expanding democracy, protecting national identities, and resulting soft power and political influence in Eastern Europe.

Ultimately, however, the constructivist argument on anarchy and the security dilemma is more convincing as states, without effective communication, are driving themselves into a security dilemma due to their shared misconception that a self-help policy is the most effective way to maximize their own security in an anarchical society. This paper will now apply both realist and constructivist theory to practical, real-life examples of the security dilemma and discuss how, realistically, the effects of the security dilemma can best be mitigated.

Military Reassurance

Military reassurance as a strategy to mitigate the impact of the security dilemma and avoid conflict is based on realist logic and rests on the principle of the security paradox. It is undertaken by a security-seeking state to clarify its peaceful intentions and is achieved by explicitly weakening its relative military position, differentiating it from an aggressive adversary and thereby increasing the perceived security of others. This strategy holds some weight as Montgomery argues that aggressive states with expansionist intentions would not unilaterally reduce their military capabilities as this would compromise their strength in the case of conflict. He therefore suggests that security-seeking states must do just that in order to distinguish themselves.[26]

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[26] Evan Montgomery, "Breaking out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty", *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006): 153.

Booth and Wheeler, however, raise a key question: "how costly can (states) afford their signal to be?"[27] Generally, the more substantial the decrease in a security-seeking state's military capability, the more it can rely on the other state to correctly perceive its peaceful intentions, but this makes it extremely vulnerable to potential aggressors who may take advantage of the state's weak military position.[28] This presents a difficult trade-off as states are caught between taking substantial enough actions to convey a clear message and the risk of military retaliation should the other state have aggressive intentions, a weakness of this strategy that must be considered.

For example, in the case of the Cold War, the Soviet Union announced in May 1956 that 1.8 million troops would be cut from its military.[29] However, this was an unsuccessful case of reassurance as, despite the apparent decrease in capability, these reductions "did not function as costly (enough) signals" due to the fact that funds were instead being redirected to another part of the Soviet Union's potentially offensive strategy: intercontinental ballistic missiles.[30] Instead, the successful example of military reassurance that ultimately concluded the Cold War was Gorbachev committing to destroying 1,846 missiles compared to 846 for the US, followed by a further unilateral reduction of 500,000 troops, 8,500 artillery pieces and 800 combat aircraft, a costly enough signal in terms of its overall capability to reassure the US of Gorbachev's security-seeking intentions.[31]

Another successful example of military reassurance is that of Switzerland which remained neutral and secure through two world wars and the Cold War despite only maintaining a minimal defensive capability.[32] However, another nuance to this strategy that

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[27] Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 169.
[28] Montgomery, "Breaking out of the Security Dilemma," 158-59.
[29] Montgomery, "Breaking out of the Security Dilemma," 174.
[30] Montgomery, "Breaking out of the Security Dilemma," 177.
[31] Montgomery, "Breaking out of the Security Dilemma," 180.
[32] Urs Loeffel, "Swiss Neutrality and Collective Security: The League of Nations and the United Nations," (master's dissertation, Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, California, 2010).

must be considered is that the potential use of weaponry is extremely ambiguous and subjective and what ultimately matters is the constructivist notion of how states perceive another's actions or intent. Consequently, states taking steps to alter how they are being perceived may not be successful if others do not interpret the action in the same way. The creation of a strategy underpinned by mutual objective understanding between states, such as the categorization of weaponry, may therefore be an effective conflict-mitigation strategy, although it is not without risk.

Categorizing Weaponry

Categorizing weaponry, specifically classing them as either offensive or defensive, could theoretically result in more transparency between states and allow them to collectively increase their security without inadvertently decreasing that of others. Jervis argues that this would result in security-seeking states increasing their defensive military capabilities to the point at which they would "all enjoy a high level of security", allowing them to "largely escape" from the impact of the security dilemma and the issues relating to defensive realism theory.[33] This idea was acknowledged by President Roosevelt in his speech to the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1933 with him stating that "if all nations will agree wholly to eliminate from possession and use the weapons which make possible a successful attack, defenses automatically will become impregnable, and the frontiers and independence of every nation will become secure".[34] Furthermore, Montgomery argues that this differentiation would also identify potentially aggressive states, as only those with malign intentions would opt for offensive weaponry when a defensive military strategy would ensure the highest level of security for all.[35] This would result in less potential for misinterpretation of states' military intent, creating a more transparent international society.

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[33] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 187.
[34] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 201.
[35] Montgomery, "Breaking out of the Security Dilemma."

However, the true efficacy of categorizing weaponry is widely questioned, for example by Glaser who argues that although it "has the potential to virtually eliminate the security dilemma", weaponry cannot be classed as strictly offensive or defensive as most can be used for both purposes.[36] Mearsheimer and Huntington support this, suggesting that it is almost impossible to distinguish what makes weaponry either offensive or defensive and thereby implying that the categorization of weaponry would not be an effective strategy to mitigate the impact of the security dilemma.[37]

Furthermore, the issues of subjectivity and perception of both the nature and uses of weaponry are still very much present with this strategy of conflict prevention with Jervis suggesting that subjectivity greatly influences whether weaponry is perceived as either offensive or defensive.[38] This also leads to the constructivist idea that a state's identity and past experiences with weaponry and military strategy at the hands of previous adversaries shapes its perception of military strategy, perhaps thereby resulting in the state misinterpreting another's intent in future military dealings. Jervis makes the point that it is impossible for one state to control the way in which another perceives its actions concerning the build-up of either offensive or defensive weaponry, therefore implying that greater clarity and credibility of communication and trust is also needed.[39]

Effective Communication

As is illustrated in the cases of both military reassurance and the categorization of weaponry, clearer communication between states is crucial to ensuring the practical success of strategies aiming to mitigate the impact of the security dilemma. This is mainly due to the fact that, rather than the actions themselves, it is one state's perception of another's actions

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[36] Charles Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited", *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (1997): 186.
[37] John Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions", *International Security* 12, no. 3 (1995); Huntington (1987).
[38] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma."
[39] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma."

and underlying intentions that ultimately influences its diplomatic position and military responses. Bull argues that the prevalent lack of transparency and communication, which is clearly inherent in the causes of the security dilemma, is arguably due to states' inability to comprehend how their actions are perceived and can potentially cause concern for others.[40] This idea is supported by Butterfield who argues that entering another state's mindset is an "impossible dream".[41] Consequently, if they are to successfully address the security dilemma, states must do all in their power to increase honest communication between themselves in order to reduce multilateral tensions.

For example, as well as in Eastern Europe, there is currently evidence of a "security dilemma-driven spiral" unfolding between China and other powerful states, most notably the US, Australia, and Japan.[42] China is rapidly increasing its military capabilities but there is a distinct lack of transparency regarding its intentions which has led to an atmosphere of increased tension and suspicion. However, steps have been taken to mitigate this potentially dangerous lack of communication between states in the form of The Strategic and Economic Dialogue which is held annually by policymakers in Washington D.C. and Beijing.[43] The main aim of this conference is to promote the candid exchange of information concerning each other's interpretation of the other's policies and rhetoric, hoping that increased transparency will lead to reduced uncertainty regarding diplomatic and military intent. However, the Dialogue has only been partially successful since its introduction in 2009 due to persistent mistrust between states, resulting, at least partially, from a lack of consistency between words and actions on the ground and both believing that they cannot guarantee the honesty of the other, especially under the terms of an open dialogue.

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[40] Hedley Bull, "The Great Irresponsibles? The United States, the Soviet Union, and World Order", in *International Conflict and Conflict Management: Readings in World Politics*, ed. Robert Matthews, Arthur Rubinoff, and Janice Stein (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1980).
[41] Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 140.
[42] Liff and Ikenberry, "Racing Toward Tragedy?," 88.
[43] Liff and Ikenberry, "Racing Toward Tragedy?," 89.

Instead, more successful examples of open and honest communication mitigating the effects of the security dilemma are those which involve the signing of a bilateral or supranational agreement. For example, the Non-Proliferation Treaty of Nuclear Weapons (1968) was largely successful in contributing to bringing about the end of the Cold War and since ensuring that nuclear weapons have not been used offensively since World War II, if not its wider objective of broader nuclear disarmament. Since then, arguably the most successful international agreement has been the Kyoto Protocol (1989) which, although not inherently security related, involves states prioritizing the agreement and steps to combat climate change, when an individualist self-help mindset would encourage otherwise. Open communication between states which is both credible and consistent with actions in other areas is therefore integral to mitigating the impact of the security dilemma as it would break down the key realist assumption of uncertainty in an anarchical system and consequently states would see the benefit of the creation of an international society in which collective security thrives.

International Agreements

The method for mitigating the security dilemma which has the potential to be the most successful would be wide-ranging supranational agreements underpinned by increased transparency and honest communication. This could be achieved through the transformation of current international relationships as well as realist norms and principles, ultimately achieving the transcendence of competitive power politics and the objective of true collective security in which states are primarily concerned with absolute rather than relative security gains.[44] The constructivist view is therefore most applicable to this strategy as it involves states' realizing, through increased transparency, that elements of realist theory such as a self-

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[44] Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it," 400.

help policy are both ineffective and even counterproductive with their security being strongest when cooperating fully with one another.

Attempts have been made at creating an international security community through the League of Nations and the United Nations which both aimed to deter war and competitive power politics mainly through multilateral alliances. The League of Nations was established in 1920 in the wake of WW1 to prevent another world war with the philosophy that "an attack on one (state) would be an attack on all", hoping that this would deter states from engaging in conflict if it meant overwhelming retaliation from other League states. The idealist view was that "the spiral of the security paradox would be replaced by a virtuous cycle of disarmament".[45] However, as illustrated by the reality of WW2, this was not achieved, showing that this approach is not effective against aggressive and expansionist states.

Moreover, The United Nations, established in 1945 and grown from the seed of collective security that had been sown by the League of Nations, has been largely successful in preventing international conflict and the escalation of the security dilemma and has been accredited with the promotion of an unprecedented 'long peace', also described as the Pax Americana. This period from 1945 to the present day without widespread war illustrates that with honest and transparent international agreements, often made through effective international organizations, achieving long standing peaceful relations is possible and also mitigates the effects of the security dilemma.

The European Union (EU), created by The Treaty of Rome signed in 1957, is another strong example of an international organization that has helped mitigate the effects of the security dilemma since its creation. Among many successes, it created one of the world's largest single markets which brings into play Thomas Friedman's Golden Arches Theory of

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[45] Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 175.

Conflict Prevention (1996) and his revised Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention (2005) which both suggest that no two countries part of the same major global supply chain would engage in war due to the adverse economic impact it would have, an idea supported by Russet.[46] These theories can be applied particularly well to the EU which, despite comprising states that have been historically former enemies, such as France and Germany, their investment in the success of their economies and the single market has decreased the likelihood of them entering war due to the economic stakes simply being too high.

Therefore, the creation of a stable international society through supranational agreements that aim to unite states politically, economically, and socially is a realistic goal and remains the strategy with the most potential to reduce the impact of the security dilemma provided that these are consistently and visibly supported by actions on the ground in order to engender trust in their intent. This need is partly due to states believing that they can never completely trust one another for a number of reasons including the unpredictability of states' domestic changes that can radically change their identity, political landscape, interests and therefore actions.[47] However, the creation of a stable international society through supranational agreements that aim to unite states politically, economically, and socially is still a realistic goal and remains the strategy with the most potential to reduce the impact of the security dilemma.

Neoliberal Institutionalism

The idea that the most effective way to mitigate the effects of the security dilemma is through international agreements and, more specifically, those crafted with the oversight of international organizations such as the UN and EU is also consistent with neoliberal institutionalist theory. This theory agrees with the realist view that the international system is

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[46] Thomas Friedman, "Foreign Affairs Big Mac I," The New York Times, Dec 8, 1996; Bruce Russet, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[47] Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 95.

anarchic and that states are rational unitary actors but argues, unlike realism, that cooperation

both between states and internationally is nonetheless possible through international

institutions. Neoliberal institutionalism also suggests that these supranational bodies are best

used as mediators to find solutions to interstate problems and also that they can help to lower

the risks of states acting independently in a state of anarchy where self-help politics is the

traditional approach. For example, Greico and Ikenberry state that the theory "sees

institutions as agreements or contracts between actors that reduce uncertainty, lower

transaction costs, and solve collective-action problems", such as the security dilemma.[48]

Conclusion

States can most effectively mitigate the impact of the security dilemma through the

establishment and active support of transparent, honest, and credible international

agreements. These promote political, economic, and social integration as well as open and

effective communication concerning the military and diplomatic intentions of states, reducing

the need for structural realist behaviors such as distrustful power politics and security self-

help policies. Even realists such as Morgenthau acknowledge the effectiveness of the creation

of a security community through supranational agreements, stating that "the logic of

collective security is flawless" but suggests that it can never practically work which, indeed,

holds true as long as states base their actions on realist theory and principles thereby being

perceived as inconsistent with the spirit of these agreements and undermining trust.[49]

However, if states come to understand the constructivist view that the security

paradox and competitive power politics are a socially constructed phenomenon, then

international agreements could indeed be the key needed to unlock the door to an

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[48] Joseph M. Grieco and G. John Ikenberry, *State Power and World Markets: The International Political Economy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 116.

[49] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2005), 435.

international society where collective security is the uppermost concern of all states.

Therefore, the strategy of pursuing supranational agreements is the one with the most

potential to mitigate and even eliminate the impact of the security dilemma and thus should

be the ultimate objective of all security-seeking states.