Security Dilemma – The Concept and the Iran Conflict

Mains: *GS II – International Relations*

Why in News?

The recent war dynamics between Iran and US-Israel illustrates the concept of the security dilemma, a key theory in international relations used to explain the persistence of conflicts and arms races.

What is the Security Dilemma?

- **The security dilemma** – It refers to a situation in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security inadvertently threaten other states, prompting them to respond with similar measures.
- **Effects & Results** – Security dilemma results, in a cycle of mutual suspicion, military build-ups, and potentially conflict, even when none of the states initially intends aggression.
- **Origin of concept** – The concept emerged in the 1950s and is associated with the works of scholars such as *John Herz, Herbert Butterfield, and later Robert Jervis.*
- **John Herz** – In his influential 1950 article *Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,* Herz argued that the security dilemma arises from the *anarchic nature of the international system*, where there is no central authority to enforce rules or guarantee protection.
- As a result, states seek to enhance their security by accumulating power—primarily military power.
- However, these actions make other states feel insecure, leading them to strengthen their own capabilities.
- This creates a vicious cycle of security competition.
- **Robert Jervis –** In his article *Cooperation under the Security Dilemma* (1978), Jervis explained that the dilemma arises when:
    - "Many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others."
- According to Jervis, the intensity of the security dilemma depends on two key variables:
- **Offense–Defense Balance –** This refers to whether military technology and strategy favour offensive operations or defensive protection.
- If offensive capabilities dominate, states are more likely to fear surprise attacks, intensifying the security dilemma.
- If defensive capabilities dominate, the likelihood of conflict decreases.

- **Offense–Defense Differentiation –** This refers to whether offensive and defensive military capabilities can be distinguished from each other.
- If weapons designed for defense can easily be used for offense, mistrust increases.
- Jervis illustrated this dynamic with the example of naval rivalry before the World War I.
- When Germany began building a powerful navy, United Kingdom perceived it as an offensive threat, despite already possessing superior naval power.
- This mutual suspicion contributed to escalating tensions.

What is the role of anarchy in international politics?

- **Argument of realists** – The concept of the security dilemma is closely linked to the *realist school of international relations*.
- Realists argue that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority above sovereign states.
- This *lack of central authority* creates an environment of uncertainty and mistrust, where states cannot be sure of the intentions of others.
- As a result, they prioritize self-help strategies, including military build-ups, alliances, and deterrence measures.
- These actions often trigger arms races, proxy conflicts, and wars.
- **The Role of Identity –** While realism emphasizes structural factors such as anarchy and power competition, constructivist scholars highlight the role of identity, ideas, and perceptions in shaping the security dilemma.
    - **For instance,** Mohamed Bin Huwaidin, in his article *The Security Dilemma in Saudi-Iranian Relations* (2015), argues that the way states perceive each other's identity and intentions significantly influences their security policies.
- He explains that the absence of shared identity and trust between Saudi Arabia and Iran contributes to Riyadh's strong concerns over Tehran's nuclear ambitions.
- In contrast, Saudi Arabia does not perceive the nuclear capability of Pakistan as an equivalent threat, largely due to closer political and ideological ties.

How security dilemma works in the Iran–US–Israel context?

- **Recent pressures** – The tensions between Iran, Israel, and the United States demonstrate the workings of the security dilemma in contemporary geopolitics.
- **Iran's strategy** – Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran adopted a strongly anti-Western foreign policy and challenged the regional order supported by the United States and its allies.
- This shift in identity and strategic orientation intensified mistrust, leading to:
    - Military build-ups
    - Proxy conflicts across the Middle East
    - Escalating tensions over Iran's nuclear programme
- **Countermeasures to Iran** – If Iran seeks to strengthen its nuclear deterrent in response to external threats, rival states may adopt countermeasures, including advanced defense systems or nuclear capabilities.
- Such reactions could further deepen insecurity and escalate conflict dynamics, reflecting Herz's "vicious circle" of the security dilemma.

- **New global discussion** – The ongoing conflict involving Iran, Israel, and the United States has renewed global debate over nuclear deterrence and regional security.
- Experts suggest that a weakened Iran may emerge from the conflict more determined to weaponise its nuclear capabilities to prevent future attacks.
- Such a development could trigger countermeasures from rival states, intensifying regional insecurity.

What lies ahead?

- The concept of the security dilemma provides a powerful framework for understanding the persistence of conflict in international politics.
- Rooted in the anarchic structure of the global system, it highlights how defensive actions by one state can inadvertently threaten others, triggering cycles of mistrust and militarization.
- In the context of current tensions involving Iran, Israel, and the United States, the security dilemma underscores how attempts to achieve security can paradoxically lead to greater insecurity, reinforcing the complex and fragile nature of global peace.

Reference

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