

# *War and Perception*<sup>1</sup>

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Although there are numerous cases in which political decision-makers correctly calculate that the strategic, economic, and political benefits of war will be sufficiently great to justify its costs, there are also numerous cases of precisely the opposite — where the costs of war clearly outweigh its expected benefits. Recent examples of the latter might include the Argentine occupation of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, and the U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War; other important cases in this century include decisions for war by both Germany and Japan in World War II, and Austria-Hungary and Germany in World War I. It is hard to believe that these states would have initiated (or escalated) the war had they correctly calculated its consequences,<sup>2</sup> and this logic has led many historians to argue that a major cause of each of these wars was misperception.

Many political scientists have extrapolated from these and other cases to conclude that misperception is an important cause of war in general. They have devoted considerable attention to explaining why misperception commonly occurs, giving particular emphasis to its social-psychological roots. These include the tendencies to exhibit overconfidence, to ignore value trade-offs, to assimilate new information

into preexisting belief systems, to overrely on historical analogies in general and past successes in particular, and to engage in wishful thinking, bolstering, cognitive dissonance, and other behavior which is not fully consistent with a rational model of information processing and decision-making.<sup>3</sup> These *sources* of misperception have been analyzed in other chapters in this volume, so this essay will focus instead on the *consequences* of misperception and the paths by which they contribute to the outbreak of war. There are many different kinds of misperceptions, and these can affect decisions for war in different ways and under different conditions. The aim here is to identify the most important of these patterns of misperceptions and to specify the theoretical linkages leading to war. I will focus primarily on misperceptions of the intentions and capabilities of one's adversaries and of third states, along with some secondary misperceptions affecting these.<sup>4</sup>

## FORMS OF MISPERCEPTION

One of the most common forms of misperception is the exaggeration of the hostility of the adversary's intentions. In a crisis, perceptions of unmitigated hostility can lead to the fear of an attack and create an incentive to launch a preemptive strike in order to secure the advantages of first-strike and to minimize one's losses from war. This could occur even if the

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preemptor would have otherwise preferred to avoid war, in which case misperception would clearly be a primary cause of the war. It has been demonstrated that most of the great powers exaggerated the hostility of their adversaries' intentions in 1914, and many have argued that these misperceptions and the resulting incentives for preemption were an important cause of the war.<sup>5</sup>

Exaggerated perceptions of hostility may also be important in non-crisis situations. They may lead one to increase one's own military capabilities in order to deter aggression or to prepare for war in the event deterrence fails, which in turn may lead the adversary to respond by increasing its armaments, and so on, generating an escalating spiral of conflict, an arms race, and an increasing likelihood of war. The diplomacy of both the decade prior to World War I and of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union has been characterized as an action-reaction cycle driven by such misperceptions.

It is possible, though perhaps less common, for states to underestimate the hostility of the adversary. This can also contribute to the processes leading to war, but in different ways. Underestimation of the adversary's resolve in a crisis can create the impression that it is unnecessary to compromise and that the adversary will back down in the face of additional coercive measures. But these actions may only harden the adversary's resolve and trigger a conflict spiral and an increasing danger of war, as demonstrated by Richard Ned Lebow's study of thirteen brinkmanship crises.<sup>6</sup> Over a longer term, the underestimation of the adversary's general level of hostility can lead to complacency and lack of preparedness which can contribute to war by undermining deterrence. Any inference that these misperceptions have an important causal impact must assume that actions and policies undertaken to reinforce deterrence will be successful. This is doubtful in the case of the appeasement of Hitler prior to World War II. It is more plausible, however, in the cases of the U.S. underestimation of the hostility of North Korean intentions toward the South in 1950, Israeli complacency in 1973, and British underestimation of the hostility of Argentine intentions in 1982.

There are several other forms of misperception which derive their importance from their effect on the misperception of the adversary's intentions. One is the misperception of the adversary's definition of the situation and the nature of the threats that situation poses to its vital interests, which in turn is related to a misunderstanding of the adversary's value structure. Such misperceptions bias one's expectations regarding the adversary's likely intentions, its response to one's own actions, and hence the consequences of one's actions. The U.S. misperception of Chinese resolve during the 1950 Korean crisis, and consequently of the intensity of the Chinese response to the American expansion of the war, was derived largely from the U.S. failure to understand the importance to China of preventing the establishment on its borders of a unified Korean regime under American influence.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the United States exaggerated the effectiveness of a coercive bombing strategy against North Vietnam by underestimating the value that country placed on the unification of the nation under its own control.

An important dimension of the adversary's definition of the situation, but one given insufficient attention in the literature, is its view of the future. Decision-makers' "field of expectations" about future reality may under some conditions be as important as perceptions of present reality. Misperceptions of the adversary's future expectations can lead to serious misperceptions of its current intentions. The failure to recognize that the adversary perceives that the future is bleak — and hence that the present status quo is unsatisfactory — can result in the failure to appreciate its incentives to undertake what would otherwise appear to be unlikely actions, including war. One reason for U.S. misperceptions of Japanese intentions in 1941 was the failure to understand their dissatisfaction with the existing status quo.<sup>8</sup>

The adversary's value structure and definition of the situation may also include an important domestic component, and an inability to recognize this can also generate misperceptions of the adversary's intentions. The failure to perceive accurately the importance of a rival government's domestic political interests and the seriousness of current and future domestic threats to

those interests can be particularly misleading, and can result in an underestimation of the likelihood of belligerent actions by the adversary and in the failure of an otherwise credible deterrent threat.<sup>9</sup> A related point concerns the nature of the adversary's decision-making process. There is a tendency to perceive that the adversary's political processes are more centralized than they actually are, and to interpret the actions of the adversary as being carefully planned and executed.<sup>10</sup> The failure to recognize that certain hostile actions may be the symbolic manifestation of bureaucratic infighting or domestic politics and not necessarily an indication of a sustained policy of aggression may lead to overreaction and a conflict spiral.

Another secondary category of misperception — which can affect one's expectations of the likely outcome of war, and in this way expectations regarding the adversary's intentions — is misperception of the kind of war the adversary intends on fighting.<sup>11</sup> The adversary may recognize that it would almost certainly lose an all-out war, but nevertheless perceive that it could secure its objectives through more limited forms of military action. Japan, for example, believed that the United States would fight in response to Pearl Harbor, but that it would not fight an all-out war, preferring instead to negotiate a settlement which conceded Japanese hegemony in East Asia.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Hitler believed that Britain and France would fight over Poland but terminate the war after an initial German victory. Although it is difficult to argue that correct perceptions would have made a difference, particularly in the latter case, there are other situations in which these misperceptions can contribute causally to the outbreak of war by inducing complacency and a failure to reinforce deterrence and readiness against a *fait accompli* or limited military action. Israel, for example, probably could have deterred an Egyptian attack in 1973 had it recognized that a limited move across the Suez Canal into the Sinai was perceived as a viable option by the Egyptians, even though an all-out war against Israel was not.<sup>13</sup> Erroneous perceptions of this kind can also lead states to undertake coercive measures under the false assumption that the adversary has no military options at its disposal, and those

coercive measures may provoke the adversary into an attack. Some interpret U.S. economic sanctions against Japan in 1941 in this way.

Misperceptions of the adversary's capabilities relative to one's own<sup>14</sup> may be as important as misperceptions of its intentions, for the resulting military overconfidence generates a misleading expectation of the likely outcome of a war.<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon is historically common and is often asserted to be an important cause of many wars.<sup>16</sup> Leaders tend not only to exaggerate the likelihood of victory, but also to underestimate the duration and the costs of the war. At the beginning of World War I (in August 1914), the German Kaiser optimistically declared that the war would be over "before the leaves have fallen from the trees," a belief that was shared in each of the major European capitals.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, after his victory over Poland, Hitler told his generals that "a campaign against Russia would be like a child's game in a sandbox by comparison." Numerous other cases of comparably extreme misperceptions have also been identified.<sup>18</sup> One interesting aspect of this "short-war illusion" is the expectation that one's own dramatic victories early in the war will trigger the internal collapse of the adversary's regime and its replacement by a political elite willing to sue for peace.<sup>19</sup>

Decision-makers' expectations of the likely outcome of war, and therefore their decisions regarding the initiation of war, are affected not only by their perceptions of the dyadic balance of military power between themselves and their adversary, but also by their expectations regarding the behavior and impact of other states. Thus the misperception of the intentions and relative capabilities of third states constitutes an important form of misperception. There is a common tendency to exaggerate the likelihood that the adversary's allies will stay neutral while one's own allies will come to one's aid.<sup>20</sup> This helps generate the false expectation that a contemplated war can be "localized" and won with minimum costs, and this military overconfidence can be an important cause of war. For instance, the belief that an Austro-Serbian war could be localized in the Balkans without the intervention of the other great powers significantly

reduced the incentives of the powers to restrain their allies, and the German underestimation of the likelihood of British entry into the war is often identified as a critical factor contributing to the German decision for war.<sup>21</sup> There is also a tendency to underestimate the relative military capabilities of potential enemies, and consequently, to minimize their impact on the outcome of the war should they intervene. Hitler's belief that the United States would probably not intervene — and that if it did it would have only a marginal impact — is one example.<sup>22</sup> Thus an erroneous sense of military overconfidence generated by misperceptions of the intentions and capabilities of third states often contributes to decisions for war.

This analysis has identified the most important causal paths by which misperceptions of the intentions and capabilities of adversaries and third states can contribute to the processes leading to war. A reading of the historical literature on international relations would suggest that these misperceptions frequently occur and that in some cases they are among the leading causes of war. In reality, however, the identification of misperceptions and the evaluation of their causal impact on the outbreak of war are not at all easy tasks, but instead involve some enormously difficult conceptual problems. Let us briefly examine some of these.

### CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS IN THE ANALYSIS OF MISPERCEPTION

The first problem we encounter is that the concept of misperception itself is extremely vague, leading Lebow to conclude that “nobody has been able to provide a clear, empirically useful and generally accepted definition of the concept.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most obvious approach is to define a misperception as a perception which is inconsistent with “objective reality,” as a discrepancy between the psychological environment of decision-makers and the operational environment of the “real world.”<sup>24</sup> It is extraordinarily difficult, however, to determine the perceptions of the actor in question, much less the accuracy of those perceptions in terms of the true intentions or relative capabilities of the adversary. Actions may be observed, but inten-

tions are inherently ambiguous, and there are serious problems of data availability and access. Even if we have complete access to all the documents, however, the question of intentions may still be unresolved. This is illustrated by the continuing debate about the intentions of Germany in 1914, even after the release of most of its official government documents. Statements by decision-makers must be interpreted carefully because of individuals' incentives to misrepresent their true intentions in order to influence the expectations and behavior of their foreign or domestic adversaries. Decision-makers' later autobiographies are often suspect because the author's concern for his or her image in history is often as great as his or her concern for the truth. This distortion need not necessarily be deliberate, for motivated biases may help shape the recollection of past events. Finally, it is perhaps even more difficult to know whether those perceptions were correct or not. The very concept of an “objective reality” raises difficulties, for it assumes that an analyst's perceptions of what reality actually was are more “objective” than the perceptions of the actor in question.

Another problem is that the concept of objective intentions implies that action is purposive and that leaders plan to act in definite ways under certain future contingencies. But individuals are not always certain of their intentions, and their intentions can change over time. The problem of purposive behavior is compounded for collective decision-making bodies, where different individuals often have different preferences, and where resulting decisions are often determined by unpredictable political trade-offs and social-psychological interactions. Thus there is often considerable uncertainty regarding the intentions of the adversary, and the failure to recognize this would itself constitute an important misperception.

This raises a more general point. Perceptions — whether of adversary intentions, the outcome of war, or the consequences of other behavior — are best conceptualized as *subjective probability judgments* involving a range of possible outcomes and the estimated probability of each. That is, rational individuals are rarely absolutely certain that a particular event will occur, but instead attempt to construct an

expected probability distribution of possible outcomes. One might conclude, for example, that there is a fifty percent chance the adversary intends to attack, a thirty percent chance it will initiate military action short of war, and a twenty percent chance it will do nothing. Low probability outcomes will occasionally occur, and when they do one's expectations should not necessarily be classified as a misperception. Thus in an earlier article I asked how we can distinguish between misperception and bad luck.<sup>25</sup> Is it meaningful to say that the Spanish misperceived the military balance in launching the Spanish Armada in 1588, when in fact unfavorable winds had much to do with their defeat? Because issues of war and peace involve perceptions in situations which are, for all practical purposes, unique events, it is not really possible to compare the accuracy of some expected distribution of outcomes with the distribution of actual outcomes, in the same way as we might examine the accuracy of weather forecasts. This leaves us without a good standard to measure the accuracy of perceptions of an adversary's intentions and capabilities, and the concept of misperception becomes very problematic.<sup>26</sup>

One way around this dilemma is to use a "third party" criterion. If other actors at the same time had similar perceptions as "actor A" of the intentions and relative capabilities of a particular state, then we can conclude that "A's" perceptions were correct; if other parties had different perceptions, then "A's" perceptions were incorrect. The fact that few other observers in 1982 shared Argentina's belief that Britain would not respond with military force to a seizure of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands suggests that the Argentine view was a misperception driven by motivated biases based on the strategic or domestic political needs of the Argentine elite. One difficulty here, of course, is that the lone view may be correct. Churchill belonged to a very small minority in asserting the hostility of Hitler's intentions in the late 1930s, and the use of a third party criterion in this instance would force us to label Churchill's views as misperceptions.<sup>27</sup>

Intractable problems like these lead Robert Jervis to suggest that the analyst focus not on the accuracy of perceptions as an *outcome*, but instead on the reasonableness of the decision-making *processes* by which

information is utilized and perceptions are generated.<sup>28</sup> The implication is that decisions based on a sensitivity to risks and uncertainties and a reasonable use of information available, or potentially available (given resource and time constraints), should not be judged to involve misperception, even if they lead to an undesired outcome. Here the criterion for evaluation is how closely the actual decision-making process conforms to a "rational model," and the evidence required is different than that needed to establish the accuracy of perceptions. The precise operational criteria by which deviations from a rational model are to be measured may be difficult to determine, however, particularly since the rational model is an ideal type which is never perfectly satisfied in practice, and because there are several variations of rational models based on different assumptions. Nonetheless, it might be possible to speak of degrees of approximation to the rational ideal. Note that in this approach the explanation of decisions and behavior is shifted from misperceptions — which can no longer be identified because there is no standard against which they can be measured — to psychological, organizational, and political variables which account for departures from a rational decision-making calculus.

The question of how to define and identify misperceptions is just one of several conceptual and methodological problems involved in the analysis of misperception and war. Another is that the existence of a misperception (or a departure from a rational decision-making process) does not necessarily mean that this misperception has a causal impact on one's decision or behavior.<sup>29</sup> Hitler clearly misperceived the intentions of Britain and France when he invaded Poland in 1939, but it is questionable whether correct perceptions or more rational information-processing would have led him to forgo the invasion. Thus it is necessary to establish not only that a misperception occurs, but also that it has a real influence on decision-making or behavior — a much more difficult task. One would have to show that in the absence of misperceptions the observed behavior would not have occurred, which involves the difficult job of counterfactual analysis. From a social-scientific perspective, it would be necessary to find adequate control groups

for the purpose of a comparative analysis. In order to show that certain types of misperceptions causally contribute to war, we would need to demonstrate that in similar situations correct perceptions do not lead to war, and this would require not just cases of misperceptions accompanied by war, but also similar cases of relatively accurate perceptions that are not followed by war. The difficulty here is that cases of war have attracted far more scholarly attention than cases which do not lead to war, and cases of mutually accurate perceptions are relatively rare, so that the relative paucity of these control cases complicates the task of comparative analysis.<sup>30</sup>

Still another conceptual problem that enormously complicates the task of establishing a causal connection between misperceptions and war is that misperception can sometimes *reduce* the probability of war. A state which erroneously perceives that the balance of military power favors the adversary may for that reason refrain from initiating a war that it otherwise might have desired, and a declining state which erroneously expects that a rising adversary will be conciliatory once it achieves superiority may refrain from initiating a preventive war that it might otherwise have sought. Complicating things even further, the same type of misperception that under some conditions increases the likelihood of war can, under slightly dif-

ferent conditions, contribute to peace. The exaggeration of the hostility of the adversary may lead one state to undertake preemptive military action and another to act more cautiously for fear of provoking the adversary. A state which erroneously perceives that the dyadic balance of military power favors the adversary might resort to an arms buildup to rectify the situation, which in turn may be perceived as threatening and trigger a conflict spiral and war; or, such a state might be deterred by its perception of an unfavorable military balance from initiating a war it actually desires.

An understanding of the consequences of misperception thus requires that we examine not only the perceptions or misperceptions themselves, but also the conditions under which they occur and the other variables with which they interact. Stated differently, misperceptions cannot be studied in isolation, but only in the context of a more general theory of the causes of war which specifies the conditions under which misperceptions are likely to help in leading to war and the conditions under which they are likely to help in maintaining the peace. The analysis of misperception and war is made all the more difficult by the extraordinary lack of agreement among international theorists regarding the causes of war.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This research has been supported by the Stanford Center for International Security and Arms Control, the Carnegie Corporation, and the MacArthur Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of the Center or of either foundation.
- 2 An exception would be a situation in which a state expected negative consequences from war, but perceived that the consequences of inaction would be even worse — perhaps an attack by the adversary, or the erosion of its economic and military strength and the risk of war under worse circumstances later. One example might be Japan in World War II. See Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40 (October 1987).
- 3 See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), and "War and Misperception," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, forthcoming, 1988; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), chaps. 5-6; and Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). For a summary of the social-psychological literature upon which these studies are based see Richard Nisbett and Lee

- Ross, *Human Inference* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980).
- 4 This discussion is based largely on the frameworks suggested by Jack S. Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics* 35 (October 1983), 76-99; and Jervis, "War and Misperception"
  - 5 Robert C. North, "Perception and Action in the 1914 Crisis," *Journal of International Affairs* 21 (1967), 103-21; Jack L. Snyder, "Perceptions of the Security Dilemma in 1914," in Jervis, Lebow, and Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence*, pp. 153-79. It should be noted, however, that some recent scholarship on the 1914 case has minimized the causal importance of misperceptions and emphasized instead the deliberate expansionist policies of Germany. See Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961).
  - 6 Lebow, chap. 4.
  - 7 Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), chap. 7.
  - 8 Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 270; Levy, "Declining Power;" Bruce M. Russett, "Pearl Harbor: Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory," *Journal of Peace Research* 4 (1967), 89-105.
  - 9 Lebow, chap. 4, 6; Janice Gross Stein, "Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence, I & II," in Jervis, Lebow, and Stein, chaps. 3-4.
  - 10 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, chap. 8.
  - 11 Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," in this volume.
  - 12 Russett, pp. 98-99.
  - 13 Stein, "Calculation, Miscalculation?"
  - 14 Note that misperception of relative capabilities includes misperceptions of military potential in a protracted war as well as immediately available military capabilities. The adversary's military potential might also be underestimated through the misperception of the impact of the war on the cohesiveness of the adversary's population and on the adversary's morale, and hence on the ability of the adversary's leadership to mobilize additional resources for the war effort.
  - 15 It is also possible for decision-makers to overestimate the adversary's capabilities relative to one's own. Because an adversary's capabilities are often used by leaders as indicators of intentions, the overestimation of an adversary's strength may lead to an exaggeration of its hostility, unnecessary defensive measures, a conflict spiral, and perhaps war.
  - 16 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), chap. 3; Lebow, chaps. 5-7.
  - 17 Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 142; L.L. Farrer, *The Short War Illusion* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1973), pp. 3-7.
  - 18 Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 238.
  - 19 This expectation was shared by Athens with respect to Sparta, Hitler regarding Russia in 1941, and Iraq regarding Iran in 1980. See Levy, "Misperception," 83-84.
  - 20 Blainey, chap. 3; Levy, "Misperception," 91-93.
  - 21 Lebow, chap. 5.
  - 22 William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1959), p. 1170.
  - 23 Lebow, p. 90.
  - 24 Levy, "Misperception," 79.
  - 25 Levy, "Misperception," 95.
  - 26 The extent to which political decision-makers do in fact treat their perceptions of an adversary's capabilities and intentions as subjective probability estimates is an interesting research question. There may be a tendency, perhaps deriving from overconfidence, bolstering, and the avoidance of value trade-offs, for actors to deny the probabilistic nature of their estimates of an adversary's intentions and capabilities.
  - 27 Jervis (*Perception and Misperception*, p. 7) tends to favor the careful use of a third party

criterion whereas Lebow (p. 91) is more skeptical of its merits.

- 28 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, p. 7; "War and Misperception."
- 29 Arthur A. Stein, "When Misperception Matters," *World Politics* 34 (July 1982), 505-26; Levy, "Misperception."
- 30 Jervis, "War and Misperception." The lack of

attention to non-war cases is changing. Two questions which have recently begun to attract considerable attention among scholars are the conditions under which crises do and do not escalate to war, and the conditions under which cooperation can emerge in the absence of formal regulatory institutions, both of which can involve the analysis of non-war cases.