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**Andrej Krickovic. "Catalyzing Conflict: The Internal Dimension of the Security Dilemma."** *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1:2 (2016): 111-126. DOI:

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Without saying so, Andrej Krickovic's "Catalyzing Conflict" makes a compelling case that state power is a function of legitimacy. And legitimacy, in turn, is driven by a state's ability to generate some combination of military capability (that, among other things, allows it to monopolize coercion within its borders), economic development, cultural unity, and political stability. Unquestionably, there is an issue of endogeneity at play in analyzing the relationship between legitimacy and power. But through his discussion of the security dilemma Krickovic effectively raises the importance of domestic vulnerabilities for the construction of foreign policy.

The great value of the realist model of international relations is its parsimony. Very few variables are required to anticipate both how states will interact and the likely outcomes of those relations. And yet, it may be accurate in predicting behavior without being correct in modeling how decisions are made. Certainly the world is more complex than the 'black box' explanation of state behavior proffered by realist accounts. So the question for an analyst is whether the process of unravelling that complexity offers a value in terms of prediction, description, or prescriptions for shaping state behavior.

Krickovic's article offers indications that unpacking the dynamics of the two-level game of foreign policy may be worth the effort. By revealing how internal weaknesses drive states to make puzzling foreign policy

choices, Krickovic demonstrates that there is greater complexity than anticipated to iterative interactions such as the security dilemma. He also explains that the consequences of this complexity are important for strategies to deescalate international competition and tension.

He begins with a discussion of the recent crisis in Ukraine and failed U.S. attempts to build a coalition of broad-based economic sanctions against Russia, which ultimately failed when China aligns with Russia. Why would China support Russia's violations of Ukrainian sovereignty in Crimea? Given that China has its own challenges from separatist movements, one would expect that its leaders would uphold norms of territorial sovereignty and nonintervention.

Krickovic's answer is that China's actions are "opportunistic—an attempt to balance power against the United States and other Western countries" (111). This choice, he suggests, is driven largely by China's "feelings of vulnerability and insecurity," leading them to conclude that the "West's promotion of human rights and democracy is detrimental to their countries' political and social stability" (111). Tied to China's vulnerability is their suspicion that the US is promoting liberalization policies for less than altruistic purposes: "Some even go so far as to claim that Western countries are deliberately using democracy and human rights as tools to destabilize their countries and thereby prevent them from rising up as formidable challengers to US and Western hegemony" (111).

With this launching point, Krickovic begins an examination of how internal insecurity affects foreign policy. He assesses the impact of challenges to domestic legitimacy and sovereignty on foreign-policy decisions, with a focus on the cases of China and Russia. And he notes that because of the material and economic power of those states, these might be perceived as "least likely" cases in which foreign policy choices are influenced by domestic vulnerabilities.

A behavioral regularity of international relations, according to realist thought, is the security dilemma: "One state's efforts to improve its security can lead other states to respond with similar measures, producing increased tensions that create conflict even when no one desires it" (112). States cannot be sure of the intentions of others and therefore attempts by other states to improve their security must be perceived as threats.

According to Krickovic, this dynamic varies based on whether the security policy of the other state threatens to impact the internal or external dynamics of a given state. In other words, "Where security dilemmas are the product of states' external security policies, states can deescalate tensions through confidence-building measures that highlight each state's defensive security posture and nonaggressive intentions" (112). Such measures are important for overcoming (temporarily) the anarchic nature of the international system and the subsequent competition that results from it. The psychological bases of perceptions of internal vulnerabilities, however, are much harder to mollify: "the internal insecurities of states present a special challenge to policymakers who are trying to avoid the security dilemma. Fears of internal meddling are generated no so much by the policies of other states as by the state's internal vulnerabilities themselves. Thus, states with internal vulnerabilities may not be easily assuaged by confidence-building measures" (112).

This is the most important theoretical contribution of Krickovic's work—highlighting that "the internal dimension of the security dilemma not only complicates the relationship, but also creates a unique problem even more difficult to solve. Fears of 'internal meddling' are generated, not only by the policies of other states, but also by the internal vulnerabilities of a targeted state" (116).

As a result, what are generally perceived to be humanitarian Western efforts of promoting democracy and defending human rights can raise tensions and escalate potentially violent conflict. Furthermore, even when Western states do not directly promote such changes, the “demonstration effects” of Western states’ economic and political models may lead to increased insecurity in authoritarian states. The consequence is that through the lens of the ‘targeted’ state, every action and effect initiated from the outside will be interpreted in light of its own vulnerabilities and thus very little can be done from the outside to assuage the targeted state’s security concerns. And yet, Krickovic observes that “managing these fears may be the key to avoiding conflict and major power wars” (112).

Regarding power, Krickovic observes that relations between states will be affected by the symmetry or asymmetry of domestic vulnerabilities. In this sense Krickovic suggests that the traditional realist measures of the military capability of a state are not the only determinants of foreign policy decision-making: “Despite the progress Russia and China have made in recent decades, they still lag behind developed Western states in terms of legitimacy and institutional state capacity. These deficiencies are vulnerabilities that fundamentally shape how Russia and China define their security” (117). Both states grapple with large ethnic and religious minorities that seek to modify or become independent of existing state structures. And with regard to China, “legitimacy has come to rest on its ability to maintain high levels of economic growth” (118). In the context of state capacity, Krickovic references military might, cultural (specifically ethnic and religious) unity, economic development and growth, and political stability as affecting a state’s legitimacy. These characteristics become particularly important as globalization heightens popular awareness regarding economic, political, and social alternatives outside of the state and the demonstration effects of popular movements.

Krickovic argues that to counter the threats that are based on or augment their internal deficiencies, leaders rely on a number of tactics. These include creating “coup proof” regimes, “omnibalancing,” foreign policy diversions (especially war or escalation of conflict), repression, rhetorical challenges to external and internal opposition, and alliance building (112). It is important to note that this argument presupposes that domestic vulnerabilities shape many foreign policy decisions. The common goal of these actions is to stabilize the domestic environment and to reduce the threat of opposition, issues that are of secondary importance to the realist school of thought.

Realists assume that all states are consumed with the task of ensuring their own security and survival; if they are not, or if they are ineffective in accomplishing this task, they will cease to exist. A state’s internal divisions and factions are relatively unimportant to international behavior, and domestic distinctions do not influence state capacity, which is based in military power and the ability to employ force to improve security. The realist paradigm assumes that threats to a state’s security stem primarily from outside of the state’s borders, and that these threats are generally of a military nature.

What Krickovic establishes is that the decisions leaders make are based on expectations about both domestic and international environments, and how their choices will affect their security within as well as the overall security of the state. For example, a decision to increase military capacity as a result of external risks has consequences for the state’s ability to respond to internal threats; attempts to respond to internal threats by building the domestic defense capacity can result in greater external risks.

As noted in the article, leaders are motivated, at least in part, by domestic concerns and the desire to retain power. In order to preserve their jobs, leaders have to be concerned with such issues as legitimacy, resources,

and social fragmentation. The extent to which leaders appeal to outside actors for support from internal insurgencies suggests that “[l]eaders are not worried about losing their states, as realist theory suggests, but about losing their offices.”<sup>1</sup> According to Michael Barnett, state leaders who are couched in a bi-level environment of domestic and international concerns have two primary objectives: “The first is war preparation — the government’s mobilization of material and human resources in order to be prepared to undertake interstate war... The second objective is political stability, the insulation of the government from would-be domestic challengers.”<sup>2</sup>

In light of the combination of internal and external threats, a leader must balance strategies to effectively monopolize coercion and consolidate authority. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith describe this process as building and maintaining a winning coalition, which occurs when coalition members receive enough benefits from their leader that they are willing to do horribly distasteful things to ensure that the existing system is maintained.<sup>3</sup> Rebellion occurs when those who preserve the current system are sufficiently dissatisfied with their rewards that they are willing to look for someone new to take care of them.

Whether a leader has the tacit approval of domestic and international actors will affect both the willingness of opposition groups to challenge the leader and the willingness of coalition members to defect. Thus, legitimacy is a primary determinant of regime stability, alongside repression and cooptation. It can facilitate active support, consent, obedience, and toleration of policies. Without legitimacy, conditions of political instability, cultural fragmentation, and economic hardship can combine to generate domestic volatility. The result is often violence between groups struggling for power and authority. In these circumstances, leaders frequently attempt to reduce domestic challenges by employing state terror and repressing specific opposition groups.

Krickovic’s analysis would be complemented by a discussion of what has been termed the *insecurity dilemma*.<sup>4</sup> The anarchy of the domestic environment leads the ruling regime to employ a ‘self-help’ strategy of coercion in response to threats from domestic challengers and neighboring states. Cooperation is not expected to endure because the state cannot reinforce agreements with economic incentives, appeals to national unity, or through a reliance on widely accepted ‘rules of the game.’ All of the actors involved — domestic opposition groups, external challengers, and the state itself — recognize this circumstance. As a result, the state has the incentive to (a) signal to others that it is willing to use force, (b) be preemptive in reducing threats or potential threats, and (c) to take risks given that the status quo is a condition of insecurity.

With this in mind, the relative power of states becomes increasingly important for understanding the dynamics of international relations. Weak and failing states would not be expected to have the options and

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<sup>1</sup> K. J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 127.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Barnett, “High Politics is Low Politics: The Domestic and Systemic Sources of Israeli Security Policy, 1967-1977,” *World Politics* 42 (1990): 536.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Random House, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Brian L. Job, “The Insecurity Dilemma: National, Regime, and State Securities in the Third World,” in *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States*, ed. Brian L. Job (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1992).

alternatives available to them that more powerful states such as China and Russia would have. This is not to say that the domestic vulnerability of Russia does not matter—Krickovic shows that it clearly does—but the range of possible responses to threats is much greater for Russia than it is for a state such as Somalia. Accordingly, the prioritization of threats for these two states is likely to be different as well. Whether a state identifies intrastate or interstate conflict as the primary concern will depend in large part on its capabilities and ability to project power internationally. The goals that motivate decision-makers, and the choices that they make, must be considered in light of both domestic and foreign policy options as well as the environmental conditions that affect the payoffs of alternative state strategies. As Krickovic argues, “a more comprehensive theory of the security dilemma is needed that incorporates internal security concerns in its analysis” (114).

Such an analysis would also benefit from a greater emphasis on the changing nature of social movements in the world. The increased spread of ideas and information has led to greater contagion of democratic and quasi-democratic movements, what Krickovic refers to as demonstration effects. He discusses the concept of ‘coup proofing’ in this context, as well as repressive strategies to limit the diffusion of revolutionary ideas and tactics. Karrie Koesel and Valerie Bunce describe this process as “diffusion-proofing” whereby states attempt to insulate themselves from popular mobilizations.<sup>5</sup>

Alliance-building can also be seen as a complementary strategy to authoritarian repressive practices. Krickovic’s description of Chinese and Russian calculations and policies is consistent with the work of others in this area. William Martel describes the emergence of a new “authoritarian axis” which alters the global balance of power and has the potential to pose a serious challenge to Western geopolitical control.<sup>6</sup> Countries such as Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Venezuela have initiated a coherent and coordinated effort to advance the preservation of their roles as authoritarian leaders and the consolidation of their sovereignty. Alexander Cooley identifies a similar pattern of authoritarian coordination among a “League of Authoritarian Gentlemen.” China and Russia, in particular, have promoted economic coordination among authoritarian states and improved multilateral relations between non-democratic states. Concurrent with their crackdowns on domestic democratic opposition, they have “been working hard to forge an international front of anti-democrats, developing a new set of counter-strategies and regional legal tools.”<sup>7</sup> These arrangements are mutually reinforcing for the ruling governments and help to establish legitimacy for each other.

Krickovic identifies one additional source of legitimacy: *ontological security*, or “each actor’s need to establish predictability in its relationships to the outside world and a stable sense of social identities” (124). To Krickovic this becomes particularly important in the context of democracies promoting their values and associated social arrangements, but it also works in the opposite direction as the “very existence [of authoritarian regimes] tacitly challenges the ideological basis of [democratic state] legitimacy: that is, that

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<sup>5</sup> Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, “Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11:3 (2013): 753-68.

<sup>6</sup> William C. Martel, “Grand Strategy of the Authoritarian Axis: How Will the West Respond?” *The Diplomat*, 24 July 24 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Cooley, “League of Authoritarian Gentlemen,” *Foreign Policy*, 30 January 30 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/30/the-league-of-authoritarian-gentlemen/>.

democracy is the only morally just and truly effective form of government” (124). This is an extremely important point for considering the internal dimension of the security dilemma for a democratic state such as the United States.

Voter apathy is at present extremely high as large numbers of the U.S. public reject Washington insiders. #BlackLivesMatter protests are fueled by the recognition—aided by expansive video technology—that not all U.S. citizens are treated equally and opportunity is not the same for all Americans. Collateral damage, failed democratic interventions, and corporate profiteering from U.S. military actions abroad undermine the rhetoric of democratic promotion and human rights efforts. All of these indications of government behavior that is incompatible with the United States’ stated values and principles have the potential to undermine legitimacy and to create domestic vulnerabilities. Krickovic argues that “[m]aintaining a coherent sense of identity and purpose is essential to states’ legitimacy in the eyes of domestic publics as well as other states” (124), and in doing so highlights the internal security concerns of authoritarian regimes to expound on new dimensions of the security dilemma. His work can, however, equally serve as a timely invitation to speculate on what US domestic vulnerabilities will mean for our approach to foreign relations under a Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton presidency.

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