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### THREE TYPES OF SPIRALS

In his classic Perception and Misperception in International Politics Robert Jervis failed to spell out the elements of spirals. As a result the research program on spirals has been stunted. I distinguish three types of spirals.

The three spirals have different causes and different solutions.

#### I. WHAT IS A SPIRAL?

By common usage a spiral is any self-feeding or self-reinforcing conflict process. The conflict expands through positive feedback. Conflict behavior by each side elicits more conflict behavior from the other. Otherwise the definition is open.

#### II. THREE TYPES OF SPIRALS

1. **Spirals can stem from the security dilemma.** In such spirals a state deliberately and wittingly takes measures to secure itself that also pose an unwanted threat to others. The state knows that its actions threaten others, and will likely provoke a hostile response, but it sees no other way to gain security for itself. The other state then takes predictable and expected hostile measures in response.

No misperceptions are involved in fueling such spirals. Rather, the spiral stems from tragic circumstances. The state cannot achieve safety without harming others. It would avoid harm to others if it could, but it can't.

Spiral as tragedy.

2. **Spirals can stem from a state's exaggerated belief that other states have a propensity to concede to threats.** In such spirals states deliberately and wittingly threaten or punish the other in the incorrect expectation that the other will then become more compliant. The sanctioner believes a false general causal proposition--"If we threaten others they will grow more compliant"--and applies

it to the instance at hand. In fact the other reacts to the punishment or threat with greater hostility. The first state then applies even more punishments in the belief that the first punishments failed because they were too mild. Spiral as blunder.

In this spiral the negative sanction is intended; but the result of the negative sanction is neither intended nor expected.

Example: bandwagon-believing militarists like Kaiser Wilhelm II, Friedrich von Bernhardi, Curtis LeMay or Tojo threatened or punished others because their bandwagon beliefs wrongly suggest that punishments will produce compliance.

Solution: states should apprise themselves of the greater tendency of states to balance than bandwagon.

3. **Spirals can stem from states' false understanding of others' interests.** In such spirals states inadvertently and unwittingly threaten or injure another's interests because they underestimate the scope of the other's interests or fail to understand their nature.

For example, states often underestimate others' security interests because they fail to realize that they themselves are a threat to others, giving rise to the other's security interest. Thus the U.S. failed to realize that China saw a vital interest in keeping U.S. forces far from the Yalu river in 1950. Kaiser Wilhelm II likewise failed to understand that Britain saw a vital security interest in preventing any single state from dominating the European continent.

States may also underestimate others' interests because they are unaware of the grievances that their past actions have generated in others. This happens when states have a believe a whitewashed version of history that downplays their own past aggressions against others.

Or states may underestimate others' interests just because they do not see the world through the other's eyes and live in the other's skin, so they overlook the other's concerns.

Such states then injure the other's interests inadvertently, and respond to the hostility they provoke with still greater hostility because they think the other's hostility is unprovoked. Again, spiral as blunder.

The error here is factual: the sanctioner believes

falsehoods about the others' interests: "we are no threat to others, so their warning that they see a vital interest in keeping us far from their shores is false." And the negative sanction is inadvertent and unintended.

Examples: the U.S. as it approached the Yalu in 1950; Israel in 1967 according to someone (Harkabi?); and Russia in the Crimea, 1853-54.

Solution: states should not sugar-coat the history of their own conduct toward others. They should study others' interests and perceptions.

A related problem: spirals can develop if states have a contemptuous assessment of the other's character: "They are cowards and so will not respond firmly if we bully them." But such spiralling may be dampened because the target is aware that it is injuring the target (bullying is its conscious strategy) and the target's response disproves the first state's factual assumption of cowardice. So the spiral is slower, or does not occur. Such spiralling can stem from appeasement, and so is an element of the deterrence model, and is a point where the models overlap.

I prefer to reserve the term "spiral model" for self-feeding conflicts that are fueled by misperception, while referring to tragic spirals that stem from security competition as "security dilemma" conflicts, although they do have a self-feeding quality that qualifies them as spirals in a strict sense.

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