



# **CDSn4001: Conflict Analysis**

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National misperception  
as a cause of war

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# Agenda

- Individual/perceptual lens on conflict
  - How do leaders respond to ambiguity and uncertainty in IR?
  - Do decision-makers' perceptions/misperceptions matter in global politics?
  - How can we use our knowledge of cognitive biases to lessen the potential for/intensity of conflict?

# Unmotivated vs. motivated bias

- **Unmotivated bias**

- Results from the simplification/categorization that decision makers use to make sense of the world
- Decision making characterized by bounded rationality
- **Bounded rationality**: decision makers try to be rational but face inherent limits on their ability to do so (too much information, inability to process it) → people take shortcuts, decision-making is not irrational but imperfectly rational



# Attribution theory

- How preexisting beliefs shape the interpretation of new information
- **Fundamental attribution bias**
  - People apply different attributions to their opponents than to themselves
  - What does this tell us about the security dilemma in IR?

# Prospect theory

- How individuals weigh options is heavily influenced by whether the outcome is seen as a loss or a gain.
  - Individuals are much more willing to take a risk to avoid loss than to achieve gain.
- Results in a strong status quo bias in IR – leaders will take great risks to protect what they have

# Unmotivated vs motivated bias

- **Motivated bias**

- Due to some psychological need;
- The actor sees what they want to see
- **Cognitive dissonance:** individuals tend to construct internally consistent views of the world. When a new piece of information doesn't fit with internal beliefs → psychological discomfort → affects interpretation of new information



# Discussion

- Are all causes of action justifiable?
- Why is militarism dangerous? Has militarism gone away?
- How can we use our knowledge of misperceptions to find solutions to conflict?