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The Psychology of Fear and Global Conflict: How Collective Anxiety Shapes International Relations

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Abstract

This article explores the psychological mechanisms through which fear, insecurity, and group identity influence international relations, diplomatic decision-making, alliance formation, and conflict escalation. Integrating theories from political psychology, emotion research, and social identity theory, it examines collective anxiety as a key driver in major global conflicts, focusing on the NATO–Russia and China–U.S. rivalries. Fear, as an evolutionarily grounded emotion, biases threat perception and generates security dilemmas whereby defensive measures escalate mutual insecurity and mistrust. Group identity reinforces narratives of existential threat, fostering in-group cohesion at the cost of out-group hostility. Alliances serve not only strategic but

also psychological functions by addressing fears of isolation and abandonment, although fragile trust within alliances can paradoxically increase instability. Emotional feedback loops exacerbate tensions through mutually reinforcing fear and hostile postures, reducing diplomatic flexibility. This interdisciplinary approach reveals the emotional substrates underlying persistent geopolitical rivalries and highlights the need for integrating emotional and identity-sensitive strategies in diplomacy and peacebuilding. Practical implications advocate for policies aimed at emotional de-escalation, confidence-building, and recognition of collective identity to disrupt cycles of collective anxiety and promote global security.

Keywords: Fear, Collective Anxiety, Group Identity, Alliance Formation, NATO-Russia, China-U.S. Relations

1. Introduction

International relations (IR) traditionally prioritize rational choice, power balancing, and strategic calculations as the drivers of state behavior. Yet, these frameworks insufficiently account for the profound psychological and emotional processes that shape how states perceive others, assess threats, and behave on the global stage. Political psychology has emerged as an essential interdisciplinary field that deciphers the role of emotions, particularly fear, anxiety, and identity, in influencing diplomatic decisions and conflict dynamics (Huddy, 2013 ^[14]; Mercer, 2017).

The contemporary international environment, characterized by volatile geopolitical rivalries and alliance transformations, provides compelling case studies for these psychological phenomena. NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's subsequent insecurity illustrates how collective fears inform security policies and aggressive postures (Allison, 2017) ^[1]. The United States and China's intensifying strategic competition reflectss mutual anxieties rooted in historical grievances and identity claims, complicating diplomatic engagement (Shambaugh, 2016) ^[30].

This article critically synthesizes psychological theories and empirical observations to examine how fear and group identity influence diplomatic decision-making, alliance behaviors, and conflict escalation. The synthesis aims to bridge the gap between psychological science and IR theory, producing insights that can enhance understanding of contemporary conflicts and inform novel paths toward emotional de-escalation and peacebuilding.

2. Theoretical Framework: Psychological Processes in Conflict

2.1 Psychological Foundations of Fear in Global Politics

Fear functions as a primal emotion with deep evolutionary roots, facilitating rapid threat detection and adaptive behavioral responses (LeDoux, 2012; Öhman, 2008) ^[22, 28]. Within international politics, fear transcends immediate danger and manifests as collective anxiety that distorts perceived threat landscapes. Cognitive-affective research shows that fear triggers heightened vigilance, threat exaggeration, and risk-averse decision-making (Lerner & Keltner, 2001) ^[23]. These psychological dynamics

escalate the classic security dilemma, wherein one state's defensive measures intended for security appear offensive to others, thereby initiating arms buildups and proxy conflicts (Jervis, 1978) ^[16].

This dynamic is observable in Russia's reaction to NATO's encroachment, which it interprets as existential rather than defensive, despite NATO's stated defensive posture (Giles & Legvold, 2018) ^[10]. Similarly, the US-China relationship is permeated by threat amplification, partly due to collective trauma and fear of relative decline (Nathan & Scobell, 2012; Wang, 2018) ^[26, 38]. Affective forecasting errors inherent in fear increase states' sensitivity to risk, prompting preemptive or escalatory policies that paradoxically undermine security.

2.2 Group Identity and Emotional Narratives as Conflict Drivers

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) ^[34] explains how individuals derive self-worth and meaning from group affiliations, with collective identities shaping intergroup attitudes and behaviors. National identities are socially constructed through historical narratives emphasizing victimization, resilience, and threat (Brubaker, 2004; Billig, 1995) ^[4, 2]. Such narratives cultivate collective emotions, including fear, anger, and grief, that consolidate in-group loyalty while magnifying suspicion or hostility toward perceived out-groups (Smith & Mackie, 2015) ^[31].

In international conflict, these emotional narratives solidify resistance to compromise and fuel conflict persistence. Russian identity is heavily informed by narratives of NATO aggression threatening sovereignty and dignity (Laruelle, 2014; Trenin, 2019) ^[21, 37]. Chinese nationalism invokes 'century of humiliation' stories to mobilize unity against Western influence and justify assertiveness in territorial disputes (Zhao, 2004; Wang, 2020) ^[40, 39].

Media and political rhetoric actively perpetuate these identity-based emotional climates, shaping mass psychology and constraining policymakers' options (Gibney & Dalton, 2020; Druckman *et al.*, 2016) ^[9, 6]. The emotionally charged framing hardens public attitudes, reducing the political space for diplomatic engagement.

2.3 Alliances: Psychological Security Structures with Strategic Functions

Alliances are not purely strategic but also satisfy deep-seated psychological needs, affording states a sense of security and belonging (Browning, 2020; Kertzer, 2016) ^[3, 19]. Strong alliances help alleviate existential anxieties by providing reassurance of collective defense and identity affirmation (Grieco, 1988) ^[12]. However, alliance politics are inherently ambivalent; trust and reliability concerns foster anxieties over abandonment or betrayal, especially under shifting geopolitical pressures (Snyder, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001) ^[33, 25].

NATO exemplifies this duality: while its collective defense principle reassures member states, it simultaneously fuels Russian fears of encirclement and alienation, which lead to aggressive countermeasures (Ruggerio, 2017) ^[29]. The psychological need for alliance security coexists with external anxieties, contributing to a spiral of mistrust and competition.

2.4 Emotional Feedback Loops and Conflict Escalation

Conflict escalation is often driven by emotional feedback loops where fear reinforces threat perception and hostile policy choices, which in turn cement fear in the adversary (Mercer, 2010; Halperin & Gross, 2011) ^[24, 13]. Political leaders' emotions, public sentiment, and media narratives converge to harden negotiating positions and reduce adaptability. Such loops can become self-fulfilling prophecies, escalating localized conflicts into broader wars (Gibney & Dalton, 2020 ^[9]; Horowitz & Sechser, 2014).

The current military buildup on NATO's eastern flank demonstrates this pattern, where Russian military provocations fuel NATO's defensive deployment, which then strengthens Russian threat narratives (Duncan, 2021; Neubauer & Suman, 2023) ^[7, 27]. US-China diplomatic tensions similarly reflect cycles of mistrust and fear permeating official discourse and policy actions.

3. Empirical Case Analyses

3.1 NATO–Russia Relations: Collective Anxiety and Identity Threat

The NATO–Russia relationship stands as one of the most emblematic cases of how collective anxiety and identity threat shape international conflict. In the post-Cold War era, the expansion of NATO eastward into territories once considered within Russia's sphere of influence became a profound psychological and political rupture for Russia, fueling insecurity, mistrust, and antagonism that persist to this day (Allison, 2017; Laruelle, 2014) ^[1, 21].

3.1.1 Historical Psychological Context

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia confronted a dramatic loss of global status and security, experienced as collective trauma and humiliation. Russian national identity, shaped by narratives of historical grandeur, resilience, and victimization, faced a crisis of meaning, exacerbated by the perception that the West, especially NATO, was capitalizing on Russia's weakness to strategically encroach on its borders (Trenin, 2019) ^[37]. NATO's expansion into Central and Eastern Europe was widely interpreted within Russia as a betrayal of implicit post-Cold War understandings and as an existential threat, not merely strategic competition (Götz, 2019) ^[11].

The West's assurances, if any, were insufficient to overcome Russian fears. Rather, repeated US and NATO commitments to include former Warsaw Pact and Soviet republics reinforced a narrative within Russia of Western hostility and containment. Perceptions of encirclement became deeply embedded in Russian political discourse and public consciousness (Ruggerio, 2017) ^[29]. This is an essential psychological dimension: rather than focusing solely on objective military balances, Russian responses reflect a collective emotion of fear shaped and sustained by historical grievances and identity threat (Krebs, 2015) ^[20].

3.1.2 Security Dilemma and Emotional Feedback Loops

Russia's perception of NATO expansion triggered a classic security dilemma, whereby one side's defensive precautions cause existential fear in the other, resulting in a self-reinforcing spiral of mistrust and armament (Jervis, 1978) ^[16]. Russia's military modernization, proactive measures in its near abroad (e.g., Georgia 2008, Crimea 2014), and assertive diplomacy seek to counter perceived NATO

encirclement but simultaneously justify NATO's continued military buildup in Eastern Europe (Smith, 2017) ^[32]. These mutual actions form an emotional feedback loop, fear provokes defensive aggression, which fuels more fear, hardens threat perceptions, and constrains diplomatic space. Russian political elites and media promulgate narratives emphasizing NATO's hostile intentions and Western betrayal, heightening popular fears and nationalistic sentiment (Giles & Legvold, 2018) ^[10]. These narratives anchor collective identity around themes of resistance against external threat, further entrenching the 'us versus them' dichotomy.

3.1.3 Identity and Existential Threat

Russian leadership's framing of NATO not just as a military threat, but as an affront to Russia's sovereignty and historical destiny, imbues the conflict with existential significance (Laruelle, 2014) ^[21]. This identity-based threat perception motivates policies beyond pure strategic calculation, as reactions become about preserving the integrity of the Russian state, culture, and national pride (Fearon, 1995) ^[8].

The 2014 annexation of Crimea serves as a case study. Moscow justified the move in terms of protecting ethnic Russians and reversing historical humiliation, an emotional act linked to collective identity and perceived existential threat (Trenin, 2019) ^[37]. This maneuver was met with NATO condemnation and accelerated military readiness in Eastern Europe, intensifying the security dilemma.

3.1.4 Western Perspectives and Missed Psychological Opportunities

Western policymakers have often minimized or misunderstood Russia's emotional and identity-based concerns about NATO (The Arctic Institute, 2024) ^[35]. Despite warnings from analysts like George Kennan about the perils of NATO expansion, Western nations proceeded, framing enlargement as stabilizing and justified by Central and Eastern Europe's sovereign rights (Götz, 2019) ^[11].

This failure to engage sincerely with Russia's emotional and identity worries served to validate Russian fears and bred resentment, closing off trust-building opportunities that may have mitigated escalation (The Arctic Institute, 2024) ^[35]. Current Western policies tend to emphasize deterrence and punishment, reinforcing Russian narratives of Western hostility and sustaining the cycle of collective anxiety.

3.1.5 Psychological Dimensions Essential to Resolution

The ongoing NATO–Russia confrontation underscores that persistent geopolitical insecurity cannot be addressed solely through military balancing or deterrence strategies. Instead, the conflict is deeply rooted in psychological substrates that include collective fears nurtured by historical experience, threats to national identity, and perceived affronts to dignity (Kashani, 2023; Laruelle, 2014) ^[18, 21]. Russia's sense of ontological insecurity, the fear of loss of status, sovereignty, and cultural identity, shapes its defensive and assertive policies in ways that go beyond calculative strategic interests (Kashani, 2023) ^[18].

Recognition of these emotional and identity-based dimensions is critical. Without transparent dialogue that genuinely engages Russia's concerns about identity and historical narratives, attempts at de-escalation risk appearing disingenuous or threatening, thereby exacerbating mistrust (The Arctic Institute, 2024) ^[35]. Confidence-building measures tailored to acknowledge Russia's psychological anxieties, along with diplomatic efforts aimed at reframing

adversarial narratives, are essential to defuse existential threat perceptions that fuel escalation (Ruggerio, 2017) ^[29]. Recent analyses also highlight the role of psychological warfare tactics and information operations in escalating tensions, which reinforce a climate of fear and uncertainty that hinders diplomatic breakthroughs (Institute for the Study of War [ISW], 2025; The Telegraph, 2025) ^[15, 36]. Addressing the conflict's psychological foundations requires integrating strategic patience, empathy, and identity-sensitive communication into crisis management frameworks (Kashani, 2023) ^[18].

In summary, durable resolution depends on transcending narrow military logic to embrace the emotional realities driving state behavior. Only through acknowledging and addressing the fears of history, identity, and dignity that underpin Russian policy can the dangerous NATO–Russia rivalry be effectively de-escalated.

3.2 China-U.S. Strategic Competition: Fear, Pride, and National Narratives

The China–U.S. rivalry represents a different, yet equivalently potent, psychological contest rooted in fears of national decline, historical grievances, and clashing identities. This relationship, arguably the most consequential geopolitical rivalry of the 21st century, provides insight into how emotion and identity similarly drive conflict dynamics in a distinct regional and cultural context.

3.2.1 Cognitive-Affective Dynamics in Sino-American Relations

The rise of China challenges the unipolar dominance of the United States, stirring American fears of relative decline and loss of geopolitical primacy (Nathan & Scobell, 2012) ^[26]. Empirical studies in political psychology reveal that this status anxiety generates threat inflation, in which Washington increasingly interprets China's economic growth, technological advances, and military expansion as deliberate attempts to undermine US supremacy (Wang, 2018) ^[38]. This threat inflation is consistent with affective forecasting errors under anxiety and status threat, leading to measures designed to contain China's rise but which risk escalation (Halperin & Gross, 2011) ^[13].

Similarly, China's leadership and society view the United States through the lens of a "century of humiliation" narrative that emphasizes historical subjugation and foreign exploitation (Zhao, 2004) ^[40]. This narrative underpins a national identity centered on rejuvenation and resistance to external interference (Wang, 2020) ^[39]. The emotional salience of pride and collective dignity motivates assertive policy initiatives, particularly regarding Taiwan, the South China Sea, and technology sectors (Shambaugh, 2016) ^[30].

Mutual fear and pride entrench cognitive biases such as threat amplification and confirmation bias on both sides, reducing prospects for rational compromise and increasing the likelihood of conflict miscalculations (Kang, 2017) ^[17].

3.2.2 Strategic Postures and Emotional Escalation

The American "pivot to Asia" strategy and deepened alliances with regional powers such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia are construed by Beijing as attempts at encirclement and containment, exacerbating Chinese insecurity and provoking more assertive stances including accelerated military modernization and public nationalist rhetoric (Duchâtel & Godement, 2021) ^[5]. The escalation encompasses economic confrontations, such as tariffs and technology restrictions, compounding the security dilemma

and mutual distrust.

This pattern exemplifies a feedback loop wherein fear-driven responses increase hostility and reduce diplomatic space. Heightened nationalistic sentiments in both countries further constrain leadership flexibility and magnify perceived zero-sum stakes (Gibney & Dalton, 2020) ^[9].

3.3.3 Identity Narratives and Domestic Mobilization

National identity and collective memory serve domestic political functions that shape foreign policy. In China, the narrative of national revival and resisting Western dominance unites diverse constituencies and legitimizes the ruling Chinese Communist Party's policies (Wang, 2020) ^[39]. Similarly, American political discourse frequently invokes exceptionalism and strategic necessity to justify containment policies (Smith, 2018).

These identity narratives harden public opinion and political incentives, often pushing leaders toward confrontation even when diplomatic solutions exist (Huddy, 2013) ^[14]. Media, educational curricula, and political rhetoric reinforce these collective emotions, embedding them deeply in the political culture on both sides (Druckman *et al.*, 2016) ^[6].

3.3.4 Toward Emotional De-Escalation and Dialogue

Understanding the emotional and identity underpinnings of the China–U.S. rivalry suggests that effective management requires more than classic balance of power tools. Confidence-building measures, crisis communication protocols, and dialogues sensitive to identity concerns and historical grievances are crucial (Nathan & Scobell, 2012) ^[26].

Incorporating emotional intelligence in diplomacy and engaging in narrative reframing that recognizes mutual dignity may mitigate zero-sum perceptions and foster cooperation even amid competition (Halperin & Gross, 2011) ^[13]. Multilateral forums and people-to-people exchanges can contribute to dismantling constructed enemy images and reducing distrust (Shambaugh, 2016) ^[30].

4. Discussion and Implications

The NATO–Russia and China–U.S. case studies demonstrate that collective anxiety, reinforced by identity narratives and psychological biases, is central to understanding persistent geopolitical conflicts. Traditional IR frameworks focused on material power give an incomplete picture if emotional drivers remain unaddressed. Effective conflict management requires diplomats and policymakers to recognize and address these emotional and identity layers. This includes acknowledging fears and grievances embedded in historical narratives, employing confidence-building measures, and fostering dialogue that respects identity concerns. Emotional intelligence and empathy in diplomacy, coupled with transparency and trust-building, can mitigate feedback loops of fear and antagonism.

Further research should pursue interdisciplinary methods combining political psychology, neuroscience, and conflict studies to better target emotional mechanisms in policy design and crisis negotiation.

5. Conclusion

Fear, insecurity, and group identity profoundly shape contemporary global conflicts, particularly in the NATO–Russia and China–U.S. rivalries. Emotional and identity-based factors amplify threat perceptions, fuel alliance insecurities, and drive conflict escalation through

reinforcing feedback loops. Incorporating psychological insight into diplomatic practice offers promising avenues for de-escalation and enduring peace. Addressing the emotional substrates of conflict alongside traditional strategic concerns enriches understanding and opens innovative paths toward global stability.

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