



(IN)COMPLETE INFORMATION,  
(MIS)PERCEPTION, AND (UN)CERTAINTY

# A CRASH COURSE IN IR

- Int'l system = anarchy
  - Absence of world gov't
- Anarchy creates commitment and enforcement problems
  - A self-help system → no gov't to enforce rules
  - States must take care of themselves
  - Security dilemma
- We have incomplete information, which creates the possibility of mistakes and deepens uncertainty

# COMPLETE INFORMATION

- Def: Absolute and correct knowledge of objective reality
  - Omniscience
- Rational actors would never make mistakes
  - Irrational does not mean “insane”
- Ideal, but impossible
  - We have incentives to conceal (or misrepresent) info

# PERCEPTION

- Def: Awareness through the senses
  - Direct observation of reality
- However – perception requires interpretation
  - Most interpretation happens without even knowing it
  - Mistakes and miscalculations





- Cognitive biases – subconscious worldviews
  - We see what we expect to see
- Motivated biases – emotional rationalizations
  - We see what we want to see
- Past and personal experience form positive/negative preferences

# CERTAINTY

- Def: The acceptance of fact without doubt
  - True knowledge
- Objective certainty (scientific fact) vs. subjective certainty (belief)
  - What are we certain of?
  - How do we know?









- If we don't have all the info, misperceive what info we have, and can't be certain, how do we make good decisions?
- We can only try to overcome these obstacles
  - Examine historical relationships
  - Acknowledge bias
  - Interpret signals and motivations
  - Evaluate capability and credibility
  - Strategic reasoning: costs, benefits, consequences

# HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Our perception of “others” derives from mutual history
  - Past conflict → we believe current threats
  - Past cooperation → we believe current promises
- Honesty and bluffing behaviors

# ACKNOWLEDGE BIAS

- To properly assess reality, we have to be aware of our own perceptions of reality
- Recognize biases and preferences and try to understand other side
- Then examine why we hold those biases and whether they accurately reflect the info we have

# SIGNALS AND MOTIVATIONS

- To overcome info problems, we send each other signals and try to persuade others of our motives
  - Must interpret
- Some are nothing but “cheap talk” → how do we know if they’re legit?
  - Actions speak louder than words

# CAPABILITY AND CREDIBILITY

- Capability – can they do what they say?
- Credibility – will they do what they say?
  - Increased by:
    - Capability
    - Reputation for honesty
    - Value of the issue
    - Costly signaling

# STRATEGIC REASONING

- Chess match mentality – think multiple moves ahead
  - Make contingency plans
- Maximize utility – highest payoff at the lowest cost
  - Realize that *both* sides are attempting this