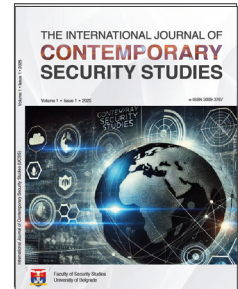




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Article

Security Communication and the Security Dilemma: Insights from the Iran-Israel Rivalry

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how security communication, often intended as deterrence or reassurance, can heighten insecurity within enduring rivalries, using the Iran-Israel conflict as a case study. It finds that during the 2025 Twelve-Day War, rhetorical threats, symbolic military gestures, and coercive diplomatic signalling reinforced perceptions of existential threat, deepened mistrust, and escalated the crisis. These communicative patterns illustrate how strategic messaging can construct rather than merely convey threat. In contrast, the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates that interpretive clarity and direct diplomatic exchange can mitigate such risks. The study refines the security dilemma framework by positioning communication as a constitutive driver of insecurity rather than merely a reflection of material capabilities. It argues that interpretive transparency, institutionalised back-channels, and sustained dialogue are critical for transforming security communication from an instrument of threat amplification into a means of conflict management. The findings contribute to theoretical debates on the communicative dimensions of security and offer insights for policymakers seeking durable de-escalation mechanisms.

KEYWORDS

Security Dilemma, Security Communication, Iran-Israel Conflict, 12-Day War, International Security.

1. Introduction

The Iran and Israel rivalry exemplifies one of the most enduring paradoxes in global security, as efforts at reassurance through communication often become triggers for escalation. During the June 2025 Twelve-Day War, both states sought to project deterrence and reassure their domestic audiences; however, these same messages were interpreted by the opposing side as hostile signalling, thereby intensifying the conflict. Israeli officials described pre-emptive strikes as defensive, while Tehran viewed them as existential threats. In turn, Iranian leaders framed uranium enrichment as lawful and peaceful, but Israel interpreted it as a covert nuclear weapons programme. This pattern of misreading is not unique to the Iran-Israel context. It reflects a broader theoretical question of why communicative acts intended to reduce insecurity so frequently deepen it.



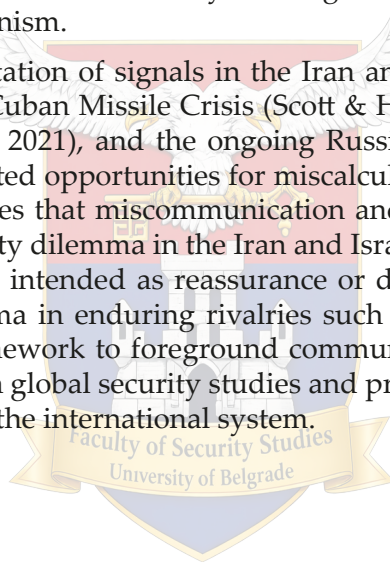
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Existing studies on the security dilemma, such as those by Booth and Wheeler (2008) and Jervis (1978), have shown how defensive measures can be perceived as offensive provocations. However, the communicative dimension of this dilemma, understood as the verbal, symbolic, and legal signals through which states convey reassurance or deterrence, remains undertheorized. While scholars have acknowledged the importance of signalling in international politics (Taylor & Bean, 2019; Baker, 2019), much of the literature continues to treat communication as secondary to material power, emphasising weapons capabilities, force postures, and strategic doctrines. What remains insufficiently explored is how verbal and nonverbal exchanges serve as mechanisms that sustain or mitigate the security dilemma. This gap has become even more urgent in the contemporary context of information warfare, cyber signalling, and media framing.

The Iran-Israel conflict provides a critical case for interrogating this theoretical gap. It reveals how communicative practices ranging from statements of intent and appeals to international law to targeted assassinations and displays of military technology are interpreted in ways that reinforce cycles of mistrust. For example, Israel's invocation of an "existential threat" draws legitimacy from Article 51 of the UN Charter; however, its ambiguity permits unilateral military actions whose legality is widely contested (Green et al., 2022). Similarly, Iran's depiction of support for groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas as "resistance" is interpreted by Israel as encirclement and provocation. These communicative acts thus represent not merely exchanges of words but instruments that generate insecurity and deepen antagonism.

Comparatively, the misinterpretation of signals in the Iran and Israel rivalry echoes other historical confrontations such as the Cuban Missile Crisis (Scott & Hughes, 2015), the Cold War arms race, the 1999 Kargil conflict (Gill, 2021), and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. In each instance, communicative misjudgments created opportunities for miscalculation and escalation. Against this background, this study hypothesises that miscommunication and rhetorical escalation are central mechanisms intensifying the security dilemma in the Iran and Israel rivalry. Accordingly, the study asks how security communication, intended as reassurance or deterrence, becomes a mechanism that intensifies the security dilemma in enduring rivalries such as the Iran-Israel conflict. By extending the security dilemma framework to foreground communication, the paper contributes to theoretical and empirical debates in global security studies and provides a comparative perspective for analysing other rivalries across the international system.



2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical foundation of the study

The security dilemma and securitisation theories jointly provide the theoretical foundation for this study. Together, they explain how communication functions as both a reassurance and a provocation mechanism in enduring rivalries such as that between Iran and Israel. While the security dilemma offers a structural and psychological understanding of insecurity, securitisation theory brings a communicative perspective that highlights how discourse transforms ordinary politics into perceived existential threats. Their integration provides a platform for introducing the concept of security communication, which captures how messages, signals, and symbols intensify or alleviate tensions in protracted conflicts.

The security dilemma remains one of the most enduring and influential concepts in international relations. First introduced by Herz (1950), it describes the paradox whereby actions taken by a state to increase its security, such as military modernisation, alliances, or deterrence, inevitably make other states feel less secure. Jervis (1978) elaborated this logic by emphasising the role of uncertainty and the difficulty of distinguishing between offensive and defensive intentions. Glaser (1997) refined the framework further by distinguishing between "benign" and "malign" dilemmas, showing that mistrust rather than material capability often drives escalation. Moreover, Booth and Wheeler (2008) later advanced the discussion by identifying the psychological dimensions of the dilemma, particularly fear and identity. Collectively, these scholars underscore that insecurity is not only structural but also perceptual, driven by how states interpret one another's signals.

This theoretical lens provides a structural explanation of the Iran-Israel rivalry. Defensive actions such as Iran's uranium enrichment or Israel's pre-emptive military postures are interpreted by each side as offensive provocations. Consequently, what begins as deterrence often becomes escalation. The same logic applies to other rivalries such as India and Pakistan, where nuclear signalling and public rhetoric repeatedly transform reassurance into provocation (Kapur, 2007). Similarly, in the Russia and Ukraine context, defensive troop movements and symbolic language about sovereignty have triggered deep suspicion and intensified confrontation. These examples reveal how communication, whether verbal or material, lies at the heart of the security dilemma's tragic spiral.

While the security dilemma explains the structural logic of mutual suspicion, it does not fully account for how security meanings are communicated, constructed, and contested. Here, securitisation theory provides a complementary communicative framework. Developed by Wæver (1995) and later expanded by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), securitisation theory posits that issues become security concerns not because they are inherently dangerous but because authoritative actors label them as existential threats through what Wæver termed "speech acts." In doing so, political leaders justify extraordinary measures beyond the realm of normal politics. The theory thus explains how discourse shapes what societies perceive as threats.

It is, however, important to distinguish between securitisation and security communication. While securitisation focuses on discrete moments when political elites elevate issues onto the security agenda, security communication captures the ongoing process through which states express, negotiate, and interpret security meanings through both verbal and nonverbal channels. It offers a broader analytical lens, particularly suited for complex and long-term rivalries such as that between Iran and Israel. Security communication comprises not only official statements and policy declarations but also symbolic gestures, media narratives, and digital signals that shape perceptions of threat or reassurance (Taylor & Bean, 2019).

The multidimensional character of security communication can be seen in various global cases. For example, North Korea's missile tests and military parades serve as internal affirmations of regime strength while simultaneously sending deterrent messages to the United States and South Korea (Ekmektsioglou & Lee, 2020; Kim & Park, 2019). Similarly, China's naval activities in the South China Sea are domestically framed as protective of sovereignty but are interpreted externally as signals of regional expansion (Alessio & Renfro, 2022; Poling, 2021). Turkey's cross-border incursions in northern Syria, justified as counterterrorism measures, are likewise viewed by neighbours as assertions of regional dominance (Ferah & Tunca, 2022; Al Asad, 2025). These examples demonstrate how communicative acts are inherently complex, aimed at both domestic audiences and international rivals, and often misinterpreted in ways that exacerbate insecurity.

In the Iran and Israel context, securitisation theory illuminates how both states portray the other as an existential threat. By framing their rival as a danger to survival, political leaders justify exceptional measures ranging from military readiness to diplomatic isolation. The interaction between these two processes, securitisation and misinterpretation, illustrates how communication can transform political rivalries into perceived security crises.

2.2. Conceptual framework

Concept of Security Communication

Security communication, as articulated by Taylor and Bean (2019), refers to the ways in which states construct and express perceptions of threat and intention through both verbal and nonverbal acts, including speeches, diplomatic declarations, symbolic gestures, and military postures. The concept emphasises that security is not only about what states do but how their actions are communicated, interpreted, and legitimised within wider political and social contexts. It assumes that threats are discursively constructed, that security performances are mediated, and that public legitimacy is central to the effectiveness of security narratives. In this respect, security is dynamic, continuously shaped and reshaped through communicative practices.

Although the security dilemma has often been conceptualised in structural or material terms, scholars have increasingly recognised the communicative dimension that underpins it. Schelling's (1970) work on deterrence and bargaining demonstrated that strategic success depends on credible signalling and interpretation (Taylor, 2019). Later, securitisation theorists (Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq, 2011) expanded this understanding by showing how speech acts and symbolic performances produce security realities. The communicative turn in security studies, therefore, highlights that discourse, rhetoric, and media framing are not peripheral but constitutive of security itself.

Recent efforts to bridge the classical and communicative perspectives have yielded important insights. Booth and Wheeler (2008) proposed "security dilemma sensibility," a disposition grounded in empathy and trust-building communication. Kydd (2005) showed that credible commitments and consistent signalling can reduce uncertainty. Comparative cases such as India and Pakistan (Kapur, 2007) and Cold War diplomacy (Lebow & Risse-Kappen, 1996) reveal that communication, whether through backchannel talks, deterrent statements, or symbolic gestures, can either ease or escalate rivalries depending on interpretation. However, despite these advances, much of the literature remains focused on state elites, neglecting the roles of media, public discourse, and transnational communication that have become increasingly vital in the digital age.

Security Communication in the Iran-Israel Rivalry

Despite progress in integrating communication into security studies, limited research explicitly applies the concept of security communication to enduring Middle Eastern rivalries. Existing works have tended to prioritise material or strategic dimensions, such as Iran's regional interventions or Israel's deterrence strategies (Zafar, Akhtar, and Shaukat, 2025). Few have examined how verbal, symbolic, or cyber exchanges sustain mutual suspicion and escalation. The June 2025 Twelve-Day War provides a vivid example. Both states relied heavily on rhetorical threats, symbolic demonstrations of force, and media-based signalling rather than direct diplomacy. Israeli airstrike warnings were framed as preventive communication, while Iranian statements on retaliation were presented as defensive justice. These communicative performances, amplified by state-aligned media and digital propaganda networks, transformed reassurance attempts into triggers of further insecurity.

Amaliya (2025) has examined the cyber dimension of the rivalry, framing digital attacks as strategic tools of competition. However, her analysis remains anchored in realism and does not capture the communicative construction of threat. By contrast, this study situates security communication at the centre of analysis, exploring how threats, rhetoric, media narratives, and symbolic acts perpetuate the security dilemma. Like the India-Pakistan and Russia-Ukraine cases, the Iran-Israel conflict demonstrates how rhetorical escalation and communicative misjudgement deepen insecurity rather than alleviate it.

In bridging classical security dilemma theory with the communicative turn in security studies, this research addresses a crucial gap. It proposes that miscommunication and rhetorical escalation are not incidental to conflict but are central mechanisms that intensify the security dilemma. This conceptual synthesis advances the understanding of global rivalries by placing communication, rather than weapons or alliances, at the core of how insecurity is produced and reproduced.

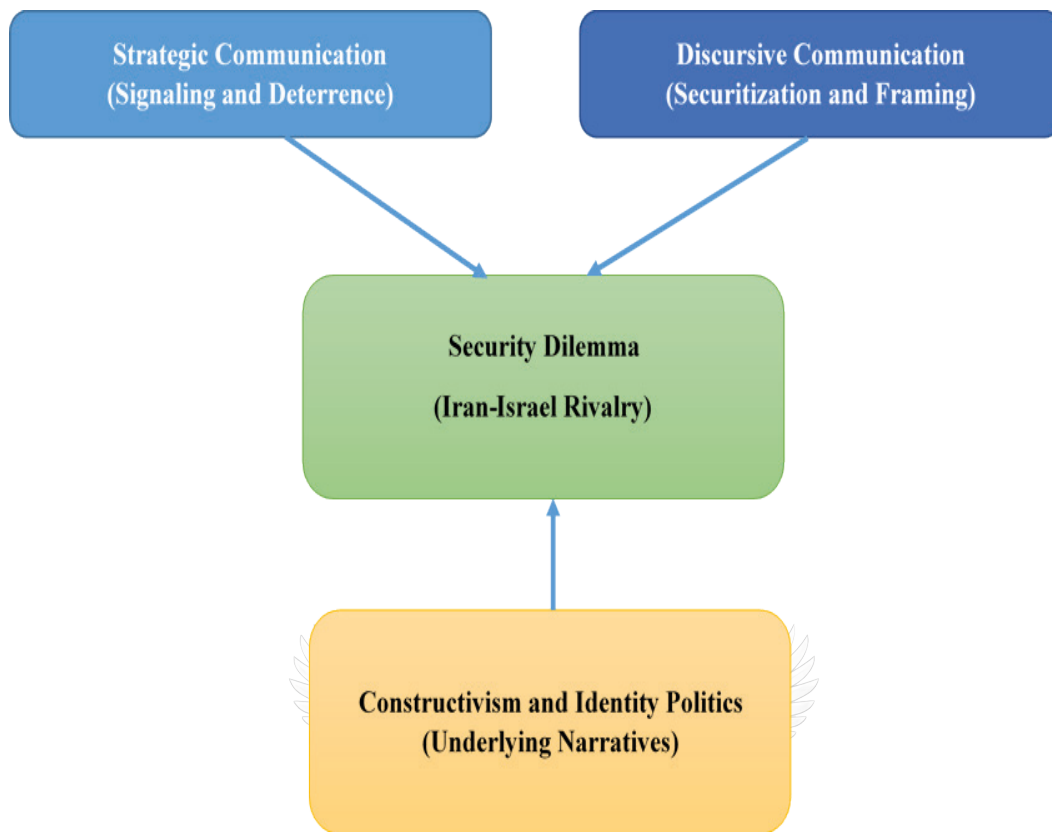


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Security Communication and Security Dilemma. **Source:** Authors' Construct, 2025.

The conceptual framework illustrates the interrelationship between security communication and the security dilemma in the context of the Iran-Israel rivalry. At its core, security communication explains how political leaders, state institutions, and media actors construct one another as existential threats through speeches, statements, and symbolic gestures. This process of securitisation transforms political disagreements into matters of survival. The rival state, in response, interprets these communicative actions through the logic of the security dilemma, where defensive measures by one side are perceived as offensive intentions by the other. This dynamic produces a recurring cycle of mistrust, military preparation, and strategic confrontation. The framework also recognises the potential moderating role of communication mechanisms such as backchannel diplomacy and crisis signalling, which either may intensify or ease tensions. Ultimately, it demonstrates that discourse and structural dynamics operate together to sustain and reproduce the enduring insecurity that defines the Iran-Israel relationship.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in documentary analysis and comparative case logic. The choice of qualitative methodology reflects the study's focus on meanings, representations, and communicative patterns rather than quantifiable variables. The analysis is guided by the theoretical intersection of the security dilemma and security communication, which together provide a lens for interpreting how verbal and nonverbal exchanges between Iran and Israel sustain cycles of insecurity.

The case material comprises a wide range of secondary and open-source data, including official government statements, speeches by state leaders, United Nations records, media reports, policy documents, and scholarly analyses. These sources were purposively selected to capture the communicative dimensions of security interactions between Iran and Israel, particularly during critical episodes such as the June 2025 Twelve-Day War and earlier confrontations over nuclear development and regional influence.

The data were systematically organised using thematic categorisation. This involved identifying recurring patterns and motifs in the language and symbolism of both Iranian and Israeli actors. Three analytical criteria guided the evaluation. The first involved examining rhetorical framing, focusing on how each state's official discourse constructs the other as a threat or as a legitimate actor. The second criterion concerned symbolic signalling, encompassing nonverbal communication such as military displays, cyber operations, and diplomatic gestures. The third criterion involved media framing, analysing how national and international media narratives amplified, reframed, or moderated these security communications. Together, these categories enabled a structured interpretation of how communicative acts both reflect and reproduce the logic of the security dilemma.

The data analysis followed a process of iterative reading and coding, consistent with qualitative interpretive methods. Texts were read repeatedly to detect emerging themes and intertextual linkages, after which the patterns were compared across different time periods and communication contexts. Particular attention was paid to moments of escalation and de-escalation, where the interpretation of messages shifted the direction of the rivalry.

Although the study provides a rich interpretive account of security communication, it acknowledges certain limitations. The reliance on secondary and open-source data constrains the ability to make causal inferences about state intentions or decision-making processes. Additionally, because official communications are often strategically constructed, they may not reflect the full range of internal deliberations within either state. Nonetheless, the study mitigates these limitations through cross-validation of sources, triangulation across different media and policy documents, and the application of established theoretical frameworks.

4. Results

Iran-Israel and the Cuban Missile Crisis

The Iran-Israel rivalry and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis share structural similarities rooted in the security dilemma. Both involved nuclear-capable states, mutual mistrust, and ideological hostility that transformed defensive actions into perceived offensive threats. However, the stark difference in outcomes lies in the quality and credibility of communication. While the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated the stabilising potential of structured negotiation, the Iran-Israel confrontation illustrates how communication failure entrenches insecurity.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, direct and backchannel negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union were central to de-escalation. These communication mechanisms provided interpretive clarity and prevented worst-case assumptions. Secret correspondence between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev allowed both sides to exchange concessions without public escalation. Khrushchev's message to Kennedy, offering to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba in return for assurances and the later removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey, demonstrates how credible dialogue and mutual recognition of interests averted catastrophe (Cawley, 2017; Kim & Martín, 2021; Radchenko & Zubok, 2023). The episode shows that when communication is transparent, reciprocal, and institutionally grounded, even existential tensions can be contained.

In contrast, the Iran-Israel conflict, particularly during the Twelve-Day War of 2025, demonstrates how securitised rhetoric, unilateral military action, and disrupted diplomatic efforts fuel escalation. Israel's pre-emptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, supported by U.S. air operations, was publicly framed by President Donald Trump as a "spectacular military success," aimed at the "total destruction of Iran's nuclear capacity" (The Guardian, 2025). This communication reinforced Iranian perceptions that negotiation had been replaced by coercion. Iran's foreign minister condemned the attack as a "grave violation of the UN Charter," while President Masoud Pezeshkian declared that Iran "does not seek war but will defend itself forcefully" (New Indian Express, 2025; Nichols, 2025). In response, Prime Minister Netanyahu portrayed the assault as an act of existential defence, emphasising that "hesitation is not an option" (UN News, 2024). These mutually exclusive narratives illustrate how verbal and symbolic acts deepened mistrust and delegitimised diplomatic dialogue.

Even when Iran expressed readiness for negotiation, as Ali Larijani noted regarding missile restrictions, external demands and asymmetrical conditions prevented progress (Tehran Times, 2025). In this communicative environment, rhetoric and military gestures became tools of assertion rather than reassurance, contrasting sharply with the structured, reciprocal engagement that resolved the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This comparison underscores that effective crisis management depends less on military balance and more on communicative integrity. Where credible, institutionalised negotiation channels exist, interpretive clarity can transform potential escalation into compromise. Where such mechanisms are absent, as in the Iran-Israel case, communication becomes a vehicle for securitisation, amplifying fear and hostility.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Communication Dynamics

Variable	Iran-Israel Rivalry (2025)	Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)
Negotiation Channels	Fragmented, indirect, and often mediated through third parties	Direct and backchannel negotiations between leaders
Mutual Trust	Extremely low; characterised by ideological rigidity and adversarial framing	Minimal but functional trust is maintained through controlled communication.
Interpretive Clarity	Low; rhetorical threats and symbolic gestures misinterpreted as aggression	High; reciprocal communication and credible signalling reduced ambiguity.
Outcome	Escalation, breakdown of diplomacy, and enduring mistrust	Peaceful resolution through mutual concessions and institutionalised communication

Implications of the Iran-Israel Conflict

The Twelve-Day War revealed the structural fragility of Iran-Israel relations and the global reach of their rivalry. Initiated by Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear sites and followed by Iranian missile retaliation, the conflict caused widespread human and infrastructural losses (Abo El-Kasem, 2025; Milton, 2019). Both states experienced casualties, blackouts, and societal anxiety, exposing the psychological and material consequences of failed communication (Al Jazeera, 2025; Fabian, 2025; Cornwall, Hafezi & Holland, 2025).

Unlike the Cuban Missile Crisis, where backchannel diplomacy contained escalation, the Iran-Israel confrontation lacked interpretive clarity and credible mediation. U.S. airstrikes on Iranian targets and the absence of sustained dialogue reinforced perceptions of betrayal and existential threat. The addition of cyber operations, proxy engagements, and strategic media campaigns further distorted communication, multiplying misinterpretations and heightening instability.

The implications extend beyond the Middle East. Africa's reliance on Gulf oil exposes it to economic shocks, while Iranian and Israeli engagements across the continent risk turning African regions into peripheral arenas of proxy competition (Akerele, 2021; Gidron, 2024; Lob, 2024; Salman, 2021). Ideological narratives from the conflict also resonate within local political movements, influencing security discourses.

Consequently, the Iran-Israel case demonstrates how security communication can construct threat perceptions and escalate rivalries when dialogue is absent or manipulated. In contrast, the Cuban Missile Crisis exemplifies the transformative role of credible and reciprocal communication in mitigating insecurity. Together, these cases reaffirm that the security dilemma is not merely a structural condition but a communicative process whose management depends on interpretive transparency, trust-building, and the institutionalisation of dialogue.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the theoretical argument that security communication is not a neutral conduit of information but a constitutive mechanism that actively constructs threat perceptions within the security dilemma. Communication does not merely transmit meaning; it produces it, shaping the strategic behaviour of states through signals, interpretations, and performances. In the Iran-Israel rivalry, verbal, symbolic, and legal-diplomatic acts intensify rather than ease insecurity. Threatening rhetoric, selective diplomatic engagement, and publicised military demonstrations function as communicative acts that define the adversary's intentions. As Wæver (2015) and Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) explain through securitisation theory, speech acts and symbolic gestures elevate political disputes into existential questions, mobilising domestic legitimacy while reinforcing external hostility. This finding resonates with Herz's (1950) foundational insight that the security dilemma emerges when defensive measures are misinterpreted as offensive, and with Jervis's (1978) view that perception and interpretation, more than material capability, often drive escalation.

The communicative dimension of the Iran-Israel rivalry further demonstrates that misperception is not a by-product of conflict but a structural outcome of how states speak, signal, and perform their insecurities. Booth and Wheeler's (2008) notion of "security dilemma sensibility" is instructive here, as it calls for empathy and interpretive caution in state communication. However, such sensibility remains absent in the Iran-Israel context, where interactions are defined by mutual suspicion and ideological rigidity. Each side constructs the other through hostile discourses that leave little room for interpretive ambiguity. This aligns with Taylor and Bean's (2019) argument that contemporary security practices are communicatively mediated, with both state and media actors contributing to the production of threat narratives in the global arena.

In practical terms, the Iran-Israel rivalry illustrates the limits of deterrence and reassurance in the face of communicative distortion. Attempts to demonstrate restraint, such as Iran's periodic willingness to re-engage under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), are often overshadowed by symbolic provocations like airstrikes, cyber operations, and inflammatory rhetoric. These communicative acts, meant to project resolve, are received as threats, thereby converting reassurance into provocation. The comparison with the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights this contrast: through structured backchannels and interpretive transparency, the United States and the Soviet Union managed to avoid nuclear confrontation despite extreme tension (Cawley, 2017; Kim & Martín, 2021; Radchenko & Zubok, 2023). In the Iran-Israel case, by contrast, fragmented communication channels and unilateral coercive measures undermine interpretive clarity, creating an environment in which every message risks escalation.

Normatively, these findings underscore that the management of enduring rivalries depends as much on communicative reform as on military or diplomatic initiatives. When communication is unidirectional, ideologically rigid, or mediated through antagonistic narratives, escalation becomes almost inevitable. Policies that prioritise interpretive transparency, backchannel diplomacy, and institutionalised trust-building mechanisms can transform communication from a driver of hostility into a stabilising tool. Such mechanisms include verified dialogue frameworks, reciprocal signalling protocols, and third-party mediation structures that facilitate understanding even amid deep mistrust. These measures echo Booth and Wheeler's advocacy for empathy in security relations and Taylor and Bean's call for communicative reflexivity in statecraft.

Consequently, the Iran-Israel rivalry illustrates that security communication possesses a dual character. Under conditions of credible negotiation and interpretive clarity, it can mitigate the security dilemma; in their absence, it deepens it. By situating these findings alongside other enduring rivalries such as India-Pakistan and Russia-Ukraine, the study advances the proposition that insecurity is co-produced through language, perception, and performance as much as through power and strategy. This reinforces the broader theoretical synthesis that security communication and the security dilemma are not separate domains but mutually constitutive processes that shape the dynamics of contemporary conflict.

6. Conclusions

This study has shown that security communication is not a neutral exchange of information but a constitutive force that shapes threat perceptions and sustains the security dilemma. Through the Iran-Israel rivalry, it demonstrates how verbal, symbolic, and diplomatic acts construct rather than simply convey intent, transforming reassurance into provocation and perpetuating cycles of mistrust.

Theoretically, the study contributes to security scholarship by integrating communicative processes into the logic of the security dilemma, thereby reframing communication as a mechanism through which insecurity is produced and reproduced. Comparatively, it provides insights relevant to other enduring rivalries, such as India-Pakistan and Russia-Ukraine, where miscommunication and rhetorical escalation similarly deepen mutual suspicion.

For policy and practice, three implications emerge. First, interpretive transparency should be institutionalised in diplomacy to minimise misperception. Second, backchannel and crisis communication mechanisms must be strengthened to enable adversaries to clarify intentions. Third, trust-building communication frameworks, supported by third-party mediation, can transform adversarial exchanges into constructive dialogue. These measures recognise that peace depends not only on material restraint but on reconfiguring the communicative structures through which states define and manage insecurity.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

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