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Title

Measuring Threat Perception: Theory and a Case Study of Taiwan

Abstract

Threat perception is a ubiquitous element in international relations theory and security studies. Despite the ubiquity of this theoretical construct, the field has had less success providing practical guidance for the operationalization and measurement of threat perception. In fact, how to assess and measure perceptions of threat remains one of the thorniest problems for the field of IR due to the intangible nature of this theoretical construct. Drawing on the theoretical discussion on spiral and deterrence models as well as interstate reconciliation, complemented with the literature of social psychology, I construct a new measure of threat perception. This new measure conceptualizes threat perception as an assessment a state makes concerning the possibility of loss due to the actions of another state. I categorize perceptions of threat into three different types: perception of active threat, perception of dormant threat, and perception of unlikely threat. I generate clear observable implications for each type of perception of threat so that this measure is empirically falsifiable and practically useful. I separate threat perception from the strategic behavior induced by it so that I measure perceptions of threat in a way that is not tautological. By developing this vital new measure of perceptions of threat, my article fills one major lacuna in the IR theoretical literature.

The analytical issue with threat perception carries more than theoretical implications. It also affects how scholars and decisionmakers should think about the implication of China's rise. Do East Asian countries perceive an imminent threat from China, and if so, how do we know? Although

seemingly straightforward, this question is difficult to answer in any systematic manner precisely because we do not have a uniform way of measuring the existence of and change in threat perception. I apply my new measure of threat perception to Taiwan—a most-likely case for the conventional wisdom that China's rise has led to deep-rooted fear in East Asia. Using 2,733 legislative candidate manifestos as data source, I carefully describe the configuration of Taiwan's perception of threat toward China. I find that Taiwan's perception of China as an active threat has declined significantly over the past two decades, not strengthened. While this paper does not propose any decisive causal argument to explain for the change in Taiwan's threat perception toward China, I offer some discussion on how economic factors possibly affect Taiwan's threat assessment toward China. With the new measure of threat perception and the empirical finding derived from Taiwan, this article contributes to both the theoretical literature and the study on East Asian security.

#### Relevance to the themes of the workshop

This paper resonates well with the first theme (the economic-security nexus) of the workshop. The strategic and economic environment in which the state finds itself will determine the type of perception of threat the state forms and my paper provides an opportunity to examine the consequences of different configurations of economic and security parameters.

#### Resonance with GRADNAS ethos

This paper contains conceptual innovation because it provides a novel measure of threat perception that avoids some analytical pitfalls commonly seen in the literature. The paper pursues empirical rigor by measuring the concept of threat perception in an empirically falsifiable and systemic manner.