The Social Construction of Threats. The Iran Nuclear Crisis as a Textbook Example for Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

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Abstract: Perception matters for research and analysis because the image of a state (non-state actor) as aggressive and the perceptions of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing. We will use an interdisciplinary perspective combining political science and adult education research, which we believe has the potential for further policy advice.

Introduction

How perceptions can differ! After signing the interim Iranian nuclear pact on November 24th 2013 in Geneva, a historic agreement between Teheran and the P5+1-group[2] that freezes key parts of the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for temporary relief on some economic sanctions, US President, Barack Obama, praised the agreement. But Israel's Premier, Benjamin Netanyahu denounced it as a "historic mistake" that will enable Iran to fulfill its nuclear ambitions (Booth, 2013). As the current Iranian nuclear crisis shows (Bock, 2012, 2013), states as the key players in security issues[3] tend to balance[4] against what they (i.e., those in charge of political decisions (Wendt, 1999, p. 94)) perceive as a threat (Bock & Henneberg, 2013; Stein, 2013). I believe that perception matters because the image of a state (or a non-state actor) as aggressive and the perceptions of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: the image influences the perception, and the perception fosters the image (Bock & Henneberg, 2013, pp. 25–28). With respect to the policy against a perceived threat, it is irrelevant whether the state (or non-state actor) under suspicion really has aggressive intentions; the deciding factor is how the intentions are perceived and evaluated. We consider Walt's (1990) "balance of threat" theory to be a convincing theory for explaining state behavior. States react to threats, not power. This state-centered approach is also open to the psychological phenomenon of perception and its effect on decision making (Robert Jervis, 2010, pp. 1–14). Because the core assumption of security "is about the pursuit of freedom from *threat*" (Buzan, 1991, p. 18 Italics added), research on how states react to threats addresses both security and peace.

Research Gap: Does Balancing Work?

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[2] The P5+1 are the six major states which, in 2006, joined diplomatic efforts regard to the Iranian nuclear program. The term refers to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

[3] This does not imply that states are the only actors. There are, of course, other actors as well, but states are in security questions still the decisive actors; see page 10 for detailed clarification.

[4] For the purpose of this research, we define balancing as a state strategy that is 1) designed to counter a perceived external threat by 2) either military or nonmilitary means that are 3) either internal or external and aim 4) to weaken a state or alliance perceived as a threat.

Balancing is an age-old and fundamental concept in international relations and political science. Despite the long history and use of this concept, "there has been little analysis of what it means for a state to 'balance'" (Martin, 1999, p. 1), and despite the extensive literature on balancing, no systematic empirical research has been done to determine whether balancing can fulfill its purpose: to reduce the threat and provide security by weakening the threatening state or alliance. I intend to fill this fundamental research gap. Hence our leading research question: *Can balancing fulfill its purpose and reduce the threat states react to and provide security by weakening the threatening state or alliance?*

The Puzzle: What Makes a Threat a Threat?

But what makes Iran a threat? Is it the anticipated possession of nuclear weapons, as Walt's theory suggests (Walt, 1990, pp. 22–26)? Walt distinguishes four different sources that make states[5] a threat (Walt, 1990, pp. 21–26):

- Aggregate power refers to means "a state's total resources" (Walt, 1990, p. 22); the greater the aggregate power, the greater the threat a state can pose.
- Geographic proximity refers to the distance that lies between the potential competitors; the greater the distance, the more limited "the ability to project power" (Walt, 1990, p. 23), and the more limited the potential threat.
- Offensive power refers to the size of "offensive capabilities" (Walt, 1990, p. 24); the greater the offensive power, the greater the threat a state can pose. Offensive power is closely related to aggregate power and geographic proximity.
- Aggressive intentions refer to how states perceive a potential enemy (Walt, 1990, pp. 25–26).

We hold this explanation for not decisive. For example, during the Cold War, the nuclear weapons of the US, the UK, and France were not threatening to Germany despite the tremendous supremacy of the US alone in terms of aggregate and offensive power (given the vast amount of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the remoteness between the US and Germany was of little importance). The image Germany had/has of the US as well as the UK and France was, and still is, decisive: Germans neither perceive the US as aggressive nor as hostile. They are therefore not a threat (Robert Jervis, 1985, p. 14). An analogous example is the US-led Kosovo war. Russia and China balanced against the US and tried to form a Russian-Chinese-Indian alliance – which ultimately failed to materialize because "the principal powers began to perceive the likelihood of potential American military intervention […] as extremely low" (Paul, 2005, p. 63). The perception of the US as non-threatening was crucial for Russia and China. So, it's not the weapons alone that are threatening. We assume that it is not the availability of weapons but rather the intent that constitutes a threat: the aggressive intentions the US and Israel believes the regime in Teheran has, make the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons threatening. Therefore, the first hypothesis can be formulated as follows: *The perception of a state's intentions as aggressive is decisive for that state being (perceived as) a threat.*

Why Perception Matters

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[5] We do not believe that only states can be threatened to states; (national and transnational) terrorism set a very good example that non-state actors can also be perceived as a threat. However, we believe and fully agree with Walt's theoretical assumption that the image a state, i.e., the persons in charge with the political decisions has of the non-state actor is decisive in how this actor is perceived and evaluated. Exactly for that reason, a non-state actor (e.g., Hezbollah) is perceived by Israel as a threat but not by Iran or Palestine.

At this point, one may wonder why balancing a state perceived as a threat would be counterproductive. The Cuban Missile Crisis, which I believe is symptomatic of a fundamental security policy problem, is a textbook example. The reason for Nikita Khrushchev's decision to station nuclear missiles in Cuba can be described as an effort to balance (Bock, 2013, pp. 77–91). John F. Kennedy's motivation for the US policy concerning both post-Batista Cuba and the Soviet Union can equally be described as balancing. Khrushchev and Kennedy's efforts to balance against the threats perceived from the opposing side led the world to the brink of nuclear war (Lebow & Stein, 1994, p. 5). The problem here was that any action that the US or the Soviet Union took in order to increase its particular security was perceived by the other as a reinforcement of the threat and only caused countermeasures that were more rigorous. This made the security situation even more precarious for both sides.

Herz described a mutually reinforcing process as a security dilemma (Herz, 1950, p. 157). This dilemma is highly dependent on the perceived inte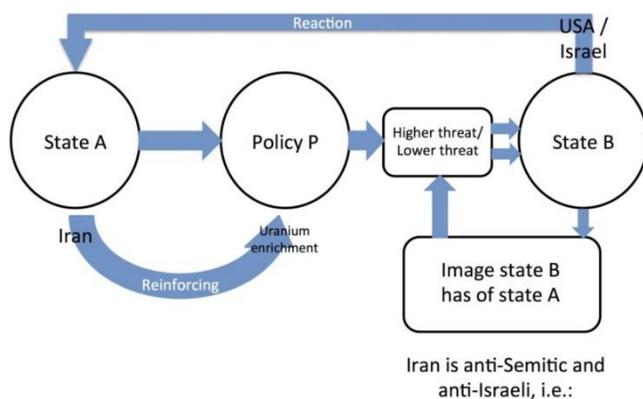ntions of the potential adversary. As Jervis states: "The decision maker who thinks that the other side is probably hostile will see ambiguous information as confirming this image, whereas the same information about a country thought to be friendly would be taken more benignly." (Robert Jervis, 1985, p. 18). In other words, the same information can lead to rather different assessments and evaluations. Self-perception and external perception may also fundamentally differ. As former US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles stated, "Khrushchev does not need to be convinced of our good intentions. He knows we are not aggressors and do not threaten the security of the Soviet Union" (quoted in R. Jervis, 1976, p. 68). Unfortunately, the opposite was true: Khrushchev felt threatened by the US, which led to his decision to station nuclear missiles in Cuba.

An explanation for this "perception problem" is offered by Richards J. Heuer, who describes perception as "an active rather than a passive process; it constructs rather than records 'reality'" (Heuer, 1999, p. 7). This process, in which people construct their own version of reality is "strongly influenced by their past experience, education, cultural values, and role requirements [...]" (Heuer, 1999, p. 7).

Figure 1 is a simple example to demonstrate the influence of experience and expectations on our perceptions. Looking at the three phrases, what did you read? In each of the phrases, the article is written twice. That is commonly overlooked because perception is influenced by our experience and our expectations about how these phrases are grammatically correctly written. This example demonstrates one of the most fundamental principles concerning perception: "We tend to perceive what we expect to perceive." (Heuer 1999, 8). And this means that threats are not given but socially constructed – against the background of the experiences states made. Because, as Alexander Wendt puts it: "[s]tates are people too" (Wendt 1999, 94). In the case of the perception of a threatening

Figure 2 (own graphic)

Iran there is a whole bunch of experience with negative connotations made both by the US and Israel. Here we see Jervis' observation from his Perception and Misperception in International Politics confirmed: "So we find that decision-makers […] worry about the most implausible threats." (R. Jervis, 1976, p. 62) With respect to policy against a perceived threat, it is therefore irrelevant whether the state (or alliance) under suspicion really plans to attack the US (as the Kennedy administration wrongly perceived during the Cuban Missile Crisis) or merely wants to satisfy a need for security.

The crisis over the Iranian nuclear program illustrates how this dynamic process can work in international politics (Bock & Henneberg, 2013, pp. 25–28). The key arguments are (see Figure 2): State A[6] (e.g., Iran) implements a policy P (buying clandestine uranium centrifuges). The way state B (in our case: the US and Israel) reacts depends largely (if not exclusively) on how the intentions underlying policy P are perceived i.e., the intentions that state A (here: Iran) is assumed to have. The perception of the intentions underlying policy P is strongly influenced (not to mention determined) by a preexisting image: Iran is aggressive, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israeli. The image of a state as aggressive and the perception of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: the image of Iran as being aggressive, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israeli influences the perception of policy P as being aggressive; the perception of policy P as being aggressive conversely fosters the image of Iran as being aggressive, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israeli. Balancing the perceived Iranian threat tends to backfire. Balancing aims to weaken Iran, but to weaken Iran means to threaten it. This entails convincing the leaders in Teheran that a nuclear-weapons program is a necessary means of deterrence and self-defense (Bock, 2012, 2013). This means: The image of a state (or a non-state actor such as Hezbollah) as aggressive and the perception of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: the image influences the perception, and the perception fosters the image. Consequently, the second hypothesis can be formulated as follows: *Balancing exacerbates the dynamic of the security dilemma and thereby reinforces the perceived threat of the balancing state(s).*

Outlook

Provided our hypotheses are valid, an alternative approach to reacting to threats is required. There is actually no established alternative to balancing in the repertoire of reactions to external threat. This clear lack of analysis inhibits an appropriate foreign policy strategy and affects the security and policy options of modern states.

As the Iranian example indicates, it is contestable how a threat can be overcome. Critical (self) reflection is required to realize a change in perspective, which helps to overcome the "perception problem". This entails reflection on the content (What makes Iran a threat?), the process (How becomes Iran a threat?), and the premise (Why is Iran a threat?). Here, we believe Jack Mezirow's (1978, 1991) Transformative Learning Theory comes into play, given that offers an explanation for the processes of how our reality is constructed in response to our frames of reference or meaning perspectives – as the structure of assumptions and expectations through which our impressions are filtered (1994; Mezirow, 1978, 1991). In this cyclic process, perspectives also result from how we interpret our experience, either within or outside our awareness.

To cope with threats we believe that it's necessary to understand the making of meaning as an open learning process, which means to transform our taken-for-granted perspectives, described by

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[6] You may also replace state for a non-state actor like Hezbollah. The argument remains the same. Here, I use state to illustrate the dynamic of the Iran nuclear crisis.

Mezirow: "Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action." (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76). This applies directly to the Iran crisis as there are a lot of not-transformed taken-for-granted frames of references – unreflective stereotypes about hostile Iranians with suicidal tendencies.

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