

Threat Perception and National Security

*Himanshu Shrivastav

Research Scholar, Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, S.P.M. Govt. Degree College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj

Abstract


This paper examines the concept of threat perception to analyzing the national security which occupies one of the key positions in realist paradigm of national security. Both classical and structural realists believe that threats are the result of power asymmetric. Any transformation of power balance would make some states less secure due to the anarchical tendency of the international system, where no hierarchically superior global guarantor of peace exists. The most fundamental work on the role of perception in international politics has been carried by Robert Jervis. He argues that the explanation of crucial decisions is impossible without considering the decision-maker belief about the world and the image of other.


Keywords: *threat perception, internal threat, external threats, national security, climate change, non-traditional security challenges, gut feeling*


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*Author's Correspondence

 Himanshu Shrivastav

 Research Scholar, Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, S.P.M. Govt. Degree College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj

 himanshu.srivastav07[at]gmail.com

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Introduction

The term threat has political and scientific dimensions. Security has been examined in terms of objective and subjective perspectives by we mean threats, challenges and perceptions. Each need further deeper analysis. The English term 'threat' refers to "a communication of a disagreeable alternative to an individual or group by one in authority or who pretends to be."¹ Webster's Dictionary defines 'threat as statement or expression of intention to hurt, destroy, punish, etc. in retaliation or intimidation", and "an indication of imminent danger, harm, evil etc.; as, the threat of war". The Compact Oxford English Dictionary define threat as: "(i) a stated intention to inflict injury, damage, or other hostile action on someone; (ii) a person or thing likely to cause damage or danger; (iii) the possibility of trouble or danger". Further explaining threat, the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary states "(i) a throng or crowd of people; a troop, a band. (ii) oppression, compulsion; torment; distress, misery; danger. (iii) An indication of the approach of something unwelcome or undesirable; a person or thing regarded as a likely cause of harm etc." In British and American Language, the term 'threat' has various meanings.

Concept of Threat Perception

The security perception uses 'threat as a 'political term'. It is difficult to give a 'scientific concept. It is defined in various many social science dictionaries. According to Robertson, 'threat has been analysed as "the reasons behind an opponent's armament programmes". On a worst-case basis", "Besides personnel and hardware totals" the enemy's military doctrine also play an important part.

It was during the cold war era, Buzan well pointed out about a dual nature of threat perception to state institutions by use of force (capabilities) and Focusing on ideology. It can conquer the territories or destroying the enemy and it's both external and internal dimensions. The Buzan states different elements of the state are open to different types of threats. The strong states are mainly concerned by external forces while weak states have to face challenges from within and outside. Thus, from a national security perspective, Buzan make a distinction between military threats, economic threats and ecological threats. Military threat means method, occupation of territory, invasion, change of sovereign rule and manipulation of policy. By Economic threats be mean indulgence in export, imposing import restrictions, price manipulations, control of currency so for the domestic stability. Ecological threats are generally used as damage besides taking note of physical base of the state. These threats, make the state insecure.

Threats are related to the state's vulnerable points. One factor is weapons development. So, for specific threats or concerned an international security strategy focuses on “the sources and causes of threats, the purpose being not to block or offset the threats, but by the political action it is eliminated.”²

We saw the disappearance of such kind of threat in Europe with the Disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990. Thus, the threat perception has been dramatically changed. During 1969–1975 and 1986–1989 as political rapprochement as concept lost its relevance. Since 1990, threat experts analysed the dangers to our planet earth because of destructive potentials to the environment and which had great global and societal consequences. Since 1990, it brought more violent internal conflicts. and has affected the scope of ongoing arms control agreements. But in other parts of the world like the Middle East, South Asia or the Korean Peninsula, the old concept is still hold good. Regular warfare became less relevant and one saw the asymmetric types of the warfare. The role of more militant non-state actors and the negative universal impact of uncontrolled commercial activities are responsible for such kind of 'structural terrorism'. Terrorism based on violence has “made the security dangers more complex and the security risks less calculable and predictable”.³

Threat Perception and Security

After the end of the cold war, Buzan and Hansen made valid points where the structural international security studies (ISS) has regarded the state as the main referent object. It included both internal and external threats. It was also affected by globalization and the use of force. During the cold war period a most of ISS have emphasised on the external threats of a state since it led to “ethnic and civil conflicts and hence domestic stability was disturbed.

After 1990 be also saw a change in the threat concept. It was seen as the basis for military planning and programmes. Today the security concept has become more dynamic and broader as compared to traditional military and diplomatic security. Hence the threat concept has also been involved a series of new emerging threats which not only concerns the 'state' activities but also to the other objects of new dimensions of security from human beings to global security.⁴

The early writers of environmental security have extended the nature and outlook of 'threats' military elements but extending to the environmental realm. Ullman has discussed security threat as “an action of events i.e. 1) threatens drastically and over a relatively short span of time to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state; 2) threatens significantly to narrow the range of policy choices available to the government of a state or to private non-governmental entities (persons, groups, corporations) within the state”.⁵

The Brundtland Commission has also suggested about two major threats that humankind is facing. “The first is that of nuclear exchange. The second is that of environmental destruction around the world”. In 1988 President Gorbachev emphasised: “The relationship between man and the environment has become menacing. The threat which is received from the sky is global warming not the missiles”. According to Brundtland the new “security

threats “may be caused social unrest caused by poverty and inequality, by environmental degradation and internal conflicts leading to new flows of refugees”.

Widened Concept of Security Threats

Various countries made a sharp reaction to white papers and national military documents regarding the major changes in the form of threats while also including the concept of extended security. It may include like soft security threats in the form of economic and environmental challenges, political and societal insecurity. It also pointed to a “multitude of risk factors of a different nature with widely varying regional manifestations”. The official German document stated “risk analysis of future developments must be based on a broad concept of security ... They must include social, economic and ecological trends and view them in relation to the security of nation and its allies.”⁶

The recent German Defence White Paper pointed out new risks and threats as forced by globalization and not ignoring the strategic framework conditions “global challenges, opportunities, risks and dangers.” The challenges are in the form such as globalization, militancy, proliferation of arms inter and intra, regional conflicts, illegal arms trade. These tendencies have affected the development, fragile transportation systems, natural resources, communication and migration.

Even in the United States, several works were carried on to lay down national security strategy papers during the Clinton administration. The focus was the major transformation in security threats. The former president of USA, George W. Bush, declared “to shift the basis of defence planning from a 'threat based model that has dominated thinking in the past to a 'capabilities-based model in the future focuses more on how an adversary might fight rather than specifically who the adversary might be or where a war might occur.”⁷ During first quarter of the Obama government has also referred to “Climate Change and Energy two fundamental challenges in shaping the future security environment”. It stated that:

“climate change could have significant geopolitical impacts around the world, contributing to poverty, environmental degradation, and further weakening of fragile governments. Climate change will contribute to food and water scarcity, (will increase the spread of disease, and may spur or exacerbate mass migration. While climate change alone does not cause conflict, it may act as an accelerant of instability or conflict, placing a burden to respond on civilian institutions and militaries around the world. In addition, extreme weather events may lead to increased demands for defence support to civil authorities for humanitarian assistance or disaster response both within the United States and overseas. DoD has undertaken environmental security cooperative initiatives with foreign militaries that represent a nonthreatening way of building trust, sharing best practices on installations management and operations, and developing response capacity”.⁸

Security Challenges

For challenge, the synonyms are “confrontation, defiance, interrogation, provocation, question, summons to contest, test, trial, and ultimatum”. In English dictionaries, challenge conveys different meanings “(i). something difficult ... that tests strength, skill, or ability; (ii). questioning rightness: a refusal to accept that something is right and legal; (iii). invitation to compete: a suggestion to someone that they should try to defeat you in a fight, game etc.; (iv). a demand to stop: a demand from someone such as a guard to stop and give proof who you are, and an explanation of what you are doing”; or: “a demanding task or situation”; as well as: “call to try one’s skill or strength; demand to respond or identify oneself; formal objection”; or: “a call to engage in a fight, argument or contest; a questioning of a statement or fact; a demanding or stimulating situation, career, etc.”⁹

The word ‘challenge’ has often been regarded both in regional and universal sense. It is often regarded synonymous with ‘threat’. In international politics, there can be ‘non-traditional’ security challenges as major

factors after 1991. They argue “that the public’s conception of the security environment has changed so much as we moved to the next century.

Today, we are facing challenges from environment. It is seen as ozone depletion. The impact of toxic chemicals is great on the world ecosystem. The rise in greenhouse emissions and their negative reinforcements is often related to natural and artificial environmental disasters. It includes: “global environmental, governance, water, urbanization, industry and sustainability, global food security, energy requirements for the next millennium, global governance of biological diversity, land degradation, and the atmosphere”.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, comprehensive list of security challenges indicates a basic shift from military threats to a wide spectrum range of manifold challenges. It covers various dimensions of a broadened security concept. Security challenges may, thus, be referred not so important and sometimes non-violent soft security problems, become important. For example, migration, human and drug trafficking are such threats. All these challenges harm the nation and then the nation tries to visualize what kind of threat perception will provide stability to the state.

The most fundamental work on the role of perception in international politics has been carried by Robert Jervis. He argues that the explanation of crucial decisions is impossible without considering the decision-maker belief about the world and the image of other. He claims that although perceptions are not only important variable that influences the behavior of countries, the actor will often respond identically having the same perceptions. Otherwise, it is quite easy to find the reasons of differences in the decision-making process.¹⁰

Conclusion

According to Raymond Cohen, threat perception is how the observer, the decision maker, anticipate the impending ill effect of military, strategic, and economic kinds.¹¹ His arguments are based to some extent on the fundamental work done by David Singer. David Singer said that threats are due to a situation of military hostility, in which decision maker anticipates other hostile designs will be carried out by physical and direct means. In this calculation the estimated gains to have upper hand over the estimated losses. The study of recent events, historical memory, and interrelated socio-cultural differences can be actually readily transformed into concrete hostility towards a particular external actor.¹² Cohen’s reservation is that Singer has overlooked the irrational aspect of threat perception. He states that “there is a crucial gap between a cold conclusion that a given opponent possesses a certain intent and the essentially subjective conviction, or the “gut feeling”.¹³ Moreover, there should be predispositions to perceive threats that which are derived from mistrust, past history, ongoing planning and personal anxiety.¹⁴

Cohen argument lies in this fact that familiarity is an important factor that enables reason to find the stimulus not to be absent in the particular circumstances which the actor finds himself. He will even observe of a rare stimulus if earlier events try to find its further appearance. Thus, the more familiar phenomenon as compared to others is the more will be easily recognized.¹⁵ There are certain factors that are important for the real perception of threat:

1. Historical and contemporary events indicate how perceiver of the threat and the source of the threats are interrelated.
2. Previous experience of threat includes psychological factors like anxiety and distrust, personal nature, and philosophical beliefs.
3. the relevant actors balance of capabilities in term of diplomatic role, military, social and economic means and allied assistance.
4. Even structural factors like role of bureaucracy, institutional interest and contingency planning are important.
5. The juridical framework in the form of various agreements, international law, and behavioural norms become important in examining the threat.
6. The policy and interest of the perceiver covers the area or issue in question.¹⁶

Threat perception has a direct connection. According to Cohen, it is directly related to the belief in the existence of tacit rules of the game that have to be kept by all states. Generally, they allow the boundaries of permissible behaviour without necessarily being restricted by international law. This could be further illustrated by the events occurred during the cold war. What was important than how the superpower perceive the world in terms of political, military and economic competition. The perception of these states was based on security threats and how to overcome it.

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