The Gap between Threat and Threat Perception in the Asia-Pacific

By Zhang Tuosheng

Against the backdrop of a rising China and the U.S. "rebalance," security frictions have been on the rise in the Asia Pacific over the last few years. An important reason for the current tensions is that countries deviate in threat perception. The gap between actual and perceived threat is usually the result of underestimation, overestimation, and/or misjudgment. Overestimation and misjudgment factor into China’s past perception of threats from the USSR, and in its current perception of threats from the United States and Japan. Inaccurate threat perceptions can have serious consequences on state-to-state relations by either aggravating differences and frictions and creating hidden dangers or by pointlessly causing tension and confrontation. The basic requirement for reducing the gap between actual threat and perceived threat is to have an objective and scientific method for making judgments. This should include a comprehensive assessment as well as qualitative and quantitative analyses, and an empathy that enables one to assess the other party’s behaviors and motivations.

The gap between actual and perceived threat is usually the result of underestimation, overestimation, and/or misjudgment. In today’s Asia Pacific — and in East Asia in particular — overestimation or misjudgment of threats are among the miscalculations most commonly seen. I see six reasons for this.

- The first is serious shortage of mutual trust between the countries concerned.
- The second is the lack of adequate accurate information and intelligence about the other parties, which is related to the low level of transparency.
- Third, some countries still have a Cold War mentality and prefer to over-state threats and prepare for worst scenarios in order to ensure their own security.
- Fourth, some countries also exaggerate threats in order to excuse armament expansion.
- Fifth, the lack of an effective crisis management mechanism leads to outbreak and escalation of crises, which fuel the sense of threat.

While security threats caused by different geopolitical interests exist objectively, the perception of threat is a subjective exercise, formed on the basis of a comprehensive assessment of the differences between self-interest and the capabilities, motives, and will of another. When threat perception is accurate, security policies tend to be both correct and feasible, and thus conducive to serving national security interests. On the other hand, when there is a gap between perceived threat and objective threat, the biased security policies that result harm national interests and external relations.
Countries tend to overestimate threats from big and/or strong countries, including those that are still emerging, as well as threats from countries that have historically caused them harm.

Overestimation and misjudgment factor into China’s past perception of threats from the USSR, and in its current perception of threats from the United States and Japan. These factors are also present in U.S., Japanese, and some Southeast Asian perceptions of the threat posed by China. In comparison, countries tend to underestimate the threats posed by weak, small, or friendly counterparts, such as China’s previous perceptions of threats from India and Vietnam or its current perception of the threat posed by North Korea’s (DPRK) development of nuclear weapons. Between states where there is hostility, it is common to overestimate the threat of the other — such as in the U.S.-DPRK, Republic of Korea-DPRK, and Japan-DPRK relationships.

Be it overestimation, underestimation or misjudgment of threats, inaccurate threat perceptions can have serious consequences on state-to-state relations by either aggravating differences and frictions and creating hidden dangers or by pointlessly causing tension and confrontation.

The basic requirement for reducing the gap between actual threat and perceived threat is to have an objective and scientific method for making judgments. This should include a comprehensive assessment as well as qualitative and quantitative analyses, and an empathy that enables one to assess the other party’s behaviors and motivations. Countries should make efforts in the following five ways.

- First, they must try their best to acquire comprehensive and accurate intelligence and information.
- Second, they should formally and informally conduct, maintain, and strengthen security dialogues, contacts, and exchanges, including between their militaries and at track 1 (official dialogue), track 1.5 (government officials and non-officials), and track 2 (non-officials and academics), in order to improve their knowledge and understanding of one another. This is a job that has been done better when it comes to the China-U.S. and China-ASEAN relationships. There is still a lot of room for improvement between China and Japan.
- Third, efforts should be made to progressively strengthen confidence-building measures, strategic reassurances, and mutual trust. Confidence-building measures (CBMs) between China and India since the 1990s have played an important role in relaxing territorial disputes. However, in the face of maritime disputes, strong CBMs are still not present between China and Japan or China and Southeast Asian countries concerned. The recent incident between Japan and China, where Japan disrupted Chinese military exercises in the East China Sea, highlights how essential confidence-building measures between the two countries are. If China and the United States are to succeed in creating a new model for relations between major countries, while strengthening CBMs in the area of traditional security and global commons, the two sides should start advancing strategic reassurances at an early date.
- Fourth, an effective crisis management mechanism must be established in order to avoid the escalation of differences into crisis. Between countries with significant differences and disputes, the lack of a fairly strong crisis management capability increases the chances of a worst scenario with one or both sides resorting to force in order to solve their problem. Such a situation must be fundamentally changed.

Since the end of the Cold War, China and the United States have gone through multiple crises. Although progress has not been satisfactory, improvement has been made in crisis management dialogues and the establish-
ment crisis management mechanisms. During a meeting with President Obama, President Xi Jinping put forward a four-point proposal concerning a new model for relations between major countries. One point included the exploration of new methods to manage and control differences. Crisis management could be that method. China and Japan have not yet established a crisis management mechanism between them (the relevant agreement reached between the defense departments in the summer of 2012 has not yet been launched). This should be changed as soon as possible. In addition, crisis management mechanisms are also necessary between the DPRK and ROK, the DPRK and the United States, Japan and Russia, India and Pakistan, and the United States and Pakistan.

- Fifth, efforts should be made to expand shared interests and increase cooperation. This will allow the two sides to develop a more objective and accurate understanding of the other party. While this may be an indirect way to shape threat perception, it could reduce the sense of threat by increasing confidence and trust in the other party.

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**About the Author**

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