

## The Political Psychology of ‘China Threat’: Perceptions and Emotions

Ulaş Başar Gezgin<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In this study we first briefly introduced political psychology of international relations, and moved to the notion of threat perceptions in political psychology which extends from national threats to group threats. Thirdly, we focused on the so-called ‘China threat’ which is mostly considered as a theory, a perception, a discourse or a thesis, but also as an issue, a theme, a hypothesis, a notion, a charge, a narrative, a debate, an image, a coverage, a topic, a school of thought, a public discourse, a story, a perspective, a proposition, a specter, a view, a syndrome, a school, a fear, a sentiment, an idea, a terminology, a rhetoric, a possibility, a mentality, and an atmosphere, in the order of frequency. We also see other scholars preferring to use ‘the so-called China threat’ as they don’t believe it. The notion of ‘China threat’ is mostly associated with China’s military build-up which is visible in South China / East Vietnam Sea territorial disputes. China is at odd with most of its neighbors due to its revisionist moves. Emotions play a role in all parties to the conflict including the Asian neighbors and U.S.. Chinese government, reminiscent of the past humiliations, wants to be respected; but China’s military moves are viewed with fear, mistrust and suspicion among other parties. National threat perceptions are updated accordingly. As a response to China’s rise, conservatives and Republicans support containment policies, while the liberal and Democrat response is engagement. This division is also related to the attitudes towards Chinese people and Chinese government. China has its own logic in its moves, but to what extent it is rational is to be disputed. The study concludes with further discussions about China’s rise, considering the possibility of peaceful rise or confrontation.

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1 Ulaş Başar Gezgin, Istanbul Galata University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, [ulas.gezgin@galata.edu.tr](mailto:ulas.gezgin@galata.edu.tr), ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6075-3501

## Introduction

Views on 'International Relations' from the perspective of political psychology are not new. Even in the past, such views were put to work in the Cold War era to maintain peace, or at least non-aggression. Nevertheless, we need to be careful: Not everything can be explained by psychology. Goldgeier and Tetlock (2001) rightly argue that the application of psychology to 'International Relations' is not necessarily reductionist. Instead, it is possible to discuss the issue by uncovering the hidden psychological assumptions of 'International Relations' theories and frameworks (Kertzer & Tingley, 2018). From a psychological point of view, as listed in Ripley (1993), the primary actors of 'International Relations' are foreign policy elites rather than states; these elites have their own interpretation of situations (Larson, 1988); 'International Relations', then, is a matter of problem solving; and information is the key to 'International Relations' (Ripley, 1993). On the other hand, Mercer (2005) correctly argues that psychology in 'International Relations' is not only about prejudices and errors, but also about making the right decisions.

According to Gildea (2020), the biggest problem in applying the political psychological understanding to 'International Relations' is the problem of aggregates, since psychology includes individuals and 'International Relations' includes the state and others (Stein, 2017). On the other hand, Gildea (2020) considers this to be a minor issue on a deeper analysis. Also, social psychology is more relevant because of its analysis of decision-making within the group. Another perspective would be to classify states psychologically, for example by personality traits.

A potential avenue for a psychological understanding of 'International Relations' goes to game theory; however, this theory has been criticized for not including the interpretations of competitors (Larson, 1988). Prospect theory is another candidate for applying psychological knowledge to 'International Relations' (see Berejikian, 2002; Boettcher III, 1995, 2004; Farnham, 1992; Levy, 1992a, 1992b, 1997; McDermott, 1992, 2004; Schaub Jr, 2004; Shafir, 1992; Vis, 2011); however, the risks, gains and losses in policy making are rarely measurable, unlike in laboratory settings (Gildea, 2020). In this context, there is a practical dilemma: While political psychology-inspired empirical research is increasing in 'International Relations' (see Hyde, 2015; Mintz, Yang, & McDermott, 2011), their validity in real life is a big problem. In a study, different results can be obtained depending on whether the research is conducted before and after events such as September 11 (see Bourne Jr, Healy, & Beer, 2003). It is also debatable to what extent

experiments with average people, and students in particular, can be applied to the elite in foreign policy decision-making positions.

Recently, there has been a movement from cold cognition to hot cognition and emotions in 'International Relations' and political psychology (Erişen, 2013a, 2013b; Kertzer & Tingley, 2018). Emotions emerge as a new set of variables that need to be investigated in the political psychology of the field of 'International Relations' (Erişen, 2012; Gries, 2005). In this context, Rathbun (2009) defines fear as a generalized lack of trust under social uncertainty; this means a lack of information that includes the intentions of others in the context of 'International Relations'.

As a result, many clues await to look at 'International Relations' from the perspective of political psychology. More research needs to be done, and a blend of scientific knowledge and current politics is needed.

### **The Political Psychology of Threat Perceptions**

The concept of threat perception is one of the concepts that connects political psychology and 'International Relations' (Stein, 2013; 1988). In the example of the Iraq War, it can be said that the White House exaggerated the threat posed by the Saddam regime, while Saddam underestimated the American threat (Stein, 2013). Both autocratic and democratic states often exaggerate external threats, as they serve political functions such as building unity (Larson, 1997) or making people forget the real problems of society. Enemies are dehumanized in a political psychological sense, they are not considered human (Herrmann, 2013). Military overconfidence is also a common mistake in foreign policy decision-making (Levy, 2013). Wars are expected to be short-lived, but this rarely happens. The White House had thought that in the invasion of Iraq, the Iraqi people would embrace the American soldiers as the bringers of democracy. This is an example of military optimism...

The perception of threat is actually a situation that makes it difficult to distinguish the real from the unreal in many respects. Politicians may deliberately scratch the threat. The Iran-Iraq War can be given as an example from both sides. On the other hand, sometimes politicians mistakenly exaggerate or underestimate the threat. The basis of some regimes is the perception of threat. The first to come to mind would be North Korea and Cuba. In these countries, the perception of threat is justified.

Traditionally, national threat perceptions are salient in threat perceptions literature (see Blank, 2008; Chourchoulis, 2012; Darwich, 2016; Farnham, 2003; Fordham, 1998; Gries et al., 2009; Jung, 2010; Kimmelmeier,

& Winter, 2000; Minkina, 2011; Ridout, Grosse, & Appleton, 2008; Sinkkonen, & Elovainio, 2020; Tamaki, 2012; Vinayaraj, 2009; Zhu, 2002). Threat of nuclear war had been added to this during the Cold War (see Lebovic, 2009; Mayton II, 1986; Schatz, & Fiske, 1992). However, recently, for many societies, threat perceptions moved from the Cold War mentality towards terrorism (Goodwin, Willson, & Stanley Jr, 2005; Leventhal, & Chellaney, 1988; Malhotra & Popp, 2012; Nissen et al., 2015; Pelletier, & Drozda-Senkowska, 2016; Stevens et al., 2011), foreigners (Watts, 1996), minorities (Canetti-Nisim, Ariely, & Halperin, 2008; Tahir, Kunst, & Sam, 2019; Verkuyten, 2009), refugees (Thomsen, & Rafiqi, 2020), immigrants and/or immigration (Araújo et al., 2019; Badea, Bender, & Korda, 2020; Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikian, & Lahav, 2015; Bianco, Kosic, & Pierro, 2022; Blinder, & Lundgren, 2019; Canetti et al., 2016; Erisen, & Kentmen-Cin, 2017; Escandell, & Ceobanu, 2009; Ha & Jang, 2015; Kiehne, & Cadenas, 2021; Kustov, 2019; Larsen et al., 2009; McLaren, 2003; Paxton & Mughan, 2006; Pereira, Vala, & Costa-Lopes, 2010; Thomsen, & Rafiqi, 2020; Vala, Pereira, & Ramos, 2006; Woods, & Marciniak, 2017), climate change (Carmi & Kimhi, 2015; Davydova et al., 2018; Schwaller et al., 2020), disasters (Bodas et al., 2019; Losee, Smith, & Webster, 2021; Tønnessen, Mårdberg, & Weisæth, 2002) and more recently disease (Covid 19) (Adam-Troian, & Bagci, 2021; Bonetto et al., 2021; Calvillo et al., 2020; Clarke, Klas, & Dyos, 2021; Maftai, & Holman, 2021; Paredes et al., 2021).

Threat perception increases Right Wing Authoritarian (RWA) attitudes and support for authoritarian systems with a vicious cycle from the other direction (Russo, Roccatò, & Merlone, 2020). Political conservatism and racial prejudice predict the threat perceptions (Vala, Pereira, & Ramos, 2006). RWA is associated with negative views of asylum seekers (Onraet et al., 2021), while contact with the immigrants reduces threat perceptions (McLaren, 2003). On the other hand, terror threat perception moves the public opinion towards hawkish foreign policy (Gadarian, 2010), restriction of civil liberties (Sekerdej, & Kossowska, 2011), and even in favor of torture (Conrad et al., 2018). Additionally, higher education level is found to be associated with less support for hawkish policies (Kim, 2015). Against terror threat, partisan divisions are overcome (Malhotra & Popp, 2012). Threat perception and political conservatism are correlated, although definitions broadly matter (Crawford, 2017). People under terrorism threat vote more for right wing parties (Getmansky, & Zeitzoff, 2014). Threat perception is also related with prejudice levels (Sari, 2007).

In the international relations literature, a number of works can be mentioned as examples of interstate threat perceptions (e.g. Almomani,

2019; Balakrishnan, & Varkkey, 2017; Ballard, 2008; Behera, 2021; Fathir, Johan, & Ab Raman, 2018; Gause III, 2003; He, 2012; Katagiri, 2018; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2018; Liao, & Whiting, 1973; Matonytė, & Morkevičius, 2009; Peleo, 2015; Russo, 2016; Sasaki, 2010; Seongji, 2009; Staniland, Mir, & Lalwani, 2018; Viraphol, 1985; Yuan, 1998). The notion of ‘Russian threat’ is a popular subject in the relevant literature (see Thornton, & Karagiannis, 2016). After Ukraine’s invasion, this notion is no longer believed to be a myth (Gezgin, 2022). It appears as a realistic threat in a number of country’s policy considerations (for instance, Lithuania (Nevinskaitė, 2017)) as well as NATO’s (Kendall-Taylor, & Edmonds, 2019). On the other hand, Russia feels threatened by America’s new weapons (Bartles, 2017). Fears and anxieties are bidirectional (Gezgin, 2022). American view of Russia drastically changed after Ukraine invasion in 2014 (Ambrosio, 2017). The United States started to consider Russia as a threat and as a future violator of international norms (Ambrosio, 2017). As early as 1997, Alexandrova (1997) asks “The Russian Threat—Real or Imaginary?” As of 2022, the answer is clear. On the other hand, according to Simons (2019), ‘Russia threat’ is just a narrative seen in Western media, and Russia, in these portrayals is scapegoated. Obviously, there are different sides to the conflict with their own particular views. Tsygankov (2013) reminds us that NATO-Russia mistrust is grounded in the Cold War, so it is hard to fix it.

China’s rise mostly fueled fear and anxiety among world powers and neighboring states. Shiffrinson (2018), for instance, asks “Should the United States fear China’s rise?” Likewise, Zhou (2008) asks “Does China’s rise threaten the United States?” Abe (2003) asks “Is “China Fear” Warranted?” Jiang (2002) asks: “Will China be a “Threat” to Its Neighbors and the World in the Twenty First Century?” Other notable questions in this context are “Will China’s rise be peaceful?” (Toje, 2017), “Will China’s rise lead to war?” (Glaser, 2011), and “Can China’s Rise Continue without Conflict?” (van der Pijl, 2017).

Khoo (2011) notes that key actors in Northeast Asia respond to China’s rise with fear. Chubb, & McAllister (2021), Jain & McCarthy (2016) and Zhixin (2018) argue that Australia views China’s rise with fear and anxiety. Pan (2014) is among those noting anxieties of Indo-Pacific Alliance powers vis-à-vis China’s rise. Zhang Y. (2013) even calls those emotions as ‘China anxiety’. On the other hand, China is also anxious of U.S. military power (Riqiang, 2013).

Pillsbury (2012) lists 16 basic fears of China which are:

“Fear of an island blockade

- Fear of a loss of maritime resources
- Fear of the choking-off of sea lines of communication
- Fear of a land invasion or territorial dismemberment
- Fear of an armoured or airborne attack
- Fear of internal instability, riots, civil war or terrorism
- Fear of attacks on pipelines
- Fear of aircraft-carrier strikes
- Fear of major air-strikes
- Fear of Taiwanese independence
- Fear of insufficient forces to 'liberate' Taiwan
- Fear of attacks on strategic missile forces by commandos, jamming or precision strikes
- Fear of escalation and loss of control
- Fear of cyber attack
- Fear of attacks on anti-satellite capabilities
- Fear of regional neighbours India, Japan, Vietnam and Russia" (pp.152-160).

### **The Political Psychology of 'China Threat'**

Now is the time to ask the key questions of the paper: Is China a threat? To whom? Objectively or subjectively? Psychologically or economically? What are the emotions and perceptions involved in viewing China as a threat? These questions await comprehensive answers.

Before all, what is China threat? Goodman (2017) briefly defines 'China threat' as "the fear of being taken over by China and the Chinese" (p.2). For researchers, 'China threat' is

a theory (Arif, 2021; Aukia, 2017; Broomfield, 2003; Chansoria, 2011; Christensen, 2006; Ding & Huang, 2011; Hsu, 2009; Jain, 2019; Kim, 2016; Kristensen, 2014; Lai, 2021; Larson, 2015; Larson, & Shevchenko, 2010; Lee, 2016, 2010; Liao, 2012; Liff & Ikenberry, 2014; Liu, 2020; Lu, 2011; Okuda, 2016; Oren, 2019; Saalman, 2011a, 2011b; Sun, 2015; Turner, 2013; Wang, 2010; Wang & Shoemaker, 2011; Wei-cheng, 2015; Yang & Liu, 2012; Yerima, 2020; Zhang, 2015, 2013, 2013 October),

a perception (Ambrosio, Schram, & Heopfner, 2020; Chengqiu, 2020; Ding & Huang, 2011; Fitriani, 2018; Gao, 2021; Ikegami, 2009; Jung & Jeong, 2016; Larson, 2015; Liao, 2012; Liff & Ikenberry, 2014; Machida, 2010; Mirilovic & Kim, 2016; Okuda, 2016; Peng, 2009; Saalman, 2011; Sun, 2015; Wang, 2021; Wei-cheng, 2015; Zaffran & Erwes, 2015),

an argument (Chu, 1994; Foot, 2009; Liao, 2012; Machida, 2010; Tsai & Liu, 2019; Yang & Liu, 2012; Zhu & Lu, 2013),

a discourse (Gao, 2021; Goh, 2005; Gries, 2006; Gries, Crowson, & Sandel, 2010; Johnson, 2018; Kim, 2021; Pintado Lobato, 2015),

a thesis (Kim, 2016; Ling, 2013; Machida, 2010; Pintado Lobato, 2015; Zhai, 2019),

an issue (Broomfield, 2003; Oren, 2019; Yeoh, 2019),

a theme (Lee, 2010; Song, 2015),

a hypothesis (Kim, 2016, 2021),

a notion (Jerden, 2014; Liao, 2012),

a charge (Liao, 2019; Shih, 2005),

a narrative (Ambrosio, Schram, & Heopfner, 2020; Oren, 2019)

a debate (Yeoh, 2019; Zhang, 2001),

an image (Szilágyi, 2015; Xiang, 2013),

a coverage (Aukia, 2017; Yang & Liu, 2012)

a topic (Song, 2015),

a school of thought (Broomfield, 2003),

a public discourse (Goodman, 2017),

a story (Goodman, 2017),

a perspective (Machida, 2010),

a proposition (Machida, 2010),

a specter (Zaffran & Erwes, 2015),

a view (Okuda, 2016),

a syndrome (Liao, 2012),

a school (Foot, 2001),

a fear (Lee, 2010),

a sentiment (Lu, 2011),  
 an idea (Foot, 2009),  
 a terminology (Oren & Brummer, 2020),  
 a rhetoric (Pintado Lobato, 2015),  
 a possibility (Brittingham, 2007)  
 a mentality (Goh, 2005), and  
 an atmosphere (Tsai & Liu, 2019).

Thus, China threat is mostly considered as a theory, perception, argument, discourse and thesis which are mostly subjective and psychological characterizations. Other than these, some other researchers such as Abe (1996), Baginda (2021), Bhattacharya (2007), Chen (2021, 2012), Cheng, & Zhang (1999), Chunlai (2002), Das (2013a, 2013b), Gross (2007), Guang (2008), Ikenberry, Parmar, & Stokes (2018), Jung-seung (2012), Kim (2009, 1998), Korolev (2019), Kwan (2003), Lai To (1997), Lam (2005), Lee (2008), Lee, & Haupt (2020), Li (2013), Liu (2016), Machida (2010), Marton, & Matura (2011), McDewitt (2014), Miranda (2017), Nagy (2017), Ondriaš (2018), Qingguo (1996), Rawnsley (2012), Richardson (2010), Sato (1998), Schneider, 2014; Scobell (2009), Shambaugh (1996), Shee (2004), Shichor (1996), Shih (2011), Shih & Huang (2015), Sismanidis (1994), Song (2015), Sukma (1994), Tan (2011), Tarrósy (2017), Tungkeunkunt & Phuphakdi (2018), Turner (2013, 2009), Vuori (2018), Wang (2012, 2011, 2008, 2005, 2000), Wang, & French (2013), Wang, & Rosenau (2009), Yang (2004), Yee & Storey (2013), Yeophantong, & Shih (2021), Yuan (2001), Yuliantoro (2017), Yunling (2016), Zhao (2020), Zhou (2009) don't believe in truth of the statement, thus they say 'the so-called China threat'.

The rise of China is considered to be "a threat to the national interests of the United States and Asian-Pacific security" (Broomfield, 2003, p.265). U.S. media is the carrier of the 'China threat' perceptions as reflected in changes in coverage of China-related news (Yang & Liu, 2012). Zhang (2015) finds that American students do not have negative stereotypes about Chinese, but nevertheless consider 'China threat' as serious. Okuda (2016) discovers that English print media makes the audiences anxious about China's rise and America's decline. Lai (2021) analyzes U.S. media coverage on China and views U.S. media as ethnocentric in this context. However, this study can be considered as incomplete without a comparative study with Chinese media's coverage of U.S. Wang & Shoemaker (2011), in this



context, suggests that more cultural, social, human interest news should be placed in American media about China, instead of political news only, to promote a better understanding of China and a more favorable attitude toward China.

Goodman (2017) proposes that ‘China threat’ perceptions are rooted in early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Australia, but does not make any sense as the two countries are important economic partners. On the other hand, China’s military rise leads to unfavorable attitudes among its neighbors (Jung & Jeong, 2016). Military modernization is at odds with the claims of peaceful rise (Chansoria, 2011). China’s military build-up is viewed as an excuse for more military spending in U.S., Japan and Australia (Zaffran & Erwes, 2015). This leads to a form of escalation very much reminiscent of the Cold War era. China points out that American military involvement around China increased (Liu, 2020). From Chinese side, U.S. appears to act arrogantly, not respecting China (Liu, 2020; Zhang, 2013). For China, the Cold War mentality continues in American foreign policy thinking (Liu, 2020). China claims that U.S. wishes for the collapse of Chinese Communist Party through a color revolution (Liu, 2020).

Arif (2021) “shows how threat assessment could trigger a spiral of conflict through state’s tendency to overestimate threat level and its failure to perceive that defensive behavior can be interpreted as offensive by the belligerent” (p.120). Convergingly, Sun (2015) states that “If the US holds that China’s growing military power threatens US vital interests, it may adopt overly competitive military and foreign policies, which will in turn threaten China and overall bilateral security” (p.94). Nevertheless, Arif (2021) is optimistic: If the communication channels will be opened, misperceptions will be corrected and accordingly, no Sino-American confrontation would take place. Lai To (1997) note that lack of transparency in Chinese security considerations contributes to the conflict through anxieties. On the other hand, Zhang (2013) notes that “But the United States should avoid the conceit that a given mode of behavior can be wrong for every other country in the world but still right for the United States because of the purity of its motives” (p.508).

In this context, Chinese defensive position is more or less the following:

“China has increased its military strength steadily due to its booming economy. However, Chinese military modernization has been modest compared with other countries in the region and its rapidly growing economy. China focuses on economic development; it is not filling the

“power vacuum” because there is no such vacuum left in the Asia-Pacific region” (Chu, 1994, p.77).

Another defense is the following:

“Some people may claim that there is clear evidence of the real “China threat,” such as the ever-increasing Chinese military might, persistent nationalist indoctrination, global hunt for energy, and a market economy. (...) These same events can be represented in a significantly different ways. For example, China has strong reason to increase its national power, for national self-defense and unification and to pursue social and economic development” (Song, 2015, p.164).

Richardson (2010) warns that the so-called ‘China threat’ discussions do not serve American interests, converging with Kim (2016). One should consider looking ahead and try to influence Chinese policies. This can avoid worst outcomes such as open confrontation. In an empirical study, Gries & Crowson (2010) find that American conservatives, Republicans and older respondents feel a higher level of ‘China threat’ and more anti-China. Lowest educated respondents are found to be more negative about China (Gries & Crowson, 2010). Liberals support engagement with China, while conservatives are in favor of containment (Lee, 2016). The personality variable of openness to new experience is found to be negatively correlated with prejudice towards China and positively correlated with negative attitudes towards Chinese government (Gries, Crowson, & Sandel, 2010). Right wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) are also found to follow the same pattern (Gries, Crowson, & Sandel, 2010). Obviously, there is a distinction between Chinese people and Chinese government as attitude objects. Additionally, Crowson & Gries (2010) find that RWA and SDO are correlated with the idea of containment. Zhang (2013), on the other hand, argue that those in favor of containment overestimate military strength of China, and underestimate their own. With all its military bases in the region and fast-developing weapons technology, U.S. is much superior than China (Zhang, 2013).

Al-Rodhan (2007) states that “Proponents of the “China threat” theory argue that it is inconceivable for China to have a peaceful rise; a superpower China will inevitably be a threat to the United States” (p.41), and argues that such threat perceptions are exaggeration for various reasons. Jiang (2002) adds that “(...) in terms of China’s low per capita GDP, its comparatively low military budget, and the serious challenges in its domestic affairs, China’s national power has not been increased to such an extent that it will threaten the security of the region (...)” (p.55). Soeya (2002) argues that ‘China

threat' is a myth hiding other developments in the region. Ding (2000) thinks that China can't be a threat to U.S., as the former does not have strong domestic defense industries. For Powles (2010), China can't be a security threat as it focuses on economic development. Xu (2011) does not see China as an expansionist power; and Jalil (2019) views China as a status quo power, not a revisionist one.

Yuan & Fu (2020) analyze U.S. threat perceptions with regard to the Cold War USSR, wartime Japan, and current 'foe' China, and finds continuities in the way American threat perceptions are framed. Additionally, misperceptions lead to mistrust and further insecurity in Sino-American relations (Gries, 2009; Gries & Jing, 2019). Uncertainty about China's plans lead to negative views (Kim, 2019). Furthermore, fundamental attribution error is at play (cf. Beukel, 1992; Markedonov, & Suchkov, 2020; Reynolds, 2015): U.S. attributes China's military build-up to hostile intentions rather than circumstances (Moore, 2010). Same holds for Indonesian officials (Yeremia, 2020). China's military modernization makes U.S. and Taiwanese anxious (Arif, 2021; Ding, & Huang, 2011). In turn, China fears a possible declaration of Taiwanese independence (Lai To, 1997). However, Gries (2005) contends that "Like all peoples, Chinese are neither innately pacifist nor hardwired for conflict. Instead, history and culture shape how individual Chinese will construe the events of world politics" (p.257).

Past terms to characterize the public opinion was 'Yellow Peril' and 'Red Menace' (Chen, 2012), while a relatively new currency is 'Sinophobia' which is shortly defined as "discrimination against Chinese" (Gao, 2021, np). Sinophobia involves hatred which is another emotion that plays a role in international relations. The notion of 'China Threat' is considered to be just reframing of the past expressions (Chen, 2012).

Song (2015) reminds that 'China threat' can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For Broomfield (2003), Machida (2010), Zaffran & Erwes (2015), and Zhou (2011), it is an exaggeration. For Ling (2013), it is old colonialism. For Turner (2013), it is "contingent upon subjective interpretation" (p.21). Turner (2013) notes that "throughout history 'threats' from China towards the United States, rather than objectively verifiable phenomena, have always been social constructions of American design and thus more than calculations of material forces." (p.1)

Zhai (2018) conducts surveys with Asian youth in 7 societies (Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam) and finds that they are highly negative about China's rise with the exception of Thailand. Vietnamese, Japanese and Taiwanese youth hold most unfavorable

attitudes towards China (Zhai, 2018). It is predicted that such a public opinion will bring about more military spending among China's neighbors. Interestingly, listening to Chinese music is associated with more favorable attitudes, while no such relationship exists between watching Chinese drama and the attitudes. Zhai (2018) proposes that "China's foreign policymaking should take greater consideration of Asian public opinion rather than be dominated by wishful thinking" (p.1). Likewise, Chu, Kang, & Huang (2015) find that people from China's neighboring countries hold less positive views about China. In another study, Sonoda (2021) finds Vietnam to be the most negative, Singapore and Indonesia more positive, and Japan and South Korea were in-between.

China's rise makes the country more self-confident (Wang, & Cui, 2011). From a social psychological perspective, Lee (2016) argues that China's rise will be peaceful, unlike 'China threat' narratives. Also from a social psychological view, Gries (2005) proposes that Sino-American relations will not necessarily be competitive. Miller and Taylor (2016), Broomfield (2003), He (2017), Kim (2016), and Machida (2010) agree with this position noting the economic interdependence relations. Zhang (2013) converges with Lee (2016) and Miller and Taylor (2016) stating that Sino-American relations have been stable for the last three decades. In the same vein, Jerden (2014) think that assertive China narrative is flawed.

Of course, the perceptions are not unilateral. China feels threatened with America's rebalancing strategy in the region which makes U.S. a revisionist state from Chinese perspective (Arif, 2021). Abbasi, & Khalid (2021) argue that Chinese nuclear program is a direct response to threat posed by American nuclear arsenal. China has its own hardliners (hawks) and moderates (doves) (Zaffran & Erwes, 2015). Lee (2016) provides an emotional description of China's behavior:

"For China, as greatly sensitized it still is to the painful memories of the Century of Humiliation, the feeling of disrespect is likely to encourage a level of anger that negatively biases perceptions, reduces demand for information, and shortens decision times, consequently increasing both the degree and probability of risk prone and aggressive behavior on its part" (p.45).

In that sense, it appears that Chinese state behavior is more emotional and less rational than that of other great powers, comparable to Russia whose Ukraine invasion is viewed as irrational, but emotionally predictable considering the threat level, anxieties and fears (Gezgin, 2022). Lee (2016) adds that "At the same time, however, China is likely to resort to violence when others (especially the United States) show disrespect toward its sovereignty,

even if rational calculations would suggest otherwise” (p.45). China feels to be humiliated in the past (Kim, 2016) which color its judgements.

One point to be pessimistic about China’s rise is South China / East Vietnam Sea dispute (Kim, 2019, 2016). Another is observed in Sino-Indian border clashes (cf. Saalman, 2011). Thirdly, Sino-Japanese territorial dispute is to be noted (cf. Nakano, 2015). Contrary to Broomfield (2003)’s position, these all show that China is a revisionist power as to its borders, although internationally speaking military involvement plays a minor role in its economic investments in foreign countries. China stands as the new regional hegemon, if not a global one yet (Jain, 2019). On the other hand, South China / East Vietnam Sea dispute becomes an excuse for American presence in the region (Kim, 2016). In fact, considering NATO’s expansion, U.S. should also be considered as a revisionist power. Two revisionist powers are more than enough to cause conflict in Asia-Pacific.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we introduced political psychology of international relations in short, and presented the notion of threat perceptions in political psychology including national threats and group threats involving not only states, but also immigrants. Then, we moved to the so-called ‘China threat’ which is viewed from different lenses by various scholars. Through providing an overview, we showed how emotions are involved in interstate relations. Further research is needed to learn more about the Chinese position referring to sources in Chinese language.

How can China’s rise be peaceful? Ding, & Huang (2011), in the context of Taiwan-PCR relations, recommends “cooperation with the mainland in the field of non-traditional security, including combating transnational crime, terrorism, drug trafficking, pandemic disease, disaster relief, and humanitarian rescue” as “these areas are less politically sensitive” (p.50). Same can be said for other parties to the conflict.

For the future of China’s rise, emotions and perceptions will continue to influence the politics, as Chinese state is an emotional state doing everything in order not to return to the era of humiliation. Taiwan policy will be the key to other movements. Taiwan is also significant as it reminds China of the past weaknesses of the colonial times. South China / East Vietnam Sea will continue to boil, as China will continue to militarize the islands. On the other hand, we will hear more about China not due to military build-up but Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (see Gezgin, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, in pressa, inpressb, inpressc, inpressd). BRI has the potential to convince

all powers that China's rise will be peaceful. Although securitization of some of the projects such as China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is problematic, overall Chinese influence will be more visible in infrastructure projects. Especially CPEC will make a big difference, as China's South China /East Vietnam Sea route-dependence will no longer be applicable (Gezgin in pressa).

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which is an ambitious set of international infrastructure projects may shift Chinese activity away from China's South China /East Vietnam Sea, as the state will be busy in other regions of Asia and the world. Contrary to this expectation, BRI can exacerbate the current conflict at South China /East Vietnam Sea, as the Maritime Silk Road passes through this territory. We will see which expectation will come true.

To sum up, China is expected to be known with international infrastructural projects rather than military confrontations if U.S. would not wage war against China. For China, all out confrontation will be detrimental to economic interests, but as an emotional state, this risk can be taken to avoid humiliation as previously explained.

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