

ABSTRACT

Deconstructing the “China Threat”: An Inquiry into Changing Perceptions in India and Japan

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This research has tried to answer a basic research question: When, how, and why did India and Japan perceive China as a traditional security threat? Based on the literature on threats and perceptions, three variables have been identified that can explain change: (a) military capabilities (material), (b) escalatory foreign policy acts (behavioral), and (c) identity othering (ideational). What this research has found is that escalatory foreign policy acts can best explain changing perceptions of threats. In the case of Japan, we can see significant discursive changes in 1996 (Taiwan Straits Crisis), 2005 (the Senkaku Islands conflict over oil and gas), and 2012 (the Senkaku Islands conflict over sovereignty) when it was perceived that China showed non-compromising, escalatory behavior. The main reason why “China threat” arguments in India are less common is because India feels it is able to manage the bilateral relation, partly through the confidence-building measures. Nonetheless, “China threat” arguments in India also peaked after incursions on the border (in particular in 2009 and 2013). The perceived unwillingness of Chinese leadership to de-escalate crisis situations significantly contributes to changing perceptions of threat. Changes in capabilities in turn create an “enabling environment” for changing perceptions of threat. It raises a certain level of wariness and attention (in particular in the defense and security communities) and creates a latent threat. Nonetheless, such changes in capabilities are often securitized in policy discourse only after perceived aggressive actions have taken place. Finally, identity-othering in official and non-official discourse have contributed in Japan to binary images and created anticipations of a “belligerent” China. When such expectations became a reality it reinforced such belief systems and contributed to a conformation bias. In India, officials mostly refrain from using identity-politics in their narratives on the bilateral relation with China.