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## **Japan's Evolving Threat Perception: Data from Diet Deliberations 1946 – 2017**

### **Abstract**

Scholars have recently commented on Japan's increasing threat perception, either in the context of an 'increasingly complex security environment', or in the context of its use by Japanese elites to advance their political goals. Yet while references to Japan's threat perception are ubiquitous, conceptual clarity and comprehensive empirical evidence is far less so. This paper seeks to address these gaps by conducting a longitudinal study of threat perception in postwar Japan. Data is driven from content analysis of debates in Japan's national parliament over a period of seven decades (1946-2017). The evolution of Japan's threat perception is analyzed and a revisionist account of Japan's threat perception is put forward. Thus, the study both serves as a metric of threat perception in postwar Japan and as a model for the study of threat perception in International Relations.

### **Introduction**

Understanding threat perception is a crucial element in the the study of international relations. As Janice Stein (2013) has noted, threat perception plays a central role in general theories of war, deterrence, alliance behavior, and conflict-resolution. And as Raymond Cohen (1979) has demonstrated, threat perception is *the* decisive intervening variable between action and reaction in international crisis. Yet while scholars have highlighted the importance of threat perception to international relations, to the best of my knowledge no accepted method to empirically measure threat perception has surfaced, and no systematic attempt to do so in an Asian-Pacific context has been made.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have recently commented on Japan's increasing threat perception, either in the context of an 'increasingly complex security environment' or in the context of its use by

Japanese elites to advance their political goals.<sup>ii</sup> How accurate is this assessment of Japan's threat perception, both from conceptual and empirical points of view? This paper tackles this question by conducting a longitudinal study of threat perception in postwar Japan. Data is driven from content analysis of debates in Japan's national parliament over a period of seven decades (1946-2017). The evolution of Japan's threat perception is analyzed and a revisionist account of Japan's threat perception is put forward.

Much of the confusion surrounding *Japan's threat perception* stems from poor conceptualization; three points in this context are in order. First, the terminology of '*Japan's threat perception*' is misleading. States do not perceive threats—people do. And so, whereas a majority of Japanese may agree that a certain country (e.g., North Korea) or an entity (e.g., terrorism) pose a security threat to Japanese interests at a certain point in time, this may often not be the case. Leaders, government officials, politicians, defense personnel, media pundits, and the public regularly *disagree* about the nature of security threats. Because different people may hold different judgments on the same issues, it becomes necessary to evaluate the distribution of individual judgments across a certain unit of analysis.

Second, even if people agree about the type of the threat (e.g. the Soviet Union), they often differ in terms of the perceived intensity of the threat (and in their preferences about how to mitigate it). A certain entity may be perceived as 'existentially' threatening to one person and only mildly so to another. Rather than a binary construct, then, threat perception is better conceptualized on a scale.

Third, and in-line with the previous points, any analysis of threat perception is ought to strive for measuring both the distribution and intensity of threat-judgements as they were held by a specific population in a specific time-period. For the purpose of this study and drawing on

Stein (2013), I use the following definition for ‘threat perception’: *the collective and on-going process by which subjective judgements about security threats are communicated among domestic audiences*. Threat perception is thus conceptualized as an intersubjective procedure (rather than subjective assessment of threat or an objective reality); a constant process in which personal judgements about security threats are communicated, debated, and contested by domestic actors.

Drawing on this understanding of the concept, this study examined Japan’s threat perception empirically; it confirms that Japan’s threat perception has undergone dramatic changes over the last seven decades, further suggesting that these changes be illustrated along three axes (Diagram 1). Axis I pertains to the way in which the *nature of the debate* about security threat has evolved: whether political actors referred to security threats with *abstract* or *concrete* language. Axis II entails the degree of *sensitivity* to framing foreign countries as threats, i.e., whether political actors were inclined to use the terminology of ‘threat’ to securitize foreign countries as military threats or avoided from doing so. Finally, Axis III involves the extent to which dominant narratives of threats were shared *across* the political spectrum. As I demonstrate below, the empirical investigation of Japan’s threat perception reveals that over the last seven decades, Japan’s threat perception has become more concrete, less sensitized to utterances of foreign threat, and increasingly homogenous.

**Diagram 1** : Axes of Change in Japan’s Threat Perception

The rest of the paper proceeds in four sections. The first section surveys previous studies that tackle the issue of threat perception in Japan; the second section introduces the rationale and method used to measure Japan’s threat perception; the third section introduces the major findings, and the fourth section discusses the implications of these findings. Finally, the

conclusion part links back to the literature and outlines several potential follow-up studies.

### **1. Japan's Threat Perception – Background**

Although there is a sizable literature on Japan's foreign and defense policies, empirical studies dedicated to Japan's threat perception are surprisingly rare. Rationalist scholars writing about Japanese security have tended to reduce Japan's threat perception to a unitary outcome: thus, Japan's threat perception was viewed as either a product of Japan's security environment, the strategic balance between the U.S./Japan and the Soviet Union, the oscillating U.S. commitment to defend Japan, or any mixture of these factors.<sup>iii</sup> However, rationalist accounts gloss over the fact that throughout most of the postwar period, judgements of security threats greatly differed among domestic actors. Recently, several studies have tackled the sub-state level of analysis, producing nuanced, although by no means comprehensive evaluations, of Japan's threat perception. I explore these studies below.

#### ***Previous findings***

Few scholars have examined Japanese threat perceptions empirically (Williamson, 2013; Hoest, 2016; Vosee et al., 2014). While these studies provide important evidence and approaches from which to draw, they are limited in either scope, depth, or both. The first study is Piers Williamson's book *Risk and Securitization in Japan (1945-1960)*, in which he does an excellent job in outlining how domestic actors in Japan held very different perceptions of threat during the early postwar period.<sup>iv</sup> Using documents as his main source of data, Williamson (Williamson, 2013) argues for example that progressive intellectuals rendered the scenario of nuclear war between the two superpowers to be graver than did the policy makers, "who were relatively sanguine about the Japanese state's involvement in a showdown between the US and USSR."

The result of this threat assessment, continues Williamson, was that, “whereas the policymakers pursued securitization based on the use of military force to prevent the risk of a war they viewed as improbable, the... [progressive intellectuals] pursued de-securitization through rejection of the use of military force to prevent the risk of a war they viewed as probable” (Williamson 2013, 186, 192). Interestingly, Williamson notes that during the early postwar period, both the left-leaning progressive intellectuals and the conservative policy-makers avoided framing foreign countries such as the Soviet Union or China as military threats (and as this paper will show, political actors in the early postwar period also avoided framing the United States, the occupying power until 1952, as a military threat).

The second study that addresses Japan’s threat perception was authored by Peter Van Der Hoest (Hoest, 2016), who examined the “China perception” of political elites in Japan and in India between 1996 and 2014. Using discourse analysis, Hoest explores the sources of threat perception, arguing that China’s ‘escalatory’ foreign policy *behavior* – rather than China’s military capability or a shared sense of identity – best determined changing perceptions of threats. Specifically, the Taiwan Straits Crisis (1996), the Senkaku Islands disagreement about oil and gas (2005), and later the Senkaku Islands conflict over sovereignty (2012), generated “significant discursive changes” among Japanese elites.

The third study that addresses threat perception in Japan is the volume *Governing Insecurity in Japan*, which was edited by Wilhelm Vosse, Reinhard Drifte and Verena Blechinger-Talcott. Since at least the mid 2000s, the authors (Vosse et al., 2014, 1) assert, a heightened security discourse in Japan has led to an increased threat perception.<sup>v</sup> Using cross-national surveys and opinion polls, Vosse finds that in the post-Cold-War period, the Japanese have been, “highly concerned about a large number of domestic and regional threats” (Vosse et

al., 2014, 5). Among these threats were the threat of Japan's involvement in a war, the threat of a military attack against Japan, major global wars, and the danger of weapons of mass destruction (Vosse et al., 2014, 16-20).

This paper is the first attempt to produce a comprehensive content analysis of 'Japan's threat perception' as articulated in the Diet between 1946 and 2017. Complementing Williamson's study, which addressed the concept of 'risk', this paper zooms in on the concept of 'threat' (*kyōi*) in the context of military security issues.<sup>vi</sup> Augmenting Hoest's study, this paper extends the period of analysis and covers security issues in addition to the China threat narrative, such as those concerns that originated from other countries (the Soviet Union and North Korea) as well as those concerns that originated from threatening scenarios (e.g., nuclear war, cyber-attack). Finally, revisiting Vosse's findings, this paper examines threat perception as held by political representatives and other influential figures who were summoned to discuss the matter before the Diet. The extended time frame enables an evaluation of any long-term patterns present in Japan's national conversation about security threats, and the examination of Diet deliberations in particular provides a snapshot of the dominant threat-judgements as put forward by all the major political actors in the postwar period.

## **2. How to Analyze Japan's Threat Perception?**

The collective process by which subjective judgements about security threats are shared and communicated among audiences may be analyzed by using various combinations of data sources and research methods. In this study, I choose to operationalize and measure Japan's threat perception by combining three complementary indicators: the *frequency* with which various military-security issues were debated in both houses of the national parliament, the *affiliation* of

the speakers, and their *underlying security argument*.<sup>vii</sup> Japan's threat perception is thus examined through the lens of spoken language, with a particular emphasis on the term 'threat' (*kyōi*). To analyze the data, I employ the method of Content Analysis.

Defined as, "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts...to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2018), content analysis is an ideal method for studying threat perception in open, democratic societies. This is so because it enables the researcher to measure the dimensions of the content of a certain political message such as the security-related argument and to draw inferences about threat perception from the content. In this study, following the well-established procedure set by agenda-setting studies (McCombs, 2004), I identify a range of issues related to military-security and then count the number of times these issues have occurred in the sample, which consists of text retrieved from Diet deliberations between 1946 and 2017. Following Benoit (Benoit 2010), the categories I use for the content analysis are altogether exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and relevant to Japan's threat perception.<sup>viii</sup> Specifically, the paper organizes the categories into three types: external agents and actors (communism, Soviet Union), dangerous scenarios (nuclear war, Soviet/Chinese attack, cyber warfare), and names of general and concrete weapon-systems (missiles, SS-20). By focusing on both tangible and non-tangible entities, the study constructed an exhaustive list of categories; to maintain clarity of presentation, however, several categories were removed and the final list consists of 22 categories (Table 1, all tables and figures are in the online appendix).<sup>ix</sup>

The research-design mostly follows a *manifest* content-analysis, examining threat perception 'on the surface' by tabulating the frequency of references to certain security issues and by identifying the affiliation of those who uttered the references. To enrich the analysis, I complement the manifest procedure with what is normally considered a component of the *latent*

content analysis: an attempt to determine the underlying security argument of the speaker – whether political actors sought to *inflate* or *deflate* a certain threat. To be clear, the inflation of threat occurs when actors emphasize the danger associated with a certain issue (for example, the Soviet Union), and the deflation of a threat occurs when actors de-emphasize the dangers associated with it. <sup>x</sup>

The following analysis is divided into three distinctive periods: early postwar period (1946-1976), late postwar period (1977-2007), and the last decade (2008-2017). I chose this temporal demarcation because it facilitates a comparison between the two earlier periods (each of which extends over 30 years), and because it enables us to zoom in on recent developments in Japan's threat perception (that is, over the last decade).<sup>xi</sup>

The rationale behind this choice of data source and method – Japan's national parliament and content analysis of military-security issues – is three-fold. First, Diet deliberations are an excellent data-source because every word that was ever uttered in either house of parliament is available online; a search engine further enables one to locate the speaker and the committee in which a certain utterance was made, and to read the full text of the deliberation (<http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/>).

Second, as the main stage of political communication in postwar Japan, Diet deliberations are expected to reflect the full range of Japanese threat perceptions with high degree of accuracy. Since perceptions of military threats do not simply 'emerge' into the world, they accordingly require some source: a securitizing actor. Once a securitization move of a specific issue has been made by a securitizing actor ('country X is a grave threat to our security', or 'a nuclear war is the most extreme threat facing our country'), other actors may challenge this claim by debunking it (in what amounts to a 'de-securitization' move).<sup>xiii</sup> It is therefore through spoken language that

competing views of security threats are advanced in the political discourse.<sup>xiii</sup> Whereas domestic actors debating security threats may use various forms of communication to persuade audiences (such as written statements or visual material), and whereas domestic actors may opt to make their (de)securitization moves in different venues altogether (e.g., mass demonstrations outside of the national parliament or opinion-columns in the national press), it is likely that any substantial securitization move would, sooner or later, be debated by politicians at the Diet. Indeed, as Wæver suggested, analyses of parliamentary debates in democracies enable us to identify the dominant discursive representations of a certain issue, and the differences between these representations (Wæver, 1999).<sup>xiv</sup> In recent years, a growing number of scholars have used the National Diet Minutes Retrieval System to analyze discursive representations of salient issues in the Japanese parliament, including the Sino-Japanese bilateral relationship (Hagström & Jerdén, 2010), Japan's maritime intervention in the Gulf of Aden (Black 2012), and Japan's national identity (Hagström & Hanssen, 2016). By applying discourse analysis to a sample of text containing selected key words, these studies uncovered the meanings attributed to representations of these issues in specific periods of time.

Third, a content analysis of military-security issues as they appeared in Diet deliberations is crucial in construing how Japan's threat perception has evolved throughout the *entire* postwar era. This is because for the period before 1970 (the year when the annual Defense of Japan was first published by the Japan Defense Agency), few authoritative indicators are available in order to reconstruct Japan's threat perception.<sup>xv</sup> The considerable advantage of examining data from the Japanese Diet is therefore the availability of the data since 1947.

Three additional comments about the design of the study are warranted. One, throughout the postwar period, Japanese politicians have referred to matters of security by using various

terms, such as ‘concern’ (*kenen*), ‘anxiety’ (*fuan*), or ‘attention/interest’ (*kanshin*). Whereas all of these expressions convey varying degrees of danger, the strongest sense of danger is arguably reflected by the term ‘threat’. In order to delineate those instances in-which the strongest judgement of danger was invoked, and echoing the Securitization theorists’ call to maintain a criteria, “by which to avoid a slippery slope of everything is security” (Buzan et al., 1998, 71), I chose to focus on utterances of ‘threat’. Two, to ensure that the results of the content analysis were not skewed by the wavering popularity of the term ‘threat’ in everyday use of language, I tallied the references to the word ‘threat’ in Diet deliberations throughout the postwar period. As Figure 1 shows whereas the number of annual references to ‘threat’ has oscillated between 60 and 240 throughout the postwar period, the use of term ‘threat’ by domestic actors has been fairly consistent. As a result, any significant change in the number of references to a specific issue (for example, the ‘Soviet threat’) could not be simply attributed to oscillating popularity of the term in everyday language, in what lends this study-design a strong internal validity.<sup>xvi</sup> Three, as this study mostly operates a manifest content analysis procedure, it did not apply a measure of inter-coder reliability. In places where I strayed from the manifest content analysis into latent content analysis – specifically, where I offered an interpretation of political messages (see the inflate/deflate discussion above), I have provided a direct link to the specific debate in which a security-argument was made; thus, anyone with knowledge of the Japanese language and the political context of postwar Japan can verify my interpretation.

Below, I summarize the main findings of the analysis.

### **3. Results**

#### ***Early postwar period (1946-1976)***

What security issues dominated the Diet in the early postwar period? Who spoke security and what was the underlying rationale? The content analysis of references to security issues in the first three decades of the postwar period yields several findings. For the sake of clarity, I present these findings along the three axes outlined above.

*Axis I: Level of concreteness in the debate about Japan's threat perception*

Early postwar Japanese were mostly occupied with the following three security issues: (1) a 'direct aggression' (*chokusetsu shinryaku*) (2) an 'indirect aggression' (*kansetsu shinryaku*); and (3) a 'nuclear war' (*kakusensō*). Especially significant was the relatively high number of references to 'direct' and 'indirect' aggression in 1953-1954. Figure 2 summarizes the number of references to security issues made during this period *by year*. As can be seen, both the terms 'direct aggression' and 'indirect aggression' peaked in the period leading to the enactment of the SDF law. After 1954, the intense political debate over the SDF abated and there was a dramatic decrease in the number of references to aggression. This point suggests that many of the references to 'direct' and 'indirect' aggression were made in the context of the legal debate about Japan's measures to protect itself. Although as we will see below, some of these references echoed genuine security concerns about potential security threats, the focus of political debate in the mid 1950s centered on Japanese measures to defend itself, and not external threats.

*Axis II: Sensitivity to framing foreign countries as threats*

Second, as Table 2 shows, the two most frequent terms in the early postwar period pertained to scenarios (aggression/war) rather than threatening state-actors. Country-specific terms such as 'Chinese aggression' (75 references), 'China threat' (58 references), 'Chinese nuclear weapons' (47), 'Soviet submarines' (58 references), 'Soviet threat' (15) or 'America threat' (10), were rarely communicated.<sup>xvii</sup> Although the term 'Communist threat' (*kyōsanshugi no kyōi*) was

communicated relatively frequently (103 references, last reference made in 1968), it denoted both domestic and foreign (Chinese/Soviet) communist agents, and was therefore not necessarily used to indicate a threat posed by a specific foreign country. Likewise, while the term ‘MiG fighter aircraft’ was communicated relatively frequently (111 references), more than a third of the references were made in 1976 alone, as a result of the MiG incident.<sup>xviii</sup> In other words, during the entire early postwar period, MiG was mentioned in the Diet 67 times, an average of slightly more than twice a year.

### *Axis III: Degree of fragmentation in Japan’s threat perception*

In addition to their low frequency, when examining the exchanges in which the references to country-specific threats were uttered, it becomes clear that they do not necessarily indicate an attempt at securitization of an issue as an existential threat. For example, in the case of the ‘Soviet threat’ terminology, none of the references to this term was actually made to inflate a Soviet military threat.

Whereas none of the references to a ‘Soviet threat’ in the early postwar period was made to securitize the Soviet Union as an existential threat, several references to a ‘*China threat*’ were made as an attempt to securitize China as a military threat. The following month after China’s first successful nuclear test, Imazumi Isamu, a Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) member, stated that, “This [nuclear test] causes great concern (*ooinaru fuan*) and distrust for the whole world, while posing a great threat (*ooki na kyoui*) to Asian countries neighboring China (National Diet Minutes Retrieval System, 25 November, 1964). Imazumi further called upon the Japanese government to communicate a strong protest to the China and to urged China to join the Partial Test Ban Treaty (“PTBT”).

The terminology of a ‘China threat’ was indeed on the rise, as can be seen in Figure 3, but

similar to the ‘Soviet threat’ terminology, the vast majority of these references were made by opposition members in order to deflate a China threat. As Figure 4 indicates, nearly 70 per-cent of the total references to a ‘China threat’ made between 1950 and 1972 were made by members of two opposition parties: the JSP and Kōmeitō. After the normalization of the bilateral relationship between Japan and China (1972), the references to ‘China threat’ completely disappeared from Diet deliberations, and would not reappear until the 1990s.

This is not to argue that in the early postwar period the Japanese were unconcerned about security threats. Whereas the custom of designating specific countries as threats in the Diet was unpopular throughout the early postwar period (1946-1976), concerns about security threats associated with the Soviet Union and China were by no means negligible. To recall, the 1950s saw several disturbing developments in the vicinity of Japan, among which were the Korean War and the Taiwan Straits Crises (1954-5 and 1958). The fear of a violent revolution by communist agents, for example, was especially prevalent during this period among conservative figures, such as prime ministers Yoshida and Hatoyama (Williamson, 2014, 66-67). Instead of a country-specific ‘threat’ terminology, then, these military security concerns were often echoed in terms such as ‘direct aggression’, ‘indirect aggression’, and ‘nuclear war’.<sup>xix</sup>

### *Late postwar period (1977-2007)*

What security issues dominated the Diet in the late postwar period? Who spoke security during this period and with what rationale? The content analysis of references to security issues in the late the postwar period (1977-2007) yields the following findings.

#### *Axis I: Level of concreteness in the debate about Japan’s threat perception*

As Table 3 shows, late postwar Japanese were mostly occupied with the following three issues:

‘nuclear war’, ‘Soviet threat’, and ‘SS-20’. Especially significant was the high number of references to specific components of the Soviet military threat during the 1980s. During that decade, references to Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads (“SS-20”) and MiG fighter aircrafts as well as Tupolev Tu-22M bombers (“Backfire”), were frequently mentioned in the Diet. As Figure 5 demonstrates, whereas the security discourse about specific components of the Soviet military threat was dormant during the early postwar period, beginning in the early 1980s, it exploded with references to concrete weapon systems and scenarios involving the Soviet Union, as political figures became embroiled in a fierce debate about the assessment of the Soviet Union. This trend is especially interesting as it testifies to a growing interest in security issues across the political spectrum. As we will see below, the trend towards the specification of the security discourse would continue in the 1990s and 2000s.

*Axis II: Sensitivity to framing foreign countries as threats*

As Table 3 demonstrates, foreign countries were labeled as threats more often than in the early postwar period, with the Soviet Union leading this trend (456 references in the late postwar period compared to only 15 in the early postwar period), and North Korea (109 compared to 3) and China (95/58) following behind. Interestingly, the somewhat abstract terms of ‘direct aggression’ and ‘indirect aggression’ were less communicated in the Diet during this period when compared with the early postwar period, and the term ‘communist threat’ almost completely disappeared from the political debate in the late postwar period.

Between the end of the 1970s and the early 1990s, the Soviet Union dominated the discourse, with the number of references to ‘Soviet threat’ peaking in 1981, to a record of 42 (more than twice the record number for the ‘China threat’ in 1968). As Figure 6 shows, the Soviet threat terminology peaked once again with the demise of the Soviet Union, as politicians

and commentators were debating the repercussions of that historical event.

The ‘Soviet threat’ terminology emerged in the 1980s for both international and domestic reasons. Superpower tensions were on the rise with the collapse of the *détente* (marked by the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan in December 1979) and the Far-East received larger strategic role in the military plans of both sides. But whereas high tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union were prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s as well, Japan’s enhanced military role within the framework of the security relationship with the U.S. was a new development at the end of the 1970s (Berger, 1998, 347; Sasaki, 2015, 150). The higher frequency registered for the term ‘Soviet threat’ was therefore a result of the opposition’s push against certain policy measures taken by the government, which it perceived as leading Japan to remilitarization. The logic was consistent with the early postwar period: a closer security cooperation with U.S. forces increases the likelihood of Japan’s entrapment in a war with the Soviet Union, and should therefore be avoided.

*Axis III: Degree of fragmentation in Japan’s threat perception*

Figure 7 captures the number of references to a ‘Soviet threat’ by political actors (during the Cold-War period). As can be seen, the overwhelming majority of references were made by members of the Socialist Party (JSP), the Communist Party (JCP), and Kōmeitō – all left-leaning opposition parties (73 per-cent of the total references to a ‘Soviet threat’ made by elected politicians were made by representatives of these three parties). Reading through dozens of these references, it becomes clear that in almost all cases, members of the opposition attempted to *deflate* the Soviet threat. Also interesting to note how rarely have members of the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) used the terminology of a ‘Soviet threat’ in the Diet; instead, JDA officials have usually adhered to the official terminology propagated by the Japanese government, according to

which the Soviet Union was only a “latent threat” (*senzaiteki kyōi*).

Finally, whereas the Soviet Union dominated the security discourse in the Diet during the 1980s, since the mid 1990s, both the terminologies of a ‘North Korea threat’ and a ‘China threat’ became apparent. As Figure 7 shows, the year 2003 saw the number of references to a “North Korea threat’ dramatically increasing, to 29 references.

The ‘North-Korean threat’ terminology correlated with external events. In February 1993 North Korea denied entry from an inspection team of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and in the following month, it threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT; later it relented this intention). In May the same year, the DPRK conducted a *Nodong 1* missile-test and launched it to the Sea of Japan, and was accused by UN inspectors to have been hiding evidence of nuclear-program development. Subsequently, North Korea became a security concern: in 1994 alone, almost 50 references to “North Korea” and “Nuclear weapons” were made in the Japanese Diet. In August 1998, North Korea surprised the Japanese and fired a *Taepodong* missile over Japan’s airspace. The missile test generated almost 90 references to the missile’s name the following year (1999). During 1999, the North Korean “spy-boats” (*fushinsen*) and the “kidnapping issue” (*rachi mondai*) had also emerged in the political discourse; while the DPRK agreed to freeze testing on long-range missiles in September that year, in 2002 it once again expelled UN inspectors from Yongbyon nuclear facility, thus triggering “the second North Korean nuclear crisis.”

Unlike the 1980s, when the terminology of threat was mostly used by opposition members in order to *deflate* a Soviet threat, in the early 2000s, most of the references to a ‘North Korea threat’ were made in order to *inflate* the threat from North Korea.<sup>xx</sup>

Figure 8 captures the distribution of references of ‘North Korean threat’ as made by

political actors throughout 2003. Note how the LDP's share of the total number of references had grown from about 16 percent of the "Soviet threat" in 1981 to 27 percent of the "North Korean threat" in 2003, and how the share of the left-wing parties had fallen. As illustrated by the figure, 73 percent of the total number of references to a "North Korean threat" was made by representatives of the LDP (27 percent), the DPJ (33 percent), and the Liberal Party (13 percent). Although their rhetoric varied, members of these three parties employed the terminology of a "North Korean threat" in order to inflate the threat from North Korea, as I detail below.

The LDP stance towards North Korea is demonstrated in the following statement made by Yamamoto Ichita, a member of the Foreign and Defense Policy Committee, on June 4, 2003: "The greatest threat to Japan's national security is North Korea." (National Diet Minutes Retrieval System, 4 June, 2003). Notably, in addition to the LDP, representatives of centrist opposition parties – such as the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) – took part in the securitization of North Korea as a military threat. Consider for example the following statement made by Naoto Kan (DPJ) during his discussion with Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro at the Budget Committee of the House of Representatives (National Diet Minutes Retrieval System, 6 February 2003):

If I were the prime minister, I would judge both Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and North Korea's WMD as problems for the international community. But...North Korea is more of a threat to Japan. And so from a Japanese point of view, while Iraq is important, it is more important to remove the threat from North Korea.

Although Kan's comment was made in the context of the opposition's criticism of Koizumi's policy of sending the SDF to Iraq, it also reveals just how far Japan's security discourse has traveled since the Cold-War period, as a leading opposition figure labels a foreign country in the Diet as a threat, calling for the threat's "removal". Still, not all political parties accepted the

securitization move of North Korea as advanced by the centrist and center-right leaning parties. Members of the Social Democratic Party (the SDP; previously JSP) and the JCP resisted the claim that North Korea is a threat to Japan on various occasions, warning against the government's use of the issue as a pretext to advance its aggressive policies.<sup>xxi</sup>

### *Threat perceptions in the last decade (2008-2017)*

What security issues have dominated the Diet in the last decade? Who spoke security during this period and with what rationale? Over the last decade, Japan's political discourse about security threats has been centered on the following themes: an unstable security environment in East Asia, North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, China's modernization of its military and its lack of transparency, China's behavior in the seas, the threat of international terror and the cyber-threat.

#### *Axis I: Level of concreteness in the debate about Japan's threat perception*

Table 4 summarizes the number of references to military security issues in Diet deliberations between 2008 and 2017. As can be seen, the trend toward the specification of the debate about security issues identified earlier has continued, as the frequency with which concrete components of threat – for example names of North Korean missiles such as 'Tepodong' and 'Nodong' – were uttered in the Diet in the early 2000s was high. Likewise, the three most frequently mentioned terms of the previous period (1977-2007) – nuclear war, direct and indirect aggressions – receive in recent years far less attention.

#### *Axis II: Sensitivity to framing foreign countries as threats*

Two countries dominated the political discourse in the Diet over the last decade: North Korea and China. Whereas references to a 'China threat' were more frequent between 2010 and 2015,

the terminology of a ‘North Korean threat’ was more prevalent in other years as well as overall (95 references to ‘North Korean threat’ compared to 55 references to ‘China threat’). Figure 9 summarizes these data.

Since 2016, following the substantial improvement in the relations between the two governments the previous year (Tanaka, 2017, 315-327), the frequency of the ‘China threat’ terminology decreased. At the same time, in 2017, the term ‘North Korea threat’ reached unprecedented frequency, as it became the most cited foreign-country threat of the entire postwar period (that is, in a given year). Figure 11 summarizes the number of references to country-specific threats throughout the postwar period.

### *Axis III: Degree of fragmentation in Japan’s threat perception*

The framing of North Korea and China as ‘threats’ over the last decade (thus, inflating these issues) was especially revealing, because for the first time in the postwar period it was made not only by right-wing and centrist politicians, but also by left-wing politicians, such as members of the pacifist-leaning Kōmeitō. Consider the following statement made by Kōmeitō’s Hamada Masayoshi in July 2009 as an example. During his discussion with Foreign Minister Nakasone Hirofumi about a nuclear disarmament measure named the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT), Hamada conceded to Nakasone that the long advocated international negotiations on the treaty should now take into account the “harsh reality of the security situation”, saying that, “Indeed, we are facing a difficult situation. There is the threat from China, and there is the threat from North Korea.” (National Diet Minutes Retrieval System , 2 July 2009).<sup>xxii</sup>

## **4. Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to provide an empirical account of Japan's postwar threat perception as it was manifested on Japan's main political stage – the national Diet. The content analysis of references to security issues in the Diet over the period of seven decades provides a good measurement to Japan's changing threat perception, as it allows us to identify which issues have dominated the discourse over time, and which issues have vanished from the political debate. Merely counting the number of references to security issues was not enough; to thoroughly examine Japan's threat perception one must identify the speakers, read through the exchanges, and explore the message underlying the utterance – whether the speaker sought to inflate a certain threat or to deflate it.

During the postwar period, Japan's threat perception has undergone dramatic changes; these changes can be characterized along the three axes. The first axis of transformation in Japan's threat perception (see Diagram 2) entails a shift from high degree of abstraction in the early postwar period – embodied in the terms 'direct aggression' and 'indirect aggression' – towards the use of concrete terms such as names of Soviet or North Korean weapon-systems. In the course of the postwar period, then, Japan's threat perception became less abstract, less legal, and more *real*.

The second axis of change in Japan's threat perception is the degree of sensitivity towards framing foreign countries as security threats; here, the study recorded a trend of decreasing sensitiveness to the inflations of country-specific threat over the postwar period. To recall, during the early postwar period political actors largely avoided the terminology of a 'country-specific threat', and during much of the late postwar period the terminology of a 'country-specific threat' was often employed by opposition members in order to deflate security threats; today this is no longer the case, as actors across the political spectrum often label foreign

countries as ‘threat’ in the Diet.

Finally, the third axis of change in Japan’s threat perception is the degree of fragmentation concerning the judgements of security threats; here, a trend toward a more homogeneous view of the security threats Japan faces was identified. The fundamental differences between members of the opposition parties and government officials, which pertained to the nature of foreign threats during the Cold-War (the Chinese threat in the 1960s and the Soviet threat in the 1980s), are a thing of the past: today, perceptions of external threats such as the North Korean and Chinese threats are widely shared across the political spectrum (with the exception of the JCP), although possibly with differences in their perceived intensity.

The reasons behind these three transformation are varied and complex, and I examine them elsewhere. For the purpose of this paper, however, it is important to highlight two general points. First, the three transformations in Japan’s threat perception can-not simply be attributed to rationalist factors, such as the changes in Japan’s ‘objective’ threat environment. On paper, the potential threat posed to Japan by a nuclear China in the second half of the 1960s was not any milder than the more recent threat posed by a nuclearized North Korea. But as we have seen, while the North Korean issue has had a serious effect over Japan’s threat perception since the early 2000s, the Chinese menace of the mid 1960s had registered a relatively limited impact over Japan’s threat perception as manifested in Diet deliberations. Not only that the number of references made by political representatives to a ‘North Korean threat’ was considerably higher – 29 references in 2003 alone, compared with 20 references to a ‘China threat’ in 1968, but the majority of references were made in order to *inflate* the threat from North Korea. To recall, the majority of references to a ‘China threat’ in the second half of the 1960s were made in order to deflate the threat from China. Clearly, factors other than external developments in Japan’s

security environment play a role in shaping the collective process by which subjective judgements about security threats are communicated among domestic audiences.

Second, the three transformations in Japan's threat perception may be correlated with domestic developments. During the early postwar period (1946-1976), Japanese society exhibited strong *aversion* to labeling foreign countries as military security threats by using the terminology of 'threat' (*kyōi*). In what can be attributed to the dire consequences of Japan's experience of the Second World War, the way this experience was reinterpreted by domestic actors (Berger, 1998), and to anti-militaristic attitudes, mention of military threats was considered taboo and so the debate about security threats took on a cautious, theoretical character. But as the empirical record suggested, the aversion to framing military-security issues as threats has been gradually declining since the 1980s, and by the early 2000s, military threats were no-longer considered taboo in Japan. In that sense, the trends towards specification of the debate about security threats and the decreasing sensitization to labeling foreign countries as threats (axes I and II) suggest that Japan's contemporary threat perception has become more substantial, open and transparent.

Likewise, the trend towards homogeneity in Japan's threat perception (axis III) is strongly correlated with the tectonic shifts in Japan's domestic politics. Since the mid 1960s, the percentage of left-leaning opinion-leaders who advocated for 'unarmed neutrality' (about 80 percent according to one estimate) has been on the decline; by the late 1970s, the majority of opinion-leaders were leaning toward the center or right-wing of the political spectrum.<sup>xxiii</sup> The remarkable collapse in the early 1990s of the main opposition party – the JSP –has accelerated this process: the only viable, left-leaning alternative to the conservative camp had ceased to exist. And with the demise of the JSP, the intense debate about Japan's threat perception that featured

so strongly during the Cold War era had also abated.

**Diagram 2** : Axes of Change in Japan's Threat Perception 1946 - 2018

## 5. Conclusion

Having set to examine how accurate recent assessments of Japan's 'increasing' threat perception were, the current study defined threat perception as the collective, on-going process by which subjective judgements about security threats are communicated among domestic audiences.

Using elements of both manifest and latent content-analysis, the study examined references to twenty-two security issues (agents/actors, scenarios and weapon-systems) as they appeared in Diet deliberations over the entire postwar era. Based on the results, the study identified three trends in Japan's threat perception: a first trend of *specification of the debate about security issues*, a second trend of *decreasing sensitization* to framing foreign countries as threats and a third trend of *decreasing fragmentation* of threat judgments (Diagram 2).

The findings of the current analysis augment the studies discussed earlier (Williamson, 2013; Hoest, 2016; Vosee et al., 2014) in at least three ways. Firstly, Williamson's depiction of the diametrically opposed views regarding security threats as held by conservative politicians and progressive intellectuals in the early postwar period was corroborated by the current analysis. But while the fragmented account of Japan's threat perception held sway throughout the Cold-War period, the current study showed that over the last two decades the situation has changed, as Japan's threat perception has largely converged over issues such as the North Korean and Chinese issues.

Secondly, Hoest's claim that when evaluating threat, Japanese policy elites tended to draw

on China's escalatory foreign behavior is in line with the data presented above. Throughout the postwar period, escalatory foreign policy behavior by the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea has been correlated with periods of heated debates about security threats. Thus, China's development of nuclear weapons in the mid 1960s, the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan (1979), and the nuclear crisis surrounding North Korea (2002) were followed by peaks in the number of references to these foreign countries (see Figure 11). But, unlike the recent framing of the North Korean and Chinese issues, both Cold-War debates about China and the Soviet Union did not result in the securitization of these countries as existential threats, at least not in public (Oren 2017). In other words, escalatory behavior by foreign powers does not automatically translate into successful securitization of foreign threats.

Thirdly, Vosse et al.'s assertion that in the post-Cold-War period, the Japanese have been, "highly concerned about a large number of domestic and regional threats" (Vosse et al., 2014, 5), is somewhat simplistic when extrapolated to the Diet. Whereas the analysis of data from Diet deliberations indicated that over the last decade or so, Japan's threat perception has incorporated new agents and scenarios including terrorism and cyber-attacks, other security issues have largely disappeared from the political stage. Moreover, as we have seen, the number of references to country-specific threats such as North Korea and China has fluctuated considerably over the past decade (Figure 10). Finally, the longitudinal analysis also revealed that Japan's threat perception had been aggravated numerous times in the past: in the early 1950s, mid 1960s, early 1980s, and mid 1990s.

Viewed together, the conceptual issues surrounding 'Japan's threat perception' and the empirical findings listed above undermine the validity of the mainstream view regarding Japan's threat perception (Dupont 2005; Vosse, Drifte and Blechinger-Talcott 2014; Nakano 2016).

Rather than constant, linear ‘deepening’ or ‘increasing’ threat perception in the post-Cold-War era, Japan’s threat perception has fluctuated in terms of the frequency of references to specific security issues during this period. Whereas as we have seen, the longitudinal content analysis did identify three long-term trends in Japan’s threat perception, these trends should not be confounded with neither sustained nor absolute increase in the perceived *intensity* of all potential security threats as they were held by individual politicians. Relatedly, it is somewhat misleading to claim that *a state’s* threat perception has been increasing since, say, 1995, as if the state were an organic entity and its subjective assessment of threat can be observed. This is because subjective judgements of threats vary within states and among people, differ in their intensity, and fluctuate with time.

The three trends in Japan’s threat perception will similarly continue to fluctuate. Regardless of the future trajectory it will take, Japan’s threat perception has traveled a long way since the 1950s. More than seventy years after the end of the disastrous war, Japan’s threat perception presents mixed results: on the one hand, it has become more concrete, more substantial, and more transparent. On the other hand, it has largely coalesced into a single narrative, especially when considering the North Korean issue. Whether these trends will shape Japan’s security policy in some ways and not others is an interesting follow-up question that is ought to be addressed empirically; future studies may probe into the potential effects of these developments over Japan’s and the Asia-Pacific’s security.

Three additional follow-up studies come to mind. A first study may build on the current research design to incorporate terms in addition to ‘threat’: key words such as ‘concern’ (*kenen*), ‘anxiety’ (*fuan*), and ‘attention/interest’ (*kanshin*) are of particular interest to the analysis of Japan’s threat perception, as they were often mentioned by political actors during the postwar era

in order to denote security issues. By improving our understanding of the intricate terminology with which domestic actors in Japan have been ‘speaking security’, such an analysis may be able to make a significant contribution to the study of Japan’s threat perception. A second study may extend the investigation of Japan’s threat perception outside of the Diet, for example into the media sphere or to literary works. By exploring Japan’s threat perception as communicated in the Japanese media/literature in a systematic manner, it would be possible to compare between the various manifestations of Japan’s threat perception and to trace any interlinkages between them. Finally, a third study may tackle threat perceptions as communicated in parliaments of other countries; here, the availability of the data and the plausibility of the method adopted by this study should direct us to those countries where such an endeavor would be possible.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> A notable exception is Krebs (2015), whose study of narratives' change during the Cold War era relied on longitudinal content analysis of two newspaper editorials in the US.

<sup>ii</sup> For three examples of the first type of argument, see Vosse, Drifte and Blechinger-Talcott (2014), Dupont (2005), and Nakano (2016). Vosse et al. note that “since the end of the Cold War, Japan’s security environment has changed significantly”, citing the North Korean nuclear program, China’s economic and military rise, and international terrorism as sources of concern in Tokyo; Alan Dupont (2005: 44) indicates a ‘sea change’ in Japanese attitudes towards security in the mid 2000s, asserting that, “the once-apatetic public is becoming increasingly concerned about deterioration in Japan’s security environment”; Ryoko Nakano (2016: 165) notes “deepening” threat perceptions in the region as a result of a perceived regional power-transition. For examples of the second type of argument, see Hook (2003) and Taoka (2015). Hook (chapter 3) takes a sceptic stance vis-à-vis the reality of the Soviet threat in the 1980s, suggesting that rather than a perception of a direct Soviet military threat, the Japanese viewed the Soviet issue through the prism of economic security considerations and specifically the need to maintain a healthy relationship with the U.S.; Taoka (2015) asserts that the ‘China threat theory’ has been used by the Japanese government in 2015 to advance controversial security legislation. For a synthesis of both types of the arguments, see Christopher Hughes (2009, 311), who argues for a disproportion between an ‘actual’ and perceived North Korean threat. Hughes explains this discrepancy with the ‘multilayered’ nature of the North Korean threat, in which (1) an actual military threat, (2) a political threat to the alliance with the US, (3) a domestic threat, and (4) a ‘catch-all’ proxy threat for the longer-term peril stemming from China are combined together to create a ‘super-sized’ North Korea threat.

<sup>iii</sup> See for example: Soeya, (1998), Lind (2004), Dian (2014).

<sup>iv</sup> Rather than ‘threat’, Williamson focuses on the concept of ‘risk’ in his book, but I do not follow his conceptual distinction between the two concepts in this paper. (Williamson , 2013).

<sup>v</sup> Other scholars note a similar trend of increasing threat perception among both the Japanese public and the elites, which since the 1990s, centered on North Korea and China (See for example, Oros 2007).

<sup>vi</sup> Throughout the period between 1946 and 2017, the word *kyōi* was articulated in the Diet 9,284 times.

<sup>vii</sup> Of the three indicators (frequency, affiliation, underlying security rationale), the third one is arguably the most challenging to assess in a systematic and consistent manner, as it requires reading through the exchanges of thousands of references to security issues and coding them accordingly. To overcome this challenge, I chose to confine the analysis of this indicator to the following issues: “Soviet threat”, “China threat” and “North Korea threat”.

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<sup>viii</sup> In some cases, categories were not mutually exclusive. For example, three categories denote aspects of North Korea's missile program: 'North Korean missiles', 'Tepodong', and 'Nodong'. While the first category contains the other two, I thought it important to record how each of the categories fared individually.

<sup>ix</sup> In addition, the following terms were sampled but removed from the final analysis due to low number of references or little relevance to Japan's threat environment: Soviet weapons systems ('Sukhoi', 'T4', 'R5', 'Zulu-Class submarines', 'Scud'), American weapons systems ('Nautilus', 'Jupiter', 'Pershing'), and cyber-related term ('cyber warfare', 'cyber army', 'North Korea hackers', 'Chinese hackers'). The terms 'nuclear submarines' and 'Polaris' were frequently debated in the *early* postwar period, with a staggering number of 737 and 354 references, respectively. These issues, however, were often mentioned by opposition representatives in the political context of the 'Anti-Nuclear Submarine Port Call Movement', and not in the context of external security threats. Likewise, the terms ICBM (Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles) and IRBM (Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles) were also debated rather frequently in the early postwar period, with 170 and 102 references respectively. Finally, while the term 'hackers' was frequently used in Diet deliberations (260 references), many of the references were made outside of the military-security context. Follow-up studies may explore additional categories to enrich the current analysis.

<sup>x</sup> It is important to note that I choose to remain agnostic whether the issues to which speakers in the Diet referred to constituted 'objective' threats. Instead, I only focus on the subjective judgement of the speaker.

<sup>xi</sup> Although this choice of temporal demarcation enables me to compare between two equal time periods, it does gloss over the Cold-War divide. To compensate for this lacuna, I analyze the data by year: one could therefore observe the impact of the Cold-War divide in Figure 5, 6, and 11. In addition, while the absolute number of questions posed by members of the Diet in deliberations which related to security issues may have oscillated during the postwar period, thus affecting the frequency of references, the current research design provides for two additional indicators to evaluate Japan's threat perception: affiliation and underlying security argument.

<sup>xii</sup> Originally introduced by Ole Waever, Securitization Theory was further developed by Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde and Waever himself in their book "*Security: A New Framework for Analysis*" (1998). ST, as initially advanced by the CS with its emphasis on language, discourse, and the speech act, has generated much interest, as well as criticism, over the past several decades. Thierry Balzacq suggests to differentiate between a "philosophical" variant of securitization, as represented by the work of CS scholars like Waever, and a "sociological" variant of the theory. According to Balzacq, whereas the former approach views securitization of threats as a deliberative, discursive, and performative process, the latter variant considers securitization as either deliberative or non-deliberative, discursive or non-discursive, performative but not necessarily limited to the "speech act" (Balzacq, 2010, 1-2). My application of ST in interpreting data is limited to the security speech-act. As such, I am not concerned with identifying the precise impact of the securitization move. I would like to thank Petter Lindgren for this clarification.

<sup>xiii</sup> Language plays a significant role in human interaction, inducing people to act and react in certain ways and not others (Yennie Lindgren & Lindgren, 2017). In addition to its role in constructing reality, language is also a window into the human nature, representing our thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, often in ways that are hidden to the speaker. As such, language both represents our subjective perception of reality and reproduces reality.

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<sup>xiv</sup> While Wæver's edited volume deals with European case-studies, the analysis of parliamentary debates may be used to analyze non-European parliamentary democracies, such as Japan; this is so because despite some differences, the Japanese political system share many characteristics with fellow parliamentary democracies. Other indicators such as strategic documents and military doctrines can be used to evaluate Japan's threat perception. However, these measures of Japan's threat perception are often formal documents prepared by a limited number of officials or organizations. As a result, they do not reflect the full scope of perceptions about security threats.

<sup>xv</sup> Other indicators that can be used to examine Japan's threat perception prior to 1970 are the 4 defense build-up plans implemented between 1958 and 1976, although they too are not perfect. Moreover, whereas defense White Papers may provide some indication as to the 'official' threat perception among those defense and government officials who formulate and approve these documents, these documents are produced on an annual basis, and are often the outcome of bureaucratic negotiation and compromise. As a result, they do not reveal divergence in threat-judgements. The considerable advantage of examining data from the Japanese Diet is therefore that parliamentary deliberations are often up-to-date and reflect events as they unfold on an almost a daily basis (this is the case when the Diet is in session).

<sup>xvi</sup> In addition, whereas the absolute number of questions that deal with security issues other than the term 'threat' may have shifted significantly during the postwar period thus affecting the number of references to a specific security issue (e.g., nuclear war), this in itself does not skew the results of the analysis. The fact that a certain issue received a certain amount of attention by politicians in a certain period is in itself quite telling about what security issues were rendered important in the Diet.

<sup>xvii</sup> During the early postwar period the term "America threat" was mentioned 10 times. Only two of the references pertained to an American threat, as a result of port calls of U.S. nuclear submarines to Japan and the deployment of American weapon systems to Japan. In other words, the threat posed by the U.S. was not to Japan per-se but to "Asian people" as well as to China and to the Soviet Union. See: Tokano Satoko (JSP), House of Representatives, 15 May 1963; Hodzumi Shichirō (JSP), House of Representatives, 9 November 1965.

<sup>xviii</sup> The 'MiG Incident' pertains to the events that took place on September 6, 1976, when a Soviet pilot of a MiG 25 aircraft defected to the West, landing his aircraft in Hokkaido.

<sup>xix</sup> This finding is in-line with Hook's assertion that Japanese politicians, "have often referred to constitutional, defense and nuclear issues as 'taboos'." (Hook 1996, 226),

<sup>xx</sup> In the late 1990s, political representatives still attempted to deflate the North Korean threat. JCP members such as Ueda Kōichirō, Kasai Akira, and Nakajima Masahiro, argued in the Diet that rather than a "North Korea threat", the biggest threat to Asian peace is the expansion of the U.S.-Japan security alliance and the U.S.'s military presence in the region. See for example: International Issues Investigation Committee, House of Councilors, 24 February 1997; International Issues Investigation Committee, House of Councilors, 21 May, 1997. Some voices within the LDP also criticized the government stance vis-à-vis North Korea. In February 1999, claimed Hase Hiroshi for example that the government's reaction to the *Taepodong* missile test was overly sensitive, and that rather than a North Korean threat, it is the lack of dialogue between Japan and North Korea that is dangerous. See: Hase Hiroshi, House of Councilors, 3 February, 1999.

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<sup>xxi</sup> See for example, Imagawa Masami, House of Representatives, 15 May, 2003; Ogata Yasuo, House of Councilors, 6 June 2003.

<sup>xxii</sup> For a similar statement made by Kōmeitō representative, effectively securitizing China as a military threat, see Higashi Junji, House of Representatives, 26 July 2012. Whether these statements made by Kōmeitō representatives were informed by a shift in the perception of the security environment or by the fact that the Kōmeitō formed a coalition government with the LDP and thus preferred to align itself with its policy line is an interesting follow-up question that may be addressed elsewhere.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Komiya, Ryūtarō. 1979. “Ureubeki migi senkai”, *Gendai keizai*. Public opinion surveys confirm this estimation. See for example: Hasegawa, 1987, 44.