

Setting the Agenda of Threats: An Explanatory Model

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Why is it that certain threat images appear on the political agenda and others do not?¹ The issue of how a political agenda is set has been studied in a series of different contexts and with the aid of any number of different theoretical approaches. Many of these attempts, though not all, deal explicitly with threat, risks or security issues.² Traditional security policy research often views threat images as something relatively unproblematic and assumes that real threats in the world are directly reflected in security policy planning. In contrast, we argue that there exists no self-evident or natural conformity between the substance of a threat image and whether it has an impact on the political agenda.

The formation of an agenda may depend on a number of different factors, not least of which are power and politics. This may seem obvious, but, strangely enough, it is perceived as controversial by many in the traditional security studies research community. It has even been claimed that research on how the security policy agenda is set diverts attention away from “real” problems (Knudsen 2001: 359-61). Security policy researchers rarely hesitate to identify what the real threats are. It is, nonetheless, a well-known fact that these researchers do not always gain a hearing for their threat images. Attempts to make environmental problems into a security policy issue—attempts in which a number of academics have played an active roll—may have achieved some success in terms of the wording of UN documents. However, such attempts have had little effect on national security policy agendas the world over. Given this situation, there is every reason to emphasise the need for research exploring why different actors often perceive the same problem in radically different ways as well as why certain threat images take on societal salience and others do not.

¹ It is the goal of “The Politics of Threat Images,” a project led by the authors of this article, to explain the reasons behind threat image agendas and their rise and fall in societal debates. This project was started in January 2001 with the financial support of The Swedish Agency for Civil Emergency Planning (ÖCB). For previous project ideas, arguments, and results, see among others Eriksson (2001a, b, c); Noreen (2001); Holmgren and Softa (2001).

² Within security policy research, it is primarily the so-called Copenhagen School and its theory of “securitization” that has taken into consideration the politics surrounding the formation of security policy agendas (Buzan et al 1998; Wæver 1995). This theory is discussed later in the section on “framing.”

For these reasons, it is important to adopt relevant theories, even when such theories lie outside of current security policy research and risk studies. A good deal of inspiring theory and empirical research can be found within a number of research areas, among them cognitive theory, agenda-setting theory and research dealing with the significance of “problem framing.” Most of these theoretical areas have primarily evolved in order to study issues other than risk perception, threat images and security politics. The application of these theories in the research on the societal salience of threat images and their presentation within the framework of a general analytical model represents, we believe, an important contribution not only to public policy research in general, but also to security and risk studies more specifically.

Research on the ways in which threat images and risk perceptions are created and achieve political salience is particularly fragmented. While efforts have certainly been made to theorise around aspects of these problems, there remain few systematic attempts to join together relevant theories and concepts to better understand threat image politics. Consequently, the need for a general survey of such theories remains as does the need to combine different analytical tools.

This article is exploratory in nature. It is neither our intention to present a definitive explanatory model nor to conduct an empirical test of this model here. Instead, this article may be viewed as a first step towards the development of a theoretical model capable of being applied to different types of case studies and comparative analyses of threat politics. We will also offer examples of application that ought, however, to be developed into more systematic empirical tests. In order to lay the groundwork for this model, we will first briefly describe a number of key theoretical concepts necessary to explain why certain issues, particularly those perceived as threatening, appear on the political agenda or are removed from it. These concepts draw on different groups of explanatory factors taken from our own previous research as well as the research of others.

The political agenda

First, the concept of the “political agenda” requires further elaboration; that is, the political agenda that we have chosen to focus on within the context of threat politics. As Hinnfors has

shown, there are a plethora of different definitions of this concept in the research on agenda-setting (Hinnfors 1995: 60 ff). In general, however, there are two main approaches: one that is elite-based and the other pluralist in focus. The first approach focuses on formal political power and strategically-placed decision-makers high up in the hierarchy. The latter approach broadens the concept of the “political agenda” to include such factors as the agenda of the media. We adhere to Kingdon’s definition with its emphasis on elites and the argument that the political agenda reflects those issues that key decision-makers wish to focus on at a particular moment (Kingdon 1995: 3; Hinnfors 1995: 63 ff, 79-83). The identity of these key decision-makers varies. The important point is that it is the political agenda of key decision-makers that requires explanation. Decision-makers lower down in the hierarchy or actors outside of the government and legislative bodies (for example, the media) are also influential. The fact that these actors choose to push particular issues explains, at least in part, why certain threat images appear or fail to appear on the political agenda we will examine. Research on agenda-setting has traditionally focused on the national political level, and there are only a handful of studies on political agendas at other levels, among them EU institutions (Kronsell 1997; Tallberg 2001). Although there is a general focus on the national level, an understanding of threat image politics requires that other levels also be taken into account. This includes, for example, decision-makers in international organisations such as the UN, NATO and the EU.

Occasionally, there is talk of an open agenda and a hidden agenda; that decision-makers say one thing and do another. In addition, they may not reveal all of the issues under deliberation. This is particularly relevant in a discussion of the national security policy agenda as this agenda is often protected by rules of confidentiality or other extraordinary measures. Threat images that seem to have disappeared may in reality be very much alive on a hidden, unofficial agenda. While there is every possibility of this, such a situation is quite difficult to deal with methodologically. We therefore suggest that the *official* agenda serve as the main focus. In order to identify this agenda, the researcher ought to consider whether a certain clarity, repetition and explicitness can be observed. On a concrete level, the researcher may look for the agenda in public speeches, policy documents, proposed laws and so forth. Interviews may also serve as suitable source material (Kingdon 1995; Robinson 2000). Interviews may also present the researcher with an opportunity to uncover possible hidden agendas.

As we see it, issues that receive attention in the media, for instance, but not the attention of decision-makers will not appear on the *political* agenda. However, the media remains important as it is able, among other things, to *influence* general opinion (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Dearing & Rogers 1996: 6-8; Strömbäck 2000: 145 ff). An issue that achieves salience in societal debate may make its mark on the political agenda, although this need not be the case. A speaker, too, may not intend to influence decision-makers, but may well be content instead to argue an issue in the media and other public forums.

In connection with the literature on agenda-setting, we want to suggest a number of distinctions that are important to an understanding of threat image politics. An issue can (1) *appear* or (2) *be removed from* the agenda. Moreover, it can (3) *be prevented from* appearing on the agenda. If it is already on the agenda, it may be (4) *prioritised*.³ Serious discussion of a threat image does not necessarily mean that concrete action will be taken to address the perceived threat. Not to make a decision can also be interpreted as a decision, or a so-called “non-decision,” which is a particular way of exercising power (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Svärd 1982; Hinnfors 1995). An additional distinction can be made between a decision-making agenda and a problem agenda (Kingdon 1995). Decision-makers focus on a number of issues, not all of which are decided upon. For our purposes, it is enough that the threat image appears on the problem agenda.

In what follows, we discuss a number of different groups of explanations as to why issues appear on the agenda or disappear from it. A primary influence on our discussion is agenda-setting theory as it has been developed in the work of Kingdon and Robinson, and we make an attempt to incorporate parts of this theory into our synthesis.⁴ We argue that much of this

³ Tallberg (2001) briefly discusses three different ways of influencing the agenda-setting process: “agenda setting,” “agenda obstruction,” and “agenda structuring.” Tallberg’s collective term for these is “agenda shaping.” Tallberg’s category of “agenda obstruction” refers to attempts to actively prevent an issue from appearing on the agenda and is related to Hinnfors’ agenda-setting theory (1995) as well as to the theory of non-decision making (Svärd 1982; Bachrach & Baratz 1963). We wish, however, to enlarge the typology to include the option of removing an issue from the agenda (“agenda removal”). Clearly, this option logically differs from the other three.

⁴ As the following overview departs to a certain extent from the structure in existing theories on agenda-setting, it is necessary to summarise these theories in brief. Theories, or rather fragments of theories on agenda-setting politics (“agenda setting”) may be categorised as problem-focused, actor-focused, and focused on exogenous factors (Robinson 2000: 11-47). In certain cases, these different parts are combined in attempted syntheses (Kingdon 1995; Robinson 2000: 36-47). Among other things, Kingdon’s synthesis stresses that perceptions of problems and policy alternatives are continuously discussed among decision-makers, advisers, journalists, lobbyists, and other so-called “policy entrepreneurs.” Whether these perceptions of problems take on salience or not depends on a number of circumstances, among them chance events such as dramatic incidents that cast new light on a given issue, political events such as a change of government or a shift in public opinion and news

theory can be applied to the study of threat image politics. At the same time, we suggest that certain additions must be made, among them the inclusion of insights from cognitive theory on the psychology of threat and risk perception, the treatment of agenda-setting privilege and the art of using rhetoric in order to facilitate or complicate the impact of threat images. Moreover, we intend to include insights from research on the importance of institutions and identities.

The subject and object of threat images

In discussions on the concept of security, many security policy researchers have stressed the importance of distinguishing between *what is threatening* (the subject of the threat image) and *what is perceived as threatened* (the object of the threat image) in (Petersen 1990; Wolfers 1962: 150; Baldwin 1997; Buzan et al 1998; Stern 1999). Without this distinction, it is difficult to identify and assess threat images, and, as such, it becomes unclear as to why certain threat images appear on the agenda and others do not.

When it comes to identifying what it is that is threatening, the underlying assumption within traditional security policy research has been that it is a question of conscious threats by *antagonistic* actors, usually hostile states (Bellamy 1981: 102; Luciani 1989: 151; cf. Buzan 1991: 16-17). In the debate on issues such as terrorism and information warfare, it has also been emphasised that *non-state actors*, too, may pose a threat—a view that has gained supporters in recent years within security policy research in most of the countries in Europe and North America. Furthermore, a number of researchers have pointed out that it is not simply actors, but also *structural conditions* that may be perceived as threatening (Sundelius 1983; Eriksson, 2001b: 11-12). Nuclear power accidents, power outages, floods, epidemics, and similar phenomenon are often the result of structural problems. Naturally, actors may also cause these problems. However, these problems may just as likely be the result of structural causes.

Armed conflicts or terrorist attacks are often associated with actor-based threats. This is hardly a surprise considering that behind each act of violence lies one or more actors. On the

coverage, and the acquisition of new knowledge in the form of, for example, scientific discoveries. In particular, Kingdon emphasises the importance of the existence of a “policy window” when circumstances are favourable,

other hand, it is a commonplace to point out the structural causes of war and terrorism. The structural dimension becomes particularly tangible when actors responsible for terror attacks—for example, the attacks of September 11, 2001—refuse to make themselves known. “Network terrorism” refers to a structure in which actors—terrorists—participate. Environmental threats, which, at first glance appear to depend primarily on structural factors, often have, in fact, an actor dimension. Environmental pollution such as the destruction of the ozone layer, the acidification of lakes and oil spills at sea frequently trigger a search for scapegoats. If we intend to combat as well as to prevent threats, this clearly becomes easier if we are able to identify the actors responsible. There is much to suggest that the process of placing a threat image onto the political agenda is facilitated when one is able to identify the actor or actors constituting the threat. Threats that are represented as structural appear to have greater difficulty attracting attention than those portrayed as actor-based. Yet once such threats appear on the agenda, they can be expected to remain there for a long time (Eriksson 2001b). HIV/AIDS is one example that has been a political focus since the beginning of the 1980’s.

Many researchers stress that what is at stake in discussions about that which is threatened are “core values”; that is, those values that are considered more important than other values and perhaps even instrumental for the realisation of these other values (Wolfers 1962; Baldwin 1997; Stern 1999; Buzan et al 1998). Within security policy research, for instance, national sovereignty has been declared an essential value. *Identity*, particularly national identity, is another concept that is identified as an essential value. Buzan and others draw an interesting, though not uncontroversial, distinction between the object that is threatened and the values that are threatened. When the political power apparatus that we call the state is threatened, the value of sovereignty becomes a main focus, but when the community we refer to as the nation is threatened, the value of identity occupies a central position (Buzan et al 1998; Wæver et al 1993; Wagnsson 2000). Depending on which values different actors prioritise, it may be easier or harder to draw attention to a given threat image. In a multi-cultural country with a relatively weak national identity, for instance, Canada, it may be more difficult to gain a hearing for the depiction of threats against this value (i.e. national identity) than it would be in comparatively homogenous nations such as Japan and Iceland. In contrast, all states base their power on the essential value of sovereignty which explains why this value is so central to

but that “policy entrepreneurs” must also seize the moment in order to succeed. They must strike while the iron is hot, for example before the media’s interest in a suddenly high-profile threat image cools.

traditional security policy. Other central values besides those of sovereignty and identity may also be perceived as threatened. Firms may view their market share or even their existence as threatened. The variety and stability of the ecosystem may be perceived as threatened by environmental pollution. Individual freedom may be perceived as threatened, for example, by the violent and coercive actions of private or public actors.

Explanatory factors – a checklist

In this section, we discuss a number of theoretical concepts that can be coalesced into a synthesis that may be capable of serving as a general explanatory model. More specifically, the model may be applied either in its entirety or in one or more parts to the analysis of empirical cases of how threat images become a part of or are removed from the political agenda. The concepts that this model focuses on should be viewed as groups of explanatory factors. Every group is capable of generating several different theses and arguments. The factors have been developed both through the synthesis of existing theories and through empirical observation. Some of the explanatory groups have their basis in a relatively specific research tradition, such as cognitive research, which, in its turn, has received inspiration from social psychology. Other explanatory groups, for example dramatic events and public opinion, are not as clearly associated with a specific line of research, although they appear as separate categories in earlier research.

It is possible to distinguish between factors that are necessary but not sufficient, and factors that are to a higher extent context-dependent and therefore neither necessary nor sufficient. The former must always be taken into consideration whereas the latter are important only in certain situations, and, within these situations, in different types of combinations. Those factors that we characterise as context-dependent include events, identity, public opinion, and political and institutional context. This is no way an exhaustive catalogue, however. We want to stress that we are in no way dismissing the possibility of adding other explanatory factors. We reserve the right to include additional explanatory factors during the course of this research as well as to modify those already included in the model. In this respect, research can be likened to a journey of discovery through empirical and theoretical landscapes.

We view the content of threat images, their cognition, framing and their very effect on the agenda as constituting the core of our explanatory model. However, this does not mean that

cognition, for example, always has great explanatory power. Cognition is a necessary, but most often insufficient explanatory factor. Nevertheless, our point of departure is that an individual's cognitive and memory functions always play a role. How large that role is remains, however, an empirical question.

Cognition

Cognition (from the Latin) is a collective term for an individual's cognitive and memory functions. Our starting point is that this group of factors must always be taken into consideration on the individual level. *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), as Descartes said. Threat images and political agendas would lack all meaning if human consciousness and thought were not a principle object of analysis. There are several theories, particularly within social psychology, that may be useful in shedding light on how cognitive factors influence the ways in which people form threat images. An understanding of how people form threat images may, in turn, explain why certain threats appear on the agenda whereas others do not. We will provide a number of examples in what follows.

Research in social psychology has shown that the uncertain and the unknown often produce anxiety (Johnson 1997: 14-15). Fear of the unknown that might be lurking in a dark alley is something that most people have certainly experienced. This is the psychological basis of the classic ghost story – terror is greatest when you suspect something, but you do not know for certain what it is. In reality, this is about the experience of not having control over a course of events. This scenario also corresponds to a classic definition of national security policy; that is, to preserve national freedom of action even in cases of external threat (cf. Buzan 1991: 16-17; Andr n 1997).

Often, it is not enough to identify that which is threatening and that which is threatened in order to draw attention to a particular issue. Something as powerful as a natural catastrophe may have relatively transient effects on society ("only transient effects") if it is not followed, as Kingdon writes, by "a firmer indication of a problem, by a preexisting perception, or a combination with other similar events" (Kingdon 1995: 197). It is frequently our basic conceptions that determine how we perceive an event; the event is filtered through our prism of preconceived notions.

Explanation by analogy within cognitive research illustrates the importance of basic conceptions. One of the explanations for the fact that American president Lyndon B. Johnson received congressional support for his decision to place American ground troops and bombers in Vietnam in 1965 has been that he focused on the historical analogy of the Korean War (Khong 1992). Prior to the American invasion, the Vietnam War had scarcely affected American citizens in the U.S.. A historical example was necessary in order to justify U.S. involvement in a large-scale military operation in a third-world country far from home. U.S. involvement in Korea had not been a complete success—now was a second chance to stop world communism. Khong’s study has been cited as an example of “framing” (an explanatory group that we will return to in the next section). American foreign policy leadership fashioned a communist threat by focusing on the Korea analogy (Garrison 2001: 783). We wish to emphasise that the analogy explanation that Khong applies to American decision-making is derived from a social psychological theory based on experiments with human subjects (Khong 1992: 19-46).

The Vietnam War meant that tens of thousands of American citizens and many more Vietnamese lost their lives over a number of years. However, the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 affected thousands of American citizens *in one fell swoop*. Historical analogies may have played a lesser role in this case, despite the fact that, in the early stages, a number of commentators compared the sense of shock and surprise to that felt after the attack on Pearl Harbour during World War II. Nonetheless, we can analyse this case in light of cognitive factors. One reason that an issue attains societal importance and political salience may have to do with the individual’s inclination to avoid risks (“risk aversion”) or his/her unwillingness to compromise on core values (“avoid losing a core value”) (Sjöberg 2001; also Eriksson 2001b: 213). Both of these cognitive factors—risk aversion and preservation of core values—may have had significance after September 11th. It is, perhaps, of even greater interest to explain why terrorism as a threat was *not* perceived as a national threat to a sufficient degree before September 11th, 2001. One possible explanation for this is that the risk of a terrorist attack on a colossal scale was not perceived as imminent. This suggests that the cognitive factor of “risk aversion,” the individual’s attempt to avoid risks, lacked any greater influence on framing as far as central decision-makers were concerned before September 11th—a situation that would change after September 11th.

As mentioned above, there are a multitude of cognitive theories of varying explanatory power with respect to framing and political salience. We have only attempted here to illustrate a set of problems using a pair of examples. One major point is that framing, a concept we will return to in the next section, is intimately connected to cognition; our point of departure is that individuals perceive and interpret events. Following logically from this is “the speech act,” that is to say, actors give verbal form to their conceptions of threats and risks (Wæver 1995). We move from thought to speech and from the individual to the collective level of analysis. One aspect of framing is thus that it is a verbal expression of thought. However, the speech act has its own dynamics and own set of theories, both of which are addressed in the following section.

Framing

The rhetorical art of formulating problems, finding scapegoats and coming up with solutions has been defined in different contexts as “speech acts,” “framing” and “problem definition.” It is a question of depicting and representing an issue, a phenomena—for example, something that is perceived as threatening—in such a way that others listen and are convinced or are at least persuaded to pay attention to the issue. This is something that essentially interdisciplinary research on “the politics of framing” has shown (Schön & Rein 1994; Goffmann 1974; Jachtenfuchs 1996; Eriksson 2001b; Strömbäck 2000). Generally, the choice of “speech costume” has a major impact on an issue appears on the agenda (Hinnfors 1995: 143).

In contrast to cognition, framing may be a direct expression of a political act. On a basic level, a given problem can be formulated in more than one way. If the army of one country marches into the territory of a neighbouring country, this act may either be constructed as an act of liberation or as the realisation of an existential threat. Insight into the rhetorical strategies that framing is an expression of may enable a political actor to make a conscious effort to influence the agenda.

The importance of language lies not only in the fact that it expresses thought. Language also has a social and semiotic function. Let us look, for example, at a study on Estonian decision-makers’ view of Russia during the 1990’s (Noreen 2001). The message that Russia does not

present a threat is developed in communication between senders (e.g. the state) and receivers (e.g. public opinion). The fact that a growing number of actors in society speak more frequently of other issues than the Russian threat has great significance for, among other things, relations between Russia and its neighbours. There is a particular kind of theorising on the importance of speech acts, verbal politics (Jansson 1991: 19-23). This aspect was formerly ignored in agenda theory.

One of the most important forms of “threat framing” is to categorise something as a “security policy” threat. In the research, this behaviour has come to be called “securitization.” The opposite of such behaviour is, of course, to minimize the issue and avoid the negative connotations that threat images carry; that is, to undertake “desecuritization” (Buzan et al 1998; Wæver 1995; Wagnsson 2000; Eriksson 2000). Among other things, possible connotations include that it is urgent, that the issue must be given top priority, that survival is at stake, that it is the responsibility of the state, and that extraordinary measures such as secrecy and **acts** of force may be necessary (Buzan et al 1998: 23-26). Security policy is often regarded as the foundation of all other politics. Economic, social and other goals can never be attained if threats to survival cannot be averted. In other words, security policy and threat images are exceptionally loaded issues. As such, exploitation of the politically-loaded concepts of security and threat may make it easier to place an issue on the political agenda (Eriksson 2000; Eriksson 2001a: 3). Issues that are perceived as a threat, a crisis, or are in some other way related to security demand to be handled with greater force, gravity and haste than other issues (Kingdon 1995; Stern 1999; Keeler 1993: 436; Eriksson 2000). Similarly, desecuritisation may be used to remove an issue from the agenda, to reduce the amount of attention paid to it, to prevent secrecy and other extraordinary measures (Wæver 1995). This need not always mean that an issue is removed from the agenda. As is well known, politics involves more than the management of security threats. Put another way, desecuritisation may mean that an issue is made the object of a normal democratic decision process rather than being handled in panik.

Hinnfors (1995), in particular, has discussed the art of saying no as a means of managing the political agenda—an analysis which, in turn, relates to discussions on non-decision (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Svärd 1982). In an investigation of a number of political issue areas within Swedish political debate, Hinnfors identifies three specific rhetorical methods for preventing an issue from appearing on the agenda. The first is to claim, “it is not our responsibility”—a

well-known tactic in politics which means that the decision-makers do not have to right to make a decision, or, perhaps, even to discuss the issue. The other method is to claim that “It is bad timing,” that is, that they are unable to do anything about the matter however much they would like to. Although it might be the decision-makers’ responsibility, they can nonetheless claim that the time is not right to address the issue, pointing, for instance, to ongoing investigations, rules of procedure, and the established order of priorities. The third method is to claim that “It is the wrong content.” Arguments here may be ideological as well as factual. For example, those opposed to a broader concept of security assert that this concept is diluted when it is extended to include more threat images. Ultimately, these opponents argue, there will be no difference between serious and less-serious threats. Hinnfors’ argument on rhetorical counter-strategies is an important contribution as the bulk of research has primarily dealt with why issues appear on the agenda—not with why they never make it there, or why they are removed from the agenda. Formulating or re-formulating the issue, in any case a threat image, may make it easier or more difficult to claim that the forum, the timing or the content is right.

We have now reviewed the necessary, but not sufficient, explanatory factors of our model. In the following section, we give examples of factors that often complement cognition and framing with the purpose of explaining why certain threats appear on the political agenda whereas others do not.

Events

Events—particularly of the dramatic kind—are a category that must be taken into account if we want to explain the political salience of certain threat images (Eriksson 2001a, b). Events that are interpreted as crises or external shocks often imply that central values are perceived to be at stake; that time is short, and that extraordinary measures are justified (Keeler 1993; Kingdon 1995; Stern 1999; Hermann 1990: 12). There is no doubt that the terror attacks in the U.S. on September 11th, 2001 immediately moved global terrorism to the top of the agenda around the world. Terrorism has long been viewed as a grave problem that several authorities in countries such as the U.S. have had the specific mission of counteracting. A great deal of research and many policy suggestions have circulated among experts and decision-makers for a number of years without making an impact in the form of decisions about the allocation of resources and new programmes. However, the unprecedented scope of violence, drama and

symbolism around the attacks of September 11th undoubtedly meant that a window of opportunity was opened for terrorism as a threat image and for different proposals on how to handle the problem. In the U.S., this event resulted in a number of measures, including a serious budget increase in order to meet the “new” threat—a threat that was hardly unknown earlier—as well as the creation of a new authority for “homeland security.” Military action and other types of action against Usama bin Ladin, his network al Quaida and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan were other results, actions that would hardly have developed as they did during the Fall of 2001 had the terrorist attacks not occurred. Events may also shed light on structural and actor-related threat images, even if the event does not constitute a threat in and of itself but rather the execution of a threat (Eriksson 2001b: 11-12).

Dramatic events may even contribute to the downplaying of a threat image or its disappearance from the agenda; a situation that is sometimes called “desecuritisation.” An almost symbolic example of this is the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event that immediately created a whole new set of conditions for conceptions in the Western world. Another example is that of the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Baltic states during the early 1990’s, an event that created conditions for a security political language in the Baltic states that articulated a downplayed threat image of Russia while a broadened threat image appeared on governmental agendas. During the 1990’s, the general trend in all of Europe and North America was a much greater emphasis on structurally-based threats at the expense of actor-based threats. It remains to be seen whether the new awareness of terrorism after September 11th 2001 will alter this situation.

Identity

In recent years, identity has become a central theme within the social sciences in general and security studies in particular (Katzenstein 1996; Wæver et al 1993; Wagnsson 2000; Lapid & Kratochwill 1996). Why is identity important in the study of threat images and threat politics? First of all, identity, as mentioned above, is, like sovereignty, a fundamental societal value that may be perceived as threatened. Second, identity, and, more specifically, the development of identity, may be viewed as one explanation of why certain threats are played down whereas others are accentuated.

Together, identity and sovereignty are the cement that bonds the components of the state-building project together: the state as idea, its physical basis and its institutional form (Buzan 1991: 65 ff). When a country occupied for decades by a foreign power regains its independence, it becomes crucial not only to safeguard the country's sovereignty, but also to build national identity. In particular, ideas about state-building are linked to the concept of identity in the form of ideas about national solidarity, i.e. "what we are in relation to others." The Baltic states looked the part during a half century of Soviet occupation. The individual Baltic identities have survived, perhaps even been reinforced, in the face of external threat.

Theoretically, identity may be related to threats in several ways. In the scholarly debates on identity theory, we can identify two, partially-opposed assumptions. On the one hand, it has been suggested that the more strongly members identify with other members within their own group ("in-group"), the more negative their attitudes vis-à-vis other groups outside of their own group ("out-group"). In extreme cases, this antagonism may lead to conflict. On the other hand, it is assumed that a strong feeling of identity is necessary and healthy for individuals. According to this assumption, conflict and instability between different groups or nations may be an expression of poorly-developed identities (Schafer 1999: 830).

If we translate this to a Baltic reality during the 1990's—at least as decision-makers have portrayed this reality for the rest of the world—one is more likely to agree with the latter assumption, at least preliminarily. As identity is strengthened between Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, respectively, and the self-esteem of these groups increases, there is no reason to offer remonstrations of a Russian threat based primarily on historical experience. In other words, it is not the ambition of Baltic decision-makers to place a potential Russian military threat on the official foreign policy agenda as the worst of all possible scenarios. Instead, Baltic decision-makers are able to concentrate on other threats, for example terrorism and environmental pollution, perhaps even in collaboration with the former occupying power (Noreen 2001).

Moreover, there is a pragmatic aspect here that links identity and threats more clearly together. As Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians—elites as well as non-elites—gradually seek a European identity, threat images are gradually shifting to accommodate European conceptions of threat and security. In the rest of Europe, there is no interest in depicting Russia as a serious threat. In Sweden, decision-makers have emphasised a non-military threat

image of the near abroad since the middle of the 1990's, and, according to certain researchers, this security policy language has been "exported" to the Baltic states (Archer & Jones 1999: 172-174; Schimmelfennig 2000; Wennersten 1999). However, this argument naturally assumes the existence of willing receivers of the new language, receivers who are seeking not only national identity, but also a larger affiliation within a modern Western political culture.

Political context

Inspired by Kingdon's discussion of "the political stream," we have found it relevant to examine the political context as a separate category (Kingdon 1995). The logic behind this group of factors is that it is a question of the conditions required to win or to persuade decision-makers with power-based arguments and interests rather than persuading decision-makers with good ideas and knowledge-based arguments. We consider the latter within the framework of what we call the institutional context. The conditions this context concerns are, among others, the majority position in legislative assemblies, alliances and coalitions, negotiations, and the preferences and ideologies of leading decision-makers.

On their own, changes within the political context can open a policy window, for example in cases where there is a change of government or a new governmental policy established. Different political parties prioritise partly-different threat images. Within European politics, the left-right dimension still plays some role in perceptions of what security policy threats are. For instance, all of the Swedish parties represented in Parliament support a widened security concept which includes several non-military threats. However, differences do exist. The Green Party represents the widest view on security. At the same time, they strongly emphasise environmental threats and downplay all possible military threats. The Moderate Party advocates most clearly for a threat image in which military threats remain essential, although it is not a question of the traditional threat of invasion. However, they do consider possible strategic attacks that might be undertaken against Sweden using military means. The remaining parties stand somewhere in-between, emphasising a widened threat image that is, however, more limited to antagonistic actors than the threat image represented by the Green Party. Clearly, the majority position in Parliament may influence which threat images are more readily emphasised or toned down.

The strategic manoeuvring that the political context refers to does not only concern government and parliament. The administration, too, can act strategically in order to realise their own interests, a fact which directs attention to theories on bureaucratic politics (Hilsman 1992; Townsend 1982; Halperin 1974; Allison 1971). Hammond summarises the argument in the following way: ‘strategic behavior by subordinates – bargaining, coalition formation, and the dissemination of supposedly secret information – enables them to circumvent constraints placed on them by their positions and jurisdictions, thereby making the structure largely irrelevant’ (Hammond 1986: 416). The fact that terrorism first achieved the kind of salience it now has on the U.S. agenda after September 11th can partly be explained by bureaucratic conditions. Early on, a number of articles in, for example, *Foreign Affairs* drew attention to the problem, yet the issue still failed to take on sufficient salience (Ashton, Deutch & Zelikow 1998; Lewis 1998). Much of the information analysed by intelligence services is screened before it moves up the hierarchy. The issue may quite simply have been downplayed or, in the worst case, pushed to the side in the bureaucratic process. The issue may, for example, have fallen victim to a rivalry between groups within the bureaucracy (Eriksson 2001b: 217-18).

Institutional context

In the group of explanatory factors we refer to as the institutional context, it is not a question of pushing an issue for the purpose of promoting actors’ interests or gaining power, e.g. winning an election. This aspect is part of the political context. Within the framework of the institutional context, it is, instead, a question of persuasion based on knowledge arguments rather than persuasion through bargaining and compromise. Perceptions about large-scale terrorism before September 11th may serve to illustrate this point. As mentioned earlier, the risk of terrorist acts on a massive scale was discussed among academics, but this group apparently failed to convince the most central decision-makers of the seriousness of this threat. Naturally, it is significant that the ministries of foreign affairs in the Baltic countries push the issue of alternative threat images as opposed to the threat image of Russia. Had academics alone argued for alternative threat images, it is less likely that these threat images would have achieved the level of societal salience that they have. Accordingly, the academic specialists who hatch ideas that may gain societal salience in the long term are usually to be found farther down on decision-making hierarchies. If a group of specialists is in agreement, we have a so-called ”epistemic community” (Haas 1992), which, by virtue of its consensus,

has a greater opportunity to push an issue higher up the decision-making hierarchy than if it were not in agreement. Thus, it is possible to follow the process from the stage of ideas to its political break-through. A good example of this is the way in which IT became a security policy issue (Eriksson 2001a, b). Another example is the way in which the millennium bug rose to prominence on the agenda in the U.S., Russia and Sweden (Holmgren & Softa 2001).

In sum, the institutional context reveals that the actors in question are dependent on norms and bureaucratic sub-cultures within their organisations (cf., the discussion on "organizational setting." See, for example, Carlsnaes 1986: 113). Moreover, the problematics of formal and informal networks between different actors must also be factored in. Gunnar Sjöstedt has emphasised that informal networks can be just as important as formal ones, for example, within foreign policy (Goldmann, Berglund & Sjöstedt 1986: 153). If a group of experts has good informal contacts with centrally-placed decision-makers, the conditions are more favourable for the quick placement of an issue high up on the political agenda. In most countries, a security policy establishment exists that maintains formal and informal contacts whereby ideas and information on, among other things, threat images are exchanged (Eriksson 2001a, b). It remains the task of future research to map out exactly which networks are being developed here and their importance to the setting of the security policy agenda.

Opinion

The role played by opinion and the moulding of public opinion in the placement of an issue on the political agenda is a contested matter. Much has been written on the media's effect on the moulding of public opinion, which has sometimes been termed the CNN effect (Dearing & Rogers 1996; McCombs & Shaw 1972; Strömbäck 2000). A number of studies prove, meanwhile, that this effect is less important on central decision-making than previously thought (cf. Strobel 1997; Strömbäck 2000).

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that opinion and the moulding of opinion in the broader sense (that is, not only with a view to the media) influence the types of threat images that receive significant attention in society as the shaping of opinion is part of the attention. It is not self-evident, however, that the moulding of opinion will later lead to political success. An example of this is the threat posed by neo-nazism, a threat that has received significant coverage in the media across Europe for many years. Certainly, this threat image achieved

political prominence at the highest level—ministers made statements and conferences were organised. Still, the issue failed to appear on the security policy agenda (Mellbourn & Robertson 2001: 44-45). This example relates to one of Ulf Bjereld's conclusions when he claims that there is no necessary connection between "the objective strength of a threat" and "the risk perceptions that exist in a society" (Bjereld 2001: 29). States exposed to large-scale environmental catastrophes do not automatically move environmental threats up to the top of the political agenda. It is, rather, in what respect public opinion in the state in question is dominated by different types of opinion cultures that is decisive. Bjereld's research, based on cultural theory, makes an analytical distinction between individualist, egalitarian and hierarchical cultures. A particular combination of these culture types has an impact on which threat images will receive societal and later political salience. For example, Bjereld shows that in a country such as Sweden, there exists a mixture of egalitarian and individualistic cultures within public opinion, the result of which is that threat images concerning the economy and the environment "dominate risk perceptions both among members of Parliament and among voters" (Bjereld 2001: 29).

A theoretical synthesis

In the model below, we summarise our theoretical synthesis. The importance of the necessary factors (see the large arrow in Figure 1) changes according to situation, but they are inevitably present in every agenda-setting process. We assume that a threat image first appears in the mind, whether it is a reaction to something real or merely a work of the imagination. Human cognitive and memory functions play a role in this context. One's conception of a threat may, of course, stop with the thought. In such case, the threat image becomes neither an object for framing nor political action. In other words, it is impossible for a threat image to gain salience if it has not been given some sort of form for decision-makers. It is not sufficient merely to think about threats. They must also be talked about or written about in order to draw attention to them. The way in which this is done has an impact on their success; that is, their effects on the agenda.

Each explanatory group (see the smaller boxes in Figure 1) suggests one or more hypotheses. It is important to note, however, that these hypotheses often complement each other. Thus, they are, each and every one, neither necessary nor sufficient as explanations. This can be

illustrated with the example of September 11th 2001. Why is it terrorism was not given top priority in the U.S. before this date? Above, we pointed to political and institutional factors, but, from all appearances, it was the dramatic events of September 11th that opened “the policy window” for terrorism. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the importance of what was identified as a threat and what was identified as threatened, how this was handled cognitively, and how the threat was given form rhetorically.

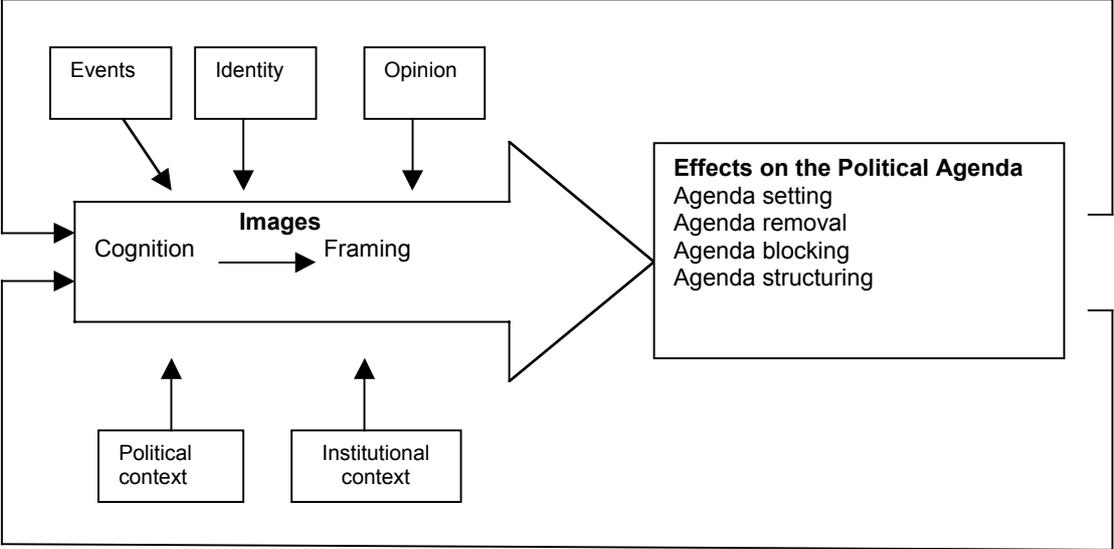


Figure 1. Setting the Agenda of Threats: An Explanatory Model

An example of a completely different process is how the Russian threat was removed from the official agendas of the Baltic states, an act that can be connected with the Baltic governments’ quest for affiliation with the Western political culture, often in terms of European identity. However, it is also reasonable to explain the downplaying of the Russian threat as a result of Russia’s withdrawal of its troops from the territories of the Baltic states during the Fall of 1994. The fact that Baltic decision-makers have, in all probability, not removed the Russian threat from their hidden agendas—that is, agendas that are not accessible to the public—can be related to the cognitive factor of negative memories of the past. A half century of Russian occupation has made a profound impression on the cognitive world of Baltic decision-makers; they often become “prisoners of the past” (Jervis 1976; Vertzberger 1990). We may also find an explanation within the institutional context. It is likely that the security policy establishment in Estonia, for example, has developed an "epistemic community" in their view

of the Russian threat. The intense desire to become members of NATO may well indicate that the Russian threat image still has a significant impact on security policy planning in the Baltic states.

How a threat image disappears from the political agenda is just as important as how it rises to prominence. However, the downplaying of threat images has received far less attention than studies of their rise to prominence. The research has primarily focused on “agenda-setting” rather than its opposite: the prevention of an issue from appearing on the agenda (“agenda obstruction”) or its removal (“agenda removal”). In this context, Hinnfors’ discussion of rhetorical strategies for preventing an issue from appearing on the agenda is useful, as is the discussion on non-decision. Despite attempts by the Swedish Green Party and a number of academics, the concept of “environmental security,” for example, has not taken on salience in the official Swedish definition of security policy (Fredriksson & Holmgren 2000). As Tallberg points out, the effect may also be that issues already on the agenda are re-prioritised or reinterpreted (“agenda structuring”) (Tallberg 2001).

This model has similarities both to established agenda-setting theory (Kingdon 1995; Robinson 2000, Keeler 1993; Dearing & Rogers 1996) and some of those theories that attempt to explain foreign policy change (Hermann 1990; Holsti 1982; Gustavsson 1998). Similar to these theories, our model provides multi-causal explanations in which actor-related as well as structural factors are considered. Gustavsson (1998) makes an interesting distinction between “checklist models”, “structural constraints models” and “cyclical models.” Our model is, similar to the models developed by Holsti (1982) and Hermann (1990), a “checklist” of various types of structural and actor-dependent factors. However, our model also incorporates a dynamic perspective. A good example is the enormous political salience of threat images connected to IT and information warfare. An important explanation for this is that these “new” threats have been interpreted within the framework of established security policy institutions. There has been no challenge made by outside actors. It is, rather the traditional military authorities that have widened their view on security and interpreted “cyberthreats” as a further development of the classic threats that the military has always had to manage. There has been an undeniable *Revolution in Military Affairs* (RMA) (Eriksson 2001c).

First, the dynamic is apparent in "the feedback loops." In turn, the effects on the agenda influence how new threat images are interpreted. Threat images appearing on the agenda may become institutionalised, i.e. the objects of routine decision-making and the responsibility of specific authorities and agencies. This means that further "securitisation" is facilitated as events and new problems can then be interpreted within the framework of established threat images. It becomes difficult, moreover, to question or remove the threat image from the agenda. At the same time, it becomes difficult to promote new threat images outside of the institutionalised framework.

Second, the dynamic deals with why a threat image effects the agenda at a specific point in time, even though underlying causes may have been present over a longer period. Kingdon's argument on "policy windows" is useful in identifying trigger factors: "An open policy window is an opportunity for advocates to push their pet solutions or to push attention to their special problems" (Kingdon 1995: 203). Without actors who see an opportunity to seize the moment, the agenda will not be affected, regardless of how favourable other circumstances may be. There is no mechanism or invisible hand independent of actors that determines the political agenda. What is it, then, that creates these "policy windows"? Obviously, it is question of changing conditions. Changes in the political context are important. It may, for example, be a question of a change of government or a conference at which a new political programme is to be formulated. In such moments, decision-makers are often more open to new ideas than they otherwise would be. When a shift of government occurs, those in power do not fall back on established routines and policies, but rather ask themselves what should be done and what should be done first. Changes of public opinion can also serve as a trigger factor that, for instance, populist actors may exploit.

It is clear that dramatic events may have a trigger effect. They draw attention to a specific problem, but this is often limited to the relatively short period during which the event occurs. It is a question of striking while the iron is hot. A number of "policy windows" are predictable and recurrent, such as changes of government and political conferences, while it is difficult to predict when and if other "policy windows" will occur, i.e. large-scale accidents and terrorist attacks. In contrast to Kingdon, we argue that changes within the institutional context as well—what Kingdon refers to as "the policy stream"—may affect the agenda (Kingdon 1995; Eriksson 2000: 19). The end of the Cold War opened a "policy window" for changes in security policy across Europe and North America. The result of this was that the traditional

military threat image of large-scale war in Europe was downplayed or simply disappeared from the agenda. Subsequently, decision-makers turned to experts and researchers with an entirely new question. Instead of merely mapping an already well-known and institutionalised military threat, experts and researchers were given the task of identifying "new" threats. The vacuum on the threat image agenda was quickly filled with all sorts of non-military and non-state-centered threats. However, had earlier consensus between researchers and experts on military and nuclear threats not been replaced by a new consensus on a broadened threat image, the opportunity to influence the agenda would likely have passed them by. The threat image changed, but the security policy establishment remained the same.

Final comments

Syntheses have both strong and weak sides. Criticism of syntheses often focuses on their incorporation of too many explanations such that the syntheses are incapable of distinguishing between what is more important and what is less important. We can defend our synthesis, however, by arguing that earlier research has been far too fragmented. The various elements that other researchers have contributed are incapable of explaining on their own the complex process that threat image politics actually is. Therefore, a synthesis is vital. At the same time, the synthesis can be viewed as a menu from which specific hypotheses can be derived and tested in individual cases. Distinguishing between more and less important factors is, moreover, something that cannot be done generally or once and for all. On the contrary, our synthesis is based on the conclusion that the analysis of which factors are more important than others can only be undertaken in a given situation. Our model simply maps out which factors the researcher ought to consider, and we have proposed how they are logically connected within this general model. In addition, we offer examples of explanations relevant in certain situations. We would now like to move forward and identify additional groups of explanations. Future research should clarify *types* of situations and processes in which possible combinations of explanatory factors and outcomes are asserted. The next step in the research is to increase knowledge of such typical cases. To this end, qualitative case studies and comparative analyses are required.

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