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Friends or Foes?

*Examining 10 years of U.S Intelligence assessments on the China threat,
2013-2023*

Mir Rashid

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how China has been portrayed in the Annual Threat Assessment reports of the U.S. intelligence community between 2013-2023. A qualitative document analysis is conducted on 9 publicly available threat assessment reports issued during this period. The theoretical framework applied is threat perception theory, which posits that a state's perception of threats guides strategic policymaking. The analysis focuses on identifying recurrent themes, descriptions, and characterizations of China through qualitative coding of the relevant text. Preliminary results indicate shifts in both the tone and substance of China's portrayal over time, reflective of changing threat perceptions within the intelligence community. Key external developments such as China's modernization of their military and their actions in the South China Sea are discussed. Meanwhile, internal factors like leadership transitions and strategic priorities in the U.S. are considered for their influence. This research aims to contribute to the fields of intelligence studies and U.S-China relations by shedding light on the evolution of threat perceptions within the U.S intelligence community. The changing narrative on China revealed through a decade of assessments offers valuable insights into understanding the shifting dynamics in U.S- China relations.

Keywords: United States, China, U.S Intelligence Community, U.S-China relations, Qualitative document analysis, Threat perception theory

Wordcount: 9745

List of abbreviations

IC: U.S Intelligence Community

DNI: Director of National Intelligence

U.S: United States

WTA: Worldwide Threat Assessment

FONOPs: Freedom of Navigation Operations

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1. Introduction

President Donald Trump vowed during a rally in Fort Wayne that once he is president of the United States, he will tackle the U.S. trade deficit. Trump continued by saying “*We can’t continue to allow China to rape our country, and that’s what they’re doing*” (CNN 2016). Rhetoric like this was common during the Trump administration, however the relationship between the United States and China has been rocky since the founding of the People's Republic of China 1949. China's rise over the past few decades epitomizes the emergence of a global power, with profound implications for the strategic calculations of existing powers, particularly the United States (Shambaugh 2013, p. 77). The evolution of this relationship has been underscored by a series of challenges and complexities, defining an era of shifting alliances, economic interdependence, and strategic competitions.

This thesis examines how the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC), through its Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment reports (WTA) from 2013 to 2023, has portrayed the rise of China. These assessments are critical as they encapsulate the U.S. government's official evaluation of potential threats and inform policymakers in their strategic decision-making (Betts 1998, p. 32). The research aims to contribute to the field of intelligence studies and U.S - China relations.

The timeframe encompasses leadership transitions in both countries and significant external developments that heightened tensions , such as China’s action in the South China Sea and issues on trade and technology. Applying threat perception theory as a framework, the research examines if shifts occurred in how China was characterized in tone, substance and emphasis within the reports. It also considers potential influencing factors like changes in strategic priorities or threat perceptions within the IC.

This research aims to provide insights into the U.S. Intelligence Community’s evolving assessment of China. As relationships evolve between countries, the implications for understanding dynamic power relations between the two nations is important as they can act as guidance for relevant policy responses.

1.1 Motive for research question

The changing portrayal of China in the Annual Threat Assessments reflects significant shifts in the geopolitical landscape and is indicative of the evolving perceptions of threats by the U.S. Intelligence Community. As China continues to grow in global stature—economically, militarily, and technologically—the way in which it is represented in these critical documents can have profound implications for U.S. national security policy and strategy. The U.S.-China relationship has emerged as one of the most complex and potentially consequential bilateral relationships of the 21st century. As Friedberg (2011) argues, this relationship encompasses a strategic rivalry that could define the future international order. Thus, tracing the evolution of China's portrayal can offer invaluable insights into how the U.S. perceives and responds to China's rise (Friedberg 2012, pp. 1-6).

1.2 Research question

The research question for this study has been formulated as followed:

'How has China been portrayed in the Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S Intelligence Community between 2013-2023?'

To examine this, the study will implement a qualitative content analysis as its methodological approach. The text within the Annual Threat Assessments will be analyzed to identify and interpret recurrent themes, descriptions, and characterizations of China. Underpinning this methodological approach is the theoretical framework of threat perception theory. The theory will provide a framework to interpret the qualitative data derived from the content analysis, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the changing narrative surrounding China within these assessments. By comparing the Annual Threat Assessments over a ten-year period, the aim of the research is to uncover how the narrative on China's threat has potentially shifted in tone, content, and emphasis, reflecting broader changes in the U.S. threat perception.

1.3 Limitations

This research is limited to how China has been portrayed in the annual Worldwide Threat Assessment (WTA) documents published by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI). The sample consists of 9 publicly available Annual Threat Assessment documents published by the DNI, during the period of 2013 to 2023. The 2020 document was not released by the DNI and is therefore not included in the research. The research focuses on textual portrayals of China as a threat within the WTA documents. Portrayals of other nations like Russia, Iran, or North Korea that may be mentioned in the threat assessments are not analyzed, as the research question concerns how China is portrayed. The scope of the thesis is limited to examining the 10-year period from 2013 to 2023. The limited timeframe was chosen to encompass leadership transitions and the escalation of strategic competition between the U.S. and China. However, long-term historical trends or developments outside this period are not analyzed.

1.4 Disposition

This thesis will be structured into several key sections. The introduction provides background context on the research topic and presents the research question and motives guiding the study. The literature review summarizes previous scholarly perspectives and findings relevant to the research question. This review is organized thematically to compare discourse on U.S.-China relations under the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. Next, the theoretical framework explains threat perception theory, which provides the analytical lens for examining the portrayal of China in the WTA documents. Key concepts from the theory are highlighted to aid in the analysis. The methodology section details the research design, including the qualitative document analysis approach. It discusses how the methodology aligns with the research aims and question. Operationalization using coding derived from threat perception theory is explained. The results present findings from the qualitative content analysis of the annual threat assessments between 2013-2023. Relevant excerpts are highlighted to demonstrate the coding process. The analysis synthesizes the results to reveal patterns and changes in China's portrayal over time. The discussion interprets the findings, examining how the research question was addressed. Connections to previous literature are made to contextualize the results. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the overall research outcomes, revisits the question, acknowledges limitations, and suggests future research directions.

2. Previous research

The upcoming sections will offer a comprehensive review of scholarly work pertaining to the evolving U.S-China relationship. The first section discusses the diplomatic engagements and policies during the Obama administration, examining the strategic 'Pivot to Asia' and its implications for bilateral relations. Following this, the Trump administration, taking into account the significant changes and policy shifts that characterized the period, notably in areas such as trade and regional security. Finally, the discourse will extend to the current strategies employed by the Biden administration, evaluating continuity and change in the U.S. approach to managing their relationship with China.

2.1 The Obama Administration

Renato Cruz De Castro (2013) examines U.S-China relations during the first term of former President Barack Obama. During the Obama administration, the dynamics of U.S-China relations underwent a transformation, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. This period was characterized by a series of strategic shifts and challenges, primarily driven by the growing influence and assertiveness of China. The administration's response, often referred to as a pivot strategy, was formulated to address and navigate the evolving dynamics, particularly in the South China Sea (De Castro 2013, p. 332).

The initial diplomatic endeavors of the Obama administration aimed to counter China's assertiveness through diplomatic means. An example of this approach was Secretary Clinton's 2010 Hanoi Declaration, which sought a multilateral resolution of the South China Sea dispute to impede Chinese expansion. However, China promptly responded critically, emphasizing the need for bilateral negotiations and warning against the internationalization of the issue in the region (2013, pp. 332-333).

In response to the limited success of diplomatic efforts, the Obama administration executed a strategic pivot, gradually repositioning U.S. naval and airforce towards the Asia-Pacific region. This shift signified a broader reorientation of U.S. global strategy, steering away from the post-

9/11 focus on the War on Terror, towards a renewed aim on maintaining stability and influence in Asia (De Castro 2013, p. 334).

China's reaction to the U.S. strategic pivot in the region was marked by a countervailing display of military power and renewed assertiveness within the South China Sea. The response of China included naval exercises and various demonstrations of its assertiveness over the disputed territories, setting the stage between the U.S. and China, over the influence of the Asia-Pacific region (2013, p. 344). The changes in the way the United States and China interacted during the Obama administration had significant effects on the dynamics of the region. The U.S. pivot strategy aimed to tackle China's growing naval power and its assertive behavior in the South China Sea, while China's response highlighted its willingness to challenge U.S. influence in the region. (2013, p. 334).

According to De Castro, during the first term of the Obama administration, there was a notable change in the U.S-China relations. The focus shifted from diplomatic efforts to a more strategic and military-oriented approach in the Asia-Pacific region. This shift, combined with China's assertiveness, created a situation where there was increased competition and repositioning in the region. This transition highlighted the challenging nature of managing U.S-China relations, especially given China's rising influence and assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region (2013, pp. 344 - 345).

2.2 The Trump Administration

Igor Mishin studies the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and China under Donald Trump's leadership. Mishin notes a distinct transformation in the relationship throughout the Trump-era, with considerable effects on the Asia-Pacific landscape, especially in the context of the South China Sea (Mishin 2021, p. 155).

According to Mishin, the Trump-era marked a clear shift from the diplomatic strategy characteristics of the Obama administration. The United States took on a more combative approach, focusing on curbing the expanding power and assertiveness of China within the region (2021, p. 156). The change of strategy was exemplified by a more robust and decisive demeanor,

as seen in the escalated number and magnitude of the U.S. Navy's Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. The FONOPs were intended to take a stance against Chinese territorial assertions and activities in the region, symbolizing the U.S. determination to preserve maritime freedom of navigation, while opposing China's endeavors to consolidate dominance over the region (Mishin 2021, p. 162).

Mishin points to the Trump administration's tactic of mobilizing a global alliance to address the South China Sea dispute, an effort to bring together regional and international partners against Chinese maritime sovereignty assertions and military activity in the region. This strategy was directed at diplomatically sidelining China and forging a collective opposition to its activities in the South China Sea. The U.S. conducted joint military drills and naval maneuvers with its allies such as Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Mishin states that the goal of the military operations was to send a clear signal of building a coalition aimed at neutralizing China's regional influence (2021, pp. 164-165).

Mishin argues that the Trump administration's actions had a significant impact on the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. worked to revive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as the Quad, which includes the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India. The main aim of the Quad was to improve security and stability in the region, especially in response to China's growing military and influence. Furthermore, Mishin states that the initiatives are seen as part of a broader strategy to oppose China's ambitions and military growth (2021, p. 168).

2.3 The Biden Administration

Dongchan Kim (2023) argues that there has been a significant shift of U.S. - China relations under the Biden administration. This shift is captured by the Biden Doctrine, which outlines a strategic approach characterized by a focus on strengthening alliances, multilateralism, and strategic risk reduction in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, Kim states that the Biden administration's stance in the region has triggered a significant response from China, leading to increased diplomatic tensions, military activities, and efforts by China to build partnerships with U.S. adversaries (Kim, 2022, pp. 107-108).

Kim highlights that the foreign policy under President Biden, also known as "The Biden Doctrine," signifies a shift in the U.S. approach to global affairs. It emphasizes the value of forging strong alliances, working collaboratively on an international scale, and strategically managing risks in the region. This policy direction is driven by the belief in an ongoing worldwide contest between democratic and authoritarian ideologies, which shapes the administration's strategy in foreign policy (Kim 2022, p. 109). Moreover, Kim states that the doctrine has influenced the administration's policy towards China, leading to increased support for Taiwan, strategic risk reduction measures, and a concerted effort to rally allies against perceived authoritarian influence (2022, p. 110).

The reaction of China to the foreign policy strategies of the Biden administration is shown by an escalation in diplomatic language, both within their own borders but also on the global stage. China has also increased its military activities around Taiwan, and the strengthening of partnerships with U.S. adversaries (2022, p. 113). The Chinese reaction reflects a perception of containment and a rejection of the Biden Doctrine, leading to an intensification of tensions between the two nations. Kim proclaims that the Biden administration's emphasis on democracy and strategic risk reduction, combined with China's response, has exacerbated the risk of a new type of Cold War, particularly concerning potential flashpoints such as Taiwan (2022, p. 114). Kim comes to the conclusion that as the global political scene changes and both the U.S. and China pursue their own strategic plans it is clear that their relationship is becoming more complex and tense under President Biden's leadership (2022, pp. 115-120).

3. Theoretical framework

The following segment will explain Threat Perception Theory, a framework applied in this study to explain how China has been portrayed in WTA documents over the years 2013 - 2023. The theory is based on the idea that a nation's strategic decisions and actions are largely influenced by the perception of threats.

3.1 Threat Perception Theory

Threat Perception Theory offers a lens into how countries recognize and react to potential dangers. According to the theory, a state's view of threats is molded by a combination of influences from outside (External) and within its borders (Internal). Externally, the observable capabilities and actions of other states are objective indicators or their threat potential (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 467). However, just the existence of such threat indicators does not necessarily translate into a perceived threat. Internal factors, like strategic culture, leadership and organizational dynamics mediate how external threats are interpreted (Jervis 1976, p. 58)

A state views other nations' capabilities through pre-existing lenses of strategic assumptions, biases and worldviews (Jervis 1976, p. 69). Perceptions of intentions are especially prone to distortion based on perceptual biases. For example, an adversary may be seen as aggressive even if their military buildup is purely defensive, which is due to preconceptions of their motives (Jervis 1976, p. 60). Thus, internal factors play a critical role in shaping whether external factors are processed as threats. Cognitive and organizational psychology sheds a light on how internal factors can systematically skew threat perceptions. At the individual level, Jervis outlines cognitive biases like mirror-imaging, where one's own rational motives are projected onto others (Jervis 1976, p. 48).

At the group level, bureaucratic politics and standard operating procedures within intelligence organizations can create "mindguards" that filter out disconfirming information (Jervis 1976, p. 64). Agencies are therefore prone to "groupthink", where consensus seeking overrides impartial assessments (Jervis 1976, p. 65). Such cognitive biases and organizational routines can influence how collected intelligence is framed and processed into strategic estimations of threats.

As Jervis (1976) states, perceptions of threat are heavily influenced by the psychological predispositions of decision-makers, who interpret information through cognitive biases and filters. This includes the tendency to see what is expected, rather than what is new, the inclination to fit ambiguous information into existing beliefs, and the propensity to consider actions of others as more hostile than one's own (Jervis 1976, p. 58).

While threat perceptions are shaped by internal factors, they are not static and can evolve in response to changes in the external environment or domestic politics. Shifts in an adversary's material capabilities, or crises and confrontational incidents, may force revisions in threat analysis (Jervis 1976, p. 63). Leadership transitions can also bring new strategic outlooks that prompt re-evaluations of other states (Ripsman et al 2016, p. 469). Periods of threat inflation or deflation may thus reflect an interplay of a changing external and internal environment.

The perception of an adversary's capabilities and intentions is filtered through the lens of the observer's own strategic culture, biases and their expectations (Jervis 1976, p. 69). Internal factors can therefore create discrepancies between perceived and actual threats. For example, racial stereotypes blinded U.S. intelligence of Japanese capabilities preceding Pearl Harbor (Wohlstetter 1962, pp. 341-342).

4. Methodology

This thesis addresses the research question “How has China been portrayed in the Annual Threat Assessment documents of the US Intelligence Community between 2013-2023?”. I have carried out a qualitative textual analysis of the WTA documents published online by the DNI. This study focuses on explaining how China is portrayed from threat perception. This implies that the discussion regarding China within the assessments can be systematically and reliably understood by identifying recurring linguistic use and portrayals, all of which are rooted in the predefined codes based on the theory.

4.1 Method

A qualitative research method has been used to examine the research question chosen for this research. A qualitative approach was chosen due to the aim of the research, which is to research the textual portrayals of China as a threat over time (Creswell 2018, p. 4). A qualitative method allows for an inductive, flexible, and contextualized analysis process, which is needed to interpret the meanings and assumptions within the WTA documents (Bowen 2009, p. 28). This includes interpreting the documents, rather than just describing surface trends. It also aligns with the constructivist ontological view of analyzing threat perceptions as fluid social constructions shaped by language (LeGreco & Tracy 2009, pp. 1520-1521).

Moreover, a qualitative textual analysis method can shed light on subtle connotations, implications and power dynamics concealed within documents, moving beyond their face value (Rapley 2007, p. 111). This is critical for understanding the internal and external factors that shape how China is portrayed as a threat over time. In contrast, a quantitative method would lack the interpretive depth and inductive exploratory traits needed for this analysis. Quantitative approaches are better suited to hypothesis testing or statistical generalizations rather than in-depth, contextualized explanation building (Creswell 2018, p. 4). By drawing out key themes and concepts through close reading of the documents, a qualitative analysis helps to show the subtleties and complexities of the portrayal in ways a quantitative approach cannot (Bowen 2009, p. 29).

4.2 Qualitative Document Analysis

A qualitative document analysis has been used as the research method to examine how China has been portrayed in the WTA reports of the U.S. Intelligence Community from 2013-2023. Qualitative document analysis is used for interpreting and coding textual data to identify key themes, concepts, and meanings (Bowen 2009, p. 27). Specifically, a directed qualitative content analysis has been used to analyze the threat assessment documents. This involves using initial coding categories that are derived from threat perception theory (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1277). Coding helps to organize the data and capture threat portrayal patterns and nuances within the WTA documents.

The chosen method aligns with the objective of showing how specific factors influence the textual depiction of China as a threat across different periods. It facilitates a thorough investigation of the discourse by methodically condensing the data and later on interpreting it (Downe-Wamboldt 1992, p. 314). The insights into threat perceptions generated through coding and analysis of documents makes this an ideal method for the chosen research question.

Compared to quantitative content analysis, qualitative document analysis allows for a more contextualized, flexible, and inductive interpretation process, which is suited to the complexity of WTA documents (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1285). While subjective interpretations are involved, structured coding and category-based analysis lead to a higher replicability (Downe-Wamboldt 1992, p. 315). The codes were developed based on threat perception theory concepts, which will guide the analysis. The codes can be applied manually or by using a datasytem. In order to answer the aim of the research I have used Nvivo, accessed through Lund University, to apply the codes to the text. Kristina Boreus (2018) explains that by applying the codes into a dataprogram the researcher can apply the codes to a larger amount of documents, therefore helping the researcher to systematically analyze the data (Boreus 2016 p. 58).

4.4 Code Development

In order to systematically analyze how China is portrayed in the WTA, a set of codes was developed to capture key themes and concepts revealed through close reading of the texts. This directed qualitative content analysis approach involves using theory-driven codes as initial

categories to guide the analysis, while also allowing for open coding of emergent themes. The codes are derived from threat perception theory (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1285).

The coding categories stem from central concepts in threat perception theory. Boreus (2016) argues that the researcher has to read the material before applying the codes through the data program (Boreus 2016, pp. 58 - 59). The primary material, which consists of the WTA documents, have been thoroughly read before applying the codes in NVivo. The codes were therefore created through a mix of induction and deduction. As the codes are anchored to the chosen theory, it will help identify patterns related to internal and external factors that have shaped the portrayal of China as a threat over time. The codes act as filters to clarify the interactions among various factors, such as leadership priorities, Chinese activities, and intelligence gaps that come together to form perceptions of threat (Jervis 1976, p. 63).

For example, codes were created to capture threat emphasis placed on certain Chinese capabilities or actions. Other codes track threat comparisons made between China and other adversaries. The coding system rooted in threat perception theory concepts facilitates a nuanced analysis of how both internal and external factors condition the portrayal of China in the WTA documents. Employing a coding framework that draws from the concepts of threat perception theory enables a detailed examination of the discourse concerning China, taking into account how both internal and external influences shape its depiction. This approach aids in identifying crucial patterns and factors that explain these portrayals while also accommodating the incorporation of new themes through open coding. Linking the codes to the foundational elements of threat perception theory ensures that the analysis is deeply rooted in the established theoretical framework, moving away from subjective interpretation to a systematic, theory-driven research, based on evidence and the theory for explanation.

4.5 Codes based on Threat Perception Theory

To address the research question, "How has China been portrayed in the annual threat assessments of the U.S. intelligence community between 2013-2023?", a codescheme grounded in threat perception theory was implemented. The framework will incorporate a coding scheme based on threat perception theory, which accounts for factors influencing how states perceive and

react to potential threats. The coding scheme allows for a systematic and objective analysis of the WTA documents, in order to identify and categorize the portrayal of China over the specified time period.

The coding scheme is mainly based on the book “Perception and Misperception in International Politics” published by Robert Jervis (1976). Jervis argues that the perception of decision makers are filtered through cognitive biases, leading to potential discrepancies between perceived and actual threats (Jervis 1976, p. 28). The coding scheme distinguishes between references to China's capabilities and actions (external factors) and the U.S. intelligence community's interpretations influenced by strategic culture, organizational biases, and leadership (internal factors). In practice, references to China's military growth or economic strategies are categorized as external elements. Meanwhile, the assessment's language, focus, and backdrop are evaluated for signs of internal elements. This includes insights into what the U.S. intelligence community believes motivates China's actions, which mirrors the strategic culture and organizational viewpoints within the intelligence community itself.

The codes, which are organized into external and internal factors, have been entered into the data analysis program NVivo along with the WTA documents. These codes have been manually assigned throughout each document. Subsequently, NVivo generates a graph that displays the frequency of each code's application within the document.

4.5.1 External factors

External Factors:	
Military capabilities	Modernization programs, weapons development, and intelligence about capabilities amplify threat perceptions, especially unclear capabilities (Jervis 1976, p. 58).
Aggressive actions	Territorial assertiveness, human rights abuses, cyber attacks, and other confrontational moves increase perceived threat levels (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 55).

Alliance relationships	Adversarial alliances and defense partnerships, like Sino-Russian cooperation, raise threat perceptions (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 55).
Geopolitical surroundings	The priority given to one threat compared to other threats, based on developments in the external environment (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 55).
Ideological/regime differences	Perceived threats are amplified if an adversary gains influence in strategically vital or unstable regions (Jervis 1976, p. 62)

4.5.2 Internal factors

Internal Factors:	
Leadership priorities and beliefs	The ideologies, worldviews, and threat priorities of top leaders influence which adversaries are emphasized or downplayed. New administrations often reframe portrayals based on agendas (Jervis 1976, p. 29).
Strategic culture	Ingrained cultural assumptions, historical analogies, and shared threat perceptions within national security organizations shape assessments (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 59).
Intelligence gaps	Unknowns and uncertainties regarding adversaries' capabilities and intentions amplify threat perceptions (Jervis 1976, p. 62).
Analogical reasoning	Past experiences with adversaries, especially trauma like Pearl Harbor or 9/11, provide analogies that color future assessments (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 59).
Domestic politics	Public opinion, economic costs, special interests, and partisan debates act as constraints on threat portrayals and ensuing policies (Jervis 1976, p. 216).

4.6 Material and Research Boundaries

The aim of the research is to analyze the public WTA documents, published annually on Intel.gov, by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence from 2013 - 2023. The year 2020 is excluded because no assessment was published that year. The WTA documents is the primary data examined. Prior research on the topic and the chosen theory was conducted using keywords such as “Threat perception”, “Threat Perception Theory”, “China - U.S. relations” “Biden China”, “Trump China”, “Obama China” and “China Intelligence” at Lund University's academic database, LubSearch. Relevant peer reviewed articles alongside the literature have provided the background on threat perception theory as well as previous research.

The WTA documents examine key national security issues and spotlights nations such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. They open with an overview of global threats, followed by regional overviews, and conclude with sections detailing threats posed by specific adversaries. The consistency of structure of the WTA documents facilitate a comparative analysis (Ratcliffe 2016, p. 29). The scope was limited to these assessments due to the fact that they offer valuable insights into how the IC publicly portrays threats such as China. The consistency of the documents make them useful for studying evolving narratives over time (Ratcliffe 2016, p. 33). However, focusing only on the published assessments has its limitations. They do not show all the behind-the-scenes analysis and debate within intelligence agencies and the IC. Also, threat perceptions in the assessments do not always shape actual policy decision making (Ripsman et al. 2016, p. 57).

Still, the assessments can be viewed as summaries of how the IC publicly depicts key threats (Ratcliffe 2016, p. 28). China is featured prominently in each one. Adding interviews with intelligence officials or policymakers to the textual analysis could provide more context on internal debates and the decision-making process. However, interviews were not conducted as part of this research due to the nature of this study, which is focused narrowly on textual analysis of the published WTA documents. This research specifically focuses on the sections related to China. This narrow focus allows in-depth textual analysis of how China is portrayed as a threat. Comparing the annual assessments over time reveals important patterns and changes in how China is portrayed (Bowen 2009, p. 29).

4.7 Operationalization

As Bryman and Bell (2017) note, operationalization involves converting qualitative data into a form that can be interpreted according to the chosen theoretical lens (Bryman & Bell 2017, pp. 171-172) . In this study, the qualitative data comes from the WTA documents published annually by the DNI from 2013 to 2023. This material is systematically organized and coded to analyze how China is portrayed when examined through the framework of threat perception theory.

Lynham (2002) discusses how operationalization links theory to the empirical material. To link the theory and the empirical material, the theoretical perspective must be transformed into concrete indicators (Lynham 2002, pp. 231-232). In this study, the theory will be connected to realities depicted in the threat assessments, through a qualitative interpretation and theory based codes.

A coding scheme has been developed, which consists of key constructs from threat perception theory. Relevant excerpts from the assessments will then be assigned these codes, with patterns in the coded data revealing how U.S. perceptions of China as a threat have changed over time. For instance, discussions of Chinese military activities are coded as “external factors”, helping interpret shifts in how such capabilities are portrayed. This bridges the gap between the qualitative data source and the theoretical framework chosen. It thereby allows the research question regarding portrayals of China to be empirically addressed through a structured analysis guided by threat perception theory. The operationalization creates an operational link between the theory and the WTA documents, which are central to the study.

4.8 Reliability and Validity

According to Teorell & Svensson (2017), it is important to consider validity and reliability when conducting qualitative research. This is to ensure the quality and credibility of the findings (Teorell & Svensson 2017, p. 71). Bergström and Boreus (2018) note that a study is only valid if it fulfills its intended aim, which in this case is to examine portrayals of China in the WTA documents (Bergström & Boreus 2018, p.38).

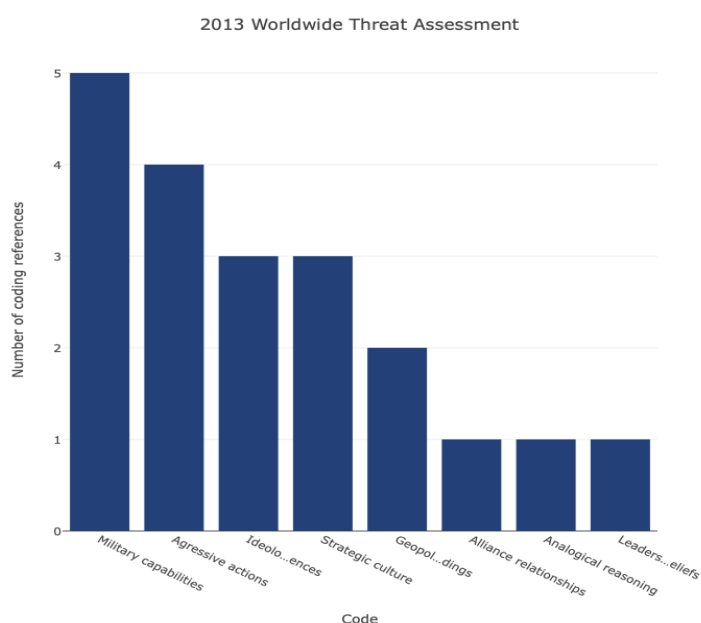
To achieve this, the connection between the aim of the research and the research question has been thoroughly evaluated. Additionally, Threat Perception Theory as the guiding theoretical framework will be carefully applied throughout the study. This will confirm that the object of study remains focused on what is intended to be studied. It is also critical to avoid preconceptions that could influence analysis or results (Bergström & Boreus 2018, pp. 41-43). As such, previous scholarly work will be comprehensively reviewed to identify any inherent biases. The selected primary source materials from the DNI are also limited strictly to those relevant for addressing the research question (Bergström & Boreus 2018, p. 39).

Reliability involves precision and consistency in the methodology (Bergström & Boreus 2018, p. 40). A qualitative document analysis has therefore been conducted in a meticulous, structured manner. By transparently documenting the research from the theoretical underpinnings through the data analysis and the subsequent interpretations, the study upholds its credibility. This transparency allows the research process to be replicable, enabling others to potentially reach similar conclusions.

5. Results and analysis

In the following sections, the outcomes derived from the coding scheme based on threat perception theory on the World Wide Threat Assessments, as released by the DNI, will be presented. Each graphical representation, generated using NVivo, is structured according to the respective WTA document, which illustrates the frequency and application of the specific codes derived from the theoretical framework within the document. The upcoming sections will also offer an analysis of the results and figures obtained from NVivo, based on the codes derived from Threat Perception Theory and the documents published by the DNI from 2013 to 2023. Each document will be systematically analyzed in chronological order, followed by a comprehensive summary analysis encompassing all examined documents.

5.1 2013 assessment



(Figure 1: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2013, published by DNI).

Figure 1 illustrates that the code “Military Capabilities” has appeared five times in the document, while “Aggressive Actions” emerged four times. Additionally, the codes “Ideological/Regime differences” and “Strategic culture” appeared three times, whereas “Geopolitical surroundings” emerged twice. Finally, “Alliance relationships”, “analogical

reasoning”, and “Leadership priorities and beliefs” each appeared once in the document published in 2013.

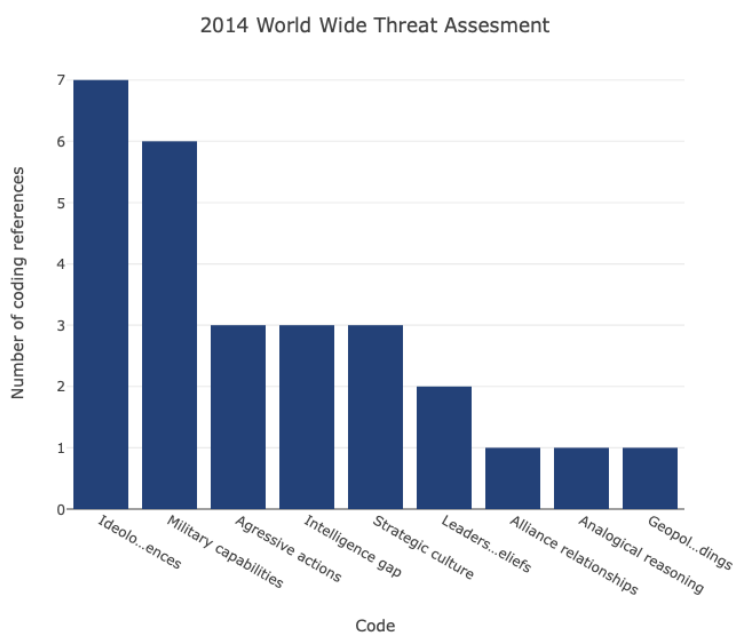
The assessment focuses on China’s cyber espionage as a major threat - *“Advanced cyber actors— such as Russia and China—are unlikely to launch such a devastating attack against the United States outside of a military conflict or crisis that they believe threatens their vital interests”* (DNI 2013, p. 1).

The 2013 assessment delivered mixed signals regarding the portrayal of China (DNI 2013, p .4). Drawing on a theoretical understanding of how external factors impact perception (Jervis 1976, p. 7), it recognized China's expanding economic and military power. It suggested that these developments could pave the way for collaborative efforts between the U.S. and China, as noted in the assessment (DNI 2013, p. 6).

Nonetheless, the assessment seemed to be shaped by internal subjective elements as well, echoing the principles of Threat Perception Theory (Jervis 1976, p. 63). The document highlighted concerns over intelligence espionage and cyber threats as urgent issues (DNI 2013, p. 8). Consequently, China's observable actions might provoke stronger perceptions of threat than a detached assessment of its abilities would suggest.

Territorial disputes and maritime claims by China were flagged as emerging challenges and threats towards regional stability and the interests of the United States in the region. Regarding the territorial disputes and maritime claims, the U.S. views the challenges as strategic implications rather than openings for cooperation between the nations (DNI 2013, p. 6). The assessment also acknowledged China’s increasing influence in the region (DNI 2013, p. 7).

5.1.2 2014 assessment



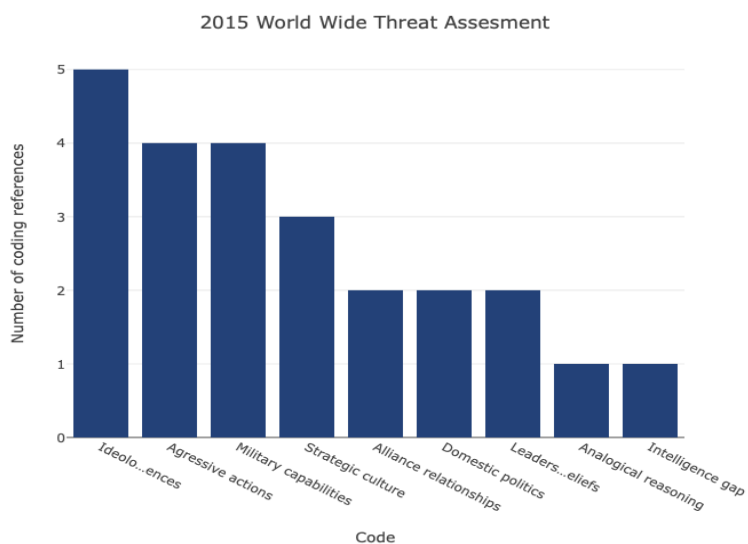
(Figure 2: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2014, published by DNI).

Figure 2 illustrates that the code “Ideological/Regime differences” has appeared seven times in the document, while “Military capabilities” has emerged six times. Additionally, the codes “Aggressive actions”, “Intelligence gap” and “Strategic culture” appeared three times, whereas “Leadership priorities and beliefs” emerged twice. Finally, “Alliance relationships”, “analogical reasoning”, and “Geopolitical surroundings” each appeared once in the WTA document published in 2014.

The 2014 WTA document maintained that China’s modernization efforts pose a long-term threat to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region (DNI 2014, pp. 3, 21). In line with De Castro, the assessment acknowledges China’s military buildup in the South China Sea, noting that assertive maritime activities have increased tensions in the region by China (De Castro 2013, p. 334). More starkly, the assessment warned that China’s rise could challenge “existing international rules and norms” (DNI 2014, p. 10). The rhetoric used reflects Jervis (1976) theory on how threats are filtered through expectations of change, as suspicion grew over China and its growing political and economic hegemony (Jervis 1976, p. 58). Moreover, the assessment emphasized

China's expanding military modernization and overseas political aspirations, corresponding with Betts (1978) observation that threat perceptions may be influenced by organizational biases (Betts 1978, p. 51).

5.1.3 2015 assessment



(Figure 3: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2015, published by DNI).

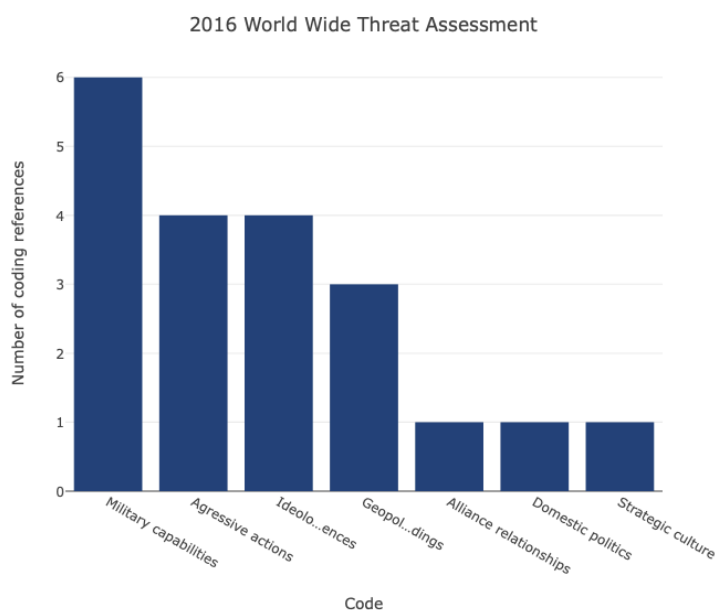
Figure 3 illustrates that the code “Ideological/Regime differences” has appeared five times in the document, while “Aggressive actions” and “Military capabilities” emerged four times. Additionally, the code “Strategic culture” appeared three times, whereas “Alliance relationship”, “Domestic politics” and “Leadership priorities and beliefs” emerged three times each. Finally, “Analogical reasoning” and “Intelligence gap” each appeared once in the WTA document published in 2015.

The 2015 assessment's portrayal of China was strongly shaped by perceptions of ideological/regime differences, as the code was referenced five times in the assessment. Discussions of China's differing political system and values compared to the United States, resonate with Jervis's idea that preconceived notions and cognitive biases can shape how a threat is perceived (Jervis 1976, p. 58).

Military capabilities and aggressive actions were also common codes, each applied four times when describing China's military modernization, and its assertive behavior in the South China Sea (DNI 2015, pp. 3, 7). This emphasis on external threat factors mirrors the presupposition that perceptions of threat are predicated on assessments of capabilities (Jervis, 1976 p. 150).

However, internal factors were also evident. Strategic culture was coded three times, suggesting historically influenced perceptions of China in the assessment. Domestic politics and leadership priorities/beliefs were each referenced three times, demonstrating how these internal lenses mediated perceptions of Chinese capabilities (Director of National Intelligence 2015, pp. 1, 9). Alliance relationships appeared three times, referring to the alliances of China, whereas they are perceived as a threat. This shows that threat perception is socially constructed, rather than objectively reflecting capabilities alone (Jervis 1976, p. 69).

5.1.4 2016 assessment



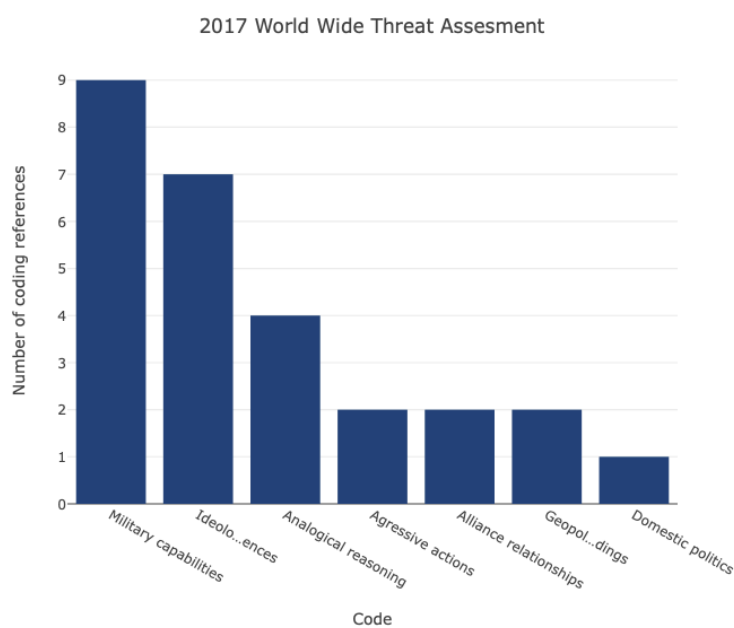
(Figure 4: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2016, published by DNI).

The 2016 assessment's portrayal of China was primarily shaped by a focus on the nation's military capabilities. "Military capabilities" was referenced six times, mainly when discussing China's military modernization, capabilities and growing defense budget (DNI 2016, pp. 2,7,10).

The focus on external threats suggests that evaluations of comparative power play a significant role (Jervis, 1976, p. 150).

“Aggressive actions” was also a common code applied four times when referring to descriptions of China engaging in cyber espionage and increasingly assertive rhetoric (2016, pp. 3,17). This reinforced a perception around China’s actions, rather than intrinsic attributes (Jervis, 1976, p. 58). “Geopolitical surroundings” appeared 3 times, demonstrating China’s regional rise and ambitions in the South China Sea (DNI 2016, pp. 3, 10, 15; Betts 1978, p.325). Alliance relationships and domestic politics was referenced once, indicating less weight on these factors, compared to more material power concerns (DNI 2016, p. 3, 9; Betts 1978, p. 325).

5.2 2017 assessment



(Figure 5: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2017, published by DNI).

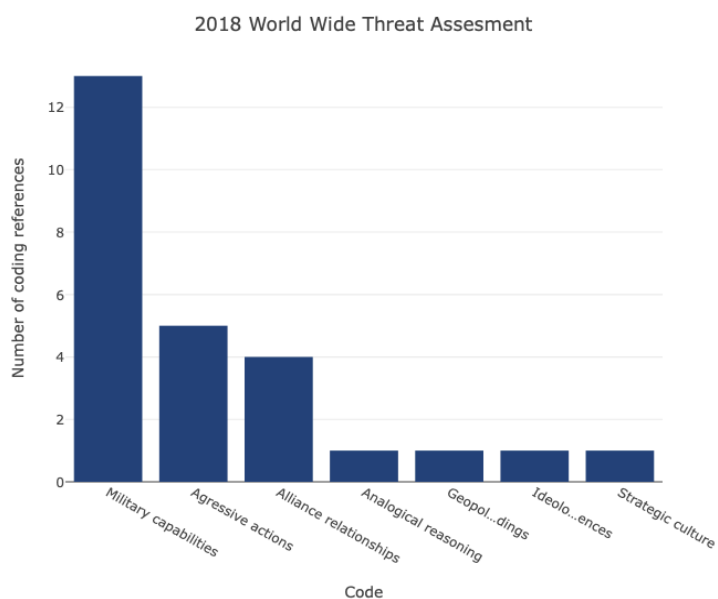
The 2017 assessment was predominantly shaped by China’s military capabilities, referenced 9 times (DNI 2017, pp. 4, 6, 8-9). The framing of China's military capabilities as a threat is in line with the idea that perceptions of a nation's capabilities can significantly influence the overall perception of threat (Jervis 1976, pp. 150-152). The modernization of capabilities such as

counter-space weapons and the development of power projection was highlighted in the WTA document. The emphasis on China's military capabilities perceived as a threat aligns with how states view and interpret a potential threat (Jervis 1976, p 58).

“Ideological/regime differences”, the second most common code at 7 references, also reflected assumptions made by threat perception theory (DNI 2017, pp. 8, 16-17). The portrayal of China's authoritarian regime as being at odds with Western democracies and values shows a cognitive bias that often casts skepticism on systems that differ from one's own (Jervis 1976, p. 43). Such a perspective reinforces cultural stereotypes and perceptions based on attributes or ideology, rather than solely on actual behaviors (Jervis 1976, p. 63). “Analogical reasoning”, cited four times in the document, suggests a trend of interpreting China through the lens of historical events, which may not even be directly related to China's own history, but rather to previous global events (DNI 2017, pp. 1, 8-9, 25).

The perception of a threat based on historical experiences could inform current strategic analyses (Jervis 1976, pp. 148-150). “Aggressive actions” and “geopolitical surroundings” were referenced two times respectively, reflecting the influence of China's behavior in domains like the South China Sea and its growing influence in the region (DNI 2017, pp. 1, 11 - 12, 16).

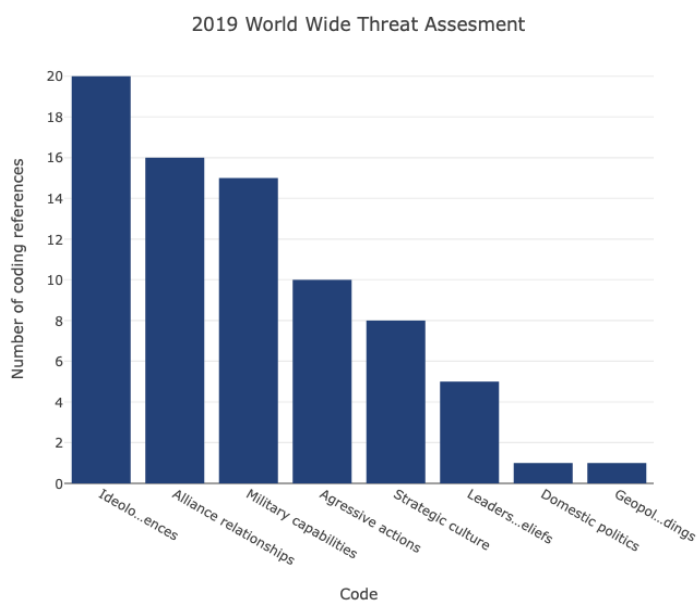
5.2.1 2018 assessment



(Figure 6: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2018, published by DNI).

As mentioned by Jervis (1976), threat perceptions are shaped by psychological predispositions that filter information through existing beliefs and expectations (Jervis 1976, p. 58). In the 2018 WTA document, China was portrayed prominently through the code “Military capabilities”, which was referenced 12 times (DNI 2018, pp. 6-7, 11-13). By repeatedly emphasizing the material advancements of China, the assessment implies that the nation has a growing potential to pose a threat to the United States. However the mere existence of military capabilities does not necessarily mean that they should be viewed as threatening. “Geopolitical surroundings”, “Analogical reasoning”, “Ideological/regime differences” and ‘Strategic culture’ were referenced once each. Jervis suggests that threats can be seen through the influence and relationships of a nation, which corresponds with “Geopolitical surroundings” and “Alliance relationships” being referenced in the text (Jervis 1976, p. 63). “Analogical reasoning” shows that threat perceptions could be influenced by a precedence, or a historical context (Jervis 1976, p. 271). The code “Ideological/regime differences” implies that a strategic cultural perspective perceives China’s differing system as a challenge (Jervis 1976, p. 58). China was also characterized through “aggressive actions”, which was referenced four times in the assessment (DNI 2018, pp. 5-6, 14, 18).

5.2.3 2019 assessment

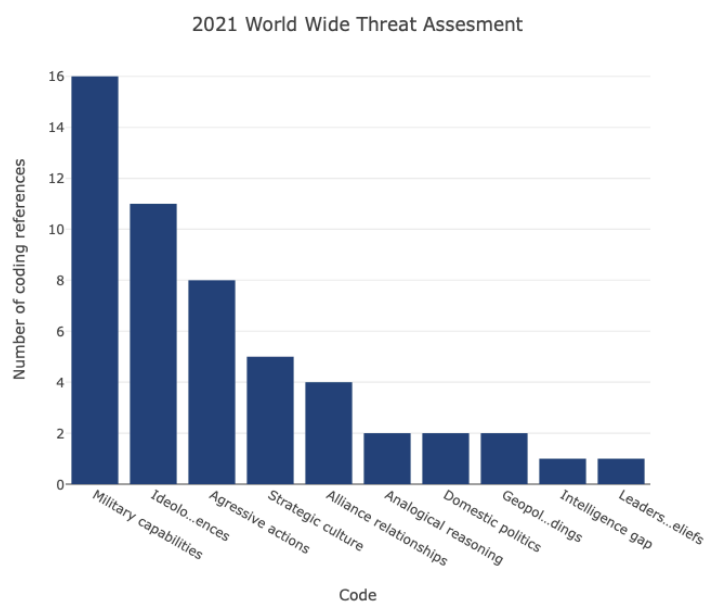


(Figure 7: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2019, published by DNI).

Externally, China’s military capabilities continued to grow, based on the assessment of its nuclear arsenal expansion and advances in space and cyber capabilities (DNI 2017, pp. 1, 11 - 12, 16). The focus on China’s military capabilities align with the perspective of threats stemming from material power (Wohlstetter 1962, p. 341-342).

However, the most common code applied in the 2019 assessment was “Ideological/regime differences”. This highlights the view of China’s authoritarian system as a threat to the democratic values of the United States and their global influence (Jervis 1976, p. 63). “Leadership priorities and beliefs” was also a factor, as the assessment was released during tensions between President Donald Trump and Xi Jinping. “Alliance relationships” emerged as another key code, showing the influence of domestic politics on threat construction. Portraying China’s military ambitions and alliance-building as threatening to U.S. allies could serve to rally support domestically, as the U.S emphasized a hardline stance against China.

5.3 2021 assessment

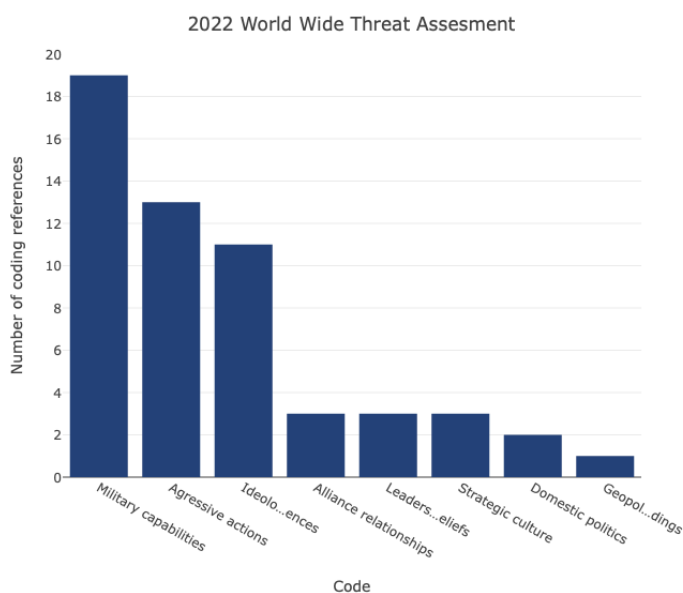


(Figure 8: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2021, published by DNI).

“Military capabilities” are clearly emphasized as a major factor contributing to the view of China as a threat, with 16 references. As Jervis (1976) discusses, developing military capabilities could increase aggressive actions as nations try to demonstrate power and exert influence internally and externally (Jervis 1976, pp. 223-224). For example, the assessment discusses China’s push to modernize its nuclear arsenal by developing more advanced military technologies, and expanding the ability to project power over Taiwan and other regional nations (DNI 2021, pp. 6-7).

“Ideological /regime differences” were also a key driver of perceived threats in the 2021 WTA document. The view of competitive authoritarian states as threats to democratic nations, and their interests could be a factor at play. The assessment also shows that China attempts to gain control and influence over Taiwan and shape the public discourse in the United States (DNI 2021, pp. 8-9).

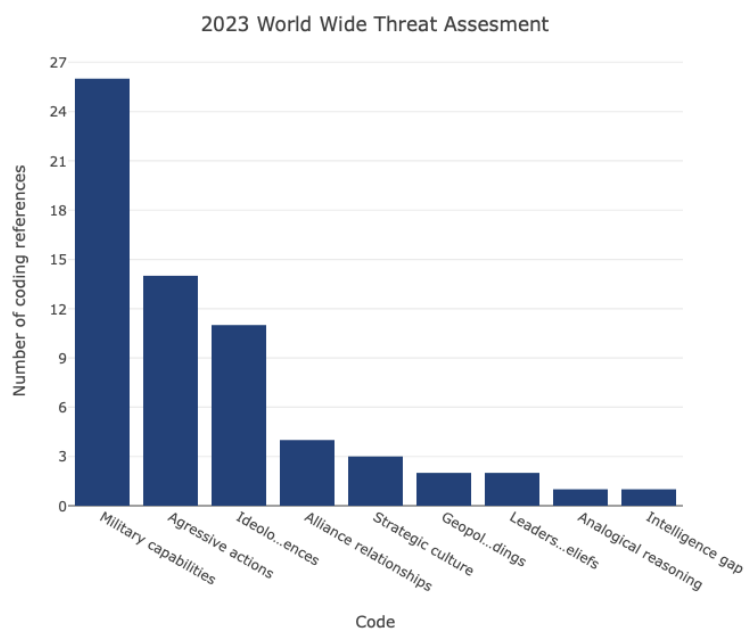
5.3.1 2022 assessment



(Figure 9: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2022, published by DNI).

Based on the frequency of emphasized threats, the most common code applied in the assessment was “Military capabilities” with 19 references and “Aggressive actions” with 13 references in the assessment (DNI 2022, pp. 4, 6-9, 19). The assessment highlights how China is emphasizing new military technologies in order to offset perceived U.S military superiority. As the internal threat code “Strategic culture” shows, American leadership seems to prioritize a ‘hard power’ projection to achieve geopolitical objectives in the region. Increased assertive exercises of military power by China in the region could also be seen. China’s pressure on Taiwan could be seen as a way to appease hardliners domestically (Jervis 1976, p.184). Growing differences in ideological values and governance models could be a factor in the tension or perceived threat of China in the region, as the external code “Alliance relationships” were applied. Authoritarian propagation could be viewed as challenging to the U.S-led cooperation in the region.

5.3.2 2023 assessment



(Figure 10: Generated by NVivo, this compilation provides a summary of each code that has surfaced within the World Wide Threat Assessment from 2023, published by DNI).

Based on the findings from the 2023 WTA document, the code that was referenced most was “Military Capabilities” at 26 times. This highlights that the U.S intelligence community perceives China’s growing military capabilities as a key threat. As Jervis (1976) argues, external threat factors such as observable capabilities can influence threat perceptions (Jervis 1976, p. 241).

The code “Aggressive Actions” was also frequently referenced at 14 times, which indicates that China’s actions in the South China Sea and towards Taiwan is viewed as a threat towards the United States and its interests in the region. This could also be viewed as destabilizing the region's geopolitical balance. That fits with Jervis (1976) argument that perceptions are shaped by how the actions of others are interpreted (Jervis 1976, p. 58). Other notable codes mentioned were “ideological/regime differences” at 11 times, and “Strategic culture” at 3 times. This speaks to the internal threat codes that show cultural biases as a bias shaping how China’s political system and historical strategic patterns are perceived (Jervis 1976, p. 69).

5.4 Analysis of 2013 - 2023 assessments

Over the course of the ten-year period analyzed from 2013 to 2023, China's portrayal in the Annual Threat Assessment published by the Office of the Director of National Security has evolved significantly, reflecting a shifting dynamic in the U.S - China relationship and threat perceptions within the U.S intelligence community.

In the early assessments from 2013- 2015, under the Obama administration, China was portrayed as a sophisticated cyber actor engaged in espionage for economic and political advantage, consistent with external realities (DNI 2013, p. 7). However, the language used tended to be cautious and avoided inflammatory rhetoric when describing China. For example, the 2013 WTA document stated that China pursues its strategic objectives "while preserving its autonomy" (DNI 2013, p. 6-7). This reflects the Obama administration's preference for diplomacy rather than confrontation in managing China's rise, as noted by De Castro (2013, pp. 332-333).

However, starting in 2016, a more subtle shift can be discerned as then-candidate Trump began criticizing China on the campaign trail (CNN 2016). The 2016 assessment refers more directly to China's "aggressive" illegal acquisition of U.S. government-funded research and commercial activity, posing a security threat (DNI 2016, p. 8). The contrast from the previous WTA documents suggests that threat perceptions were beginning to align with the emerging confrontational political rhetoric, influenced by internal dynamics like leadership transitions. As Jervis (1976) notes, a political shift can alter threat filters within bureaucracies over time (Jervis 1976, p. 29). The most pronounced evolution in China's portrayal in the WTA documents occurred during the Trump administration from 2017 - 2021, known for increasingly grave and inflammatory language. For example, the 2017 WTA document warned of China's potential "long-term competitive" threat due to its "military modernization" (DNI 2017, p. 6). Subsequent WTA documents referred to China as a "strategic competitor" and intensifying "rival", explicitly challenging American power and influence, both regionally and globally (DNI 2018, p. 3; DNI 2019, p. 5). The language used in the threat assessments during the Trump administration aligned with President Trump's adversarial stance on China, indicating that the IC had internalized Trump's aggressive strategic perspective. Jervis (1976) points out that domestic political factors

can intensify perceptions of threat, suggesting that the prevailing political climate can influence how potential threats are perceived and articulated (Jervis 1976, p. 29).

Interestingly, even as the Biden administration sought to regain international alliances and reduce tensions through a policy of strategic risk reduction and cooperation, as outlined in the “Biden Doctrine” (Kim 2023, pp. 107-108). However, the WTA documents maintained a hardened characterization of China. While acknowledging cooperation in some areas like climate change, the documents emphasized China’s “increasingly confrontational military activities” and the use of “predatory practices” (DNI 2021, p. 4; DNI 2022, p. 7). This could suggest that the organizational culture within the IC had internalized a more adversarial view of China, demonstrating the significant influence of political leadership on the shaping of threat narratives.

Moreover, the 2021 WTA document states that China is aiming to create global spheres of influence and currently employs economic and diplomatic leverage to discourage other nations from collaborating with the U.S. and its allies. (DNI 2021, p. 4-5). This signals a rhetoric that frames China as a challenger to American international standing. Betts (1978) noted that once narratives of threat take root, they often stay put due to institutional inertia, persisting even as the larger political landscape moves in the direction of collaboration (Betts 1978, p. 23).

Leadership priorities under the Biden administration, who took a hardline stance on competitiveness with China, likely contributed to threat inflation as well. The WTA documents reflected the administration's policy of confronting China on issues like human rights and trade while cooperating selectively on climate change. This suggests cognitive biases and reputational concerns within the IC, which amplified perceptions of risk from China to align with White House preferences.

Notably, references to ideological/regime differences were continued throughout all WTA documents. This illustrates a lasting cultural viewpoint that perceives China's different political system as fundamentally opposed to American values and interests on a global scale. The constructed narrative posits that China seeks to erode the validity of democratic principles. Such

an ideological frame points to perceptual biases that could influence depictions beyond tangible military capacities.

The qualitative analysis of the WTA documents from 2013-2023 provided valuable insights into the portrayal of China over time. When viewed through the theoretical lens, both external developments and internal dynamics have played a role in the portrayal of China.

Throughout the period, the focus on China's capabilities as an external threat was constantly shown. The mention of China's military modernization efforts align with the idea that observable improvements in military capabilities often lead into the belief of potential threats. Nonetheless, the themes emphasized have evolved in response to changing conditions throughout the period. There have been notable changes in the rhetoric used in the WTA documents, over the 10-year period. The narrative around China also shifted from portraying it as a competitive nation to portraying it as overtly antagonistic. This escalation in rhetoric appears to have mirrored shifts in the domestic political landscape, implying that the perspective of leadership influences how situations are depicted, often processed through a lens of subjective predispositions.

Earlier assessments highlighted “strategic culture” and “analogical reasoning”. Later reports prioritized capabilities and amplifying concerns. This revealed strategic cultural predispositions shape the perspectives, despite material shifts. Finally, both external and internal factors conditioned the portrayal of China. Leadership transitions decisively modulated characterizations tone.

6. Discussion

The findings from the qualitative content analysis provides an insight into how the research question can be addressed. To reiterate, the question is: “How has China been portrayed in the Annual Threat Assessment documents of the US Intelligence Community between 2013 - 2023?”.

This study aimed to examine how China has been portrayed in the annual WTA documents of the US intelligence community between 2013 - 2023. Through qualitative content analysis of textual portrayals, recurring themes were identified using codes derived from threat perception theory. The analysis revealed both continuity and change in the portrayal of China. There was significant consistency in the external factors cited, such as China’s military territorial claims (DNI 2013, p 3; 2023, p. 5). This suggests the IC objectively recognized China’s growing hard power capabilities, in line with Mishin (2021, p. 156). However, internal threat perception codes were also apparent. Under Obama and Biden, the language emphasized cooperation alongside competition, reflecting their preference for diplomacy discussed by De Castro (2013, p. 334) and Kim (2023, p. 109).

In contrast, the Trump era assessments used stronger and adversarial language on China’s intentions, aligning with his confrontational approach as analyzed by Mishin (2021, p.162). For example, the 2018 WTA document showed China’s goal of achieving “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near future” (DNI 2018, p. 3), whereas earlier and later reports simply referred to its pursuit of “regional dominance” (DNI 2013, p. 5; 2023, p.7). This highlights how leadership preferences can shape threat inflation or deflation through internal filters as shown by threat perception theory (Jervis 1976, p. 58). The research also shows how organizational dynamics influence threat perceptions, such as mediating organizational factors, which are essential to threat perception formation according to the theory (Betts 1978, p. 145).

The results also demonstrate variations in the thematic emphases given to China’s threat attributes over the period. In earlier assessments, cyber capabilities and espionage were highlighted most prominently. However, as China’s global economic and military footprint expanded, the assessments placed a growing importance on China’s technological advancements,

infrastructure investments such as the “Belt and Road initiative”, and naval modernization programs challenging U.S. dominance in Asia. This development shows China’s rising comprehensive national power, with the IC adapting its threat perceptions in response to China’s military and economic progress.

7. Conclusion

The following segment will answer the aim of the research as well as the chosen research question based on the analysis and discussion.

7.1 How has China been portrayed in the Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S Intelligence Community between 2013-2023?

This study aimed to examine how China has been portrayed in the Annual threat Assessment reports published by the DNI from 2013 to 2023. Through a qualitative content analysis to these documents, guided by threat perception theory, several key findings can be shown.

The WTA documents showed an escalation in how China was portrayed over the period analyzed. In early years under examination, China was described as a strategic competitor with concerns highlighted around cyber espionage and economic policy. However, by the latter years, the tone had shifted significantly with China portrayed as an acute threat across multiple areas, including military modernization, public influence operations and technological dominance.

The rhetorical portrayals of China in the reports also intensified over time, with a more alarmist terminology and the focus on China's objectives as increasingly conflicting with the interests of the U.S. Ideological competition became more pronounced in the WTA documents starting from the Trump administration, corresponding with what was seen as a more assertive China on the international scene. Threat perception theory reveals that the altered depictions were influenced by both external elements, such as China's growing capabilities and actions, and internal U.S. political shifts. The escalating geopolitical tensions involving Taiwan, the South China Sea, and trade disputes have been paralleled by heightened concerns about China's potential threat. The domestic political landscape also seems to have played a role in influencing the WTA documents. To summarize, this study has revealed that the depiction of China by the U.S. Intelligence Community in its Annual Threat Assessment reports has become progressively more critical and confrontational over the decade from 2013 to 2023. The evolving narrative has been sculpted by actual shifts in China's stance and capabilities, as well as by internal factors, including political climate and strategic cultural perceptions within the United States.

7.2 Relation to previous research

The findings of this study resonate with and extend several aspects of the reviewed previous research. In relation to the Obama administration, the early threat assessments corresponded with De Castro's (2013) analysis highlighting China as a strategic competitor. The tone of these reports reflected the administration's initial diplomatic efforts but also foreshadowed the emerging security dilemma in the South China Sea (De Castro 2013, pp. 332-333). As tensions rose in the region due to China's assertiveness, the latter Obama-era threat reports featured stronger characterizations of China's military modernization (2013, p. 344), relating to the strategic pivot and policy change described by De Castro (2013, p. 344).

Mishin (2021) documented intensified naval operations challenging China during the Trump-era (Mishin 2021, p. 162). Comparably, the assessments under Trump emphasized China's territorial claims more vigorously. References to issues like espionage also climbed, aligned with an increased confrontation noted by Mishin (2021, pp. 164-165). Consistent with Kim (2023), Biden-era assessments ratcheted up warnings as diplomatic tensions escalated (Kim 2023, pp. 107-108, 113-114). References to Taiwan and alliances increased, mirroring aspects of the strategic environment as outlined by Kim (2023, pp. 109-110, 113). Collectively, this study corroborates and expands upon the analyses of De Castro (2013), Mishin (2021) and Kim (2023) by tracing the official portrayal of China in threat assessments, published across these distinct periods.

7.3 Future Research

This study has some acknowledged limitations. It only includes the U.S Intelligence Community's view on China from their annual reports (WTA) , lacking China's views on threats and defense tactics. Countries have their own ways of seeing threats, influenced by their strategic culture, politics, and aims. The American IC, with its many agencies and analysts, may not present a unanimous view, and the study may omit alternative opinions. The analysis here is limited to the WTA documents published by the DNI.

The research covers a decade and captures a time of changing relations between China and the U.S, but it is not all encompassing. Future research could look further back, before 2013 or

beyond 2023. Adding the perspective of China, to compare how the individual countries view each other could enrich future studies. Public polling on American public opinion regarding China could also add to the findings of this study. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as interviews with former intelligence officers, could reveal deeper insights. The ongoing changes in China - U.S. relations offers continued research with different approaches and techniques.

8. Sources

The following section contains a full list of all the references utilized in this thesis. The sources are organized by type, beginning with hardcover books. This is followed by peer-reviewed scholarly journals and news articles.

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