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Dangerous Liaisons
A Theory of Threat Relationships
in International Politics

Chapter 1
The Study of Threats in International Relations

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The Study of Threats in International Relations

International politics is characterized by the frequent occurrence of threats. Yet, although scholars have long acknowledged that threats are one of the most important concepts in the theory and practice of international politics, no theory of threats has been proposed. As one review on the subject remarks "threat has generally been treated as a vital but presumably implicitly 'understood' facet of reality." (Hopple/Rossa/Wilkenfeld (1980:19) The negligence to systematically examine threats is all the more troubling if one considers that threats figure prominently in research on international crises, strategic bargaining, and foreign policy decision-making. Without a better understanding of what threats are and how they affect the behavior of state actors, we also have difficulty to better understand international crises and foreign policy making in crisis situations. This study aims at developing a theory of threats which is grounded in the empirical analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It aspires to provide a framework to conceptualize threats in international politics, to examine its relation to international crises and foreign policy making, and to demonstrate its value and relevance in the application to one of the most acute crises in recent history.

A logical starting point for examining threats is to review the extensive literature which refers to threats in one way or another. However, a literature review yields little value since, despite the importance generally attributed to the occurrence of threats, no systematic examination of threats has been undertaken. ⁽¹⁾ A better way to address the relevant literature is to discuss how and why various contributions have succeeded, failed or stopped short of enhancing our understanding about threats. Let us begin our discussion with a first cut on what is generally understood to be a threat. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines a threat as the "declaration of or the intention to inflict punishment, injury, death or loss upon someone in retaliation for, or conditionally upon, some action". Although this definition is readily accepted by most scholars, it is interpreted differently. One interpretation emphasizes that a threat is the communication of one's intention to take an action that is harmful to another party, if that party does not comply with one's request. This interpretation is adopted by scholars who place emphasis on the interactive nature of threats. In their view a threat possesses a certain logical structure which is external to the interaction, and therefore independent of the threatener and the threatenee. What is central to their analyses is how a threat can either be credibly communicated in an interaction or identified as a particular action sequence. Another interpretation is preferred by scholars who stress that the perception of the other's intentions accounts for the identification of a threat. In their view the threatener may or may not communicate a threat, for a threat is the result of how an actor derives estimates about the future behavior of the other from past experiences.

The difference between these interpretations cannot be reduced to the distinction between an objective and a subjective understanding of threats. In fact, neither of the interpretations is concerned with how threats are understood. In both views, threats, like any other phenomenon, is assumed to be already understood. The difference between the two views rather relates to their analytical objectives. The former aims at explaining how threats affect the sequence of state actions, whereas the latter tries to account for how threats influence the decision-making process. On the one hand, threats are conceived of as *behavior* by which a certain stimulus produces a certain response. Both, stimulus and response are readily identifiable, and the connection between them is either established through correlation or determined *a priori*. On the other hand, threats are thought of as *perceptions* by which situational pressures or psychological predispositions influence the recognition of the stimulus upon which a corresponding response is dependent. The recognition of the stimulus is therefore problematized. In order to see the merits and shortcomings of these interpretations let us make a second cut by examining how they are applied to the analysis of international crises.

1. Threats as Behavior

Threats are conceived of as behavior in the systemic analysis of international crises and the analysis of strategic bargaining in crisis situations. Whereas the former aims at identifying threats from typical interaction sequences in order to predict the occurrence of international crises, the latter aims at explaining how threats can be used more effectively to avert that a crisis turns into war.

The systemic analysis of threats was popular when general systems theory was believed to yield the most relevant explanations for social behavior in general and international relations in particular. Scholars working in this tradition have maintained that the focus on individual policy makers or the decision-making process of individual states obscures the structural constraints within which states can interact in a given international system. (Waltz 1959, 1979) Based on a systemic view of international relations, a group of scholars has set out to observe changes in the patterns in which states interact in order to predict the occurrence of crises. This research program has become known as international event analysis. Contrary to other uses of the systemic view, in which the focus is set on how the configuration of states affects their behavior, or how configurations change over time, international event analysis traces the behavioral record of actors in the system to identify patterns of state interactions. ⁽²⁾ (McClelland 1966) It is

the observation of regular patterns of action sequences which allows to determine the state of a system. The normal state of a system is characterized by peaceful interactions whereas the structure of a system is changed when wars occur. It is this transition which international event analysis tries to explain and eventually forecast. (Beal 1979)

The change from peace to war is itself thought of as patterned. Not only is the emergence of a crisis believed to precede the outbreak of war. The crisis itself is conceived of as a sub-system which can proceed through distinct phases from peace to war, or remain on a level of crisis stability.⁽³⁾ Whereas for most scholars in this tradition threats are merely attributes of a crisis situation, McClelland argued that "since it is evident immediately that not all events and event sequences generate threat responses and that not all threats lead into crises, the theory problem centers on the question of what the general statements should be concerning the conditions that do produce these results" (McClelland 1975:17). McClelland is one of the few who examined threats in their own right. In his view threat situations are precursors to crisis situations, and they are by no means limited to military actions. (McClelland 1977) In fact, he argued that threat recognition and response to threat make better objects for theory development than crisis itself. (ibid). He pointed out three aspects which other researchers have largely neglected. First, although crises are characterized by threats, and usually precede the outbreak of a crisis, threat situations can also occur without producing a crisis. Hence, for explaining crises we have to better understand what kind of threat interactions lead to the outbreak of a crisis and which do not. Second, threats are not only distinct actions, but they define a situation in which actors interact with each other in a way which is distinguishable from the interactions characterizing other situations. This difference is reflected in the action sequence, that is the order in which particular actions are performed. This suggests that state interactions in general, and threat interactions in particular, are examined best in terms of their sequential order. Third, the sequential order of an interaction determines whether or not a crisis is created. This implies that a sequential order can be assembled in different ways, and depending on the order of the action sequence a threat interaction or a crisis situation is created.⁽⁴⁾ The compositionality of interactions allows to think about the conditions under which a threat or a crisis is created, and thus, to explore the possibilities of avoiding threats and crises.⁽⁵⁾

McClelland's research program is useful to the extent that it proposes to examine the syntax of state interactions in general and of threat interactions in particular. However, his attempt to develop a pure and universal syntax of threat interactions precludes him from assessing what threat interactions are about.⁽⁶⁾ He argues that "without any reference to the setting of a crisis or to its larger meanings in the politics of international relations, the coding of the events of a crisis in chains of interaction sequences makes

possible the identification of patterns and the comparison of forms of crisis behavior" (McClelland 1961:193). Without an equally thorough examination of the content of crisis behavior, and thus of its semantics, he is unable to account for what it is that makes an action threatening, and what it is which allows to connect several actions into a threat interaction.⁽⁷⁾

In a systemic perspective an interaction is "a chain of acts which, in translation, become inputs and outputs between blocks, the latter standing for the 'units' of the system" (ibid:192) Except for their observed consecutive order it remains unexplained which acts can or cannot fill a particular slot in an action sequence. Instead of explaining how an action is understood in one way and not in another, and how this understanding relates to preceding and succeeding actions in an action sequence, the individual researcher is asked to impose his or her own interpretation on the available empirical evidence. One of the categories to be identified by the coder are utterances or deeds committed by some initiator and directed toward a legitimate target which constitute a threatening action. (Beal 1979:105-106) However, it is precisely the constitution of an action which explains why some actions are considered to be threatening and others are not. Thus, if one is interested in learning more about how threats are constituted, one cannot code the final product but one needs to identify its constitutive parts. Moreover, what constitutes a threatening action cannot be deferred to the coder, for "the correct description of an act is more than a reliable convergence of coder and/or diplomatic judgments; its meaning and identity is constituted by the multiple interpretative perspectives of the principle actors in such events" (Alker 1993:150-151). Finally, an examination of the sequential order of state interactions has to spell out which combinations of actions are permissible, and this requires that actions are not only correlated to each other but that the fit between actions is explained.

If the "connectedness" between actions is poorly explained in the literature on international event analysis, we should expect a better account in the literature on strategic bargaining. After all, strategic bargaining sets out to explain how "one constrains the partner's choice by constraining one's own behavior. The object is to set up for one's self and communicate persuasively to the other player a mode of behavior (including conditional responses to the other's behavior) that leaves the other a simple maximization problem whose solution for him is the optimum for one's self, and to destroy the other's ability to do the same" (Schelling 1968:160). Hence, an interaction is not only a chain of consecutive actions, but each action is contingent on the other's past and expected response. This adds a notion of temporality to the interaction which is absent in systemic analyses, for the contingency of one action on the other's decision implies that one actor has to wait until the other makes her move. (Goffman

1970:100)⁽⁸⁾ The contingency of actions on past and expected responses also implies that actors direct and chose their actions with respect to the expression which the other actor communicates.⁽⁹⁾

One key feature of strategic bargaining is the communication of threats. A threat is conceived of as a commitment for second move, that is, one player can be forced, bluffed or otherwise induced to move first so that the other player can refrain from inflicting whatever she had committed herself to do. (Schelling 1968:124)⁽¹⁰⁾ However, only if the threat is effectively communicated can it yield the intended response. Particular emphasis has therefore been placed on the notions of credibility and resolve. By making one's threats credible or by displaying resolve, the other actor can be convinced that one is not bluffing. However, even if the other actor believes the threat, she can defy it, and threaten in turn.⁽¹¹⁾

Credibility differs from resolve in that the former is an attribute of a threat whereas the latter is an action. It is difficult to assess how resolve differs from other actions, and whether it has to be a threatening action. This triggers a crisis which is understood as a competition in risk-taking behavior.

Two types of threats are distinguished. A deterrent threat is defined as making the punishment dependent on the other's action, that is, the other is called upon to refrain from her action. A compellent threat, on the other hand, requires the other to act in order to avoid punishment. "This distinction is in the timing and in the initiative, in who has to make the first move, and whose initiative is put to the test." (Schelling 1966:69) However, this distinction has little analytical value because it is based on the arbitrary definition of what constitutes a first move. For instance, the imposition of a blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis is a deterrent threat if the first move is defined as the Soviet compliance or defiance. However, it is a compellent threat if the blockade is considered to be the first move.⁽¹²⁾ As long as this decision is left to the analyst we can learn nothing special about the generic properties of threats.⁽¹³⁾ If we want to think of a sequence of interactions as more than just a chain of moves, we have to look for how interactions are assembled and re-assembled in real-world cases.⁽¹⁴⁾

An account for how actions relate to each other is also necessary for a better understanding of the kinds of interactions which the literature on strategic bargaining has set out to explain, for it claims that one's own threatening behavior is contingent on the expected responses, and *vice versa*. As long as it is not explained what kind of actions

evoke what kind of responses we can say very little about the contingency of actions, and thus, what is constitutive for an interaction, be it a strategic interaction, a threat interaction or any other kind of interaction.⁽¹⁵⁾ This is recognized by Boulding, who argues that "threats can be perceived as legitimate only if they are also perceived as appropriate; the threatened punishment must fit the deterred crime. Even if what we are trying to accomplish is not perceived as preventing a crime by the threatened party, that is, even if the threat is not perceived as legitimate, its credibility still depends on its appropriateness" (Boulding 1963:428).⁽¹⁶⁾ A better understanding of interactions can thus be gained by identifying how actions and responses fit together in terms of appropriateness. If we were able to determine what kinds of responses are appropriate with respect to a particular action, we could not only explain how actions fit together, but also specify the range of possible responses which a particular action produces. This would bring us a large step ahead of game structures, in which the possible range of responses is defined on *a priori* grounds, and which are therefore not contingent on the preceding action.⁽¹⁷⁾ In fact, our conception of a sequence would be considerably enriched, and we would be able to think about different possibilities to configure state interactions, and eventually threat interactions.

However, the notion of a fit would require us to go beyond the purely syntactical qualities of a sequence, and also consider a corresponding semantics. We cannot expect to identify a threat interaction without knowing what the interaction is about. To illustrate this argument recall the movie "Take the Money and Run". Virgil (Woody Allan) is once again in jail where he carves himself a gun from a piece of soap that he subsequently paints with black shoe polish. He takes one of the wardens hostage by threatening him with his "gun". The other wardens follow his instructions until they reach the outside. The wardens certainly do feel threatened while the kidnapper is pointing the "gun" at their colleague's head. However, once they arrive outside it is raining cats and dogs, and the "gun" starts turning into bubble and foam. The threat collapses, that is, the wardens no longer feel threatened but rather feel to have fallen victim to a bad joke; a very credible one indeed. However, this does not render the prisoner's act into a threat that was no longer credible, but it rather becomes another act altogether. This illustration shows nicely how we can conceive of a threat interaction. It is started when Virgil points his "gun" at the warden, and it ends when his bluff is called. However, to explain what renders the first action into a threat, and how this differs from the last action, we have to explain what it is that makes the wardens recognize that pointing a gun at them is threatening, and pointing a piece of soap at them is not. We are therefore required to explain how actors piece together an understanding of what represents a threat. However, this brings us to another definition of threats which is related to perception.

In sum, although strategic bargaining makes an important point about the contingency between actions and expected responses, it fails to elaborate on the notion of appropriateness which would explain how this contingency is formed and operates in social interactions. It also lacks the valuable features identified in the systemic analysis of interactions. Whereas in systemic analyses threat situations can be distinguished from other situations in terms of their characteristic interaction sequences, in strategic bargaining they are assumed and not explained. Moreover, it is impossible to elicit from the formal characteristics of an interaction sequence what the interaction is about. This is similar to the shortcoming previously identified in systemic analyses but differs from it in one important respect. In systemic analyses the pattern of interaction sequences, and thus the definition of particular situations, is identified through coding procedures which are applied to empirical material. In strategic bargaining, on the other hand, the structure of the game, and thus the definition of the situation and the possible interaction sequences characterizing it, are unrelated to any particular empirical case. Both traditions fail to provide us with an understanding of what threats are, because they conceive of threats as a particular behavior whose meaning and consequences we already know. As long as state interactions are conceived of as chains of content-free moves or stimuli, without explaining how one element of a sequence relates to another, threat interactions and any other kind of social interaction remains unexplorable.

2. Threat as Perception

Many scholars have criticized the view that threat interactions be conceived of as unmediated behaviour by which a certain stimulus produces a particular response. Their claim is that behaviour is not entirely determined by the objective or external properties of the situation but also by subjective or internal sources that form an actor's perceptions. Knorr has observed that "the facts that all perception is fundamentally selective and that selection is normally governed by working assumptions, or beliefs, about the outside world permit predispositions to intervene in the act of threat perception". (Knorr 1976:112) The main contribution of scholars working in this tradition is that perspective is added to an otherwise uniform interpretation of a situation. As Robinson argues a "crisis is a subject-dependent concept because the status of a series of events as crisis depends on one's perceptive: for what or whom are they a crisis?" (Robinson 1996:14) One should therefore expect that one of the shortcomings identified earlier can be avoided by paying attention to perceptions. We noted that in the systemic analysis a threat interaction is identified by the coder whereas in strategic bargaining it is designed by the analyst. Let us therefore have a closer look at how threat perceptions are analyzed, and how this analysis can add to our understanding of threats.

For those who conceive of threats as behavior, the connection between actions is either a function of their chronological order, or the result of how the structure of the game has been defined. No attention is paid to how an actor interprets an action which is directed at her. It is rather assumed that actors take the other's actions for what they are, and what they are is determined by the coder or analyst. If threats are viewed as perceptions, on the other hand, the selective biases of policy makers represent "the decisive intervening variable between event and reaction in international crises" (Cohen 1979:3). Threats are thus the result of looking through a kaleidoscope made up of biases, predispositions, and beliefs which obscures an accurate assessment of the situation. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Emotional distortions are explained either by the risks involved in possible responses which generate psychological stress or the perception of limited time horizons which produce time pressure. Some important representatives of the former position are George (1979), Janis (1982), Janis/Mann (1977), Jervis (1976), Lebow (1981), and Jervis/Lebow/Stein (1985). The latter position has been mainly held by Holsti (1972).⁽¹⁹⁾ More concretely, "these intervening preconceptions and attitudes produce selectivity in the receipt and use of information; they therefore contribute to a distorted image of reality and to false expectations" (Knorr 1976:85).⁽²⁰⁾ This suggests, however, that, at least for analytical purposes, a distinction between existing and perceived reality is maintained. As Knorr points out, "the crucial point is that a threat is usually not observable. It is a cognitive construct. But unless it is a product of psychopathology, this construct is derived from things which, in principle, can be observed - that is, the behavior of governments and the capabilities of states" (ibid:84).⁽²¹⁾

Scholars working in this tradition have been less concerned with how perception works, and have concentrated instead on identifying the sources which account for the discrepancies between what policy makers believe to be threatening and the "real" situation.⁽²²⁾ They contend that the effects of perceptions can be identified, if an actor behaves unusually, that is, "when he does not do what the situation seems to dictate" (Jervis 1976:36).⁽²³⁾ Consequently, scholars working in this tradition have rather focused on misperceptions than on perceptions, for it is argued that only through deviations that the selection schemes of policy makers can be examined. However, this procedure is highly problematic because it stipulates a certain behavior to be deviant without identifying the norm from which this behavior is supposed to digress. It is simply assumed that an actor behaves according to the norm if she interprets evidence in ways that conform to the generally accepted rules of drawing inferences. (ibid:119) However, it is precisely the drawing of inferences which characterizes the process of perception, and as long as this process is not explained, the concept of misperception has little value. Moreover, actions are still not contingent on each other in the sense that we can explain what makes a response appropriate with respect to a preceding action, and thus, how a

range of responses is created with regard to a particular action. Although the literature on perceptions implies that responses are contingent on how policy makers perceive a certain action, it does not further explore the relationship between actions. It is rather left to the analyst to judge whether a response is usual or unusual with respect to a particular action. Consequently, we are still unable to explain what it is that makes an action threatening, and how we can distinguish threat interactions from others. If we were able to make the process of perception explicit, in the sense of explaining how policy makers make inferences and categorize actions, we could not only explain how some actions are understood to be threatening, but also what responses are considered to be appropriate. What is appropriate according to the participants would then determine what is considered to be normal behavior, and we no longer would have to resort to some objective standard of normalcy established by the analyst. This would render misperceptions into a misnomer, because from the perspective of the participants, their responses would be appropriate with respect to the action which they perceive. However, we could preserve the objective of studying misperceptions, and examine how different perceptions are created, and how this misunderstanding *qua* mis-categorization characterizes and affects state interactions.

Cognitive psychologists have elaborated more on the inferential schemes which policy makers apply than other scholars working on perceptions usually have. Whereas the latter are primarily concerned with how capabilities and intentions are inaccurately assessed, the former are interested in making the inferential schemes explicit through which policy makers "impose structure on otherwise highly ambiguous data" (Steinbruner 1974:90). This allows them to directly address the process of perception as a routine activity. In fact, cognitivists argue that "a great deal of information processing is conducted apparently prior to and certainly independently of conscious direction and that in this activity the mind routinely performs logical operations" (ibid:92). This argument is used to point out the inadequacy of the analytic paradigm, according to which the most mundane activities are the result of conscious calculations. ⁽²⁴⁾ More importantly, this argument emphasizes that the "ability to build stable, reliable perceptual images out of varying stimulus patterns reveals that the mind is routinely capable of powerful logical operations on inherently ambiguous data" (ibid:93). Cognitive information processing therefore expresses the characteristics of a generative grammar which Chomsky describes as "a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences" (Chomsky 1965:8). When policy makers draw inferences they do so according to a system of rules which can be applied to an infinite number of situations. Some concrete inferences are therefore said to be generated by the system of rules *qua* belief systems.

Cognitivist theorists are interested in explaining how decisions are made under

uncertainty.⁽²⁵⁾ The founding fathers of this approach, Richard Cyert and James March, argued that the failure of an established performance launches a "problemistic" search for a remedy, that is, the existing feedback channels limit the information, and thus, the alternatives between which a new standard procedure is being selected. (Cyert/March 1963:120-122)⁽²⁶⁾ Halperin makes a similar argument when he talks about the definition of an issue. An issue is first identified by lower echelons of the administration. However, most issues are not new but have already been defined in terms of the interests involved. Depending on the own organizational interest the participant develops a plan of action to turn the emergence of this issue favorable for him. (Halperin 1974:117-118)⁽²⁷⁾

Consequently, an organizational account can tell us nothing about threats. Although threatening acts are an integral part of a number of standard operating procedures such as military contingency plans, they do not automatically match the image contained in them, or they fall outside the contingencies altogether. As long as we cannot explain how policy makers interpret information, the formal characteristics of information processing tell us little about policy making in threat situations. Uncertainty is the result of complex situations, and describes the discrepancy between the actual state of the environment and the information available to the decision maker. Contrary to other scholars who maintain that uncertainty leads policy makers to make probabilistic judgments about the other's response, cognitivist scholars hold that uncertainty is resolved by categorical inferences. The categories applied to concrete situations are derived from the belief system and assembled in a way as to assure consistency with existing beliefs.⁽²⁸⁾ For instance, an object seen to hover on the horizon is inferred from existing belief systems to be a bird, a helicopter, or a balloon. No inferences would be drawn that the object is a person, not because persons are unlikely to hover in the air, but because persons are believed to be unable to fly.⁽²⁹⁾ The cognitivist literature provides us with the most solid notion of perception thus far, for it emphasizes that perception is a systematic and consistent assembly of categories which are inferred from existing belief systems. We are also told that the compositionality of perceptions is thought of best in terms of possible and not probable combinations. Particular categories are assembled in a way so as to fit with each other according to an existing belief system, and as argued previously, a fit is more than a correlation; it requires that the relation between categories be rule-governed.⁽³⁰⁾ (Abelson 1959) However, what remains to be explained is in which situations policy makers invoke a particular belief system which allows them to infer categories that map onto particular situations. In the absence of such an explanation we cannot say anything specific about threat situations. We are also left uninformed about how the connection between actions and responses is inferred from the belief system. This is primarily the result of thinking of perceptions as images or mental maps. Although we might be able to explain how threats are cognitively constructed, we would have difficulty to explain how a cognitive construct translates into action. Hence, although information processing and the cognitive construction of phenomena can be

addressed by cognitivist theories, they are unable to account for how inference rules are applied in continuously evolving social interactions.

Few scholars have elaborated on how threats are inferred from concrete situations. As Cohen argues "threat perception involves less an instantaneous act of recognition than a more or less protracted course of evaluation." (Cohen 1979:84) Lazarus elaborates further that "the appraisal of threat is not a simple perception of the elements of the situation, but a judgment, an inference in which the data are assimilated to a constellation of ideas and expectations" (Lazarus 1966:25).⁽³¹⁾ Although Cohen's study on threat perception is based on the systematic analysis of empirical cases, he fails to make the rules of inference systematically explicit.⁽³²⁾ Instead he arrives at the conclusion that international conduct is regulated by rules which reduce uncertainty in the communication between actors, and thus allow their expectations about each other's future behavior to converge.⁽³³⁾ If he conceived of rules as making systematic inferences, he could explain how policy makers from different states achieve a mutual understanding of their interactions. Instead, he uses a functional definition of rules which is understood as limits imposed on actions.⁽³⁴⁾ (Cohen 1979:184) He holds that as long as actors play by the rules no threats occur. If, on the other hand, an actor transgresses a rule, the coordination of mutual expectations is disrupted, uncertainty about the other actor's future behavior is created, and the infraction is interpreted as a foreboding of impending harm. (ibid:187-189) Hence, in Cohen's view rules are not generative but constraining, and he is therefore unable to account for how threats are generated so that they can be understood as being illegitimate.⁽³⁵⁾ Even if threats were transgressions of socially accepted practices, they still would have to be categorized as such in order to be understood.

Although Cohen ignores that threats can also be used to maintain and not only to disrupt the social order, he adds a social dimension to his understanding of rules, that is, policy makers apply rules which are not mentalistic and private, but they are expressed in actions.⁽³⁶⁾ Moreover, the question of whether or not a threat is legitimate is not answered by the actors of a threat interaction but rather by the relevant public. Milburn and Watman argue that "the legitimacy of a threat may be closely related to the legitimacy of the need from which the threat is perceived to have emanated (or the extent to which the need is socially approved)" (Milburn/Watman 1981:25). This implies that the public makes similar inferences as the actors, that is, they apply a similar inferential scheme for interpreting a particular situation. This allows an actor to make inferences about the public's judgment, but also about the other actor's response based on her behavior. This renders actions not only social but it also brings to the fore the performative character of actions. However, we are now leaving the realm of perception, for we are no longer

dealing with how threats are cognitively constructed. Instead we are entering the realm of social construction, where we examine how threats are constituted in the course of state interactions.

In sum, the literature on perception adds perspective to an otherwise unproblematic understanding of threats. Yet, as long as the analysis is focused on misperceptions without explaining how perception works, we are unable to describe what it is that makes a particular action threatening. To describe the sources of misperception tells us more about specific psychological influences than about how a particular phenomenon is interpreted. Although more general features of the decision making process can be explained by organizational and cognitive methods of coping with complex situations, the specifics of how particular situations are understood and reacted to cannot be addressed. However, the findings of scholars working in the cognitivist tradition add considerably to a better understanding of how threats can be conceived of, at least in principle, as being systematically assembled through a process of inferring categories from existing belief systems. The notion of a generative grammar is a very powerful proposition to account for how policy makers are able to make sense of an infinite number of situations. If we were interested in the cognitive construction of threat images we could examine how individual policy makers invoke similar or different belief systems to infer an interpretation of a particular situation. Yet, in addition to the difficulty of making reliable statements about how individuals construct concrete phenomena in their minds, we could hardly account for how one or several cognitive constructs translate into actions. Since our objective is to explain how threats are understood and reacted to, and how this understanding affects the further unfolding of an interaction, we have to explain how threats are constructed socially.

3. Threats as Social Constructs

Whereas threats as behavior are situated in a readily accessible world, threats as perception are located in the minds of policy makers. We have discussed the problems of both interpretations, and have concluded that they are unable to provide us with a satisfactory account of what threats are, and how they affect the interactions between states. One aspect which we have not addressed explicitly is language, for it has little bearing on the arguments put forward by scholars working in either of the two traditions. However, our discussion was at least implicitly concerned with the constitutive characteristics of language. We noted that in a systemic analysis of threats, the coder uses his or her linguistic competence to identify threats in the available empirical material. We also pointed out that in strategic bargaining, the analyst uses his or her

vocabulary to describe a bargaining situation without which it would not be intelligible to us. Considerable effort has been invested to examine how scholars of international relations construct the very world which they study.⁽³⁷⁾ However, this shall not be our concern.

Our concern is rather with how policy makers describe and interpret the world in which they operate, for only in this way will we be able to understand how they categorize some actions to be threatening and design responses which they deem to be appropriate. This is why the literature on perceptions makes an important contribution, for it emphasizes the perspective of participants. However, we have also seen that the process of perception is not adequately explored because it either focuses on misperceptions, making the analyst the arbiter for what is considered to be normal behavior, or traces the cognitive construction of phenomena which is disconnected from the interactions participants are engaged in. If we want to avoid to study threats as if they were either unproblematically given or exist only as mental constructs, we have to adopt a different view; a view by which "the world exists independently of language, but we can never know that (beyond the fact of its assertion), because the existence of the world is literally inconceivable outside of language and our traditions of interpretation" (Campbell 1992:6). Thus, instead of dismissing language as a mere vehicle for communication, or of restricting the generative power of language to cognitive information processes, we have to make central to our analysis how policy makers use language pragmatically, that is, how policy makers make their activities accountable when they discuss, decide, and formulate foreign policy.

A considerable number of scholars have adopted this view, and studied threats as a discursive technique to constitute security and identity.⁽³⁸⁾ It is argued that meaning is not inherently inscribed into any object, but rather becomes meaningful only if interpreted. However, it can be interpreted in different ways, and thus each interpretation gives a different meaning to an object. Although the meaning of an object is ambiguous, it is fixed, at least temporarily, by actors who are endowed with authority. The ability to impose a dominant interpretation, not only on the object in question, but also on competing interpretations, constitutes the power which allows to take certain actions, and produces the knowledge which allows to legitimize these actions. Thus, many scholars working in this tradition concern themselves "with matters of power and discourse, the use of socially organized linguistic and semiotic constructions to mobilize meanings in the service of power" (Dalby 1990:4).

In international politics, governmental agencies exercise and obtain their power in the

very act of formulating foreign policy. As Campbell explains "those events and actors that come to be 'foreign' through the imposition of a certain interpretation are not considered as 'foreign' simply because they are situated in opposition to a pre-given social entity (the state). The construction of the 'foreign' is made possible by practices that also constitute the 'domestic'. In other words, foreign policy is 'a specific sort of *boundary-producing political performance*'" (emphasis in the original, Campbell 1992:69). The analysis of the differences which are drawn by policy makers allows not only to examine how they constitute particular objects in their linguistic practices so that these objects are understood in one way and not in another; it also allows to study the discursive politics by which other interpretations are suppressed, and other actors are excluded.

Many studies which problematize the meaning of security and identity in international politics are less concerned with how specific threats are constituted, and rather focus on the discursive practices by which the inscription of threats is used as a political *qua* rhetorical instrument to define and re-define security and identity. In Campbell's words "the constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is thus not a threat to a state's identity or existence; it is its condition of possibility. While the objects of concern change over time, the techniques and exclusions by which those objects are constituted as dangers persist" (ibid:12). However, for our purposes it is unsatisfactory to conceive of threats as a rhetorical instrument which is used to constitute the identity of a state, for we can learn nothing special about how particular threats are constituted. Although we learn a great deal about the macro-sociological processes in which meta-narratives about the "Soviet threat" or the "ecological threat" are discursively created, we need a micro-sociological account to capture the processes by which policy makers interpret and adjudicate between competing interpretations of concrete actions, and design responses which are discursively justified as appropriate. For this purpose, we need a more grammatical approach to examining political discourse, for what we are concerned with are minute differences in categorizing actions which are skillfully assembled into sequential orders. We therefore cannot, as a matter of principle, conceive of a discursive space as consisting of dichotomous relations. ⁽³⁹⁾ We rather have to preserve the distinctions drawn by policy makers which may or may not be dichotomous. We also have to make time central to our analysis, for it describes a contingency between actors and objects which is discursively created, and which not only allows that, but also determines how, a conversation unfolds. ⁽⁴⁰⁾

Although the micro-sociology of social actions has long been a central concern in other disciplines, it has received little attention in international relations. ⁽⁴¹⁾ I will therefore, in the next chapter, provide a theoretical framework that allows us to think of threats as

social productions. They are social productions in the sense that humans behave self-reflexively, and are capable of shaping and guiding their own behavior as well as that of others. By taking their own standpoint and fitting that standpoint to the behavior of others, humans interact with one another. I will therefore be concerned with many of the aspects which are also central to scholars who study threats as behavior or perception, but I will explain the phenomenon of threats as skillfully employed discursive practices.

Endnotes

1. A comprehensive review of threat research does not exist. However, several attempts have been made to point out the shortcomings of more specialized bodies of literature dealing with threats. See e.g. Baldwin (1971), Cohen (1979), Hopple/Rossa/Wilkenfiled (1980).

2. The literature on alliance formation, especially when focusing on the balancing and bandwaggoning behavior of states, conceives of threats as a reflection of states' resources. Hence, the concept of threat is only a theoretical label for power differentials, and has no ontological status of its own. See e.g. Walt (1987) Recent attempts to revive structural Realism have placed particular emphasis on threats. However, the inclusion of other than power resources has merely lead to the conclusion that "threats increase in number the harder one looks for them, and since there is a tendency to adopt a worst-case view, an active policy has no theoretical limits" (Buzan 1991:141)

3. Wright proposed a four-stage model, Bloomfield and Sherman settle for six stages, and Kahn identified nine stages. See Wright (1965), Bloomfield and Leiss (1969), Kahn (1965), Sherman (1994). They share the view that conflicts proceed through identifiable stages, and it is therefore tantamount to identify what stage corresponds to a particular situation. It is argued that this does not only allow to develop an early-warning system but also to devise strategies to diffuse crises. See e.g. Lund (1996).

4. On the transformation of sequences see McClelland (1969).

5. McClelland prided himself and his collaborators to be interested in the "combinations, proportions and patterns of the categories in unfolding action structures rather than by a pursuit of cooperation and conflict manifestations" (McClelland 1983:171-172). He therefore not only deviated from other research by emphasizing the compositionality of action sequences, he also allowed to conceive of particular forms of cooperation and conflict as particularly assembled action sequences. For a critique see Herman (1969,

1972).

6. The same criticism applies generally to international event analysis. For recent contributions and prospects see Merritt/Muncaster/Zinnes (1993). Boulding also suggested a pure systems theory of threats. See Boulding (1963).

7. At this point it suffices to conceive of a syntax as the sequential arrangement of actions into interactions, and a semantics as the categorization of actions and interactions.

8. In the systemic analysis of threats, a sequence of actions is essentially a chronological order which is measured in absolute time. Hence, time is external to the interaction, and in fact, is the organizing principle which brings chronologically consecutive actions in relation to one another. In strategic bargaining, on the other hand, actions are contingent on each other, i.e. the time which unfolds between an action and a response to it is not independent from the interaction, but a function of it. However, this notion of temporality is still fairly impoverished, for no temporal constraints are internal to the interaction which would determine when a response has to be made. Consequently, premature or delayed responses cannot be addressed.

9. In systemic analyses, the coder decides to which actor an action is directed to, whereas in strategic bargaining all actions are assumed to be directed towards the other actor. What is missing is an account for how directedness is expressed so that it can be identified in concrete situations.

10. This definition is similarly articulated by Boulding. He thinks of threats as "an act that creates a conditional expectation of damage, conditional on the performance (or, perhaps, non-performance) of some other act; it typically has the form, 'If you do (or do not) A, I will do B'" (Boulding 1963:253). See also Boulding (1959, 1962, 1971).

11. Despite the importance attributed to the credibility of a threat, it remains at best vague. For instance, Schelling states that "the willingness to hurt, the credibility of a threat, and the ability to exploit the power to hurt will indeed depend on how much the adversary can hurt in return" (Schelling 1966:3). If credibility is an attribute of a threat, it remains to be explained whether it refers to the correctness of a statement, the other's belief and resolve in making it, or the capability in regard to carrying it out. (Goffman 1970:103) Moreover, if any of these variations leads to the conclusion that a statement is not credible, the statement is not a threat. This implies that threats do always have to be credible, in which case credibility is a redundant attribute, leaving us wonder how a threat differs from any other credible statement.

12. Schelling states that "deterrence involves setting the stage - by announcement, by rigging the trip-wire, by incurring the obligation - and waiting. The overt act is up to the opponent. The stage-setting can often be nonintrusive, nonhostile, nonprovocative. The act that is intrusive, hostile, or provocative is usually the one to be deterred; the deterrent threat only changes the consequences *if* the act in question - the one to be deterred - is then taken. Compellence, in contrast, usually involves *initiating* an action (or an irrevocable commitment to action) that can cease, or become harmless, only if the opponent responds." (Schelling 1966:72) This contrast makes the contradiction apparent. How can an announcement set the stage for deterrence without being considered an initiating action which makes it a form of compellence?

13. Robert Sugden explains that Rational Choice theory, of which strategic bargaining is a subset, is built upon the axiom that choices are made according to preferences over acts, where acts are made up of consequences. The implication is that "consequences must be defined so that any assignment of consequences to states of the world is a meaningful act, and so that any pair of such acts is a meaningful choice problem" (Sugden 1991:762). Consequently, preferences, acts and their consequences are given, which excludes virtually everything that might be relevant for the analysis of social interactions.

14. For a detailed theoretical discussion of moves see Brams (1985, 1994). See also Powell (1989, 1990) and Wagner (1992).

15. Strategic bargaining is limited to very specific situations, namely situations in which participants are locked into what they perceive as mutual fatefulness, and are obliged to take one of the available courses of actions. However, it remains unexplained how we can determine when such a situation exists, for all interactions are conceived of as strategic interactions. Consequently, strategic bargaining can tell us little about social relationships, how they are formed, and how they define a particular situation.

16. Unfortunately, Boulding does not carry his argument as far as he should. He argues subsequently that "the mother who says angrily to her child, 'I'll kill you if you don't stop that noise', is seldom likely to meet with a successful response; the threat is of such magnitude that the subjective probability is zero, and its importance is likewise zero. A smaller threat is likely to have more effect." (Boulding 1963:255-256) Boulding thus abandons the notion of appropriateness which he so carefully elaborated on before. The problem is not that the "threat" of the mother to kill her child might be too "strong", while Kennedy "threatening" to spank Khrushchev might be too "weak". The problem is rather that both "threats" are not appropriate in their respective situation which explains why they are not understood as threats.

17. Game theorists would probably object and say that contingency does not relate to the creation of a range of responses but to the decision that a player makes with respect to a given range of responses. However, it is precisely this interpretation which makes the notion of an *interaction* meaningless, for if everything but the decision to choose one course of action over another is given, nothing remains which could account for how two actions relate to each other.

18. Several sources for biased assessments have been identified. The most frequently referred to sources are cognitive consistency and emotional distortions. Cognitive consistency refers to the economic selection and organization of cognition into coherent images which facilitate the interpretation, retention and recollection of information. Cognitive consistency is referred to as rational if the selection and organization principles are generally shared, whereas it is considered irrational if other than the general rules are applied. (Jervis 1976:119)

19. Some important representatives of the former position are George (1979), Janis (1972), Janis/Mann (1977), Jervis (1970, 1976), Lebow (1981), and Jervis/Lebow/Stein (1985). The latter position is mainly held by Holsti (1972). Stressful situations are characterized by unpleasant emotional states including anxiety, guilt and shame. (Janis 1989:77) These emotions interfere with an effective selection, scanning and interpretation of information, eventually leading to ineffective decision making. These emotions can be further exacerbated if decisions are made in cohesive groups. The more cohesive the group, the more individual members feel constrained to adhere to group norms at the detriment of independent and critical reasoning. (Janis 1972, 1989) For a comprehensive review on the literature of crisis decision making under psychological stress see Holsti (1989).

20. One view contends that "each perceives the other as a threat to its national security, and such perception is a function of both estimated capability and estimated intent. To state the relationship in quasi-mathematical form: threat-perception = estimated capability * estimated intent." (Singer 1958) This view does not take the perspective of participants but rather conceives of perception as an objectively calculable algorithm. This view has been modified by making estimates a function of predispositions that affect the interpretation of capabilities and intent. According to Pruitt predispositions to perceive threat are derived from such sources as distrust, past experience, contingency planning, and personal anxiety, and "create systematic distortions in the perception of evidence, leading to 'possibilistic thinking' in which future events are seen as probable that should only be seen as possible" (Pruitt 1965). Pruitt makes an interesting point about possibilistic thinking, for he implies that in particular situations policy makers do not distinguish between more or less plausible possibilities. However, he fails to provide empirical evidence and to account for the conditions under which possibilistic thinking

takes over. Moreover, this argument has not been taken up by other scholars who rather contend that distortions lead to over- or underestimations, and thus, to an inaccurate attribution of probabilities. See also Snyder (1985).

21. This distinction reappears in various disguises. For instance, Holsti argues that "unless the content of the image coincides in some way with what is commonly perceived as reality, decisions based on these images are not likely to fulfill the actor's expectations" (Holsti 1967:18). He thus contrasts the policy makers' image of reality to some other commonly perceived image which the analyst but not the policy makers can distinguish. Thus, whenever statements are made in terms of over- or underestimating capabilities or intentions, a distinction is drawn between what policy makers perceive and what they ought to perceive. This implies a normative claim which requires superior knowledge. Jervis argues that scholars can acquire this knowledge because "although one might think that the actor can always accurately predict his own behavior, this is not the case. Indeed observers may know the actor's intentions better than does the actor himself" (Jervis 1976:54). See also Fisher (1969).

22. Prominent representatives of this line of reasoning are: Axelrod (1976), Festinger (1957, 1964), Finlay/Holsti/Fagan (1967), Holsti (1967, 1972), Jervis (1976), Jervis/Lebow/Stein (1985), Lebow (1981).

23. With regard to threats, Jervis maintains that "in order to examine what leads states to perceive others as threats one needs to examine cases in which this perception is absent as well as cases in which it is present." (Jervis 1985:13) This assumes that we already know what threats are, and how we can identify them.

24. The analytical paradigm is roughly equivalent to Rational Choice Theory. Steinbruner argues that "formal versions of the rational theory of decisions are frequently advanced as *normative* arguments; that is statements of how decisions ought to be made with no necessary implications that they actually are made in that way. Use of theory to explain actual events, however, requires *positive* assumptions which do purport to explain or predict how actual, empirical decision processes work." (emphasis in the original, Steinbruner 1974:26)

25. A similar concern is shared by scholars who apply an organizational approach to the analysis of decision making. In their view decision makers have a repertory of operations available which they perform in particular sequences according to a "recipe" established by prior experience. (Steinbruner 1974:55, 66) These recipes or standard operating procedures allow to control the complexity and uncertainty inherent in a situation. If an established practice does no longer produce the desired results, the lower echelons of the organization raise the issue to high-level decision makers who start a limited scanning

process to modify existing procedures.

26. (Cyert/March 1963:120-122, Halperin 1974:117-118) Although consensus exists that information about a situation is decisive for the assessment of whether or not a standard operating procedure works, not everybody would agree with Deutsch that information is a quantitative concept. (Deutsch 1966:149) Other scholars contend that information comes in images, which are compared with the images underlying routine behavior. (Steinbruner 1974:115-121)

27. The problem which these explanations share, is that information is an essentially undifferentiated concept which does not allow to explain how particular information is selected from the profusion of intelligence, and more importantly, how this information is interpreted. For a critique see Alker (1986).

28. Attempts have been made to identify the operational code of policy makers, that is, to map their belief systems. The operational code is assumed to be an essentially unchangeable matrix in which cognition takes place. However, the constraining influence of belief systems on the process of cognition remains unexplained, the creation of belief systems is not accounted for, and the relation between operational code and behavior is unclear. See George (1969), Holsti (1982), Jönsson (1982), Cottam (1986).

29. Steinbruner makes very compelling arguments about how impossibility inferences block off whole ranges of calculations. (Steinbruner 1974:117-120) However, what is possible and what is not depends on the belief system. Although one might generally believe that persons cannot fly, one might at the same believe that sometime in the past some persons quite literally ascended to the heavens. We therefore need an explanation for when, that is, in which situations what kinds of belief systems are applied for drawing inferences.

30. Consider the following example: William Clinton is a) president of the United States of America, b) a husband, c) a father, d) a member of the Democratic Party, e) grey-haired. Each of these possibilities fit the description of William Clinton, not only because truth values can be attributed to each statement, but also because each statement is grammatically correct. If one were to apply probabilities one could not exclude incorrect statements such as William Clinton is tree or William Clinton is green.

31. Cohen maintains that policy makers use a deductive heuristic to draw inferences. (Cohen 1979:189) However, it can be shown easily that practical reasoning is quite different from theoretical reasoning, and that deduction does not allow to categorize an object such as a threat. Deduction arrives at a necessary conclusion by drawing on an assumed rule and a case. From the assumed rule "all humans being are mortal" and the

case "Socrates is a human being", the conclusion follows that "Socrates is mortal". The deductive mode proves that the result is a particular instance of a case. However, for inferring that a particular action is threatening we start with an observed result, and have to derive a case which is compatible with the particular action. Hence, practical reasoning aims at categorizing particular actions by typifying them as instances of a class, which is eventually what Cohen has in mind when he argues that policy makers use a "cognitive 'rule of thumb'" (ibid). However, this is not deduction.

32. To Cohen's credit it has to be mentioned that he traces the reasoning of policy makers in various crisis situations. He identifies a number of possible interpretations considered by participants of which only some describe a particular action to be threatening. He therefore demonstrates empirically how an understanding of a seemingly identical action can vary. However, he fails to identify the constitutive elements of each interpretation which could explain why some interpretations describe threats and others do not. (Cohen 1979, Part II)

33. A similar argument is made by Schrodtt who asserts that foreign policy decisions are heavily based on historical precedent. He contends that "when a new situation arises, a data base is searched for a past experience which matches the situation as closely as possible according to some pattern-matching criterion. That experience is used as a template for the current action: on the basis of past experience one applies a set of rules to determine what should be done. Depending on the outcome of the decision, the data base is either modified or reinforced." (Schrodtt 1985:390-391)

34. See also Cohen (1981) who builds on Bull (1984).

35. Cohen wants to go further than Schelling who considered the tacit coordination of behavior in strategic interactions as a special case by which actors can prevent conflict escalation. Cohen generalizes the claim of shared rules of conduct by drawing an analogy to language which is based on tacitly agreed upon rules to use linguistic symbols. However, he conceives of rules as "limits on action" which makes his reference to language more than problematic. (Cohen 1979:184)

36. Lockhart works in the tradition of strategic bargaining, and shows empirically how threats are used to resolve crisis, and thus to re-establish an order. (Lockhart 1973) See also Kent (1967).

37. For primarily meta-theoretical discussions see Alker (1990), Ashley (1988, 1989), Connolly (1989), Der Derian (1989), George/Campbell (1990), George (1994), Hollis/Smith (1994), Onuf (1989), Shapiro (1989), Tickner (1992), Walker (1994), Wendt (1987, 1992, 1994).

38. See especially Dalby (1990, 1992), Campbell (1992), Klein (1990), Luke (1989), O'Tuathail (1993).

39. Many scholars follow Derrida's dictum that the modernist discourse is permeated with logocentric processes by which identity, unity and universalized meaning is created by excluding what does not correspond to the logo, that is, the original, singular and authentic. (Derrida 1976). By deconstructing modern narratives one can reveal the discursive politics which marginalize competing interpretations.

40. Time is absent in many discourse analyses, for it implies a contingency which is itself discursively created. This becomes particularly relevant for the writing of histories. The concern with writing multiple histories stems from the recognition that our understanding of history is itself a discourse which excludes other interpretations of past events. With reference to Foucault, George explains that "the objects and subjects of history are discursively constructed via logocentric processes of framing real meaning. [Genealogy] is, by definition, a historical approach suspicious of any kind of determinism, universalized patterns of thought and behavior, development formats (e.g. stages of growth), or any grand-theorizing pronouncements of essential behavior. ... It acknowledges no single, essential history but the struggle of 'histories', the struggle among discursive practices" (George 1994:31)

41. Some recent exceptions are Doty (1993), Milliken (1994), Sylvan/Majeski (1996, 1997).