



Ministerie van Defensie

# Summary

*state-of-the-art*

## research State Threats



## Summary

### *state-of-the-art* research State Threats

War Studies Research Center – Faculty of Military Sciences, Netherlands Defence Academy



**Projectteam State Threats:**

Marthe van Ekeveld  
Georg Frerks (principal investigator)  
Sari Koeleman  
Martijn Kool  
Trineke Palm  
Daan Sanders  
Esmeralda Vane

This state-of-the-art research project State Threats was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security. ©2021, WODC. Copyrights reserved.

The views and opinions in this research project are and remain solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Defence.

## Summary English

### Reason, Aims & Set up of the study

This state-of-the-art research project State Threats was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security's Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) at the request of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) for the further development of the research agenda of the NCTV. This research agenda is intended to lay the foundations for intensified cooperation with academia on the domains for which it bears responsibility. One of those domains is state threats. The purpose of this research is to conduct a first literature scan of the academic field on state threats: the topics that are covered, those which are underexposed and deserve more attention, and the state of the literature (size and quality). The research contract was awarded to the War Studies Research Centre (WSRC) of the Faculty of Military Sciences (FMW) of the Dutch Defence Academy (NLDA).

In this research report, the following research questions are answered:

1. Which subjects in the area of state threats are according to the researchers relevant and studied – to what extent and with what quality?
2. Do the topics fall under the domain described by the NCTV?
3. How can these research questions be examined during phase 2?
4. Which research questions emerge for phase 2?

The research was conducted in three steps: selection, screening and analysis of the literature. In total, 2905 academic articles from 19 journals and 29 special issues were screened, resulting in 1000 articles with relevant information on state threats. Subsequently the articles were analysed in terms of the threat subject, threat object and threat mechanism. Based on this screening, 24 threat mechanisms were distinguished in the categories military, political, economic and other. Due to the size of the corpus, the further analysis was restricted to 10 mechanisms, taking into account the different categories. Combining several mechanisms resulted in 8 separate mechanism-analyses, based on the close-reading of 231 academic articles.

### Threat subject, threat object and threat mechanism

Based on this inductive approach, dozens of threat subjects, objects and mechanisms were distinguished. Threat subject refers to who or what causes the threat (or is perceived to). Threat object is defined as who or what is being threatened (or is perceived to). Threat mechanism concerns the means and ways to exercise the threat.

27 states were mentioned as threat subject, 26 states as threat object. China, Russia and the US were mentioned most often, both as object and subject. In addition to individual states, regions or particular groups of states are mentioned, such as:

the West, North-Africa and the Middle East, World Powers and Nuclear Powers. Moreover, non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations, criminal organizations, private or state-owned companies, militias and private military companies, are instrumentalised as threat by state actors. Finally, international alliances and international partnerships are mentioned, such as the European Union (EU), the North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the United Nations (UN).

Comparing the threat subjects and objects, we notice a reciprocity among the great powers and regions, which could reflect the well-known security dilemma, mutual enemy images and strategic competition. The lion's share of academic literature assumes, implicitly or explicitly, this geopolitical logic of great power politics. Moreover, the boundaries between state and non-state actors and threats are fluid, allowing for all kinds of overlap. Nor should it be assumed that the state is a homogeneous actor acting coherently. States may consist of different actors, with different, even competing, threat perceptions and policy conceptions.

24 threat mechanisms were distinguished. Most articles (671) are about military threat mechanisms, 566 articles are about political threat mechanisms and only 131 deal with economic threat mechanisms. The top-5 of threat mechanisms in the academic literature are: conventional weapons, nuclear and radiological weapons, hard cyber, soft cyber and coercion strategies. Since the journals in international relations and security studies deal with questions of violence and military means, the predominance of military threat mechanisms in the top-5 is probably partly the result of the journal selection. Other frequently mentioned threat mechanisms are: hybrid warfare, unmanned weapon systems and/or artificial intelligence, securitization and ideological framing, and (terrorist) attacks. The research report provides an in-depth analysis of 10 selected threat mechanisms: biological and chemical weapons, space threats, espionage & technology theft, diaspora politics, fueling radicalization, securitization & ideological framing, energy politics, direct foreign investments and development aid. For each of these mechanisms the report maps the manifestation of the mechanism and the key issues in the academic debate on this threat mechanism concerning state threats.

Concerning **biological and chemical weapons**, state threats play a role at three different levels: the lack of regulation on property, production, distribution and dumping of biological and chemical weapons, careless handling and a technological arms race between China and the US. Similar themes are covered when it comes to **space threats**: the lack of regulation, non-intentional consequences of space debris, the role of technology in the militarization of space dominated by the US, China and Russia. **Espionage** by state actors concerns both the collection of state military intelligence and (facilitating) theft of corporate secrets and technology. The digitization of the threat mechanism is central to the literature that was analyzed. State actors play different roles in relation to **diaspora politics**, both as state of origin and host state. State actors may oppress dia-

sporas, but also fuel their identity and use them as a source of intelligence. Similar themes are covered in the literature on the threat mechanism of **fueling radicalization**. A state may fuel radicalization to disrupt another country's society, for example by returning foreign fighters and radicalizing right-wing extremists. **Securitization and ideological framing** is about the construction of threat perceptions by states. A huge part of the literature is concerned with the conceptualization of these notions. In terms of the cases that are studied, it is primarily about the securitization of muslims/migrants by state actors as an instrument against other states, and the ideological dimension of geopolitical rivalry between Europe/US and China/Russia.

**Energy politics** as threat mechanism by states concerns the creation of dependencies on the access to energy sources. Climate change and scarcity contribute to a shift in the power relations. The literature deals with Europe's dependence on gas, the growing influence from China in the Middle-East and the emerging alliance of Russia and China in the Arctic. Creating dependencies is also a central feature of **direct foreign investment and development aid as a state threat**. The literature focuses primarily on the threat of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, the impact of Chinese direct foreign investments on developed economies in the West has been studied.

Analyzing the main threat subjects (China, Russia and the US) in relation to the analyzed threat mechanisms, the securitization and ideological framing stands out as a common threat mechanism. Energy politics is distinctive to Russia, and direct foreign investment and development aid plays a prominent role in the perception of China as threat subject.

In addition to the mechanism-specific element, one of the main findings of this research report is the connection and overlap between different threat mechanisms. First, the geopolitical rivalry between great powers. Geopolitical processes transform existing mechanisms, such as energy politics or the use of technology in space, into a threat or an arms race. Second, the overlap between mechanisms, in which one mechanism turns into another or even mutually constitute each other. Most threat subjects use a repertoire of different threat mechanisms which can be deployed at the same time or consecutively. Moreover, the diminished role or lack of legal frameworks and international regimes facilitates the emergence of threats. The pace of technological developments is so high that it cannot be kept up with by appropriate legislation.

Based on the analysis of the ten threat mechanisms the report reflects on the conceptualization of state threat. First, it is difficult to draw a clear line between state actors and non-state actors. For example, state actors may instrumentalize diasporas, terrorist organizations and companies. Second, the concept of "threat" depends on the underlying perceptions and may be constructed. For example, in a process of securitization certain

topics emerge on the security agenda. Similarly the academic literature is subject to certain trends. Third, not all state threats are intentional. Some of them are side-effects or the result of carelessness, negligence or omission. Examples include the careless treatment of dangerous materials or weapons (both on the earth, sea and space), and the danger of certain technologies falling into the wrong hands, or the possibilities of dual use. It is evident that non-intentional threat mechanisms can be just as dangerous as intentional ones. Moreover, in some cases it is unclear whether a certain threat subject has only defensive or offensive intentions with particular weapons or threat mechanisms.

### Reflection on the quality of the academic publications

On average the journals that were examined are of reasonably high quality, or have a certain status in academia. For each journal a short description was provided on the focus areas and the review policy, the publisher and/or sponsors, and the impact factor. Moreover, the nationality of the editors and the journal are given, just as the gender diversity in the editorial board. In addition to a general Western predominance, the Anglosaxon predominance stands out. Almost all journals are peer reviewed. The editorial boards are relatively diverse in terms of gender, but still mainly populated by (white) men. The main limitations and shortcomings concern the (lack of) methodological and theoretical justification, one-sidedness and western-centrism. These limitations are inherent to the study of a large corpus of academic articles from a large variety of diverse sources. Including non-western perspectives would be beneficial for the second phase of the research in order to redress a potential western bias.

### Connection to the NCTV focus areas

The NCTV has three focus areas: unwanted foreign interference aimed at diaspora, protecting democratic processes and institutions, and economic security. Several of the analyzed threat mechanisms address these issues. The analysis of diaspora politics relates to the first focus area – acknowledging that the mechanism of diaspora politics has a broader and more multifaceted coverage than the NCTV focus area. The fueling of radicalization fits with the second theme – acknowledging that its impact may go beyond democratic process and institutions, and could target civil unrest, societal discontent and distrust at large.

Our analyses subscribe that the initial focus on the radicalization of fundamentalist muslims has to be complemented with attention for so-called lone wolves and rightwing extremists, such as white supremacists. The theme of economic security features in the study of corporate espionage, direct foreign investment and development aid. The latter two may both damage and reduce, and increase economic security – this depends on the perspective of particular authors or countries. Also, energy politics is related to economic security. Moreover,

---

economic security features indirectly in the mechanisms over dual-use technology, such as space threats and biological and chemical weapons. It concerns technologies and (production) capacities which are very important for the civil industry and economy, but may be used for the purpose of the arms industry and/or by potential enemies. Most mechanisms are only partly covered in the governmental documents about Dutch threat perceptions.

#### *Suggestions for future research*

Which topics in the field of state threats are of most importance cannot be established objectively. Topics that are usually underexposed or harder to grasp deserve further attention. For phase 2 of a research project on state threats we suggest to analyse the remaining threat mechanisms that were identified. The exemplary approach that was developed for phase 1 can easily be applied to analyze the literature of the other mechanisms. First, the military threat mechanisms nuclear and radiologic weapons, conventional weapons and unmanned armed systems and/or artificial intelligence contains a considerable part of the articles that were screened. They remain relevant in the light of the continuing decline of regimes of regulation and containment. Second, the threat mechanisms humanitarian military intervention, coercion strategies and protectionism & illiberal trade policy are seen by third countries as a threat coming from Western threat subjects. Climate change is a global threat and deserves further study in connection with endangered ecosystems and biodiversity. Third, we suggest a further study of hybrid warfare and state crime.

A second component of phase 2 could be to expand the corpus of literature for the mechanisms for which we, in our systematic inductive approach, had to rely on a relatively small amount of articles: biological and chemical weapons, espionage and theft of knowledge and technology. A more targeted search in niche journals and thinktank publications could be useful in this regard. Suggestions for specific search words can be found in the appendix of this report. Moreover, the corpus could be expanded to include recognized handbooks on a specific threat mechanism.

A third component of phase 2 would entail the analysis of the specific coherence/relation between the different mechanisms. For each of these components the report presents several detailed research questions.

