Searching for an East Asian Security Theory: Threat Transition and Two-Level Security Dilemma

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Abstract   Presupposing the significance of the regional-level theories of international relations, this essay explores an East Asian regional theory in comparison with the universal theories, and argues that the two kinds of theory can be mutually complementary. This essay is divided into three parts. While the first part addresses the significance of the attempt to find an East Asian theory, the second begins with an explanation of the conventional and universal security theories, including the theories of balance of power, power transition, balance of threat, and security dilemma, and it surveys how the theory of international society reviews the universal theories. The second part then suggests the theories of threat transition and two-level security dilemma, and analyzes the threat perception in East Asia through the two frameworks with a purpose of criticizing and modifying the universal theories. The third part discusses actual East Asian experiences—the Korean War, Korea–Japan relations, and South–North Korea relations—to which the theories of threat transition and two-level security dilemma may apply.

Keywords   regional theory · threat transition · two-level security dilemma · Korean War · Korea-Japan relations, South-North Korea relations

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War, globalization, the September 11 attacks, the global financial crisis, the rise of China, and the emergence of the Islamic State have all added to the immense complexity that characterizes international relations in the 21st century. This complexity has manifested itself in numerous debates on security studies, which deal with various actors and agendas (see Buzan & Hansen, 2010; Cerny, 2010). An emerging trend in the study of international relations today is the growing volume of comparative analyses on the current status of security across regions. The popular saying "The future of Asia is the past of Europe" reflects this growing interest. However, one is left to wonder how well such analogies, with such a time gap, properly reflect the particular regional characteristics.

Presupposing the significance of the regional-level theories of international relations, this essay explores an East Asian regional theory in comparison with the universal theories, and argues that the two kinds of theory can be mutually complementary.[1] This essay is divided into three parts. While the first part addresses the significance of the attempt to find an East Asian theory, the second begins with an explanation of the conventional and universal security theories, including the theories of balance of power, power transition, balance of threat, and security dilemma, and it surveys how the theory of international society reviews the universal theories. The second part then suggests the theories of threat transition and two-level security dilemma, and analyzes the threat perception in East Asia through the two frameworks with a purpose of criticizing and modifying the universal theories. The third part discusses actual East Asian experiences to which the theories of threat transition and two-level security dilemma may apply.

Searching for an East Asian regional theory

Searching for and developing *Korean* theories of international relations has long been a key topic of debate in the international relations community in Korea. However, given the particularity of the South–North relations on the peninsula and the South Korea–US relations, few sufficiently *theoretical* contributions have been made concerning the Korean experience. Even if one were to recognize the geographic and historical relativity of the social sciences (see Weber, 1949), one would have a difficult time avoiding the self-centeredness and the errors of bias in the formulation of local and nation-by-nation theories of international relations.[2] Such a theory would most likely be a *strategic* rather than a *relational* one. Amid these concerns, it would be more appropriate to search for an *explanatory* theory of international relations for East Asia than for a *normative* theory. One's hope is that such an explanatory theory would be of help in identifying the role of regional analyses that mediate between local- and global-level

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[1] As for the controversy over the Western-centeredness of universal theories, as debated in Korea, see Kang (2004) and G. Kim (2015).

[2] As did the so-called "archaeological approach," which looked for the basis of contemporary theories of international relations in pre-modern history, as shown by the example of China's "Tsinghua school," which reemphasizes the traditional order. See Yan and Xin (2008).

international relations.

In other words, this essay presupposes the meaning and value of an East Asian regional theory as a middle-range theory.[3] The goal is to examine some of the issues through the universal/Western theories and, subsequently, to look for supplementary frameworks or concepts to answer those issues. Then, finally, this essay will apply the modified universal theories to the case of East Asia. While the international system and society of the Western hemisphere certainly have their own spatial–temporal particularities, they have nonetheless acquired modern universality through the process of globalization and still retain continuous aspects. For its part, East Asia also has irreducible regional particularities, but the particularities of international relations in this region should be examined in the context of global universality. It is this ongoing interaction between particularity and universality that will shed light on the understanding of, and the theoretical approaches to, any given region.

Critique and modification of universal theories

Balance of power, power transition, balance of threat, and security dilemma

Few would dispute that the mainstream approach to security in international relations is the balance-of-power theory. While there is no universally accepted single definition of the balance of power, the concept is variably used to denote an almost law-like empirical phenomenon, the principle and convention of modern international politics, and even the policy goals of individual states at times (see T. Kim, 2004). The balance-of-power theory holds that in a state of international anarchy, states try to achieve stability by balancing acts rather than bandwagoning. Proponents often cite the emergence of anti-hegemonic alliances—intended to keep any single state from wielding overwhelming power over others—as support for their theory.

Waltz, a leading balance-of-power theorist, holds that a bipolar world order is more stable than a multipolar one. According to this view, one might infer that the stability of the international and regional systems would increase as the power grabs between the United States and China and between Japan and China are decreased. Ross, who analyzes US–China relations from the balance-of-power perspective, characterizes post–Cold War Asia as being under such a bipolar order. Thus, he suggests the possibility of sustained geopolitical stability in the region between the maritime power/naval forces of the United States and the continental power/armed forces of China (Ross, 1999, as quoted in Ross, 2009). However, as China's power continues to grow at a pace faster than the expected, such optimism has been waning. Instead, worries about the escalating tension as China takes a maritime turn are on the rise (see Seo, 2010; Cha, 2012), and it is against this backdrop that the power transition theory enjoys increasing support.

Power transition theorists believe that the balance-of-power theory fails to adequately explain the change of power among states, the consequent transition in the international order, and the resulting rise in the possibility of conflicts among states. They hold that the assumption that states can maximize their strength by entering into alliances with one another is unrealistic, as, since the industrial revolution, most states have increased their power through internal

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[3] On the concept of middle-range theory, see Boudon (1991).

factors, like economic growth and development, rather than external factors like alliances. Power transition theorists also argue that an established order falls into a crisis when one of the major powers among the discontented states suddenly becomes powerful through a dramatic industrialization (W. Kim, 2004). Contrary to balance-of-power theorists, who expect parity of power to bring about greater stability, power transition theorists anticipate the opposite outcome.

W. Kim (2004), a leading power transition theorist in Korea, thus analyzes the turn of events in international relations in 21st-century East Asia:

> When a fast-growing discontented state like China begins to become a prominent opponent to the established order in East Asia led by the United States, the possibility of a power transition conflict in East Asia may increase.
> If, in the near future, China's power surpasses that of Japan and even catches up with that of the United States, the possibility of a conflict between the two powers will rise concomitantly. The possibility of conflict between China and the US–Japan alliance will also grow in proportion to the pace of the power transition or of the parity of power between the two powers, to the degree of China's discontent with the current order in East Asia and particularly, to the degree of mutual discontent between the United States and China or between China and Japan over matters such as the Taiwan question and the Senkaku–Diaoyudao Islands dispute (p. 139).

Nevertheless, there are limits to the extent of both the balance-of-power and power transition theories because they are centered on changes in material capabilities in explaining the changes in US–China and China–Japan relations. The two theories lack comprehensive explanations of the ideational factors in international relations even though they mention soft power and discontent.[4] The balance-of-threat theory, which holds that states modify their behavior and seek stability in response not to changes in the balance of power, but rather to changes in the balance of threat, places a relatively greater emphasis on the role of ideational factors. Contrary to neorealists, who argue that the changing structure of the distribution of state capabilities is a main cause of adversarial conditions, balance-of-threat theorists focus on the identity of individual states and their policymakers' intention, thus requiring a revision from the constructivist and neoclassical realist approaches. As such, Walt (1987) proposes:

> Balancing and bandwagoning are usually framed solely in terms of capabilities. Balancing is in alignment with the weaker side, while bandwagoning is with the stronger. However, this conception should be revised to account for the other factors that statesmen consider

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[4] The *hegemony* transition theory may not be as limited because the theory makes use of hegemony than power to analyze how international systems change. Gills (1993), for example, adopts the Gramscian view that hegemony is made up of not only material factors, but also factors that are cultural, ideational, and historical. According to Gills, Japan—which held a marginal status in the traditional China-centered order —quickly adapted when Western modernity began to penetrate the region and attempted to establish a new hegemonic order in East Asia, which was centered on itself. However, Japan's attempt to monopolize China ultimately culminated in the Pacific War, allowing the United States to play the hegemonic role after the demolition of the Japanese empire. Gills notes that the American hegemony in the region has manifested itself in the economic integration of East Asia, led by the elites of Japan and other neighboring states, rather than as a unilateral rule of the region by a foreign state.

when deciding with whom to ally. Although power is an important part of the equation, it is not the only one. It is more accurate to say that states tend to ally with or against the foreign power that poses the greatest threat. For example, states may create balance by allying with other strong states if a weaker power is more dangerous for other reasons (pp. 21–22).

This implies the possibility of the emergence of a balancing alliance and a "cold peace" in East Asia that would be led by the United States and Japan, as a response to the perceived increase in the potential threat posed by China's rise. If we take the balance-of-threat theory, the truly important factor to consider is not the changing distribution of material capabilities ushered in by China's rise, but whether the Chinese state or policymakers hold the intention of threat. However, the balance-of-threat theory appears to be unable to provide an objective criterion by which one may judge how threatening states are. Also, it does not answer the question of whether the changed balance of threat will ultimately be stable.

Another mainstream approach to international security is the theory of security dilemma. The classic theory that the increase in the military power of one state inevitably increases uncertainty over international security and may ignite fear in other states—even if the first state means only to deploy such increased power to the end of its own survival—continues to form the basis of thinking for numerous theorists and policymakers across the world today (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, p. 1). Herz thus concludes that it does not matter whether humans are instinctually cooperative or conflict-seeking. What matters, rather, is that conflicts—structurally inherent to the security dilemma—are ultimately manifested among political units. Nevertheless, Herz (1950) emphasizes the necessity of realistic liberalism, which provides the theoretical and practical grounds for a "realizable ideal."

Since then, the theory of the security dilemma has made some progress. Among these contributors is Jervis, who addresses the problem of misperception and the limits of the human perception of changes in the macroscopic environment; Schweller, who criticizes the status-quo bias of neorealism and argues that the nature of the security dilemma can vary by type of state; and Snyder, who specifically focuses on problems of alliance dilemma such as abandonment and entrapment. As globalization continues in depth, adding to the complexity and diversification of political actors and issues, some have even proposed a "new security dilemma" theory, criticizing earlier theories as unduly focused upon states and official policymakers. Cerny, for example, argues that the "complex interdependency" within the network structure may amplify the likelihood of noncooperation, but conflict increases in the "divisibility" of goods concerning international and security relations, which has in fact weakened the mechanism by which interstate relations can be controlled and made cooperative (refer to Min, 2012).

Theory of international society

The English school of thought known as the theory of international society provides a more advanced understanding of the balance of power from a mixture of realist and liberalist theories. Little (2007) argues:

The balance of power is identified as a simple but extremely effective and universally

applicable metaphor that transforms an agency-based concept of power, where one actor has control over another, into a structural concept, where power is a product of the system and the overall distribution of power must be constantly reconfigured (p. 13).

Little points out the limits of understanding the balance of power from the perspective of polarity, and he proposes a "composite model of balance of power," which appropriates the English school's division of system and society and takes into account the geographical dimension. So, international society theorists emphasize the "associational balance of power," as it draws upon the historical experience of Europe, rather than the adversarial balance of power (see Little, 2007, pp. 251–287).

The English school's emphasis is also evident in the security dilemma theory. According to Booth and Wheeler, the security dilemma consists of strategic situations at two levels: the first requires interpretation of the other's motive, intention, and material capabilities, and the second involves the decision of the most rational possible course of action. Focusing on the role of actors facing systemic restraints operative on both levels, the authors stress the importance of "security dilemma sensibility," which is "an actor's intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others" (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, pp. 4–7).

Using the trichotomy of anarchy, society, and community, Booth and Wheeler (2008) envision the possibility of reducing and ultimately transcending the security dilemma:

> We contend that human society, globally and regionally, does not have to live in the frameworks and "false necessities" demanded by fatalism about politics among nations, or strategies of rational egoism (p. 295).
> Despite all the pressures to think otherwise . . . it is not beyond human potential to construct the political conditions, regionally and even globally, to live together in the room of embedded trust in the house of uncertainty (p. 299).

Nevertheless, the authors also envision a situation of "security paradox," in which mutual hostility among the involved actors escalates not because of animosity, but because of fear (or uncertainty) that incapacitates the security dilemma sensibility (Booth & Wheeler, 2008, p. 9). Additionally, it is also possible for the security dilemma to arise even when fear is not actually warranted, as well as for mutual hostility to spread despite the security dilemma sensibility in the involved actors. These possibilities reveal the need for supplementary approaches to analyzing the agency and the domestic-social dynamics of actors facing contexts that are different from Europe.

Agency and domestic-social factors: threat transition and two-level security dilemma

In comparing the theories of balance of power, power transition, and balance of threat, a two-by-two matrix may be drawn, which assumes material and ideational factors on the one hand and stability and instability on the other. Then we may take into account an additional possibility that is not fulfilled by the three foregoing theories: instability resulting from

changes in ideational factors. This is the focus of the theory of "threat transition," which is intimately related to the problem of agency. The "agent–structure problem" debates helped in the conceptualization of the role of agency. However, the so-called "ideational structuralism" of mainstream constructivists like Wendt has inspired worries over the possible neglect of human agency in their theory, as follows:

> Wendt advocates a structurationist solution to the agent–structure problem at the level of the state and state system, and a structuralist solution at the level of the individual and the state. . . . But the state, as a constructed social form, can only act in and through individual action. . . . The theory of the state articulated by the agent–structure writers, on the other hand, neglects these points and there is no space for human agency (Wight, 1999, p. 128).

Unlike theorists of international relations, who are focused on the system level, foreign policy analysts have focused on policymakers and actors at various levels and their interactions (see Hudson, 2007). According to their view, the security dilemma is also best approached from two levels, i.e., the interstate and the domestic. Many scholars have already attempted to incorporate these considerations into their analyses of the states' external behavior. Examples include Putnam's two-level game and Bueno de Mesquita's strategic perspective (see Putnam, 1988; Bueno de Mesquita, 2015). The former analyzes the international–domestic interactions involved in the processes of negotiation and ratification over politico-economic issues such as trade. The latter has developed the electorate theory to analyze the interactions between domestic and international benefits in the leaders' thinking and decision-making. Neoclassical realism provides another theory analyzing the effects of the decision-makers' threat perception and the domestic political structure. Lobell (2009), for example, presents the "complex threat identification model" that takes into account systemic, subsystemic, and domestic threats. Lobell concludes that the government (or other social actors) of a state defines the given threat and decides courses of external policies and actions in accordance with its perception of the level at which the other's state power would increase. Such decision-making thus influences the domestic balance of power as well.

Here, an analysis may be attempted of the chain of decision-making processes that extends from leaders/policymakers to the international/domestic political contexts, back to the leaders/ policymakers, and finally to the foreign policies may be attempted. Threats are transferred through the events related to the agents' choice or the agents' autonomous projections. The perception of international or domestic threats that is thus formed serves as a mechanism that controls the agents.[5] This process of threat transition reveals distinctive dynamics that set it apart from the theories of balance of power, power transition, and balance of threat. The frame

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[5] The two world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf wars, and the September 11 attacks of 2001 provide good examples of such events. Some American scholars point out that the United States has been in the practice of "making" its enemies in its foreign relations. Oren (2003), for one, studies the enemy-making histories of Imperial and Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule in analyzing the discursive characteristics of American political science. Cumings and others (2004) have also analyzed the process by which North Korea, Iran, and Syria were "made into" the "axis of evil." These claims are similar to the "representational approach," which emphasizes the elite's role in the formation of social identity (cf. Klotz & Lynch, 2007, pp. 65–85).

of the two-level security dilemma can explain the mixed presence of irrationality or limited rationality in security problems in ways that the two-level game and the strategic perspective theory cannot. Furthermore, it goes beyond the mere supplementary role of neoclassical realism and makes it possible to critique and develop an alternative to the mainstream realist approaches.

The threat transition approach shares an important message with the theory of securitization proposed by critical security theorists. According to the theory, security consists of the speech acts that define which core objects should be protected and what their threats are. Therefore, security is a social construct that lacks a fixed definition.[6] In other words, the objects of and threats to security are able to be transferred from one place to another. It can be argued that the perception of security threats carries three dimensions, i.e., primordial, constitutional, and instrumental.[7] One could say that among the theories of international relations, neorealism focuses on the primordial, constructivism on the constitutional, and neoclassical realism on the instrumental. The theory of threat transition pays relatively greater attention to the constitutional and the instrumental, or the combination of the two. The occurrence of an event forms the constitutional dimension, while the agent's projection forms the instrumental one. Cumings' (2014) quote of Nietzsche reveals the elastic nature of threat perception:

> The cause of the origins of a thing and its eventual utility, its acting employment and place in a system of purposes, lie a world apart; whatever exists, having come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends.

If we want to understand why Asia—Northeast Asia in particular—lacks elements of the international society manifested in Europe and why no associational balance of power has ever emerged in this region, we need to address the problem of constitutional superfluity because of instrumental purposes. More specifically, there is a need to analyze how states in Northeast Asia attach (or deny) threat perceptions to certain actors, whether excessive securitization (or desecuritization) has occurred, and the domestic–political situations that have formed backdrops to these perceptions. This requires an examination of the status of security in Northeast Asia through the lens of the two-level security dilemma, which links the domestic-social factors of individual states to their interstate relations. This is akin to the combination of representation and social identity discussed by Klotz and Lynch (2007, pp. 65–85).[8] In other words, the elite first defines and proposes a particular perception of threat. The perception is then shared by and diffused among the general public or the elites of other states, thereby forming paths that regulate the elite's future foreign policy choices.

In this theoretical context, "lose-sets" that block cooperation are more important to consider than "win-sets" that support cooperation. It is through this analysis of threat perception at the social level that an understanding can finally be achieved of why region-wide instability and conflicts persist—amid the prevalence of seeming irrationality or limited rationality—despite the political leaders' different intentions and the need for cooperation at the state level. Contrary to the neorealist–neoliberal debate, the threat transition theory requires analysis of losses as

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[6] As for the securitization theory, see Weaver (1995), Taureck (2006), and Balzacq (2011).
[7] This typology was used originally in Dawisha's (2002) study of nationalism.
[8] For an analysis of the threat perceptions at both the state and social levels, see Rousseau (2006).

opposed to gains, because this theory has room for *emotional* choices of total losses over and beyond calculations of absolute or relative gains.[9] Therefore, a proper understanding of the regional context should be preceded by a historical-sociological understanding of the states in the region, particularly of how East Asian states have experienced modernity through colonization, decolonization, the Cold War, and the post−Cold War era.

Application

Threat transition through the Korean War

A major term of the post−World War II agreement between the United States and Great Britain was the absolute decomposition of Japan's militarism. This emphasis, which formed the backbone of Washington's occupation policy of Japan, underwent a major change as the Cold War broke out. As Kennan's strategy shows, Japan would soon gain the status of being the United States' most important ideological and strategic partner in East Asia.[10] The event of the Korean War served to worsen US−China relations, to consolidate the Cold War consensus within the United States, and to mark the rearmament of Japan, thereby transforming the structure of the Cold War in East Asia from that of passive containment into that of open hostility. As Jervis points out, the Korean War, instead of being an outcome of the Cold War, is a historic event that redefined the nature of the Cold War in East Asia and the world (see Jervis, 1980).[11] Moreover, the Korean War and its aftermath led to the birth of a major axis of international relations in Cold War Asia, centered on the United States and Japan, allowing the chosen parties to sign off and handle the legacy of the Pacific War through the San Francisco Treaty.[12]

The so-called San Francisco System that emerged through the Korean War and the San Francisco Treaty carried political and economic implications that reached far beyond the scope of a security alliance. The event reveals the process of threat transition from the *Japanese question* to the *North Korean problem*, and the substantial gap in threat perception between Korea and the United States towards Japan at the same time. The threat transition and the institutionalization thereof during this period has given birth to adversarial bipolar structures of two groups—the Northern and Southern Triangles. The Korea−US−Japan security alliance of the Southern Triangle has itself experienced internal tensions,[13] stemming from the different threat perceptions of American policymakers and President Syngman Rhee. Whereas the

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[9] This would produce outcomes different from those predicted by the loss-aversion tendency of the prospect theory. See Hwang (2007).

[10] As for the background and details of the reverse course policy, see Gallicchio (1996).

[11] Jervis views the Korean War as an independent, and not a dependent, variable of the Cold War.

[12] Analyzing the treaty and how it affected the Cold War in East Asia in the context of decolonization (with all its restraints and refractions) and the formation of the American-led Cold War hegemony, J. Lee (2013) draws connections between this historical process and the current territorial disputes, controversies over historical interpretations, and problems with the alliance system in the region.

[13] A good example is the tension between Korea and the United States over the normalization of Korea−Japan relations.

United States completely turned around and accepted Japan as a friend, Rhee's practical attitude barely concealed Korea's continued perception of Japan as a potential enemy. This complexity of threat perception not only governs interpretations of East Asia's colonial past to this day, but also continues to be a destabilizing factor in regional security.

Two-level security dilemma of Korea–Japan relations and South–North Korea relations

Both Korea–Japan relations and South–North Korea relations show the complex interactions among power, interest, and idea. In his analysis of Korea–Japan relations, S. Lee (2013) points out:

> The assumption that common enemies, friends, and interests should have given rise to solid and steadily improving relations between Tokyo and Seoul has been far from realized. Rather, the Japan–ROK relationship continues to be marked by highly volatile behavior— ranging from intense friction to reluctant cooperation—which not only offers a vexing puzzle to the Realist school of international relations but also to the constructivist one (p. 93).

Korea–Japan relations also challenge the democratic peace theory of liberalists. President Myungbak Lee's sudden visit to Dokdo Island and the consequent failure to prolong a currency swap with Japan provides a good example of the two-level security dilemma, in which political leaders' perceptions of threat with instrumental factors influence and form domestic-societal perceptions of threat, which subsequently goes on to constrain practical cooperation.

Considering the status of South Korea's military strength prior to the North's nuclearization and the status of the nuclear power of the Korea–US alliance after the North's nuclearization, the South–North relations on the Korean Peninsula are also riddled with questions that cannot be answered by simple changes in the distribution of capabilities and the resulting security dilemma. Suh (2004) explains the characteristics of the military balance on the Korean Peninsula as follows:

> The current military balance on the peninsula can be described as a "balance of terror" in which each side maintains an asymmetric advantage over the other, resulting in a fragile condition of mutual deterrence. Such a balance is inherently unstable and dangerous, and can be resolved only when the legitimate security concerns of both sides are addressed in a simultaneous, comprehensive, and binding manner (p. 63).

This complex nature of the South–North conflict can only be analyzed through the lens of a multilevel security dilemma, which reflects the process of threat transition since the Korean War, the gap in the threat perception between Washington and Seoul that reflects the domestic-political factors on both sides, and the changing social identity within South Korea fueled by social polarization.

Conclusion

A security theory that accurately understands Asia should be one that emphasizes neither the internal characteristics of East Asia nor its normative orientations, but rather is explanatory and makes it possible to criticize and modify Western-centered universal theories. The current situation of security in East Asia reveals the limits of the balance-of-power theory, as it drives the power transition and balance-of-threat theories into competition. However, it is difficult to conclude that the persistent instability and conflict in the region is simply the product of changing material capabilities, and that a changing balance of threat may give rise to stability and eventual cooperation.

Therefore, it is necessary to consider the role of ideational factors and domestic politics, and the possibility of instability, which can be caused through the projection of threats, when we examine the changing East Asian international relations. The cases of the Korean War, Korea–Japan relations, and South–North Korea relations provide relevant examples representing the complex dynamics between material and ideational variables and between external and internal dimensions. For this theoretical and empirical complementation, this essay proposes a heretofore unexplored possibility that the clue may be found through the frameworks of threat transition and two-level security dilemma.

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