



Institutskolloquium

IfP

Institutskolloquium / DEPARTMENTAL SEMINAR

The Confidence Trap: Civil-Military Decision-Making and the Formulation of (In)Credible Threats

Wednesday, 08 July 2026 · 16:00 c.t.

Room 124, Institut für Politikwissenschaft

Or join online via Zoom: 930 8975 0663 (Meeting ID), 142311 (Passcode)



Conventional wisdom holds that states that project superior capabilities, clear interests, and strong reputations should issue more credible military threats, while states with limited capability, ambiguous stakes, or thin reputations struggle to convince. Yet these markers of presumed credibility frequently misfire, and actors lacking them sometimes succeed in making their threats count. Why? I argue that a military threat's credibility is not solely a function of its public signaling. It is also strengthened or weakened in internal deliberation, shaped by civilian leaders' interactions with their military advisors before a threat is issued.

Drawing on social psychological findings from the Judge-Advisor System framework of advice utilization, I develop the Confidence Trap Theory to explain how confidence, understood as the extent to which individuals are certain they are right in their own judgments, shapes why policymakers believe their threats will be credible or incredible. Leaders assimilate advice selectively. Those who are certain dismiss dissent and reinforce preexisting assessments, while those who are uncertain seek multiple perspectives but struggle to resolve competing inputs. Advisors differ in how forcefully they communicate advice. Those who are certain advocate strongly for their position, while those who are uncertain hedge and dilute the credibility of threats. I test the theory against expertise-driven assessments in the Korean War, showing how Truman's overconfidence led to deterrence failure, while Mao leveraged expert deliberations to lure Washington into overcommitment. These findings highlight the risks of confidence-driven miscalculation and underscore that before credibility is in the eye of the beholder, it can often be won or lost in internal debate.

Wendy He

(NTU Singapore / Global Encounters Fellow)

Wendy He is a Research Fellow with the Military Studies Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, and a Global Encounters Fellow at the University of Tübingen's College of Fellows. She holds a PhD in International Relations from NTU. Her research sits at the intersection of international security, political psychology, and foreign policy analysis, with a focus on how leaders and advisers assess the credibility of military threats in war and crisis decision-making.

Her book project, *The Confidence Trap*, develops a theory of how confidence shapes advice-seeking, threat assessment, and strategic judgment. Her work has been published in *International Studies Perspectives*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *RUSI*, *The U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, *East Asia Forum*, and *LSE China Ideas*. Her research has also been recognised by the International Studies Association's (ISA) Carl Beck Award in 2026 and the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society (IUS) Graduate Student Paper Award in 2025.



For more information

