

# Economic Downturns and Hardline Public Opinion

## *Objective.*

With an aim of extending the scope of group threat theory from within-country tensions between racial groups to international economic competition, this study specifically examined the impacts of perceived relative economic status of an ingroup country on attitudes about contentious political issues with a rival outgroup country.

## *Methods.*

Two survey experiments were administered, both of which manipulated Japanese participants' perceptions of the relative economic powers of Japan and South Korea.

## *Results.*

When Japanese perceive that their country's economic power is declining relative to South Korea's economy, they demonstrate more hardline attitudes about territorial and historical issues between the two countries.

## *Conclusion.*

This study demonstrates the applicability of group threat theory to bilateral international relations. It also suggests that public opinion about international conflicts is a function of the long-term rebalancing of economic power, which cannot be easily influenced by short-term policies.

How does relative status in a globalized economy relate to domestic public opinion? As interstate wars and militarized disputes have become less common since the end of the Cold War, economic power has increasingly gained importance as an index of national power. However, little is known about the mechanisms by which nonmilitary economic competition influences public opinion about international conflicts. Drawing on group threat theory (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1999), which holds that negative attitudes towards outgroups are linked to the perception that these groups pose a threat to the majority/dominant group, this study focuses on Japan–South Korea relations to examine the impact of the perceived relative economic status of the two countries on the attitudes about contentious international issues—Takeshima/Dokdo territory and reparations for the comfort women who were enslaved and sexually abused during World War II.

Since the 1990s, Japan has suffered slow economic growth, whereas the South Korean export-oriented economy has soared since the 2000s. These trends have narrowed the gap in economic power between the two countries. Simultaneously, public opinion about territorial and historical issues such as the disputed Takeshima/Dokdo territory and reparations for the comfort women has created difficulties for Japan and South Korea in their attempts to develop friendlier relations in recent decades. By experimentally demonstrating a causal relationship between these two concurrent phenomena, the rebalancing of economic power and lingering conflicts over territorial and historical issues, this study attempts to build a bridge between interstate non-military economic competition and domestic public opinion.

### **Group Threat Theory and Economic Competition**

Originally concerned with relations between racial groups in the US, group threat theory holds that a dominant or majority group (e.g., White Americans) will become

more hostile to a subordinate or minority group (e.g., Black Americans) when the former perceives that their symbolic superiority within the society is threatened by the latter. The theory is founded in Blumer's (1958) efforts to shift explanations for racial prejudice from the individual to the collective level. These efforts led to the identification of four preconditions for the formation of negative prejudices by dominant groups: i.e., 1) a sense of superiority; 2) the belief that the minority group is fundamentally different and alien; 3) claims of exclusivity to certain areas of privilege; and 4) fear that the subordinate group is or will become a threat to their status. According to Blumer, the combination of the first two preconditions may give rise to feelings of aversion and antipathy, but not prejudice. For this to occur, it is necessary that the majority interprets perceived threats to their sense of social position as "an attack on [their] natural superiority," "an intrusion into their sphere of group exclusiveness" or "an encroachment on their area of proprietary claim" (Blumer, 1958:4). Blalock (1967), for whom majority–minority relations can be described as "power contests," advanced Blumer's argument by suggesting that negative attitudes towards the minority group were particularly strong not when they threatened individual properties but *the relative status of the majority*.

Among the several sources of perceived threat to the relative status, the fear that a group's *economic* status is at risk has been described as "crucial" (Bobo, 1983, p. 1208). Although economic competition over limited resources may occur between long established racial groups, such as White and Black Americans in the US (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996), such competition has been examined most extensively in relationships between newly arrived immigrants and residents of the host country. A large body of literature consistently indicates that when the residents of a host country believe that their economic status is threatened by immigrants, their attitudes toward immigrants

and people in their countries of origin tend to be more negative and hostile, corroborating the prediction of group threat theory (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Bobo, 1983; Quillian, 1995). However, most studies in this area have been limited to intergroup tensions within a country and, more specifically, with respect to immigrant communities (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). Thus, much less is known about how international relations can deteriorate because of a perceived decline in one country's relative economic status.

### **Extending Group Threat Theory to International Economic Competition**

In a globalized competition over economic power, some countries can challenge existing hegemony, whereas others gradually lose their once dominant economic status in their regions. In this context, we contend that group threat theory can help explain the dynamics of international public opinion because Blumer's (1958) four preconditions of group threat are also relevant in international economic competition.

First, countries that are economically dominant regionally nourish a sense of superiority among their residents. As an illustration, using survey data collected by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, Kobayashi (2018) noted that the number of Japanese who thought "Japan is a leading country" increased from 41.0% in 1973 to 56.8% in 1983, reflecting Japan's rapid economic growth since the 1960s. This sense of superiority as a leading economic power in East Asia justified the notion of "Japan as Number One" (Vogel, 1979). Second, because national identity is one of the more salient social identities for many people, citizens of once-dominant countries are likely to perceive people in economically competing countries as fundamentally different and alien (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Third, when a country is economically dominant, other

countries are necessarily economically less than dominant. Although two countries can mutually benefit from economic cooperation, the dominant economic status itself is a limited resource. Therefore, when an economically rising country supplants a once dominant country, the latter loses its dominant status, even when they are economically interdependent. This reality enhances the exclusivity of the status of being dominant. Given the above reasoning and following Blumer's (1958) argument, when the people in a once economically dominant country fear that an economically subordinate country is becoming a threat to their status—i.e., when the fourth of Blumer's proposed preconditions is met—attitudes toward the economic rival country will be more negative.<sup>1</sup> As this prediction concerns international relations, the negative attitudes of those who feel threatened will manifest most vividly in hardline public opinion over contentious issues between competing countries.

*H1: Attitudes toward contentious issues with a neighboring country will be more hardline when people believe that their country's economic status is declining relative to their neighbor's.*

### **Contextual Background**

We test our hypothesis in the context of Japan–South Korea relations. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties between Japan and South Korea in 1965, the US pushed the two countries to cooperate over security amid threats from North Korea, which culminated in the United States-South Korea-Japan Security Triangle (Cha, 1999). At the

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this prediction is consistent with power transition theory in the study of international relations. Power transition theory posits that international conflicts are more likely when the power of a rising country threatens the status of a once-dominant but declining country (e.g., Organski & Kugler, 1980).

same time, South Korea faced the need to establish economic partnership with Japan to recover from the damage of Korean War and to cope with the decreasing economic aid from the US (Jackson, 2011). These immediate concerns over security and economy largely shelved several contentious issues including Takeshima/Dokdo territory and reparations for comfort women. Until South Korea established diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union and China in the early 1990s, Japan unilaterally aided South Korean economy and more than half of South Korean trades was shared by Japan and the US. Under these circumstances, the linkage between economic and territorial/historical issues was carefully avoided, and the “two-track approaches” such as the Japan-South Korea Business Council were institutionalized to deliberately separate economic issues from other contentious issues (Lee, 2011).

However, the relative decline of developed countries in the world economy, globalization, and the development of South Korean economy started to decrease the importance of Japan for South Korea since 1970s the (Kimura, 2019). Japan was the dominant economic power in East Asia until the end of the 1980s, but its economic downturn following the collapse of the bubble economy at the beginning of the 1990s has continued for more than 20 years. On the one hand, declining birthrates and increasing fiscal deficits during this period have made Japanese people even more pessimistic about their economic outlook. On the other hand, after overcoming the 1997 financial crisis, the South Korean economy has grown substantially through active investment in information industries and advances into overseas markets, although the speed of its economic growth has slowed recently. Consequently, the gap in nominal GDP per capita between Korea and Japan shrank from 24,000 USD in 1996 to 5,000 USD in 2015 (IMF, 2017). The gap in purchasing power parity per capita GDP also narrowed from 10,000

USD in 1996 to 1,500 USD in 2015. Simultaneously, the debt-to-GDP ratio for Japan was 230% in 2015, which was the worst among developed countries, whereas in South Korea it was 45%. In summary, Japan's economic power has declined relative to South Korea's, whereas South Korea's economic power is catching up with Japan.

The more commensurate balance of economic power between the two countries have increased the salience of territorial and historical issues that were once shelved in order to prioritize economic and security cooperation (Kimura, 2019). As an illustration, the former South Korean President Lee Myung-bak stated in August 2012 that "Japan's influence in the international community is not the same as before", which provoked the Japanese public. Although this statement was not explicitly linked with the territorial and the comfort women issues, it is noteworthy that the statement was made in the same month when Mr. Lee landed on the disputed Takeshima/Dokdo and demanded the Japanese emperor's apology for the colonial rule.

## **Study I**

### *Method*

In July 2016, 1,047 Japanese adults (20–59 years old) were recruited from Crowd Works, a leading Japanese crowd-sourcing service akin to Amazon Mechanical Turk (Female: 60.76%, Mean age: 36.34). After responding to pretreatment measures, including information about demographic variables and ideology, the participants were assigned randomly to one of four groups: "Japan dominates South Korea," "South Korea surpasses Japan," "no prediction," and the control group. To manipulate perceptions of the relative economic statuses of Japan and South Korea, a graph including a brief description of GDP per capita (US dollar-based) and trends for the two countries was

presented to the groups, except for the control group. After carefully examining the graph and its description, participants responded to posttreatment measures. Because we deceived some groups in predicting the GDP per capita, participants were fully debriefed at the end of the experiment.

### ***Treatment***

For the “Japan dominates South Korea” group (Panel A in Figure 1), the observed trend in GDP per capita up to 2015 was presented followed by a prediction for the GDP per capita until 2020. In this condition, the Japanese GDP per capita was predicted to increase from 2016, whereas South Korean GDP per capita was predicted to decrease, which would result in a widening gap between the two countries. In contrast, for the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group (Panel B in Figure 1), the presented graph predicted that the South Korean GDP per capita would surpass the Japanese GDP per capita in the near future, which indicated that South Korean people would be more affluent than Japanese people on average. This manipulation was intended to increase perceived group threat by inducing the perception that Japan’s economic status relative to South Korea’s economy would decrease. For the “no prediction” group, only the observed GDP per capita trend until 2015 with a brief description was presented (Panel C in Figure 1). No graph was presented to the control group. See Willer, Feinberg, and Wetts (2016) for a similar graphical manipulation.

[Figure 1 around here]

### ***Pretreatment Covariates***

We solicited information about the participants’ sex, age, educational level, political interest, and ideology and used these covariates in the following analyses to increase the efficiency of treatment effects estimations. Age was measured as real age. Educational

level was measured as a three-level variable in which 0 = high school or less, 0.5 = some college, and 1 = university or above. Political interest was measured on a single four-point scale and rescaled to range from 0 to 1 ( $M = 0.61$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ). Ideology was measured using an 11-point Likert scale ranging from left to right and rescaled to range from 0 to 1 ( $M = 0.50$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ).

### ***Outcome Measures***

#### *Attitudes about the Takeshima/Dokdo Issue*

Attitudes about the disputed Takeshima/Dokdo territory were measured with a single item and a five-point Likert scale: “Japan should forcefully claim sovereignty over Takeshima, even if it increases tension between Japan and South Korea.” Responses were rescaled to range from 0 to 1 so that higher values indicated more hardline attitudes ( $M = 0.63$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ).

#### *Attitudes about the Comfort Women Issue*

Attitudes about the comfort women issue were measured with a single item and a five-point Likert scale: “Japan should listen to South Korea’s arguments about historical issues, such as that of comfort women, among others.” Responses were rescaled to range from 0 to 1 so that higher values indicated more hardline attitudes ( $M = 0.61$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ). The correlation with the issue attitudes about Takeshima/Dokdo was 0.344 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

### ***Analysis***

First, we performed a manipulation check to ensure that the treatments successfully manipulated the participants’ perceptions about the relative economic status of the two countries. See Appendix 1 in the Online Appendix for the details of the manipulation check. Next, covariate balance was checked by calculating standardized biases between all the pairs of four groups. Non-negligible imbalance (i.e., standardized bias  $> 10$ ) were

observed for sex, education, and ideology, and moderate imbalance (i.e., standardized bias > 5) were observed for age and political interest, at least between one pair of comparison. See Appendix 2 in the Online Appendix for the details of the covariate balance.

To test the treatment effects on the outcome variables, we estimated ordered logit regression models with the attitudes about Takeshima/Dokdo and comfort women as dependent variables (Table 1). Sex, age, educational level, political interest, and ideology were included as covariates, which is justified from the viewpoints of efficiency and unbiasedness of estimation (Gerber & Green, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Because the estimation of the treatment effects of online experiments suffers from survey satisficing (e.g., Maniaci & Rogge, 2014), we estimated models with and without participants who spent less than 4 s browsing the stimuli. Models 1 and 3 use the entire sample, whereas Models 2 and 4 use only those who spent more than 4 s browsing the stimuli. Although the threshold of 4 s is an arbitrary criterion, the results did not change substantially when different thresholds were used.

Note that this experiment estimates the effect of the manipulated perception of economic power on the seemingly unrelated attitudes on the contentious political issues between Japan and South Korea. As the treatment and the outcome are conceptually distant, we do not expect to find large effects. To detect small effects in the less

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<sup>2</sup> Including covariates that predict the outcome improves the precision with which the treatment effect is estimated (Gerber & Green, 2012). Because “the statistical drawbacks of adjusting for covariates are fairly minor, particularly when the experiment involves a large number of subjects” (Gerber & Green, 2012: 105), the current experiment with more than 1,000 subjects benefits from including covariates. In addition, as noted in Appendix 2 the Online Appendix, some covariates indicated non-negligible imbalance across groups. Estimation without imbalanced covariates that predict the outcome can produce biased estimation of treatment effects. We therefore controlled for these covariates because “if a covariate is imbalanced due to random assignment, controlling for this imbalance produces unbiased estimates (Gerber & Green, 2012: 109).

stringently controlled online experimentation, it is crucial to boost the efficiency of estimation by including covariates and excluding inattentive respondents. However, for the sake of transparency, the results without covariates are reported in Appendix 3 in the Online Appendix. Furthermore, the sensitivity analyses were reported in Appendix 4 in the Online Appendix to assess the robustness of the result against different specifications. None of these additional analyses substantially changes the conclusion derived from the following analyses.

[Table 1 around here]

The results showed that the attitudes of the participants in the “Japan dominates South Korea” and the “no prediction” groups did not differ significantly from the control group for either issue. In contrast, participants in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group showed more hardline attitudes relative to the control group for both the Takeshima/Dokdo and comfort women issues, which supports H1. These effects were consistent regardless of the inclusion of inattentive respondents. To put the effect size into context, net change in predicted probability of the outcome was calculated based on Model 2 in Table 1, holding all the covariates at their means. The probability of selecting hardline responses (i.e., “Agree” or “Strongly agree” to the attitudes about the disputed Takeshima/Dokdo) increased from 49.80% in the control group to 57.20% in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group, while that of selecting more flexible responses (i.e., “Disagree” or “Strongly disagree”) dropped from 20.89% in the control group to 16.28% in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group. Similarly, predicted probability of selecting hardline responses for the issue of comfort woman based on Model 4 in Table 1 increased from 47.73% in the control group to 55.26% in the “South Korea surpasses

Japan” group, while that of selecting more flexible responses dropped from 21.47% in the control group to 16.70% in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group.

## **Discussion**

The realization that Japanese economic power is declining while the South Korean economy is surpassing it constitutes group threat to Japanese citizens, which diminishes the positive image of their ingroup. With their national identity threatened in this manner, the Japanese tend to be more hostile and uncompromising with respect to Japan–South Korea relations, which leads to more hardline attitudes about contentious issues between the two countries. This result supports the prediction of group threat theory and its validity in explaining public opinion at the international level.

However, Study 1 has a major limitation, as it could not decompose the contributions of the declining trend of Japan and the rising trend of South Korea in the significant treatment effect found for the “South Korea surpasses Japan” condition. Group threat theory predicts that attitudes toward the outgroup decline when people perceive that their ingroup’s superiority is challenged by the outgroup. Therefore, a hardline shift in attitudes would not be expected when either a declining trend of the ingroup *or* a rising trend of the outgroup is observed alone; it would be expected when a declining trend of ingroup *and* a rising trend of outgroup are observed together. Study 2 was designed to address this limitation.

## **Study 2**

If the treatment effect for the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group in Study 1 was not caused by either the absolute decline of Japan or the rise of South Korea but by the relative shift in the economic power balance between the two countries, then the

treatment effect should only occur when the two national trends are juxtaposed.

Therefore, we test the following hypothesis in Study 2.

*H2: Attitudes about contentious international issues between neighboring countries will be more hardline *only when* people perceive that their country's economic status is declining relative to the neighboring country, but not when *only* the decline of their own country or the rise of the neighboring country is indicated.*

Testing H2 serves two purposes. First, the comparison between the "South Korea surpasses Japan" group and the control group constitutes a replication of Study 1. Second, Study 2 decomposes the effects of the declining trend of Japan and the rising trend of South Korea in Panel B of Figure 1 to elucidate the necessary conditions for group threat to trigger a hardline shift in public opinion on contentious international issues.

It should be noted that, although no major events related to the Takeshima/Dokdo issue occurred between Studies 1 and 2, several major developments occurred for the comfort women issue between the studies. First, Japan and South Korea reached an agreement in December 2015 on this issue, making an announcement that the issue is "resolved finally and irreversibly" (MOFA, 2015). However, the renegotiation of that agreement became a prominent issue in the South Korean presidential election of May 2017, as the eventual winner (Moon Jae-in) had promised to re-negotiate the agreement. Second, the 2015 agreement stipulated that the South Korean government "acknowledges the fact that the Government of Japan is concerned about the statue built in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul [...], and will strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner [...]" (MOFA, 2015). However, a new statue commemorating the comfort women was installed in front of the Japanese Consulate in Busan in December 2016, which was

followed by the Japanese government's countermeasures including temporarily withdrawing its ambassador to South Korea. In addition, at the meeting with President Moon at G20 in Hamburg, Prime Minister Abe stated that "the agreement between Japan and the ROK on the comfort women issue is an indispensable foundation for building a future-oriented Japan-ROK relationship" (MOFA, 2017). With these major developments and their heavy news coverage that occurred after Study 1, the Japanese public started to frame the issue in terms of the fulfillment of the 2015 agreement rather than as a long-term process of negotiation over the comfort women issue. To examine this shift in frames of reference, new measurements regarding attitudes about the comfort women issue were employed in addition to the one used in Study 1.

### ***Method***

In August 2017, 1,528 Japanese adults (20–59 years old) were recruited from Crowd Works (women: 56.79%; mean age: 37.25). The experimental procedures were identical to those used in Study 1, except for the treatment and the additional measurement of attitudes about comfort women. In Study 2, participants were assigned randomly to one of four groups: "South Korea surpasses Japan," "Japan declines," "South Korea rises," or the control group.

### ***Treatment***

The "South Korea surpasses Japan" group (Panel D in Figure 1) was presented with the same graph and description used in Study 1 (Panel B in Figure 1). The "Japan declines" group was only presented with the predicted declining trend of Japan's GDP (Panel E in Figure 2). The declining trend was identical to the one presented for the "South Korea surpasses Japan" group. On the other hand, the "South Korea rises" group was only presented with the rising trend of South Korea's GDP (Panel F in Figure 2),

which was identical to the South Korea's future trend presented to the "South Korea surpasses Japan" group. No graph was presented to the control group.

### ***Outcome Measures***

*Attitudes about the Takeshima/Dokdo issue* ( $M = 0.65$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ) and *attitudes about the comfort women issue* ( $M = 0.61$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ) were measured in the same way as in Study 1.

The correlation between the two outcome measures was 0.378 ( $p < 0.01$ ). To tap into new developments regarding the comfort women issue since Study 1, we added two new Likert items with five-point scales to measure attitudes about comfort women: "The agreement over the issue of comfort women between Japan and South Korea should be observed" and "The statue symbolizing comfort women in front of the Japanese Consulate in Busan should be removed." Responses to these two items were summed and rescaled to range from 0 to 1 so that a higher value indicated more hardline attitudes (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.61$ ;  $M = 0.75$ ;  $SD = 0.23$ ). The correlation between this new measurement and attitudes about the Takeshima/Dokdo and comfort women issues (the item used in Study 1) were 0.37 ( $p < 0.01$ ) and 0.33 ( $p < 0.01$ ), respectively.

### ***Analysis***

Manipulation check and covariate balance check are reported in OAX and OAY in the Online Appendix, respectively. To test the treatment effects on the outcome variables, we estimated two ordered logit regression models using the same dependent variables as Study 1 (Models 1 to 4 in Table 2). The independent variables included the treatment with the control group as the baseline category, as well as the same host of covariates used in Study 1. We estimated models including participants who spent less than 4 s examining the stimuli (Models 1 and 3) and models excluding those participants (Models 2 and 4) to address the potential bias due to satisficing.

[Table 2 around here]

Models 1 and 2 show that participants in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” condition demonstrated more hardline attitudes on the Takeshima/Dokdo issue compared with the control group, which replicates the finding of Study 1. Fisher’s combined probability test indicated the joint null probability (i.e.,  $p$ -value) of the “South Korea surpasses Japan” condition drawn from Study 1 and 2 was 0.02 and 0.01 for models with and without satisficers, respectively. More importantly, the attitudes of participants in the “Japan declines” and “South Korea rises” conditions did not statistically differ from those of the control group. That is, the attitudes on the territorial issue became more hardline *only when* the declining trend of Japan was juxtaposed with the rising trend of South Korea, which is consistent with group threat theory’s focus on the relative status of two groups as the critical factor. On its own, the declining status of the ingroup does not make attitudes more uncompromising; a hardline shift of public opinion is triggered only when the ingroup’s decline is coupled with the rise of the rival outgroup. Predicted probability of selecting hardline responses based on Model 2 in Table 2 (i.e., “Agree” or “Strongly agree” to the attitudes about the disputed Takeshima/Dokdo) increased from 54.56% in the control group to 60.64% in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group, while that of selecting more flexible responses (i.e., “Disagree” or “Strongly disagree”) dropped from 20.65% in the control group to 16.74% in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group, holding all the covariates at their means.

Models 3 and 4 were estimated to replicate Study 1’s finding regarding attitudes about the comfort women issue. However, in contrast to Models 1 and 2, the “South Korea surpasses Japan” condition did not show more hardline attitudes compared with

the control group, though the coefficients were properly signed. Fisher's combined probability test indicated the joint null probability of the "South Korea surpasses Japan" condition drawn from Study 1 and 2 was 0.14 and 0.12 for models with and without satisficers, respectively.

We suspect that there are two reasons why Study 2 failed to replicate Study 1 for the comfort women issue. First, it could be simply due to sampling variation. Even direct replications of studies sometimes fail to find significant effects because of variation between the samples (e.g., Lakens & Etz, 2017). Therefore, a single failed replication does not rule out the effect found in the original study. However, this explanation is less plausible because Study 2 is substantially powered with the sample size over 1,000, although the small effect sizes found in Study 1 and less stringent control in online experimentation might have worked against replicating the findings.

Second, the developments in the comfort women issue that occurred between Studies 1 and 2 may have changed the nature of treatment effects, which we believe is more plausible than sampling variation. As above-mentioned, since President Moon took office in May 2017, the fulfillment and potential renegotiation of the December 2015 Japan–South Korea agreement became prominent aspects of the comfort women issue. As a result, Japanese public opinion had shifted its attention from the long-term process of reconciliation over the issue to more concrete, short-term points, such as the potential of renegotiation of the agreement and the removal of the statue in front of the Japanese Consulate that memorializes the comfort women. Therefore, it is likely that the dependent variables that reflect the recent developments in this issue are more sensitive to the treatments than are the general issue attitude that was repeatedly measured in Studies 1 and 2.

To probe the second explanation of the failed replication, we estimated two ordinary least-square regression models with the new scale of attitudes about comfort women as the dependent variable (Models 5 and 6 in Table 2). The specification of the models was identical to the specification of Models 1 to 4. Model 5 was estimated including participants who spent less than 4 s examining the stimuli and Model 6 was estimated without them. The results indicate that participants in the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group showed more hardline attitudes when the model was estimated without potential survey satisficers (Model 6). However, the attitudes of the participants in the “Japan declines” and “South Korea rises” conditions did not statistically differ from those of control group. These results conceptually replicate the finding of Study 1, although, unlike the Takeshima/Dokdo issue, the direct replication failed for the comfort women issue.

In summary, the results of Study 2 partially replicated the findings of Study 1. The replication was more successful for the Takeshima/Dokdo issue, but similar results were obtained for the comfort women issue when the recent developments in that issue were incorporated in the outcome measurements. Furthermore, by decomposing the graph of the “South Korea surpasses Japan” condition into separate trends of declining Japan and rising South Korea, Study 2 revealed that attitudes about contentious international issues become more hardline *only when* the economic decline of ingroup is coupled with the rising trend of its rival, although the results was somewhat equivocal for the comfort women issue. These results partially support H2.

## General Discussion

By extending group threat theory (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1999) from within-country to between-country comparisons, this study examined the impact of the perceived relative economic status of an ingroup country on attitudes about contentious international issues with a rival outgroup country. Two experiments that focused on Japan–South Korea relations indicated that when Japanese people perceive that their country’s economic power is declining relative to South Korea’s economy, they demonstrate more hardline attitudes about contentious political issues between the two countries. This hardline shift in Japanese public opinion was not observed when the Japanese participants were presented with just a declining trend in the Japanese economy or just a rising trend in the South Korean economy, strongly suggesting that information about both a decline in ingroup’s status and an increase in the rival outgroup’s status is necessary for group threat to trigger a hardline shift of public opinion. These results have several implications.

First, although group threat theory has been primarily used to explain interracial tensions within a country or hostile attitudes toward immigrants, the present study demonstrated that the theory is applicable to international contexts by showing global economic status threat affects attitudes about international conflictive issues. This finding fits squarely with the increasing attention to the role of group status in mass opinion. As an illustration, Mutz (2018) demonstrated that perceived threat to the dominant global status of the US, especially the “China threat”, contributed to the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election more than pocketbook economic concern did. In 2016, roughly half of Americans thought the US played less important roles as a world leader compared with 10 years ago (Manevitch, 2017), suggesting their

perceived threat of losing dominant status in the world. Expectedly, these trends are accompanied by the negative shift of Americans' sentiment toward China. What is noteworthy is that concerns about China's military strength has been declining, while concerns about China's economic strength is on the rise since 2016 (Wike & Devlin, 2018), which corroborates our claim that it is relative economic power rather than military power that carves out international public opinion in the post-Cold War era.

Second, this study demonstrated that public opinions about contentious international issues are not necessarily defined by political variables; they also can be influenced by non-political, economic perceptions. More specifically, the treatments in this study used observed data and predictions of future economic power, but they did not include any reference to the contentious political issues between Japan and South Korea. Nevertheless, the non-political treatment in this study had a significant impact on attitudes about the issues we examined, implying that domestic public opinion on contentious international issues is not only a function of short-term political processes but is also a consequence of long-term shifts in the relative economic power of the countries involved. In the specific context of Japan–South Korea relations, this suggests that disputes over territorial and historical issues between these countries will intensify as the balance of economic power between Japan and Korea becomes more proportionate. While political leadership is needed to improve international relations, it is also important to note that hardline international public opinion is a function of the long-term rebalancing of economic power, which cannot be easily influenced by short-term policies. On the other hand, although the impact of group threat and hardline attitudes on foreign policy is beyond the scope of this study, recent literature of international relations indicate public opinion's bottom-up influence on foreign policy (e.g., Baum &

Potter, 2008; Knecht, 2010). Therefore, the hardline attitudes caused by perceived group threat might influence Japanese foreign policy, which would in turn have impact on the perception of threat. This recursive micro-macro dynamics between state-level foreign policy and individual-level public opinion would be a fruitful direction for future studies.

Third, the two experiments in this study suggest that the effect of group threat depends upon the context of issues. In Study 1, the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group demonstrated more hardline responses to the item that explores general attitudes on the comfort woman issue, which asked whether “Japan should listen to South Korea’s arguments.” However, the identical comparison between the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group and the control group did not reach significance in Study 2, whereas the “South Korea surpasses Japan” group showed significantly greater hardline responses to the items that gauged more concrete and specific attitudes about the 2015 agreement between Japan and South Korea. This finding was obtained precisely because the comparison was replicated in Study 2. These results imply that group threat affects general issue attitudes when the issue is not salient, and it affects more specific aspects of the issue when the issue becomes salient. However, future studies are needed to examine the role of issue salience more thoroughly in group threat theory.

Several limitations remain to be addressed. First, the sample of the two studies were drawn from an online crowdsourcing service and thus does not represent Japanese general public. Although we did not weight the data so as not to lose statistical power (Mutz, 2011), the observed effects need to be replicated by using more representative data. Second, while we manipulated the perceived decline of Japan’s relative economic status by presenting the trend and prediction of GDP per capita, the mechanism through which individual Japanese might feel economic group threat from South Korea in the real

world context remains largely unknown. Japanese individuals might feel more imminent group threat when Japan's decline relative to South Korea in specific industries that are nationally symbolic is indicated (e.g., electronic appliances), rather than general economic power represented by GDP. Observational studies would be helpful to identify the real world indicators that are most strongly associated with perceived group threat.

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**TABLE I.**

## Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Issue Attitudes (Study 1)

Issue attitude (Hardline)		Takeshima/Dokdo		Comfort women	
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
		Coef. (B)			
Treatment Baseline: Control	Japan dominates South Korea	0.135 (0.156)	0.156 (0.157)	-0.080 (0.158)	-0.080 (0.159)
	South Korea surpasses Japan	0.333* (0.160)	0.320* (0.162)	0.322* (0.160)	0.331* (0.161)
	No prediction	0.123 (0.157)	0.135 (0.158)	-0.026 (0.159)	-0.023 (0.160)
Covariates	Sex (Female)	-0.551** (0.119)	-0.572** (0.121)	-0.387** (0.117)	-0.404** (0.119)
	Age	-0.000 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.006)
	Education	-0.327* (0.151)	-0.337* (0.154)	-0.362* (0.152)	-0.429** (0.154)
	Political interest	0.771** (0.240)	0.688** (0.244)	0.115 (0.242)	0.096 (0.246)
Constant	Ideology (Conservative)	2.487** (0.359)	2.533** (0.362)	3.568** (0.363)	3.574** (0.366)
	Cut-point 1	-1.943** (0.367)	-2.018** (0.373)	-1.931** (0.370)	-2.021** (0.375)
	Cut-point 2	-0.309 (0.347)	-0.374 (0.353)	-0.140 (0.350)	-0.219 (0.355)
	Cut-point 3	1.128** (0.349)	1.054** (0.354)	1.379** (0.352)	1.290** (0.357)
	Cut-point 4	2.604** (0.356)	2.523** (0.361)	2.828** (0.360)	2.756** (0.364)
Observations	1,047	1,027	1,047	1,027	
Pseudo R-squared	0.033	0.033	0.041	0.042	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$

**TABLE 2.**

## Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Issue Attitudes (Study 2)

Issue attitude (Hardline)		Takeshima/Dokdo		Comfort women		Comfort women (New items)	
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
		Coef. (B)					
Treatment Baseline: Control	South Korea surpasses Japan	0.248+	0.276*	0.046	0.065	0.021	0.030*
		(0.131)	(0.132)	(0.129)	(0.131)	(0.015)	(0.015)
	Japan declines	-0.042	-0.050	0.159	0.180	0.002	0.010
		(0.131)	(0.133)	(0.130)	(0.133)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Covariates	South Korea rises	0.151	0.191	-0.014	0.023	0.012	0.026+
		(0.131)	(0.133)	(0.129)	(0.131)	(0.015)	(0.015)
	Sex (Female)	-0.749**	-0.730**	-0.288**	-0.268**	-0.027*	-0.019+
		(0.096)	(0.098)	(0.094)	(0.096)	(0.011)	(0.011)
	Age	0.010*	0.008+	0.007	0.006	0.005**	0.004**
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.001)	(0.001)
	Education	-0.279*	-0.238+	-0.229+	-0.192	-0.000	0.007
		(0.121)	(0.122)	(0.118)	(0.120)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Political interest	0.401*	0.447*	0.231	0.129	0.140**	0.146**	
	(0.190)	(0.195)	(0.186)	(0.191)	(0.022)	(0.022)	
Constant	Ideology (Conservative)	2.996**	2.979**	3.199**	3.486**	0.244**	0.269**
		(0.294)	(0.305)	(0.294)	(0.305)	(0.032)	(0.032)
	Cut-point 1	-1.817**	-1.803**	-1.420**	-1.407**		
		(0.295)	(0.300)	(0.284)	(0.291)		
	Cut-point 2	-0.007	0.013	0.495+	0.592*		
		(0.276)	(0.280)	(0.269)	(0.274)		
	Cut-point 3	1.286**	1.286**	1.656**	1.732**		
		(0.277)	(0.281)	(0.271)	(0.276)		
Cut-point 4	2.605**	2.615**	2.927**	3.008**			
	(0.283)	(0.287)	(0.278)	(0.284)			
	Constant					0.388**	0.388**
					(0.032)	(0.032)	
Observations		1,528	1,470	1,528	1,470	1,528	1,470
Pseudo R-squared		0.047	0.046	0.033	0.037		
R-squared						0.132	0.132

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$