TALK

The Confidence Trap: How Advisors Gain and Lose Credibility at War

Wendy He
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ABOUT THE SPEAKER

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, a Global Encounters Fellow at the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen's College of Fellows and a Singapore Social Science Research Council Graduate Research Fellow. 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.

WHEN
Tuesday 10 November 2026 · 15:00–16:30

WHERE
Room H.004

ABSTRACT

Why do some advisors lose credibility when their judgments prove wrong, while others remain credible to their leaders? I develop the Confidence Trap to explain how confidence – the degree to which individuals are certain their judgments are correct – shapes how advisors gain and lose credibility during war. Drawing on social psychological research, I argue that confidence operates through two heuristics. When leaders are certain of their judgments, the agreement heuristic leads them to regard advisors who agree with them as credible. When leaders are uncertain, the persuasiveness heuristic leads them to regard advisors who communicate their assessments confidently as credible. Crucially, the ways advisors establish credibility also influence how leaders reassess that credibility after mistakes. Credibility grounded in agreement is more resilient, whereas credibility grounded in persuasion is more vulnerable to loss. Comparing President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur with Chinese leader Mao Zedong and Marshal Peng Dehuai during the Korean War, I show how MacArthur's overconfident assurances ultimately undermined his credibility with Truman, whereas Peng's agreement with Mao preserved his credibility despite mistaken assessments. The Confidence Trap helps explain why leaders and advisors persist with erroneous military strategies, with costly consequences for the conduct and outcomes of war.

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