

Neorealist Analysis of Security Dilemma in Cyberspace; A Quantitative Study

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1. Abstract

Two crucial factors have urged IR academia to account for state behavior in cyberspace: the increasing volume of cyber attacks and the rising scale of damage induced by these attacks. This has led to a series of initiatives appealing to the grand theories of IR in order to scrutinize state behavior in depth, particularly regarding the securitization and militarization of cyberspace. Following a similar pattern, this work intends to contribute to IR academia by presenting a neorealist analysis of state behavior in cyberspace, relying on quantitative methods. Two regression analyses, one using a linear algorithm and the other using a negative binomial algorithm, were conducted using a compiled dataset consisting of 4,099 samples. The analyses indicate that as states build more cyber security capacity, they tend to engage in more disruptive actions against other states in cyberspace. Both regression models were subsequently trained using artificial neural networks (ANNs) and showed improvements in their metrics compared to the traditional regression counterparts.

2. Keywords

realism; neorealism; security dilemma; cyberpolitics; cyber security

3. Introduction

Cyberspace has been characterized as the fifth domain of warfare almost for one and half decade, beside air, space, sea and land (Azmi et al., 2016; Dunn Cavelty and Wenger, 2020). Two crucial factors urged IR academia

to account for state behaviour in cyberspace; one is the increasing volume of cyber attacks in recent years, and the other is the raising scale of damage induced by these attacks. These developments made states more sensitive and demanding on the issues pertaining cyber security, leading them to establish their own peculiar national cyber security strategies (NCSS) (Luijckx et al., 2013). Though not endorsed by all, there is a wide-ranging implicative consensus reached upon the fact that building defensive mechanisms in the age of information technology and of internet is much harder and more expensive than adopting offensive initiatives (Drezner, 2019; Lynn III, 2010; Mohee, 2022; Nakashima, 2015; O’Hanlon, 2018). This makes executing detrimental actions, such as cyber attacks, in the cyberspace more appealing both for states and non-state actors. In spite of the malignant outcomes of cyber attacks for states, there exist considerable amount of scholarly work that indicate the inappropriateness of the cyberspace to be accounted by the theories of IR. On the other hand, as of today, majority of the works that specifically deal with cyberspace politics achieved to yield empirical findings on state behaviour in cyber venues. Yet, the literature is having a wide gap as of today when it comes to provide this area of issue with a theoretical perspective anchored in an empirical quantitative analysis conducted by using historical data. Therefore, this work strives for bringing a theoretical framework on cyber politics by applying the concept of “security dilemma” on states’ endeavor in pursuit of the militarization and the securitization of cyberspace (Mehmetcik, 2014). By doing so, I intend to give an answer from a neorealist perspective to the question that “Does states’ cyber security capacity building increase their tendency to execute detrimental actions against other states in the cyberspace?”. I hence took states’ “cyber security capacity” as the independent variable, and states’ “dissemination of false information in foreign countries” and “the number of state-sponsored or executed cyber attacks” as the dependent variables. The study relies purely on quantitative methods—particularly on linear and negative binomial regression analyses—to justify the hypothesis. Two datasets were taken from different data repositories and were mutated into a single dataset, which included 4,099 samples in total. Subsequently, the dependent variables were analysed on multivariate basis.

4. Previous relevant work

A retrospective outlook unfolds that, back into the first decade of the 21st century, several attempts were made to scrutinize and explain the relationship between state security and cyber medium to which (Bendrath, 2001) was an example, arguing that sustaining a stable and effective cyber security policy would be challenging for states particularly under liberal order in which infrastructure providers consist mostly of private companies. Nonetheless, this and such works either remained shallow in terms of providing a theoretical framework on security, or their remarkings remained nothing more than assumptions due to the lack of adequate scientific data of the time and of relevant case studies that demonstrate the outcomes of cyber (in-)security and of cyber warfare. A parenthesis should be put here in the sense that the very existence of the term “cyber war” or “cyber warfare” has always been controversial. I would prefer to dichotomize these type of works falling into the debate on whether the conflicts in cyberspace can evolve into a scale of “warfare”;

“the camp of deniers” and “the camp of endorsers”. One of the most prominent works in the camp of deniers belongs to (Rid, 2013). His and alike works’ fundamental arguments commonly revolve around the idea that actions taken in cyber venues may have real-world implications, however, their results cannot be devastating than conventional acts of violence. He furtherly underlines that competition and rivalry between states given in cyber domains can be resolved before evolving into a great scale real-world war. I would therefore prefer to put his work on liberal line. On the other hand, it is a commonly accepted idea both in the camp of deniers and the camp of endorsers that one of the most, or maybe the most, conspicuous feature(s) of cyber venues is its facilitatory role in the acts of espionage, DoS (denial of service), propoganda, identity theft, sabotage, and so forth (Choucric, 2012b; Denning, 2001; Greathouse, 2014; Inkster, 2010; Kassab, 2014; Kremer and Müller, 2014; Luijff, 2012; Steed, 2011). I therefore point out that main inference that should be taken from such works is that there is no debate over whether cyber world facilitates such malignant actions; the main point of controversy is *to what extend* states bear to go for extraordinary offensive measures against one another as a consequence of these actions.

Such attempts were followed by highly suspicious accounts on the applicability of theory on cyber venues in terms of security issues, drawing attention to the gap of theoretical framework and on the incompatibilities of the current traditional IR theories to explain security-related state attitude in cyber realm (Eriksson and Giacomello, 2006). Going on a deeper level, I want to point out one velied aspect in the work of Eriksson & Giacomello (2006); I catch an implicit sight that they particularly draw attention on the undeniable and considerable amount of impacts of non-state actors in cyber venues. Therefore, I concluded from their work that a liberal perspective may be proposed to explain the very peculiar characteristics of cyber domains by drawing attention particularly on the power of non-state actors, which hold, in some cases, more power even than states. What counts as “power” in the cyber realm is a blurry issue, though; if it is counted as capacity to influence, Kremer and Müller 2014 define it as “the direction of (public) opinion by either providing, shaping or withholding information”. They continue and underline the empowering impacts of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) in terms of non-state actors by quoting the words of Dartnell (2003): “(ICT provides) enormous opportunities for non-state actors and enhances the global profile of previously marginalised issues and movements”.

Validity of such accounts has and had been challenged by a great number of works published in the last decade. It is noteworthy to mention of the work of Tumkevič (2019) falling to this branch in the sense that her perspective is relatively similar to the one used in this study. In her work, she specifically draws attention on the emergence of a “negative cooperation” between US-China and US-Russia in cyberspace by subscribing to the perspective of defensive realism. Watanabe (2020), on the other hand, particularly deals with “capacity building” in cyberspace and provides a more general framework by applying three major IR theories (Liberalism, Realism, and Constructivism), thus, explaining military capacity building in cyberspace with realism, economic capacity building with liberalism, and normative capacity building with constructivism. Again, even though his work provides the literature with a qualified point of view from the lenses of the grand

theories of IR, the validity of these finding remains questionable without relying on a grounded data. In his analysis on Stuxnet cyber attack incident in 2010 (Baezner and Robin, 2017), Mohee (2022) concludes that anarchical nature of cyberspace makes offensive incentives more tempting, and cyber capabilities of states contribute to their survival. This is still a matter of great debate among scholars and is commonly accounted by referring to the offense-defense theory of Robert Jervis (Glaser and Kaufmann, 1998; Jervis, 1978; Quester, 2002; Slayton, 2017). Although a consensus yet to be reached, most of scholarly works point out that developments in cyber technologies appreciate offensive actions. As indicated by Shaheen (2014), utilization of cyber weapons mostly for offensive actions but not for defensive purposes would tilt the offense-defense balance in favor of aggression, resulting in the destabilization of the international security system. Even though this study does not consider offense-defense theory as its central theory of explanation, it implicitly relates the adoption of defensive measures with offensive action and how increasing capacity for the former may subsequently contribute to the execution of the latter, triggering a vicious spiral.

Moreover, Pytlak and Mitchell (2018) went one more step further and conducted a quantitative study on the incentives that trigger a cyber activity between states, discovering that nuclear power status of a state may be a driving force of cyber conflict. There lies a similar motive behind the logic of this study. As seen in the aforementioned studies above, majority of the works that seek bringing a theoretical perspective on cyber security-related issues lack a quantitative data analysis to reinforce their findings. This gap also limits the improvement of existing theories, and the development of new theoretical perspectives. This work therefore intends to put forth a satisfactory realist point of view anchored in a quantitative analysis conducted by using historical data.

5. Realist Understanding of Cyber Security, Its Implications, and Security Dilemma

There exists two concepts which had and have been appreciated by realist thinkers above everything else; power and security, both of which tightly complement each other. The concept of “security” is commonly attributed to four basic elements; physical safety, autonomy, development, and rule. On the one hand, no concessions are to be given on the idea reached by the realist consensus that both physical safety and autonomy are the compulsory elements of security, however, some realists may or may not attribute less importance on the “autonomy” and the “development”. Overlooking the developmental aspect may result in bitter consequences for a state as it implicitly contributes to the relative national power (Morgan, 2007). Increasing awareness of states about how cyber attacks may result in devastating outcomes that explicitly undermine national security raised the attributed importance and precedence on cyber security, vaulting its degree of severity to the national security level (Dewar, 2018). Cyber security, hence, is not a matter of low politics but high politics (Dunn Cavelty, 2008). Therefore, I find fair to say the fact that emergence of cyber challenges cements the indeniability of the developmental aspect of security in the realist school of thought.

One foremost and identical characteristic of cyberspace that it shares with the realist assumption of a real world political system is its anarchical structure (Adams, 2001; Choucri, 2012c; Kiggins, 2014; Nye Jr, 2022), lack of an upper authority above states. One crucial point I intend to argue on is that the structural realist theory of Waltz (1979) takes the anarchy as the chief point of departure that urges states to seek power to ensure their security. Power is therefore not seen as an end but only as a “tool” to reach the very ultimate goal; survival. By the same token, the state is just a virtual being seen in cyberspace among other actors, such as hackers, other cyber terrorist groups, and sometimes even NGOs, against whom its chief purpose is maintaining its security and existence in the realm. One may hence postulate that in a space where non-state actors dominates much of the acts of aggression, which is called “cyber attack” in cyberspace, states have no choice but focus on ensuring their own “survival” in the realm by taking advantage of the means called “cyber security”, which is possible through security maximization. Indeed, this does necessarily not mean that states are free of offensive initiatives in cyberspace. I just want to underline that non-state actors have the upper-hand over states in terms of offensive actions thanks to four characteristics of cyberspace that specifically favour non-state actors; *permeation* (penetrates boundaries and jurisdictions), *participation* (reduces barriers to activism and political expression), *attribution* (obscures identities of actors and links to action), and *accountability* (bypasses mechanisms of responsibility)¹.

This postulation brings forth the question that how—or simply can—security dilemma manifest in cyberspace in the light of the security understanding of states in cyberspace mentioned above? Security dilemma emerges as a consequence of the possibility of the dual-use of capacity. This means that technological innovations made by a state to improve its level of development in cyber technologies also increase its capacity to use these technologies in a disruptive manner, threatening internal and/or external security of the victim. I therefore argue that raise in the cyber security capacity of states increases the tendency of the utilization of cyber power in a disruptive manner.

H_0 = Raise in the cyber security capacity of states has no particular effect over the tendency of the utilization of cyber power in a disruptive manner.

H_α = Raise in the cyber security capacity of states increases the tendency of the utilization of cyber power in a disruptive manner.

6. Research Design

The study takes “cyber security capacity” as the independent variable (IV), and “utilization of cyber power in a disruptive manner” as the dependent variable (DV). The existing literature provides academia with vast amounts of datasets to measure a given country’s security in cyberspace in numerical values. Nonetheless, surveying explicit state aggression or state-sponsored cyber attacks is much challenging than assessing cyber

¹ See Table 1.1 in; Choucri N (2012a) New Challenges to International Relations Theory and Policy. In: Cyberpolitics in International Relations. Cambridge, MA 02142: The MIT Press, p. 4 .

infrastructure protection for data providers. This issue makes it complicated for this study to examine available data that are suitable to be adapted on the dependent variable. I therefore preferred to rely on two different but interrelated dependent variables. One is the number of cyber operations executed by states, and the other is the dissemination of false information in the virtual platforms against foreign states.

I intend to make further clarifications on the latter dependent variable; what is covered within the context of “dissemination of false information abroad”? It covers the actions undertaken by the state in question on social media, blogs, forums, the internet channels of news moguls, or in any other internet medium to diffuse synthetic information, or disinformation. The chief objectives by doing so ranges from promoting, justifying, pretextualizing, and appreciating the disinformationized narratives favouring the disseminant government, to falsify, trivialize, and sometimes to antagonize the distributor(-s) of the genuine information disfavoured by the disseminant party. It is a common practice to execute these initiatives both through, for instance, real and bot accounts on Twitter and Facebook. All these actions are considered to be part of information warfare given on the internet—take the role of Russia in the US presidential elections in 2016 as an example² (The Guardian, 2017).

My research design relies on two different regression algorithms. The data on the independent variable are taken from the “government cyber security capacity” index of Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem) version 13 (V-Dem Coders, 2023). As stated by the respective coders preparing these data, scores for all countries are scaled to interval by the measurement model, which were ordinal in the initial form. I took the scores for each individual country in the dataset between 2000 and 2022 as there are no available data before 2000. An adequate amount of sample size (4,099 in total) is reached to conduct a consistent and meaningful analysis. Similarly, the data regarding the first DV (government dissemination of false information abroad) are provided by the V-Dem project. The data on the second DV (cyber operations by country) are taken from a different database, Council on Foreign Relations (2023). Their dataset encompasses each known state-sponsored cyber attack from 2005 to 2022. I collapsed these data to the numbers of cyber attacks executed by a given country in a specific year. Subsequently, I compiled two datasets, one of which consists of V-Dem data, and the other of Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) data. I eventually mutated these two datasets to a single dataset via “join” method. For the first model, where dissemination of false information is the DV, no missing values were observed in any variables, including controls and the DV. For the second model, an initial negative binomial regression model is created to predict all missing values in the second DV (number of cyber attacks). All missing values were replaced with predictions made by the initial model. Subsequently, a genuine negative binomial regression model is created using the data where missing values in the second DV were replaced by these predictions.

Multivariate regression analyses were used to conduct the research. Three additional control variables beside the independent variable were added in order to reinforce the consistency and reliability of the analysis, all of

² For further clarifications and examples, Tai H (2022) Russia’s dissemination of false information. Available at: https://v-dem.net/weekly_graph/russias-dissemination-of-false-information.

which are provided by the V-Dem project. These are defamation protection, government internet filtering capacity, and government capacity to regulate online content. Measurements applied on the independent and the dependent variables are likewise applied on the control variables. The dataset I compiled after all these steps lacked the value “0” in the following variables: dissemination of false information abroad, number of cyber attacks, defamation protection, internet filtering capacity, capacity to regulate online content. I therefore strived to reach more optimal equations by subtracting the least value in each column from the value in the each individual cell. One regression model is produced for each DV, first of which is a linear model (OLS) as the first DV is a continuous data scaled to interval. The second model is built of negative binomial regression algorithm since the second DV is a count data where the variance (5.503028) is greater than the mean (0.6028). I used R language to carry out all these operations and to create a regression coefficient plot. Python language is subsequently used for building an artificial neural network (ANN) modelling on both DVs.

7. Results

Table 1 and **Figure 1** indicate the numerical results of the analyses.

Table 1: Multivariate regression results

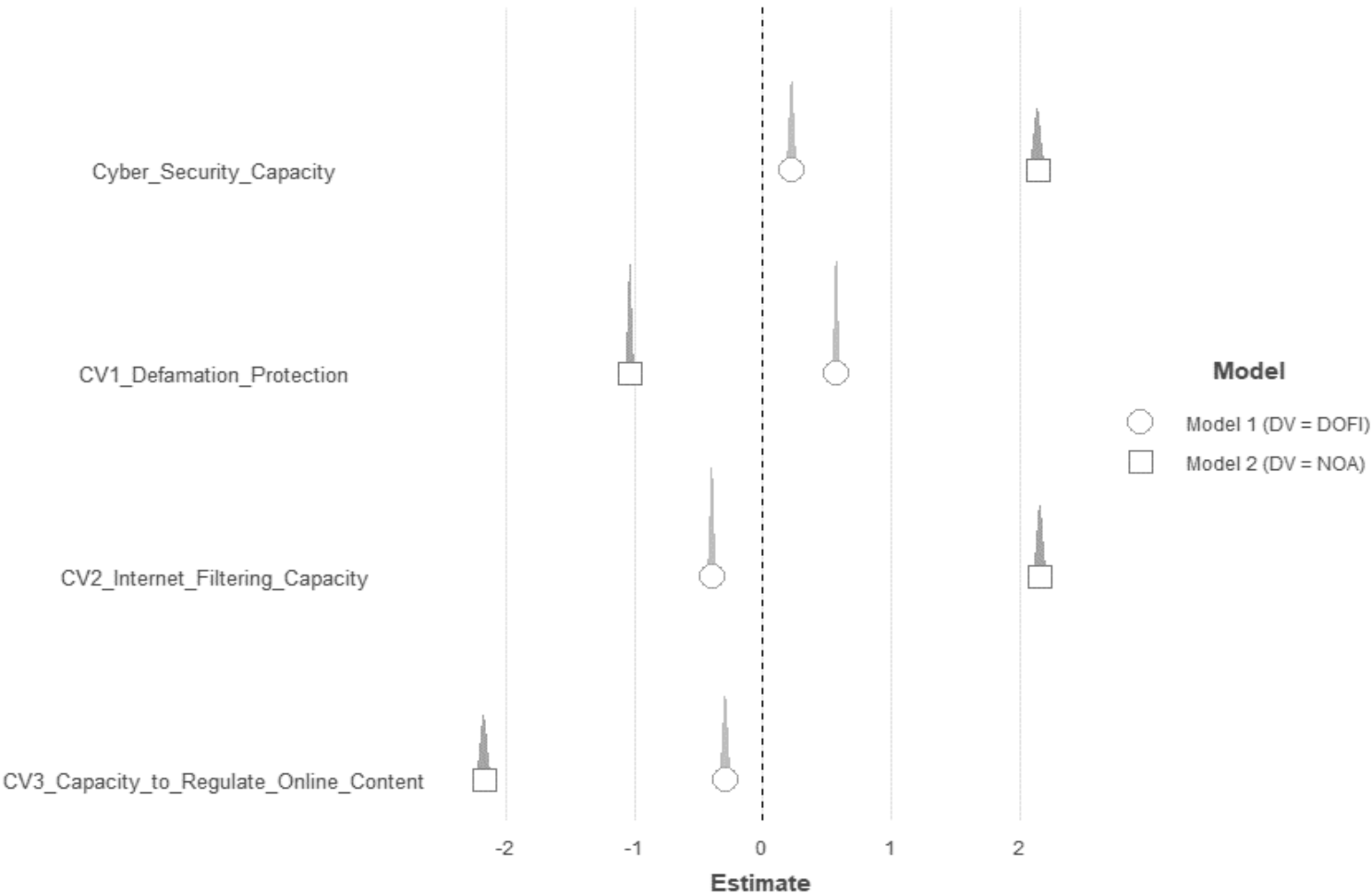
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Dissemination of False Information	Number of Cyber Attacks
	<i>OLS</i>	<i>negative binomial</i>
	(1)	(2)
Cyber Security Capacity	0.230*** (0.019) $p = 0.000$	2.144*** (0.048) $p = 0.000$
Defamation Protection (Control Variable)	0.578*** (0.014) $p = 0.000$	-1.029*** (0.027) $p = 0.000$
Internet Filtering Capacity (Control Variable)	-0.391*** (0.015) $p = 0.000$	2.164*** (0.042) $p = 0.000$
Capacity to Regulate Online Content (Control Variable)	-0.287*** (0.020) $p = 0.000$	-2.169*** (0.047) $p = 0.000$
Constant	0.521*** (0.016) $p = 0.000$	-3.119*** (0.076) $p = 0.000$
Observations	4,099	4,099
R ²	0.455	
Adjusted R ²	0.455	
Log Likelihood		-1,509.904
θ		11.879*** (1.952)
Akaike Inf. Crit.		3,029.809
Residual Std. Error	0.983 (df = 4094)	
F Statistic	855.542*** (df = 4; 4094)	

Note:

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

All variables (including controls) in both models yielded highly statistically important results by falling below $P < 0.01$ threshold and not containing the value zero (“0”) within respective confidence intervals, as shown in **Figure 1**. On the other hand, whilst cyber security capacity and defamation protection are found to have a positive-sided relationship with the DV in the first model, internet filtering capacity and capacity to regulate online content are found to have a negative association. In spite of its positive linear relationship with the DV in the first model, it is found by the second model that defamation protection is associated with a negative linear relationship with the number of cyber attacks. Reversely, internet filtering capacity indicated a negative association with the first DV but a positive association with the second DV. These results indicate, in simpler terms, that increasing cyber security capacity also leads to an increase in the dissemination of false information abroad and the number of executed or sponsored cyber attacks. The null hypothesis (H_0) is successfully rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis (H_a); executing disruptive actions in the cyberspace becomes a more common practice for a country when its cyber security capacity raises.

Figure 1: Regression coefficient plot



Several iterations are conducted on the model 1 to find out the most optimal density values. It is eventually found that the ANN architecture of the model 1 with the most ideal validation loss comprised of two hidden layers with twelve neurons on both layers. **Figure 2** and **Figure 3** visually demonstrate the architecture of the model.

Figure 2: ANN architecture of the Model1 in FCNN style

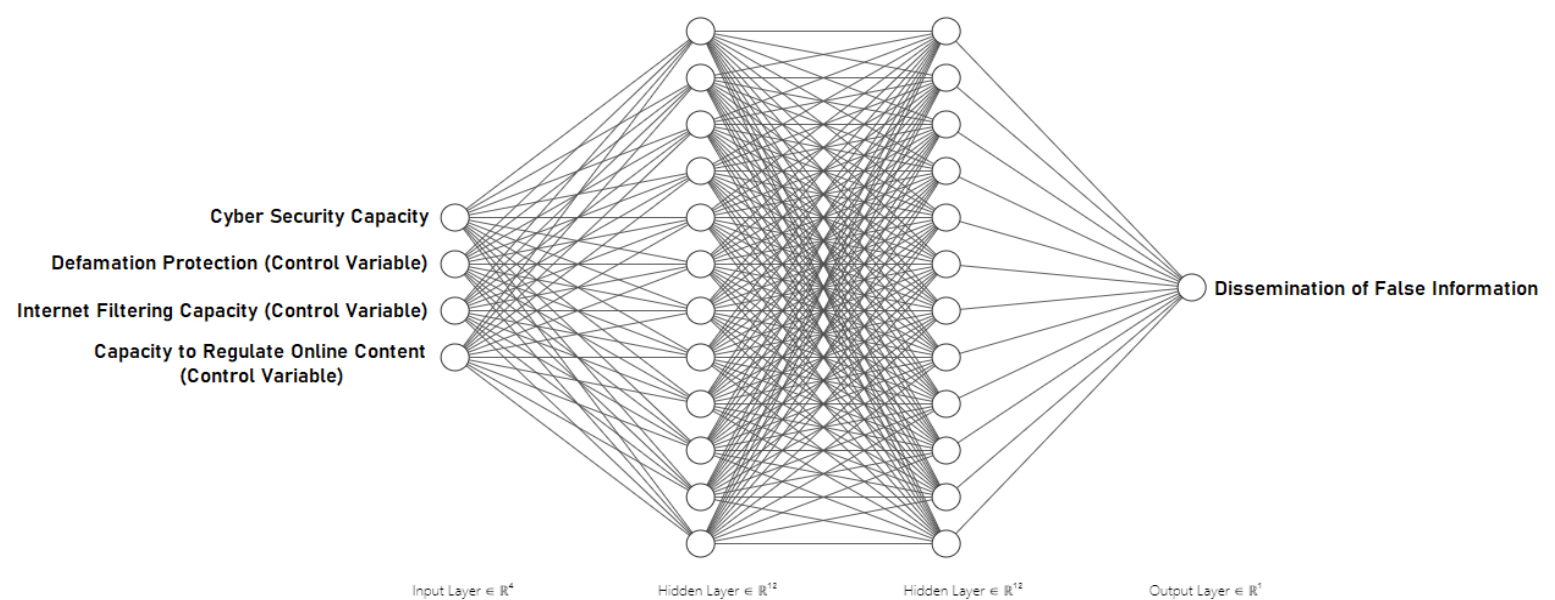
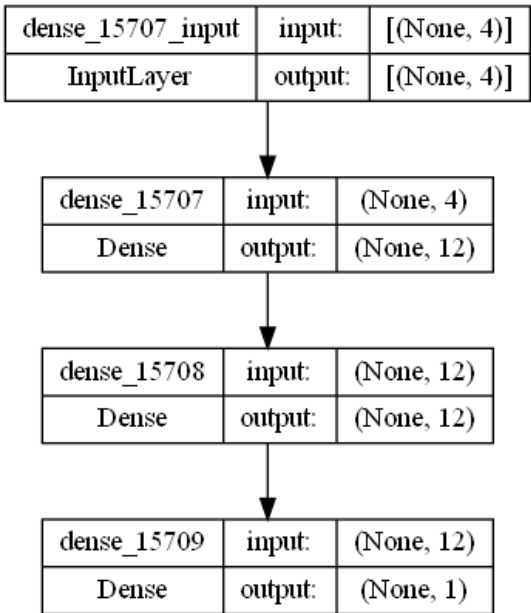


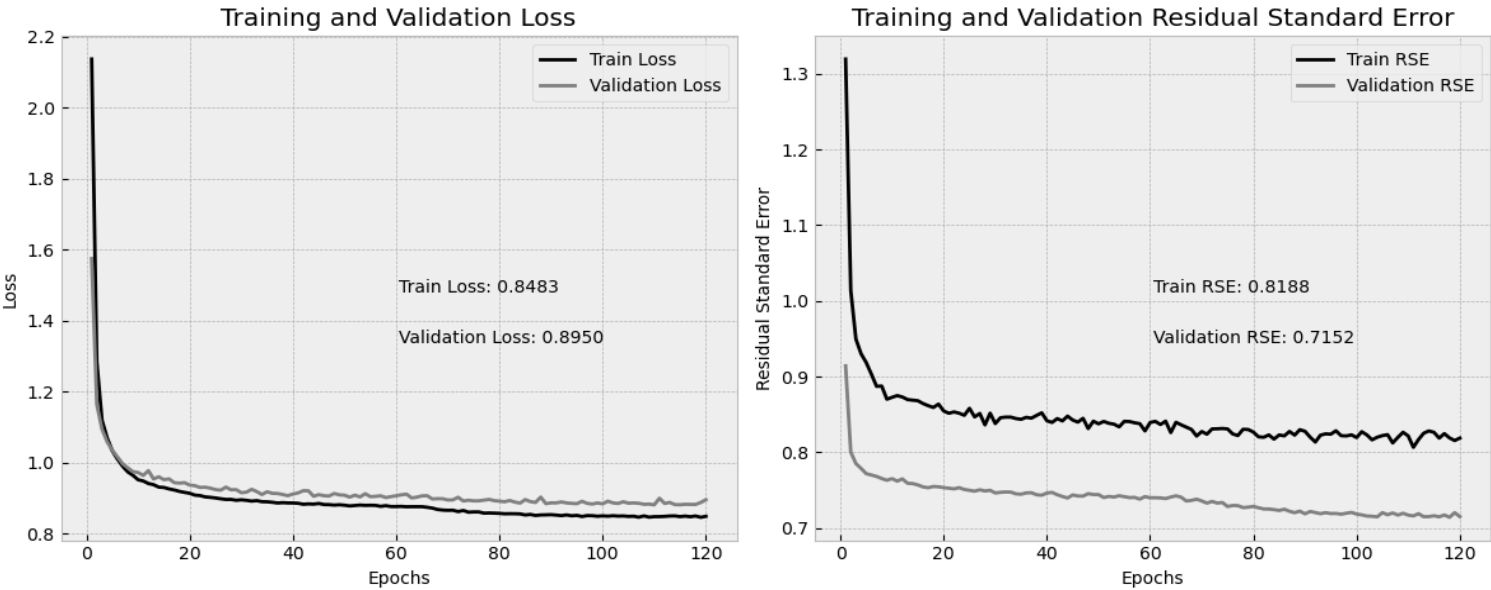
Figure 3: Keras plot of the Model1



Methods that are applied on the Model1 to prevent the over-fitting were L2 regularization, k-fold cross-validation, and early stopping. Three different lambda values are iterated over the model (0.001, 0.01, 0.1). The most ideal lambda value for L2 regularization turned out to be 0.01 hereby. The data were divided to ten folds by k-fold cross-validation, and the max number of epochs is decided to be two hundred, with eight batch size. Lastly, early stopping with the patience value of ten is applied and the training sequence is thereby

stopped when the performance of the model started to degrade. Residual standard error (RSE) of the model is traced in order to compare the efficiency of the ANN model with the traditional OLS model. “Rectified linear unit” (ReLU) is used as the activation function in the hidden layers, and “Linear” function is used in the output layer. **Figure 4** demonstrates the training process along with the final RSE and loss values. An improvement with 0.2678 less RSE is seen in the ANN model vis-à-vis the traditional model (0.9830 – 0.7152). Neither over-fitting nor under-fitting were observed in the ANN model.

Figure 4: Training sequence of the Model1



I applied same procedures to create the most optimal architecture for the model 2. However, the second model failed to yield an accurate ANN model without overfitting the model. I therefore removed L2 regularization for the model 2. As shown in the **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**, the most optimal ANN architecture of the model 2 comprised of a single hidden layer with one neuron. “ReLU”, which is applied on the hidden layer, and “Exponential”, which is applied on the output layer, activations were used for this model.

Figure 5: ANN architecture of the Model2 in FCNN style

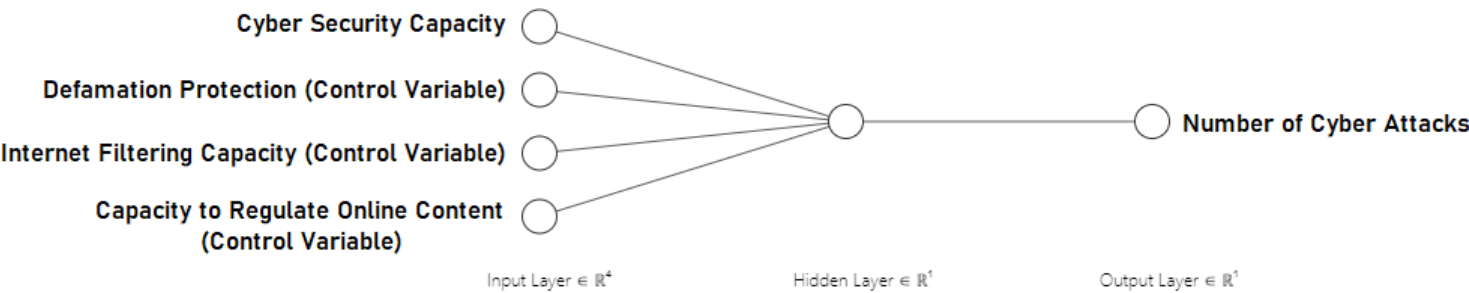
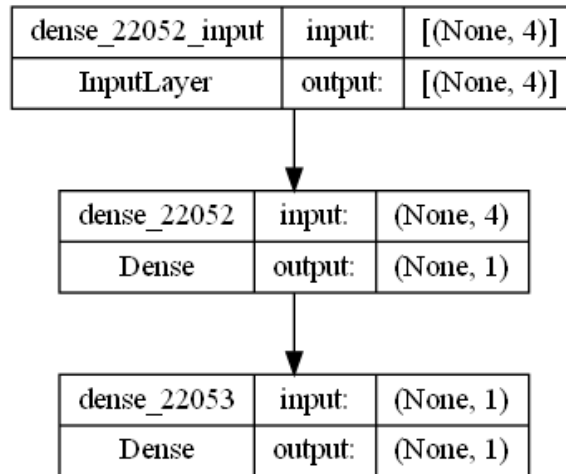
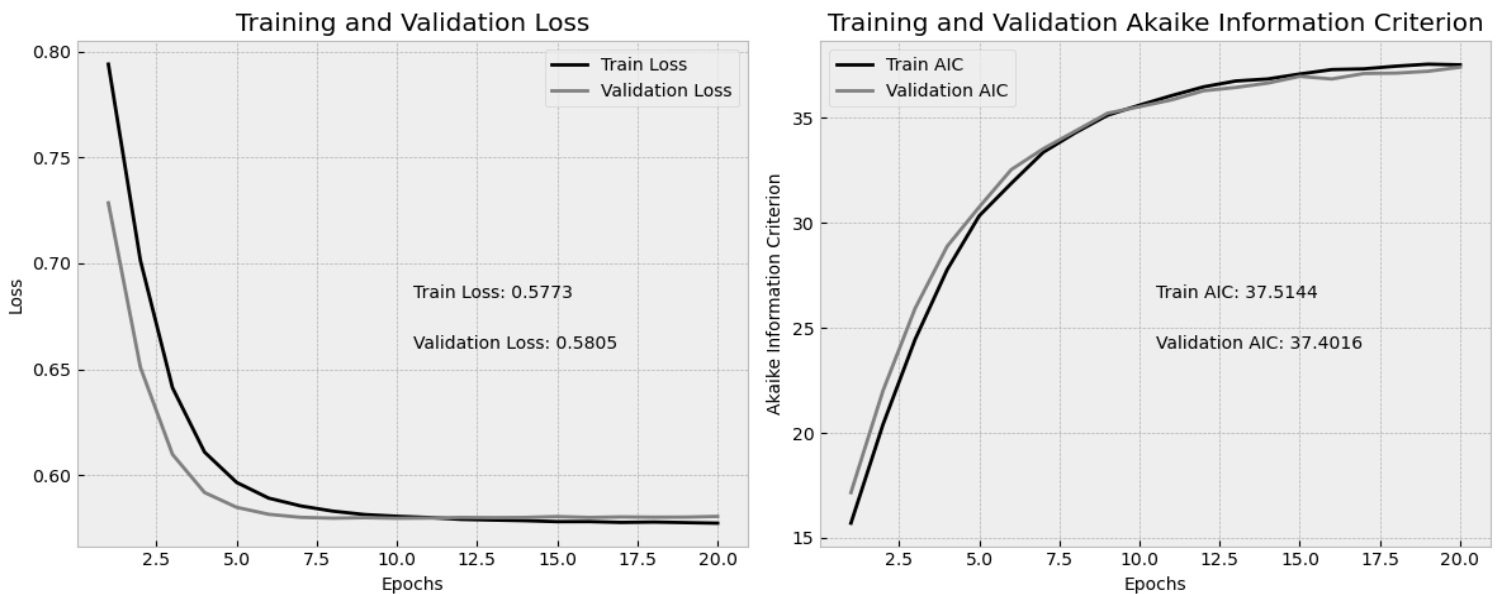


Figure 6: Keras plot of the Model2



I chose Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) as the metric to compare the performance of the ANN model with the traditional negative binomial regression model. A substantial improvement was observed in the ANN model with a decrease of 2992.4 in AIC value ($3029.8 - 37.4$). Neither over-fitting nor under-fitting were observed in the ANN model. **Figure 7** shows the training sequence of the Model2.

Figure 7: Training sequence of the Model2



8. Discussion and Conclusion

Security dilemma is one of the key tenets in the realist understanding of international politics. As it has widely been referred by the scholars in the realist school of thought in order to ascribe explanations on state behaviour and foreign policy in the real world, it is also possible for us to apply this concept on state actions

in the cyberspace as well. The results I got by this quantitative analysis urge me to underline one point; as I mentioned in the previous sections, chief driver of state attitude in the cyberspace is ensuring its security as any vulnerability may be exploited by non-state aggressors to undermine its tangible assets, such as infrastructure (The White House, 2000). However, the results furtherly indicate that states also do not hesitate to use the capacity they built for security purposes to breach other states' security, which means that security challenges of states in the cyberspace is not given solely to non-state actors, but also to other states. This finding therefore makes this study more suitable to be put on the offensive line of neorealism, indicating that states commonly tend to see cyber capacity building no different that "cyber power building" which is to be used against other states when an advantageous angle is caught (Mearsheimer, 2001).

What are the implications of this argument? By putting much lesser effort and capital compared to conventional offensive initiatives, cyber attacks may provide assailant parties with much higher returns (Valeriano et al., 2018; Watanabe, 2020). What is more, traditionally weaker states can vault power to challenge stronger states in cyberspace thanks to the low costs of organizing offensive actions (Pytlak and Mitchell, 2018). This means that cyberspace can be characterized as a leverage for traditionally weaker states and non-state actors, which would result in the redistribution of power (Langø, 2018; Singer and Friedman, 2014). On the other hand, it can be implied that states opt to use their cyber power in a defensive stance against non-state actors, but when it comes to other states, it is always a viable choice to abuse this power for an offensive action.

A neo-classical realist approach can be made from different facades. As it is articulated by The White House (2000) "the Federal government alone cannot protect US critical infrastructures(...) For this Plan to succeed (The National Plan for Information Systems Protection), government and the private sector must work together in a partnership unlike any we have seen before(...)". Bendrath's perspective on the issue underpins this statement, taking such "partners" as private companies that may be of use in the establishment of a close private-public partnership (Bendrath, 2001). There hence exist more opportunities both for states and non-state actors to deepen cooperation in the cyberspace. However, one should also keep in my that advancements in information technologies made the activities, especially organized cyber attacks, that take place on cyber realm much harder to surveil and charge the responsible party—or parties—in what follows. This intransparency paralyzes particularly the international organizations that specifically deal with monitoring state conflicts. "When a nation tests a missile, the world knows almost immediately; when a nation constructs physical facilities for nuclear weapon development, other states or IOs can physically observe this and monitor it. However, when a nation tests a piece of malware, there is little to no way of knowing; when a nation begins ramping up their cyber capability, this goes unknown until execution of sophisticated attacks, or until malware is attributed to that state actor." (Tischio, 2020).


9. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

10. Funding

No funding is provided to this study.

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12. Data Availability Statement

The datasets and the code scripts used in this study are available at the link https://figshare.com/projects/Neorealist_Analysis_of_Security_Dilemma_in_Cyberspace_A_Quantitative_Study/163576 for replication purposes.

13. Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

14. Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

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