CHAPTER FOUR

Lessons from Crises

> The light which experience gives us is a lantern on the stern, which shines only on the waves behind us.
>
> —Samuel Taylor Coleridge[1]

The role of the nuclear factor in international crises since 1946 is all too commonly underestimated, even among the community of specialists. A reexamination of the period since World War II made possible by many declassified documents, especially from the United States, shows just how mistaken that perception is. Tentative steps—sometimes cunning, sometimes blundering, now subtle and then blustering—to translate nuclear capabilities into effective deterrence, compellence, or blackmail are in fact present in a variety of crises that hold a series of lessons for international security in the 21st century.

Granted, nuclear deterrence does not operate only when crises occur. It does reinforce caution and moderation even in peacetime. The interest in crises, though, stems from the fact that they *test* deterrence in a situation of tension, since they can be described as twilight regions between peace and war,[2] with stakes of such magnitude in nuclear matters that mistakes in this twilight can be devastating. The aim during a crisis is to prevent not only war but also significant political losses. Both are failures of deterrence, but while the first constitutes the "unthinkable" that must be prevented at (almost) any cost, the second has the ability to modify the strategic balance in ways that could lead to crises in the future that are more damaging than the previous ones if credibility has been badly damaged.

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1 *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, London: Harper & Brothers, 1835, p. 11.

2 See President Eisenhower's closing comments in a press conference on March 4, 1959: "We are living in sort of a half world in so many things. We are not fighting a war, we are not killing each other, we are not going to the ultimate horror. On the other side of the picture, we are not living the kind of normal, what we'd like to call a normal life of thinking more of our own affairs, of thinking of the education and happiness of our children, and all that sort of thing that should occupy our minds." Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference of March 4, 1959," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1959; Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1 to December 31, 1959*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, 1960, p. 236.

During the Cold War, behavior in the course of crises varied considerably. Some politicians tried to instill cautionary uncertainty in the minds of their adversaries while operating under the same uncertainty themselves (e.g., Truman and Nixon). Others made rather blatant threats (e.g., Eisenhower and Kennedy). In all instances, politicians never followed a script or even prescriptions from strategic experts, and there is little evidence that lessons drawn from crises played a role in the development of the nuclear doctrine. Few references to crises (with the notable exception of the Cuban missile crisis[3]) are made in the most important documents and books on nuclear weapons written by major American nuclear strategists.[4] This may be because decisions made in emergency situations "do not make good permanent policies."[5] It may also be because nuclear doctrine was developed in a rather abstract way (as Raymond Aron has contended all along).

However, almost all past crises contain interesting lessons. For example, once one crisis had concluded, the following confrontation was influenced by its outcome; the Cuban missile crisis, for example, is directly linked to the 1961 Berlin crisis, an attempt by Moscow to restore balance between the two superpowers.[6] Some crises demonstrated how events could unravel even though leaders had agreed to contain them (e.g., Black Saturday).

Crises during the Cold War also showed that, if provoked, the United States had the capability to increase its military resources very rapidly: In June 1950, the debate concerning the U.S. defense budget centered on whether it should be $14 billion, $15 billion, or $16 billion. Then came North Korea's invasion of South Korea, and Congress authorized $60 billion.

The U.S. domestic scene played an important role in at least one nuclear crisis, in 1973 when Richard Nixon was embroiled in the Watergate scandal. The President's need to look tough with the Soviet Union led him to overdramatize the crisis at a time when it was not that serious. The Soviets were only asking for a joint implementation of a cease-fire that had been broken by Israel.

Finally, there is little evidence of what leaders in Moscow or Beijing were thinking during the nuclear crises (with the principal exception of the Cuban missile crisis, about which substantial information has been gathered from Moscow and Cuba since the end of the Cold War). But there are indications that the Chinese used the crises over Quemoy and Matsu to get Soviet cooperation on their nuclear military program. It also appears that the 1969 Chinese-Soviet border clashes encouraged China to decide on a rapprochement with Washington.

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3 See, for example, Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Controlling the Risks in Cuba,* Adelphi Paper No. 17, London: Institute for Strategic Studies, April 1965.

4 Some important references to crises can nevertheless be found regarding Korea and Berlin; see, for example, Kahn, 1960.

5 Dulles, 1954.

6 The Soviets knew by then that Washington had discovered that the missile gap favored the United States.

Preliminary Crises

Two brief crises with some reported nuclear element—as the following sections show, they can hardly be called nuclear crises—took place in 1946, before the Soviet Union had nuclear weapons. In February of that year, Stalin made a famous speech in which he asserted that "world capitalism proceeds through crisis and catastrophic wars,"[7] an assertion that was interpreted as a threat. A month later, Winston Churchill made his equally famous speech concerning the shadow that had fallen on Eastern Europe, which was now cut off from the free world by an iron curtain. The context was tense.

The first crisis was related to the Soviet refusal to honor its commitment to leave Iran after the end of World War II; the only reason to include it in this discussion is a statement made by President Truman himself that he threatened Moscow with an ultimatum on this occasion. The second crisis was related to a Greek pro-communist movement, ELAS, which was receiving help from Yugoslavia and which was being fought by U.S. forces. The second crisis (more so than the first one, since Truman's ultimatum to the Soviets is not documented) shows how easily nuclear threats could be issued at the time.

1946: Azerbaijan

In October 1945, the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan was formed in northern Iran, supported by the Soviet army, which had occupied the area since 1941. By 1945, the group had established an autonomous government in Tabriz, and the Soviet protection prompted fears in Tehran that Moscow intended to separate the province from Iran and unite it with the new neighboring Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. Those fears intensified when Soviet troops declined to set a date for their withdrawal (a position incompatible with the Tripartite Treaty of Alliance of 1942, which stipulated that all foreign troops were to be withdrawn from Iran within six months of the end of World War II). After leaving office, Harry Truman claimed several times that he had threatened Moscow with an ultimatum on this occasion:

> Truman is reported to have said that the way he caused the Soviet Union to withdraw her forces from Iran was to "summon" the Soviet Ambassador to the White House and tell him that unless Soviet troops were evacuated from Iran within 48 hours, the United States would use the atomic bomb. Truman is quoted as saying that the Soviet Union withdrew in 24 hours.[8]

However, the reason for the eventual withdrawal of Soviet troops remains unclear. On March 21, 1946, Truman declared at a press conference that he would meet with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at 11 a.m. that day, but there is no

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[7] Joseph Stalin, speech during the Supreme Soviet elections, published by *Pravda*, February 10, 1946.

[8] See Barry Blechman and Douglas M. Hart, "Afghanistan and the 1946 Iran Analogy," *Survival*, Vol. 22, No. 6, November/December 1980.

record of this meeting. The U.N. Security Council was seized of the matter, but this was a moral pressure that Moscow may not have considered serious enough. Not only did the Iranian prime minister enter into negotiations with Moscow, proposing to withdraw the complaint from the U.N. if Soviet troops departed, but an oil deal was also discussed. This deal, however, was never approved by the Iranian parliament. The crisis ended soon with the departure of Soviet troops from northern Iran. The main reason for the decision in Moscow may have been to concentrate forces and purpose in Eastern Europe, leaving aside what can be called peripheral irritants.[9]

1946: Yugoslavia

In November 1946, an American military aircraft flying from a base in Germany to Greece to fight the pro-communist ELAS forces was downed over Yugoslavia by Josip Broz Tito's fighter planes (five American airmen were shot down). Five B-29s were subsequently flown across a section of Yugoslavia as an apparent nuclear threat, and Yugoslav airspace was soon reopened to the U.S. Air Force. The crisis lasted one day. The nuclear threat, even if indirect, looks reckless under the circumstances. American core interests were not at stake. What would have happened if a B-29 had been downed by Belgrade? Nuclear retaliation would have been unthinkable and would have brought worldwide condemnation. It is unknown whether the aircraft were in fact loaded with nuclear weapons, but, the B-29 having become famous after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the question appears irrelevant: Belgrade could assume that nuclear weapons were on board.[10]

Crises over Berlin

1948: Berlin Blockade

The Berlin Blockade took place from June 24, 1948, to May 11, 1949, and it was the first serious opportunity for the Cold War to turn hot. At the time, the Soviets were progressing in Eastern Europe.[11] The Soviet Union blocked the three Western powers' railway and road access to the sector of Berlin under its control (there had never been a formal agreement guaranteeing rail and road access to Berlin through the Soviet zone, Berlin being located 100 miles inside the Soviet occupation zone). The most

[9] Such is the view expressed by Barry Blechman and Douglas Hart: "While tightening his grip on the area most vital to Soviet interests, Stalin sought to allay Western fears and avoid Western reaction by stepping back from claims in less important regions." Blechman and Hart, 1980.

[10] According to General Lauris Norstad's testimony in 1966, U.S. nuclear weapons were first introduced to Europe under NATO auspices in 1952. But whether the five B-29s were nuclear capable or not, they were meant to be seen as nuclear capable; thus, they constituted at least an indirect nuclear threat, particularly only two years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

[11] The Czech Communist coup took place in February 1948.

immediate aim of the blockade was to give the USSR control over the entire city, but the larger objective was to get Western concessions on "the German question" and, as soon as the Western Alliance was created, to prevent the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) from joining—or, later, after West Germany *had* joined NATO, to convince West Germans that the decision would be costly. The American, British, and French response was the Berlin Airlift (13,000 tons of food was delivered daily in an operation lasting almost a year). There was no explicit nuclear threat, but by the end of July 1948 there were three B-29 groups in Europe,[12] and tacit nuclear pressure reportedly helped to resolve the crisis. The threat was indirect and uncertain,[13] as President Truman wanted it to be: "We would have to deal with the situation as it develops." He also said he did not want "to have some dashing lieutenant colonel decide when would be the proper time to drop one."[14] In a year's time, on the same issue but this time over Korea, it would not be a dashing lieutenant colonel Truman had to deal with but a gruff general, and Truman would reassert his authority, this time for real.

1958–1959: The Status of Berlin

In 1948, when the United States still had a nuclear monopoly, President Truman agonized over exploiting even the shadow of nuclear blackmail toward Moscow (which calls into question his assertion about the nuclear threat during the much less significant Azerbaijan crisis in 1946). Ten years later, Eisenhower did not. In 1955, West Germany joined NATO with the prospect of conditional access to U.S. theater nuclear weapons. In April 1957, a note from Khrushchev to Bonn threatened to turn West Germany "into a nuclear graveyard."[15] In 1958, Moscow announced its intention to conclude a separate treaty with East Germany disregarding the Four-Power rights of World War II occupiers in Berlin. On December 11, Eisenhower declared: "Khrushchev should know that when we decide to act our whole stack will be in the pot."[16] The President explicitly denied any hope of restricting a war in Europe to conventional combat. He argued that it was necessary to rely on deterrence and that the Soviets were bluffing and would back down in the face of Western resolve. Shortly before the end of the crisis, Averell Harriman met with Nikita Khrushchev. When the Soviet leader threatened action against Berlin, Harriman laughed, and Khrushchev said to him, "What

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[12] President Truman agreed to deploy three bomb groups of B-29 Superfortresses to England, along with the personnel to support them. From then on, the American presence developed with speed in the East Anglian air bases.

[13] It now appears that the bombers were conventionally equipped, but does that make any difference? They were meant to be seen as nuclear equipped, and as such they played a role in the crisis.

[14] Quoted in James Forrestal, *The Forrestal Diaries*, Walter Millis, ed., New York: Viking Press, 1951.

[15] Betts, 1987, p. 84.

[16] Quoted in Günter Bischof and Stephen E. Ambrose, eds., *Eisenhower: A Centenary Assessment*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995, p. 220.

are you laughing about?" Harriman replied, "Well, Mr. Chairman, that would mean nuclear war and you don't want that." Khrushchev looked at him and said, "You are right."[17] The deadline passed and the issue remained unsettled. When the Soviets tried the same game with the next U.S. President in 1961–1962, they lost again, even though the new Democratic administration was ready to find a diplomatic compromise.

1961: The Berlin Wall

In June 1961, Khrushchev and Kennedy met in Vienna, and the Soviet leader tried to intimidate the young President. He handed Kennedy an aide-mémoire on Berlin restating the points made to Eisenhower in November 1958 and demanding the neutralization of Berlin within six months. Extended deterrence was at stake. Kennedy decided that if Khrushchev was serious, "the prospects for nuclear war were now very real."[18] Khrushchev for his part did not believe that "Kennedy would start a nuclear war over traffic controls on the autobahn." He also said that the Western powers' contention that they would fight to preserve the freedom of the city was "a fairy tale. There are 2,000,000 people living in West Berlin. But if a war is unleashed, hundreds of millions might perish. What sensible person would find such arguments of the imperialists convincing?" In July, he added: "It is best for those who are thinking of war not to imagine that distance will save them," implying that Moscow now had the means to reach the American homeland (ICBMs). In addition, Khrushchev emphasized the Soviet threat to Western European nations; he highlighted the vulnerability of U.S. bases in Europe and the large Soviet force of medium-range aircraft and missiles.

Kennedy had come into office as a critic of massive retaliation and even wanted "to put the nuclear genie back into the bottle,"[19] but this was hardly the time to do it, and he did not waver on the U.S. commitment to the NATO allies. This was also the first operational exercise on flexible response led by Paul Nitze. Civilian analysts believed that a counterforce strike was possible, but on what targets? In August 1961, when the East Germans began to build the Berlin Wall, Thomas Schelling proposed firing a nuclear warning shot over some isolated location in the USSR.

As for the Soviets, they made no preparations, and there were indications that they would not press the ultimatum. But they tested bombs in the megaton range. Paul Nitze reacted by underplaying the threat.[20] The episode shows how differently the two sides thought about nuclear weapons and how uninterested the Soviets were in any theory of limited nuclear war; massive nuclear exchanges against cities in an

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[17] McGeorge Bundy, "Risk and Opportunity: Can We Tell Them Apart?" in Catherine Kelleher, Frank Kerr, and George Quester, eds., *Nuclear Deterrence: New Risks, New Opportunities*, Washington, D.C.: Pergamon, 1986, p. 34.

[18] Quoted in Ted Sorensen, *Kennedy: The Classic Biography*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 549.

[19] Sorensen, 1965, p. 587.

[20] See Nitze quote in Chapter Three.

all-out war were obviously what Moscow had in mind.[21] In September 1961, data gathered via reconnaissance satellites led U.S. intelligence experts to estimate the number of Soviet ICBMs at only a handful, and this information was conveyed to the Soviet ambassador. There was no strategic parity, and the missile gap favored America. At the end of the day, Kennedy did not have to make a decision. The Soviets backed down again and decided to content themselves with the Berlin Wall. The Wall halted East German immigration and satisfied East German leader Walter Ulbricht, who had been complaining in Moscow about the exodus through West Berlin,[22] but it was a default option for the Kremlin and the wider game.

But there was a serious attempt on the American side to find a diplomatic compromise in the first half of 1962 (between January and May). In November 1961, John F. Kennedy had given an interview to *Izvestia* where he made his objectives clear:

> In attempting to work out a solution of the problems which came about as a result of WWII, we don't want to increase the chances of WWIII. All we wish to do is maintain a very limited—and they are very limited—number of troops of the three powers in West Berlin and to have, for example, an international administration of the autobahn so that goods and people can move freely in and out.[23]

In January 1962, Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared that Washington was prepared to defend Berlin "at whatever cost," an expression of the U.S. readiness to risk nuclear war for a city very difficult to defend conventionally. At the same time (January 2) negotiations began between the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Llewellyn E. Thomson, and Andrei Gromyko, then Soviet foreign minister. There were meetings in Moscow and Washington for six months, but no substantial progress was made during this period, even though nine meetings and one formal conference took place between American and Soviet diplomats. American and Soviet interests were too different: Moscow wanted to keep the issue unresolved (much in the way China often leaves some piece of contention on contested borders with neighbors) and was not interested in a compromise. The United States was convinced that some diplomatic solution could be reached because there was a common interest in avoiding war over Berlin. The

[21] Marshal Rodion Malinovsky said the following on this subject in October 1961: "[We must] devote special attention to the initial period of a possible war. The importance of this period lies in the fact that the first massive nuclear blows can to an enormous extent determine the entire subsequent course of the war" (quoted in Freedman, 2003, p. 252). The emphasis on attacking cities was also consistent with the most important perceived weakness of democratic states, namely the reluctance to accept massive civilian casualties. Soviet operational planning uncovered after the end of the Cold War thanks to documents found in East Germany showed without any possible doubt that cities would have been targeted with chemical and nuclear weapons.

[22] See Petr Lunak, "The Berlin Crisis," in *Cold War History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, January 2003: "The only means [Ulbricht] had to influence Moscow was his country's weakness as a result of the exodus of his citizens."

[23] John F. Kennedy, "Transcript of Interview with the President by Aleksei Adzhubei, Editor of Izvestia," November 25, 1961, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

fact that the Kremlin (and Gromyko in particular) was more concerned about the last war's vestiges—the U.S. military presence in West Berlin, for example—than about the avoidance of the next war was not understood by the American negotiators, who were convinced that the Soviets were bluffing. They were not. The war was avoided, but the Cuban missile crisis was looming on the horizon.

1962: The Cuban Missile Crisis

The Cuban missile crisis was the most dangerous nuclear crisis so far, and many analysts see it as a follow-up to the Berlin crisis in 1961. The Soviet objectives were to restore parity (nuclear balance),[24] to complicate a possible U.S. first strike, and to try to extend deterrence to Cuba in the way Washington had extended deterrence to West Germany (Havana was as vulnerable as West Berlin). It was a great gamble for Khrushchev, who lost. He underestimated Kennedy and American reconnaissance: The missiles were detected prior to their installation. He thought he would be in a better position with intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in Cuba in a possible fourth confrontation over Berlin.[25] Another linkage with Berlin was made in Washington: In the event of strikes on Cuba, the main worry in Washington was retaliation on Berlin.[26] Dean Rusk mentioned a report in which "high Soviet officials were saying: We'll trade Cuba for Berlin."[27]

The context was one in which the myth of the missile gap had been exposed:

> The exposure of the "missile gap" myth in the second half of 1961 ended a four year period during which inflated beliefs in the West that the Soviet Union was rapidly acquiring a large continental strike force had tended to deprive continued and even growing U.S. strategic superiority of much of its political value. Western confidence in U.S. strategic superiority was restored; moreover, it became apparent that the Soviet leaders knew that the West had been undeceived about the strategic balance.[28]

In this situation, Khrushchev sought a breakthrough with the Cuban missile deployment, with the idea that Washington would be obliged to accept the operation because it would not be discovered until it was completed.

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[24] If not for the importance of U.S. nuclear superiority, why did the Soviets secretly put missiles in Cuba and lie about it?

[25] This new confrontation over Berlin was expected to be raised by the Soviet side after the 1962 U.S. elections.

[26] Arnold Horelick, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RM-3779-PR, September 1963, p. vii: "There was no lack of evidence available to Soviet leaders to make it appear plausible that response by the United States would be constrained by concern over possible Soviet retaliation in Berlin."

[27] Quoted in Timothy P. Maga, *The 1960s*, New York: Facts on File, 2003, p. 98.

[28] Horelick, 1963, p. v.

Moscow did not count on Washington's prompt discovery of the plan or on the prompt response, the quarantine placing U.S. Navy ships between Cuba and Soviet ships bound for Cuban ports. Both unexpected events happened, threatening the Soviet operation to fail from the start of the crisis. This did not prevent the U.S. side from fearing the outbreak of a nuclear war. Arthur Schlesinger remembered the crisis: "One lobe of the brain had to recognize the ghastly possibility; another found it quite inconceivable."[29] On two occasions the crisis threatened to escalate, first with the Cuban quarantine (a de facto blockade), then with a series of unexpected incidents on Black Saturday.

What Washington was not aware of (it was discovered only after the end of the Cold War) was the presence in Cuba of nine Soviet short-range atomic weapons that a senior Soviet troop commander in Cuba was authorized to use without further approval from Moscow in case of a U.S. invasion of Cuba. If those weapons had been fired at U.S. troops, the United States would have retaliated with nuclear weapons. This new information—revealed by retired Soviet General Anatoly Grybkov during a January 1992 four-day closed-door meeting in Cuba among former U.S., Soviet, and Cuban officials—indicates that the two nations were even closer to a nuclear conflict than was previously realized.

After the crisis, President Kennedy recognized that miscalculations were made on both sides: "I don't think we expected that he would put the missiles in Cuba, because it would have seemed such an imprudent action for him to take. . . . He obviously thought he could do it in secret and that the United States would accept it."[30] The outcome was a clear victory for the United States (the missiles were quickly withdrawn), and Robert McNamara presented deterrence as the major element of success before Congress: "We faced that night the possibility of launching nuclear weapons and Khrushchev knew it, and that is the reason, and the only reason, why he withdrew those weapons."[31]

After 1962, Khrushchev, whose "recklessness in putting missiles in Cuba brought the world as close as it has ever been to all-out nuclear war,"[32] embarked on a policy of détente. However, a coalition of his Politburo colleagues removed him from office in 1964, allowing the military to reassert its position and engage in a major military buildup. What was not noticed at the time (and was only fully discovered after the end of the Cold War) was the extremely risky game played by Fidel Castro, unknown to

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[29] Quoted in James G. Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Savage, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992, p. 131.

[30] John F. Kennedy, "After Two Years—A Conversation with the President," television and radio interview, December 17, 1962, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

[31] Quoted in Sean M. Lynn-Jones, Steven E. Miller, and Stephen Van Evera, eds., *Nuclear Diplomacy and Crisis Management*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990, p. 260.

[32] Strobe Talbott in Khrushchev, 1970.

Kennedy, in confronting the Soviet Union directly. Castro was ready to risk a nuclear war that the Soviets wanted to avoid.[33]

The widespread idea that, from this crisis onward, both superpowers became *extremely cautious about all things nuclear* is not borne out by the facts, as the 1970s amply showed.

Asian Crises

1950: Korea (Truman)

The Korean War was an atomic war, even though no atomic weapons were used. The conflict raised the question of nuclear use more forcefully than any of the previous crises. North Korea launched a surprise attack on the South on June 25, 1950, with support from the Soviet Union. The attack was extremely effective, and on the evening of the first day of the war, the possible use of the atomic bomb was brought up at a Blair House meeting. But as with Berlin, Truman did not try to exploit U.S. nuclear capability. He sent in American troops from Japan to stop the invasion, but the American troops were overwhelmed.

The nuclear issue was raised again on June 29, four days after North Korea invaded South Korea, when a questioner at a news conference asked the President whether the United States might have to use the atomic bomb. Truman answered, "No comment." A month later, in response to the same question, Truman's answer was "no."

China indicated that it would not be deterred by the specter of the American bomb and disparaged nuclear weapons as "paper tigers." The Chinese chief of staff told the Indian ambassador: "They may even drop atomic bombs on us. What then? They may kill a few million people."[34] China sent many signals that it would intervene during the U.S. advance to the Yalu River. Those signals were not understood. As Thomas Schelling commented later:

> When communication fails, it is not easy to decide whether the transmitter is too weak for the receiver or the receiver too weak for the transmitter, whether the sender speaks the receiver's language badly or the receiver misunderstands the sender's. Between the two of us, Americans and Communist China, we appear to have suffered at least one communication failure in each direction in 1950.[35]

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[33] Castro's position fits a description in Brodie, 1958, p. 11: "To be willing to accept enormous destruction only for the sake of inflicting greater destruction on the enemy . . . argues a kind of desperation at the moment of decision which rules out reason."

[34] See K. M. Panikkar, *In Two Chinas: Memoirs of a Diplomat*, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1955, p. 116.

[35] Schelling, 1966, p. 55.

As a matter of fact, the Chinese were convinced that they had sent a number of serious warnings. But the Americans did not believe that Mao would intervene while his conventional weapons were rudimentary and the Chinese civil war had just recently ended. That assessment was a major mistake, particularly since Beijing knew there was no credibility in any U.S. nuclear threat.

In late November 1950, a massive Chinese intervention took place by night, achieving strategic surprise and driving American forces back to Seoul. The inferiority of Chinese weaponry did not prevent this important victory. And as far as the civil war was concerned, Mao believed that passivity could encourage separatism and dissidence. The civil war therefore played in the exact opposite direction of what Washington expected. After the return to the status quo ante, the nuclear issue was brought up again, this time by General MacArthur.

On November 30, at a famous news conference, President Truman declared: "We will take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation." He was asked: "Will that include the atomic bomb?" The answer came: "That includes every weapon that we have."[36] Would the threat of use against China—before the Chinese intervention, or even after it, in November 1950—have been capable of stopping a third actor that changed the face of the Korean War, with considerable consequences? Historians will never know for sure. But it is worth at least asking the question: The Soviets had just tested their first nuclear device in August 1949, Stalin had more pressing business at home, and, when tested, Soviet extended deterrence over China never proved very strong, even when Moscow had much more powerful capabilities.[37]

There was also serious anxiety that the Chinese intervention in Korea might be a diversion preceding a Soviet attack against Western Europe and general war, something General MacArthur did not take into account in his request. Truman's tacit threat did not work: Chinese forces did not hesitate in their offensive, perhaps because they did not regard the threat as credible (the Soviet spy Donald McLean[38] was privy to information about British Prime Minister Clement Attlee's meeting with Truman in which the U.S. President made clear he had no intention of using the bomb). In December 1950, General Douglas MacArthur requested 34 nuclear bombs against invasion forces and suggested taking the war directly to China. This was seen in Washington as risking the loss of America's allies, an expanded war with China, and even an all-out war with the Soviet Union. There is no way to confirm this judgment, but the Chinese might have backed down and the Soviet Union might have been hesitant to enter another major and risky war when no Russian territory was at stake. When General MacArthur insisted, Truman asserted civilian control over the military (this was

[36] See Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, "The President's News Conference," November 30, 1950.

[37] Soviet extended deterrence over China was tested in the 1954 and 1958 Quemoy and Matsu crises.

[38] Donald McLean (London 1913–Moscow 1983) was a British diplomat and a Soviet spy recruited by the Soviet intelligence service while he was an undergraduate at Cambridge.

no doubt a necessary assertion) and MacArthur was dismissed.[39] President Truman rightly saw General MacArthur's public remarks about a necessary change in strategy as a public defiance over how to fight the Chinese in Korea.[40] The nuclear option vanished, only to come back three years later with another President.

1953: Korea (Eisenhower)

The next administration rejected the limited war strategy. President Eisenhower saw merit in MacArthur's plan for using a nuclear threat to induce a settlement of the conflict (Nixon may have also had this example in mind when dealing with Vietnam). Eisenhower focused on the coercive diplomatic potential of nuclear threats. During the spring of 1953, nuclear use in one form or another dominated the planning (Paul Nitze expressed his opposition). Ten years later, Eisenhower wrote:

> The lack of progress in the long-stalemated talks—they were then recessed—and the nearly stalemated war demanded, in my opinion, definite measures on our part to put an end to these intolerable conditions. One possibility was to let the Communist authorities understand that, in the absence of satisfactory progress, we intended to move decisively without inhibition in our use of weapons, and would no longer be responsible for confining hostilities to the Korean Peninsula.[41]

A Joint Chiefs of Staff plan was approved that included nuclear strikes against North Korea, Manchuria, and the Chinese coast. General Mark Clark was therefore authorized to "carry on the war in new ways never yet tried in Korea."[42] The Eisenhower strategy worked, particularly since there was a second element of uncertainty for Beijing: How would Moscow react now that Stalin was dead? The stalled negotiations were concluded with an armistice in July 1953. Mao may have considered the atom bomb a paper tiger,[43] but he took the new U.S. President seriously. When asked why

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[39] After his dismissal, MacArthur remarked, "There is no substitute for victory," expressing an opposition to restraint in the use of force in war. Quoted in Richard Rovere and Arthur Schlesinger, *General MacArthur and President Truman: The Struggle for Control of American Foreign Policy*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 2003, p. 227.

[40] Harry Truman later wrote: "If there is one basic element in our Constitution, it is civilian control over the military. If I allowed him to defy the civil authorities in this manner, I myself would be violating my oath to uphold and defend the Constitution." Quoted in Michael Foley, *Harry Truman*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. 80.

[41] Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, New York: Doubleday, 1963, p. 230.

[42] Mark W. Clark, *From the Danube to the Yalu*, New York: Harper, 1961, p. 267.

[43] In a 1946 interview with American journalist Anna Louise Strong, Mao said, "The atom bomb is a paper tiger with which the American reactionary try to terrify the people. It looks terrible, but in fact is not. Of course, the atom bomb is a weapon of mass annihilation: the outcome of a war is decided by the people, not by one or two new weapons." Quoted in Alice Langley Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy in the Nuclear Age*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962, p. 132.

the Chinese backed down, Eisenhower replied simply: "Danger of atomic war." During the Korean War, therefore, there were three instances in which the use of nuclear weapons was considered: (1) at the beginning of the war, (2) when the Chinese intervened, and (3) before the armistice. Only the third threat can be said to have been serious and credible for Beijing. In January 1954, soon after the war ended, Dulles made his famous and controversial speech before the Council on Foreign Relations on massive retaliation in which he threatened to counter *all* aggressions with nuclear weapons, a rather extreme position that no sound lesson from the crisis could support.

1954: Indochina, Operation Vulture

Never implemented, this plan for a secret operation was meant to salvage the French garrison in Dien Bien Phu. The plan involved U.S. airstrikes and the dropping of three small tactical nuclear weapons on the Viet Minh forces.

President Eisenhower thought the position of the French forces in Dien Bien Phu was indefensible ("no military victory is possible in that kind of theatre"[44]) and disapproved the plan. French Prime Minister Georges Bidault, for his part, was worried about the consequences of another nuclear use and a possible Soviet intervention. Finally, there was also reluctance in London to go in this direction. The British, like the French, were worried that any nuclear use in Indochina would result in a Soviet nuclear response on European territory.

Dien Bien Phu fell on May 8, 1954. Along with Suez, but for different reasons, this episode may have played a role in France's decision to go nuclear.

1954–1955: First Taiwan Strait Crisis

At the beginning of September 1954, the PRC launched a bombardment on the island of Quemoy. In November the Tachen Islands were bombed as well, and they were raided again in January 1955. The motivation for the use of force in November was to prevent the signing of a defense treaty between Washington and the Chinese Nationalist forces, Chiang Kai-shek pressing the United States to do so in order to replace the executive order for Seventh Fleet protection. The result was exactly the opposite. Not only did President Eisenhower change his mind and sign the defense treaty with Chiang in December 1954, but he secured a congressional resolution, the Formosa resolution, when the PRC conducted an assault on the Taizhou Islands and seized an outpost of the Dachen in January 1955.

In fact, the Formosa resolution committed the United States only to the defense of Formosa and the Pescadores, *with no reference to the offshore islands*.[45] However, the

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[44] Quoted in Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark R. Rubin, eds., *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954–1955*, Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1990, p. 86.

[45] It is worth noting that most Western experts declared the islands indefensible and believed that Formosa could be defended without those outposts.

resolution meant that the United States could not back down from the defense of Formosa without an intolerable loss of prestige. It was a clear support of American deterrence and a clear message to Beijing (and to Moscow) about American determination.

In his memoirs, President Eisenhower wrote about his decision: "If we defend Quemoy and Matsu, we'll have to use atomic weapons. They alone will be effective against the mainland airfields. To this I agreed."[46] Eisenhower and Dulles made a number of public statements that left little room for doubt that nuclear detonations would be part of the military resistance to a Chinese invasion. The bombing plan was made, and nuclear-armed naval and air units were brought to the area. The potential for a Soviet response was ignored this time, as were the objections of the Allies.

The PRC took notice, and Chou en Lai announced at the Bandung Conference in late April that Beijing was willing to negotiate. A month later, he said that the PRC was willing to "liberate" Taiwan "by peaceful means as far as this is possible."[47] The crisis was ended.[48]

Dulles concluded: "Nobody . . . is able to prove mathematically that it was the policy of deterrence which brought the Korean War to an end and which kept the Chinese from sending their Red armies into Indochina, or that it has finally stopped them in Formosa. I think it is a pretty fair inference that it has."[49] In April 1955 the Sino-Soviet atomic cooperation treaty was signed.

1958: Second Taiwan Strait Crisis

In August 1958, at the time of the Great Leap Forward, China blockaded the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, and the Chinese artillery barrages were matched with a commitment of Chinese airpower. The bombardment was officially justified by the landing of U.S. forces in Lebanon as a show of "international solidarity." In Washington, the move was taken seriously. The American response included a large naval deployment, and Eisenhower authorized preparations "to use atomic weapons to extend deeper into Chinese Communist territory if necessary" (according to documents declassified in 2008, the services were ordered by President Eisenhower to plan for nonnuclear attacks).[50]

On the Soviet side, Khrushchev looked resolute as well: "Any threat against the Chinese Communist regime would be interpreted in Moscow as a threat against the

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[46] Quoted in Stanley Meisler, *The United Nations: The First Fifty Years*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997, p. 86.

[47] Betts, 1987, p. 61.

[48] Chiang Kai-shek played an important role during this crisis, refusing a U.S. blockade of the mainland Chinese coast that could have precipitated an unnecessary war.

[49] Quoted in Richard Goold-Adams, *John Foster Dulles: A Reappraisal*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962.

[50] See Walter Pincus, "Eisenhower Advisers Discussed Using Nuclear Weapons in China," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2008, p. A15.

Soviet Union,"[51] a declaration evidently designed to be interpreted as a clear expression of Soviet extended deterrence.

But there was no intention in Moscow to enter into a confrontation with Washington over islands that represented no vital interest for either Moscow or Beijing, particularly since a September memorandum from Eisenhower stated his decision to use nuclear weapons if necessary, with broader mission and recognition of the risks noted by Dulles: "The risk of a more extensive use of nuclear weapons and even a risk of nuclear war would have to be accepted."[52]

This position was criticized in Europe and America[53] for fear of the potential consequences, but it attained the objective. By the end of September, the Chinese blockade was broken, and on November 10, the *New York Times* printed the headline: "Victory at Quemoy." As in previous cases, there is no clear evidence as to whether nuclear threats influenced Beijing, but the likelihood is high that they did.[54] Lack of confidence in Soviet extended deterrence could also have played a role. (Even though Moscow contended all along that the USSR would give China the necessary aid "to fight for the liberation of Formosa,"[55] the Soviet nuclear forces never went on alert.) The return to the status quo was another failure for the PRC.[56] It was humiliated by being forced to withdraw without any gain. When questioned by a vice chairman of the National Defense Commission as to why he did not seize the islands, "Mao replied that the heavy concentration of U.S. forces had to be taken seriously."[57] China was also worried about the caution shown by the Soviet side.

The Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister for the Far East at the time, M. S. Kapitsa, tells a different story in his memoirs, asserting that Mao was willing to see the United States use nuclear weapons against Fujian province during the crisis in order to convince the Soviets that China needed nuclear weapons.[58] (As a matter of fact, the

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[51] Betts, 1987, p. 73.

[52] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 168.

[53] London rejected any possible involvement in the crisis, and respected American officials like George Kennan attacked the policy.

[54] Such is the judgment of a French expert, Pierre Gallois, in his book *The Balance of Terror: Strategy for the Nuclear Age*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1961, p. 144: "Thanks to M. Dulles' determination, Peking retreated. The stake of the conflict—the islands of Quemoy and Matsu—seemed to Peking out of proportion to the risk that would have to be run to test the Secretary of State's intentions."

[55] Betts, 1987, p. 73.

[56] It took time for Mao to understand what changes were introduced by nuclear weapons in times of crisis. In his memoirs, Nikita Khrushchev recalls the need to explain to Mao that the reference to the number of divisions was no longer relevant: "And now with the atomic bomb, the number of troops on each side makes practically no difference to the alignment of real power and the outcome of a war." In Khrushchev, 1970, p. 470.

[57] See Allen S. Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950–96, and Taiwan," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Fall 2001, p. 110.

[58] M. S. Kapitsa, *Memoirs*, Moscow: Kniga I Bizness, 1996.

Soviet leadership had decided by mid-1957 to pass on to China the know-how of production of nuclear weapons. On August 2, a group of Soviet designers had just left Beijing after a month and a half in China, but Mao wanted the model of a Soviet atomic bomb along with full documentation of the test benches, control panels, rigging, testing devices, etc.[59]) By the time of their meeting in July 1958, relations between Khrushchev and Mao had already become tense, and the Chinese leader was starting to appear too irresponsible and possibly too assertive and even dangerous to be getting the ultimate weapon.[60] In many ways, it was already too late. The Chinese had gotten training, equipment, and more information than was necessary. Beijing decided to become less dependent on the Soviet Union; as Foreign Minister Chen Yi told the Soviet ambassador at the end of the crisis, "You have left us without pants, but we will build a bomb nevertheless."[61] In 1960, the Soviet-Chinese friendship faded away openly, and in 1964, as Khrushchev was falling from power, China detonated its first atomic bomb, with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai reportedly declaring: "Let it be our parting salute for Khrushchev."[62] The paper tiger rhetoric had disappeared for good.

1962: India-China War

The 1962 war over the disputed Himalayan border also had a political motivation for China: to punish India for having granted asylum to the Dalai Lama after the 1959 Tibetan uprising. The Chinese offensive, launched on October 20, coincided with the Cuban missile crisis. The war ended a month later with the Chinese decision to adopt a cease-fire and to withdraw its troops. It was not a nuclear crisis involving the United States, but it raised an interesting argument, well put by Thomas Schelling:

> As far as I can tell, we had only the slightest commitment, if any, to assist India in case of attack by the Chinese or the Russians, if only because over the years the Indians did not let us incur a formal commitment. One of the lessons of November 1962 may be that, in the face of anything quite as adventuresome as an effort to take over a country the size of India, we may be virtually as committed as if we had a mutual assistance treaty. We cannot afford to let the Soviets or Communist Chinese learn by experience that they can grab large chunks of the earth and its population without a genuine risk of violent Western reaction.[63]

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[59] See Evgeny A. Negin and Yuri N. Smirnov, *Did the USSR Share Atomic Secrets with China?* trans. Vladislav M. Zubok, Zurich, Switzerland: Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security, 2002.

[60] See Kapitsa, 1996, p. 63.

[61] Quoted in Lyle Goldstein, *Preventive Attack and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 77.

[62] Negin and Smirnov, 2002.

[63] Schelling, 1966, p. 51.

This is the expression of a latent or implicit policy. As a matter of fact, the Kennedy administration considered the offensive a "blatant Chinese communist aggression against India," and in May 1963, a National Security Council meeting considered that in the event of another similar attack on India, the United States should use nuclear weapons in case of intervention.[64] Such was Robert McNamara's advice to the President, one year before China exploded its first nuclear device.[65]

1964: The First Chinese Test and Japan's Reaction

China's first nuclear test does not amount to a nuclear crisis, but it deserves some consideration because of the importance of the Japanese reaction. According to documents recently declassified by Japan's foreign ministry, Japan asked the United States in 1965 to be ready to launch a nuclear attack on China if war broke out between Beijing and Tokyo.[66] The talks were held on January 13, 1965, between Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, against the backdrop of China's first successful test of an atomic bomb. At the time, neither Japan nor the United States had diplomatic ties with China. Secretary McNamara asked Prime Minister Sato whether Japan would develop its own nuclear weapon capability. Sato responded that it had no intention of doing so, but that it would "of course be a different matter in the event of a war." He added that the United States was expected "to retaliate immediately using nuclear weapons." Japan would allow the United States to use Japanese waters (but not Japanese soil) to launch the attack.[67]

Prime Minister Sato is the one who formulated Japan's nonnuclear policy (*no* production, no possession, and no nuclear weapons on its territory). He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974 for his stance on nuclear weapons.

The documents declassified in 2008 are indicative of Japan's lasting anxiety concerning China's nuclear capabilities. As they expand, the anxiety grows. The 1964 message is therefore one to keep in mind in the years to come.

1969: Vietnam, Operation Duck Hook and Operation Giant Lance

When Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in January 1969, one of his top priorities was to end the Vietnam War. The Nixon Presidential Materials Project at the U.S. National Archives revealed in 2005 that two National Security Council documents

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64 Dinesh Lal, *Indo-Tibet-China Conflict*, Delhi, India: Kalpaz Publications, 2008.

65 In May 1963, Robert McNamara gave the following advice to President Kennedy: "Any large Chinese Communist attack on any part of that area would require the use of nuclear weapons by the US, and this is preferred over the introduction of large numbers of US soldiers." See Anand Giridharadas, " '63 Tapes Reveal Kennedy and Aides Discussed Using Nuclear Arms in a China-India Clash," *New York Times* (International), August 26, 2005.

66 The diplomatic documents were officially declassified in December 2008 and have been widely commented on in the Japanese press.

67 "No-Nuke Policy Ruled Out Years Before Declaration," *The Japan Times*, Monday, December 22, 2008.

related to the Vietnam War mentioned the option of threatening the use of nuclear weapons in order to coerce Hanoi to negotiate.

It remained unclear for some time whether President Nixon had approved these documents or even had read them. In 1985, Richard Nixon said that he had considered using nuclear weapons four times during his administration.[68] Between 1969 and 1974, apart from the 1973 Yom Kippur War, what conflict other than Vietnam was serious enough to warrant contemplating nuclear use? None.[69] And indeed, thanks to two declassified documents released by the Nixon Presidential Materials Project at the U.S. National Archives in 2005, we now know that in early July 1969, contingency military plans were developed under the code name Duck Hook that "targeted at least two sites in North Vietnam for nuclear air bursts."[70] The objective was

> to coerce Hanoi "to negotiate a compromise settlement through a series of military blows," which would walk a fine line between inflicting "unacceptable damage to their society" and bringing about "the total destruction of the country or the regime, which would invite major outside intervention [by the USSR or the PRC]."[71]

The operation was supposed to be short and to "generate [a] strong psychological impact on Hanoi's leadership." The nuclear dimension is brought up in an attachment titled "Important Questions," which raises the question, "Should we be prepared to use nuclear weapons?" The documents show that the use of nuclear weapons had at least been considered and examined by military planners.[72]

Operation Giant Lance was the preparatory phase of Duck Hook. On October 10, 1969, major U.S. military commanders received a message from the Joint Chiefs of Staff informing them that U.S. military readiness should be increased in order "to respond to possible confrontation by the Soviet Union."[73] On October 27, the airborne alert went far enough:

> SAC launched a series of B-52 bombers, armed with thermonuclear weapons, on a "show of force" airborne alert, code-named Giant Lance. During this alert opera-

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[68] Henry Kissinger disagreed with the former President in "An Interview with Henry A. Kissinger: 'We Were Never Close to Nuclear War,' " *Washington Post*, August 11, 1985, p. L8. Nixon, however, may have kept his view on the subject until his death.

[69] The two other instances President Nixon had in mind may have been Jordan and Cuba in 1970.

[70] William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, eds., "Nixon White House Considered Nuclear Options Against North Vietnam, Declassified Documents Reveal," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 195, July 31, 2006.

[71] Burr and Kimball, 2006.

[72] Burr and Kimball, 2006.

[73] William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, eds., "Nixon's Nuclear Ploy: The Vietnam Negotiations and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 81, December 23, 2002.

> tion, eighteen B-52s took off from bases in California and Washington State. The bombers crossed Alaska . . . and then flew in oval patterns toward the Soviet Union and back, on eighteen-hour "vigils" over the northern polar ice cap.[74]

This was at the end of the Sino-Soviet confrontation over border clashes.

What was the purpose of this bizarre operation? Apparently the goal was to convince both the Soviets and the North Vietnamese that Washington would do anything to end the war in Vietnam—but what, exactly, did that mean? It remains an enigma. The wisdom of such a dangerous move (even if some precautionary measures were adopted) at a time of Soviet nervousness because of the crisis with China is questionable at best. In addition, it apparently failed to impress either the North Vietnamese or the Soviets but caused the Chinese to go on alert (probably because Beijing expected the Soviets to react). In April 1972, Nixon again told Kissinger about his interest in using a nuclear bomb to respond to the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive. The U.S. President then settled only on the threat of use.

1969: Soviet-Chinese Border Clashes (March–October)

In 1969 the USSR was an impressive nuclear power, while China was a relative newcomer to the nuclear scene, having tested its first atomic nuclear weapon only four years earlier. This asymmetry did not prevent Beijing from challenging Moscow and from scoring a political victory, thanks to the United States acting as a third party in the dispute. The initial situation was as follows: On a disputed island (Zhenbao Island, or Damansky Island) on the Ussuri River, between the USSR and China, Chinese troops took the initiative to attack their Soviet counterparts, driving Moscow almost hysterical in the very first days (General Grechko was in favor of a massive nuclear attack on Chinese soil). The Chinese move was reckless indeed: This is the only recorded incident of conventional combat[75] between nuclear-armed nations prior to the Kargil crisis in 1999 (with two other protagonists, India and Pakistan).

Moscow soon became concerned about the American reaction. After the initial Chinese attack, Moscow asked Washington how it would react to an attack against Chinese nuclear assets (Lop Nor, the Chinese nuclear testing site, was included as one of the targets, but the ambition was to destroy the nascent Chinese nuclear arsenal with conventional means).

A memorandum to President Nixon, now declassified, reports a Soviet démarche in Washington asking point blank what the United States would do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China's nuclear installations. The objectives mentioned were twofold: one, eliminate the Chinese nuclear threat for decades, and two, discredit

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[74] See Scott Sagan and Jeremi Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2003.

[75] On March 2, 1969, 31 Soviet guards were killed and 14 were wounded; on March 15, Chinese forces numbered 2,000 men and Soviet forces used about 50 tanks and—for the first time—launched BM-21 Grad rockets.

"the Mao clique" at the time of the Cultural Revolution. Washington could have easily concluded that a confrontation between two of its adversaries would be in its interest, particularly if the conflict remained conventional, and there was little chance that Beijing would be foolish enough to escalate, taking into account the Soviet retaliatory capability. But there was apparently no hesitation in answering that Washington would view any outbreak of major hostilities between the Soviet Union and China with great concern but that the United States would want to keep out of such a conflict.[76] Be that as it may, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, reported that "the US would not be passive regarding such a blow at China."[77]

The Chinese finally backed down on October 7, but they won a major political battle with Moscow, and they saw an opportunity to use Washington against Moscow at a time when Washington was already taking initial steps in the Sino-American rapprochement, which would worry the Soviets about the prospect of Beijing exploiting the new U.S.-Chinese relationship in order to exert pressure on them.[78] China, for its part, changed its position vis-à-vis Washington in 1971.

Thomas Robinson, in a 1971 RAND study, writes the following:

> The American efforts to improve relations with Peking, until July 1971 nearly a unilateral effort, suddenly received support from the Chinese leadership in agreeing to the American President's visit to Peking. Why? It is very tempting to argue either that some as yet unknown development in Sino-Soviet relations (possibly concerning the border) caused Peking to open the door to Washington, or that Mao and his associates feared an imminent Soviet attack. Or, as a third possibility, a basic decision might have been taken to use Washington as a makeweight in the long term Chinese effort to build a world balance of power against Moscow.[79]

The third possibility looks more likely than the first two, and July 1971 was the date of Kissinger's secret trip to Beijing, which was not known at the time of the RAND study.

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[76] See "Memorandum for the President from Secretary of State William Rogers, 'The Possibility of a Soviet Strike Against Chinese Nuclear Facilities,'" September 10, 1969, in William Burr, ed., "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969," National Security Archive briefing book, June 12, 2001.

[77] Betts, 1987, p. 81.

[78] The Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, thought after Kissinger's trip to China in July 1971 that Moscow should continue its policy toward the United States but give Washington no reason to believe that the Chinese factor could influence Moscow and lead it to make concessions. Anatoly Dobrynin, "Telegram from Ambassador Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Washington, July 17, 1971," in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top-Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow*, Washington, D.C.: New Press, 2000, p. 401.

[79] Thomas Robinson, *The Border Negotiations and the Future of Sino-Soviet-American Relations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, P-4661, August 1971, p. iii.

1971: Indo-Pakistani War

In 1971 a crisis was triggered by East Pakistan's quest for independence and ended with the Indo-Pakistani War and the emergence of Bangladesh. The Soviets supported India (an Indo-Soviet treaty had been signed in August 1971 to offset the U.S.-Chinese rapprochement), while China and the United States, though they helped Pakistani forces,[80] did not prevent India from breaking up Pakistan. In light of the Vietnam entanglement, neither country wanted direct involvement in a crisis in which intervention might lead to becoming embroiled in a larger war. In addition, both countries were entering a new diplomatic era; Nixon ignored atrocities carried out by Pakistani forces, in order to avoid Islamabad's displeasure at a time when President Yahya Khan was helping Nixon prepare for a secret trip to China (1972).

The Pakistan-China relationship (and not only the fact that India was seen as a Soviet client) was therefore an important element in the U.S. decision to send military aid to Pakistan through Jordan and Iran, and even to dispatch USS *Enterprise*, America's largest aircraft carrier with 75 nuclear-armed fighter bombers on board, to the Bay of Bengal in December 1971. The decision was unwise, however, since the *Enterprise* left the region shortly after arrival, at a time when the Indo-Pakistani War had been over for five days. It was pure theater, but with nuclear weapons.

If the American aircraft carrier was intended to blackmail Moscow, the main support behind India, then the blackmail failed.[81] According to the Dobrynin-Kissinger Back Channel Meetings, declassified in 2007, Moscow was surprised by the intensity of American accusations regarding its support of India's use of force against the integrity of Pakistan.[82] For its part, India was puzzled as to the real objective of the U.S. naval task force, fearing a possible evacuation of Pakistani soldiers by U.S. ships.

Middle East Crises

Any serious crisis in the Middle East could have led to a superpower confrontation, even against the will of the two main actors, since Moscow was all along committed to Arab victories and Washington to Israeli victories. Occasions for such possible confrontation were never lacking.

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[80] Nixon is thought to have been in favor of Pakistan partly because of the latter's crucial role in the rapprochement with Beijing.

[81] See Louis J. Smith and Edward C. Keefer, eds., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Vol. XI: *South Asia Crisis, 1971*, Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2009. See also William Burr, "Nixon/Kissinger Saw India as 'Soviet Stooge' in 1971 South Asia Crisis," National Security Archive, June 29, 2005. According to the documents declassified in 2005, which contain many exchanges between Nixon and Kissinger during the crisis, Kissinger noted the problem that would arise "if our bluff is called."

[82] Burr, William, ed., "Kissinger Conspired with Soviet Ambassador to Keep Secretary of State in the Dark," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 233, November 2, 2007.

1956: Suez Canal Crisis

The Suez Canal crisis saw the first postwar instance of deep disagreement between the United States and Britain and France about a strategic decision. Britain had already been worried about Washington's nuclear threats (notably Eisenhower's), but the divide never went far before Suez. This was also the first instance of a Soviet nuclear threat in a crisis, but it was not directed against America but against Britain and France, whose forces had landed in Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision on July 26 to nationalize the Suez Canal. Both nations saw the decision as the beginning of the complete loss of their colonies. Egypt's decision followed U.S. refusal on July 19 to provide funding for the dam project because of the alleged diversion of resources to buy Soviet equipment.

On November 5, 1956, Moscow demanded a cease-fire in Egypt and the withdrawal of foreign troops. Two messages to London and Paris were regarded as an ultimatum. Nikolai Bulganin's note to Antony Eden contained the following warning: "If this war is not stopped, it carries the danger of turning into a third world war."[83]

Eisenhower pressured the Allies to withdraw from Egypt but warned Moscow that nuclear attacks on Britain and France would draw U.S. retaliation. The American Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Alfred Gruenther, declared that if the Soviets attacked Britain or France, Moscow would be destroyed "as surely as night follows day," a pretty clear expression of extended deterrence.[84] U.S. intelligence was convinced that the Soviets were bluffing. Eisenhower said, "If the fellows start something, we may have to hit them—and, if necessary, with everything in the bucket."[85] The President later claimed: "We just told them that this would be . . . global war if they started it, that's all."[86]

In a 1985 article on the importance of nuclear deterrence in keeping international security, Richard Nixon cites this episode as a significant example along with Korea (1953), Berlin (1959), and Cuba (1962).[87]

A second Suez crisis erupted in 1970 during the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt along the Suez Canal. By then, Israel had acquired nuclear weapons and found itself fighting antiaircraft missiles supplied to Egypt by the Soviets along with Soviet crews, resulting in four F-4s downed (summer 1970). A cease-fire prevented further escalation.

1958: Lebanon

In 1958, there was a radical coup in Iraq, and the West lost an ally in the Middle East. The event spread fears that the whole Middle East might become unsettled, particu-

[83] Betts, 1987, p. 63.

[84] Betts, 1987, p. 64.

[85] Betts, 1987, p. 65.

[86] Betts, 1987, p. 65.

[87] Richard Nixon, "How to Live with the Bomb," *National Review*, Vol. 37, No. 18, September 1985, p. 25.

larly Jordan and Lebanon. The United States decided to send Marines to Lebanon and the Sixth Fleet received reinforcements from the Atlantic. Britain sent forces to Lebanon. The meaning was clear: The coup in Iraq was accepted, but further extension of radical influence to neighboring countries would be met with resolve. Moscow declared that it "was not remaining indifferent to events which seriously threatened a region bordering its frontiers, and that it reserved the right to take the measures which the defense of peace and the concern for its own security imposed."[88] Eisenhower, for his part, ordered the Strategic Air Command (SAC) on alert, and 1,100 aircraft were positioned for takeoff. The American resolve impressed the Soviets. Khrushchev declared on the occasion: "Frankly, we are not ready for WWIII."[89] The resolve was also noted in China, where the PLA newspaper reported on July 17 that "the US openly threatened to carry out atomic warfare in Lebanon."[90]

1970: Jordan

This is one of the crises where President Nixon showed a surprising recklessness, as if he would have welcomed a confrontation. Seymour Hersh pretends that Nixon was "determined to have his crisis and prove his mettle, as John F. Kennedy had in the Cuban missile crisis,"[91] a mere (and rather bizarre) possibility,[92] but Nixon did make the following remark in 1970: "There is nothing better than a little confrontation now and then, a little excitement."[93]

The occasion for the "little excitement" then was Black September, the massive Jordanian attack on Palestinian forces based in Jordan. Syria crossed the Jordanian border, Israel wanted to secure King Hussein's regime, and U.S. airborne units in Germany were conspicuously moved to airfields—even though there was no indication that the Soviets were backing Damascus. By September 20 and 21, five U.S. divisions had been put on full alert and the Sixth Fleet, trailed by Soviet ships equipped with cruise missiles, was significantly expanded (from two to five aircraft carriers), while Israeli forces, supported by Nixon, attacked the Syrians.

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88 Nixon, 1985.

89 Quoted in Barry Blechman and Stephen Kaplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1978, p. 251.

90 Quoted in William Quandt, "Lebanon 1958 and Jordan 1970," in Barry Blechman and Stephen Kaplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1978, p. 257.

91 Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, New York: Summit, 1983, p. 238.

92 Since Kennedy had conveyed the image that he was tougher on the Soviets than Nixon was during the 1960 television debate, a post-mortem revenge was not unthinkable. After all, at the time of the Jordan crisis, another crisis with Moscow loomed: Cuba was building soccer fields, and Kissinger contended that Cubans play baseball while Russians play soccer (untrue then and now), suggesting that a large Soviet base was under construction.

93 Quandt, 1978, p. 272.

By then, the excitement was no longer so "little." Fortunately, Jordanian forces later succeeded in hurting Syrian tanks badly, driving them back home; but the considerable risks accepted by Richard Nixon are almost unbelievable, all the more so since there was no serious attempt on his part to communicate with Moscow during this period. He may have thought that looking capable of "irrational action" was good for relations with the USSR, but the truth is that even Henry Kissinger reportedly had some difficulty making himself heard.

1973: Yom Kippur War[94]

The Yom Kippur War erupted in the context of Israel's overwhelming victory over Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War—resulting in Jordan's loss of Jerusalem. The Arabs "were not deterred from waging the 1973 war by the knowledge that Israel was in possession of nuclear weapons"[95] and launched a massive surprise attack against Israel on October 6, 1973. The attack did not only surprise Israel, convinced after 1967 that Egypt would not attack without strong air capabilities; it also surprised a number of Western capitals, including Washington. Henry Kissinger put it in the clearest possible fashion: "Our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of [Egypt and Syria] starting an unwinnable war to restore self respect."[96] Rational or not, this war, which lasted 20 days, could have had "incalculable consequences" (the exact wording in President Nixon's letter to the Kremlin on October 24[97]). A day earlier, when a second U.N. cease-fire unraveled, Israel appeared to be threatening to collapse Egypt's defense completely by surrounding the Egyptian Third Army and demanding its surrender. The USSR decided to exert pressure on Washington, suspected to have betrayed a jointly worded cease-fire agreement reached in Moscow by Henry Kissinger that was supposed to have been communicated to Tel Aviv with the additional pressure of U.N. resolution 338.[98] Since fighting continued on the ground, a second cease-fire resolution (339) was adopted by the Security Council on Octo-

[94] By this time, Israel was thought to have possessed nuclear weapons for five or six years already. In September 1969, when Golda Meir visited Washington in the first year of the President Nixon mandate, there was a commitment on her part not to test, not to declare possession, and not to make the weapons visible in any way. But during the Yom Kippur War, the situation was almost desperate in the very first days, and Israeli nuclear weapons reportedly went on alert.

[95] Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 342.

[96] Henry Kissinger, 1982, p. 465.

[97] Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, Vol. II, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, pp. 498–499.

[98] This U.N. Security Council resolution, adopted on October 22 at 12:49 a.m., called "upon all parties to the present fighting to cease all firing and terminate all military activity" within 12 hours. The resolution lacked an enforcement clause.

ber 23, urging "the parties to return to the previous lines."[99] Shooting resumed again, however, and the Soviets warned Israel of the "greatest consequences" if it did not stop its "aggression"[100] (actually, the trapped Third Army was trying to break its encirclement). On October 24, Leonid Brezhnev sent an urgent and unusually tough message to Washington proposing joint superpower intervention to reinstitute the cease-fire and threatening unilateral action in case of refusal. The Soviet alert was heightened[101] and so was the U.S. alert (SAC B-52s were recalled from Guam[102]).

According to Richard Betts, "the US threat was an example of manipulation of risk, the 'threat that leaves something to chance,' an exploitation of the danger that the crisis could slip out of control and into mutual catastrophe."[103] It was meant "to play in domestic politics by giving the impression that the administration was being tough on the Soviets while it was actually doing what Moscow wanted: squeezing the Israelis."[104] Actually, President Nixon, being in the midst of the Watergate scandal, was thought to be in no shape to make weighty decisions, and this may have figured into Kissinger's alert decision. The nuclear element, though, does not appear appropriate during this particular crisis: This was no threat to American territory or to any Allied territory but an invitation to interpose troops to enforce an agreed U.N. Security Council cease-fire. True, the crisis originated in Moscow with Brezhnev's message to Nixon, but the message itself and its tough tone would not have been possible without the conviction in Moscow that it had been double-crossed, a feeling that Washington did nothing to dissipate. The message from the Kremlin seems to have been overdramatized by Washington, and the Soviets, surprised by the U.S. move and nervousness, were wise enough not to aggravate the situation by overreacting as well: Starting World War III because of Syria and Egypt appeared totally unreasonable to the Kremlin.[105] The Soviets actually sent 70 observers to monitor the U.N. cease-fire, and the Israelis finally complied.

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[99] Of October 23, Henry Kissinger writes, "Eight impeachment resolutions had that day been submitted to the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee." See Kissinger, 1982, p. 375. So Kissinger was almost entirely in charge of the crisis management.

[100] Kissinger, 1982.

[101] By October 12, all seven Soviet airborne divisions were on alert and a special airborne command post was established in southern USSR.

[102] The 82nd Airborne Division was alerted, additional aircraft carriers were ordered to the eastern Mediterranean, and all U.S. units were put at DEFCON 3.

[103] Betts, 1987, p. 126.

[104] Betts, 1987, p. 126.

[105] One Soviet plane reached Cairo on October 25 and left immediately, probably recalled home by the Kremlin. Once vindicated by the successes early in the conflict, Egypt could contemplate peace with Israel as well as leaving the Soviet sphere of influence.

It should be noted here that such compliance, far from being a concession, was in the best interest of Tel Aviv: There would have been no way to sign any peace agreement in Camp David with a humiliated Cairo in 1973.

Misperception

1983: Able Archer Exercise

Able Archer, a ten-day NATO exercise starting on November 2, 1983, took place in a deteriorating strategic environment between the United States and the USSR, with the arrival in Europe of Pershing II missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles. The exercise simulated a conflict escalation, with a nuclear release at the end. The conditions were exceptional, with the participation of heads of state and government and the use of a number of new communication systems. Moscow, although informed about and familiar with the exercise, came to believe that it was in fact a ruse of war, due to the strategic environment and the realistic features of the activity.[106]

What Lessons Can Be Drawn from These Crises?

Superiority Is Not the Decisive Factor

At a time when the United States had a clear nuclear monopoly, it did not prevent the Soviet Union from solidifying its control over Eastern Europe.[107] In 1950, when Moscow had just completed its first nuclear test (RDS-1, or Joe-1, August 29, 1949[108]) and when Beijing had no nuclear capability, the Chinese were not prevented from entering the Korean War.[109] During more risky times, when the Soviet Union was building its nuclear arsenal, Washington came out on top in most crises: Korea in 1953, when negotiations were concluded; Quemoy and Matsu in 1954 and 1958; Berlin in 1958–1959 and 1961; and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. In 1969, China challenged not only Soviet interests but Soviet soil at a time when the Chinese nuclear

[106] The war scare of the 1980s was related to other operations besides Able Archer. See Benjamin B. Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance: The Soviet War Scare and US-Soviet Relations," in Stephen Cimbala, ed., *Mysteries of the Cold War*, Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999, p. 89.

[107] Indeed, no nuclear threats were issued to prevent the Soviet Union from extending its power in Eastern Europe, not even with the Communist *coup de force* in Prague in 1948. But the demonstration made in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States did not lead Moscow to exercise prudence in the years immediately following World War II.

[108] The bomb, designated and built at Arzamas-16, is visually almost identical to the American "Fat Man."

[109] Dean Acheson's controversial speech of January 12, 1950, is often read as a signal that Washington did not regard South Korea as a U.S. defense interest (Dean Acheson, "Speech on the Far East," speech given at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., January 12, 1950). But this was evidently an incorrect assessment: The war was fought essentially by Americans and lasted three years under terrible conditions.

arsenal was nascent and the Soviet arsenal huge. Weapons were not the decisive element.[110] They are not decisive today, either.[111]

But Numbers Do Matter

That nuclear parity, or even superiority, does not *guarantee* a credible deterrent does not mean that numbers do not matter. They do, to an extent. Moscow was wrong to strive for nuclear superiority (and the USSR did not feel secure even when Moscow had more ICBMs than Washington), but the ability to survive an attack and to strike back requires dealing with numbers.

Leadership Lies at the Very Core of Deterrence

To follow up on the previous section, impressive military power cannot compensate for hesitant leaders. It appears that the personalities of leaders have played the most significant role during nuclear crises. Leadership may not be sufficient to ensure deterrence, but it is undoubtedly necessary. The Chinese, for example, took the 1953 nuclear threat seriously, but they ignored the ambiguous signal made by Washington in 1950. In 1950 they had learned from the Soviets that Washington had no intention of seriously threatening Beijing with a nuclear attack, while in 1953, Eisenhower looked credible enough for them to back down. Another example comes from the Cuban missile crisis. In 1962, after a first meeting a year earlier between Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy had revealed weaknesses of the new U.S. President in his relations with Moscow, the Soviet Union thought it could engage in gambling. It was far from expecting Kennedy to issue this clear warning to Moscow: "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."[112] As the crisis developed, the quality of the American team was recognized by the Soviet leadership, but that initial perceived lack of credibility of Kennedy was part of the Soviet equation. The importance of leadership also means that documents—for example, the conclusion of agreements to prevent nuclear war—will be less significant than determined diplomacy during a crisis.[113] It finally means that it is dangerous to disregard the importance of personalities in the nuclear decision-making process.

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[110] See Albert Wohlstetter, Fred S. Hoffman, and Henry S. Rowen, *Protecting U.S. Power to Strike Back in the 1950s and the 1960s*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1956, not available to the general public, p. 5: "The criterion of matching the Russians plane for plane, or exceeding them, is, in the strict sense, irrelevant to the problem of deterrence."

[111] This does not mean at all that the United States and the USSR did not consider superiority to be a most important element in their nuclear relationship.

[112] Quoted in Graham Allison, "Deterring Kim Jong Il," *Washington Post*, October 27, 2006, p. A23.

[113] The 1973 Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War, concluded only some months before the 1973 crisis, played no other role in October than to allow the United States to remind the Soviet Union that it risked violating its provisions.

Deterrence Is About Behavior in Daily Life, Not in Brief Crises

While they are inherently unpredictable, crises should be expected as part of strategic relations among competitors or adversaries. Lack of preparation cannot be remedied by improvisation when difficulties arise. A reputation for firmness on principles, good judgment, and reliability does more to deter than sophisticated nuclear warheads and missiles. Once corroded by doubt, credibility is difficult to restore. As a result, subsequent crises are likely to be all the more difficult to manage, and more damaging, too. This lesson deserves some serious thought from political leadership worldwide. Some leaders who consider themselves fit and ready may discover they are badly mistaken and lack knowledge and imagination as well as steady nerves.

The Ability to Take Risks Is Part of Any Success Story

Compromises can be fine, but their substance and the way in which they are reached should avoid encouraging future challenges: A series of concessions, for example, could send a message of weakness and lead to military confrontations. The policy of deterrence (or crisis management backed by nuclear forces) was defended in these terms by John Foster Dulles in 1956, after the Korean War and the first Taiwan Strait crisis: "You have to take chances for peace, just as you take chances for war. Some say we were brought to the verge of war. Of course we were brought to the verge of war. The ability to get to the verge without getting into the war is the necessary art."[114] Compromises, concessions, and negotiations are not necessarily recipes for peace. In some circumstances, they can lead to war.

Different Approaches to "Rationality" Should Be Acknowledged

This is a clear lesson from at least the 1973 Yom Kippur War. As Henry Kissinger later recognized, "Our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of Egypt and Syria starting an unwinnable war to restore self respect."[115] Actually, in Anwar Sadat's calculation, restoring Egyptian self-respect had a very high value, and this perception was correct, particularly if he had in mind a future peace treaty with Israel. On the Israeli side, the idea that Egypt would start a war to restore self-respect without a respectable air force made no sense. This is a good example of dangerous misperceptions leading to war. Since the end of the Cold War, worse examples (i.e., more difficult to explain in rational terms) have occurred: Saddam Hussein started one unwinnable war in 1991 and provoked a devastating military invasion of his territory in 2003—resulting in the end of both his regime and his own life—while Slobodan Milosevic started another unwinnable war in 1999. As strategic thinkers have acknowledged since antiquity, in matters of war and peace, passions are at least as powerful as reason and calculation.

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[114] Quoted in Albert Carnesale, et al., *Living with Nuclear Weapons*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 254.

[115] Kissinger, 1982, p. 465.

Prudence Should Prevent Unnecessary Risk-Taking

This is a mere corollary to the previous point. The postwar period shows a reckless pattern, with Washington issuing nuclear threats for issues that did not warrant them (Greece in 1946 is a good example). Short of extreme circumstances, it is absurd to provoke opponents with nuclear coercion and blackmail. The 1970 and 1973 nuclear crises may appear to future historians not as a skillful political use of nuclear weapons by Washington, but rather as a reckless manipulation of risk by Richard Nixon.[116] Today, Western powers may find themselves on the opposite side of the spectrum, finding it difficult to even imagine under which circumstances it would be necessary and indeed wise to issue a nuclear threat, while other nuclear weapon states assert blunt nuclear doctrines matched by military maneuvers. One example is the September 2009 Russo-Belarusian military exercises simulating nuclear use against Poland: unnecessary and irresponsible. They should have been denounced as such by Washington, European capitals, and NATO. They have not been, even after Poland's request. Why?

Ignorance Is Blissful—but Dangerous

"The less we knew, the more hopeful we were."[117] Such was the judgment of one of the most brilliant nuclear strategists of the Cold War, Albert Wohlstetter, whose ideas greatly influenced nuclear strategy in the 1960s. If he was right, then this is one of the major lessons to be remembered, for the extinction of knowledge in the information age is such that many current leaders would have difficulty naming more than two past nuclear crises (probably Berlin and Cuba). They would probably have forgotten the relationship between those two crises and would be seriously challenged if asked about the main dangers encountered by the Soviets and the Americans at the time. Knowledge often brings with it undue pessimism, but it also brings indispensable prudence, notably in the case of ambiguous intelligence. Learning about past crises is a good defense against wishful thinking.

Subtleties of Deterrence Theory Play Little Role in Times of Crisis

The Soviets did not accept the concept that nuclear forces had a deterrence role before the late 1960s, and Soviet studies on deterrence never reached the level of sophistication of their American counterparts. But in the United States, where deterrence was part of the nuclear doctrine much earlier, it seems clear that politicians never followed a script during crises. As James Schlesinger once said, "Doctrines control the minds of men only

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[116] The 1973 Middle East crisis is well documented. The best account may be the one provided by Barry Blechman and Douglas Hart in "The Political Utility of Nuclear Weapons: The 1973 Middle East Crisis," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Summer 1982. As far as 1970 is concerned, knowing that Jordan might trigger a crisis with Moscow, Nixon did not hesitate to open a second front because of constructions in Cuba, a move that even U.S. intelligence sources at the time said they could not understand.

[117] Albert Wohlstetter, *The Delicate Balance of Terror*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, P-1472, November 6, 1958.

in periods of non-emergency. They do not necessarily control the minds of men during periods of emergency. In the moment of truth, when the possibility of major devastation occurs, one is likely to discover sudden changes in doctrine."[118] In particular, in actual crises political leaders did not calculate probability, as certain theories said they should. President Kennedy, for example, said he thought the chances of war during the Cuban missile crisis were at least one in three, a belief that placed an incredibly high value on prevailing, according to Robert Jervis[119] (and to any sensible mind, for that matter). But the important point is not whether the President was fully aware of what the theory of probability actually contained. It is that he prevailed. Game theory, Kahn's escalation steps, and the like were not part of the picture in the Situation Room.

Strategic Thinkers Nonetheless Had a Far-Reaching Effect on Defense Policy

The remarkable work done over decades on nuclear strategy played a major role in defining Western policy. It was part of an intellectual effort to understand the new world arising from the nuclear era, and it tried to answer the most difficult questions. The work was *necessary*, and it was most probably an important element that reduced the danger of a nuclear war. Those who cared most about details (like Albert Wohlstetter) as opposed to general concepts were the most important in building the intellectual foundations of the nuclear age. Without careful analysis of missile accuracy, missile range, bomb yields, strategic bases, and targeting, there was no possibility of making a serious contribution to defense policy. Survive an attack and strike back, the two main elements of deterrence, were anything but automatic and easy. China understands this today: It protects its forces and is building a credible second-strike capability.

On the Whole, Blatant Moves or Threats, When Credible, Were More Successful Than Uncertainty

Eisenhower and Kennedy were more effective than Nixon. Uncertainty may instill caution in the opponent's mind and lead him to ponder decisions. Blatant threats, if calibrated and credible, oblige the opponent to take sides in a gamble known to be highly dangerous. Experience shows that retreat is likely. However, it is debatable whether such a consequence would always be the case, notably in the 21st century: Blatant threats can enrage incautious minds or leaders with no experience of major wars. It is now clear from declassified documents that Soviet leaders and the Soviet military high command both understood the devastating consequences of nuclear war and, on the whole, thought the use of nuclear weapons should be avoided. Who can be sure this belief is present in the same way in Ahmadinejad's or Kim Jong Un's mind?

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[118] U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy Hearings*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974, p. 160.

[119] See Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1979, pp. 289–324.

Participants Are Never in Full Control of Events

Clausewitz made clear that such is the case in wartime. It is also true in crises, particularly nuclear crises, because friction can have such disastrous effects. Friction can take different forms: deployed nuclear weapons at locations unknown to the adversary, wise or reckless reaction to a blockade, orders ignored or not received on time. Even small events (a message sent and not received, for example) may derail the process of deterrence in a time of crisis. Misunderstanding is also *always* part of the equation, because human beings tend to misunderstand what is said to them in situations of extreme tension. One ought to try limiting its range and frequency but should be prepared for its occurrence.

The Past Contains Significant Experience Related to Asia[120]

This is indeed truer than we might think, since *eight* crises took place there, leaving aside the Middle East (also called West Asia). Whatever the differences between the Asia of the Cold War and the Asia of today, the crises concerned should be analyzed again with care: They may provide food for thought in the so-called Asian century, notably with regard to Taiwan.[121] The 1969 Soviet-Chinese crisis contains food for thought in more than one area: First, it shows the ability of a nascent nuclear power to embarrass an established nuclear power. Second, it underlines a rather daring Chinese behavior that contrasts sharply with Soviet behavior after the Cuban missile crisis.[122] Third, it includes a Soviet-American exchange that should be remembered: When asked by American diplomats whether Chinese nuclear capability could ever come

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[120] China presents itself as the country most frequently threatened by nuclear attack. A senior PLA colonel, Yao Yunzhu, describes this threat as follows:

> During the Korean War, General MacArthur urged the Truman administration to drop atom bombs on China. During the French-Vietnamese War, President Truman and British Prime Minister Churchill consulted on several occasions, agreeing that the Allies would support U.S. use of atom bombs on China in case the Chinese intervened on the side of Vietnamese troops. The Eisenhower administration threatened to use nuclear weapons against key areas in China (including Beijing) if it launched another offensive in 1953 during the Korean War. The Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958 once again saw China threatened by U.S. nuclear weapons; top Soviet military leaders considered launching a preemptive strike against China with a "limited number of nuclear weapons" during the Sino-Soviet border clash in 1969.

This presentation may be disputed, but this is how it is perceived by the PLA. See Yao Yunzhu, "China's Perspective on Nuclear Deterrence," *Air and Space Power Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Spring 2010.

[121] The nuclear crises listed in this chapter do not cover the various instances in which Washington confronted the Taiwanese government over its secret nuclear activities. The confrontations took place in 1976, 1977, 1978, and 1988. The problem was one of a vulnerable ally showing the ambition to develop nuclear weapons as an insurance policy.

[122] As a matter of fact, Mao, who wanted to teach Moscow "a lesson," badly miscalculated. Beijing had no intention to risk a wider conflict with the Soviet Union, but only to fight a limited border conflict. The understanding in Moscow was totally different: a reckless and useless challenge that could not be left unpunished. For the Soviets, a Chinese attack under such unfavorable balance of power meant a very dangerous nuclear adversary in the future.

close to that of the Soviet Union, the Soviets answered that in the future this capability could become a serious threat to the Soviet Union. They reminded the oblivious Americans that there was a time when the United States doubted the ability of the Soviet Union to catch up with it in the nuclear field. Washington, it seems, still doubts the ability of China to seriously challenge the United States with nuclear weapons. This is a dangerous mistake. And fourth, the 1969 crisis yields an interesting question (if not a clear lesson): Had a final agreement been achieved on the Sino-Soviet border in 1969 (*as is now the case*), and had this been accompanied by an improvement in the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Beijing (*as is also now the case*), would the U.S. freedom of maneuver have been considered narrowed?[123]

Finally, it remains true that "we live in a world where emergencies are always possible, and our survival may depend upon our capacity to meet emergencies. Let us pray we shall always have this capacity."[124] Do we still have this capacity?

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[123] The main difficulty with drawing definitive conclusions about these cases is not the relatively small number of crises: They are still more numerous than most nuclear experts would have thought, they are related to different regions of the world, and they contain a significant diversity of scenarios. The lack of available information on the Russian and Chinese sides has long appeared more embarrassing, even though Eastern Europe's archives have shed some light on the Soviet management of the crises. Post–Cold War interviews with former Soviet officials, published in September 2009 by the National Security Archive, shed new light on the behavior of at least one of the two nations and have allowed the two editors, William Burr and Svetlana Savranskaya, to explore a variety of topics, including (1) the overestimation of Soviet aggressiveness, (2) the ability of the Soviet leadership to mislead U.S. decision makers about their intentions, (3) the misunderstanding in Washington of the Soviet decision-making process, (4) the Soviet willingness to strive for nuclear superiority all along, (5) the lack of Soviet interest in environmental consequences, (6) the Soviet skepticism concerning limited nuclear war, and (7) the sharp decline of the Soviet leadership during the Brezhnev period. William Burr and Svetlana Savranskaya, eds., "Previously Classified Interviews with Former Soviet Officials Reveal U.S. Strategic Intelligence Failure over Decades," September 11, 2009.

[124] Dulles, 1954.