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Claremont McKenna College

On the Brink: The Impact of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict
Behavior Between States

submitted to
Professor Lisa Koch

by
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for
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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of nuclear weapons on conflict behavior between states. Using the Soviet Union and China engaging in conflict with the United States from 1950 to 1965 as case studies, this paper provides support for the theory that nuclear weapons do impact conflict behavior. It was found that newer nuclear states will rely on bold brinkmanship strategies while older nuclear states will rely on deterrence. Non-nuclear states will use avoidance and deterrence when engaging in conflict with a nuclear power.

Keywords: nuclear weapons, deterrence, brinkmanship, conflict, conflict behavior

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Conflict is inevitable and universal. Whether nuclear weapons affect a state's behavior during conflict may not be so generalized between all states. I will examine if and how nuclear weapons affect conflict behavior between states depending on nuclear status.

The international community is complex and consists of a great number of daily interactions between all states. From allies to trade deals, states must communicate in order to sustain themselves, gain strength and power, and protect themselves from potential threats. There is no overarching governing body for the international community, such as those that exist within the states, creating a complicated playing field for these interactions to occur in. This anarchic system allows individual states to behave in any way that supports their personal power and survival. Given this freedom, it is interesting how most states have appeared to agree to a set of international norms that attempt to govern the international community in a non-official fashion.

States all have main interests and secondary interests that guide their actions and decisions. The main interests of all states are power and survival.¹ A state's secondary interests have to do with the state's unique identity, leadership, and citizen constituency. Power and survival are difficult to quantify but can be seen as a state's position within the international community. Conflict between states is quite common as the shared goals of power and survival often contradict other states' desire for the same things. Because of

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 55, <http://archive.org/details/tragedyofgreatpo0000mear>.

this, conflict, in order to gain more power or survive in the community, occurs often and can be handled in many different ways.

Military intervention and diplomatic negotiations are two possibilities when entering into a conflict with an enemy state. It is important to note that war is not a guarantee with military action and peace is not a guarantee if negotiations are pursued. A state's lesser and more individual interests and values help determine which type of intervention strategy will be used to attempt to resolve a conflict. The type of conflict at hand and the other state(s) the conflict is involving also determine which strategies a state will use. When it comes to military intervention with an enemy state, there is still a large number of different conflict behaviors that can be pursued to claim victory.

Understanding a state's choice of conflict behavior is crucial to determining successful strategies to oppose and win against an opponent.

All decision-making is imperfect, considerably so during a crisis.² The heightened tensions and pressure that a crisis creates leads to mistakes in decision making.³ If a state can understand and learn what to potentially expect when opposing an enemy state, the decision-making process and conflict itself can become more perfect. Understanding an opposing state's conflict behavior strategies allows other states to make better decisions regarding how to handle that state. This understanding of when and how a particular conflict strategy will be used by another state provides a significant advantage and the potential for success during the conflict.

² Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict: With a New Preface*, 1980 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 20) 201-203.

³ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 189.

Nuclear weapons were first developed by the United States in July of 1945.⁴ Only a month later, the United States used two atomic bombs against Japan in August 1945, ending World War II in the Pacific Theatre. These two bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the only use of nuclear weapons during conflict in history. Ever since the international community witnessed the devastation in Japan in 1945, these weapons have been labeled as weapons of deterrence and not for use.

All military conflict behaviors involve a large amount of risk for the state and require careful consideration, especially when nuclear weapons are involved. The development of nuclear weapons has greatly impacted the international community and conflict behavior between states. Weapons of this caliber had not been seen before and it took many years to fully understand the implications of this new technology and the destruction it could cause. Once these weapons of deterrence were introduced into the international stage, conflict behavior changed when a nuclear-capable state was involved. These weapons also inherently increase the risks associated with all military conflict behaviors with the potential of using these weapons. Specific types of conflict behavior are utilized when nuclear weapons are at play.

Brinkmanship and deterrence are the two main styles of conflict behavior states use when nuclear weapons are involved on either or both sides. Brinkmanship is the act of escalating a crisis to demonstrate resolve and intimidate the opposing state into de-escalating and admitting defeat. This strategy is generally pursued by nuclear states or states with strong conventional military powers. Deterrence can be pursued directly with

⁴ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "United States Nuclear Forces, 2019," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 75, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 122–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1606503>.

the threat of nuclear weapons or indirectly through increasing the risks of using nuclear weapons for either side. Nuclear weapons are weapons of deterrence meaning they are meant to deter opponents without actually being used in conflict. This strategy does not require a crisis to be used.

Many states will choose to pursue a combination of these two strategies depending on the specific conflict situation. A state's nuclear status plays a large role in which and how these strategies of conflict behavior are pursued. Both nuclear and non-nuclear states will pursue different strategies when in conflict with a nuclear state. This is due to the differences in resolve and credibility that come with nuclear capabilities.

Through the analysis of case studies and specific states' conflict behaviors, I find that nuclear weapons do change conflict behavior between states. In general, the possession of nuclear weapons emboldens states to act in ways and pursue strategies that a non-nuclear state would avoid. Nuclear weapons provide an extra level of credibility and resolve for the state, allowing for more escalation and boldness in a state's actions. Because of this, many nuclear states will choose to pursue brinkmanship strategies against another nuclear state. It is uncommon for a nuclear state to pursue this same strategy against a non-nuclear state due to the difference in capabilities and international norms that exist. A non-nuclear state will engage in avoidance and deterrence strategies against a nuclear state in order to pursue its interests without the opportunity for nuclear weapons to become involved. This increases the costs of using nuclear weapons against it and therefore lowers the benefits for a nuclear state and prevents the conflict from escalating to a nuclear strike.

A state's individual view of nuclear weapons and nuclear doctrine also influence what strategies in conflict it will pursue. There are many different views of nuclear weapons in the international community which allow for many different interpretations of conflict behavior among states. If a state views nuclear weapons as the danger that they are, it will be more cautious during conflicts to prevent too much escalation and risk of these weapons being used. However, if a state were to view nuclear weapons as appropriate to use, it would be less likely to avoid brinkmanship strategies and would continue escalation.

I will use evidence from the Soviet Union's and China's interactions with the United States during the middle of the Cold War to examine this theory. I analyzed the years between 1950 to 1965 when the Cold War was escalating between the Soviet Union and the United States.⁵ With the Soviet Union having just gained nuclear powers and the United States maintaining nuclear superiority in the international community, this decade and a half was a time of high and still rising tensions between these two states. I selected these states and this period to demonstrate how two rival nuclear states behave in conflict and analyze what strategies each state utilized and why.

China did not have nuclear weapons until 1964, the end of the analyzed time period.⁶ However, this state interacted in conflict against the United States, a strong nuclear power, during 1950-1965 without having its own nuclear weapons. I selected this specific case study to examine the conflict behavior of a non-nuclear state opposing a

⁵ Paul C. Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019) Ch. 5.

⁶ Vipin Narang, "China," in *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era, Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 121.

strong rival and nuclear state. It is important to analyze the interactions of states during the same time period to minimize the potential for changing international climate and have comparable situations. The period of 1950 to 1965 hosted many different conflicts between the United States and the rival states of the USSR and China. Analyzing states that both engaged in conflict with the United States prevents differences that could exist from states engaging in conflict with different rival states. The United States represents the rival state that either a nuclear or non-nuclear state is opposing and using conflict behaviors against.

The following chapters will explain the theory behind conflict behavior strategies and analyze two case studies that will demonstrate the theory in practice. I will explain when and how each type of state will pursue each type of conflict behavior. The case study involving the Soviet Union and the United States will focus on how the Soviet Union handled the United States in conflict and utilized its new nuclear capabilities. With China lacking nuclear weapons during this time period, the second case study will focus on how the United States' nuclear weapons affected China's conflict behavior. Finally, the concluding chapter will look at how these findings can aid states in determining the most effective conflict strategies given the impact of nuclear weapons and what this could mean for future conflicts.

Chapter 2: Theory

States are constantly interacting with each other in a variety of ways, but their behavior changes depending on the interaction. Occasionally, these interactions turn into conflicts as states hold competing interests. We live in an anarchic world and all states have a goal of becoming a hegemonic power.¹ Survival and power are the main interests of states. Conflict is one of the many ways to maintain power and can also be a means of survival against another powerful state. Many conflicts can occur over threats to these two crucial interests of all states or various other disagreements.

Within conflict, there are different strategies states can utilize and different conflict behaviors that states take part in. States engage in a combination of diplomatic and conflict behaviors, using different strategies based on the situation and the desired outcome. Brinkmanship is a specific type of behavior that occurs when states are contemplating going to war, looking to escalate a war, or to avoid war.

Brinkmanship is used to demonstrate the resolve of the state. Any type of escalation comes with a large amount of risk in conflict: both states aim to demonstrate as much resolve as possible to intimidate the enemy state. The idea of conflict behavior and brinkmanship can be thought of as a poker game where bluffing and misinformation are the players' greatest strengths. No state has all of the information about its opposition during a conflict. Bluffing and misinformation are methods that help increase the potential of a weaker state to win a conflict. Faking resolve through these strategies allows weaker states to appear stronger and benefit more throughout a conflict and in

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 54-55, <http://archive.org/details/tragedyofgreatpo0000mear>.

potential negotiations. Brinkmanship is not always meant to go to war and war can be initiated accidentally through brinkmanship strategies.² The art of brinkmanship is to push the opponent close to the possibility of war or the escalation of war, in this case to the use of nuclear weapons, to have it be forced to de-escalate and give in to the state's demands.

Brinkmanship creates a shared risk and possibility of escalation for both parties unless the threatened side withdraws from the conflict.³ This shared risk acts as a “game of chicken” for both states seeing which will act first and accept defeat. As well, the threat of a general war increases if a limited war is already being fought by the two states.⁴ Each step of escalation increases the risk of escalating to the next step, an exponential scale of risk as one moves further down the line. Neither state is in full control of the situation once brinkmanship is utilized, not even the state that initiated the escalation. A way to describe this situation is the threatening state is deliberately allowing the conflict to get somewhat out of hand.⁵ The hope is that this risk of escalation that is unknown to both parties will be enough for the threatened state to withdraw and de-escalate the conflict.⁶

If the fighting states do escalate the conflict, that is up to both sides and some degree of chance. Neither side can accurately predict how the other will react to escalation. The options are to give in and de-escalate, to continue to match the resolve of

² Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict: With a New Preface*, 1980 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 20) 189.

³ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 200-201.

⁴ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 190-192.

⁵ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 199-200.

⁶ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 200.

the threatening state, or to take escalation into its own hands before the threatener has a chance to control the conflict. The third option is not a common strategy used by states but still a possibility the threatener must take into account. When threatened by an opposing state, some may choose to do a preemptive strike as a way to gain the first strike advantage if the state believes war will inevitably result from the escalation. This is a rare occurrence but still a possibility.

The second method of conflict behavior is the use of deterrence to prevent a war, to begin with. This is seen with specific states that have nuclear weapons and some states with very strong conventional military power. Deterrence works when one state has a weapon or strategy so powerful and dangerous that the opposing state will not attack in fear of said weapon or strategy. Deterrence hangs on the idea of credibility. If a state is not seen as credible in its threat to follow through, the threat will not deter the enemy.

Nuclear weapons are known as weapons of deterrence. While conventional weapons are meant to be used in combat, weapons of deterrence are intended to deter potential enemies and to never actually be used in war. As Schelling points out, weapons of deterrence focus on “ex-ante” prevention rather than “ex-post” revenge.⁷ Such as threatening a child with consequences before he or she acts, deterrence is a threat prior to any action, warning enemies of what will happen if they do act. Deterrence is used to prevent action all together instead of retaliation once action occurs.

Using deterrence in conflict acts as protection and defense.⁸ These weapons are used as warning threats, rather than revenge, to defend the states against conflict. The

⁷ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 187.

⁸ Robert Powell, “Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Nuclear Proliferation, and National Missile Defense,” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (April 1, 2003): 88-89, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951108>.

issue of credibility is a large one. Many states fake resolve and it is difficult to tell which states will follow through on their promised consequences. A way to increase credibility is to combine deterrence and brinkmanship and leave the possibility of the threatened use of the deterrence weapon up to chance.⁹ By leaving the possibility of war up to chance due to brinkmanship and escalation, many opposing states will choose to withdraw and be successfully deterred from further conflict with the other state.

A state can also increase its credibility by following through on smaller threats prior to actually using a weapon of deterrence. By starting a limited war or escalating a limited war to a general war, a state can prove its resolve to its opponents so when a deterrence weapon is threatened, the threat is real and credible.¹⁰ Deterrence is a serious threat of retaliation used to prevent any combat in the first place.

Nuclear weapons are weapons of deterrence and greatly impact conflict behavior between states. These are weapons of mass destruction and after the international community witnessed the damage they can cause in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are now understood as weapons of deterrence rather than weapons for use. Although these weapons are no longer intended for use and the international community knows this, no one can be sure that the next conflict will not be the one where a nuclear weapon is used. Because of this uncertainty, states must act as if the weapons could be used at any time and the nuclear states must be resolved enough to act as if they will use the weapons at any time.

⁹ Powell, "Nuclear Deterrence Theory," 89-91.

¹⁰ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 190-192.

When two nuclear states interact in conflict behavior, things become complicated. Nuclear-nuclear conflict brings up the idea of mutually assured destruction. With two nuclear states going to war, if one state was to decide to use its nuclear weapons, the other would as well. The conflict would then end in both states' nuclear destruction. The idea of capabilities matters more than a state's intentions when it comes to conflict, particularly with nuclear weapons involved. If a state has weapons of any kind, opposing states will assume and act as if they could be used. States will not take the risk of debating an enemy's intentions with its weapons, they will simply look at the capabilities and assume they could be utilized at any time.¹¹

The case studies following this chapter will examine how two nuclear states' behavior interacts in conflict and how a nuclear state and non-nuclear state behave in conflict with each other. These interactions, while having some similarities, are expected to be generally different from each other given the differing nuclear capabilities of each state involved. As well, it is not expected that all states will pursue conflict behavior in the same way, with or without nuclear weapons. Each state shares the main interests of power and survival but has its own individual interests of the state's leadership and citizens that also influence which strategies are utilized in conflict. These case studies demonstrate how nuclear and non-nuclear rivals of the United States will behave in a conflict with Washington.

I argue that nuclear states pursue stronger brinkmanship strategies compared to non-nuclear states when interacting with another nuclear state. This strategy is dangerous

¹¹ See, for example, United States' actions in the Cuban Missile Crisis: Vladislav M. Zubok, *Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 143-149.

for a non-nuclear state when in conflict with a nuclear state due to the unequal distribution of force. It is therefore logical to avoid implementing brinkmanship strategies in this case. A nuclear state has the ability to escalate conflicts due to having nuclear capabilities that enhance the credibility of its threats. It is more common for a nuclear state to utilize brinkmanship rather than a non-nuclear state when in a conflict with any nuclear state, but specifically the United States.¹²

However, brinkmanship strategies only go so far and can only account for so much in conflict behavior between nuclear states. Differing doctrines regarding nuclear weapons also determine how a state will behave in conflict. When a state has had nuclear weapons for some time and fully understands the costs and destruction of using them against an enemy, it is more likely to approach the situation cautiously and attempt to avoid nuclear war. For states with newer nuclear capabilities that lack this full understanding, brinkmanship and escalation strategies are more likely to be pursued. Depending on how seriously a state views nuclear weapons, that state will be more or less likely to pursue brinkmanship and be willing to escalate the conflict to dangerous levels.

Brinkmanship will be the main tactic in the early days of a new nuclear weapons state when interacting with its rival country. These weapons tend to embolden states due to the severity of them and the credibility they hold. Because of this, brinkmanship is generally pursued by new nuclear states in times of conflict with a rival nuclear state.

There are multiple conditions in which nuclear states would choose to pursue brinkmanship. For one, the conflict must be an immediate crisis rather than a low-stakes

¹² See, for example, Russia's use of brinkmanship against the United States in 1960: Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 137-143.

encounter.¹³ The increased stress that a crisis adds to conflict makes brinkmanship a more likely strategy. This pressure increases the possibility of risky decisions and mistakes. Brinkmanship is a risky decision that many nuclear states will make during times of crisis. Escalation adds further stress to the crisis while demonstrating resolve to end the situation through any necessary means. Brinkmanship is a way to force the opposing state to end the crisis through intimidation and escalation.

However, when a nuclear state uses brinkmanship against another nuclear state, this intimidation will not work as well, and the opposing nuclear state will most likely meet the escalation levels. Due to both powers having nuclear capabilities, brinkmanship falters when the potential for mutually assured destruction is introduced. With both states having balanced escalation capabilities, brinkmanship is not as effective. Both states are aware of the possibility of destruction if nuclear weapons were to be implemented. This becomes a game of which state will break its resolve first and de-escalate the conflict for the safety of everyone involved.

Another condition that encourages nuclear states to use brinkmanship is a conflict with a rival state. When two states have a long-standing history of conflict, whether military or diplomatic, it is more likely for one of them to pursue brinkmanship strategies in a military conflict against that state. These repeated interactions create an iterated game where past resolve and past actions play a large role in how each state will handle the current conflict. If both states have proven their resolve in the past, brinkmanship will be a likely choice of conflict behavior as a way to further push the other state's resolve and hopefully find its breaking point. Brinkmanship, if pursued successfully,

¹³ See Cuban Missile Crisis: Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 143-149.

further solidifies the escalating state's resolve for any future interactions with the same state.

It is rare for a nuclear state to utilize nuclear brinkmanship against a non-nuclear state.¹⁴ It is possible to use brinkmanship and escalate a conventional conflict with a non-nuclear state but nuclear weapons act as a deterrent more so than an escalation factor in these cases. Going directly to nuclear brinkmanship when dealing with a non-nuclear state demonstrates a lack of understanding of the severity of these weapons and is too high of an increase in escalation. International norms regarding conflict and nuclear weapons have determined this is generally unacceptable as nuclear weapons are meant to be deterrents and not used.¹⁵ This severe escalation of force is unnecessary against a non-nuclear state and is generally not pursued. However, this escalation is acceptable against another nuclear state due to the balance of force between each side and the potential for mutually assured destruction.

It is not the best practice for a non-nuclear state to use brinkmanship when dealing with a nuclear state. While in a conventional war it is possible to escalate conventional tactics, the nuclear state being threatened is aware of its own nuclear capabilities and the non-nuclear state's lack of these abilities. This escalation by a non-nuclear state against a nuclear state is illogical in most scenarios due to this unequal balance of force and the resolve of the non-nuclear state lacks the credibility the nuclear weapons state has.

¹⁴ See, for example, how the United States interacted with China: Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019) Ch. 4.

¹⁵ Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999): 435.

Because of this unequal power balance, non-nuclear states are expected to pursue avoidance and discouraging strategies against nuclear states. Many non-nuclear states will avoid direct military interaction with a nuclear state during a conflict in order to prevent escalating and creating a direct conflict with that state. If a non-nuclear state avoids direct interaction with a nuclear state, it does not make sense to implement nuclear weapons against it. Through this practice, non-nuclear states are discouraging the nuclear state from conflict with them by lowering the benefits the potential conflict would have for the nuclear state.¹⁶ By limiting the benefits of conflict for the nuclear state, the non-nuclear state discourages the nuclear state from starting a direct conflict.

It should also be pointed out that a non-nuclear state will not be deterred from a conflict with a nuclear state if its interests are strong enough. The mere existence of nuclear weapons in the nuclear state is not enough to deter and prevent a non-nuclear state from pursuing its interests of power and survival. However, these weapons do change how a non-nuclear state will pursue its interests and forces the state to proceed with stronger levels of caution and apprehension than it would have if these weapons were not involved. Maintaining resolve, even if faked, when dealing with a nuclear state is crucial for the success of these avoidant and discouraging strategies. This avoidance of direct conflict makes the use of excessive force or nuclear weapons unacceptable in the international community and therefore prevents nuclear states from using this form of escalation. If a non-nuclear state does not directly threaten a nuclear state, it is breaking international norms to in turn, threaten or use nuclear weapons against that state.

¹⁶ See, for example, China's actions in the Taiwan Strait Crises: Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

The conditions in which a non-nuclear state will pursue avoidant and discouraging strategies vary but there are some generalities. A non-nuclear state will use these techniques when it is prevented from pursuing its direct interests in a second non-nuclear state. This prevention is usually in the form of a nuclear state's protection of the non-nuclear state through a defense pact or allyship. If the non-nuclear state's interests in that non-nuclear enemy are strong enough, the non-nuclear state will not let the nuclear state's protection of the other state deter it from pursuing these interests. If the enemy nuclear state is protecting the interests of the non-nuclear state and preventing direct access, the non-nuclear state will attempt these avoidant strategies. The state will then avoid direct contact with the opposing nuclear state while still attempting to pursue its interests in the other non-nuclear state through conflict with that protected state.

A second general condition for using avoidance and deterrence is the state's views on nuclear weapons and ability to fake resolve. If a non-nuclear state can portray a lack of fear regarding nuclear weapons, a nuclear state is less likely to threaten it. This faked resolve demonstrates that threats of nuclear weapons use will not be successful and lowers the benefit to a nuclear state to use this escalation strategy. With this potential of nuclear weapons relatively low, the non-nuclear state has successfully deterred the nuclear state from escalating conflict and can simplify pursuing interests from this point.

This ability to fake resolve is also a strategy of nuclear states. However, the benefits are larger for a non-nuclear state. A nuclear state has the credibility of nuclear power on its side while non-nuclear states lack this sense of security. Because of this, it is more important for non-nuclear states to fake resolve in the face of nuclear weapons compared to nuclear states.

The following case studies will look at the Soviet Union and China and how these states interacted with the United States from 1950 to 1965. The USSR's nuclear capabilities and doctrine regarding nuclear weapons as a fairly new nuclear state will affect how it interacts with the United States, another strong nuclear power. China's lack of nuclear weapons but strong interests in Taiwan and other territories will affect how it handled the United States during this time before it gained nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union is expected to heavily rely on brinkmanship strategies while China is expected to practice avoidance and deterrence against the United States.

Chapter 3: The Soviet Union and the United States

This chapter will cover Russian and American interactions during the Cold War from 1950 to 1965. This case study demonstrates how two nuclear states interact during conflict with each other. During the Cold War, the USSR gained nuclear capabilities and began building up its nuclear weapons arsenal. The United States, which had developed nuclear weapons at the end of World War II, began developing hydrogen bombs and was striving for nuclear superiority over the USSR.¹ With Russian conventional military power outnumbering the United States, the country had to maintain nuclear superiority in order to feel secure and attempt to prevent an actual war from starting.²

This case study focuses on USSR-US relations as these two states were some of the strongest and first nuclear powers of the international community. Their actions during the Cold War set precedents for nuclear weapons use, or lack of use, and were also the focus of many nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear containment laws and treaties. The period of 1950 to 1965 focuses on the nuclear arms race the two states competed in and also follows the most eventful time of the Cold War in terms of United States and USSR relations. This period also encompasses the USSR first experimenting with its brand-new nuclear capabilities and determining its nuclear doctrine regarding them. The United States in this period was focused on further refining its nuclear power and maintaining superiority over the USSR. These two nuclear weapons states provide a useful example of how two nuclear states interact during conflict and how nuclear

¹ Alexander Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), Ch. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.73414>.

² Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

weapons affect a state's conflict behavior as a whole during recent years after gaining nuclear capabilities.

Two Exercises in Brinkmanship

There was a consistent oscillation between which state had superior nuclear strength during the Cold War and both states strived for this position. By increasing and improving their own nuclear capabilities, the United States and USSR escalated the possibility of a real conflict and also increased the danger that such a conflict would hold. An arms race between states demonstrates resolve to go to war by both sides and leaves each state prepared for a very severe war due to the buildup of weapons. While it can be argued that an arms race demonstrates threat credibility and can be used as deterrence, it also is a form of showing resolve as a stockpile of weapons can be seen as readiness for war. The arms race also places each state on edge waiting for a conflict to strike which can lead to the increased possibility of a preemptive strike in fear of the other state's capabilities; or lead to a real conflict starting from a mistake or miscalculation by either side.

An example of this stress potentially leading to miscalculations occurred on May 1, 1960, when the Soviet Union shot down an American U2 spy plane.³ The USSR was apprehensive waiting for a potential attack from the United States so when a suspicious plane was seen, it was taken down. This had the possibility of starting a war between the two states and while that was not the case, escalation did occur as a result of the incident.

³ Vladislav M. Zubok, *Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 138.

The USSR was anxiously anticipating an attack from the United States due to the American nuclear arsenal growing nearly 72 times the size from 1949 to 1960 as well as its advanced delivery capabilities.⁴ The Soviet Union was particularly nervous due to the rivalry between it and the United States following World War II. In 1959 and early 1960, Nikita Khrushchev, Premier of the Soviet Union, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States, with the help of the British Prime Minister, had spoken about a potential de-escalation of the conflict. Khrushchev found these talks very promising but after the U2 plane incident, by the end of 1960, all prospects for a détente between the states were gone.⁵ This incident represents how easily two states can enter into war during an arms race due to heightened tensions and advanced military powers. The U2 plane incident did not cause a war but did further the escalation between the Soviet Union and the United States.

If the United States and the Soviet Union had gone to war in 1950, there would have been major casualties but would not compare to the devastation if the two had gone to war in 1960 after building up such destructive nuclear arsenals. In 1954, the Soviet Union began building bunkers and prepping the country to survive nuclear war demonstrating a strong resolve to follow through with the use of such weapons.⁶ The realization that nuclear war could end civilization did not slow the Soviet Union's development of the weapons but led it to begin preparing to survive the potential attacks. The United States thought very differently about this potential danger.

⁴ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

⁵ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 138.

⁶ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 126.

While both states had nuclear capabilities, they had very different doctrines regarding these weapons of mass destruction. The USSR under the rule of Khrushchev sought to beat the United States' nuclear superiority and used a method of nuclear brinkmanship.⁷ Khrushchev did not act as if he understood the severity of these weapons and was consistently pushing for bigger and better nuclear capabilities as a way of forcing the United States to back down. This is a perfect example of brinkmanship as this escalation did have a factor that was not in control by the USSR or the United States.

The USSR's nuclear brinkmanship strategy reached its most critical point in October of 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In an attempt to protect Cuba from American influence and to demonstrate resolve, Khrushchev secretly placed nuclear missiles in Cuba and worked with Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of Cuba.⁸ Even in secret, this preparation for war so close to the United States demonstrated readiness and commitment to nuclear conflict and Khrushchev planned on announcing the missiles' existences at a later date.⁹

When the United States discovered the missiles just miles from its own border, John F. Kennedy, the President of the United States, brought the incident to the public eye, adding pressure to both sides.¹⁰ Once the international community is watching an event unfold, there is added pressure to appear resolved to the entire community and to follow through on any threats made in the public eye. This phenomenon is known as "hand-tying" as states commit themselves to actions by making the threats public. The

⁷ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 130.

⁸ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 143-144.

⁹ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 144.

¹⁰ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 146.

Soviet Union's attempt at brinkmanship did not have the desired effect of forcing the United States to de-escalate. Instead, the United States continued the escalation by bringing the international community's attention to the issue.

As a way to increase the nuclear deterrent and prevent the United States from trying to invade Cuba, the Soviet Union put four nuclear-armed submarines on the Cuban shoreline.¹¹ Once Khrushchev learned that Kennedy was also fearful of nuclear war at this time, he continued his faked resolve and left the missiles in Cuba for some time longer.¹² As a nuclear strike became more likely for the United States to implement, Khrushchev backed down and came forward with terms to end the crisis.¹³ After this month of rising tensions and a shared fear of nuclear war, the United States and the Soviet Union signed terms agreeing to remove all Soviet nuclear capabilities from Cuba and the United States' nuclear weapons from Turkey.¹⁴ This use of brinkmanship strategies by the Soviet Union held the most uncertainty and potential for a nuclear war between the USSR and the United States during the Cold War.

Along with an exercise in nuclear brinkmanship, this incident also demonstrates a nation making movements in an attempt to appear resolved with no plans of following through. The Soviet Union had kept the nuclear warheads locked miles away from the actual missiles and eventually determined they would not be used, but the United States saw launch capabilities in Cuba and assumed they were for use rather than appearance.¹⁵ While the Soviet Union was bluffing about launching these weapons into the United

¹¹ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 147.

¹² Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 147.

¹³ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 147-148.

¹⁴ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 148.

¹⁵ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 147.

States, it was impossible for Kennedy to know that Khrushchev truly wouldn't use the weapons or how Castro's desire for conflict with the United States would factor into the equation. In these cases, it is safest to assume the threat will be followed through on. This demonstrates how much more important capabilities are compared to intentions when it comes to military and nuclear power.

The use of nuclear brinkmanship by the Soviet Union in this situation brought both states uncomfortably close to a nuclear war. Khrushchev was unsure of how the United States would react to the Soviet Union building up such a large arsenal of weapons in the arms race or placing weapons so close to the border and the United States did not know if the Soviet Union would end up truly using its weapons or not. Khrushchev intended to intimidate the United States into removing its nuclear weapons from Turkey.¹⁶ Any mistake in planning or unseen factor could have triggered complete nuclear war due to this extreme escalation by Khrushchev. The USSR also misunderstood the idea of brinkmanship and believed there to be a "margin of safety" within the strategy as the United States was a democratic nation that would not let a full war occur in Khrushchev's mind.¹⁷ Khrushchev viewed Kennedy as a young politician who would not be bold enough to use a nuclear device and could be easily intimidated into submission.¹⁸ There was no guarantee that this was the case and therefore a very risky move by Khrushchev to continue to escalate the situation. Khrushchev assumed that Kennedy's resolve was a bluff and Kennedy assumed that Khrushchev's resolve was

¹⁶ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 148.

¹⁷ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 130.

¹⁸ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 140.

real. By taking the threat more seriously, Kennedy handled the situation carefully compared to the rash escalation that Khrushchev conducted.

The Cuban Missile Crisis forced the Soviet Union to take arms control seriously.¹⁹ After seeing how easily and unexpectedly a nuclear war could start, Khrushchev came to the decision to end his “New Look” policy and reassess his reliance on nuclear brinkmanship.²⁰ In this crisis, both sides witnessed how uncontrollable brinkmanship strategies can get and the dangers of the unknown when dealing with such powerful weapons and the potential for war. Khrushchev was worried by how close to nuclear war the USSR was with the United States and decided to “back away from the brink” and de-escalate the conflict.²¹

Views on Nuclear Weapons During the Arms Race

Russia was reckless during the nuclear arms race and acted on the belief that the fear of nuclear war disadvantaged the United States more than it did the USSR. Being a democratic state with a young leader, the USSR thought the United States would be more reluctant to start a nuclear war than the Soviet Union. It hoped that its built-up arsenal would be enough to deter the United States from going to war even when the United States had more nuclear capabilities than it did.²² After the Sputnik missile was launched in October of 1957, the United States did fear nuclear war more than the Soviet Union and launched itself into a second round of the arms race to regain its nuclear superiority.

¹⁹ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 149-150.

²⁰ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 150.

²¹ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 149.

²² Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 124-125.

The Soviet Union's plan of nuclear brinkmanship was highly unstable but did successfully increase fear in the United States.

The United States took a much more calculated and careful approach to the arms race and nuclear weapons as a whole compared to the Soviet Union. America knew that it had nuclear superiority for the majority of the Cold War but also knew that the USSR's conventional military forces outnumbered its own and that a nuclear strike would only strengthen Soviet communist beliefs.²³ This was an issue for the United States as a key foreign policy goal in the Cold War was to contain the spread of Communism. Having the USSR deepen its beliefs following an attack would only impede this goal. The United States' focus shifted to maintaining nuclear superior forces and ensuring the cost of war was too high for the USSR to pay.

The United States built up its delivery capabilities while maintaining the warheads it already had, unlike the Soviet Union who focused entirely on developing new weapons without advanced delivery methods.²⁴ As late as 1962, the USSR still had extremely limited delivery abilities for its weapons. While nuclear capabilities are important, the weapons themselves make little impact if the state has no way to deliver the weapons to their targets. Therefore, the deterrent factor of these weapons weakens without the necessary delivery methods and capacities. For the deterrent of nuclear weapons to be effective, there must be a threat of using these weapons which includes a delivery system.

²³ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

²⁴ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

The United States also recognized the destructiveness of these weapons long before the Soviet Union did. Having been the only state to ever execute a nuclear strike while at war, the United States knew the consequences of utilizing these weapons. In the 1950s, the Soviet Union was still new to having nuclear weapons and was confirming its new identity as a nuclear state. While Khrushchev understood the power of nuclear weapons, he still implemented them with a sense of recklessness. Under Eisenhower, the United States developed a military policy called the New Look that focused on maintaining military strength while balancing the budget.²⁵ However, this plan relied heavily on maintaining nuclear superiority over the USSR as the conventional forces balance still highly favored the Soviet Union.²⁶

The New Look policy was an example of the United States taking a careful approach to nuclear weapons compared to the Soviet Union. Its only intention was to have slight nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union to deter a real war without developing an arsenal that could end all of civilization. The United States' strategy was to have an arsenal large enough to deter Soviet aggression without having to ever implement the use of the weapons. Arguably, the United States was implementing a "containment" strategy to limit how many nuclear weapons existed in the world.²⁷ While the United States focused on containment and strategic nuclear superiority, the Soviet Union focused on nuclear brinkmanship and the chaos that comes with the inherent loss of complete control with this tactic.

²⁵ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

²⁶ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

²⁷ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

The differing strategies on nuclear weapons greatly affected each state's conflict behavior during the Cold War time period. Because the United States treated nuclear weapons as the threat to humanity that they are, it was cautious and strategic in its conflict behavior and only escalated when needed. The United States focused on deterrence theory and preventing the USSR from attacking in the first place so the conflict would not turn into a general war. The Soviet Union, however, saw nuclear weapons as the key to spreading the rest of its communist ideologies and viewed nuclear brinkmanship as the best strategy. A nuclear state has significantly higher credibility in the international community than a non-nuclear state due to the strength of the weapons. By having nuclear capabilities, the Soviet Union believed it could more easily gain influence over other states and create communist regimes within those states. It believed the uncertainty in brinkmanship would scare the United States more than it did the Soviet Union and therefore prevent war while the USSR would still be the "winner" of the conflict. While nuclear weapons greatly change how states interact in conflict, this can be partially attributed to the difference in philosophy that states have regarding these weapons.

Governmental Differences

The difference in nuclear strategy between the states can also be seen in their government structures. In the United States, the government is separate from the military; this is a characteristic of a democratic nation. The military is run by the government and the civilians within the government. In this structure, the President, a

civilian, is the only person to have access to the nuclear launch codes.²⁸ In the event that the President is no longer able to launch these weapons when necessary, there is a list ordered of who next gets access to the codes and the Secretary of Defense is extremely low on this list.²⁹

On the contrary, the USSR was a communist regime with a large amount of overlap between government and military officials. The Soviet Union also gave three people the nuclear codes rather than a singular official. Two out of these three people were high-ranking military officials including the Minister of Defense.³⁰ This demonstrates a different view of nuclear weapons compared to the United States as more individuals and military officials were granted access to using the weapons. By giving the codes to military officials rather than civilian government officials, it further empowers the military to act without government input. This can lead to impulsive decisions militarily and negatively affect ties to other states' governments. This does, however, increase the credibility of the state as it would be easier to put these weapons into use by giving access to military officials and more people in total.

Taking this even further, the Soviet Union considered implementing a computer system in charge of launching its nuclear weapons.³¹ It was referred to as "the dead hand" and would have fully dehumanized the process of a nuclear attack. The human interaction that is required to launch a nuclear weapon is necessary to ensure they are only used as a last option. A computer analyzing code sequences cannot take into

²⁸ Alexey Arbatov, "Understanding the US–Russia Nuclear Schism," *Survival* 59, no. 2 (2017): 42-43.

²⁹ Arbatov, "Understanding the US–Russia Nuclear Schism," 43.

³⁰ Arbatov, "Understanding the US–Russia Nuclear Schism," 42-43.

³¹ Arbatov, "Understanding the US–Russia Nuclear Schism," 45.

account the human and societal factors that would factor into the decision to start a nuclear war. If the dead hand system was implemented, a nuclear war would have been more likely due to the nature of the computer system. This system idea occurred at a later date outside of the analyzed time period of 1950 to 1965, however, is still important to mention. While this may seem like the next logical step in weapons technology, there is something to be said about maintaining a human aspect to war and the importance of this factor. The Soviet Union would have completely depersonalized the process of nuclear war in order to establish even stronger credibility for the use of these weapons.

Nuclear Weapons in the Korean War and Berlin Crisis

From 1950-1953, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a proxy war through Korea. The Korean War was fought by United States' troops on the South Korean side and Soviet and Chinese troops on the North Korean side. Through this proxy war, the United States and the Soviet Union got to witness the conventional military capabilities of the other side and got a glimpse at each other's conflict behavior strategies without directly interacting. During this time, the United States had a large increase in its conventional forces, putting \$13 billion into defense spending in a single year.³² While the Soviet troops still outnumbered the United States conventionally, the Soviet Union took note of this increase in strength and recognized the United States' readiness for war.

³² Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

It is important to note that the United States viewed the Korean War as marking the seriousness of the communist threat from the Soviet Union.³³ While they did not directly engage in war with each other, the United States knew that the Korean War signified much more. The Korean War was the first step towards actual war with the Soviet Union and each side got a preview of the conventional force of the other state. The United States began to expand its forces and security throughout the world to protect states such as Japan and Australia from potential communist influence.³⁴ Aside from recognizing the severity of the Soviet threat, the United States fought the Korean War as it would any war against an ally by providing conventional troops and military support to the South Koreans.

Both states' behavior during the Korean War demonstrated an understanding of the opposing state's power while still defending their political ideologies in Korea. The United States saw the conventional strength of Soviet forces and in response, built up its troops in hopes of this acting as a deterrent to the Soviet Union.³⁵ The USSR consistently avoided any direct conflict with the United States during the Korean War and other conflicts recognizing the United States' nuclear superiority.³⁶ Both sides exhibited caution during this conflict as it was the start of the Cold War and both sides were attempting to gauge the other's actions. This was also the first conflict where both the United States and USSR opposed each other and had access to their own nuclear

³³ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

³⁴ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

³⁵ Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance*, Ch. 2.

³⁶ Paul C. Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019) Ch. 5.

weapons. The Korean War was a form of an indirect temperature check for each state to gain insight into the other's potential for general war.

Another indirect conflict between the United States and the USSR occurred during the Berlin Crisis of 1961. Post-World War II, Germany was split into East and West Germany with the East being controlled by the Soviet Union and the West being controlled by the NATO powers. Germany's capital, Berlin, was also split into East and West and controlled by the same powers, respectively, but located within the East German border. Tensions between the two sides of Berlin and the two sides of Germany were already running high when Khrushchev demanded that the NATO powers make West Berlin a "free" city within six months or he would give control of all access to West Berlin to East Germany.³⁷ The United States, Britain, and France refused to give West Berlin up to communist powers as this went against the policy of containment. The United States greatly feared Soviet forces in Western Europe during this time but could not give up a state to Communism.³⁸ The Soviet Union feared direct conflict with the United States but was committed to maintaining Communism in Eastern Germany.³⁹

Because of these equal fears yet strong commitments, the Berlin Crisis did not involve direct military conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States but did involve negotiations and examples of conflict behavior between the two. The Soviet Union hoped this ultimatum and forced escalation of the situation in Berlin would force the United States to back down and negotiate with the USSR and abandon all communist

³⁷ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 132.

³⁸ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 2.

³⁹ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 133.

containment strategies.⁴⁰ This was another act of brinkmanship by Khrushchev in an attempt to intimidate the United States out of real conflict. However, the United States still had nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union at this time and looked to diplomatic negotiations rather than direct military conflict.⁴¹ The Soviet Union had hoped that an ultimatum would scare the NATO powers into submission due to its growing nuclear strength and vast conventional military powers. Khrushchev did not, however, have plans to utilize nuclear weapons during this crisis and hoped his “nuclear bluff” would work in his favor.⁴² The threat of using nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union was implied and not a direct threat. NATO was aware of this implied threat due to the ultimatum given by the Soviet Union and the large arsenal that had been built under Khrushchev’s leadership.

The Soviet Union relied heavily on bold brinkmanship moves during the Cold War in an attempt to force the United States into de-escalation. Its nuclear brinkmanship strategies reflected its different view of nuclear weapons and can explain why it relied so heavily on escalation. Deterrence was more of an afterthought for Khrushchev and the Soviet Union as he viewed all weapons as “strategic deterrence” rather than distinguishing the deterrence capabilities of nuclear weapons specifically.⁴³ This failure to view nuclear weapons as specific weapons of deterrence limited the Soviet Union’s conflict behavior strategies as it could have utilized these weapons in different ways instead of only using escalation.

⁴⁰ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 133.

⁴¹ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 133-134.

⁴² Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 137.

⁴³ Arbatov, “Understanding the US–Russia Nuclear Schism,” 35.

The following chapter will examine similar conflict behavior strategies through China and United States interactions during the same period of 1950 to 1965. This time period is before the Chinese gained nuclear capabilities.

Chapter 3: China and the United States

This chapter will analyze interactions between the United States and China in the same time period as the previous chapter of 1950 to 1965. This chapter represents how a nuclear and non-nuclear state interact during conflict. In 1950, the United States was a well-established nuclear state entering the Cold War with the Soviet Union. China only tested its first nuclear weapon in 1964, the very end of the examined time period.¹ From the 1950 to 1965 time period, China did not have nuclear weapons until the end and its actions as a non-nuclear state when dealing with the United States, a nuclear weapons state, differ from how the Soviet Union, another nuclear state, handled the United States.

Mao Zedong declared the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and became the Chairman of the state, right before the examined time period.² As a state with a newfound communist identity, China would now have to focus on maintaining security and establishing itself as a communist state in the international community. China's largest focus was on maintaining Chinese control of its territories such as Taiwan and Hong Kong.³ These strong interests influenced how Mao chose to deal with various conflicts in this time period.

It is important to note that as these two case studies are being examined in the same time period, the United States was interacting with both the Soviet Union and China simultaneously. While China was not directly a part of the Cold War, it was very active during this time and worked with the Soviet Union in a few instances. There is a fair

¹ Vipin Narang, "China," in *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 121.

² Paul C. Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019) Ch. 4.

³ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

amount of overlap in interaction and some conflicts also involved all three states such as the Korean War. Even with this overlap, all three states' conflict behavior changed depending on the situation and which states were involved.

China shared views of concern with the Soviet Union regarding the nuclear power of the United States. Being a non-nuclear state, China was especially careful to avoid direct interaction with the United States whenever possible.⁴ This can be seen in China's behavior in the Korean War. China, like the Soviet Union, fought alongside the North Koreans, against the United States. However, Chinese troops were very cautious to not directly fight United States' troops and to not threaten the United States outside of the context of the Korean War, physically and metaphorically.⁵ The United States had the strongest nuclear arsenal in 1950 and the Chinese took that power seriously. The nuclear power of the United States dictated Chinese behavior during these conflicts.

Mao feared a unified Korea under United States control rather than only South Korea under Washington control which influenced China's actions during this conflict.⁶ Because of this, China was not involved in the Korean War until after Inchon where the United States' troops officially crossed the 38th parallel in June of 1950.⁷ China was hoping to avoid entering into a conflict with the United States but needed to protect against a unified Korea that could later pose a threat to its territories. Throughout the Korean War, China maintained its avoidance strategies with the United States' troops in

⁴ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

⁵ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

⁶ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

⁷ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

the hopes this would prevent a general war between the two. Whether or not the United States noticed this avoidance is unclear, but a general war was avoided.

The United States did not view China as a direct threat. Washington was only concerned with China if a general war occurred in which the Soviet Union joined forces with it against the United States.⁸ Both states did not want a general war between each other which influenced both states' conflict behavior. China was careful to avoid direct contact with the United States and Washington kept its troops to the Korean peninsula during the conflict. Neither side used brinkmanship strategies against each other during the war as an additional method of avoidance and threat reduction.

However, deterrence played a large role for both the United States and China during the Korean War. China recognized the strength of the United States' nuclear power and was not prepared to enter into a nuclear war having no nuclear weapons of its own. The United States' nuclear arsenal worked as a successful deterrent against a potential direct Chinese threat.⁹ While deterring the Chinese from a larger conflict with the United States, America was also successfully deterred from a direct conflict at the thought of the Soviet Union aiding the Chinese.¹⁰ The Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal and conventional military strength were enough to deter the United States from conflict with China knowing the USSR would join forces with it and create a large and powerful enemy.

This is indirect deterrence on China's part as China's potential alliance was the deterrent rather than something the state did or a weapon the state had. The United States

⁸ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

⁹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

¹⁰ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

was strong enough to deal with the Soviet Union and China simultaneously but not as a single unified force. The United States did everything in its power to avoid a nuclear war which would be more possible to occur if China aligned with the Soviet Union in a conflict against Washington. If the Soviet Union were to join forces with Mao, the potential for nuclear weapons use would rise as the Soviet Union was already a growing nuclear power. While the Soviet Union also looked to avoid nuclear war, the possibility of this would rise in this scenario as a nuclear strike against the United States by China was not possible, unlike by the Soviet Union. The USSR's help would increase this possibility but not ensure it. Because of this, China did not have to directly deter the United States so long as its interactions with the Soviet Union suggested Soviet nuclear support would be given in the event of conflict with the United States.

In regard to brinkmanship, the Chinese specifically avoided this strategy. Following the Korean War, China took steps to prevent any further escalation with the United States.¹¹ Even with the potential support from the Soviet Union, China could not survive a nuclear attack from the United States and began to prepare for one.¹² Mao had all machinery and raw materials moved deeper into the country and away from the coastlines along with creating defenses on the front lines and anti-atom shelters.¹³ China hoped that these protections would increase the cost of escalation and nuclear war for the United States and aid in deterring the state.¹⁴

¹¹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

¹² Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

¹³ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

¹⁴ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

It is also important to note that the Soviet Union was hesitant to provide nuclear support to Mao so this aid was only a potential rather than a guarantee.¹⁵ This uncertainty further deterred China from going to war with the United States as without support from the USSR, there was no likelihood of success. The United States did not know about this uncertainty and acted as if the support was guaranteed and continued its strategy of avoiding conflict with China.¹⁶ This risk was not one the United States was willing to take. While China did not directly fake resolve in this situation, the end result had a very similar effect of deterring the United States based on a potentially false assumption.

China had an interesting view of nuclear weapons as a whole. Mao referred to these weapons as “paper tigers” and suggested that they were only as powerful as one is afraid of them.¹⁷ However, it is very logical to fear weapons of mass destruction. The paper tiger theory goes along with the idea of faking resolve in order to deter an enemy state which was a main strategy of China. By pretending to be less fearful of nuclear weapons, one takes away another state’s power to threaten it. True feelings regarding these weapons don’t matter in the paper tiger theory as long as resolve is what is shown to the international community and enemy states.

Mao consistently attempted to raise the costs of nuclear war for the United States in any way possible while not having his own nuclear capabilities as a deterrent.¹⁸ It is difficult to say how much the increased costs of nuclear war affected the United States’

¹⁵ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

¹⁶ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

¹⁷ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

¹⁸ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

refusal to escalate compared to the state's own aversion to nuclear conflict. The United States recognized the dangers of these weapons and believed in using them as deterrents rather than actually using them. Because of this, the United States was very unlikely to start a nuclear war regardless of Mao's faked resolve and raised costs.

This can also be attributed to the differing views of nuclear power. In general, states such as the United States which have had nuclear weapons longer took the power of nuclear weapons more seriously than states such as the Soviet Union and China.¹⁹ This can be seen in the handling of nuclear weapons by each type of state. The United States was very cautious and strict about who had access to nuclear weapons and its actions demonstrated a deep understanding of their severity. This leads older nuclear states to be more averse to starting a nuclear war than newer nuclear states.

With more access to nuclear weapons, there is an increased likelihood of their use due to more people having the ability to make this decision. Having less access to nuclear weapons in the government demonstrates this aversion to using these weapons by limiting the number of people who can make this decision and have this authority. The new nuclear states were less cautious regarding access and continued with brinkmanship strategies in the face of potential nuclear retaliation. Because China lacked nuclear weapons at this time, it is impossible to know if it would have been as bold in brinkmanship strategies as the Soviet Union was but it is likely that its strategies would have differed had it had nuclear capabilities when dealing with the United States. The new access to nuclear weapons tends to embolden new nuclear states more so than

¹⁹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

conventional weapons leading to differing conflict behaviors and strategies if these capabilities are available for use by the state.

Both of the Taiwan Strait Crises are an example of indirect conflict between China and the United States. Mao wanted to gain control of Taiwan and prevent an independent Taiwan.²⁰ Maintaining and acquiring territories was a serious motivation for China's actions throughout the Cold War period. In 1954 and 1958 when the United States openly supported an independent Taiwan over Mao's leadership, China had to take action to prevent even deeper ties between the two states.²¹ Mao planned to pressure the United States out of a potential defense pact with the nationalist government of Taiwan in 1954.²²

The strategies used to attempt to pressure and deter the United States were a series of public warning announcements followed by attacks against smaller islands between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland over two months.²³ Unfortunately for Mao, the United States still went ahead and signed a treaty with Taiwan in December of 1954.²⁴ The Chinese decided to escalate the situation after this and publicly announced viewing this treaty as an act of aggression and in January 1955, captured the island of Yijiangshan as a way of testing how far the defense pact would go.²⁵ This was a bold move of escalation on China's part. China had avoided all attempts at brinkmanship strategies prior to this crisis. While Mao's forces only directly interacted with Taiwanese troops and not the

²⁰ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

²¹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

²² Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

²³ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

²⁴ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

²⁵ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

United States, the existence of the defense pact made this act one against the United States as well. The United States, not eager to start a nuclear war with the Soviet Union through a conflict with China, evacuated all Taiwanese troops from the outside islands. China continued to occupy these islands and the American government began to threaten military action.²⁶ In April of 1955, the crisis came to an end when Chinese leadership requested to negotiate with the United States.²⁷

It seems odd to escalate a conflict just to turn around and negotiate on China's part, however, there was a strategic purpose to China's actions during the first Taiwan Strait Crisis. By forcing escalation in this situation, China was able to test how far the United States would go to defend Taiwan and how seriously it took the defense pact. This was a relatively safe way to do this as the United States' troops were not harmed by the Chinese attacks and direct confrontation between the two was still avoided. There is a degree of uncertainty and danger from this brinkmanship escalation strategy, however, as soon as the United States began to threaten further escalation, China backed down and recognized the conflict needed to come to a close. China also gained vital information from this crisis. Mao saw that the United States would not immediately resort to nuclear force in a conflict and also avoided direct military interaction with China. The United States had sent nuclear weapons to Taiwan in 1958 which demonstrated resolve; however, Washington never directly threatened their use against China.²⁸

²⁶ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

²⁷ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

²⁸ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

In August of 1958, the second Taiwan Strait Crisis took place, again with China as the aggressor.²⁹ China began dropping shells on the islands of Jinmen and Mazu for two months and only ended when it began negotiating with the United States in September.³⁰ Eventually, China decided to focus on taking Taiwan from the nationalist government and ended all shell attacks in 1979.³¹ This was a second attempt at testing the United States' commitment to the defense pact with Taiwan as well as demonstrating strong resolve to the rest of the international community.³² The fear of permanently losing Taiwan motivated Mao to attempt again at gaining control of the island.

In this second crisis, China did not hesitate to begin with accelerated military intervention and decided to shell the islands rather than occupy them. This was a more dangerous move than the actions taken in 1954 by China as it had more casualties and was a larger and more serious military endeavor.³³ As pointed out in deterrence theory, if the motives for a state to act are high enough, the benefits of action could outweigh the high costs of the potential for nuclear use.³⁴ This was the case with China and the Taiwan Strait. While the United States' deterrence did not completely fail, China chose a calculated action that would enable it to pursue its interests and raise the costs of a nuclear strike for Washington. China demonstrated the ability of a non-nuclear state to enter into conflict with a nuclear power without involving the potential for a nuclear strike.

²⁹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

³⁰ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

³¹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

³² Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

³³ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

³⁴ Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (October 15, 2002): 48–85, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228802760987824>.

China acted while the United States still had power in the Taiwan Strait demonstrating the strength of its interest in controlling Taiwan. It is possible that the United States' failure to respond militarily, aside from threats, in the first Taiwan Strait Crisis emboldened the Chinese to act even more aggressively to test the waters of the United States' resolve. Had the United States taken a more assertive approach in the first crisis in 1954, China may not have been brave enough to test the defense pact a second time. The United States took a relatively lenient stance during the 1954 crisis and therefore damaged its credibility to retaliate against China and motivated Mao to attempt again.

The United States' desire to prevent Chinese control of Taiwan and China's perception of this interest were also determinants of this crisis' outcome. America had a strong containment policy against all communist states and aimed to prevent the spread of the ideology and eradicate it if possible. This containment policy inherently included protecting Taiwan from communist Chinese influence, however, the lengths to which the United States would go to accomplish this was unknown to China.³⁵ Mao recognized the strength of the United States' military and nuclear forces but questioned Washington's dedication to protecting Taiwan.³⁶ This uncertainty helped motivate the Chinese for the first attack on Taiwan to test the United States' resolve. The United States' actions in 1954 proved to China that the United States was not as resolute as it appeared to be and allowed China to make another attempt to seize Taiwan in 1958.

³⁵ Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," 48-85.

³⁶ Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," 48-85.

Nuclear weapons played a large role in Chinese decision making during the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954 and 1958. Mao took the American nuclear capacity into account during all decisions in order to determine which strategy would allow China to pursue its interests without Washington choosing to involve nuclear weapons.³⁷ China's main tactic when dealing with the United States was to pretend as if nuclear weapons were not a threat, continuing the paper tiger theory.³⁸ Mao's logic behind this was that if the United States may attack anyways, fear would do nothing to help China prepare and not be helpful in the potential negotiating process.³⁹ China was aware of its status as a non-nuclear state and that having nuclear weapons may encourage the United States to attempt intimidation tactics through nuclear threats against China. Mao knew the strategies being attempted by the United States and factored these approaches into China's planning.⁴⁰ Because of this, Chinese forces continued to avoid direct contact with American troops in both Taiwan Strait Crises and created limited dangers directly to the United States.⁴¹

By limiting the danger created for the United States, China created very low benefits for the use of nuclear weapons to the United States as the threats were minimal.⁴² The United States had no reason to implement nuclear force against China as there was no direct danger to it, only to Taiwan. Escalating the crisis to the use of nuclear power would have been very unnecessary for the United States and set the wrong precedent for

³⁷ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

³⁸ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

³⁹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

⁴⁰ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

⁴¹ Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

⁴² Avey, *Tempting Fate*, Ch. 4.

how nuclear weapons should be used. This precedent would have made it socially acceptable to utilize nuclear forces in almost any conflict where military action is already involved. China was a non-nuclear state that had no manner of retaliation against a nuclear force and did not use any military force against United States' troops, making nuclear weapons use especially unfit for this situation.

This nuclear taboo is the international social norm in which nuclear weapons have largely negative connotations, more so than conventional weapons, and their use is widely looked down upon.⁴³ The non-use of nuclear weapons globally and why the United States did not turn to their use in the Taiwan Strait Crises can be attributed to this phenomenon and attitude surrounding these weapons.⁴⁴ With the United States having previously enacted two nuclear strikes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki prior to this time period, Washington helped create this taboo that exists around nuclear weapons use.⁴⁵ The international view of nuclear weapons played a role in the decision whether or not to go against the nuclear taboo. In this situation, this factor greatly influenced the United States' decision to avoid a nuclear strike against China.

Preventing the United States from being logically and socially allowed to use nuclear weapons against China was Mao's plan for the two conflicts in Taiwan by creating limited risk to the United States. These conflicts and the Korean War motivated China to begin its own nuclear program as a deterrent against other nuclear states and

⁴³ Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999): 435.

⁴⁴ Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," 435.

⁴⁵ Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," 443.

their “nuclear blackmail.”⁴⁶ Mao sought to equalize any future conflicts with the United States and potentially the USSR by acquiring China’s own nuclear weapons and removing the ability of nuclear threats to be successful. The Chinese nuclear program began in 1955 with the first nuclear test occurring in October of 1964.⁴⁷ In 1965, China tested a second device from a Hong-6 bomber plane which demonstrated the state’s delivery capabilities to the international community.⁴⁸ The conflicts with the United States throughout the 1950s motivated Mao to begin the Chinese nuclear program and secure China’s role as a nuclear state.

While Mao had explained nuclear weapons as paper tigers, he still understood the immense power these weapons hold in negotiations and conflicts. The credibility that comes with having nuclear capabilities was also recognized by China as seen in how it handled the United States in these many conflicts. Even though Mao faked resolve to the international community and limited the impact nuclear threats had, he knew China would benefit in the long term if it had these capabilities. Mao thought of nuclear weapons as less powerful than some states portrayed, however, they still had power through the rhetoric used and attitudes regarding them in the international community.

Unlike the Soviet Union, China focused on deterrent and avoidance tactics rather than full acts of brinkmanship when dealing with the United States and its nuclear capabilities. This was a safer strategy for China as it was a non-nuclear state dealing with one of the strongest nuclear powers during this time period. Mao acted very cautiously when interacting with the United States but did not allow the state’s nuclear weapons

⁴⁶ Narang, “China,” 122.

⁴⁷ Narang, “China,” 121.

⁴⁸ Narang, “China,” 123.

capacity to intimidate China out of pursuing its interests in Korea and Taiwan. This was the most practical route to take for a non-nuclear state against such a powerful adversary. China maintained resolve throughout these conflicts, not allowing the United States to coerce it, and still understood the severity of nuclear weapons and considered their implications in each situation.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

A state's decision to enter into conflict and subsequent choice of conflict behavior is very nuanced and complex. Each individual interest of the state behind the main interests of power and survival helps motivate these specific decisions. A deep understanding of how and why these decisions are made allows states to combat their rivals in more efficient and potentially successful ways. While misinformation and bluffing are common strategies in conflict, more information about an enemy will only aid a state in conflict.

Nuclear weapons add another layer of nuance to these already intricate choices. Nuclear states have inherently stronger credibility than non-nuclear states due to this powerful advantage which allows these states to engage in different types of conflict behavior than non-nuclear states. Brinkmanship is a common tactic for nuclear states to use when engaging with other nuclear states due to the balanced power distribution between the two. This escalation strategy carries a significant risk that nuclear states can generally afford due to their inherent credibility and resolve compared to non-nuclear states that must fake this resolve in the face of a nuclear combatant.

The United States as a democratic nation with a vast understanding of the repercussions of nuclear weapons was very reluctant to engage in nuclear brinkmanship with the Soviet Union and China. Compare this to how Khrushchev continued to escalate the Soviet Union's strategies closer and closer to the brink of nuclear war. As a communist nation with limited input from its citizens, the Soviet Union was able to make these aggressive military moves and solely pursue power and status in the international community. China, on the other hand, was also reluctant to start a nuclear war due to its

non-nuclear status compared to the United States' nuclear superiority. It chose to practice avoidance and deterrence strategies in order to pursue its interests without allowing the United States to start nuclear interventions.

Each state pursued the conflict behavior most appropriate for the situation given its own nuclear status, the specific situation, the enemy, and its individual identity. The Soviet Union, a nuclear state, combating its rival nuclear state in a crisis pursued brinkmanship to demonstrate its strength and new nuclear powers. While risky, this was the most logical decision for the Soviet Union in this situation, because it demonstrated its new nuclear abilities and tested the United States resolve while preventing a nuclear war. China, a non-nuclear state, chose to avoid direct conflict with the United States, a strong nuclear power, while still pursuing its individual interests and protecting its communist identity. These conflict behavior choices accurately fit the scenario at hand for each state.

While not every state will adhere to this theory regarding conflict behavior and nuclear weapons, this can be seen as the norm when states attempt to discern their enemy's choices. Each state's individual identities play a role in this decision as well, making each state behave differently according to its identity. Understanding three states out of the entire international community does not provide an explanation for every other state's behavior. However, patterns can be observed and help explain and be extrapolated to other states with similar identities and nuclear status. In any case, this theory demonstrates how significantly nuclear weapons status plays a role in determining conflict behavior between rival states and reveals patterns that can be further generalized to other similar states and situations.

The United States can use this theory today and in future conflicts to predict the potential conflict behavior of enemy states. In applying this theory, the United States can also be aware of how its own actions affect and change behavior in opposing states. As an older nuclear power, the United States is secure in its nuclear doctrine and identity and has a history of avoiding nuclear conflict, excluding Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This demonstrates how older nuclear states rely on deterrence strategies as opposed to brinkmanship or nuclear interventions. Knowing that opposing states observe this pattern, the United States can take into account how its deterrence strategies will impact a rival state in conflict. The United States can also potentially purposely change its conflict behavior to remove a sense of familiarity in the situation for the enemy state in order to have a larger chance of success. Knowledge of this theory can aid the United States in conflict by providing insights into the enemy's potential behavior and how its own conflict behavior can be adjusted for further success.

Newer nuclear powers, such as the Soviet Union in the 1950s-60s, tend to be bolder and rasher in their actions due to this newfound resolve and credibility in conflict. This is important for the United States and other opposing states to consider when engaging in conflict with these new nuclear states. The lack of a secure nuclear doctrine provides opportunities for experimentation with different types of nuclear conflict behavior. Because of this, the conflict behavior of these states is harder to predict. However, this theory demonstrates a heavy reliance on nuclear brinkmanship by these types of states. This is also due to the increased resolve nuclear weapons give states and the bold actions that follow it. If in the future a rival state of the United States gains nuclear weapons capabilities, the United States should expect strong brinkmanship

strategies to be used by this new nuclear state and must consider this when entering into conflict.

Non-nuclear states that engage in conflict with the United States do not have to fear direct nuclear threats when engaging in avoidance and other deterrent strategies due to international norms. The United States is best off pursuing deterrence strategies with non-nuclear and other older nuclear states. This strategy has proven successful with little cost or damage to Washington. It is possible that non-nuclear states using this theory may become bolder knowing direct nuclear threats are not likely, but this is questionable due to the uncertainty that exists surrounding nuclear weapons use. So long as the United States remains resolved in conflict with non-nuclear states, the potential for nuclear use will always exist and be enough to deter most non-nuclear states from direct escalated conflict with the United States.

Conflict today, nuclear or not, is changing. With technology advancing further in today's world, the United States and other nuclear powers need to be cautious to avoid turning to an autonomous nuclear weapons system, similar to the dead hand system proposed by the Soviet Union. The human aspect that nuclear weapons require is key to ensuring that these weapons remain weapons of deterrence and do not become common use against all types of enemies. What gives nuclear weapons their power in conflict is the credibility and deterrent abilities inherent in these weapons. If these weapons were to become commonly used due to an autonomous system, not only would civilization likely drastically change, but these weapons would lose their uniqueness and ability to prevent certain conflicts altogether. While these weapons would still maintain their destructive

power, they would no longer be weapons of deterrence or a last resort for states, diminishing the power of deterrence theory.

Nuclear weapons status is a significant factor in determining conflict behavior due to the weapons' distinctive characteristics of deterrence and credibility compared to conventional weapons. This status determines what strategies make the most sense for a state to pursue during a conflict and how a state will approach an enemy state depending on nuclear status. While some states may not adhere to this theory, this can be useful for any state entering into conflict in today's world to understand the many implications nuclear status has on conflict behavior between states.

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