Advancing Without Attacking:
The Strategic Game Around the Use of Force

Dan Altman

Postdoctoral Fellow, International Security Program,
Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School

Forthcoming in Security Studies
What is the nature of the strategic game that states play during crises? Extensive research examines the leading answer: coercive bargaining. States prevail by signaling resolve, establishing the credibility of their threats, and coercing their adversaries into backing down. However, instead of (or in addition to) traditional coercive bargaining, this article shows that states frequently play out a different game with its own set of rules and tactics. The article explores how states outmaneuver their adversaries, working around their red lines, taking gains by fait accompli and imposing pressure where it is possible to do so without quite crossing the line of unambiguously using force. Based on this premise, the article develops a theoretical framework for understanding strategic interaction during crises, referred to as advancing without attacking, and shows that it best explains the course of the Berlin Blockade Crisis of 1948-1949 while also shedding light on other prominent crises.

In 2014, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula without starting a war. Russia could have issued an ultimatum to Ukraine, demanding Crimea and backing that threat with its overwhelming advantage in military power. Russia could, alternatively, have attacked and overpowered Ukrainian units in Crimea. Instead, Russia adopted a third approach, invading Crimea while working around the need to assault Ukrainian soldiers. Where Ukrainian forces were absent, Russians took charge. Upon arriving at Ukrainian bases, Russian forces surrounded them without firing, often imposing what amounted to blockades, even contacting Ukrainian base commanders to reach agreements that neither side would open fire. When Russian units eventually took control of these bases, soldiers scaled walls and rammed gates to enter without firing more than warning shots, in the process exposing themselves to Ukrainian fire, wagering
their lives on the assumption that the Ukrainians also would not fire first. To prevent resistance from aircraft at a Ukrainian airbase, Russian soldiers did not rely on threats to shoot the aircraft down. Instead, they drove military vehicles through an unguarded gate and parked them on the runway, blocking it by nonviolent means in a manner that the Ukrainians would need to use violence to reverse. To prevent the escape of Ukrainian warships in Crimea, Russian vessels took positions blocking the entrances to the ports, forcing the Ukrainian ships to either attack or remain stuck.¹ Russia sought to push as far as possible without overtly using force and, if that failed, to put itself in a position to deny that the combatants were in fact Russian. To that end, Russian soldiers removed identifying markers from their uniforms, entering as anonymous “Green Men.”²

Russia’s tactics left Western policymakers scrambling, sowing fears that Russia had pioneered a novel, 21st Century mode of limited aggression.³ However, there is nothing new or exceptional about them. They fit squarely within a long history of states prevailing in crises by maneuvering around red lines prohibiting the use of force, taking what they could without

---

¹ I refer here only to events in Crimea. During the subsequent fighting in the Donbas region, Russia utilized fewer (two) tactics from the advancing without attacking framework: the deniability of forces out of uniform and attacking by proxy. Anton Lavrov, “Russian Again: The Military Operations for Crimea” in Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov eds., *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (Minneapolis: East View Press, 2014). For video, see the “Russian Roulette” series by VICE News throughout February 2014.

² Lavrov, “Russian Again: The Military Operations for Crimea.”

³ Terms such as “hybrid warfare” and “gray zone” have come to refer to these tactics. Due to the vagueness of these terms, I eschew them and discuss instead one important subset of these tactics. BBC News, “NATO to Counter ‘Hybrid Warfare’ from Russia,” May 14, 2015; Michael Kofman, “Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts,” *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016.
unmistakably attacking. Others have identified past cases of similar tactics, but what remains missing is a conceptual framework that makes sense of them.

The temptation has been for scholars to apply what I refer to as the established view of strategy and tactics during crises, which places central emphasis on coercion, signaling resolve, and brinkmanship. Yet this framework only goes so far in explaining state behavior. Reviewing the literature on strategic interaction during crises, James Fearon drew a basic distinction between conceptualizing crises either as competitions in risk-taking or as competitions in tactical cleverness, i.e., as attempts to outmaneuver the adversary. He argued for the importance of both before focusing on the former. Since then, the International Relations field has performed admirably at elucidating the former while leaving the latter underdeveloped. There remains tremendous opportunity to better understand the chess game – not just the poker game – at play in crises.

The advancing without attacking framework for understanding strategic interactions during crises is one piece of that larger undertaking. It aligns to a broader conceptualization of crises as strategic games played by one overarching rule: do not overtly attack the other side. Both sides compete intensely – unilaterally taking what they can and applying pressure where they can – without quite crossing this red line. It comes as no surprise that states are frequently

---


5 Fearon 1992, 73-77.

6 To define crisis, I utilize the conventional definition from the Interstate Crisis Behavior (ICB) project with one change (italicized). A crisis exists when the highest level decision-makers of at least one involved state perceive all three of the following: “a threat to one or more basic values, an awareness of finite time for response to the value threat, and a heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities.” Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld. *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 3.
reluctant to use force. It is also apparent that there are innumerable exceptions to this reluctance; the use of force is far from rare. What has been under-appreciated, however, is just how much scope there is for maneuver that works around the edges of using force without clearly doing so and just how important these tactics have been in some of the major crises of the modern era.

The article begins with a review of the established view of strategic interaction during crises. Building on since-neglected insights from Thomas Schelling, the article then develops advancing without attacking as an alternative theoretical framework with implications for both state behavior and crisis outcomes. Although the intuition underlying advancing without attacking is not novel in itself, this article contributes to understanding the mechanics of this approach to crisis strategy.

The article then presents a case study of the Berlin Blockade Crisis of 1948-1949, best known for the Berlin Airlift. If Korea is “the Forgotten War,” then the First Berlin Crisis is the forgotten crisis, the recipient of far less scholarly attention than the 1958-1961 Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Nonetheless, the Berlin Blockade Crisis played a major role in the onset of the Cold War. Beyond its historical significance, this case offers a particularly rich array of observable implications for evaluating the explanatory power of the advancing without attacking framework against the established view of crisis strategy (see next section). As rival

---


8 Observable implications are visible predictions of a theory that can be checked against evidence. I focus special attention on unique observable implications, which Van Evera defines as predictions of a theory that alternative theories do not expect to observe. Sometimes buried within case narratives, I believe these aspects of a case best facilitate inference in case studies. Nonetheless, no single case can provide a determinative test of a general theory, nor ascertain its generalizability across cases. On this approach to case methods, see Stephen Van Evera, Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 30-35; Harry
frameworks for explaining strategic interaction in crises, both imply that certain actions are more likely to occur than others, certain lines of reasoning about why to take actions (i.e., strategies) are more likely to win internal debates than others, and certain overall outcomes are more likely to transpire than others. After detailing the competing predictions of the two frameworks, I show that advancing without attacking better explains the actions taken by both sides and the strategic thinking guiding the decisions of the Western Powers. Because the Western Powers held the upper hand after each pushed as far as they could without using force, advancing without attacking offers a compelling explanation for the final outcome, the Soviet decision to abandon the Berlin Blockade in return for negligible concessions. Despite entering the crisis in an extremely difficult position, the Western Powers achieved this victory without a serious attempt to coerce the Soviet Union or convince Soviet leaders of their willingness to use force to obtain their desired outcome.

THE ESTABLISHED VIEW OF CRISIS STRATEGY

Crises, like wars, are clashes of power and will. Each side leverages the prospect of war to attempt to intimidate their adversary into giving in to their coercive demands. Because the willingness to fight is not easily observed, states must find ways to signal their resolve in order to establish the credibility of their threats. This is often done through brinkmanship, aggressive

---


9 Unfortunately, few Soviet documents have been declassified. My account relies primarily on American documents, which contain the behavior of both sides but the reasoning and intentions of only one.
actions that incur a calculated risk of escalation. The established view of crisis strategy, in sum, has three pillars: coercion, signals of resolve, and brinkmanship.10

When explaining crisis behavior – troop deployments, public statements, limited attacks, etc. – the established view applies the concept of signaling. The classic signal of resolve is a show of force.11 In 1996, for example, China signaled its displeasure with the American decision to grant a visa to Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui by testing missiles in waters near Taiwan. The United States responded by deploying two carrier battle groups to the region, sending one through the Taiwan Strait.12 Public statements offer another traditional means of signaling resolve. These statements are thought to enhance credibility by putting the reputation of the nation and the leader on the line in the eyes of the adversary, allied nations, and the domestic political audience.13 After the United States discovered Soviet nuclear missiles under construction in Cuba, for example, President Kennedy addressed the nation to announce the “quarantine” of Cuba and demand that the Soviet Union withdraw its missiles. Beyond signals of a primarily symbolic nature, military mobilization provides one of the most important methods


of conveying resolve. After Iraq created a crisis by moving elite units of its army toward the Kuwaiti border in 1994, the United States responded by mobilizing elements of its ground, air, and naval forces, forward deploying them to the Persian Gulf region until Iraqi forces pulled back.

When lesser signals are insufficient, demonstrating the willingness to risk war (brinkmanship) signals resolve and puts pressure on the adversary to end the crisis. For those who see brinkmanship as the cornerstone of crisis strategy, a common assumption for studies of the role of nuclear weapons in crises, crises are not just a clash of wills but also a war of nerves. The side to flinch first loses. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the American blockade of Cuba, harassment of Soviet submarines, and intensive reconnaissance overflights risked armed confrontations with the potential to generate escalation. Brinkmanship can also involve limited uses of force to signal a willingness to go further if necessary.

This perspective on how states make gains during crises has two cornerstones: sending signals of resolve to create perceptions of credibility and leveraging the credible threat of future escalation to coerce concessions. Advancing without attacking requires neither. Rather than attempting to convince the adversary of one’s willingness to use force, it succeeds by taking

---

14 Slantchev, Military Threats.
18 The salience of use-of-force red lines means that even a small use of force can often provide a potent signal of resolve.
advantage of both sides’ reluctance to use force. Rather than using credible threats of escalation to coerce concessions, it more often takes gains by \textit{fait accompli}. The established view of crisis strategy has proven itself both theoretically rich and empirically fruitful. Nonetheless, this article explores an alternative meant to explain events that fit uneasily with the established view.

ADVANCING WITHOUT ATTACKING

What if crises are strategic competitions in which each side tries as hard as it can to prevail – taking whatever it can and applying pressure wherever it can – without unmistakably crossing the line of firing on the adversary? This article explores how states have conducted crises as a game played out on that basis.

States cannot abide an enemy that is unconstrained from using force against them. This fundamental national interest is the basis for advancing without attacking. States must draw red lines against uses of force in order to deter attack. A red line distinguishes acceptable actions from unacceptable actions; in this context, distinguishing uses of force from actions short of an attack.\textsuperscript{19} Using the term “red line” rather than merely “deterrence” will make it possible to speak of working around red lines.

Red lines come in many varieties, including prohibitions against crossing borders, using force, or building nuclear weapons. Each is important, but use-of-force red lines are perhaps the most ubiquitous. In crises over a wide range of issues, states consistently set use-of-force red lines barring attack by adversaries. These red lines provide a measure of clarity and stability when both sides choose to respect the non-use of force as a limit. Accepting the use-of-force red

\textsuperscript{19} On the dual roles of threats and assurances in coercion: Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, 4 & 74.
line as a constraint creates a competition in which both sides vie to make gains with reduced fears of escalation past that limit. Retaining the rule and thereby avoiding the risk of war is often worth even the price of losing the crisis. Once that line is crossed, no natural stopping point exists against escalation to war. I return to the issue of the salience of red lines against the use of force in a later section, where I explain why these red lines constrain behavior even in the absence of public statements specifically declaring them.

However, it is precisely because this limit on escalation is so valuable to states that there come to be games played around its edges. The next section explores the two characteristics of these red lines that make this gamesmanship possible, that is, the conditions under which advancing without attacking is possible. The following section then explains how states exploit these opportunities to make gains. These are the core elements of advancing without attacking.\(^{20}\)

**How to Outmaneuver Use-of-Force Red Lines**

Advancing without attacking is possible when there is a way to take something or impose pressure without having to overtly attack. The key to prevailing in a crisis that unfolds along these lines is to find and exploit opportunities to outmaneuver the adversary’s red line against using force. By analogy, these red lines are like medieval suits of armor. Despite their overall strength, they may contain weak spots and leave certain areas exposed to a well-placed strike. Winning a crisis can be as simple as targeting these vulnerabilities, taking advantage of them to push forward without ever unmistakably crossing core red lines like those against the use of

\(^{20}\) I define advancing without attacking as a framework consisting of these four main elements and the logic underpinning them. It is not an umbrella for all nonviolent methods of making gains.
These opportunities take two forms. First, outflank these red lines by finding ways to make gains while bypassing adversary forces. Second, target gray areas where it is ambiguous whether or not an action is unmistakably an attack.

It is often possible to work around use-of-force red lines in what amounts to a flanking maneuver, taking something of value without opening fire. The location of a use-of-force red line depends on the exact placement of ‘tripwire’ forces, which are forward deployed in part to limit the adversary’s freedom of action. Tripwires fail when the adversary can go around them or step over them. Moving troops forward into an area unoccupied by the adversary is only the most direct of many ways it is possible to outflank a use-of-force line. In the Berlin Blockade Crisis, the Soviets could interdict supplies to Berlin by blocking transit corridors in their own zone in Germany without dislodging American forces. The United States, conversely, could fly over Soviet forces to supply Berlin without needing to push through them.

When a Turkish commercial vessel ran aground on Imia (Kardak), a small island claimed by both Turkey and Greece, the incident thrust the dispute over the islands into the media spotlight. The ensuing events would become the 1995-1996 Aegean Sea Crisis. After civilians from each side ventured to the island to plant the national flag, Greece stationed a small group of

---


commandos there to guard the Greek flag. Greece exploited the absence of Turkish troops to advance without attacking. Those marines put Turkey in a more difficult position. Turkey’s options seemed limited to attacking Greek troops or suffering the humiliation of backing down. Greece had the upper hand. However, two days later Turkey landed a small group of commandos on the nearby island of Akrogialia, a heretofore-neglected islet similar to Imia except for the absence of Greek forces. Turkey outflanked the Greek use-of-force red line. The two sides stared each other down from these positions amid considerable tension before mutually agreeing to withdraw soldiers and flags, restoring the status quo ante. Both sides advanced without attacking. Turkey found a way to use it to escape from a difficult position, achieving a draw rather than a defeat and doing so without undue risk of war.23

Second, some use-force-force red lines contain gray areas that provide openings for advancing without unmistakably attacking. This is why so many crises feature pugnacious shoving matches between soldiers equipped with loaded firearms. Shooting is an overt attack, but shoving is more ambiguous. Use-of-force red lines unambiguously prohibit intentional, politically-sanctioned attacks on the soldiers or citizens of the state setting the red line. But what exactly is an attack? When one soldier jostles another? When one boat collides with another? When one plane buzzes another? Warning shots? Moreover, what about inadvertent attacks? There is an important distinction between a deliberate attack ordered by a head of state and a single officer or enlisted soldier firing without orders. States may decide to tolerate an accidental engagement if the aggressor disavows the intent to attack, whereas even a small deliberate attack carries graver implications. Finally, who or what must not the adversary attack, and who is doing

the attacking? In Berlin circa 1948, a Soviet decision to fire on German civilians (still under postwar occupation) did not carry with it the same implications as an attack on American or British forces. Similarly, destroying unmanned equipment without inflicting casualties is not clearly an attack. French forces dynamited two Soviet radio towers in the French sector of Berlin in December 1948, eliciting loud Soviet protests but no direct retaliation.\textsuperscript{24} Although the use-of-force red lines unmistakably prohibit overt attacks, there are many forms of ambiguous attack that take advantage of gray areas within them.

Consider the Cod Wars, two crises between Britain and Iceland over fishing rights in the waters around Iceland. Each unwilling to shoot at their NATO ally, Icelandic and British ships reverted to tactics that one might have believed to be anachronistic: ramming. Because collisions occur by accident as well as by malice, ramming falls inside a gray area in the red line against overt attack. Between the two “wars,” the Icelandic Coast Guard invented and deployed a new weapon system, the warp-cutter. Resembling an anchor in appearance, this device would drag behind the ship before snaring and severing the lines connecting British fishing trawlers to their nets, preventing fishing while circumventing the need to attack the trawler to accomplish that objective. The Royal Navy responded not by firing on the Icelandic vessels, but rather by interposing warships between the Icelandic vessels and the trawlers in a tactic referred to as “riding-off.”\textsuperscript{25} These British warships could not be everywhere. Iceland prevailed.


A similar game played out in the Cuban Missile Crisis, an unlikely candidate for commonalities with the Cod Wars. After deciding to attempt to work around the Soviet red line against an attack on Cuba rather than cross it, the United States confronted a challenge in implementing the resultant blockade. Soviet ships could simply steam ahead, leaving the United States in the position of having to fire first to prevail. To uphold the blockade without escalating the crisis, the United States needed to solve this problem.

American officials at the highest levels devoted careful attention to the Rules of Engagement for intercepting Soviet freighters and devised a two-part solution.26 These Rules of Engagement called for boarding as the preferred measure with firing to disable (but not kill or destroy) as the primary fallback option: “If forced to engage, an attempt would be made to stop the ship by damage in non-vital areas, such as the rudder, and with minimum loss of life.”27 The intent was to stop the ships with minimum force, disabling only if required and “not sinking ships unless absolute necessary.”28 The effect and intent of disabling are both distinct from firing to kill or destroy. Therefore, disabling falls (just barely) ambiguously short of unmistakably attacking. American policymakers feared the consequences of a disabling shot, but not as much as they feared the consequences of deliberately sinking a Soviet ship.

26 John McCone, “Memorandum for the Files [Executive Committee Meeting on October],” October, 23 1962 [FRUS, 1961-1963, vol. XI, #51]. All documents labelled “FRUS” are available from the State Department’s Foreign Relations of the United States series.

27 Although the full rules of engagement explicitly left open the possibility of firing to destroy the ship, they specified no circumstances in which this would occur for an unarmed merchant ship. “Riley to the Deputy Secretary of Defense ["Rules of Engagement"],” October 22, 1962. Available from the National Security Archive at George Washington University [hereafter GWU NSA].

28 “Houser to Taylor,” October 19, 1962 [GWU NSA].
Because the ability to board and – if necessary – disable was a critical element in its effectiveness, the U.S. blockade of Cuba succeeded in stopping Soviet freighters but not Soviet submarines or aircraft.\textsuperscript{29} Unlike freighters, neither aircraft nor submarines could be boarded or disabled without being destroyed. The gray area in the use-of-force red line existed for surface ships alone. This was an important flaw in the blockade, because either submarines or aircraft could have carried nuclear warheads to Cuba. Washington had yet to determine whether these warheads were already in Cuba (they were). The blockade line held only to the extent that it could take advantage of a gray area in the Soviet use-of-force red line.

\textbf{How to Make Gains}

States exploit these opportunities to outmaneuver use-of-force red lines by two methods: the \textit{fait accompli} and imposed pressure. Both methods make gains by unilaterally imposing changes to the status quo. Both can – but do not always – do so without crossing use-of-force red lines. Whereas the \textit{fait accompli} entails seizing the object of the dispute (or part thereof) outright, imposed pressure involves creating a new state of affairs that is costly to the adversary as part of a coercive effort to obtain a concession.\textsuperscript{30} Distinct from the established view of crisis strategy, neither method requires signaling resolve in order to establish the credibility of threats to use force in the future if concessions are not forthcoming.

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{30} “Coercion” refers specifically to compellence. Whereas deterrent threats aim to sustain the status quo, compellent threats demand changes to it. The \textit{fait accompli} is an alternative to coercion, whereas imposed pressure is a distinctive type of coercion. Imposed pressure is also a type of coercive diplomacy, whereas I define the \textit{fait accompli} as an alternative to coercive diplomacy. Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, ch. 2.
Although the academic literature has devoted surprisingly little attention to *faits accomplis* until recently, this tactic has played an important role in crises across history.\textsuperscript{31} In a recent study, Tarar integrates the *fait accompli* into formal models of crisis bargaining as an alternative to coercion.\textsuperscript{32} I examined territorial acquisitions since 1918 and found that states seized territory by *fait accompli* 105 times while only coercing adversaries into agreeing to cede territory in twelve instances.\textsuperscript{33} Moscow did not use the threat of war to coerce Kiev into agreeing to relinquish Crimea. Russia simply took Crimea.

A *fait accompli* imposes a limited unilateral gain at an adversary’s expense in an attempt to get away with that gain when the adversary chooses to relent rather than escalate in retaliation.\textsuperscript{34} Each *fait accompli* is a calculated gamble that the adversary will let go what was seized rather than escalate. Whereas coercion involves leveraging a credible threat to intimidate the adversary into granting a concession, a *fait accompli* imposes the change unilaterally. Coercion and the *fait accompli* are two fundamentally different ways of making a gain at the expense of an adversary. The Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, began with a Soviet *fait accompli* attempt – the missile deployment – that the United States reversed using coercion. Many *faits accomplis* succeed, as Russia’s did in Crimea. Other *faits accomplis* provoke a stronger response than had been hoped, as Argentina experienced after seizing the Falkland


\textsuperscript{33} Dan Altman, “By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries,” *International Studies Quarterly* forthcoming.

\textsuperscript{34} Altman, “By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion.”
Islands in 1982. Some *faits accomplis* use force, but I focus below on those that take gains without force.

It is not unusual for scholars to focus on coercive threats even when a *fait accompli* changed the status quo.\(^{35}\) When Soviet threats against Berlin in 1958 and 1960 failed to coerce the United States into agreeing to make concessions, for example, Khrushchev ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. This *fait accompli* curtailed the hemorrhaging of skilled labor from East Germany.\(^{36}\)

*Faits accomplis* are more likely to succeed at making a gain without provoking war when they take that gain without crossing use-of-force red lines. In the Fashoda Crisis of 1898, Britain and France raced to Fashoda precisely because the first to arrive would have the advantage of putting the adversary in a position of having to fire first to prevail.\(^{37}\) Control of Fashoda meant control of much of what later became Sudan. Both sides sought to impose a *fait accompli* that would interpose the use-of-force red line and so deter a *fait accompli* by the loser of the race. The same dynamic emerged in 1999 when NATO and Russian forces raced for control of Pristina Airport after the end of the Kosovo conflict.\(^{38}\)

---


Arriving first puts the adversary in the unenviable position of having to choose between attacking and relenting. Schelling referred to this as the “last-mover disadvantage.”39 However, contra Schelling, I doubt the existence of true last moves. Even on the day after a massive unprovoked invasion, it usually remains possible to negotiate an end to the war if both sides wish to do so. The “last move,” therefore, is not an innate feature of the strategic game, but rather it is a construct predicated on the salience of crossing certain red lines. States treat these attacks as last moves even though this is not inherently so.

Crises vary in whether they provide an opportunity for a nonviolent fait accompli. If one imagines that the tables were turned in Berlin, meaning that the Soviets needed to breach an American blockade, the Soviets would have lacked the airlift capabilities to do so. Because they could not have advanced without attacking, the framework predicts that they would have been less likely to attempt to advance at all.

The second method for makings gains is imposed pressure. Imposed pressure is, in essence, a middle ground between faits accomplis and traditional coercive threats. States impose pressure by unilaterally enacting a new state of affairs that inflicts costs until and unless a concession is forthcoming. Blockades, like sanctions, are a recurrent form of imposed pressure.40 Although blockades like the one in the Berlin case considered below inflict costs to coerce concessions, they do not need to threaten future escalation past the newly-imposed status quo.  

---

40 However, not all blockades or blockade measures are imposed pressure. American harassment of Soviet submarines during the Cuban Crisis – specifically the dropping of hand grenades and practice depth charges (non-lethal to submarines) – provides an example of signaling and brinkmanship, not imposed pressure. The measure did not in itself impose a costly state of affairs. The British blockades of Germany during the World Wars were violent elements of a warfighting campaign.
The threat is only to continue the blockade that is already in place, a threat whose credibility is established without traditional signals of resolve like shows of force.

States have found a variety of ways to impose costs and pressure adversaries without overtly attacking, often by exploiting ambiguity about who is attacking. One pervasive technique is to attack via proxy rather than attack directly. For decades, Pakistan has supported insurgent groups in conflict with India.41 These policies have generated a series of crises, including those following the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament and the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Neither, however, provoked a wider war. The United States supplied arms to Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s without anything resembling the risk of escalation that would have accompanied a direct intervention. A related technique is to attack with soldiers out of uniform or in the uniform of another armed force.42 Russia’s “Green Men” in Crimea in 2014 offer an example, as do the Russian “volunteers” during the subsequent fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk. Soviet pilots in the guise of Chinese airmen attacked American forces during the Korean War without bringing in the Soviet Union as an active combatant. Stalin ordered these pilots to engage American aircraft only behind the front lines. He sought to prevent the capture of a downed Russian pilot, which would confirm Soviet involvement.43 Some of these gambits worked better than others, but only rarely have these tactics provoked a wider war.

---

42 For a thorough study of how covert interventions avoid provoking escalation, see Austin Carson, “Facing Off and Saving Face: Covert Intervention and Escalation Management in the Korean War,” International Organization 70, no. 1 (2016), 1-29.
Table 1 summarizes the distinctions among the crisis strategies of coercion, imposed pressure, and the *fait accompli*. It does not exhaustively survey all possible crisis strategies, omitting others like brute force and positive inducements.\(^{44}\) Table 1 underscores that, although imposed pressure is a form of coercion, it differs from traditional coercion in several respects. It imposes ongoing costs rather than threatening future costs (escalation). It does not require separate actions – signals of resolve like shows of force – to make a credible a threat to escalate in the future if concessions are not forthcoming. The imperative to make that prospect of future escalation credible via signaling is fundamental to coercion as it is traditionally understood.

**Table 1: How States Make Gains in Crises**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Strategy</th>
<th>Coercive Threat</th>
<th>Unilateral Imposition</th>
<th>Signals of Resolve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coercion</td>
<td>Necessary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imposed Pressure</td>
<td>Necessary</td>
<td>Partially (Costs Only)*</td>
<td>Inherent to the Imposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fait Accompli</em></td>
<td>Unnecessary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unnecessary**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Whereas a *fait accompli* unilaterally imposes the desired outcome, imposed pressure creates a costly state of affairs intended to aid in bringing about the desired outcome through coercion.  
** *Faits accomplis* require no signaling to make a gain but may require it to hold that gain. Like imposed pressure, that signaling is often inherent to the imposition of the *fait accompli*.  

Although *faits accomplis* require no signaling to make a gain, they may require it to hold that gain. Like imposed pressure, however, that signaling is often inherent to the imposition of the *fait accompli*. For instance, the fact that Russia just took the risk of seizing Crimea is by far

\(^{44}\) Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. 
the strongest signal that Russia would fight to hold it. At issue is the importance of separate actions (signals) like shows of force, military mobilization, public declarations of resolve, and more. These actions, regarded as ranking among the most important types of state behavior during crisis by the established view, have far less of a role when states instead use advancing without attacking. The contrast between signaling and advancing without attacking is specific to this concept of signaling a greater willingness to use force (resolve), the primary type of signaling considered in the literature, not to all signaling of any kind.

Advancing without attacking is not always successful. In 1961, India sought to gain the upper hand in its ongoing border disputes with China via the “forward policy.” India gradually constructed dozens of military posts in disputed areas unoccupied by Chinese forces, creating *faits accomplis* without using force. Where possible, Indian units took up positions on ground that threatened existing Chinese posts, either overlooking them or cutting their supply lines. China initially responded with restraint. Chinese forces built new border posts in the disputed territory without engaging India’s, including positions blocking further Indian advances. Mao instructed, “Resolutely do not yield, but strive to avoid bloodshed; create interlocking positions for long-term armed coexistence.” When this proved insufficient, Chinese forces resumed patrols, risking clashes, and began to create posts in positions that threatened India’s. By August 1962, Chinese leaders determined that they could not arrest Indian encroachment by these means. Only then did China resort to a more aggressive strategy, attacking Indian forces in what became the Sino-Indian War.45

---

Although the mutual use of advancing explains months of strategic interaction during the crisis, the Sino-Indian War offers a cautionary tale of what can happen when one side advances too far at the other’s expense. It also illustrates what I observe to be common: advancing without attacking often functions as the strategy of first resort in crises, with riskier alternatives in reserve as fallback options.

**The Salience of Use-of-Force Red Lines**

Why do use-of-force red lines act as such potent constraints on statecraft during crises? The desire to avoid a costly war is straightforward, but why would a small use of force that inflicts only a few casualties carry such large ramifications?

Because war is costly, there generally exists a range of potential war-avoiding bargains that both sides of a crisis prefer to war. For instance, both sides would be better off agreeing to the eventual outcome of the war, or something like it, without the costs of actually fighting the war.\(^46\) The problem, however, is that these incentives in favor of reaching a bargain are indeterminate as to exactly where in the range of possible bargains the two sides will agree and which side will get the better of the deal.\(^47\) This leaves tremendous scope for strategic maneuver. Absent any constraints, what prevents both sides from each seizing what they can in small *faits accomplis*? From low-level fighting over these *faits accomplis*? If states disregard natural limits on escalatory behavior, the results could all too easily include simmering tensions, frequent


\(^{47}\) Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict.*
skirmishing, greater uncertainty, and a heightened risk of escalation. From the desire to avoid this instability comes the value states place on finding clear limits, with the non-use of force prominent among them.

The use of force is a naturally salient focal point at which both sides can choose to limit escalation. Schelling explained why this is so valuable for deterrence: “a focal point for agreement often owes its focal character to the fact that small concessions would be impossible, that small encroachments would lead to more and larger ones.” These focal points are different from the potential alternative places to draw red lines in a manner that is “qualitative rather than a matter of degree.” In other words, states are much more likely to set a red line such as “do not fire on my forces” than an alternative such as “do not fire at more than twelve of my soldiers” – and for good reason. How could the threat to retaliate for the thirteenth soldier be credible? If states begin to tolerate attacks on their forces, where does it end? Recent research has identified focal points as an important factor in the strength of borders at deterring challenge, the resolution of territorial conflicts, and the durability of peace agreements. The role and function of focal points is to provide clear, mutually-understood limits that aid both sides in reducing the risks of escalation.

48 Schelling, Strategy of Conflict, 111; Schelling, Arms and Influence, 138.  
In an escalation ladder spanning the full range from peacetime cooperation to crisis to limited war to total nuclear war, two lines inherently stand out as natural firebreaks: the use of any force and the use of nuclear weapons. From that standpoint, an analogy between use-of-force red lines and nuclear-use red lines is a natural one. During the Cold War, strategists contemplated high-intensity conventional wars in Europe in which both sides refrained from using nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{50} By this analogy, nonviolent crises are like these limited wars, strategic competitions played within a constraining rule. To explain the significance of the red line against using nuclear weapons, nuclear strategists have made the case for the importance of focal points, salient points, saliencies, firebreaks, conspicuous points, discontinuities, and stark distinctions – all referencing the same idea.\textsuperscript{51} The logic extends to use-of-force red lines.

Statesmen often keenly perceive the perils of crossing use-of-force red lines. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, American policymakers feared destroying Soviet ballistic missiles because it meant attacking Soviet troops. According to CIA Director John McCone,


Consequences of action by the United States will be the inevitable “spilling of blood” of Soviet military personnel. This will increase tension everywhere and undoubtedly bring retaliation against U.S. foreign military installations.52

Soviet leaders shared this view. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev said as much, “The tragic thing — they can attack, and we will respond. This could escalate into a large-scale war.”53 Particularly striking are Khrushchev’s instructions to his emissary tasked with persuading the Cubans not to fire at American reconnaissance aircraft violating their airspace. Despite acknowledging the lack of a vital American or Soviet interest at stake in the fate of one aircraft, Khrushchev saw the risk of provoking a war as grave because of the use-of-force red line:

We believe—and this is very important—that, even if they [the Cubans] opened fire against the American aircraft, and we would regret if such a development occurred, if that would have been done, that fire would not be effective. It would not result in a real strengthening of Cuban security by military means. But it could cause an onset of U.S. military actions against Cuba.54

These fears came to the fore when a Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) site shot down an American U-2, killing Major Rudolf Anderson. Unbeknownst to Washington, a Soviet

general ordered the missiles fired on his own initiative. Soviet Defense Minister Malinovsky reproached him the next day, “We believe that you were too hasty in shooting down the US U-2 reconnaissance plane.” According to Sergei Khrushchev, son and biographer of Nikita Khrushchev, “It was at that very moment – not before or after – that Father felt the situation slipping out of his control.” The shoot-down brought fears of imminent escalation to a crescendo in Washington, with President Kennedy seriously considering immediate retaliation before deciding to first give diplomacy one final chance. The resultant conversation later that day between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin produced the agreement that ended the crisis. They began the meeting with a discussion of their mutual fears surrounding the implications of the U-2 shoot-down.

Despite its importance, any small violation of a use-of-force red line does not make war inevitable. Instead, the consequences are threefold. First, what is often the single most salient line constraining further escalation is gone, generating an increased risk of escalation and greater uncertainty. Second, because advancing without attacking is no longer a viable option, states must resort to riskier alternative strategies such as brinkmanship. Third, the attacked state will face strong pressures to retaliate. Even if this reciprocity seeks only to uphold the status quo, it is

55 “Ivanov and Malinovsky to Khrushchev,” October 27, 1962 [WC].
56 The same cable ordered the missiles removed. “Malinovsky to Pliev,” October 28, 1962 [WC].
57 Sergei N. Khrushchev, Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010), 608.
all too easy for tit-for-tat retaliation to fuel an escalatory spiral. Overall, the result of crossing a use-of-force red line is not automatically war but rather a greater risk of escalation to war.

**Two Competing Frameworks for Understanding Crisis Strategy**

Advancing without attacking offers a conceptual framework for understanding strategic interaction during crises that diverges from the traditional emphasis on coercion, signaling resolve, and brinkmanship. Gains made by *fait accompli* are not concessions elicited by credible coercive threats. Signals of resolve like shows of force lose their central role in crisis tactics and are no longer a major determinant of credibility. Instead, threats to retaliate for clear-cut uses of forces are generally presumed to be credible, whereas threats to retaliate for other actions are presumed not to be credible, irrespective of signals. Rather than embracing brinkmanship as a means of signaling resolve, advancing without attacking attempts to make gains while avoiding its risks.

Nonetheless, even as these distinctions are stark in theory, elements from both frameworks combine in many different ways in practice. For instance, any *fait accompli* – indeed, any action or inaction in a crisis – may signal something to the adversary. The Berlin Airlift illustrates. The question is not whether the airlift could convey a signal of resolve to the Soviet Union – it could – but rather whether this signaling was the primary purpose of the airlift in the Western Powers’ strategy – it was not.

---

Finally, states often utilize advancing without attacking as part of a broader strategy that integrates elements from multiple approaches to crisis strategy. This is typical for concepts of strategies and theories of strategic interaction. Although this poses challenges for empirical analysis, the Berlin Blockade Crisis offers one case where the two frameworks at issue make enough competing predictions to determine which better accords with the case.

THE BERLIN BLOCKADE CRISIS, 1948-1949

At first glance, the established view of crisis strategy offers a compelling account of the Berlin Blockade Crisis. The Soviet Union demanded the cessation of progress toward a unified West German state and signaled its displeasure by blockading Berlin. The United States responded with signals of its own, the airlift itself and the deployment of B-29 bombers to Britain. These signals established Western resolve. The Soviet Union desisted.

On closer examination, however, this narrative struggles to explain several important aspects of the case. After providing a brief background to the crisis, I discuss the observable implications of the two rival frameworks, then present the evidence. I highlight aspects of the case that are difficult to explain unless the crisis unfolded with each side relying on an advancing without attacking strategy.

---

61 Consider, by analogy, Pape’s distinction between punishment and denial. Virtually any military operation designed to pursue denial also inflicts a measure of punishment, yet this does not invalidate the conceptual distinction between them. More generally, social science outcomes are rarely the consequence of single theories, yet it is standard practice to isolate individual theories for development and testing. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Airpower and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
Historical Overview

Defeat in the Second World War left Germany divided into four zones by the occupying powers: Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Berlin, despite its location at the center of the Soviet Zone in Eastern Germany, was similarly divided into four sectors. This arrangement was fraught with difficulties from the start. As the Cold War intensified, the situation began to deteriorate.

At a conference in London in February, 1948, the Western Powers agreed to the fusion of their three zones in Western Germany and the gradual formation of a new, pro-Western German state. The creation of the “West Mark,” a separate currency for Western Germany, triggered the crisis. As Pravda wrote on April 1st, 1948, “The division of Germany has become an accomplished fact.”62

The Soviet Union bitterly objected to these developments. Soviet restrictions on train traffic to the Western Sectors of Berlin began on April 1st. By the end of June, the Soviets had withdrawn from the Kommandatura council governing Berlin and severed all road, rail, and river (barge) access to Berlin.

In response, the United States and the United Kingdom began the airlift. Initially the airlift relied mainly on the C-47 Skytrain and fell well short of the quantities of food and coal needed to supply the German population of the Western Sectors. Doubts about the capacity of the airlift were pervasive. The initial intent of the airlift was to buy time, a critical tactical

62 Division of Research on Europe [State Department], “Soviet Intentions in Berlin,” April 27, 1948. Available from the National Archives at College Park [hereafter NA-CP].
advantage but not a complete strategy for victory. At the time, no such strategy existed. Nonetheless, even during the first weeks of the crisis the airlift was the central proactive element in the Western response to the blockade. Gradually it became clear that the airlift could supply the entire population of the three Western Sectors indefinitely. Over time, improved procedures, a new airfield in Berlin (Tegel), and hundreds of C-54 Skymasters turned the tide.\footnote{Michael D. Haydock, \textit{City under Siege: The Berlin Blockade and Airlift, 1948-1949} (Washington: Brassey’s, 1999), 270; Miller, \textit{To Save a City}, 26-27.}


Washington was keenly sensitive to the imbalance of conventional power in Europe in favor of the Soviet Union, often finding cold comfort in the U.S. nuclear monopoly. The United
States had only a few divisions in continental Europe. These forces were dispersed in order to carry out the occupation.\textsuperscript{65} Still recovering from World War II, Western Europe was unready for war. According to a 1948 estimate, the Red Army could seize continental Europe and hold it for at least two years.\textsuperscript{66} Although confident about its ability to ultimately outproduce and defeat the Soviets,\textsuperscript{67} the U.S. Army drew up war plans for a withdrawal to the Pyrenees Mountains in order to retain a “foothold” Europe.\textsuperscript{68}

The Berlin Blockade Crisis lasted nearly a year and consisted of more than just the airlift. Dispatching an armed convoy to break the blockade was debated throughout but always rejected. Efforts to supply Berlin by train failed at the border. Several tense standoffs took place in Berlin itself. The city government disintegrated. Two separate city governments emerged. The Western Powers imposed a “counter-blockade,” economic sanctions against the Soviet Zone. Negotiations took place throughout the crisis: in Moscow with Stalin directly, in Berlin among the military governors, and in the United Nations with third-party mediation. None of these negotiations led to agreement.

Instead, Soviet leaders eventually accepted that the airlift’s ability to supply the Western Sectors indefinitely meant that the blockade had failed. This led to an offer to end the blockade in exchange for lifting the counter-blockade and a conference of foreign ministers. These were

\textsuperscript{65} William H. Tunner, \textit{Over the Hump} (Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1985), 158.


\textsuperscript{68} “Wedemeyer to Clay,” September 20, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 443]; “Clay to Huebner,” October 8, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 443].
negligible concessions. The Soviet Union terminated the Berlin Blockade on May 12\textsuperscript{th}, 1949, marking a victory for the Western Powers.

The Course of the Crisis

The established view of crisis strategy provides a straightforward narrative of these events. The crisis was a clash of wills in which each side sought to signal their resolve.\textsuperscript{69} The Western Powers cultivated a perception of resolve through signals such as the forward deployment of nuclear-capable B-29s to England, resolute statements, and the airlift. The Soviets, in turn, did so with the blockade. Once the Western Powers established their resolve, the Soviet Union backed down.

However, the evidence presented below contradicts the established view’s narrative in several respects. First, the Western Powers’ strategy did not utilize coercive threats or ultimatums, something the Soviet Union also largely avoided aside from the threat to continue the blockade. Second, Washington never seriously attempted to do what the established view assumes to be essential: convince Soviet leaders that they were more willing to use force first to prevail. Like the Western Powers, the Soviet Union chose not to mobilize, even when the tide of the crisis turned against them. The Western Powers did send signals of resolve, but only rather tepid signals from which they expected little. Third, the deployment of B-29 bombers to Britain as a signal of resolve – the most frequently mentioned event of the crisis in the International Relations literature – had no observable impact on Soviet policy. More damningly, Western policymakers never expected otherwise. Fourth, calls to engage in brinkmanship – such as an

\textsuperscript{69} E.g., Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power}, 217.
armed convoy to Berlin in defiance of the blockade – fell on deaf ears in Washington. Fifth, neither side’s red lines were credible in general. Each side’s red lines were credible only when threatening to retaliate after being attacked first. Purely verbal red lines – when distinct from use-of-force red lines – did not arrest adversary behavior.

In contrast, advancing without attacking figured prominently in the Western Powers’ strategy and accords with Soviet behavior. Despite West Berlin’s indefensible position, the Soviet Union declined to seize it outright. Doing so would have required attacking American, British, and French forces. Nor did the Soviets attempt make credible the threat to conduct such an operation. Instead, facing a red line protecting Berlin from direct seizure by force, the Soviet Union outflanked the line by interposing its forces and other barriers in the transit corridors connecting Berlin to the Western Zones.

The blockade was a form of imposed pressure that immediately gave the Soviet Union the upper hand in the crisis. U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom Lewis Douglas wrote in a telegram to the State Department, “I am sure you will agree that we should, if possible, avoid a situation where we are forced, say, to withdraw from Berlin or use an armed convoy to remain there.”70 The Soviet strategy was to create such a situation, and for a time they believed they had have done so.71 U.S. Army Chief of Staff Bradley put it as follows, “At present with our passenger trains completely stopped, Russians in effect have won the first round.”72

---

71 Haslam, Russia’s Cold War, 106-107.
72 Teleconference TT-9341 [Clay, Bradley], April 10, 1948, [Clay Papers].
However, the new Soviet red line denying Western land access to Berlin was also susceptible to flanking, this time by air. To stop trucks or trains, the Soviets could interpose barriers and forces that left the Western Powers with the decision to use force or relent. To stop the airlift, in contrast, the Soviets would have needed to fire on or otherwise attack Western aircraft. Once the airlift proved capable of sustaining Western Berlin indefinitely, the advantage returned to the Western side. Each side played out its unilateral options to the extent possible while skirting the adversary’s use-of-force red line.

If advancing without attacking best explains the pattern of strategic interaction of the crisis – and influenced the outcome – one should expect to observe the following. Some of these observable implications are small in themselves, but no less revealing for it. First, each side should eschew threatening to attack if their minimum demands go unfulfilled. They should instead accept significant setbacks rather than attack or seriously threaten to attack. Second, despite rejecting the use of threats to attack first, each side should nonetheless believe that they can achieve their objectives by outmaneuvering the other. Each side should try to do so while taking care not to use force. Third, the Western Powers should regard one logistical means of breaching the Soviet blockade – airlift – as fundamentally different from the other three: truck, train, and barge. Whereas the Soviets could block the other three means of transit by passive means, they would need to fire first to stop transport aircraft. This subtle physical difference between different modes of transportation should greatly influence the outcome of the crisis. Fourth, the Western Powers should seriously evaluate seemingly farfetched scenarios in which they succeed in dispatching a convoy into the Soviet Zone without shots fired, whereupon Soviet forces endeavor to block the convoy by passive means up to and including the deliberate
destruction of their own bridges. Fifth, the decisive consideration in whether the Western Powers could supply Berlin by rail, as they had before the crisis, should not be any strategic-level calculus of resolve or coercive leverage. Instead, the Soviet control of rail switches should give them a means to passively block trains without needing to shoot that should suffice to block rail corridors.\textsuperscript{73} Sixth, the Soviets should be unwilling to fire overtly on the airlift but willing to assail it by means less than a clear attack, including firing searchlights into the eyes of pilots landing in Berlin at night. Finally, both sides and third parties should view the Western Powers as in a disadvantaged position and likely to lose the crisis up until they unexpectedly prove that they too can advance without attacking via a sustainable airlift. Because of that rather than signals of resolve, perceptions of the likely outcome should flip. The Western Powers then and therefore should achieve their goals of progress in Western Germany and remaining in Berlin. Subsequent sections present evidence on these points.

Western policymakers followed an advancing without attacking strategy not through an initial, holistic plan for victory.\textsuperscript{74} They came to it over time in a simple, pragmatic manner. After considering all possible actions that could take gains, apply pressure, or otherwise improve their position, they implemented those that they felt benefitted them without undue risk of war. Consistently, that meant taking only those actions that avoided attacking the Soviets. The calculus was of what they could get away with doing, rather than of convincing the Soviets of their willingness to fight for Berlin. By and large, they expected the Soviets to play out the resultant game by that same central rule. The key to understanding the course of the Berlin

\textsuperscript{73} The same holds for barges due to canal locks.

\textsuperscript{74} Initial skepticism about the logistical capacity of an airlift precluded this.
Blockade Crisis is to map out the game each side played as they applied pressure where they could and got away with what they could without crossing the line of unmistakably attacking.

**To Deploy an Armed Convoy?**

Whether to supplement the airlift with an armed convoy became perhaps the most important policy decision for the United States throughout the crisis. Why did most American policymakers believe that the Soviets would acquiesce to the resupply of Berlin by air but that attempting to supply it by road would lead to war, a humiliating retreat, or both? A shipment of food or coal reaching Berlin would harm Soviets interests regardless of the exact mode of transport. The airlift-convoy discrepancy is difficult to explain in any way other than one: trucks could be blocked, but planes could only be shot down. In the air, unlike on the ground, the Soviet Union had to fire first to uphold the blockade. Consequently, a mundane difference in the physical properties of two modes of transportation heavily influenced the outcome of one of the most significant crises of the Cold War.

The armed convoy option came in several forms, all of which envisioned a convoy of trucks and military vehicles manned by uniformed soldiers advancing toward Berlin. A May 1948 version of the plan envisioned assembling three divisions – one from each of the three Western Powers – at Helmstedt and informing the Soviets that these forces would proceed to Berlin at a certain time.\(^{75}\) A June 1948 version consisted of a constabulary regiment, an engineer battalion, bridging equipment, road repair equipment, two hundred trucks, a British infantry

battalion, and French tank destroyers. The orders would be to advance, not to fire unless fired upon, and to clear obstacles even under threat of force. Later versions of the plan envisioned a purely American effort due to British and French opposition.

The two senior American officials in Germany, Military Governor Lucius Clay and top political representative Robert Murphy, both supported an armed convoy. They believed it would reach Berlin and signal resolve to the Soviet Union. Around the peak of the crisis, Clay wrote, “I am still convinced that a determined movement of convoys with troop protection would reach Berlin and that such a showing might well prevent rather than build up Soviet pressures which could lead to war.” Clay justified this position in part by arguing, “If the USSR does intend war, it is because of a fixed plan. Hostilities will not result because of action on our part to relieve the blockade unless there is such a fixed plan.” Murphy added, “If an unfortunate incident should occur, there would be no good reason to regard it as more than local and not a casus belli.”

Clay and Murphy were overruled. The dominant view in the White House, State Department, Defense Department, London, and Paris held that a convoy was unlikely to reach Berlin and quite likely to lead to war. According to Clay, President Truman informed him that

---

76 Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948, [Clay Papers].
80 Haydock, City under Siege, 144-145.
he had been open to the convoy option until confronted with the strong unified opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Truman later described the convoy option as overly risky. 81

Opposition to an armed convoy was particularly strong in the Defense Department. Secretary of Defense Forrestal opposed an armed convoy because its chances of success were “remote” with the “distinctly probable consequence of war.” The armed convoy was opposed due to the “inadequacy of United States preparation for global conflict.” 82 Both the U.S. Department of Defense and the British Government called for military mobilization prior to an armed convoy attempt in order to prepare for its consequences. 83 A report to the National Security Council offers perhaps the clearest verdict on the armed convoy option,

Armed motor convoy … was thoroughly considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff shortly after the Berlin blockade was first imposed and the conclusion then reached is still considered sound, that such an attempt would be fraught with the gravest military implications, including the risk of war, and would probably prove ineffective even if faced with only passive interference. 84

81 Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, 262-264.
The British military informed the U.S. Army that they considered an armed convoy attempt to be “militarily unsound and politically undesirable.”  

Even Clay’s top subordinate in Berlin, Colonel Frank Howley, responded to a question months into the crisis about how an initial armed convoy attempt would have gone by saying simply, “We would have gotten our asses shot off.”  

When interviewed decades later, Soviet junior officers who manned the border posts expressed the belief that they would have fired on what would, to them, have looked like an attack by an invasion force.

The decisive advantage of the airlift over the armed convoy was that it could be accomplished as a *fait accompli* without needing to cross the red line against attacking Soviet forces deployed to block access to Berlin. Even Clay appreciated this advantage, “It must be remembered that the surface convoy places the responsibility for the first use of force on our hands, whereas the airlift can be interfered with only by aggressive action on the part of the Soviet Government.” The Soviets heeded the red line against firing on Western aircraft.

A State Department Policy Planning Staff report dealt with the question of how to respond to such an incident. This report recommended that the United States should react to the downing of a U.S. aircraft by demanding an explanation and implementing “defensive measures” (fighter escorts for the airlift, presumably). Unless the Soviet Union denied responsibility for an

---

85 “HQ Dept of the Army from Dir Plans and Operations to EUCOM,” September 10, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 443].
86 Haydock, *City under Siege*, 255.
88 More precisely, the airlift was a series of *faits accomplis*, each plane its own. An armed convoy would also have been a *fait accompli*, but one that was ill-suited to advancing without attacking.
89 “Clay to Gruenther [Secretary of the Joint Staff],” May 15, 1949 [Clay Papers]. This advantage was widely recognized, e.g., here: Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948 [Clay Papers].
intentional attack and avoided further attacks, the United States should “assume that there exists a grave risk of imminent war.”

The established view of crisis strategy does not offer a compelling alternative explanation for this difference in expected outcomes between an airlift and an armed convoy. To explain the airlift, it would apply the concept of a signal of resolve, a plausible interpretation of the airlift in itself. However, although the established view can explain airlift in that manner, it cannot explain why Washington perceived the convoy as so much less desirable. Washington took for granted that the armed convoy entailed far greater risk of escalation. If anything, therefore, the armed convoy would have sent the stronger signal of resolve. Convoy-advocate Robert Murphy made the case for the airlift without a convoy as a signal of weakness rather than resolve, stating that the choice for an airlift without a convoy “carries with it also a confession of inability or unwillingness to enforce a well-earned right of surface passage.” Moreover, the decision was not between airlift and convoy, but rather whether to supplement the airlift with a convoy; how could doing just one be a stronger signal than doing both?

In one of the few declassified Soviet documents from the crisis, Soviet officials made policy recommendations regarding the airlift based on its logistical capacity (which determined the Western ability to advance without attacking), not what it revealed about Western resolve. Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky (Clay’s counterpart) and Vladimir Semenov wrote to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, “With the onset of autumn, flight conditions have changed for the worse, […] a significant change for the better for us. The Western powers are now interested in speeding up

---

91 “Murphy to Marshall and Lovett,” July 11, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 84, UD 2534].
an agreement. Therefore it is considered inappropriate to make further concessions.”92 The airlift had to survive bad winter flying weather to change the Soviet perspective. That perspective changed more than six months after the airlift began, hardly consistent with a newfound Soviet respect of Western political resolve from the decision to conduct the airlift. To the extent that the airlift mattered as a signal, it functioned as a signal of the capability to advance without attacking on a sustained basis – a far cry from a signal of the willingness to use force.

As the Berlin Blockade Crisis came to a successful conclusion and with the benefit of hindsight, American policymakers embarked on an extensive analysis of what to do if the blockade were re-imposed. The recommendation was to adopt the same strategy: airlift but not armed convoy. A National Security Council report on this question regarded an armed convoy probe as “impractical” and a renewed airlift as “the only practicable step short of great risk of hostilities or decision to leave Berlin.”93 Undersecretary of State James Webb described President Truman’s views as follows, “He agrees that the reinstitution of the air lift is probably the only answer, he would like to come up with a better answer, and would not be averse to reconsidering the possibility of breaking the blockade if some means of surface transportation showing reasonable possibilities of success could be found.”94 Truman ordered that, if the blockade was re-imposed, American traffic should only stop when the Soviets emplace a physical barrier or an armed guard. Purely verbal warnings were to be disregarded. However, Truman also ordered that no “show of force” such as an armed convoy then be made if a physical


barrier was in place. This balancing act mirrors the strengths and weaknesses in Soviet red lines, with the United States willing to act unilaterally and defy the Soviets when doing so did not require directly attacking Soviet forces.

A Stranded Convoy?

Although some convoy skeptics foresaw hostilities starting at the border as American vehicles sought to force their way through Soviet lines, others anticipated a different scenario in which the convoy succeeded in bypassing Soviet border guards without any shooting. They envisioned the convoy entering Eastern Germany only to find itself trapped in an impossible position after the Soviets destroy their own bridges, erect obstacles, and interpose troops as roadblocks. According to one study, “Soviet passive interference, such as road and bridge obstruction or destruction, could make an armed convoy method abortive.” Clay’s British counterpart, General Robertson, feared that the Soviets would simply block the road with tanks. This would leave the convoy with no choices beyond violating the use-of-force red line and halting its progress. In response to these concerns, Clay and Murphy increasingly emphasized bridging equipment as part of their armed convoy plans, but there was little confidence in Washington or London that this would solve the problem of Soviet tanks blocking the road. Looking back on the crisis, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Bradley reiterated these concerns:

95 “Director of Plans and Operations, US Army to CINCEUR,” June 17, 1949 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 444].
96 Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948, [Clay Papers].
98 Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, 131.
General Clay recommended a military convoy, but the chiefs would never go along with it. I don’t know whether it was right or wrong. Our contention was that they might not oppose it by armed force, which of course would be war, but they could stop you in so many ways short of armed resistance. A bridge could go out or roads closed for repairs … A bridge could go out ahead of you and another bridge behind, and you’d be in a hell of a fix.100

Western policymakers took seriously this bizarre scenario that leaves a Western convoy stranded in Eastern Germany when Soviet forces destroy their own bridges rather than the invading forces. This scenario makes sense only if the tactics of both sides were derived from a calculus of pushing the other as far as possible without using force. Taking that tactic, used by both sides, to one logical extreme produces a convoy stranded in the middle of Eastern Germany, all without shots fired.

The Rail Option

The armed convoy debate only arose after attempts to supply Berlin by rail failed. The manner of that failure is revealing. Trains were the first tool used to test the Soviet announcement of new, intrusive inspections on traffic to and from Berlin, an initial step in what became the blockade. On April 1st, the United States and United Kingdom dispatched five trains with orders to proceed to Berlin. All were repulsed at the border, save for one American train which submitted to inspections in contravention of its orders. The commandant of that train was

immediately court-marchaled by the U.S Army, but he was later acquitted on the grounds that his orders to reach Berlin and to refuse inspections were contradictory.101

Why were trains so ineffective? Why did this option quickly come to be disregarded even by advocates of a land supply approach? The problem was that the Soviets could easily stop trains using passive measures that did not require attacking Western forces. These measures took two forms, neither of which required directly interposing military forces on the tracks, let alone firing on trains. First, the Soviets announced “technical difficulties” with the main lines of track, requiring repairs. They created some of these difficulties by dismantling rail lines near the border. Second, the Soviets made use of their control over switches that determined the line of track a train would take. With these switches, they could shunt an intruding train along a dead-end line.

When Clay ordered a U.S. train to try to reach Berlin on June 21st, 1948, the Soviets prevented the train from proceeding by diverting it down a siding. Eventually, the Soviets attached their own locomotive and sent it back to Western Germany, tail between its legs.102 The rail switch problem relegated the rail supply option to irrelevance. It may seem incongruous that the control of rail switches could take on such strategic significance, but rail switches mattered for the overall outcome of one of the major superpower crises of the Cold War because they determined which side needed to fire first to prevail.

The debate over how to conduct the initial train probe also revealed the keen sensitivity to the use-of-force red line. Clay initially sought to challenge the new Soviet restrictions by sending a train to Berlin defended by armed guards with orders to fire upon any Soviet personnel attempting to board the train for inspections. Boarding, of course, falls short of an overt attack. Clay’s superiors in the Defense Department immediately suspended the departure of the train due to their grave reservations about this course of action. President Truman, per their advice, instead ordered the train to proceed with the guards ordered to fire only if fired upon. After repeatedly overruling Clay, the commander on scene, Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall offered him an apology, “We are sorry that so much chaperonage was necessary but the war danger element made it necessary.” Clay repeatedly tried to impose a more aggressive strategy that embraced brinkmanship to signal resolve. He found little support in Washington.

**Searchlights versus Gunfire**

Units of the Soviet military did fire on American transport aircraft flying food and fuel into Berlin. Far from causing war, these incidents scarcely caused a stir. The reason: the Soviets fired high-powered searchlights at the aircraft with the potential to blind pilots as they landed in Berlin. Specifically, Soviet units fired searchlights at times to interfere with night landings at Gatow, an airfield near the outer edge of the British Sector of Berlin. Although occasionally

---


104 Teleconference TT-9287 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Wedemeyer], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers].
forcing pilots to put up newspapers on cockpit windows to avoid temporary blinding, this tactic never caused a crash.105

Had Soviet forces fired bullets or shells for exactly the same purpose, the consequences might have been far more severe. The Soviets were deterred from an overt attack, but not from a more ambiguous form of attack – searchlights – that targeted a gray area in Western Powers’ use-of-force red line.

The airlift cost 72 lives, 31 of them American, many in plane crashes directly attributable to Soviet policy (the blockade).106 Yet, enduring the loss of a plane and its crew to an accident was acceptable. Losing lives to Soviet searchlights would have sown more controversy but not risked open war. Losing lives to a Soviet fighter or anti-aircraft artillery battery, however, would have created a real risk of war. At a minimum, it would have escalated the crisis to a level of tension that it never reached.

In all three scenarios, a plane crashes and the crew’s lives are lost due to Soviet policy. The difference was the relationship to the use-of-force red line. The searchlights were not of any great strategic importance in themselves, but it is revealing that the Soviets were willing to attack the airlift in this manner but never with overt force. This was a microcosm of the tactics in the crisis. Each side would apply pressure and take gains where it was possible to do so without unmistakably using force but halt just short of crossing that line.

105 Tunner, *Over the Hump*, 185; Haydock, *City under Siege*, 224.
106 Tunner, *Over the Hump*, 218.
The Ineffectiveness of Purely Verbal Red Lines

Both the Soviets and the Western Powers set credible red lines that successfully constrained the other side, yet neither side ever established an overall image of resolve that made their red lines credible in general. On the contrary, only those red lines that threatened retaliation after being attacked first arrested encroachments.

As Clay wrote early in the crisis, “Overflight privileges have been constantly under discussion at Soviet insistence but only actual interference possible would be overt attack. Airport is in our sector and flights could be stopped only by Soviet use of force.”\(^ {107}\) In one incident on May 4th, 1948, a Soviet officer phoned the U.S. Berlin Air Safety Center to inform them that a particular scheduled flight would not be permitted. The flight landed in Berlin that night.\(^ {108}\) In September, the Soviet Union demanded a halt to the airlift to create space for “annual” (in reality, new) military exercises in that airspace. This warning elicited alarm in Washington that the Soviets would resort to a more aggressive brinkmanship strategy of harassing the airlift.\(^ {109}\) However, the airlift continued and the Soviet exercises never materialized.

Whereas the Soviet Union made tepid efforts to constrain the airlift with purely verbal red lines, the Western Powers largely eschewed uttering threats and demands that they expected to fail. Early in the crisis, Clay made the case for an armed convoy, “I believe if we advised Soviet authorities of our intent to move supplies into Berlin with armed escort and gave 48 hours’ notice, convoy would get through.” This view is at odds with the logic of advancing

\(^ {107}\) "Clay to Bradley," April 2, 1948 [Clay Papers].
\(^ {108}\) Civil Administration Division, OMGUS, “The Berlin Blockade,” May 17, 1949 [NA-CP].
without attacking. The Soviets could disregard merely verbal warnings, interpose their forces, and hold fast behind the red line against a direct attack on their forces. Clay added, “Am sure neither British nor French would join us.”\textsuperscript{110} Washington shared their concerns and rejected Clay’s proposals. There was, more importantly, no appetite for setting an ultimatum demanding an end to the blockade. Such policy options were available but roundly rejected.

**B-29s to Britain: Nuclear Saber-Rattling?**

No event from the Berlin Blockade Crisis has received more scholarly attention than the deployment of two groups – sixty planes in total – of nuclear-capable B-29 heavy bombers to Britain.\textsuperscript{111} This action was a prototypical show-of-force signal of resolve. Although the B-29s were not the only signal sent during the crisis, the level of attention devoted to this action suggests that it provides a basis on which to evaluate the significance of signaling during the crisis.

The interpretation of the B-29s as a signal of resolve is warranted. That was the intent, and the deployment was understood not to entail any great military significance in itself.\textsuperscript{112} In advocating this action, Clay described the deployment as “essential” and British Foreign Minister Bevin as “highly important.”\textsuperscript{113} However, there are six reasons to doubt the significance of the B-29 deployment.

\textsuperscript{110} Teleconference TT-2066 [Clay, Haislip], March 30, 1949 [Clay Papers].

\textsuperscript{111} E.g., Betts 1987, 28-29; Huth 1988, 42; Schelling 1960, 198.


First, the deployment generated no observable change in Soviet policy. The enthusiastic British request for the deployment came on June 27th, 1948, shortly after the full imposition of the blockade. President Truman approved the request the next day. After several ebbs and flows, the crisis ended ten months later. There was no apparent change in Soviet policy during the period following the decision to deploy, nor after the deployment itself.

Second, Washington delayed the bombers for nearly a month due to a desire to avoid having them come across as a response to specific Soviet diplomatic notes. This concern stalled implementation until an appropriate lull in the correspondence.\(^{114}\) The bombers did not reach Britain until late July. If this signal was seen as a potentially decisive tool rather than a minor act more on par with yet another diplomatic note, this long delay at the peak of the crisis becomes difficult to explain. It is revealing that the diplomatic notes took priority, because little was expected from them.

Third, the British insisted that both they and the Americans be disingenuous about the purpose of the deployment, recommending the phraseology of “routine training flights” and publicly denying any link to events in Berlin.\(^{115}\) Although this fooled no one, it hardly seems consistent with a strong signal of resolve.

Fourth, there was no public announcement of the deployment of nuclear weapons. None were deployed. The bomber squadrons selected were not those used for the nuclear mission.


Some B-29s even seem to have been moved back from Germany to England to reduce vulnerability in the event of Soviet attack.\footnote{“Wedemeyer to Clay,” July 27, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 443]; “Clay to Wedemeyer,” July 28, 1948 [Clay Papers].}

Fifth, despite some strongly-worded support for the deployment, nowhere in the documentary record do Western policymakers state that they expected the B-29 deployment to lead to a change in Soviet policy. They viewed the deployment as worthwhile, but its primary virtues were its lack of risk and that it created a semblance of a firm, proactive policy. It played well in the press at a time when the Western Powers had few appealing options and the Soviets appeared to have the upper hand.

Finally, in the aftermath of the B-29 deployment, it receives virtually no further discussion. There were no expressions of surprise or disappointment at the lack of impact. The B-29s faded from high-level attention immediately upon arrival.

Western policymakers never perceived the B-29 deployment as nearly as significant an element of their strategy as it has since come to be viewed. These policymakers regarded the deployment as a desirable measure with scant prospects of changing Soviet perceptions, eliciting concessions, or risking war. The limited significance of the B-29 deployment suggests that the Western strategy during the crisis was less a matter of signaling – let alone brinkmanship – than the established view of crisis strategy would expect. The Western Powers could have found ways to send stronger signals, including through large-scale mobilization or an armed convoy attempt.
They chose not to do so. In the words of Harry Truman, “This is no time to be juggling an atomic bomb around.”

**IMPLICATIONS**

Risking war, military mobilization, and bellicose public statements are widely regarded as ranking among the most common consequential forms of statecraft during crises. These actions fit within a broader established view that emphasizes brinkmanship, signals of resolve, and coercion. However, as the Western Powers demonstrated in the Berlin Blockade Crisis, it is possible to prevail in a crisis without relying on those policy tools. Both sides instead sought to outmaneuver the other, the Soviets with the blockade and the Western Powers with the airlift. Each side worked around the need to use force first and pushing forward only where they could do so without attacking. Because the unexpected logistical capacity of the airlift left the Western Powers with the upper hand in this strategic game, they overcame the disadvantageous geography of the crisis, keeping Berlin without granting significant concessions concerning West German state formation.

The central policy debate of the Berlin Blockade Crisis – whether to dispatch an armed convoy to Berlin – pitted a vocal minority advocating a strategy predicated on signaling resolve through brinkmanship against a majority intent on first exhausting all options short of using or threatening force. The arguments put forth by that minority, spearheaded by Lucius Clay and Robert Murphy, underscores the divide between two different ways of thinking about how to conduct a crisis. Had their view – an application of the established view of crisis strategy in the

---

International Relations literature – guided policy, the United States would have embarked on a course with a greater risk of escalation. That risk that would have been entirely unnecessary.

This study began with a discussion Russia’s occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and tested the framework with evidence from the Cold War, but it readily applies across the globe. For instance, as China continues to rise, disputes over the Spratly and Senkaku Islands persist as sources of tension. Control of the Spratlys today consists of a curious patchwork of intermingled Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Malaysian, and Taiwanese outposts. The islands were taken and retained by whichever state arrived first, as much in order of size (largest first) as location. Other disputants, reluctant to attack occupying garrisons, instead seized smaller vacant islands. Advancing without attacking thereby resulted in a peculiar hodgepodge of interspersed outposts.

Identifying opportunities to advance without attacking can contribute to anticipating not just the course of crises, but also whether challengers choose to initiate them. Just as the geography of Berlin left it vulnerable to a blockade that did not require force to implement, the absence of a Japanese garrison in the Senkaku Islands leaves an opening for China to seize the islands without using force. If had Japan anticipated and fixed that problem decades ago, it would find itself in a stronger deterrent position today.

In recent years, China has pursued the only remaining means of “acquiring” territory in the Spratlys without attacking: expanding its islands via extensive land reclamation. Unsurprisingly, verbal opposition to nonviolent reclamation failed. China can reclaim land

118 There was, however, an incident with fighting between China and Vietnam in 1988. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 333-335.
without attacking. Similarly, Chinese verbal declarations of sovereignty and Air-Defense Identification Zones (ADIZs) over disputed waters have failed to deter the United States and regional powers from entering. Entering disputed waters does not require attacking. Each side can play these cards without great risk of war.

Assumptions about the nature of strategic interaction in crises anchor a variety of International Relations theories. For instance, democracies are often believed to be better able to signal resolve in crises, giving them a fundamental advantage over autocracies.119 This advantage has even been used to explain the democratic peace.120 Yet, if states often prevail in crises by outmaneuvering adversaries rather than by convincing adversaries of their willingness to use force, this mechanism cannot apply as widely as is currently assumed. Similarly, nuclear weapons and, more controversially, nuclear superiority are often assumed to provide coercive leverage to states possessing them because they augment brinkmanship.121 If states often eschew brinkmanship, including in Berlin during one of the signature crises of the nuclear age, then it is worth questioning these broader theories of nuclear weapons in international politics. The assumption that states seek to out-coerce – rather than outmaneuver – their adversaries during crises is customarily taken for granted, but both are important.

Although coercion, signaling resolve, and brinkmanship remain important tools of statecraft in crises, states do not always play poker. Sometimes they play chess, finding ways to outmaneuver their adversaries, working around certain high-salience red lines like those against

119 Schultz, Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy.
121 Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve.”
the use of force to apply pressure and take gains without quite crossing the lines that make war likely.  

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Noel Anderson, Mark Bell, Steve Brooks, Ben Buch, James Cameron, Christopher Clary, James Fearon, Jeffrey Friedman, Edward Geist, Phil Haun, David Holloway, Liviu Horovitz, Nicholas Miller, Norman Naimark, Vipin Narang, Katy Powers, Daryl Press, Kenneth Oye, Scott Sagan, Kenneth Schultz, Josh Shifrinson, David Traven, Bill Wohlforth, the editors, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments and insights. Special thanks to Barry Posen.