

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

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ABSTRACT

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 applying 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 the cession of 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's strategy sought not only push as far as possible without overtly using force, but also to put Russia in a position to deny culpability for any hostilities that did occur. To that end, Russian soldiers removed identifying markers from their uniforms, entering as anonymous "Green Men" so that the Russian government could maintain a fig leaf of denial regarding its involvement.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 was 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 ever quite unmistakably attacking.

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. Lavrov 2014. For video, see the "Russian Roulette" series by VICE News throughout February, 2014.

² Lavrov 2014.

³ Terms such as "hybrid warfare" and "gray zone" have come to refer to these tactics. Due to the vagueness of these terms, I avoid them and discuss instead one specific but important subset of these tactics. BBC News 2015; Kofman 2016.

Others have identified past cases of similar tactics,⁴ 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.⁵ He argued for the importance of both before focusing on the former, as the field has done since. This article aims to better understand the latter.

To do so, it develops the ‘advancing without attacking’ framework for understanding strategic interactions during crises, which aligns to a broader conceptualization of crises as strategic games played by one overarching rule: do not overtly attack the other side.⁶ 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 reluctant to use force. It is also clear that there are innumerable exceptions to this reluctance; the use of force is far from rare. What has been under-

⁴ E.g., Murray and Mansoor 2012; Altman 2016.

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.” Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997, 3.

appreciated, however, is just how much scope there is for maneuver that works around the edges of using force without overtly 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.⁷ 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 and the conditions under which it is more likely to occur.

To show how the advancing without attacking framework can contribute to better understanding strategic interaction during crises, 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, having received far less scholarly attention than the 1958-1961 Berlin Crisis and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Nonetheless, the Berlin Blockade Crisis played a major role in the onset of the Cold War and the solidification of the Iron Curtain dividing East from West. 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.⁸

⁷ Schelling 1960; Schelling 1966.

⁸ Observable implications are visible predictions of a theory that can be checked against evidence. Unique observable implications are predictions of a theory that alternative theories do not predict. Van Evera 1997, 30-35; Eckstein 1975, 118-120. On observable implications: King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 24.

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 coercive threats. This is often done through brinkmanship, aggressive 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.⁹

When explaining crisis behavior – troop deployments, public statements, limited attacks, etc. – the established view normally applies the concept of signaling. The classic signal of resolve is a show of force.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² After the United States

⁹ Fearon 1997, 68-90; Huth 1999, 25-48; Morrow 1999; Slantchev 2011.

¹⁰ George and Smoke 1974; Schelling 1966.

¹¹ Ross 2002.

¹² Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001.

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.¹³ When 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.¹⁴

When lesser signals are insufficient, demonstrating the willingness to risk war (brinkmanship) signals resolve and puts pressure on the adversary to end the crisis.¹⁵ For those who see brinkmanship as the cornerstone of crisis strategy, a common assumption for studies of the role of nuclear weapons in crises,¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

¹³ Slantchev 2011.

¹⁴ Gordon 1994.

¹⁵ Lebow 1981; Powell 1990; Schelling 1966, ch. 3; Snyder and Diesing 1977.

¹⁶ E.g., Kroenig 2013. But see Sechser and Fuhrmann 2013.

¹⁷ The salience of use-of-force red lines means that even a small use of force can often provide a potent signal of resolve.

The established view understands all of this signaling as an aid to coercive bargaining, in the process supplying a clear answer to the question of how states revise the status quo in their favor during crises: use credible threats to coerce concessions from the adversary.¹⁸ This perspective on how states make gains 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 advantage of both sides' reluctance to use force. Rather than using credible threats of escalation to coerce concessions, it more often makes gains by *fait accompli*. The established view of crisis strategy has proven itself both theoretically rich and empirically fruitful. Nonetheless, this article explores another view meant to explain events that fit uneasily with the established view; a framework in which crisis strategy is about finding ways to unilaterally take as much as possible without overtly attacking the other side.

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 this basis.

¹⁸ Thomas Schelling coined the term “compellence” for this form of coercion. Whereas deterrent threats aim to sustain the status quo, compellent threats demand changes to it. Schelling 1966, ch. 2.

States cannot abide an enemy that is unconstrained from using force against them. This fundamental national interest is the initial basis for advancing without attacking. The result is that 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.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. As a later section explains, these use-of-force red lines have salience even without specific public statements explicitly declaring them.

Use-of-force 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 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.

Nonetheless, 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 possible, that is, the conditions under which advancing without attacking is

¹⁹ On the dual roles of threats and assurances in coercion: Schelling 1966, 4, 74.

possible. The following section then explains how states exploit these opportunities to make gains. These are the core elements of advancing without attacking.

How to Outmaneuver Use-of-Force Red Lines

Advancing without attacking is possible when there is a way to take something 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 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 force.²⁰ 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

²⁰ There are clear parallels with several common tactics of nonviolent resistance, with sit-ins the clearest analog. These similarities are intriguing because, unlike advancing without attacking, nonviolent resistance often pursues far more expansive aims – including regime change – and relies heavily on delegitimization. On these tactics: Sharp 1973; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011.

adversary's freedom of action.²¹ 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 displacing 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 the small island of Imia (Kardak), an island claimed by both Turkey and Greece, the incident thrust the dispute over the islands into the media spotlight and the forefront of Greco-Turkish relations. The ensuing events would become the 1995-1996 Aegean Sea Crisis. After individuals (but not soldiers) 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. The presence of the 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 therefore appeared to have 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.²²

²¹ On tripwire forces (as a commitment mechanism and signal of resolve): Fearon 1997, 70; Freedman 2003; Schelling 1960; Schelling 1966; Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014, 923.

²² Jacobides 2007, 455-477; Pratt and Schofield 1996.

Second, some use-of-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 from each side, soldiers fully 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? Mistakes will happen, and 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, is destroying unmanned equipment without inflicting casualties 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.²³ 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 the archaic tactic of 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

²³ Clay 1950, 384; Miller 2000, 113-114.

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.” These British warships could not be everywhere.²⁴ Iceland prevailed.

A similar tactical 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.²⁵ 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,

²⁴ Johnston 1991, 9-15.

²⁵ 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.

such as the rudder, and with minimum loss of life.”²⁶ The intent was to stop the ships with minimum force, disabling only if required and “not sinking ships unless absolute necessary.”²⁷

The strategic logic was predicated on finding an effective way to stop the Soviet ship without unmistakably violating the Soviet red line against an attack on their vessels, thereby minimizing the risks of war. Disabling falls into a gray area on the edge of attacking. The effect and intent are both distinct from firing to kill or destroy. Therefore, disabling falls ambiguously short of unmistakably violating the Soviet use-of-force red line. American policymakers feared the consequences of a disabling shot, but not as much as they feared the consequences of deliberately sinking a Soviet ship.

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.²⁸ 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 had already reached

²⁶ Although the full rules of engagement explicitly left open the possibility of firing to destroy the ship, the rules 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].

²⁷ “Houser to Taylor,” October 19, 1962 [GWU NSA].

²⁸ CIA, “SNIE 11-19-62: Major Consequences of Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba,” October 20, 1962 in Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992).

Cuba (they had). 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.

How to Make Gains without Attacking

States exploit these opportunities to outmaneuver use-of-force red lines by two methods: the *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. However, whereas the *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. Distinct from the established view of crisis strategy, however, neither method requires signaling resolve in order to establish the credibility of threats to use force if concessions are not forthcoming.

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.²⁹ In recent research, Altman examines territorial acquisitions since 1918 and finds that states have far more frequently seized territory by *fait accompli* than coerced adversaries into agreeing to cede it.³⁰ In Crimea, for instance,

²⁹ For past discussions, see George and Smoke 1974, 536-540; Schelling 1966, 44-45; Snyder and Diesing 1977, 227; Van Evera 1998, 10. Van Evera regards *faits accomplis* as “halfway steps to war,” but this depends very much on the nature and context of the *fait accompli*.

³⁰ Altman n.d.

Moscow did not use the threat of war to coerce Kiev into agreeing to relinquish Crimea; Russia simply took Crimea. Tarar integrates the *fait accompli* into rationalist formal models of crisis bargaining.³¹

A *fait accompli* is defined as imposing 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. Each *fait accompli* aims to take a gain small enough that the adversary will let it go 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 Islands in 1982. Some *faits accomplis* use force, but others take gains without force.

It is not unusual for scholars to focus on coercive threats even when a *fait accompli* changed the status quo. 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* successfully curtailed the hemorrhage of skilled labor from East Germany.³²

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

³¹ Tarar 2016.

³² Trauschweizer 2006.

in a position of having to fire first to prevail.³³ Control of Fashoda meant control of much of what is now 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.³⁴

Advancing without attacking takes the form of racing to arrive first when it is possible to take something by *fait accompli* that is currently held by neither side. Moving 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.”³⁵ 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. The “last move,” therefore, is not an innate reality of the strategic game, but rather it is a strategic construct predicated on the salience of crossing certain red lines. States treat these attacks as last moves even though this is not inherently so.

The second method for making gains is what I refer to as imposed pressure. Imposed pressure is, in essence, a middle ground between *faits accomplis* and traditional coercive threats in which the prospect of future escalation is leveraged to reap a concession. States impose pressure by unilaterally enacting a new state of affairs that inflicts costs until and unless a concession is forthcoming. Blockades are one recurrent form of imposed pressure. Although blockades inflict costs to coerce concessions, they do not need to threaten future escalation past the newly-imposed status quo. The threat is only to

³³ Lewis 1987.

³⁴ BBC News 2000.

³⁵ Schelling 1966, 44-47.

continue the blockade that is already in place, a threat whose credibility is established without traditional signals of resolve like shows of force.

The two methods of advancing without attacking – *faits accomplis* and imposed pressure – make gains in quite different ways. *Faits accomplis*, by definition, simply take the gain as a unilateral imposition. Imposed pressure, in contrast, creates a state of affairs that imposes costs on the adversary in the hope that this adversary will relent to a concession. The latter makes gain by coercion, unlike the former is not. In Berlin, this was the difference between a Soviet *fait accompli* seizing Berlin (which would have required force) and the Soviet imposition of a blockade to make the Western Powers' logistical position in Berlin untenable (which did not).

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.³⁶ 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 the Afghan *mujahideen* fighting the Soviet Union 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.³⁷ 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

³⁶ Fair 2014.

³⁷ For a thorough study of how covert interventions avoid provoking escalation, see Carson 2016.

these pilots to engage American aircraft only behind the front lines in order to prevent the capture of a downed Russian pilot, which would confirm Soviet involvement.³⁸ Some of these gambits worked better than others, but only rarely have these tactics provoked a wider war.

Advancing without attacking relies on a particular theory of crises with inherent predictions about how crises are likely to unfold. *Faits accomplis* are more likely to occur when opportunities exist to seize the gain unilaterally while either outflanking the adversary's use-of-force red line or exploiting a gray area within it. Conversely, *faits accomplis* that must use force to make a gain are less likely to occur. The reason – and the second causal claim – is that *faits accomplis* are less likely to lead to war when they are crafted to avoid overtly attacking the adversary. The same two predictions follow for imposed pressure. The theory therefore explains variation in when *faits accomplis* occur and when *faits accomplis* lead to escalation.

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 advanced by constructing dozens of military posts in disputed areas unoccupied by Chinese forces, creating a *fait accompli* without using force. Where possible, Indian units took up positions on ground that threatened existing Chinese posts, either by overlooking them or by cutting their supply lines. China initially responded with restraint. Chinese forces built new border posts in the disputed territory without engaging India's, including taking positions designed to block further Indian advances. These forces received orders to attempt to avoid armed conflict. When this proved insufficient, Chinese forces resumed patrols, risking clashes, and began to create posts in positions that threatened India's. Mao instructed, “Resolutely do not yield, but strive to avoid bloodshed; create interlocking positions for long-

³⁸ Goncharov 1993, 190.

term armed coexistence.” However, 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.³⁹ Although the mutual use of advancing explains a great deal about the course of the pre-war 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.

By avoiding the use of force, advancing without attacking enables states to make gains while minimizing the risk of war. Nonetheless, advancing without attacking is not free of escalatory risks. It remains a strategy for revising the immediate status quo in order to make gains in crises, a goal that is often inherently aggressive. Pushing adversaries too far will lead them to escalate in response. In 1999, Pakistani forces disguised as insurgents crossed the Line of Control into India’s side of Kashmir, seizing control of unoccupied positions in the Kargil region overlooking a strategic road. Although Pakistan worked around the use-of-force red line, India counterattacked, suffering hundreds of casualties in order to retake its territory. In this instance, the geographic red line – not the use-of-force red line – determined India’s response. Avoiding an overt attack improves the chances of making that gain without escalation, but it provides no guarantee. Unlike Kargil, the Berlin Blockade Crisis offers an example of a crisis in which both sides correctly gauged that their adversary was reluctant to cross this line, putting the conditions in place for advancing without attacking to determine the outcome.

³⁹ Fravel 2008, 174-178.

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 does even a small use of force that inflicts only a few casualties often 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. 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.⁴⁰ 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 end up and which side will get the better of the deal.⁴¹ 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 skirmishing, greater uncertainty, and a heightened risk of escalation. From the desire to avoid this instability comes the value states place on finding limits in crises, with the non-use of force prominent among them.

The use-of-force is a naturally salient focal point at which both sides can, if they choose, agree to limit escalation. Thomas Schelling provided the best explanation of why this type of focal point is so

⁴⁰ For this approach to the causes of war and a discussion of the conditions that make bargaining failure – and thus war – likely, see Fearon 1995; Powell 1999.

⁴¹ Schelling 1960.

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.”⁴² 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.⁴³ The role and function of focal points is to provide clear, mutually-understood limits that aid both sides in reducing the risks of escalation.

In an escalation ladder spanning the full range from peacetime cooperation to crisis to limited war to total nuclear war, two lines inherently stand 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. Use-of-force red lines matter for much the same reasons that nuclear-use red lines have long figured prominently in the literature on nuclear strategy. During the Cold War, American strategists contemplated high-intensity conventional wars in Europe in which both sides refrained from using nuclear weapons.⁴⁴ By this analogy, nonviolent crises are like limited wars, strategic competitions played within a constraining rule. To explain the significance of the red line

⁴² Schelling 1960, 111; Schelling 1966, 138.

⁴³ Gibler 2007; Carter and Goemans 2011; Huth, Croco, and Appel 2012; Fortna 2003, 343; Fortna 2004, 22-23.

⁴⁴ Kahn 1965, 97; Osgood 1979; Posen 1991.

against using nuclear weapons, the nuclear strategy literature makes the case for the importance of focal points, salient points, saliencies, firebreaks, conspicuous points, discontinuities, and stark distinctions – all referencing the same idea.⁴⁵ The same logic extends to use-of-force red lines in crises.

Statesmen are often quite explicit about 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.⁴⁶

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.”⁴⁷ 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

⁴⁵ George and Smoke 1974, 41; Osgood 1979; Schelling 1960, 55-75; Schelling 1966, 132-141; Smoke 1977. More recent research by Nina Tannenwald (2007) and T.V. Paul (2009) explores a normative taboo and/or entrenched tradition of the non-use of nuclear weapons (but see Press, Sagan, and Valentino 2013).

⁴⁶ John McCone, “Memorandum for Discussion [The Cuban Discussion],” October 17, 1962 [FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XI, #26].

⁴⁷ “Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60,” October 23, 1962 [WC].

American or Soviet interest at stake in a potential shoot-down of one surveillance 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.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹ 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.⁵² The resultant conversation later that day between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador

⁴⁸ “Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 66 [Instructions to Comrade A. I. Mikoyan],” November 16, 1962 [WC].

⁴⁹ “Ivanov and Malinovsky to Khrushchev,” October 27, 1962 [WC].

⁵⁰ This same cable ordered the missiles removed. “Malinovsky to Pliev,” October 28, 1962 [WC].

⁵¹ Khrushchev 2010, 608.

⁵² “Summary Record of the Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council,” October 27, 1962 [FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. XI, #97].

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.⁵³

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 side that was attacked first will face strong pressures to retaliate. Even if this reciprocity seeks only to uphold the status quo, it is all too easy for tit-for-tat retaliation to fuel an escalatory spiral.⁵⁴ Overall, the result of crossing a use-of-force red line is not automatically war but rather a greater risk that the crisis eventually escalates 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 gains that are not made as concessions elicited by credible coercive threats. Signaling resolve loses its central role in crisis tactics and is 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,

⁵³ “Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry,” October 27, 1962 [WC].

⁵⁴ Smoke 1977, 278-281. For a more optimistic perspective that still acknowledges this problem: Axelrod 1984.

irrespective of signals. Rather than embracing brinkmanship – including limited uses of force – as a means of signaling resolve, advancing without attacking attempts to make gains while minimizing it, avoiding its risks where possible.

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 – is likely to 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. This is typical for concepts of strategies and theories of strategic interaction.⁵⁵ Put another way, states often utilize advancing without attacking as part of a broader strategy that integrates elements from multiple approaches to crisis strategy. 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 make it possible to determine which had more explanatory power in that case.

The Berlin Blockade Crisis, 1948-1949

⁵⁵ Consider, by analogy, Pape’s (1996) 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.

At first glance, the established view of crisis strategy offers a thorough and 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, advancing without attacking was integral to both American and Soviet strategy during the crisis, while signaling played at most a secondary role. After providing a brief background to the crisis, I examine aspects of the case that are difficult to explain unless the crisis unfolded with each side relying on an advancing without attacking strategy. The final section utilizes the B-29 deployment – the most prominent signal during the crisis – as a means to assess the role of signaling, providing six reasons to conclude that this signal was of little significance.

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.”⁵⁶ The Soviets, with the damage wrought by German armies still fresh in their minds, bitterly objected to these developments.

The first new Soviet restrictions on train traffic between the Western Sectors of Berlin and the Western Zones of Germany 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. The blockade had begun.

In response, the United States and the United Kingdom initiated 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 advantage but not a complete strategy for eventual 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 be expanded to supply the entire population of the three Western Sectors indefinitely, a logistical achievement few anticipated. Over time, improved procedures, a new airfield in Berlin (Tegel), and hundreds of C-54 Skymasters turned the tide.⁵⁷

In blockading the Western Sectors of Berlin, the Soviet Union sought above all to convert Berlin into leverage in order to pressure the Western Powers to stop the process of forming a state from the

⁵⁶ Division of Research on Europe [State Department], “Soviet Intentions in Berlin,” April 27, 1948.

Available from the National Archives at College Park [hereafter NACP].

⁵⁷ Haydock 1999, 270; Miller 2000, 26-27.

three Western Zones. Control of Berlin was a secondary objective and a worthy consolation prize.⁵⁸ The Western Powers' objectives mirrored those of the Soviets. Keeping Western Germany in the Western camp took precedence. Control of the Western Sectors of Berlin was valued, but less so than progress in Western Germany. American policymakers also believed that capitulating to Soviet pressure in Berlin would damage the reputation of the United States and embolden the Soviets.⁵⁹

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, and these forces were dispersed in order to carry out the occupation.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ The

⁵⁸ Narinskii 1996, 63-69. For the same conclusions from Western sources: "Hillenkoetter to Truman," December 10, 1948 (available online from the Truman Presidential Library); "Smith to Marshall," July 24, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 984]; "Smith to Marshall," September 16, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 1160]; "Department of State Policy Statement," August 26, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 1287].

⁵⁹ Shlaim 1983, 27, 105. Some French officials opposed a centralized German state. "Clay to the Department of the Army," November 22, 1948 in Smith 1974 [hereafter "Clay Papers"].

⁶⁰ Tunner 1985, 158.

⁶¹ Joint Intelligence Committee, American Embassy, Moscow, "Soviet Intentions," April 1, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. I, p. 551]; Joint Intelligence Committee, American Embassy, Moscow, "Soviet Intentions," April 5, 1949 [FRUS, 1949, Vol. V, p. 604].

U.S. Army drew up war plans for a withdrawal to the Pyrenees Mountains in order to retain a “foothold” Europe.”⁶²

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. There were a number of standoffs in Berlin. The city government disintegrated. Two separate city governments emerged, each claiming control over the whole city but in reality controlling only their own side. The Western Powers eventually imposed a “counter-blockade” in the form of economic sanctions against trade with 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 a lifting of the counter-blockade and a conference of foreign ministers. These were negligible concessions. The Soviet Union terminated the Berlin Blockade on May 12th, 1949, marking a victory for the Western Powers.

The Course of the Crisis

⁶² “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].

The established view of crisis strategy provides a straightforward narrative of these events. From this perspective, the crisis was a clash of wills in which each side sought to signal their resolve. 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. This narrative is plausible, but it is not supported by the evidence.

Instead, advancing without attacking was central to the strategies adopted by both sides of the Berlin Blockade Crisis. The contours of this strategic game – which side ultimately had the upper hand with both sides pushing forward without overtly attacking – determined the outcome of the crisis. 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 Soviet Union hoped that the blockade would create such dire logistical and economic problems that it would lead to the same outcome – full control of Berlin – without having to cross the line of using force or finding a way to make credible the threat to do so.

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."⁶³ The Soviet strategy

⁶³ "Douglas to Acheson," February 22, 1949 [FRUS, 1949, Vol. III, p. 681].

was to create such a situation, and for a time they seemed to have done so. 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.”⁶⁴

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.

Soviet officials could issue threats and demands regarding restrictions on the airlift, and they did so. But, in the end this cheap talk was dismissed because the Soviets would have needed to fire first. As Lucius Clay, the U.S. Military Governor of Germany, 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.”⁶⁵ 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.

Western policymakers followed an advancing without attacking strategy not through an initial, holistic plan for victory, but instead 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.

⁶⁴ Teleconference TT-9341 [Clay, Bradley], April 10, 1948, [Clay Papers].

⁶⁵ “Clay to Bradley,” April 2, 1948 [Clay Papers].

Consistently, that meant taking only those actions that avoided overt attacks on 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.

Airlift versus Armed Convoy

Perhaps the most important policy decision for the United States was whether to supplement the airlift with an armed convoy. Why did most American policymakers believe that the Soviets would acquiesce to the resupply of Berlin by air but not by road? Why was resupplying Berlin by road so different that an attempt to do so was generally expected to 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. There is no compelling reason why aerial resupply would send a stronger signal of resolve than road resupply. 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, this mundane difference in the physical properties of two modes of transportation may have determined 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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 the use of 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."⁶⁸ 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."⁶⁹ Robert 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*."⁷⁰

Clay and Murphy were overruled. Few others in Washington, London, or Paris concurred with their opinion. The dominant view in the White House, State Department, Defense Department, London,

⁶⁶ Civil Administration Division, OMGUS, "The Berlin Blockade," May 17, 1949 [NA-CP]; Shlaim 1983, 137.

⁶⁷ Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948, [Clay Papers].

⁶⁸ "Clay to the Department of the Army," June 25, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 917].

⁶⁹ "Clay to the Department of the Army," July 10, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 956]. For the same view: "Murphy to Marshall and Lovett," July 11, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 84, UD 2534].

⁷⁰ Robert D. Murphy, "Comments on JCS Analysis," June 1, 1949 [FRUS, 1949, Vol. III, p. 825].

and Paris held that a convoy was unlikely to reach Berlin and quite likely to lead to war.⁷¹ According to Clay, President Truman informed him that 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.⁷²

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” and because the “distinctly probable consequence of war.” The armed convoy was opposed due to the “inadequacy of United States preparation for global conflict.”⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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

⁷¹ Haydock 1999, 144-145.

⁷² Shlaim 1983, 262-264.

⁷³ “Forrestal to Marshall,” July 28, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 994]; James Forrestal, “Report to the National Security Council: U.S. Military Courses of Action with Respect to the Situation in Berlin,” July 28, 1948. Available online from the Truman Presidential Library.

⁷⁴ “Douglas to Marshall,” July 26, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 986].

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.⁷⁵

The British military informed the U.S. Army that they considered an armed convoy attempt to be “militarily unsound and politically undesirable.”⁷⁶ 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.”⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ 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

⁷⁵ The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade,” June 1, 1949 [FRUS, 1949, Vol. III, p. 820].

⁷⁶ “HQ Dept of the Army from Dir Plans and Operations to EUCOM,” September 10, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 443].

⁷⁷ Haydock 1999, 255.

⁷⁸ Gobarev 1997, 15-17.

⁷⁹ More precisely, the airlift was a series of *faits accomplis*, each plane its own. The armed convoy would also have been a *fait accompli*, but one that was ill-suited to advancing without attacking.

interfered with only by aggressive action on the part of the Soviet Government.”⁸⁰ At the start of the crisis, however, Clay was far more sanguine than others about the possibility of circumventing this problem with 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 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.”⁸¹ Washington shared their concerns and rejected Clay’s proposals.

The Soviets heeded the red line against firing on Western aircraft. Even though the value of one plane and its crew paled in comparison to the costs of a war, shooting down a plane deliberately would have crossed a line and so risked war. A State Department Policy Planning Staff report from mid-way through the crisis 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 intentional attack and avoided further attacks, the United States should “assume that there exists a grave risk of imminent war.”⁸²

⁸⁰ “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].

⁸¹ Teleconference TT-2066 [Clay, Haislip], March 30, 1949 [Clay Papers].

⁸² “Report by the [State Department] Policy Planning Staff,” October 1, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 1198].

There is no compelling explanation for the sharp difference between the anticipated results of an airlift versus an armed convoy that does not incorporate the use-of-force red line. In particular, it is difficult to explain the observed difference between the expected outcomes of these two actions with a logic predicated on signaling – this despite the ease with which any single action in itself can be interpreted as a signal. If anything, the airlift alone would seem to send an inferior signal of resolve. Convoy-advocate Robert Murphy saw it that way, stating that the airlift “carries with it also a confession of inability or unwillingness to enforce a well-earned right of surface passage.”⁸³

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.”⁸⁴ Undersecretary of State James Webb described President Truman’s views as follows, “He agrees that the reinstatement 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.”⁸⁵ 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.

⁸³ “Murphy to Marshall and Lovett,” July 11, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 84, UD 2534].

⁸⁴ The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade,” June 1, 1949 [FRUS, 1949, Vol. III, p. 820].

⁸⁵ The Acting Secretary of State, “Possible Courses of Action in Event Berlin Blockade is Renewed,” May 31, 1949 [FRUS, 1949, Vol. III, p. 819].

However, Truman also ordered that no “show of force” such as an armed convoy then be made if a physical barrier was in place.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ According to one study, “Soviet passive interference, such as road and bridge obstruction or destruction, could make an armed convoy method abortive.”⁸⁸ Clay’s British counterpart, General Robertson, feared that the Soviets would simply block the road with tanks.⁸⁹ 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

⁸⁶ “Director of Plans and Operations, US Army to CINCEUR,” June 17, 1949 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 444].

⁸⁷ Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948, [Clay Papers].

⁸⁸ James Forrestal, “Report to the National Security Council: U.S. Military Courses of Action with Respect to the Situation in Berlin,” July 28, 1948. Available online from the Truman Presidential Library.

⁸⁹ Shlaim 1983, 131.

confidence in Washington or London that this would solve the problem of Soviet tanks blocking the road.⁹⁰ Looking back on the crisis, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Bradley reiterated these concerns:

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.⁹¹

Western policymakers took seriously this rather 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

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

⁹⁰ "Clay to the Department of the Army," July 10, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 956]; "Murphy to Marshall and Lovett," July 11, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 84, UD 2534].

⁹¹ William Hillman and Francis Heller, "Interview with Omar Bradley," March 29, 1955 in Neal 2003.

border, save for one American train which submitted to inspections in contravention of its orders. The commandant of that train was immediately court-marshaled 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.⁹²

After these failures, the option to send further trains largely fell into disfavor, with advocates of a land supply approach consistently preferring a truck convoy. Why the change? It is difficult to imagine that trucks would send a stronger signal than trains. From a commitment standpoint, trains offer an advantage: trains cannot stop on a dime. Soviet border guards would be the ones in the position of choosing whether to fire, placing the burden on them. So, why view trucks as superior?

The problem with trains was that the Soviets could more easily stop them 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 disassembling 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.⁹³ It was the inability to solve this problem which best explains the shift in Western emphasis from trains to the armed convoy option. It may seem incongruous that the control of rail switches could take on such

⁹² “Clay to Bradley,” April 1, 1948 [Clay Papers]; Haydock 1999, 126-128; Shlaim 1983, 128.

⁹³ “Murphy to Marshall,” June 21, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 911]; “Murphy to Saltzman and Hickerson,” June 21, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 84, UD 2534]; Miller, *To Save a City*, p. 31.

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, which falls short of an overt attack. Clay's superiors in the Defense Department immediately ordered the train to be delayed 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.⁹⁴ 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."⁹⁵ Clay repeatedly tried to impose a more aggressive strategy that embraced brinkmanship to signal resolve, but he found little support in Washington.

Searchlights versus Gunfire

⁹⁴ Teleconference TT-9285 [Clay, Bradley, Noce], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers]; Teleconference TT-9286 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Collins, Wedemeyer], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers]; Teleconference TT-9287 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Wedemeyer], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers]; "Murphy to Marshall," March 31, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 155]; "Murphy to Marshall," April 1, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 886]; Shlaim 1983, 122, 127; Miller 2000, 20.

⁹⁵ Teleconference TT-9287 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Wedemeyer], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers].

Units of the Soviet military did fire on American transport aircraft flying food and fuel into Berlin in a way that could have brought about their destruction. 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 forcing pilots to put up newspapers on cockpit windows to avoid temporary blinding, this tactic never caused a crash.⁹⁶

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).⁹⁷ 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

⁹⁶ Tunner 1985, 185; Haydock 1999, 224.

⁹⁷ Tunner 1985, 218.

this manner but never with the overt use of force. This is 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.

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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ In advocating this action, Clay described the deployment as “essential” and British Foreign Minister Bevin as “highly important.”¹⁰⁰ However, there are six reasons to doubt the significance of the B-29 deployment.

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.

⁹⁸ E.g., Betts 1987, 28-29; Huth 1988, 42; Schelling 1960, 198.

⁹⁹ “Douglas to Marshall,” June 26, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 921].

¹⁰⁰ “Clay to Bradley,” June 28, 1948 [Clay Papers]; “Message from the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Bevin],” July 14, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 966].

President Truman approved the request the next day. After many ebbs and flows in the level of tension and a series of fruitless negotiations, 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 deployment for nearly a month in order for it to fit nicely alongside the evolving exchange of diplomatic notes. The delay resulted from a desire to avoid having the deployment appear to be a response to specific Soviet diplomatic notes. This concern stalled implementation until an appropriate lull in the diplomatic correspondence.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰² 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 and none were in fact deployed. The bomber squadrons selected were not those used for the nuclear mission.

¹⁰¹ “Marshall to Riddleberger,” July 12, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 84, UD 2535B]; “Message from the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Bevin],” July 14, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 966].

¹⁰² “Message from the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Bevin],” July 14, 1948 [FRUS, 1948, Vol. II, p. 966]; “HQ Dept of the Air Force to Lemay,” July 15, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 443].

Some B-29s even seem to have been moved back from Germany to England to reduce vulnerability in the event of Soviet attack.¹⁰³

Fifth, despite some strongly-worded support for the deployment, nowhere in the documentary record do Western policymakers suggest that they expected the B-29 deployment to lead to a change in Soviet policy.¹⁰⁴ 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. This is again indicative of how little was expected of the deployment.

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 such as

¹⁰³ “Wedemeyer to Clay,” July 27, 1948 [NA-CP, Record Group 549, Box 443]; “Clay to Wedemeyer,” July 28, 1948 [Clay Papers].

¹⁰⁴ For the same conclusion: Shlaim 1983, 239.

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.”¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Risking war, military mobilization, and bellicose public statements are widely regarded as ranking among the most common and most 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 quite possible to prevail in a crisis without relying on any of those policy tools. The Western Powers’ strategy did not depend on convincing Soviet leaders that they were willing to use force first to retain their position in Berlin. It deliberately avoided brinkmanship, large-scale mobilization, and ultimatums. The Western Powers sent signals of resolve, but only rather tepid signals from which they expected little. They reversed the course of the crisis and prevailed nonetheless. The established view of strategic interactions during crises struggles to explain this reversal of fortune because both sides utilized a strategy from outside the standard theoretical framework. Instead, the key to understanding the course of the Berlin 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.

Assumptions about the nature of strategic interaction in crises anchor a variety of International Relations theories. Consequently, recognizing that the established view captures only one part of the totality of strategic games played out in crises has potentially far-reaching implications. For instance,

¹⁰⁵ Shlaim 1983, 255.

democracies are often believed to be better able to signal in crises, giving them a fundamental advantage over autocracies.¹⁰⁶ This advantage has even been used to explain the democratic peace.¹⁰⁷ What, then, does it mean that signaling is not always an important part of crisis strategies? Nuclear weapons and, more controversially, nuclear superiority are often assumed to provide coercive leverage to states possessing them because they augment brinkmanship.¹⁰⁸ What, then, does it mean for the role of nuclear weapons in international politics that states often avoid brinkmanship during crises, including in Berlin during one of the signature crises of the nuclear age? Most importantly, war is often understood as the result of the failure of coercive bargaining.¹⁰⁹ What, then, does it mean for existing theories of war that coercive threats and signals of resolve meant to convey information and mitigate uncertainty are not always important parts of interstate crises?

Revisiting Fearon's distinction between crises as competitions in risk taking and crises as competitions in tactical cleverness (attempts to outmaneuver the adversary), the International Relations field has performed admirably at elucidating the former while leaving the latter under-developed. There remains tremendous opportunity to better understand the chess game – not just the poker game – at play in crises. Advancing without attacking is one piece of that larger undertaking.

¹⁰⁶ Schultz 2001.

¹⁰⁷ Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Kroenig 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Fearon 1995.

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