Ch. 2: A Theory of Red Lines and Faits Accomplis

Deterrence is not an all or nothing enterprise. States must deter outright invasion and conquest, but they also must deter more limited unilateral violations, which often take the form of faits accomplis. These violations come in numerous forms, ranging from seizing a small piece of territory to supplying arms to a rebel group to building another centrifuge. Faits accomplis challenge states because making deterrent threats credible is difficult when the issue in dispute is not worth a war. This problem is quite general because all states have many small interests (e.g., individual pieces of territory) to protect. Without a solution, states would be vulnerable to a series of individually limited violations that could sum to much more. How do states manage this problem, and avoid being picked apart piece by piece?¹

The best solution is often to rely on a strong red line. In coercion, every threat contains a demand, and all demands set a red line dividing compliance from noncompliance. Strong red lines are those that make use of a focal point to encapsulate smaller units into one larger unit that states can more credibly threaten to defend, and do so without leaving any of several types of openings for faits accomplis.

Weak red lines suffer from one or more of four vulnerabilities: arbitrariness, imprecision, unverifiability, and incompleteness. First, arbitrary red lines are those that are not set on focal points. These focal points are unique, conspicuous, and clearly different from nearby alternatives. Second, imprecise red lines leave gray areas in which it is ambiguous whether certain actions would or would not violate them. Third, unverifiable red lines are set such that it will not be immediately clear whether or not they have been violated. Fourth, incomplete red lines are those that can be bypassed, the object they aim to secure taken without violating the red line meant to protect it. The history of interstate crises is replete with faits accomplis targeting these gray areas in red lines.

When the adversary calculates correctly, its fait accompli will often succeed in yielding a limited gain. When the adversary miscalculates the deterrer’s willingness to fight for whatever has been seized, the result will can be war. Either way, vulnerable red lines tend to produce undesirable outcomes for the states that set them.

It was not by accident that as Iran and North Korea proceeded towards the capability to construct nuclear weapons, both did so with a long series of incremental and deniable steps rather than one overt public decision to get the bomb. That distinction is perhaps the easiest way to understand the significance of the theory put forward in this chapter. Had Iran or North Korea been obliged to make a single, up-front, all-or-nothing, Rubicon-crossing public decision about whether or not to pursue nuclear weapons, this chapter explains why it would have been more difficult – and therefore less likely – for them to do so. However, as I discuss further below, each exploited a variety of red line vulnerabilities to inch closer and closer to the bomb.

When Italy defied Britain, France, and its legal obligations under the 1936 Non-Intervention Agreement by intervening in the Spanish Civil War, the policy was not implemented with an official announcement and the immediate large-scale deployment of Italian forces. Instead, Italy deployed its forces gradually and secretly, initially referring to them as “volunteers,” providing arms covertly, and steadily tightening a blockade on Republican-held ports for which it denied responsibility. The first contingent of Italian Black Shirts traveled to Spain unarmed and wearing civilian clothing. Even Italy’s extensive use of submarines for that blockade is attributable to the inability to conceal the nationality of surface warships. Italy escaped any meaningful retribution.²

In territorial conflicts such as Kashmir, gray areas and other red line vulnerabilities can lead to land grabs. The Simla Agreement ending the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War established the Line of Control dividing Kashmir. However, the negotiators left a gray area at the northern end, an inhospitable mountainous area centered on the Siachen Glacier with no population or economic value. The agreement read, “Thence north to the glaciers.” This phrase proved to several interpretations. By the 1980s, the temptation to score a political victory by advancing territorially had grown stronger. Reacting to intelligence reports of an imminent Pakistani fait accompli seizing Siachen, India moved first. The Indian Army advanced rapidly by helicopter and established military posts on the mountain peaks on the far side of the glacier before Pakistani forces could react. The result was a series of small battles, but India retained control of the disputed region and Pakistan forwent any immediate escalation elsewhere.³ India’s fait accompli succeeded in seizing the gray area.

The traditional way to understand crises is to suppose that statesmen approach them by asking themselves the question, “What can we do to convince the other side that we are willing to fight in order to get them to back down?” Crises, from this standpoint, revolve around signaling resolve. Although an undisputedly important perspective that I explore further in Chapter Three, in this chapter I approach crises as if statesmen ask themselves a different guiding question, “What can we get away

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² John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 117, 169, 200, 204; Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 54-56, 71. Smoke concludes that British and French red lines (“response thresholds”) were imprecise in a way that produced uncertainty and thereby inspired caution, but it is clear from his discussion that Italy and Germany sought and utilized this ambiguity to aid the Nationalists with a series of unilateral interventions.
with taking unilaterally without starting a war?” The result is a theory of coercive conflict which distinguishes strong and weak red lines, explaining how red lines with any of four weaknesses leave openings that adversaries can exploit with faits accomplis. This theory builds on neglected insights from Thomas Schelling’s classics Arms and Influence and The Strategy of Conflict.⁴

The structure of the chapter is as follows. It first explains and defines the basic concepts and variables of the study. The definitions of “red line” and “fait accompli” are particularly significant because the field lacks conventional definitions of these two underutilized concepts. It then lays out the core logic of the relationship between red lines and faits accomplis, explaining why red lines matter and why vulnerable red lines elicit faits accomplis. It next explores what the existing literature has to say about each vulnerability. Finally, the chapter defines the scope conditions of the theory and considers the question of why vulnerable red lines exist when they have such detrimental consequences for the states setting them.

Concepts: Red Lines, Faits Accomplis, and Coercive Bargaining Outcomes

This dissertation addresses two broad research questions: What explains the actions taken in interstate coercive conflicts? What explains the outcomes of these conflicts? More informally, how do states go about trying to win in a crisis? When and how does crisis strategy work? The theory provided offers partial answers to each question by focusing on the effects of vulnerable red lines and the causes of faits accomplis. To lay the groundwork for this theory, it is first necessary to explain and define the major variables and concepts.

The domain of the project is interstate coercive bargaining. Coercive bargaining is defined as bargaining under the threat of punishment. This punishment often takes the form of starting a war, but can instead consist of more limited actions such as economic sanctions or punitive bombardments.⁵ In coercive bargaining, the coercer threatens to harm the interests of the target if a demand is not met. The target ultimately retains the decision between resistance and capitulation. By definition, the outcome is not simply imposed, however severe the level of duress.⁶Ironically, for that reason this definition of coercive bargaining excludes faits accomplis, which are unilateral impositions. However, faits accomplis normally represent the failure of deterrent threats. The two are inherently linked within a strategic competition between faits accomplis and the red lines meant to deter them.

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⁴ Virtually every major point in the first hundred or so pages of these books has become a mainstay of the literature on coercion, except for the lengthy sections on what I refer to as red lines. Schelling placed no small amount of emphasis on these sections, but despite that, the insights have gone largely unutilized. This chapter aims in part to reformulate and clarify these ideas in order to bring them to light. Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Thomas Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁵ Although I refer to threats of punishment and generally discuss red lines in the context of punishment-type coercion, the theory in this chapter also applies to denial-type coercion. On this distinction, see Robert A. Pape, Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁶ Schelling, Arms and Influence, ch. 1.
The term ‘coercive bargaining’ is intentionally redundant. Coercion is, after all, a form of bargaining that Schelling (1966) aptly described as “dirty bargaining.” The purpose of the redundancy is to make clear my intention to draw from and contribute to the two bodies of literature in International Relations that too often deal separately with the same phenomenon. I refer to these as the coercion literature, which primarily follows a realist approach, and the bargaining literature, which primarily follows a rational choice approach.

In the generic threat, “If you X, then I Y,” demands are X. This definition suits both threats of the form “If you do X, I will do Y” (deterrence) and “Unless you do X, I will do Y” (compellence). These demands can be explicit or tacit, as long as they are conveyed.

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10 Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 69.
11 The efficacy of different means of communicating demands is an excellent area for future research, but it is beyond the scope of this study. One hypothesis that logically flows from the theory in this chapter is that successfully communicating red lines (i.e., the adversary comprehending them) is critical for a favorable outcome. However, I suspect that many of the cases which have been described as communication failures are in fact something else. The Korean War offers a classic example. The United States was less than explicit about its
The conventional wisdom on interstate coercive bargaining assumes that demands are simple. One side in a conflict demands a certain amount of whatever is under dispute and threatens a punishment if that demand is rejected. If the threat is credible and the demand is not too high, the other side agrees. The strategic calculation behind setting a demand is one of assessing how much can be obtained such that the other side still agrees to the terms. This simple view of demands is compelling, but it misses a series of ways in which properties of demands other than how much is demanded have powerful effects on interstate coercion and bargaining. These properties of demands are easiest to think of as characteristics of red lines.

I define “red line” as the part of the demand which divides compliance from violation. Facing a coercive demand, an adversary has a range of options it can take. The coercer must divide these into the categories of compliance and noncompliance. The coercer threatens punishment for noncompliant actions falling on one side of the red line, and declares (or implies) the intent not to punish for compliant actions falling on the other. Red lines are therefore a necessary component of all threats, even though the vast majority of threats do not use the term “red line” explicitly. States do not always set red lines, but red lines are an essential element of all coercive threats. A case without any red lines is a case of something other than coercive bargaining. These red lines are heavily constrained by the actions sought from the adversary and the context in which the demands are made; they are not mere semantics.

The term “red line” entered common usage in English through an overly literal translation of the Hebrew phrase “kav adom,” with the same meaning. This occurred through the Israeli government’s deterrent red line against North Korean invasion of the South, but North Korea nonetheless likely understood that this action would be inimical to U.S. interests. If so, North Korea believed it could get away with its invasion despite a negative response from the United States. What seems like a communication problem may in fact be a fait accompli problem. For a defense of the prevalence, relevance, and comparability of tacit coercive bargaining to explicit coercive bargaining, see Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict, pp. 55-67.


13 I make no claim to have addressed all possible characteristics of demands beyond how much is demanded. One further characteristic of demands (but not red lines) that matters is attributability. If an adversary complies with a demand, how clear is it that this action was due to the demand rather than to other considerations? Attributability is critical for capitulations to affect reputations. Unattributable demands are more likely to succeed in eliciting concessions because they entail lower reputational costs. Thomas Schelling also discusses two other possible characteristics of demands: the timeliness with which demands can be met (which can matter in acute crises) and the connectedness of demands to actions taken in pursuit of them. Schelling, Arms and Influence, pp. 77, 82-84, 86-90; Snyder and Diesing, Conflict among Nations, pp. 19, 257.

14 Schelling, Arms and Influence, pp. 4, 74. I make no assumption about the veracity of these claims; bluffs and aggression despite capitulation are important possibilities.
declaration of a “Red Line” against increased Syrian military involvement in Lebanon in 1976.\textsuperscript{15} Use of the term has steadily risen since then, particularly in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.\textsuperscript{16} Although there are many prior usages of the phrase “red line,” “redline,” and “thin red line,” they do not carry the same meaning. “Line in the sand” is an older phrase with a more similar meaning; “red line” has increasingly supplanted it in common usage, perhaps because it avoids the rhetorical problem that lines in the sand tend not to survive even a modest breeze.

Historically, most deterrent red lines were never referred to as “red lines,” and the term is still often not used when it could be today. For instance, it still appears disproportionately in Middle Eastern contexts. Statesmen, however, have always had ample vocabulary for setting an unmistakable red line without making use of the phrase, as when President John F. Kennedy said, “It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.”\textsuperscript{17}

Even in International Relations contexts, “red line” is sometimes used in slightly different ways. The most different usage refers not to the dividing line between compliance and noncompliance but instead to the minimum level of concession needed from the other side such that a party will accept a bargain rather than resort to punishment/force.\textsuperscript{18} These two overlap when states make sincere demands that the adversary not transgress past the point where the demander finds fighting preferable to enduring the \textit{fait accompli}. Nonetheless, the two definitions will diverge in some cases.\textsuperscript{19} These differences are most often found in the form of transitory positions taken in the course of negotiations, which are not the focus of the dissertation.

The term “red line” has also been increasingly associated with explicitness (i.e., excluding implicit threats) and threats to use force (i.e., excluding threats of lesser punishments). I view these as separate variables, essentially add-ons to the underlying concept of a divider between compliance and violation. Although these variables are important, imposing them as restrictions on the definition of “red line” risks artificially segmenting the phenomena. It also risks obscuring the significance of red lines through conflation with the analytically distinct questions concerning explicitness and what punishment is threatened. Moreover, neither of these variables has as simple an effect on outcomes as one might think. Lower magnitude threats may offset their reduced heft by being cheaper to implement, and

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  \item \textsuperscript{17} John F. Kennedy, “Address to Nation,” October 22, 1962.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Speed limits nicely illustrate this distinction. A speed limit of 65 miles per hour offers a precise red line at 65mph by the definition I use, albeit a somewhat arbitrary and partially unverifiable one (because speed sensors have a margin of error). In contrast, the line at which a police officer will actually pull a car over and issue a speeding ticket, which corresponds to the alternative definition, is higher and less clearly defined. Thanks to Christopher Clary for this example.
\end{itemize}
therefore more credible. Explicitness need not imply intentions. The United States explicitly left South Korea outside its defensive perimeter prior to the Korean War, yet nonetheless decided it needed to defend South Korea when the North invaded in 1950. Many of the strongest red lines are never explicitly stated to the adversary. It is hardly necessary to tell a rival to refrain from sending its army across the border for that red line to be keenly perceived and understood. In the present, South Korea need not make explicit its deterrent red line against a North Korean invasion across for North Korea to perceive that deterrent threat. Because I reject including these added requirements in the definition of “red line,” I use the term more widely than it sometimes appears in common usage.

The explanatory variables are four potential vulnerabilities in the red line component of demands: arbitrariness, imprecision, incompleteness, and unverifiability. In the following section, I provide definitions and follow these with a set of examples from coercive nonproliferation. I sometimes refer to these vulnerabilities collectively as “gray areas,” although this term suits some vulnerabilities better than others.

Faits accomplis are the intermediate variable for the study, meaning that at times I examine the causes of faits accomplis (red line characteristics) and at times I examine the effects of fait accomplis (on outcomes). The overall theory connects red line characteristics to outcomes through faits accomplis.

Faits accomplis are defined as limited unilateral acts of noncompliance that alter the immediate status quo and are not passively reversible. They are generally intended to unilaterally procure something of value, and to force the adversary into the difficult position of choosing to relent to that gain or to risk war with an escalatory response. Pakistan’s 1999 infiltration of forces to occupy positions on India’s side of the Line of Control in the Kargil district of Kashmir offers a classic example. Nazi Germany’s annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1939 despite French and British opposition provides another. Faits accomplis do not only take the form of seizing territory. The Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba in 1961 and Germany’s remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 offer examples of non-territorial faits accomplis. Cable (1994) similarly defines faits accomplis as “not merely limited, but also definitive” actions that confront the adversary “with a choice between acquiescence and an escalatory retaliation.” “Limited” does not mean unimportant, but rather only that the fait accompli does aim to conquer the deterrer outright or change the regime. “Unilateral” means that the adversary is not a participant in the change in the status quo, which is instead imposed upon that adversary to its

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20 This is in part a side-effect of strong red lines being set on focal points, as these focal points allow the adversary to perceive the red line without needing to be told.

21 Snyder and Diesing, Conflict among Nations, p. 227; Schelling, Arms and Influence, pp. 44-45.


23 This leads to a definitional oddity wherein a single action may be a fait accompli with respect to one adversary but not another. Iraq’s 1990 invasion and annexation of Kuwait was a fait accompli with respect to the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other states opposed to that action. However, it was not a fait accompli with respect to Kuwait, because it was not limited from the Kuwaiti standpoint. Faits accomplis draw their effectiveness in part from being limited, as discussed in a later section, so however awkward this definitional quirk may be, it does conform to the logic of the theory.
detriment. Coercion is usually thought of as leveraging a threat to earn a concession given by the other side, but the focus here is on simply taking a concession without it being given.

*Faits accomplis* are distinct in principle from demands or signals. For example, the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia in 1914 is not a *fait accompli* because Serbia retained the option to capitulate or attempt to negotiate; Austria did not simply seize a strip of Serbian territory at the outset. Unfortunately, it is often not possible to place crisis actions into neatly defined, mutually exclusive boxes. For instance, virtually any *fait accompli* has the potential to signal something, as – for that matter – does nearly any other action taken by a state during a crisis. It is therefore necessary to evaluate the primary purpose of actions and categorize accordingly. I use the term “*fait accompli*” far more frequently than is the norm in International Relations, but I believe I do so without broadening its definition beyond existing usage. This suggests that the concept has been under-utilized, and would benefit from more consideration.

*Faits accomplis* can be executed repeatedly in what Schelling (1966) termed “salami tactics,” a reference to slicing off the objective piece by piece in limited increments. I define “salami tactics” as repeated *faits accomplis*. Usually, but not necessarily, these *faits accomplis* are of a similar nature to each other. Hitler’s advances into the Rhineland, Austria, the Sudetenland, the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and Poland are the standard example of salami tactics. Territorial salami tactics of this sort have been rare, but salami tactics have been far more prevalent in other issue areas with weaker red lines. For example, demands to halt human rights abuses or nuclear programs are often met with a continuing series of acts of limited unilateral noncompliance.

The dependent variable is the outcome of the coercive bargaining interaction. This variable ranges from total success to total failure. Importantly, states can suffer coercive failure in two distinct ways: they can lose either by backing down or through the imposition of punishment, especially when that punishment leads to escalation and war. When a threat is rebuffed, the choice for the coercer is often between enduring a called bluff and starting a war. Coercive success is simpler; it requires the adversary to back down, either by abandoning its demands or capitulating to concessions. In the real world, outcomes often fall in between these possibilities. Stalemates are possible, and there is a difference between small and large successes. It is easiest to think of the dependent variable as a spectrum from State A backing down completely to State B backing down completely, with stalemate in the middle. Also possible, but lying outside this spectrum, is the second form of coercive failure: the imposition of punishment. This often initiates a costly war that represents a failure for both sides.

Some coercive successes (and some failures) are readily observable; others are not. A state might be deterred from an action it knows would provoke a violent response without any deterrent threat being explicitly made. A state may forego making a threat it knows would fail. Somehow taking into account the unobserved instances of success and failure is difficult but necessary. Past studies of

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coercion have disregarded these hidden cases from consideration and, consequently, misevaluated the rate and determinants of coercive success.  

The Red Line Vulnerabilities

Vulnerable red lines are any of the following: arbitrary, imprecise, incomplete, and unverifiable. These vary from not at all vulnerable to fully vulnerable, with degrees of partial vulnerability both possible and common. The U.S. red line against the Soviet introduction of nuclear missiles into Cuba was partially unverifiable, for example, because a violation might have been detected. Any combination of vulnerabilities is possible in principle, including none and all. The standard deterrence scenario in which a state seeks only to deter invasion across a well-defined border offers a common example of a red line with none of the vulnerabilities. Importantly, red lines fail for many reasons beyond the four vulnerabilities discussed here, including the absence of a sufficient national interest to uphold them. The violation of a red line with one of these vulnerabilities therefore cannot be assumed to be a consequence of the vulnerability; deeper analysis such as that in Chapters Three, Four, and Five is required to establish why red lines fail. Below I define the four red line vulnerabilities and provide a set of examples drawn from efforts by the United States to coercively halt and reverse nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran between 2002 and 2012.

An arbitrary red line is one that has no conspicuous, qualitative differences from nearby alternatives. I use the term “arbitrary” as the antonym of “focal,” rather than its alternative common usage as the antonym of “deliberate.” Non-arbitrary red lines fall on focal points. Established national borders generally provide such focal points. Geography can also often provide focal points (e.g., rivers and shorelines), as can certain norms and principles. Arbitrary red lines in the form of gray areas can arise, for instance, when political geographic focal points and political geographic focal points fail to overlap. The United Kingdom’s red line against an Argentinean seizure of the Falklands offers an example. Physical geography alone can also produce gray areas within focal points. Even as rivers offer focal points for strong red lines along borders, river islands often constitute gray areas that are tempting targets for faits accomplis.

An imprecise red line does not specify whether certain possible actions do or do not violate it. The degree of imprecision is the size of the resultant gray area. Imprecision is greater as more questions of the form “does it include ______” cannot be answered unequivocally. Imprecise demands are ambiguous, though imprecision is not the only way in which demands can be ambiguous. The focus here is on the precision of the demand itself, not the clarity with which it is conveyed.  


26 If one thinks of a radio message, the distinction is clear. A message could be received clearly but still be unclear as to its meaning. Alternatively, a highly-precise message could be garbled in transmission. It is possible that clarity of transmission and clarity of intended meaning produce the same effects, but I do not take that for granted. The former is a promising area for future research, given the role of poor communication in causing several prominent wars.
An *incomplete* red line does not fully encapsulate that which it aims to protect. An incomplete red line could also be called a “narrow” or “flankable” red line, because it is vulnerable to a *fait accompli* which seizes whatever the red line is protecting without actually violating that red line. More formally, an incomplete red line exists when a state demands A to get or keep B, but the adversary can attain B while still complying with A.

An *unverifiable* red line is one for which it will not be immediately known whether the red line has been violated if the adversary does in fact violate it.

United States coercive nonproliferation efforts targeting Iran and North Korea between 2002 and 2012 offer examples of all four vulnerabilities, which seem to be endemic to coercive nonproliferation. These vulnerabilities were, by and large, not the result of policy errors by Western diplomats. Setting strong red lines was inherently difficult due to the nature of the issue, as a later section will revisit.

To begin with Iran, the overarching objective was that Iran not construct nuclear weapons. In the words of United States Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, “Our red line to Iran is, do not develop a nuclear weapon. That’s a red line for us.”\(^{27}\) The problem was that this red line was unverifiable and, to a certain extent, incomplete. Once a state such as Iran accumulates all of the necessary materials and know-how to construct a nuclear weapon, constructing the bomb itself is comparatively easy to accomplish and conceal.\(^{28}\) Several nuclear powers did just that for a time. Consequently, demanding no nuclear weapon left Iran the opening to develop a large-scale nuclear program that would be capable of rapidly and (potentially) covertly constructing weapons. These problems led to the need for at least one additional red line limiting the nature of Iran’s nuclear program.

Consider, then, consider the potential red line from the United States to Iran that it have no nuclear weapons *program*. This red line suffers from its own problems. In particular, it is imprecise because it does not specify an answer to the question: what is a nuclear weapons program? Is it the manufacturing of bombs? Is it the production of fissile material, i.e., highly enriched uranium or plutonium? This is the critical technical hurdle to overcome in making a nuclear bomb, but fissile material has civilian applications and is a legal right under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Even within an attempt to limit fissile material production, how about a pilot centrifuge facility? Or a few experiments at spent-fuel reprocessing? These gray areas leave obvious openings for Iran to progress towards a nuclear weapon without clearly violating the red line.

Given the imprecision of demanding no nuclear weapons program, the United States found itself for years demanding instead that Iran halt and/or abandon its uranium enrichment program. Doing so

\(^{27}\) James Reynolds, “Israel’s Fears of a Nuclear Iran,” *BBC News*, January 20\(^{th}\), 2012.

meant demands such as that Iran not build another centrifuge and that Iran not operate existing centrifuges. These demands were comparatively precise. However, even assuming the United States would have known whether its demands were violated, the problem was arbitrariness. In practice, this amounted to a red line of the form, “Do not build a 5,687th centrifuge.” Why the next centrifuge, and not the one after? Could the United States credibly threaten to abandon its coercive effort and impose punishment for one centrifuge, rather than reinstate the very same demand for the next? If Iran built just one more, the temptation will be to demand a halt again, rather than to give up and impose punishment. The sudden emphasis on that centrifuge was arbitrary. The path was paved for an interminable series of threats, protracted but inconclusive negotiations, and gradual Iranian progress towards the bomb.

The history of coercive nonproliferation against Iran is a history of vulnerable red lines exploited with incremental steps towards the ability to construct a nuclear weapon. In 2005, the West set an explicit red line against Iran converting raw uranium into uranium hexafluoride gas, a necessary step for enriching uranium. When Iran did just this in 2006, the West responded by setting a new red line proscribing the use of this gas to enrich uranium.29 When Iran crossed that red line as well, a series of further red lines followed. At various times the Western powers demanded a halt to Iranian uranium enrichment, that Iran not resume enrichment after temporary halts, that Iran limit its enrichment to a pilot scale rather than industrial scale, and that Iran not enrich past low levels suitable for nuclear power reactors.30 Eventually each of these red lines was crossed.

In addition to confronting many of the same difficulties when applying coercive nonproliferation to North Korea between 2002 and 2012, the United States suffered from certain specific fears over the potential incompleteness of its red line. In order to achieve denuclearization, the United States at times focused on demanding the closure or dismantlement of the Yongbyon reactor, North Korea’s source of fissile material (plutonium). This red line was incomplete due to the potential for a rumored secret North Korean uranium enrichment program. With such a program, North Korea could (and did) flank the Yongbyon red line and continue to expand its nuclear arsenal despite closing Yongbyon.31

The logical solution to this incomplete red line was to broaden the demand by also requiring that North Korea forgo uranium enrichment and destroy all its extant nuclear devices, which was the course taken by the United States. The problem with this broader red line, however, was verifiability. Would the United States know for sure if covert uranium enrichment continued, or if a few bombs were concealed in a bunker?32 In bargaining with the North Koreans, the United States faced a tradeoff between completeness and verifiability. It opted for a complete demand with further verification

demands to redress this unverifiability, but the North Koreans rejected these measures.\textsuperscript{33} It is possible that North Korea refused to agree to any terms that would leave the United States with a stronger red line against further steps towards a nuclear arsenal.

In sum, the fingerprints of vulnerable red lines run throughout the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs. American red lines failed to do more than force the two states to proceed in limited, deniable increments toward the bomb. Iran and North Korea were able to pursue nuclear weapons without ever having to make anything like a single, public, all-or-nothing declaration of intent around which the United States could have set its red line. This would have been the ideal, strongest-possible red line, nearly the opposite of what actually transpired. Instead, the result in both cases was that the United States saw its vulnerable red lines picked apart with a series of \textit{fait accompli} steps toward the bomb. The typology of red line vulnerabilities provides a theoretical lens and set of concepts for a discussion of these challenges.

\textbf{Why Red Lines Matter: The Problem of \textit{Faits Accomplis}}

Why do red lines matter? Why aren’t they mere window dressing at the margins of coercive conflicts shaped and determined by the power and interests of the states involved? If exploiting a vulnerable red line is analogous to slipping through a loophole in a contract, why does it work without a government to compel the other party to abide such technicalities? In international politics, wouldn’t this adversary instead insist on renegotiating, and wouldn’t that negotiation be determined by the same considerations of power and interest that led to the status quo ante, implying the situation would return to where it stood initially? The importance of strong red lines is far from obvious.

Red lines matter because they frequently offer the best available solution to a pervasive problem confronting states: \textit{faits accomplis}. When an adversary takes a limited unilateral action such as seizing territory or progressing further towards a nuclear weapon, states confront a difficult decision regarding the nature and extent of their response. How would India respond if Pakistani soldiers were to tomorrow seize territory in Kashmir? How would NATO have responded if the Soviet Union were to have seized West Berlin? How would Japan respond if China were to unilaterally seize disputed islands in the East China Sea? And if deterring the first \textit{fait accompli} fails, how do states prevent being taken apart piece by piece with salami tactics? Making credible the threat to retaliate is essential for deterrence, but it is no easy task when the stakes are limited.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} For the argument that the U.S. should initially accept incompleteness to achieve an initial deal, then work towards breadth, see: Joel S. Wit, “Enhancing U.S. Engagement with North Korea,” The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 2007), p. 64.

\textsuperscript{34} I focus my discussion on the importance of red lines for deterrence because the significance of red lines is simpler for deterrence than for compellence. Nonetheless, strong red lines are important for compellence. First, many compellent threats are recast in deterrent terms. Returning to the example of Iran’s nuclear program, what would seem to be a case of compellence in which the United States and others sought for Iran to dismantle its nuclear program was nearly always presented to Iran in deterrent terms. Whatever the eventual goal, the exigent demand was usually to halt enrichment or cease installing additional centrifuges. Figure 2.1 illustrates this nicely. Second, compellent red lines matter because they can lead to bargains and thereby create the contours of a future state of affairs, including its red lines. Demanding the adversary agree to a new state of affairs in which they will
More often than not, the best option available to a state confronting this problem is to rely on a strong red line set on a focal point to encapsulate many small units of value that this state cannot credibly threaten to defend individually. Knowing it cannot mount a credible defense after abandoning this red line, that point becomes one from which it cannot retreat without greater cost. Any red lines behind it would be arbitrary, and easily pushed yet further back. Because this deterrer would be in dire straits if it loses this red line, it can more credibly threaten to fight to defend it. National borders are the clearest example: if an adversary is allowed to cross a border without starting a war, then barriers to further predation are lost even if the initial invasion only occupied a small slice of territory. The critical question is, as Schelling put it, “If not here, where?”

Strong red lines set on focal points offer states a way to manage the problem of faits accomplis that is generally preferable to the alternatives. War always remains an option, but it is likely to be costly out of all proportion to the value of what the adversary has just taken. A strategy of proportional retaliation is often the most appealing alternative to a strategy predicated on strong red lines, especially for cases in which a strong red line is out of reach. However, a proportional response to a fait accompli may be insufficient to recover what has been lost, and it may entail grave open-ended risks without a clear path to an acceptable outcome. In many cases, a proportional response amounts to accepting a localized conflicts on the adversary’s terms, often an unpromising proposition. Moreover, this sort of reciprocity strategy is prone to escalatory spirals in which each side retaliates for the last action by the other, resulting in a costly action-reaction cycle with no clear end point short of war.

Poorly defined colonial borders provide many examples of the consequences of weak red lines. The Soviet-Japanese border running from Mongolia to Korea during the 1930s offers an extreme case, because the demarcation of this border was exceptionally poor. For instance, one 632 kilometer segment of the border was identified by only 35 markers, of which twelve had vanished and six seemed

\[\text{need to defend a vulnerable red line against fait accomplis will heighten their fears that these faits accomplis are likely to take place. States capitulating to compellent threats will always be sensitive to renewed and increased demands following their concessions, but sticking these states with a vulnerable red line can exacerbate the problem. Finally, the distinction between deterrence and compellence itself may have more to do with red lines than has been appreciated. The fundamental distinction between the two lies in who must initiate the use force (i.e., “move last”); deterrence is thought to have an advantage because the adversary must either initiate mutually-costly hostilities or relent to the status quo. But, consider the simple case in which a deterrer aims to discourage an aggressive adversary from invading. Even if this adversary does attack across the border with shots fired by both sides, the deterrer still retains the option to capitulate and avoid most of the costs of fighting. The advantage for the deterrer is less a matter of the last-move position than is usually believed. Instead, it has more to do with the importance of focal red lines (both borders and firing on forces) being taken for granted. Strong red lines based on focal points are why it is usually assumed that violating many deterrent red lines “automatically” means war, even though it is not in fact automatic. On deterrence vs. compellence, see Schelling, Arms and Influence, Ch. 2.}

\[\text{35 Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 159.}

to have been moved. These conditions largely precluded strong red lines. Tensions ran high. The frontier was beset by numerous crises and small-scale *faits accomplis* in the form of occupying disputed land. The border saw 152 minor border disputes between 1932 and 1934. Even where the border seemed to be clearly and non-arbitrarily defined by the Amur River, fighting broke out in 1937 over river islands that fell ambiguously within what was otherwise a clear and conspicuous boundary between the two empires. Both sides perceive a serious chance of war breaking out on short notice. Border tensions eventually resulted in the Changkufeng War of 1938 and the larger Nomonhan war of 1939. This example illustrates the consequences of weak red lines between two long-standing rivals. Tensions and fears of war may have been the inevitable result of the collision of Japanese and Russian imperial ambitions, but the unusual pattern of *faits accomplis*, including some that boiled over into wars, was not.

As in the Soviet-Japanese case, the absence (or violation) of strong red lines does not automatically lead to war, but rather it leads to a particularly chaotic, war-prone state of disorder in which *faits accomplis* are unusually common and effective. From the desire to avoid this war-prone disorder comes the enhanced credibility of threats to uphold strong red lines.

All of this reasoning leads to the six hypotheses below, which aim to explain the behavior in and outcomes of coercive conflicts:

**H1: Vulnerable red lines make *faits accomplis* more likely.**

Vulnerable red lines cause undesirable outcomes for the states setting them in several ways, all of which flow from the underlying premise that vulnerable red lines make *faits accomplis* more effective and, in consequence, more likely. The first hypothesis embodies this claim.

**H2: Vulnerable red lines make states more likely to accede to gains made by adversary *faits accomplis*.**

The first way in which vulnerable red lines bring about undesirable outcomes is that they entice the adversary into a *fait accompli* to which the deterrer ultimately relents. Nazi Germany’s sudden remilitarization of the Rhineland in violation of the Treaty of Versailles offers one example, and the subsequent *Anschluss* with Austria (in which Austria was absorbed into Germany) another, at least from the standpoint of Britain and France. The second hypothesis captures this logic. Acceding to gains following an adversary *fait accompli* becomes more likely both because 1) vulnerable red lines make *faits accomplis* more effective and 2) vulnerable red lines make *faits accomplis* more common. It is possible that red line vulnerabilities are better at predicting where *faits accomplis* take place (gray areas) than whether they take place. Still, there is no compelling reason why red line characteristics would affect the location of *faits accomplis* if they do not also make those *faits accomplis* more effective. Why would states design *faits accomplis* around red line vulnerabilities if they accrue no

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38 Ibid., p. 93.
39 Ibid., pp. 104-105.
advantage in doing so? And, it stands to reason that making an action more effective makes it more likely.

**H3: Vulnerable red lines make states more likely to grant gains to adversaries for fear of faits accomplis.**

Vulnerable red lines can also cause capitulations even when no fait accompli takes place. This is possible when vulnerable red lines foster enough fear of a potential fait accompli that demands perceived as untenable are forgone or abandoned. States can choose to give up on something rather than attempt deterrence with a vulnerable red line. The Anglo-French decision to pressure Czechoslovakia to concede the Sudetenland to Nazi Germany in the infamous Munich Crisis offers a well-known example. The Partial Test Ban Treaty regulating the testing of nuclear weapons was partial only because the United States refused in the 1960s to accept a comprehensive ban. This comprehensive ban would have been built around an unverifiable red line against potentially concealable underground tests by the Soviet Union. The Soviets refused to consent to what the United States saw as the minimum acceptable number of intrusive inspections meant to eliminate the verifiability problem, leading the United States to give up on a comprehensive ban.\(^{40}\) This channel through which vulnerable red lines affects outcomes often transpires without an observable fait accompli or crisis.

**H4: Vulnerable red lines cause faits accomplis which make war more likely.**

Alternatively, vulnerable red lines can entice the adversary into a fait accompli which starts a war or some other form of mutually-costly punishment. Whether a fait accompli results in a successful gain or a war depends on whether the state employing it has successfully gauged the level of loss the other side will accept before it prefers war. In that sense, this theory is not entirely divorced from traditional structural variables like power and interests (see next chapter). Miscalculating or gambling on an uncertain estimate of this difficult-to-observe aspect of the other side’s interests can cause states to attempt faits accomplis in pursuit of limited gains only to end up starting wars.\(^{41}\) Although the connection to red lines has received relatively little attention, the claim that faits accomplis are perilous and fraught with the potential to cause war is generally accepted.\(^{42}\) Argentina’s seizure of the Falkland Islands in 1982 offers an example of a fait accompli that backfired and led to a failed wider war against the United Kingdom.

**H5: Vulnerable red lines cause expectations of faits accomplis which make war more likely.**


\(^{41}\) On the miscalculation of an adversary’s resolve leading to war, see Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War”;

Just as the fear of potential faits accomplis can cause states do back down without a fait accompli actually taking place, the expectation of intolerable faits accomplis can cause a state to initiate war prior to the anticipated fait accompli taking place. A state may believe its adversary underestimates its willingness to fight and so will exploit openings for faits accomplis in pursuit of limited gains. This state may choose to fight preemptively on its own terms rather than wait for that adversary to fully prepare and implement a fait accompli. Many Native American tribes and other groups confronting the gradual encroachment of settler colonists across their unmarked, ambiguous borders opted for war because they foresaw the eventual outcome. Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939 offers another example. Although also a case in which a fait accompli led to war, it was not the intrinsic worth of Poland that provoked Britain and France into the major war they had so assiduously sought to avoid. Instead, it was the fear and expectation of future German faits accomplis that led to an (already belated) decision to fight now rather than endure further German expansion. In that instance, any hope of establishing a strong red line against German expansion had been lost after the series of successful German territorial seizures leading up to the invasion of Poland.

H6: Faits accomplis which strike strong red lines are more likely to lead to war than faits accomplis which strike vulnerable red lines.

The first hypothesis conjectured that faits accomplis tend not to strike strong red lines. The sixth hypothesis explains why by conjecturing that they should be more likely to generate escalation. Somalia’s 1977 attempt to seize the ethnically-Somali Ogaden Province from Ethiopia offers an example of a fait accompli attempt which violated a strong red line and led to war. Pakistan’s 1999 Kargil Operation seizing unoccupied strategic positions on India’s side of the Line of Control (the salient focal point) offers another, albeit one that led to less intense hostilities. India and Pakistan’s nuclear tests in 1998 crossed a focal point and led to more punishment by the United States than prior actions that included the actual construction of nuclear bombs. Although the fifth and sixth hypotheses explain why vulnerable red lines make war more likely, the sixth hypothesis has the potential to offset that effect. Taking the hypotheses together, the expectation is that vulnerable red lines make faits accomplis less likely to take place but more likely to escalate to war if they do take place. Vulnerable red lines increase the likelihood of war through one mechanism but may reduce it through another. The net effect on the likelihood of war depends on which of these mechanisms predominates. I return to this point in Chapter Four, where it has significant implications for the quantitative analysis of the relationships between red lines, faits accomplis, and war.

Many crises feature more complex strategic interactions than these hypotheses can capture. One reason why is that something gained through a fait accompli must be retained. This generally requires a new deterrent red line. The new red line can have vulnerabilities of its own. For instance, a river island remains a gray area regardless of which side occupies it. In many cases, challengers seize something in a fait accompli only to have the original deterrer retake it in a counter fait accompli. Both the Berlin and Cuba cases considered in later chapters feature an initial fait accompli targeting a red line vulnerability (as predicted) followed by a more complex strategic interaction involving the new red lines
set during the crises. As explained in the previous chapter, this type of case is optimal for qualitative theory testing because it offers such a rich array of observable implications. Nonetheless, an effort to catalog each of these possibilities would quickly lose touch with parsimony, and so the above hypotheses represent only the simplest, most direct predictions of this theory of red lines and \textit{faits accomplis}.

These hypotheses speak to the underlying research agenda of explaining the actions taken during crises and other coercive conflicts, as well as the outcomes of those conflicts.\footnote{A final hypothesis also follows from this logic: vulnerable red lines make crises more likely. I exclude this from the set above for the sake of avoiding an additional dependent variable, and because this hypothesis is not adequately tested in the empirical chapters. It offers an opportunity for future research.} The hypotheses offer only one part of the complete answer to those larger questions. Although the dangers of \textit{faits accomplis} are understood in the existing literature, the determinants of when \textit{faits accomplis} take place and when they succeed have received virtually no attention, nor has the role of red lines in answering those two questions.

**Exploiting Red Line Vulnerabilities in the Literature**

This section reviews the existing literature in International Relations on red lines. Special emphasis is placed on Thomas Schelling’s insights in \textit{Arms and Influence} and \textit{The Strategy of Conflict}, from which the theory of red lines in this chapter draws heavily. The theory in this chapter builds on Schelling’s insights, refining them into a clearly-specified theory while making certain modifications and additions as necessary.\footnote{Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}; Schelling, \textit{The Strategy of Conflict}. Though undeniably brilliant, Schelling’s discussion of these dynamics is not always consistent, can be vague, and often conflates the four red line characteristics with each other and with other considerations involved in coercive signaling/communication. This likely explains why so much less has been made of these passages in these books than many other sections of those classic works, despite the emphasis Schelling himself placed on them. Partly because Schelling’s discussion of these matters tends towards vagueness and inconsistency, there is no clean way to catalog the differences between the theory in this chapter and the ideas in his books. I deal with this problem simply by citing any relevant portions for every major theoretical claim I make. Readers can judge for themselves where Schelling’s contribution ends and mine begins, but the underlying fact is that this theory is built on Schelling’s insights.} I proceed through the literature’s discussion of each vulnerability in turn.

**Exploiting Arbitrary Red Lines**

Red lines set on focal points are advantageous because once they are abandoned, there is no credible barrier against limited violations. Stern et al. (1989) conclude along these lines that “concessions encourage further demands when ... a retreat takes a state past a salient point.”\footnote{Though note the difference: further demands \textit{vs.} further \textit{faits accomplis}. Paul C. Stern, Robert Axelrod, Robert Jervis, and Roy Radner, “Deterrence in the Nuclear Age: The Search for Evidence” in Paul C. Stern, Robert Axelrod, Robert Jervis, and Roy Radner eds., \textit{Perspectives on Deterrence} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 21.} Arbitrary red lines are easily pushed to alternative arbitrary lines with targeted \textit{faits accomplis}. Schelling (1966) specifies the most important characteristic of non-arbitrary red lines as being different from alternative possible red lines in a way that is “qualitative rather than a matter of degree.”\footnote{Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, p. 138.} In other
words, this focal point will make for a stronger red line if it is unique and singular, rather than one of several similar qualitative distinctions.

The importance of focal points, salient points, conspicuous points, firebreaks, discontinuities, saliencies, and stark distinctions (all referencing the same idea) has a history in the literature.\textsuperscript{47} In International Relations, most of this attention came during the Cold War with regard to the risks of escalation from conventional war to nuclear war. Kahn (1965) famously emphasized the importance of the saliency of the nuclear-use threshold in limiting escalation. He quotes Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Alain Enthoven, “In efforts to limit violence, there is and will remain an important distinction, a ‘firebreak’ if you like … a recognizable, qualitative distinction that both combatants can recognize and agree upon if they want to.”\textsuperscript{48} Yet, can’t conventional weapons in large quantities do as much damage as a nuclear bomb? Isn’t even this distinction arbitrary? Kahn defended the emphasis on the convention-nuclear focal point as follows,

The nuclear threshold has become a purely formal, nonlogical distinction between two types of war. Therefore, before it can be dismissed as too arbitrary, we have to ask whether or not there are, logically, functionally, or otherwise, more ‘objective’ and salient threshold, at least once the nuclear border has been crossed. If we do not find such thresholds, then we must ask why it is wrong to use arbitrary distinctions when they are widely accepted.\textsuperscript{49}

The importance of focal points has also been recognized in studies of international law and agreements, with particular emphasis on their role in enabling agreements by making violations less likely. Huth et al (2011) find that international legal principles and agreements provide focal points that increase rate at which territorial conflicts get resolved.\textsuperscript{50} Carter and Goemans (2010) find that new borders tend to form based on pre-existing administrative boundaries because theses boundaries provide a focal point that enables bargains.\textsuperscript{51} Schelling (1966) remarks on the intriguing fact that states very often comply with treaties they have not signed because these treaties provide focal points for all

\textsuperscript{48} Kahn, \textit{On Escalation}, pp. 94-97.
\textsuperscript{49} Kahn, \textit{On Escalation}, p. 97.
states, including non-signatories. Fortna (2003, 2004) makes the case for precise agreements that also provide “a focal point that can help prevent ‘salami tactic’ attempts to push the line to either side's advantage.” She emphasizes the utility of demilitarized zones in establishing such focal points.

Schelling (1960, 1966) provides the one clear elaboration of why arbitrary red lines are so dangerous, and why focal points are therefore so valuable: “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.” There are many examples of this. Following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact granting the Soviet Union a sphere of influence encompassing the Baltic states, the Soviet Union did not simply invade or demand the outright surrender of sovereignty by these states. Instead, the USSR gradually used its undisputed relative power advantage to demand socialist reforms and establish military bases, which led to ever-growing control and ultimately annexation without military resistance or insurgency. Nazi Germany succeeded with a similar strategy against Czechoslovakia. Although the annexation of the Sudetenland and the ultimate annexation of the remainder of the country are more often remembered, the series of interceding steps in which Nazi Germany demanded further territorial concessions – and other concessions such as the unrestricted use of a highway cutting through the heart of Czechoslovakia – should not be forgotten. Germany thereby achieved the complete surrender of Czechoslovakia without any direct resistance from the Czech military, something that might well not have happened had Germany demanded that outcome from the start without using salami tactics.

There have always been doubts about whether what is seen as a focal point by one side will also be seen that way by the other, perhaps due to cultural differences or some intervening psychological factor. This view relates to a broader skepticism about signaling discussed in the next chapter. This critique would only pose an existential threat to the theory in this chapter if mutually-recognized focal points are truly rare, but there are too many examples of mutually-perceived focal points such as rivers, shorelines, and longstanding borders to sustain that view. Still, one can reasonably suppose that when a deterrer perceives it has set a red line on a focal point that the adversary does not perceive in the same way, unexpected and particularly perilous faits accomplis may be the result.

52 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 140. In some cases, these ‘compliant’ actions would have been taken regardless, but in others states take highly specific actions that only make sense with respect to an existing treaty.
55 Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, p. 111. I forgo further discussion here due to the treatment of the issue in the earlier section on why red lines matter.
Finally, Schelling (1960) suggests that focal points may naturally strengthen over time, particularly when they are generally respected.\textsuperscript{59} This may explain Shimshoni’s (1988) observation that challengers sometimes use violence to prevent the status quo from becoming accepted and recognized, i.e. to prevent the formation or solidification of a focal point.\textsuperscript{60} Pakistan’s history of incursions and challenges to the Line of Control in Kashmir may be indicative of this strategy to try to minimize the focal-ness of a focal point which works in the adversary’s favor.\textsuperscript{61} Strong Palestinian opposition to the Israeli security wall with segments running through the pre-1967 West Bank fits this mold, being motivated in part that this wall will become a focal point that serves as the basis for a future border.\textsuperscript{62} Egypt’s motivation for the 1967-1970 War of Attrition with Israel has also been attributed to the desire to prevent the Suez Canal (and the adjacent Bar Lev Line) from becoming the presumed basis for an eventual border.\textsuperscript{63} The phenomena of aggressive actions designed to prevent the formation or solidification of focal points provides an interesting qualification to the broader claims in this chapter that strong focal points aid in deterring aggressive actions. There is no contradiction here. The logic mirrors that of the relationship between relative power and deterrence; greater relative power tends to deter attack, but favorable relative power shifts provide a window of opportunity for the adversary to strike that tends to promote an attack.\textsuperscript{64}

\textit{Exploiting Imprecise Red Lines}

Imprecise red lines are vulnerable to \textit{faits accomplis} in their gray areas. The temptation for the deterrer is to sacrifice the gray area in order to avoid an even more costly war. The hope is that the gray area can be lost without unduly calling into question the credibility of the deterrent threats to fight in response to future \textit{faits accomplis} that unambiguously cross red lines.

According to Schelling (1966), imprecise red lines are quite prevalent: “most commitments are ultimately ambiguous in detail, ... [often] because of the plain impossibility of defining them in exact detail.”\textsuperscript{65} Ambiguity in detail is a common problem even for red lines set on undisputed focal points.

\textsuperscript{60} Jonathan Shimshoni, \textit{Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 218. Strategic behavior designed to affect the strength of other states’ red lines is not the focus of this project even as it is consistent with it, and therefore offers an interesting area for further research.
\textsuperscript{61} Raghavan, \textit{Siachen}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{65} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, p. 67. Schelling further remarks, “There is always some threshold below which the commitment is just not operative, and even that threshold itself is usually unclear.” However inviolable a border is writ large, one soldier straying across inadvertently generally will not trigger large-scale retaliation.
Smoke (1978) observes, “Decision-makers may employ a gradualist strategy to try to smudge, or avoid as much as possible, the discreteness and obviousness of saliencies they are crossing.”66

A contemporary example arises in the deterrence of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, to which the United States has an ambiguous security commitment. It is particularly unclear whether or not the U.S. deterrent red line protecting Taiwan from Chinese attack extends to the Taiwanese-held islands of Jinmen (Quemoy) and/or Mazu (Matsu) from invasion. The United States would presumably be reluctant to fight over small islands within such close proximity to mainland China, given the military disadvantages of doing so and their lack of intrinsic worth. However, failing to fight might erode the credibility of the larger red line around Taiwan. It would also cede the islands. This could undermine Taiwan’s faith in U.S. security commitments and facilitate future Chinese coercion. Should tensions escalate in the future, a Chinese fait accompli targeting these islands is a problem that should be taken seriously.

But can’t “strategic ambiguity” be beneficial? A considerable amount has been written about both the virtues of ambiguity and the virtues of clarity in coercion, bargaining, and negotiation. There is no focused study that attempts to compile (let alone evaluate) these competing claims in the International Relations context. Nor is it clear that these claims are mutually exclusive, as they may each apply in differing circumstances. Imprecise red lines are only one type of ambiguity in coercive bargaining. Several of the main arguments in favor of ambiguity do not extend to setting imprecise red lines. Moreover, the theory in this chapter does not necessarily capture the net effect of ambiguity across all the ways it may influence outcomes. Instead, the theory explains why one important consequence of imprecise red lines is to enable adversary fait accomplis and thereby bring about undesirable outcomes for the states setting them. Below I briefly review the main claims the literature makes for and against imprecise demands.

The primary argument against ambiguity is inextricably linked to the primary argument for it. By providing states with the flexibility to respond to a violation by denying that a real red line was in fact crossed, ambiguity allows them an escape route to avoid enforcing the threat. This is advantageous in that it avoids entrapment into unwanted wars, but disadvantageous in that deterrence is less credible when backing down is less costly. Schelling (1960) makes the case as follows:

It is essential ... to leave as little room as possible for judgment or discretion in carrying out the threat. If one is committed to punish a certain type of behavior when it reaches certain limits, but the limits are not carefully and objectively defined, the party threatened will realize that when the time comes to decide whether the threat must be enforced or not, his interest and that of the threatening party coincide in an attempt to avoid the mutually unpleasant consequences.67

According to Lebow (1977), “Flexible commitments, which appear to limit the would-be deterrer’s cost of disengagement, are hardly likely to be interpreted as impressive indications of

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66 Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, p. 275.
resolve.68 Snyder and Diesing (1977) argue along these lines that maximum explicitness and clarity produce maximum credibility, because explicitness engages the national reputation while imprecision allows states to evade some of the ignominy of backing down. However, they also find that states tend to choose this flexibility to avoid entrapment over the added credibility of specificity.69 Sagan (2000) articulates this same tradeoff clearly in the context of threats to retaliate with nuclear weapons against the use of chemical or biological weapons.70

These studies are far from alone in praising the benefits of clarity in making demands.71 Quinlan (2004) adds a useful qualifier: clarity about the demand component of threats may be more advantageous than clarity about the punishment component.72 For instance, telegraphing the exact form a punitive strike will take allows the adversary to take countermeasures to defeat it, or at least to better absorb the blow. Overall, the case for clarity is fairly consistent in placing its primary emphasis on the way that imprecision undermines credibility by providing a way to slip out of upholding red lines after violations.

Another candidate drawback of imprecision is that, for compellent threats, the target of the demand will assume the demand is the maximum possible (i.e. the least desirable demand possible) in the gray area.73 This would seem to directly contradict the theory in this chapter, which predicts the target will generally comply only with the minimal side of the gray area, moving there via a fait accompli if necessary. However, these two claims can be reconciled. The targets of imprecise compellent demands understand that the demand, if accepted, will serve as the basis for the new state of affairs. The target state will then need to enforce that bargain by deterring further demands and faits accomplis. If the demand which led to this state of affairs is imprecise, the state which agreed to it will often find itself stuck with an imprecise red line going forward, jeopardizing its ability to deter future encroachments. This problem can explain why states fear that they will end up at the least-desirable end of the gray area. The state making the imprecise compellent demand is, whether intentionally or inadvertently, creating an imprecise deterrent red line for its adversary in the future. This adversary is taking into account the risks of faits accomplis and undesirable outcomes that this engenders.

The case for imprecision consists of several distinct lines of reasoning. Perhaps its greatest advantage is part and parcel of its main disadvantage; added flexibility reduces credibility but also eases

68 Lebow, Between Peace and War, p. 85.
69 Snyder and Diesing, Conflict among Nations, pp. 216-217. Note that it can be useful to draw an analytical distinction between explicitness and precision. How a demand is conveyed is distinct from its content.
73 Fisher, Basic Negotiating Strategy, p. 64.
the path for states to grant war-avoiding concessions without the same reputational and domestic political costs that might otherwise apply. Fisher (1971) argues that adversaries might more easily acquiesce to ambiguous demands because there is less political risk in doing so, i.e. less damage to their reputation and prestige.\footnote{Roger Fisher, \textit{Basic Negotiating Strategy: International Conflict for Beginners} (London: Allen Lane, 1971), p. 75. However, I would argue that the attributability of an action to a demand is not solely or primarily a matter of that demand’s level of precision.} Ambiguity over one point of contention may also enable states to sidestep that issue and reach agreement on another matter.\footnote{Jane Esberg and Scott D. Sagan. “Negotiating Nonproliferation: Scholarship, Pedagogy, and Nuclear Weapons Policy,” \textit{The Nonproliferation Review}, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2012), p. 102.} Particularly in disputes over symbolic issues, ambiguity may even enable both sides to claim victory.\footnote{Zartman and Berman, \textit{The Practical Negotiator}, p. 183. For an example: Albert S. Yee, “Semantic Ambiguity and Joint Deflections in the Hainan Negotiations,” \textit{China: An International Journal}, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 53-82.}

Another argument for imprecision is that it lets adversaries comply with the broader intent of the demand in whatever form is best for them, thereby reducing the costs of compliance.\footnote{Fisher, \textit{Basic Negotiating Strategy}, p. 75. Nonetheless, Fisher does emphasize the importance of avoiding “unnecessarily ambiguous demands” (pp. 65, 76-79). Birger Wernerfelt, “Renegotiation Facilitates Contractual Incompleteness,” \textit{Journal of Economics & Management Strategy}, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2007), pp. 893-910; B. Douglas Bernheim and Michael D. Whinston, “Incomplete Contracts and Strategic Ambiguity,” \textit{American Economic Review}, Vol. 88, No. 4 (Sept., 1998), pp. 902-32. Note that this article suggests partial unverifiability makes ambiguity beneficial under certain conditions.} Fisher (1971) regards the most important drawback of specificity as that it puts a ceiling on what can be obtained.\footnote{Ibid., p. 75.} Chayes and Chayes (1990) go further, arguing that “increased detail and specificity, far from facilitating the resolution of compliance questions, may become a breeding ground for disputes.”\footnote{Antonia H. Chayes and Abram Chayes, “From Law Enforcement to Dispute Settlement: A New Approach to Arms Control Verification and Compliance,” \textit{International Security}, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring, 1990), p. 156.}

However, although these arguments about negotiation are compelling in general, they may be less applicable to the intensely-competitive conflicts that this study examines. Many times, the only common interest the two parties share is avoiding the costs of war. Beyond that, the situation is zero-sum, e.g., when both sides want the same territory. If so, then any latitude left for the other party to unilaterally shape the final terms of the agreement can be assumed to mean they will shift the bargaining in their favor as far as possible, i.e. directly against the interests of the state with the imprecise demand. Similarly, in particularly confrontational settings, it is difficult to see how specificity breeds unnecessary disputes. Leaving these ambiguities in place only avoids disputes to the extent that the other side is freely permitted to take what it wants within the gray area.

**Exploiting Incomplete Red Lines**

The vulnerability of incomplete red lines is analogous to that of deploying troops on too narrow a front: they can be flanked. Flanking seizes the object of the demand without violating the red line directly. Unlike the other red line characteristics, incompleteness has received scant attention in the International Relations literature. One exception is the conclusion in Stern et al (1989) that deterrent
threats tend to fail when the adversary “believes it can ‘design around’ the defender’s commitment” (though how this is done is never explained). In part, the lack of attention to incompleteness may be because it is not as independent from the other red line vulnerabilities as it may seem. When the primary red line is vulnerable to flanking, more often than not that actor will also set an auxiliary red line to discourage that flanking. It is, then, a matter of whether this auxiliary red line is vulnerable on the other dimensions, usually arbitrariness. Nonetheless, treating incompleteness as a distinct characteristic is valuable. It is by far the simplest way of addressing the existence of multiple red lines in a single situation, and it calls attention to the important phenomenon of flanking red lines.

As I will explore in more detail, the 1948-1949 Berlin Crisis revolved around flanking incomplete red lines. First, the Soviet Union attempted to gain an advantage over the status quo ante by shutting off land supply routes into the city without engaging in hostilities. This was a flanking strategy, exploiting the fact that the U.S. red line protecting West Berlin from direct attack did not extend to the supply corridors. Provided that the United States was unwilling to allow the population of West Berlin to starve, the blockade was meant to leave the United States in the difficult position of having to choose between using force to break open land supply routes or backing down and handing West Berlin over to Soviet control.

However, the strength of the Soviet Union’s red line against resupplying Berlin relied on the focal point of attacking their forces blocking the transit corridors, and this focal point did not extend to the skies. Consequently, the United States vertically flanked this red line with the Berlin Airlift. In the air, it was the Soviets that would need to assail Western planes to stop resupply. With the unexpected demonstration of the viability of indefinite aerial supply of West Berlin, the Soviets’ effort to leave the United States with a choice between capitulation and war failed. The story of the Berlin Blockade Crisis centers on flanking incomplete red lines, as I will explore in more detail in Chapter Four.

**Exploiting Unverifiable Red Lines**

Unverifiable red lines are vulnerable to covert violation. The adversary can secretly violate the red line, and upon eventual discovery present its violation as a *fait accompli*. A classic example of a red line with verifiability problems (though not total unverifiability) is the Soviet Union’s placement of nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles in Cuba. In this case, the *fait accompli* was not implemented with full success; its discovery triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis.

That unverifiability makes violations more likely and prevents successful bargains (out of fear of covert violations) has long been believed. According to Smoke (1977), many escalatory actions are taken in the expectation that they can be carried out secretly or invisibly. Schultz (2010) shows that openings for unilateral and covert violations can lead to bargaining failure and conflict. Fortna (2003)

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finds that verification mechanisms lead to more durable peace agreements. Verification concerns have also shaped arms control negotiations. For example, there is a strong preference for and tendency towards agreements which ban a specific weapon system outright rather than agreements limiting the levels of a weapon that states can possess. The reason: the violation of an outright ban can be detected by spotting even one of the forbidden weapons, but determining how many of a weapon system a state possesses requires far more effort and information.

**Scope Conditions**

Two scope conditions must be met in order to sustain the logic and predictions of the theory in this chapter. Both scope conditions are uniquely common in international security affairs, but both are met in certain other contexts.

First, both sides – but particularly the deterrer – must see war as costly. If the deterrer sees a potential war as likely to be short and cheap, little can be gained by a *fait accompli* which forces it to choose between war and backing down. One could argue that this scope condition was not met prior to World War One due to the false optimism with which so many states perceived their military prospects. Consequently, the hypotheses may have less explanatory power for the 1914 July Crisis than for others. In contrast, the expectation is significantly greater explanatory power in the crises preceding World War II and maximal explanatory power in Cold War coercive bargaining due to nuclear weapons raising the potential costs of a major war to extraordinary heights.

Second, bargaining that takes place within and is channeled by institutional rules might be expected to exhibit different dynamics. As a result, this study applies to institution-less bargaining, bargaining under anarchy. It is not necessary that no institutions exist at all, but rather that existing institutions do not directly channel the particular bargaining interaction.

**Why Are Red Lines Ever Vulnerable?**

Why are red lines ever arbitrary, imprecise, incomplete, or unverifiable? Why would states, as strategic actors, ever make a suboptimal demand? Is the culprit some combination of ignorance and ineptitude, or do states face constraints that limit the quality of the red lines that they can set?

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87 Note that the hypothesized effects of vulnerable red lines are the same regardless of whether the vulnerable exists due to carelessness or constraint. One would, however, be inclined to expect that such carelessness would also affect the outcome through other channels.
Because these questions seek to explain the independent variables of this study, they are, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of the project. Nonetheless, their importance is such that I provide a brief discussion here. I also commend these questions as a worthy basis for future research.

A first broad generalization from the cases and examples I have surveyed is that vulnerable red lines usually result from binding constraints, not sheer carelessness. Despite being able to choose from many potential red lines, states often cannot escape one or even several red line vulnerabilities while still demanding what they wish to demand. The nature of these constraints is consistent. States are rarely or never locked in to a particular red line, at least in the minimal sense that they can change to (inferior) alternatives if they choose to do so. Instead, states are often locked out of setting red lines that are strong on one (or more) dimension.

Although these constraints are numerous and diverse, depending greatly on the intricacies of particular situations, they appear to vary most consistently by issue type. First, arbitrary red lines are more common for types of issues in which focal points are rare. The absence of a single viable focal point on which to set a red line is largely beyond control, and can impose the burden of an arbitrary demand. Conversely, when there are only one or a few focal points present, their importance may constrain states to select one of those few possibilities even when a red line on that focal point will suffer from some of the other vulnerabilities. Second, imprecision is more common for issues which cannot be quantified or measured easily. Consider, for example, a demand to tamp down nationalist saber-rattling in the media. Third, the incompleteness of a red line often depends on the number of ways in which a goal can be accomplished. Fears of a secret North Korean uranium enrichment program and undetected Soviet underground nuclear tests fit the bill. Plutonium production is not the only path to the bomb, and atmospheric testing is not the only way to test nuclear weapons. Fourth, the ease with which certain actions can be observed affects verifiability, as those same two examples also illustrate. Schelling (1966) offers the demands conditioning foreign aid as an example of an issue type afflicted by frequent red line vulnerabilities: “Whenever a recipient of foreign aid ... is told that it must eliminate domestic corruption, improve its balance of payments, or raise the quality of its civil service, the results tend to be uncertain, protracted, and hard to attribute.” Red lines against nuclear proliferation and human rights violations seem to be far more prone to vulnerabilities than red lines against territorial conquest.

Constraints obstructing strong red lines often take the form of difficult tradeoffs among the vulnerabilities. Although ‘invulnerable’ red lines are feasible in some situations, in many others invulnerability on one dimension precludes it on another. In setting red lines against North Korea’s nuclear program, the United States confronted an incompleteness problem if it did not set an additional red line against a uranium enrichment program, but faced a verifiability problem if it did set that red

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88 For instance, compellent threats may have an inherent arbitrariness problem because they must set deadlines. Deadlines can be made quite precise, but it is rare that a single focal point exists to explain why the deadline is one week rather than two, twelve hours rather than twenty four. For more on compellent threats and deadlines, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 72.
89 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 85.
line. In setting red lines against Iran’s nuclear program, the United States confronted an imprecision problem if it simply demanded the end to its nuclear weapons program, but faced an arbitrariness problem if it attempted to make that red line more specific, such as by demanding that not one additional centrifuge be installed (see earlier in the chapter for a more in-depth discussion of these examples). In the most direct discussion of these tradeoffs in the literature, Schelling (1960) argues,

In order to make a threat precise ... it may be necessary to introduce some arbitrary elements. The threat must involve overt acts rather than intentions; it must be attached to the visible deeds, not invisible ones; it may have to attach itself to certain ancillary actions that are of no consequence in themselves to the threatening party.\(^\text{90}\)

Such problems can be found in a wide variety of issue areas. Red lines meant to deter human rights violations could be made specific to a village or even an individual, but only at the price of becoming arbitrary and, consequently, detached from the larger issue of human rights in that state writ large.\(^\text{91}\) If something does befall that specific village, why not set a new red line for the next village rather than accept failure and begin inflicting mutually-costly punishment? And by focusing on one village, what about others where information is scarce, or that simply have not been emphasized to the same degree? Imprecision is a problem, but making a red line more specific can create problems of its own. Although I observe tradeoffs among red line vulnerabilities to be relatively common, I offer no theory which attempts to predict when and explain why certain tradeoffs will exist for certain types of issues. Future research might explore this possibility.

Some of the constraints that lead to vulnerable red lines – and especially imprecise red lines – are political in origin, including domestic and bureaucratic politics. For instance, imprecise demands might enable broader domestic political coalitions. According to Lebow (1977), “Ambiguous commitments often represent compromises between competing and contradictory political demands.”\(^\text{92}\) Massie (2004) describes German demands immediately prior to World War I as follows, “Specifics were precisely what the German government did not wish to reveal, because such revelations would arouse in Germany a bitter struggle over what German war aims actually were.”\(^\text{93}\) Alternatively, politicians who are evaluated relative to stated demands may prefer to keep demands imprecise so that they can call more outcomes victories. Trager and Vavrek (2011) conclude that vague threats incur smaller audience costs if the leader who made them eventually backs down than do specific threats.\(^\text{94}\) Bureaucracies may not be adept at generating precise positions on seemingly secondary issue areas. In the Berlin Blockade Crisis, bureaucratic infighting between the War Department and State Department during the Second

\(^{90}\) Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, p. 40

\(^{91}\) This often happens when media attention focuses on the plight of an individual activist imprisoned by an authoritarian regime.

\(^{92}\) Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 85.


World War prevented the United States from securing a written legal obligation from the Soviet Union to permit free transportation and supply of West Berlin.  

Diplomatic considerations can also constrain red lines. For example, Stein (1991) concludes that the United States was prevented from setting a precise red line to deter even limited Iraqi seizures of disputed Kuwaiti-held territory by the intricacies of Middle Eastern diplomacy and politics. Other Arab states were only likely to support a U.S. intervention on Kuwait’s behalf (or the public threat of one) if it became clear that Iraq was seeking the conquest of Kuwait as a whole rather than the seizure of oil-rich disputed areas along the Iraq-Kuwait border. This precluded a precise U.S. red line protecting these territories. The United States adopted an ambiguous position on Quemoy and Matsu during the 1958 crisis partly in order to avoid criticism from congress and third-party allies. Britain’s oft-maligned imprecise commitment to defend France in the event of a war with Germany in 1914 can be attributed to its nearly contradictory goals of deterring Germany without emboldening France.

States may deliberately choose to set vulnerable red lines when they could avoid doing so for at least two distinct reasons. First, a state which desires war might seek to entice an adversary into a fait accompli that would serve as a casus belli and thereby aid in legitimizing the use of force. Such cases fall outside the scope conditions for this theory, because war is perceived as desirable rather than costly, but are worth considering nonetheless. Second, states might feel compelled by some domestic or foreign audience to set a red line over an issue that is not truly of real importance to them. In such cases, a loophole might seem to provide a way to appease that audience without risking war over someone else’s interests. This strategy comes with a powerful drawback; states generally suffer embarrassment when another state exploits a vulnerability in their red line, thereby succeeding with a fait accompli in spite of the state making the threat.

Finally, one important explanation for weak red lines that recurs in the historical record is long-term unintended consequences. The Treaty of Versailles and the terms by the agreements that ended the Second World War locked in place numerous red line vulnerabilities that gave rise to decades of tension. The Berlin crises emerged due to wartime decisions which became extremely difficult to change by 1948 but that might have been revised with only modest difficulty prior to the end of the war. Looking back on the Siachen Conflict, Indian General V. R. Raghavan commented, “The negotiators [of

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97 Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations*, p. 223.
99 My suspicion is that this drawback generally outweighs the benefits of this strategy, because trying and failing due to what often looks like ineptitude is likely more damaging to a nation’s prestige than not trying at all. However, one can imagine circumstances in which that would not be the case. For instance, politicians facing elections or term limits might make a demand with a vulnerable red line to appear strong in a critical time period, knowing that the adversary’s fait accompli will likely come after they have been re-elected or left office. This hypothesis offers one potential explanation for the weakness of U.S. nonproliferation red lines.
the Simla agreement] had just been through a war. They could not have imagined that another war would be fought to interpret their words.”

The rarity of vulnerable red lines due to sheer carelessness does not extend to decisions made in the past that affect red lines years in the future. As a result, this study should have important implications for the formulation of international agreements, especially what will seem like minor details in those agreements which hold the potential to lie at the epicenter of future crises.

**Conclusion**

This theory of red lines and *faits accomplis* provides a framework for understanding crises and other coercive conflicts that bears surprisingly little resemblance to the conventional wisdom. This is a view of crises as contests in which states seek out and identify weaknesses in deterrent red lines in order to outmaneuvering adversaries by exploiting those openings for *faits accomplis*. The next chapter summarizes the conventional wisdom, with its focus on crises as contests in competitive risk-taking with a primary emphasis on signaling resolve. My claim is not that the conventional wisdom is wrong, but rather merely that it is incomplete. The empirical chapters will evaluate both the theory of red lines in this chapter and the conventional wisdom to start to examine how much each can explain.

Although this project focuses on interstate coercive bargaining, this theory of red lines and *faits accomplis* applies to a diverse range of issue areas. For example, it would seem to shed light on the question of when and why countries violate treaties, which, much like threats, generally set red lines that distinguish compliance and noncompliance. Some of the strongest proponents of the constraining power of international treaties argue that countries rarely violate treaties, and that most violations occur due to ambiguities in the treaties’ terms, i.e., due to inadvertent misunderstandings of obligations. Therefore, these violations should not be seen as violations at all.

The two leading proponents of this viewpoint also criticize the determination on the part of the United States to set “bright lines” in arms control treaties with the Soviet Union during the Cold War on the grounds that they created unnecessary tensions and disputes. The theory in this chapter suggests a starkly different conclusion: far from being accidental, these “misunderstandings” were likely deliberate strategic attempts to get away with beneficial treaty violations where possible while minimizing the prospects for punishment.

Even the general pattern of tension during the Cold War can plausibly be explained with this theory of red lines. To oversimplify, Cold war tensions peaked during the period 1948-1962, a span which saw a series of crises in the strategically vital regions of Central Europe and (to a lesser extent) Northeast Asia. Why did these tensions ease? It is striking that this same period saw the red lines in those two regions improve as both sides expectations converged around certain focal points like the Demilitarized Zone in Korea and the solidification of the initially-temporary zones of occupation in

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100 Raghavan, *Siachen*, p. 23.
102 Chayes and Chayes, “From Law Enforcement to Dispute Settlement,” p. 155
Germany. Perhaps as a result, two things happened. First, the level of tension and the apparent probability of war declined. The situation evolved from one crisis following another to an uneasy détente. Second, the location of these tensions shifted, with an increasing share of falling in more peripheral regions where clear red lines had not yet been established. There is a compelling story to be told about how increasingly strong red lines shaped and curbed Cold War tensions. In the words of Alexander George and Richard Smoke (1974), “It can be said on behalf of American policy of containment and its handmaiden, deterrence, that they did at least establish some firm lines in the postwar world, when so much was fluid.”

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103 George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, p. 4.