

Red Lines: Enforcement, Declaration, and Ambiguity in the Cuban Missile Crisis

Dan Altman
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Georgia State University
daltman@gsu.edu

Paper Presented at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association
Boston, MA

Updated: 1/15/2021

ABSTRACT

This study challenges two lessons that dominate thinking about red lines. The U.S. red line against using chemical weapons in Syria reinforced fears that failing to punish violations damages credibility. The Korean and Gulf Wars taught leaders that they must declare unambiguous red lines to deter aggression. Using declassified materials to examine the eleven red lines of the Cuban Missile Crisis, this study shows that red lines need not be enforced to the letter or unambiguously declared to be credible. Two novel arguments help to explain why. First, violations of red lines create fleeting “windows of credibility” wherein violators fear enforcement. If declarers move quickly before it becomes clear they will not punish violations, they can convert non-enforcement into a bargaining chip, exchanging it for concessions while avoiding escalation. Second, rather than wholly embrace clarity or ambiguity, declarers can optimize by combining clarity about their demands with ambiguity about the consequences of crossing those lines.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Phil Haun, Michael Joseph, Jeff Kaplow, Roseanne McManus, Nicholas Miller, James Morrow, Vipin Narang, Kenneth Oye, Reid Pauly, Barry Posen, and Mark Trachtenberg for their comments and insights at various stages of this project.

Publicly declaring red lines offers an essential means of conveying credible threats to adversaries, in part because doing so risks a leader's international reputation and domestic standing. Unfortunately, two misleading lessons dominate current thinking about red lines. In 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama declared a red line against the use of chemical weapons in Syria. After the Assad regime slaughtered an estimated 1,400 with sarin nerve gas in August 2013, he considered bombing regime targets to enforce his red line.¹ Denied support from Parliament in London and Congress in Washington, he ultimately opted against strikes. His critics alleged that this loss of credibility emboldened U.S. adversaries. That President Obama erred in declaring the Syria red line and failing to enforce it has crystalized as received wisdom. To the extent that controversy endures, it concerns whether the mistake was making the statement or failing to follow through on it.

Although the Syrian case seemingly exposes the folly of declaring red lines, two older precedents continue to encourage policymakers to do just that.² In 1990, U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie told Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that the United States had "no opinion" on Iraq's differences with Kuwait. Iraq occupied Kuwait soon afterward. In 1950, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave a speech detailing the U.S. "defensive perimeter" in Asia – delimiting a line that excluded South Korea. North Korea invaded soon afterward. Several months later, China failed to make sufficiently clear its red line against a U.S. occupation of North Korea, paving the way for war between the United States and China. These narratives have increasingly come into question.³ Regardless, they contribute to the popular belief that credibility requires declaring clear red lines.⁴

Superficially at odds over the wisdom of declaring red lines, the two lessons are compatible. Syria instructs policymakers that they must punish any violations of their red lines or else lose credibility. The Korean and Gulf Wars teach policymakers that they must clearly and publicly declare their red lines in order to deter aggression, especially when they are truly willing to fight to oppose it. The synthesis of these propositions is that leaders should declare clear red lines against actions that will truly provoke retaliation and follow through on them while avoiding bluffs likely to be called.

This study presents theoretical arguments and historical evidence against this conventional wisdom by testing three hypotheses drawn from it. First, the *enforcement hypothesis* postulates that

¹ White House, "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013," Press Release, August 30, 2013; Hisham Melhem, "How Obama's Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart," *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017.

² Many other cases contributed to popularizing both lessons. For instance, in the Munich Crisis, Britain and France are widely thought to have damaged their credibility by having committed to defend Czechoslovakia and only to abandon it in Prague's hour of need.

³ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); James I. Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined," *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2002); Thomas J. Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1992), pp. 122-154; Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

⁴ E.g., R. W. Apple, Jr. "Allow Miscalculation, Open the Way to War," *New York Times*, April 24, 1994; Jim Hoag, "... And the Tale of a Transcript," *Washington Post*, September 17, 1990; Mark Helprin, "Hollow Talk in the South China Sea," *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2010.

when an adversary violates a red line, leaders must aggressively enforce it to sustain the credibility of that red line. Second, the *declaration hypothesis* holds that leaders must declare red lines for those red lines to be credible. Third, the *unambiguity hypothesis* expects that leaders avoid ambiguous red lines because they undermine credibility.

Two novel arguments help to explain why these hypotheses falter.⁵ First, when an adversary crosses a red line, the declarer has options other than immediately punishing the violation or losing credibility. Instead, declarers enter a fleeting window of time in which they retain credibility because their adversaries fear imminent retaliation. By parlaying a willingness to forgo retaliation as a bargaining chip in exchange for concessions, opportunistic declarers can take advantage of violations to make credible threats of their own, sometimes even to forge deals that end crises.

Second, a longstanding muddle of policy advice about deterrence alternatively praises clarity or lauds ambiguity. This study explains why leaders generally formulate threats that are clear about their red lines (i.e., their demands) but ambiguous about the consequences of crossing those lines.

Evidence for these arguments and against the hypotheses comes from a close investigation of the eleven red lines set by the United States and Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The research design works within the limits of what case studies can reveal about general theories. Case studies are comparatively ill-suited to answering probabilistic questions about explanatory power, such as how much failing to enforce a red line after a violation damages credibility. In contrast, case studies stand on firmer ground when they explore causal processes.⁶ This study relies particularly on one application of that broader approach. For theories that assume actors make constrained choices between two policy options, case studies can contribute by showing that actors repeatedly identified and selected a third option, one whose existence and appeal requires revisiting the logic of the theory.⁷

The Cuban Missile Crisis furnishes a wealth of evidence against the three hypotheses.⁸ Rather than immediately enforce his red line against Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba, President Kennedy held the potential for a military response in abeyance, exploiting Soviet fears to press for concessions. He used this tactic again when the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 over Cuba. Restraining from a military response became a bargaining chip that helped to forge the deal that ended the crisis. Two of Kennedy's five initial red lines – those against Soviet bases and organized combat forces in Cuba – quickly faded to the background. Further challenging the belief that red lines must be enforced to the letter, Washington allowed certain Soviet-bloc ships and submarines to transgress the blockade line and

⁵ Although I offer a counterargument to the declaration hypothesis, it is not novel. More interesting is the evidence showing that undeclared red lines can be surprisingly credible.

⁶ See especially Andrew Bennett and Checkel, Jeffrey T., eds., *Process Tracing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 172-185.

⁷ This approach pursues “theory-centric” process tracing rather than “case-centric” (case explaining). Within that umbrella, it combines theory-testing and theory-building by revealing when and why causal processes divert from the expected sequence. Concepts from: Derek Beach and Rasmus B. Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), pp. 11-22.

⁸ Nonetheless, skeptics might reasonably wonder whether reputational and audience cost mechanism are more potent in cases with lower stakes.

suffered no apparent credibility loss. The Soviet Union did not declare a crucial red line against attacking Soviet troops in Cuba, whose existence Moscow denied. It was credible to President Kennedy anyway. Washington committed to the Pentagon that it would retaliate if the Soviet Union shot down a U.S. surveillance aircraft, but not to the Soviets. It was credible to Premier Khrushchev anyway. All but one red line set during the crisis by either side combined clarity about the red line itself with ambiguity about the consequences of crossing it.

The exceptional array of declassified documents available from the United States and, albeit to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union, makes this study possible. The Cuban Missile Crisis falls in the brief historical window before the Watergate scandal in which the White House taped meetings, providing transcripts that more often record the reasoning behind decisions. A tape even exists of President Kennedy working with advisors to refine the language of his original statement setting a red line against Soviet missiles in Cuba, weeks before the discovery of the missiles elevated the issue. This study is not an attempt to rewrite the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Rather, it seeks to use this important case to shed light on contemporary theoretical controversies and policy debates.

The Statecraft of Red Lines

Leaders confronted with a crisis often cannot swiftly improve the balance of power or forge new alliances, but one policy tool leaders always have immediately available is rhetoric. Decisions about what, if anything, to say stand as a virtually universal feature of conflicts that approach the brink of war. In calmer times, states formulate declaratory policies that set the stage for future conflicts, often by establishing verbal and legal commitments to defend an ally or interest. The impact of verbal statements articulating red lines is the subject of question throughout this study, but the time policymakers dedicate to crafting their red lines even on the brink of nuclear war underscores their importance.

Red lines are policy tools meant to influence – usually to constrain – the actions of an adversary. Coercive threats consist of two basic elements: demands and consequences if the demands go unfulfilled.⁹ Each demand, in turn, must contain a red line to distinguish what is demanded from what is not. A coercer conveys the intent to carry out its threat for unacceptable actions that cross the red line, but not for acceptable actions that fall short of it.¹⁰

By this definition, red lines are an inherent part of all coercive demands, both deterrent threats that aim to sustain the status quo and compellent threats that demand changes to it.¹¹ Using the phrase “red line” is not necessary for a red line to exist. Leaders found ample language for articulating red lines

⁹ Of course, threatened consequences are not always imposed; bluffs qualify as coercion.

¹⁰ For more on this definition, see Dan Altman and Nicholas Miller, “Red Lines in Nuclear Nonproliferation,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3-4, pp. 315-342. For similar definitions, see Yoel Guzansky, “Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2013), pp. 23-24; Bruno Tertrais, “Drawing Red Lines Right,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2014), p. 8; Bruno Tertrais, *The Diplomacy of ‘Red Lines’* (Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, 2016). On the dual roles of threats and assurances in coercion: Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 4, 74.

¹¹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 69.

before the phrase came into vogue. Indeed, the definition does not require that red lines be publicly or verbally declared. Leaders can convey red lines implicitly, tacitly, privately, and ambiguously. These are better understood characteristics of red lines. This allows for the important possibility of undeclared red lines that are nonetheless mutually understood.

Although this study investigates threats and coercion as much as red lines, using the term facilitates discussion of both enforcement and ambiguity. One can more easily speak of limited violations of red lines than of threats, which is important for analyzing decisions concerning enforcement. Discussion of undeclared red lines is also clearer than it would be for undeclared threats, if only because many established definitions of coercive threats define threats by requiring explicit declaration.¹² The term “red line” also draws needed attention to the question of which part of a threat is ambiguous: where the line is drawn versus what happens if it gets crossed.

Practitioners and scholars typically approach red lines through two related propositions. 1) If a leader fails to impose the threatened consequences after a violation, that leader loses credibility for subsequent encounters and domestic political standing. Leaders worry about the perceptions of allies, adversaries, neutrals, and their own publics. These reputational concerns and audience costs render verbal statements such as red lines costly and thus informative.¹³ Consequently, 2) when a leader clearly and publicly declares a red line, that red line gains credibility. Clear red lines – as opposed to ambiguous red lines – are thought to magnify both effects.

The Enforcement Hypothesis

The enforcement hypothesis is the implicit basis for much of the criticism directed at President Obama for his decision not to strike in Syria. It expects that allowing a violation of a declared red line to go unpunished damages the subsequent credibility of that red line. It may further damage the credibility of the leader who declared it and perhaps even the declarer state,¹⁴ but the focus here is on the violated red line itself. In practical terms, this hypothesis counsels policymakers that they must treat their red lines as inviolable, strictly enforcing them after violations lest they erode or collapse.

Suppose a state declares a red line, then fails to enforce it after a first violation. By allowing the first offense to pass, the declarer reveals an unwillingness to enforce the red line. Schelling famously

¹² E.g., see the definition of militarized compellent threats. Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail,” *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2013), pp. 173-195.

¹³ James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (Sep 1994), pp. 577–92; Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ On the distinction between state-specific and leader-specific credibility: Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal Determination in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Jonathan Renshon, Allan Dafoe, and Paul Huth, “Leader Influence and Reputation Formation in World Politics,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (2018), pp. 325-339; Joshua Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 111.

asked how, if the United States failed to resist an invasion of California, could it then credibly deter a subsequent invasion further east?¹⁵ That reasoning underpins the enforcement hypothesis.

Survey experiments consistently find that the American public disapproves of a President who pledges to intervene to stop an aggressor but fails to follow through.¹⁶ Kertzer et al. survey the American public, American scholars of International Relations, the Israeli public, and a sample of current and former Israeli Knesset members. All four audiences believed that President Obama lost credibility (worsened his reputation, in their phrasing) by failing to enforce his red line in Syria and by failing to deter Russia from seizing Crimea in 2014.¹⁷

Observational studies have drawn mixed conclusions. Examining a variety of cases after 1945, Snyder and Borghard conclude that the “cost of empty threats” is “a penny, not a pound.” They argue that publics judge leaders based on policies and policy outcomes regardless of the content of their verbal statements.¹⁸ Early studies of reputation concluded that backing down in crises did not critically damage leaders or states’ credibility in future encounters.¹⁹ More recent studies have challenged these conclusions.²⁰ Even reputation skeptics might concede that failing to enforce a specific red line after a first violation would undercut the credibility of threats to enforce that same red line upon the next violation.

After President Obama decided not to enforce his 2012 red line by striking the Assad regime, Senator John McCain remarked, “Our friends and enemies alike, both in the Middle East and across the world, are questioning whether America has the will and the capacity to do what it says.”²¹ McCain later attributed Russia’s invasion of Crimea to the weakness President Obama revealed in Syria.²² Even many Democrats agreed that President Obama damaged his own – and perhaps the nation’s – credibility by

¹⁵ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Michael Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach.” *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2007), pp. 821-840; Robert F. Trager and Lynn Vavreck, “The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2011), pp. 526-545.

¹⁷ Joshua D. Kertzer, Jonathan Renshon, and Karen Yarhi-Milo, “Are Red Lines Red Herrings?,” Working Paper, 2018.

¹⁸ Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard. “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound.” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (2011), pp. 437-456; Marc Trachtenberg. “Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2012), pp. 3-42; William G. Nomikos and Nicholas Sambanis, “What Is the Mechanism Underlying Audience Costs? Incompetence, Belligerence, and Inconsistency,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (2019), 575-588.

¹⁹ Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

²⁰ Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve*; Frank P. Harvey, and John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility: US Reputation and International Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics,” *International Organization*, vol. 69, No. 2 (2015), pp. 473-495.

²¹ Mark Mandell, “Obama’s Thick Red Line on Syria,” *BBC News*, August 22, 2013.

²² Jake Miller, “John McCain blames Obama’s ‘Feckless’ Foreign Policy for Ukraine Crisis,” *CBS News*, March 3, 2014.

deciding against airstrikes. Jim Jones, Obama's National Security Advisor until 2010, later called the Syria red line a "colossal mistake."²³

Let us stipulate that *unpunished* violations undermine credibility *eventually*. Nonetheless, in the immediate aftermath of a violation before a response crystallizes, violators fear punishment. After all, a child most fears her parents' wrath immediately after they catch her hand in the cookie jar.

After violations of their red lines, declarers enter a short *window of credibility* before it becomes clear that they will not retaliate. Delaying before enforcement is consistent with acquiescence but, crucially, also with preparing to retaliate. Leaders can use that time to attempt other policy options besides immediate retaliation. In this period, the violator keenly understands that the declarer now confronts significant incentives to punish them, and to do so promptly. These post-violation incentives emerge from leaders' concerns about international reputation, domestic audience costs, and the strategic logic of tit-for-tat reciprocity.²⁴

Although some declarers will simply react to violations by retaliating, others can attempt to harness the aftermath of a violation as a window of opportunity to press the violator for concessions. Implicitly or explicitly, they convert restraining from enforcement into a bargaining chip, then trade it for something of value.

Describing President Obama's Syria policy as a decision not to enforce his red line misleadingly conflates what he did next with inaction. Obama did not immediately reveal his intention not to strike. After the U.S. Congress declined to back the use of force, he instead leveraged what remained of his post-violation credibility to pressure the Assad regime into a Russian-brokered deal. The regime ostensibly gave up its chemical weapons in return for U.S. non-retaliation for their violation. Assad's decision to take this deal reflected the residual credibility of the U.S. threat to punish Syria.²⁵ Tragically, Assad relinquished only a substantial part of his chemical weapons arsenal, later using chemical weapons many more times.²⁶ Nonetheless, the destruction of significant quantities of Syrian weapons of mass destruction was a substantive concession, quite possibly more than airstrikes could have achieved.

The Declaration Hypothesis

The declaration hypothesis proposes that publicly declaring a red line is necessary for that red line to be credible in the eyes of the adversary. The distinction is between publicly declared red lines and those left unsaid, either because no threat was made at all or because the threat was conveyed

²³ Olivia Beavers, "Former Obama National Security Adviser Blasts Decisions in Syria as a 'Colossal Mistake,'" *The Hill*, February 19, 2017.

²⁴ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²⁵ Harvey, *Fighting for Credibility*, p. 27.

²⁶ Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lütkefend, *Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria* (Global Public Policy Institute, 2019); Hisham Melhem, "How Obama's Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart," *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017.

implicitly or tacitly.²⁷ States have a clear incentive to appear resolute so that the adversary will back down. Confessing low resolve by declining to declare a red line gives away the game without playing. If leaders will not even say aloud that they are willing to fight for something, the declaration hypothesis doubts that adversaries will believe that they are truly willing to do so. Consistent with this hypothesis, McManus analyzes large collections of U.S. government statements and finds that statements of resolve affect diplomatic outcomes, particularly in the absence of military and domestic political constraints against following through on those threats.²⁸

The Korean and Gulf Wars contributed to the belief in the need to declare red lines, yet both featured states willing to fight after violations of red lines that they did not clearly declare. Moreover, historians have raised doubts about the significance of those non-declarations. Pyongyang began requesting Moscow's support for an invasion before Dean Acheson's speech leaving South Korea outside the U.S. "defensive perimeter," so the speech did not cause the intention to invade. Stalin's support came several months after the speech. Soviet documents rarely mention it. Well-placed Soviet spies furnished more reliable sources of information to Moscow. Stalin remained concerned about potential U.S. intervention despite the speech.²⁹

U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie stated only that the United States had "no opinion" on Iraq's "border disagreement with Kuwait" in her July 1990 conversation with Saddam Hussein. She meant that the U.S. sought a peaceful settlement but was agnostic about the content of that deal. Hussein clearly stated his intention to pursue multi-round negotiations with Kuwait. He gave Glaspie no indication of war that would have prompted her to scuttle the meeting by overtly threatening him.³⁰

Both the Korean and Gulf War precedents seem to underscore the damage that non-declaration inflicts on credibility. However, the evidence presented below will show that undeclared red lines can be surprisingly credible. As Schelling explains, many red lines are obvious to adversaries without needing explicit declaration because a violation would transgress established salencies, especially those against using force, crossing borders, and using nuclear weapons.³¹ That is, South Korea need not communicate to North Korea that it must not invade across the Demilitarized Zone for Pyongyang to appreciate the

²⁷ As discussed previously, important new scholarship has addressed a related distinction not studied here: public versus private declarations.

²⁸ Roseanne W. McManus, *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). However, two studies find that private communications more often affect perceptions than public statements. This study does not engage with that question. Robert F. Trager, *Diplomacy: Communication and the Origins of International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Azusa Katagiri and Eric Min, "The Credibility of Public and Private Signals: A Document-Based Approach," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 113, No. 11 (2019), pp. 156-172. Also see Shuhei Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy: Public versus Private Threats in Crisis Diplomacy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 3 (2007), pp. 543-558; Matthew A. Baum, "Going Private: Public Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the Domestic Politics of Audience Costs in US Foreign Policy Crises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2004), pp. 603-631.

²⁹ Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined."

³⁰ New York Times, "Confrontation in the Gulf: Excerpts from Iraqi Document on Meeting with U.S. Envoy," *New York Times*, September 23, 1990.

³¹ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Schelling, *Arms and Influence*;

credibility of that red line. These saliencies can render declaration irrelevant by making implicit red lines apparent to adversaries.

The Unambiguity Hypothesis

The unambiguity hypothesis expects that leaders avoid ambiguous red lines because they undermine credibility. Precise red lines are thought to increase the reputational and audience costs of not enforcing them, tying leaders' hands and lending their threats greater credibility.³² By calibrating the level of ambiguity, leaders can attempt to optimize the degree to which they tie their hands.

Audience cost critics reject this hypothesis and conclude that leaders consistently opt for ambiguity to preserve their freedom of action.³³ Both sides of this ambiguity debate share the same premise: a credibility-entrapment tradeoff.³⁴ They differ on which side of that tradeoff tends to outweigh the other and thus which option leaders generally select.

However, a more nuanced picture emerges from asking the question: ambiguity about what? Coercive threats consist of two main parts: demands, including red lines, and consequences. I posit that ambiguity about where the line is drawn (the demand) damages credibility more than ambiguity about what happens if the line is crossed (the threatened consequences for violations).³⁵ Resultantly, ambiguity about consequences occurs more frequently than ambiguity about demands. Because the two function differently, no blanket claim about ambiguity being beneficial, detrimental, common, or rare can capture the full picture.

In 2014, for example, U.S. President Barack Obama declared, "There will be costs" for a Russian military intervention in the Crimean Peninsula.³⁶ Obama was relatively clear about the red line – what action was prohibited – but considerably more ambiguous about the punishment for a violation. President Obama's Syrian red line took a similar form, "We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical

³² E.g., Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

³³ Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats"; Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs"; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations*.

³⁴ Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 216-217; Scott D. Sagan, "The Commitment Trap: Why the United States Should Not Use Nuclear Threats to Deter Biological and Chemical Weapons Attacks," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2000), pp. 85-115.

³⁵ For a brief discussion, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 48; Michael Quinlan, "Deterrence and Deterrability," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2004), pp. 12-13. Tertrais distinguishes these two types of ambiguity but argues only that it is best to avoid both at once. Tertrais, "Drawing Red Lines Right," pp. 7,23. McManus classifies statements of resolve that refer to consequences as stronger by a tier than statements that merely articulate demands. McManus, *Statements of Resolve*, p. 51. Snyder and Borghard discuss both types of ambiguity together and make the same claims about both. Snyder and Borghard, *The Cost of Empty Threats*, p. 439.

³⁶ David Beard, "'There Will Be Costs' – The Text of Obama's Statement on Ukraine," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2014.

weapons.”³⁷ The phrase “enormous consequences,” while more ominous than “costs,” is hardly specific; unlike the demand to refrain from chemical weapons use. Even the language of the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO) charter is surprisingly vague about consequences. It commits members to defend any attacked member by “taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force...”³⁸

Red lines tend towards clarity about demands but ambiguity about consequences for at least two reasons. First, and most simply, telegraphing the exact form of a punitive strike allows the adversary to take countermeasures to defeat it, blunt its impact, or prepare a riposte. Second, threats that specify exact consequences for violations are often at odds with the strategic and policy processes with which states respond to violations.³⁹ These responses tend to be complex, contingent, and unpredictable. The nature, extent, and context of the violation influence the response. In the case of Syria, President Obama could not have predicted that the U.S. Congress and British Parliament would decline to back military force. The size of any punishment might have depended on the quantity of chemical weapons used and the number of people killed, among other considerations. Under such circumstances, threatening a specific, fixed response to a violation is impractical.

Importantly, my claim that leaders tend to avoid ambiguous red lines is antithetical to a popular argument about the virtues of ambiguity. This argument posits that ambiguity engenders uncertainty about exactly what will trigger retribution, thus promoting caution. Correspondingly, clarity is said to function as a green light that encourages the adversary to advance up to the line.⁴⁰

That logic seems compelling, but deciding between leaving something outside a red line and leaving it ambiguous is a false choice. By analogy, the argument is that yellow lights better deter drivers from entering intersections than green lights. Ambiguity appears the more constraining of the two only because the third option, a red light, has been excluded. Yet states always retain the option to display a red light, i.e., to draw a clear line such that the adversary cannot advance before reaching it. Voluntarily doing otherwise is hardly a boon for credibility.

In sum, there are good reasons to expect that leaders will gravitate toward clarity about their red lines and ambiguity about the consequences of crossing them. Future studies might better assess whether this combination truly outperforms the alternatives.⁴¹ Because both sides adopted it so consistently, the variation to draw inferences about effectiveness is lacking in the Cuba case.

³⁷ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20, 2012.

³⁸ *The North Atlantic Treaty*, April 4, 1949.

³⁹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ James H. Lebovic, “Red Lines and Green Lights: Iran, Nuclear Arms Control, and Nonproliferation,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2016), pp. 10-42; Tertrais, “Drawing Red Lines Right,” pp. 12-13; Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 93.

⁴¹ Economic sanctions data suggestively support these conclusions: 74% of sanctions threats were specific about demands, and these threats succeeded more frequently. In comparison, 47% of sanctions threats were specific about consequences. T. Clifton, Morgan, Navin Bapat, and Valentin Krustev. “The Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions, 1971—2000.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2009), p. 104.

Nonetheless, the fact that both the United States and the Soviet Union – two rather different regimes – shared this predilection provides reason to suppose that leaders frequently settle upon declaring red lines with this configuration.

Red Lines in the Cuban Missile Crisis

A close examination of the eleven red lines set during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 provides evidence against all three hypotheses. With respect to the enforcement hypothesis, the evidence will show that President Kennedy let smaller Soviet violations of two of his five initial red lines as well as his subsequent blockade line pass without enforcement. He suffered no apparent credibility loss for it. Throughout the crisis, he avoided any admission that he would not use force to enforce his red lines in Cuba in order to exploit Soviet fears about his response to their violations. Washington doubled down on this tactic after the shootdown of an American U-2. Rather than retaliate immediately, Attorney General Robert Kennedy leveraged the threat to do so to make the deal that removed Soviet missiles from Cuba – along, of course, with the secret concession to remove missiles from Turkey.

With respect to the declaration hypothesis, each side chose not to declare a vital red line that nonetheless proved credible to the other. Soviet leaders never publicly declared a red line against attacking Soviet forces in Cuba, whose presence they denied. The undeclared Soviet red line against attacking those troops was credible anyway. Washington never declared a red line against firing on its surveillance aircraft over Cuba. Yet Khrushchev rightly reacted with dread upon learning that Soviet forces shot down a U-2 without orders from Moscow.

Tables 1 and 2 (uploaded separately) about here

With respect to the unambiguity hypothesis, all but one red line declared during the crisis by either side embraced the combination of clarity about demands and ambiguity about consequences. Tables 1 and 2 depict this and provide a reference for readers. The subsequent discussion provides the basis for the determinations in the tables. For Kennedy's initial red lines, it is possible to trace how initial language featuring ambiguous demands and clear consequences reversed course on both counts as he and his advisors crafted his statement of September 4th, 1962.

Kennedy's Initial Red Lines

Wary of the continuing flow of Soviet arms to Cuba and seeking to deflect intense Congressional criticism after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy released a portentous statement

declaring a red line against Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba on September 4th, 1962.⁴² Or so it is remembered. However, Kennedy set not one red line, but five:

There is no evidence of any organized combat force in Cuba from any Soviet bloc country; of military bases provided to Russia; of a violation of the 1934 treaty relating to Guantanamo; of the presence of offensive ground-to-ground missiles; or of other significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance. Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise.⁴³

Of the five prohibitions in the statement, the Soviet Union plainly violated four, all save Guantanamo. Alongside the missiles and nuclear-capable IL-28 medium bombers, the Soviets established bases and deployed 41,000 troops, though the full extent of that deployment was unknown at the time.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the United States did not aggressively pursue demands other than the removal of missiles and, with less vigor, the IL-28s.⁴⁵ President Kennedy instead decided to allow the non-nuclear violations in implicit exchange for Soviet compliance with higher-priority demands. Although the greater importance of the nuclear red lines explains public acceptance of that decision, it still notable that Kennedy set aside two of his red lines after their violation without any apparent loss of credibility. This conflicts with a rigid sense that red lines must always be enforced to the letter.

Written two weeks after the crisis subsided, a Joint Staff memo entitled “Soviet Military Presence in Cuba” began by asserting, “No one will record the Cuba episode as a victory of even modest proportions for the United States if the end result is a substantial Soviet military presence in the hemisphere.”⁴⁶ This memo reflected the views of hawks who had advocated invading Cuba. It recommended using the blockade as leverage to force out Soviet troops. Curiously, however, the memo failed to mention that President Kennedy had publicly committed to that red line. The September 4th statement not only included the prohibitions against Soviet organized combat forces and bases in Cuba; it began with them. Nonetheless, by November 14th the exact words Kennedy used on September 4th had lost their importance.

⁴² On the role of U.S. domestic politics, see Jeremy Pressman, “September Statements, October Missiles, November Elections: Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy Making, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2001), pp. 80-114.

⁴³ John F. Kennedy, “Statement on Cuba,” September 4, 1962. Kennedy personally read this statement to Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko on October 18th. “Cable on the Conversation between Gromyko and Kennedy,” October 18, 1962. Available from the Wilson Center Digital Archive [hereafter WC].

⁴⁴ The Soviet Union eventually did remove most of its troop presence from Cuba. That withdrawal owed more to the souring of relations with Castro than U.S. threats. For the 41,000 figure: Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy J. Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 242.

⁴⁵ “Gromyko to Kuznetsov and Zorin,” November 5, 1962 [WC]; “Tenth Meeting of the Executive Committee,” October 28, 1962. Available from U.S. State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, #103 [hereafter FRUS]; “Khrushchev to Mikoyan,” November 11, 1962 [WC].

⁴⁶ “Smith to Taylor,” November 14, 1962. Available from the National Security Archive at George Washington University [hereafter GWU NSA].

The initial draft of the statement contained vague demands that were then revised to become clearer: “To date Soviet assistance has been limited to defensive weapons with only incidental and marginal offensive capabilities. It will [changed to “It must” in hand-written edits] continue to be so confined.”⁴⁷ Concerned about the vagueness of “offensive capabilities,” Kennedy volunteered “I could just say ground-to-ground missiles?” An advisor ruminated in reply, “Just saying offensive weapons ... I don’t know what an offensive weapon is.”⁴⁸ Khrushchev later made much the same argument.⁴⁹ The decision to specify ground-to-ground missiles left Khrushchev in a weaker position from which to make that argument.

At one point, and consistent with the unambiguity hypothesis, Kennedy suggested, “We can say that if it’s going to happen, we can take action against it.” Yet the drafting meeting drifted away from such direct language. In the words of one advisor, “You don’t want to say you’ll go in there.”⁵⁰ In the end, the threatened consequences were left vague: “gravest issues.”

State Department Director of Policy Planning Walt Rostow presaged the September 4th statement in a September 3rd memo with a subsection entitled “Drawing the line” (emphasis in original):

[Soviet arms shipments to Cuba] require not merely that we explain what they are and why – up to a point – we are prepared to regard them as acceptable, but that we also clarify the kinds of installations and capabilities emplaced in Cuba that we would regard as unacceptable. ...it may, therefore, be appropriate to indicate what we would not be prepared to accept without direct military riposte. In general, that line should be drawn at the installation in Cuba or in Cuban Waters of nuclear weapons or delivery vehicles, sea or land based.⁵¹

This largely describes the resultant statement, except with respect to specifying military consequences. The decision, instead, was for clarity about demands but ambiguity about consequences. Indeed, on September 13th, President Kennedy reiterated the U.S. position. He called rhetoric about military action, “Loose talk.” He listed comparatively clear demands but again left the consequences opaque: “this country will do whatever must be done.”⁵²

One reason for the ambiguity about consequences was, quite simply, that the White House did not know how it would respond. The eventual response developed only after the crisis began. Days of intense deliberation saw an initial inclination toward airstrikes give way to the eventual choice for a

⁴⁷ Walt Rostow, “Proposed Presidential Statement on Cuban Policy,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, National Security Files, Box 338 [hereafter JFK PL].

⁴⁸ Even after removing background noise with the software Audacity, I was not certain of my ability to recognize voices besides Kennedy’s from the poor-quality tape; hence the lack of specificity about advisors’ identities. “Drafting Meeting on the Cuba Press Statement,” September 4, 1962. Available from the Miller Center John F. Kennedy Presidential Recordings.

⁴⁹ “Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State,” October 26, 1962 [FRUS #84].

⁵⁰ “Draft Meeting on the Cuba Press Statement.”

⁵¹ Walt Rostow, “Memorandum to the President,” September 3rd, 1962. JFK PL, National Security Files, Box 338.

⁵² Because the two statements are similar, I omit a full discussion. John F. Kennedy, “Press Statement,” September 13, 1962.

blockade.⁵³ That strategy depended greatly on context that would have been difficult to anticipate. For instance, U.S. policy was shaped by Washington's detection of the missiles in the brief period after they arrived in Cuba but before they became operational. Kennedy's five red lines could have been violated in any of dozens of combinations, each to various extents. When Kennedy announced the decision to blockade Cuba after days of intense planning, he began the critical part of his address by saying, "I have directed that the following *initial* steps be taken immediately: ..." (emphasis in original).⁵⁴ Even then he did not know events would unfold.

Soviet Red Lines against Attacking Cuba

Moscow succeeded, at least for thirteen days, at deterring Washington from attacking Cuba. The Soviet Union declared a red line against attacking the Cubans but declined to do so for its own forces in Cuba. Moscow denied their presence altogether. Contrary to the expectations of the declaration hypothesis, however, President Kennedy and most of his advisors perceived the undeclared Soviet red line against attacking Soviet troops as credible and indeed as significantly more credible than the declared red line against attacking Cubans. That is, they did not fear killing Cubans, despite the declared Soviet red line against doing so. But they did fear killing Soviet troops in Cuba, despite the official Soviet position that such troops did not exist and so could not be killed. The physical reality of attacking Soviet soldiers and missiles took precedence over the Soviet rhetorical stance.

Moscow announced a red line against invading Cuba in the midst of a September 11th statement that sought primarily to rebut U.S. insinuations about Soviet forces in Cuba:

We have said and we do repeat that if war is unleashed, if the aggressor makes an attack on one state or another and this state asks for assistance, the Soviet Union has the possibility from its own territory to render assistance to any peace-loving state and not only to Cuba. And let no one doubt that the Soviet Union will render such assistance...

Toward its end, the statement restated this oblique threat:

...the Soviet Government would like to draw attention to the fact that one cannot now attack Cuba and expect that the aggressor will be free from punishment for this attack. If this attack is made, this will be the beginning of the unleashing of war.⁵⁵

Taking both selections together, the Soviet Union declared a red line that made clear the demand not to attack Cuba. However, the convoluted prose never plainly stated that a U.S. attack against Cuba would trigger a Soviet attack, nuclear or otherwise, against the United States. The *New York Times* characterized the Soviet position as "a series of tough-sounding but vague commitments to defend Cuba against aggression."⁵⁶ A CIA analysis of the statement concluded,

⁵³ "White House Meeting Transcript," October 16, 1962 [FRUS #18].

⁵⁴ John F. Kennedy, "Address to the Nation," October 22, 1962.

⁵⁵ Soviet Statement as of September 11, 1962. Accessed from www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/precrisis.htm. Source listed as: *New York Times*, September 12, 1962, p. 16.

⁵⁶ Max Frankel, "U.S. Is Prepared for Any Moves Against Its Bases by Russians," *New York Times*, October 22, 1962.

Statement does not significantly alter nature of Soviet commitment to defend Castro. Moscow has once again used vague and ambiguous language to avoid clear-cut obligation of military support in event of attack.⁵⁷

The declaration hypothesis expects that the Soviet red line against attacking Soviet troops should lack credibility because it was not declared. However, President Kennedy and most of his advisors feared the consequences of crossing this undeclared line. On October 17th, CIA Director McCone wrote:

Consequences of action by the United States will be the inevitable “spilling of blood” of Soviet military personnel. This will increase tension everywhere and undoubtedly bring retaliation against U.S. foreign military installations...⁵⁸

By October 19th, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was arguing against the airstrike option. He emphasized Soviet casualties, the costs of a Soviet response, and the difficulties of controlling subsequent events.⁵⁹

According to the declaration hypothesis, Soviet non-declaration left a fatal weakness in its deterrent posture. The United States could strike Cuba while denying that it had attacked the Soviet Union. A CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate of October 18th laid this out plainly:

The Soviets have no public treaty with Cuba and have not acknowledged that Soviet bases are on the island. This situation provides them with a pretext for treating US military action against Cuba as an affair which does not directly involve them, and thereby avoiding the risks of a strong response.⁶⁰

Hawks in Washington repeatedly raised this proposal to use Soviet non-declaration as an opportunity to strike. Kennedy rejected this approach on multiple occasions because he feared that a strike would cause war, Soviet rhetoric notwithstanding.⁶¹

The protocol from a Central Committee meeting on October 23rd makes clear that Khrushchev himself considered this exact possibility:

The difficult thing is that we did not concentrate everything that we wanted and did not publish the treaty [with Cuba]. The tragic thing — they can attack, and we will respond. This could escalate into a large-scale war. One scenario: they will begin to act against Cuba. One scenario: declare on the radio that there already is an agreement concerning Cuba. They might declare a blockade, or

⁵⁷ “Carter to McCone,” September 11, 1962 in Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, D.C., 1992).

⁵⁸ John McCone, “Memorandum for Discussion [The Cuban Discussion],” October 17, 1962 [FRUS #26].

⁵⁹ John McCone, “Memorandum for the File,” October 19, 1962 [FRUS #28].

⁶⁰ “SNIE 11-18-62: Soviet Reactions to Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba,” October 19, 1962 [FRUS #32].

⁶¹ National Security Action Memorandum 196, Washington, October 22, 1962 [FRUS #42].

they might take no action. Another scenario: in case of an attack, all the equipment is Cuban, and the Cubans declare that they will respond.⁶²

Khrushchev's thinking began with a clear appreciation of the vulnerability he created, in line with the declaration hypothesis's expectations about the dangers of non-declaration. The final sentence follows this possibility to its logical conclusion: the idea that the United States might believe it could strike Cuba while claiming not to have attacked the Soviet Union. Khrushchev anticipated the gambit that hawks in Washington thought they could use to strike without Soviet retaliation. He understood the simple Soviet countermove that would prevent it: publicly declaring the Soviet commitment (and, one suspects, the extent of the Soviet presence). Yet he did not do so. He left the vulnerability in place for several more crucial days rather than release a press statement.

Although such a concise record leaves scope for interpretation, the reason seems evident, "...they can attack, and we will respond. This could escalate into a large-scale war." Khrushchev concluded that the United States would fear attacking Soviet troops in Cuba despite the lack of a declared Soviet red line. He did not see the deterrence benefit of declaring the troops' presence as greater than the propaganda value of continuing to deny it. Other Soviet leaders shared his view that declaration was unnecessary for the Soviet Union to be committed to retaliate for an attack on its troops in Cuba. In the words of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, "There is no consensus as to how and where this riposte would come, but it would happen – about this there is no doubt."⁶³ First Deputy Chairman Anastas Mikoyan thought much the same, "After all, we have a whole army here [Cuba]. If an invasion on the part of the Americans began, it would have led to a global confrontation."⁶⁴

It is revealing that Soviet denials persisted even after the U.S. discovered and announced the presence of the missiles in Cuba. Forgoing the credibility boost of public declaration is easier to explain away as a Soviet attempt to deploy the missiles secretly as a *fait accompli*. When Castro proposed that publicizing a treaty of alliance between the Soviet Union and Cuba might suffice to protect Cuba, Khrushchev demurred because he preferred to deploy the missiles in secret.⁶⁵ He planned to announce the missiles in November after the U.S. midterm elections.⁶⁶

The persistence of Soviet denials after all hopes for secrecy died on October 22nd reveals that the Soviet Union valued the propaganda value of continuing to deny the missiles' existence over the deterrence value of declaring a red line to protect them.⁶⁷ Khrushchev could, on October 23rd, have announced the large-scale presence of Soviet troops and missiles in Cuba and pledged to defend Cuba

⁶² "Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60," October 23, 1962 [WC].

⁶³ Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble* p. 232.

⁶⁴ In context, he could have said this merely to placate the Cubans. "Memorandum of Conversation between Mikoyan, Castro, and Dorticos," November 22, 1962 [GWU NSA]. Also see Sergo A. Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November*. Ed. Svetlana Savranskaya (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), p. 114.

⁶⁵ Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 196.

⁶⁶ Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 101.

⁶⁷ On the use of covert, deniable actions to attempt to avoid escalation: Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

as an ally. He did not do so even after U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson unveiled photographs of the missiles at the United Nations on October 25th.

Soviet stonewalling about the presence of missiles only began to wane on October 26th. Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy on that date cryptically acknowledged, "The weapons which were necessary for the defense of Cuba are already there." He edged toward articulating a red line against attacking Soviet troops in Cuba, "...[W]e are of sound mind and understand perfectly well that if we attack you, you will respond the same way. But you too will receive the same that you hurl against us. And I think that you also understand this."⁶⁸ That language evinces Khrushchev's assumption that declaration was superfluous. Public perceptions of Soviet denials persisted until the last full day of the crisis.⁶⁹ Khrushchev unambiguously acknowledged the presence of the missiles in an October 27th letter to Kennedy, both to facilitate a deal and to reassure Washington that Soviet officers – not Cubans – controlled the missiles.⁷⁰

Overall, Soviet red lines against attacking Cuba paint a two-part picture. Both Khrushchev and hawks in Washington clearly understood the incentives captured in the declaration hypothesis. However, Khrushchev deemed the advantages of declaration less valuable than secrecy and, after that collapsed, propaganda. Correctly believing that the United States would hesitate before attacking Soviet forces regardless, Khrushchev chose to forgo declaring his red line until the last full day of the crisis. It was credible anyway.

The Quarantine Speech

After a tense week of deliberations, President Kennedy went public on October 22nd with the discovery of Soviet missiles and his decision to "quarantine" Cuba. Referring to the blockade as a quarantine allowed the United States to maintain a patina of legality over what would otherwise legally constitute an act of war.

The decision for the blockade underscores the need to move beyond the binary of retaliating or relenting after a violation. Instead, Kennedy held the potential use of force in abeyance, using it as coercive leverage during the window of credibility before the Soviet Union gained confidence that he would not strike. The blockade, after all, was only an "*initial* step." Although a significant signal of resolve, the blockade could not itself remove the missiles. It served a broader strategy of coercion predicated on the possibility that more enforcement was to come, capitalizing on a window of credibility.

The demand to remove the missiles first appears midway through the speech. Note the edit made to the fourth draft: "Should these offensive military preparations continue, ... further action will be ~~undertaken~~ justified."⁷¹ This change injected greater ambiguity about the consequences of defying

⁶⁸ "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 26, 1962 (FRUS #84).

⁶⁹ Associated Press, "Premier's Letter Avoids Admitting U.S. Charges," *New York Times*, October 27, 1962.

⁷⁰ "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 27, 1962 (FRUS #91); Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 247.

⁷¹ Theodore Sorenson, "Fourth Draft of JFK's Address to the Nation," October 21, 1962, Theodore C. Sorenson Papers, Box 48 [JFK PL].

the demand. Before this point in the speech, Kennedy had merely stated an objective, not a threat: “Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere.”

One easily overlooked drawback of the blockade was that it gave Moscow the opportunity to correct its mistake (from the standpoint of the declaration hypothesis) by declaring a clear red line against attacking Soviet forces in Cuba. According to President Kennedy, “... obviously you can't sort of announce that in four days from now you're going to take them out. They may announce within three days they're going to have warheads on 'em; if we come and attack, they're going to fire them. Then what'll, what'll we do?” He then stated his intention to destroy the missiles in an airstrike.⁷² Kennedy reiterated this fear five days later in the lead-up to his speech.⁷³ Consistent with the declaration hypothesis, Washington preferred that the Soviet leaders never had a chance to tie their hands with a public red line. Nonetheless, Kennedy accepted that exact risk by selecting the blockade option.

In deciding how to enforce the September 4th red lines, the White House took seriously the domestic and international consequences of inaction.⁷⁴ Shortly after learning of the missiles, Kennedy ruminated, “My press statement was so clear about how we wouldn't do anything under these conditions and under the conditions that we would. He must know that we're going to find out...”⁷⁵ In an October 22nd meeting, Kennedy commented, “In September we had said we would react if certain actions were taken in Cuba. We have to carry out commitments which we had made publicly at that time.”⁷⁶ These and other similar remarks confirm that Kennedy took seriously the consequences of failing to enforce a red line.

Soviet leaders also contemplated the possibility that Kennedy's public statements would tie his hands. Ambassador (Washington) Anatoly Dobrynin wrote to Moscow,

A certain danger of the situation is that the President has largely engaged himself before the public opinion of America and not only America. In essence, he, as a hot-tempered gambler, has put at stake his reputation as a statesman and politician, and thus his prospects for re-election in 1964, what--being an ambitious man--he passionately seeks. This is why it is not possible to exclude completely the possibility that he can, especially taking into consideration his circle, undertake such an adventurist step as an invasion of Cuba.⁷⁷

This remarkable step-by-step explication of audience costs theory provides a measure of support for the declaration hypothesis. Yet, in another cable reacting to the speech Dobrynin reached the opposite

⁷² He later changed his mind. “White House Meeting Transcript,” October 16, 1962 (FRUS #18).

⁷³ “Minutes of the 506th Meeting of the National Security Council,” October 21, 1962 [FRUS #38].

⁷⁴ These domestic political motives have received extensive study and are not addressed here. Pressman, “September Statements, October Missiles, November Elections.”

⁷⁵ The National Security Advisor then interrupted. “Off the Record Meeting on Cuba,” October 16, 1962 [FRUS #21].

⁷⁶ “Minutes of the 507th Meeting of the National Security Council,” October 22, 1962 [FRUS #41].

⁷⁷ “Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry,” October 25, 1962 [WC].

conclusion, explaining that the severity of events “obviously have overtaken the significance of electoral considerations and that these considerations now are moving to the background.”⁷⁸

The atmosphere in the Kremlin grew tense as senior Soviet officials stayed up past midnight to learn what Washington would do. The declaration hypothesis envisions that a public statement such as Kennedy’s generates credibility by tying hands. Interestingly, the immediate reaction of Soviet leaders to Kennedy’s speech was a sense of relief.⁷⁹ The choice for coercive diplomacy and blockade was a choice not to bomb or invade Cuba, at least not initially. War would not begin that night. Declaration signaled weakness as much as strength. Whereas Soviet fears spiked with the discovery of the missiles, which revealed the violation of Kennedy’s red lines, those fears eased with the announcement of Kennedy’s brinkmanship policy.

The speech also delivered the crisis’s most bluntly-worded nuclear threat: “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.”⁸⁰ This was the sole red line set by either side with clearly specified consequences for a violation. However, I found no evidence that the Kennedy Administration agonized over this line of the speech or perceived it as vital to U.S. strategy. The basic threat itself – that the United States would retaliate after a Soviet first strike with nuclear weapons – merely reprised the logic of Cold War deterrence.

The Soviet press statement challenging the blockade responded in similar terms, albeit with less bellicose language that opted for ambiguity about consequences, “The Soviet Government is taking all necessary measures for preventing our country from being taken unawares and to enable it to offer a condign reply to the aggressor.”⁸¹ In contrast, Kennedy’s red lines with respect to the blockade and the removal of the missiles required rapid resolutions to avert escalation. Seen in that light, Washington and Moscow’s focus on those red lines becomes easier to understand.

The Blockade Line as a Red Line

“We’re eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.” Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s reaction to Soviet ships halting short of the blockade line remains a signature phrase in the public memory of the crisis. Yet the blockade line was not a total success, but rather merely mostly successful.

The October 22nd address declared, “To halt this offensive buildup, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation or port will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned

⁷⁸ “Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry,” October 23, 1962 [WC].

⁷⁹ Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, pp. 240-248.

⁸⁰ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation.”

⁸¹ “Text of Soviet Statement Challenging the U.S. Naval Quarantine of Cuba,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1962.

back.”⁸² In contrast to this clear demand, Washington never detailed how it would handle a Soviet ship crossing the blockade line. The U.S. Navy’s lengthy rules of engagement provided speak to the difficulty of accounting for the wide range of eventualities that could have arisen.⁸³

The Soviet Union did not unconditionally respect the blockade line. The *Bucharest*, a tanker unlikely to carry sensitive cargo, was allowed to proceed without physical inspection.⁸⁴ The East German passenger ship *Voelker Freundschaft* too was permitted through the line. Its lack of weaponry provided the public excuse for a decision motivated by the desire to avoid confronting a ship full of civilians.⁸⁵

Soviet submarines successfully violated the blockade line. Although an unlikely way to move cargo, American officials did worry that submarines could deliver sensitive materials such as nuclear warheads.⁸⁶ The U.S. Navy’s encounters with these submarines produced some of the tensest moments of the crisis, but the blockade never stopped them.⁸⁷ The same Central Committee meeting where the decision was made to turn back the freighters ordered, “Keep the submarines on their approaches.”⁸⁸

Washington tolerated specific Eastern Bloc ships and submarines to pass through the blockade line rather than confronting them under unfavorable circumstances. This suggests that U.S. credibility did not require a sacrosanct line that brooked no violations. Contrary to the enforcement hypothesis, those violations did not cripple the broader red line or Kennedy’s credibility moving forward.

Responding to Kennedy’s announcement of the blockade, Khrushchev wrote to him on October 24th,

Our instructions to Soviet sailors are to observe strictly the generally accepted standards of navigation in international waters and not retreat one step from them. And, if the American side violates these rights, it must be aware of the responsibility it will bear for this act. To be sure, we will not remain mere observers of pirate actions by American ships in the open sea. We will then be forced on our part to take those measures we deem necessary and sufficient to defend our rights.⁸⁹

⁸² Kennedy, “Address to the Nation.”

⁸³ “Houser to Taylor,” October 19, 1962 [GWU NSA]; “Riley to the Deputy Secretary of Defense [“Rules of Engagement”],” October 22, 1962. (Attachments) [GWU NSA].

⁸⁴ John McCone, “Memorandum for the Files,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #70]; “Hilsman to Rusk,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #76].

⁸⁵ “Fifth Meeting of the Executive Committee,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #73]; “Sixth Meeting of the Executive Committee,” October 26, 1962 [FRUS #79]; “Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee,” October 27, 1962 [FRUS #97]; John McCone, “Memorandum for the Files,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #70].

⁸⁶ “White House Meeting Transcript,” October 16, 1962 [FRUS #18]; “Smith to McCone [Soviet Challenge to the Quarantine],” October 23, 1962 [FRUS #54].

⁸⁷ Vadim Orlov, “Recollections,” 2002 [GWU NSA]; Soviet Northern Fleet Headquarters, “About Participation of Submarines 'B-4,' 'B-36,' 'B-59,' 'B-130' of the 69th Submarine Brigade of the Northern Fleet in the Operation 'Anadyr' during the Period of October-December, 1962,” December, 1962 [GWU NSA].

⁸⁸ “Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60,” October 23, 1962 [WC].

⁸⁹ “Khrushchev to Kennedy,” October 24, 1962 [WC].

Khrushchev almost immediately backed off from this implied commitment to run the blockade. Presumably he prioritized rejecting the legitimacy of the blockade over that inconsistency. His red line against attacking Soviet ships came with the ambiguity about consequences: “measures we deem necessary and sufficient.”

The Undeclared Red Line against Firing on Surveillance Aircraft

On the morning of October 27th, Moscow had reason to hope that a favorable stalemate had emerged. The United States had successfully blockaded Cuba but also increasingly demonstrated its reluctance to attack. The window of credibility was closing. Assembly of the missiles began to reach completion. Then, on October 27th, a Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) site opened fire, downing an American U-2 over Cuba and killing Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr.

Washington repeatedly fretted about what would happen when the Soviets fired on surveillance aircraft and yet did not declare a red line against it.⁹⁰ There does not appear to have been extensive discussion of making such a declaration before Major Anderson’s death. For instance, would such a demand – over sovereign Cuban airspace – be legal under international law? President Kennedy did once state, “If they fire on us, tell them we’ll take them out,” but it appears that nothing came of it.⁹¹ White House press statements on October 26th and 27th did not mention the issue – this despite the fact that the former devoted all four of its paragraphs to the topic of aerial surveillance over Cuba.⁹²

Unbeknownst to Washington, two Soviet generals in Cuba ordered the missiles fired on their own initiative.⁹³ In Moscow, fears of imminent escalation peaked. According to Sergei Khrushchev, son and biographer of Nikita Khrushchev, “It was at that very moment – not before or after – that Father felt the situation slipping out of his control.”⁹⁴ Nikita Khrushchev was furious that the SAMs fired without his orders. He feared how the United States would respond and the possibility that further firing, perhaps by Cubans, would lead to disaster. Sergei Khrushchev describes this moment as the tipping point for Soviet policy.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Casey Sherman and Michael J. Tougias. *Above and Beyond: John F. Kennedy and America's Most Dangerous Cold War Spy Mission* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), pp. 169-170, 186-187.

⁹¹ “Transcript of Conversation between President Kennedy and McNamara,” October 27, 1962 in Ted Widmer and Kennedy, Caroline. *Listening In: The Secret White House Recordings of John F. Kennedy* (London: Hachette UK, 2012). On another occasion, McNamara suggested that the U.S. declare a red line against shooting down U-2s after the first was shot down. Sherman and Tougias, *Above and Beyond*, p. 187.

⁹² General Services Administration, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Print Office, 1964).

⁹³ Sherman and Tougias, *Above and Beyond*, p. 248.

⁹⁴ Sergei N. Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010), p. 608.

⁹⁵ Nikita Khrushchev’s memoirs (edited by Sergei Khrushchev) place less emphasis on the shootdown. Sergei Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 3*. Trans. George Shriver (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 338.

U.S. contingency planning on October 23rd called for a proportional response to the downing of a surveillance aircraft: the destruction of the responsible SAM site.⁹⁶ Briefings to NATO allies described this as American policy.⁹⁷ McNamara advocated this policy shortly before learning of Major Anderson's death. General Taylor's report of the shootdown came with a recommendation for an airstrike on that SAM site the next day. Like McNamara, he expected this strike to escalate to a larger bombing campaign and – most likely – invasion.⁹⁸ Remarkably, Kennedy committed to retaliate after a shoot-down to the Pentagon but not the Soviets. That combination is difficult to reconcile with the declaration hypothesis.

President Kennedy seriously contemplated retaliatory attacks on SAM sites firing at American aircraft the next day if diplomatic negotiations did not progress.⁹⁹ What he did instead helps to reveal the limitations of the enforcement hypothesis.

Robert Kennedy met with Ambassador Dobrynin late on October 27th. Together they struck a bargain to end the crisis. The secret concession to eventually remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey contributed, but the credible threat of U.S. military action in response to the U-2 shootdown also catalyzed that outcome. Rather than immediately retaliate or reveal an unwillingness to do so, Kennedy used the credible threat of enforcement to as leverage to forge a broader deal to end the crisis. Dobrynin's report makes clear the importance of the U-2 shootdown:

The Cuban crisis, R. Kennedy began, continues to quickly worsen. We have just received a report that an unarmed American plane was shot down while carrying out a reconnaissance flight over Cuba. ...Because of the plane that was shot down, there is now strong pressure on the president to give an order to respond with fire if fired upon when American reconnaissance planes are flying over Cuba. The USA can't stop these flights, ... [b]ut if we start to fire in response—a chain reaction will quickly start that will be very hard to stop.¹⁰⁰

Soviet perceptions of U.S. credibility peaked at this moment. Moscow feared that a military strike could occur within hours. The Kremlin broadcasted its decision to remove the missiles on Radio Moscow without waiting for normal diplomatic channels or consulting Castro. Had Kennedy not looked beyond the false choice between enforcing the U.S. red line and appearing weak for not doing so, the crisis might have ended differently.

Conclusion

Conventional thinking counsels policymakers that they must declare clear red lines in order to deter. They must enforce those red lines after violations or else lose credibility. Although popular narratives about the Syrian, Gulf, and Korean Wars support this view, the red lines of the Cuban Missile

⁹⁶ "Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council," October 23, 1962 [FRUS #47].

⁹⁷ "Knappstein to the German Foreign Ministry," October 24, 1962 [WC].

⁹⁸ "Eighth Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 27, 1962 [FRUS #94].

⁹⁹ "Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 27, 1962 [FRUS #97].

¹⁰⁰ "Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry," October 27, 1962 [WC].

Crisis tell a different story. Soviet and American leaders consistently evinced an intuitive understanding of what I have referred to as the enforcement, declaration, and unambiguity hypotheses. They understood what policies would enact their proscriptions. However, they time and again chose different policies. In each instance, there is little reason to believe that they paid a price for doing so.

The Kremlin waited almost until the last day of the crisis to declare its most important red line: a prohibition against attacking their missiles and soldiers deployed to Cuba. Moscow knowingly left open the possibility that Washington could attack Cuba while denying that the United States had in fact attacked the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's calculated decision not to issue a statement to foreclose this tactic speaks volumes about how little he prioritized the credibility benefits of declaration. Kennedy, meanwhile, made internal commitments to the Pentagon to retaliate after the shootdown of a U.S. surveillance aircraft without publicly conveying the red line to the Soviet Union. Khrushchev perceived the threat as credible nonetheless, the decision of his generals in Cuba to fire notwithstanding. The reluctance to attack the other side took precedence over rhetoric.

This suggests that the lessons of the Korean and Gulf Wars are, perhaps, not what they have seemed. Rather than blame solitary verbal statements for failing to declare clear red lines, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea in June 1949 and the absence of a tripwire in Kuwait may have mattered more.¹⁰¹

Nor does the evidence sustain the view that leaders must aggressively enforce their red lines after small violations lest deterrence crumble. President Kennedy set aside his demands about organized combat units and military bases in Cuba in return for the more important concession to remove the missiles. He tolerated a freighter, a passenger ship, and attack submarines crossing the blockade line as long as the ships more likely to carry weapons shipments turned back.

Indeed, Soviet leaders' fears of U.S. escalation spiked twice during the crisis, once when they learned that Washington had detected the missiles – but before Kennedy revealed his response – and once when Soviet forces shot down Major Anderson. Both resulted from Soviet violations, not U.S. policies. The standard account of the Cuban Missile Crisis credits U.S. brinkmanship, particularly the October 22nd address and the blockade, with providing the credibility to coerce the Soviet Union into withdrawing its missiles. However, the Soviet "blink" notwithstanding, those steps failed to halt Soviet progress toward readying the missiles. The final impetus came from Robert Kennedy's adept leveraging of the potential U.S. response to the Soviet shootdown of a U.S. aircraft. This mirrored and built on President Kennedy's initial decision to hold the potential for a military response to the missiles in abeyance while exploiting Soviet fears of it. Both gambits exploited windows of credibility to help pave the road to eventual success.¹⁰²

This success calls into question the criticism of President Obama's Syria red line, because he used the same approach. Eliminating a substantial fraction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal was an

¹⁰¹ Although Pyongyang pursued Soviet support for an invasion before the U.S. withdrawal, Stalin did not grant it. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, p. 382; Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined."

¹⁰² I seek here to highlight neglected elements, not to rewrite the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis. U.S. brinkmanship contributed to the Soviet withdrawal, as did the Jupiter missiles concession.

objective that seemed unachievable until the Russians put it on the table. Only the credible threat to retaliate after the Assad regime crossed his red line made that possible. Is that truly weakness, with strength a circumscribed set of airstrikes with little chance of removing Assad from power or turning the tide of the Syrian Civil War?¹⁰³ His successor did just that to little apparent effect. The notion that Syria led to Russia's invasion of Crimea is particularly overwrought.¹⁰⁴

Finally, current understandings of the role of ambiguity in deterrence and coercion paint a muddled picture for policymakers that mixes praise for clarity with endorsements of strategic ambiguity. The resolution of that contradiction emerges from distinguishing ambiguity about demands from ambiguity about consequences. Leaders can set clear red lines while mitigating entrapment risks and preserving flexibility via ambiguity about the consequences of crossing those lines. Every threat save one made by either side of the crisis settled on this combination.

In short, it would be a mistake to believe that publicly declaring a red line is essential for its credibility. It would be an error to regard either clarity or ambiguity as innately superior. And it could spell disaster to conclude that every small violation of a red line requires a military response.

¹⁰³ On the ineffectiveness of such airstrikes, see Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁴ Julia Ioffe, "How Russia Saw the Red Line Crisis," *The Atlantic*, March 11, 2016.