

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

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ABSTRACT

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. However, focusing on three major decisions about red lines – whether to declare them, how aggressively to enforce them after violations, and how much ambiguity to incorporate into them – this study makes the case that the causal link from public declaration to credibility is more complex and less robust than often assumed. It closely examines each red line set by each side during the Cuban Missile Crisis, including adversary perceptions of them and policy responses to them. It draws on declassified records of the decision-making processes of both U.S. and Soviet leaders, including the progression of drafts and taped meetings that eventuated Washington's public declarations.

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In 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama declared a red line against the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. A month later, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for a red line against Iran's nuclear program in a speech to the United Nations. Since then, the term and concept of red lines has become a mainstay of the foreign policy discourse. However, the academic community has yet to resolve three of the most important questions policymakers have about red lines: First, policymakers must decide whether to publicly declare a red line at all. Second, they often need to know whether future credibility depends on rigidly enforcing their red lines after violations, including small affronts. Third, when formulating a red line, policymakers wonder whether red lines should be phrased ambiguously or with clear and specific language. This study reformulates these policy questions as social science research questions, considers a set of theoretical arguments that attempt to answer them, and evaluates those arguments with archival evidence from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Scholars and practitioners largely share a common understanding of the benefits and risks of publicly declaring red lines. I refer to this conventional wisdom as "declaration theory," which has two central tenets. First, publicly declaring a red line enhances its credibility. Second, failing to enforce that red line – that is, failing to impose consequences after violations – damages leaders' credibility and domestic standing. Taken together, these propositions provide clear prescriptions to policymakers deciding whether or not to declare red lines. That President Obama erred in declaring the Syria red line but failing to enforce it has crystallized as accepted wisdom. To the extent that controversy endures, it concerns whether the mistake was making the statement or failing to follow through on it.

However, an in-depth analysis of each red line set by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 reveals the remarkable number of ways in which American and Soviet leaders purposefully disregarded the counsel of this conventional wisdom. Time and again, these leaders understood the credibility benefits and entrapment risks of public declarations. They knew what form a decision based on those considerations would take. Then they did something else. And they paid little or no price for it. Soviet leaders never publicly declared a red line against attacking Soviet forces in Cuba, whose presence they denied even after Ambassador Adlai Stevenson displayed photographs of them to the world. 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 reacted with dread after learning that Soviet forces shot down a U-2 without orders from Moscow. President Kennedy repeatedly let smaller Soviet violations pass without immediately enforcing his red lines in the belief that doing so would not cripple his credibility going forward. He paid no visible price for it. This study brings to light these and other deviations from the received wisdom about red lines.

This article 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. It draws on the exceptional and extensive array of declassified documents available from the United States and, albeit to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union. The 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. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library's

archive contains early drafts of public statements declaring red lines, making it possible to trace the development of their phrasing.

Drawing on that evidence, the article challenges five myths about red lines. First, declaring a red line is necessary for that red line to be credible. Second, when an adversary violates a red line to a limited extent, aggressive enforcement is necessary to sustain the declarer's credibility. Third, leaders generally prefer clarity in their red lines because it enhances credibility. Fourth, leaders generally prefer ambiguity in their red lines because it mitigates the risk of entrapment into unwanted escalation. Instead of either, and for reasons I explore, leaders generally formulate threats that are comparatively clear about their demands but ambiguous about the consequences of violating those demands. Despite all the ways in which leaders repeatedly departed from the expectations of declaration theory, the final myth amounts to a qualified defense of it against a charge raised by its critics: Fifth, leaders do not take into account that public statements tie their hands and the hands of their adversaries. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, however, leaders understood these considerations when they made informed choices not to let them determine policy.

The Statecraft of Red Lines

Leaders confronted with a crisis often lack the time or capacity to improve the balance of power or forge new alliances. Yet 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 other national interest. The impact of verbal statements articulating red lines is the subject of question and skepticism throughout this article, but the level of time and effort policymakers dedicate to 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. They are an integral part of coercion, including both deterrent threats that aim to sustain the status quo and compellent threats that demand changes to it.¹ The target of the demand can respond to the threat with a range of options. A red line is the part of the threat that distinguishes acceptable actions from unacceptable actions.² The 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.³

¹ See Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 69.

² For a more detailed elaboration of this definition of red lines, 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; Todd Robinson, Paul F. Diehl, and Tyler Pack, "Crossing the Red Line: International Legal Limits on Policy Options," *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 9 (2014), pp. 59–60; 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).

³ On the dual roles of threats and assurances in coercion: Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 4, 74.

By this definition, red lines are a necessary part of all coercive threats.⁴ More formally, coercive threats contain two basic elements: demands and consequences if the demands go unfulfilled.⁵ Demands, in turn, must contain a red line to divide exactly what is demanded from what is not. This definition, however, does not require that red lines be publicly or verbally declared. Leaders often convey red lines implicitly, tacitly, privately, and ambiguously. I regard each as characteristics of red lines and thus as variables, not as criteria for whether a red line exists.⁶

Declaration Theory

Scholars and practitioners share a general understanding of the relationship between publicly declaring red lines and the credibility of those red lines. For ease of discussion, I refer to it as declaration theory. It consists of two related propositions. 1) When a leader publicly declares a red line, that red line gains credibility. 2) If an adversary violates that red line without the leader then imposing the threatened consequences, the declarer loses credibility for subsequent encounters and domestic political standing. These two claims, while distinct, are intrinsically linked. The second gives rise to the first. Declaration theory encompasses leaders' strategic concerns with their reputation in the eyes of both adversaries and allies as well as the domestic audience.

Why would a few words matter? The importance of leaders' public pronouncements may seem self-evident but should not be taken for granted. Cold logic dictates that rational leaders should speak whatever words will best influence their adversaries to take desired actions.⁷ Manipulativeness should trump honesty. Adversaries should take that into account and treat declarations with skepticism. The term "cheap talk" captures the notion that only when a declarer absorbs some significant cost or risk does the message start to become credible. In coercive conflicts, costless verbal statements fall short of that standard.⁸

However, leaders must also worry about the perceptions of allies, adversaries, and neutrals going forward – as well as the domestic audience. If these audiences penalize leaders who publicly commit to a red line and then fail to follow through, what would otherwise be cheap talk becomes

⁴ Consequently, using the phrase "red line" is not necessary for a red line to exist. Leaders found plenty of ways to articulate red lines long before the phrase came into vogue.

⁵ Of course, threatened or implied consequences are not always imposed; coercive bluffs qualify as coercion.

⁶ This distinction allows for the possibility of undeclared red lines that are nonetheless mutually understood.

⁷ This claim is inherent to the logic of signaling models. Of course, under many circumstances the truth is most likely to generate the best outcome. On that, see Anne E. Sartori, "The Might of the Pen: A Reputational Theory of Communication in International Disputes." *International Organization* vol. 56, No. 1 (2002), pp. 121-149; Alexandra Guisinger and Alastair Smith, "Honest Threats: The Interaction of Reputation and Political Institutions in International Crises." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 46, No. 2 (2002), pp. 175-200.

⁸ James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (1994), pp. 577-592; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1995), pp. 379-414; James D. Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices: Signaling, Commitment, and Negotiation in International Politics," in David Lake and Robert Powell eds., *International Relations: A Strategic Choice Approach* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Roseanne W. McManus, *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 20-21.

costly. Audience costs render verbal statements such as red lines costly and thus informative.⁹ The requirement is that audiences must perceive inconsistency between words and subsequent deeds as harmful and punish leaders accordingly.

I use the term declaration theory in lieu of audience costs for several reasons. First, it is worthwhile in itself to recast the issue in terms more consistent with and accessible to policy debates. Framing the theory in terms of the decision leaders must make serves that end while setting aside jargon. Second, audience costs are often understood as purely or primarily domestic, whereas declaration theory unmistakably includes foreign audiences. Third, actions other than declarations – for instance, military mobilizations – generate audience costs.¹⁰ The focus here is exclusively on verbal declarations. Fourth, audience costs theory is sometimes understood to apply distinctively to democracies; declaration theory contains no such assumption.¹¹ Finally, audience costs theory can be understood to require that leaders intentionally declare red lines in order to create and exploit audience costs (“tying hands”), but declaration theory makes no assumption about the motive for declarations.

Conclusions about declaration theory have, to date, largely depended on methodology. Statistical studies of crises and disputes have found some support for the theory. Schultz, for instance, finds that the targets of threats by democratic states less often elect to resist them.¹² Partell and Palmer find that democracies are less likely to back down in militarized interstate disputes.¹³ However, Downes and Sechser call into question whether most of these militarized disputes and crises in these studies truly include the sorts of coercive threats in which audience costs come into play. Using alternative data on coercive threats, they detect no advantage for democracies.¹⁴

More recently, scholars have begun to create and analyze datasets compiled from large collections of government documents. McManus explores the conditions under which statements of resolve affect outcomes. She presents a variety of evidence that they can do so, particularly in the absence of military and domestic political constraints against following through on those threats.¹⁵ Drawing on British government inferences about other states prior to World War I, Trager presents evidence that private communications more often affect perceptions than public statements.¹⁶ Katagari and Min find the same with respect to the Second Berlin Crisis and emphasize the greater noisiness of public statements intended for multiple purposes and audiences in comparison to private

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences.”

¹¹ Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (2008), pp. 35-64.

¹² Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, pp. 144-150.

¹³ Peter J. Partell and Glenn Palmer, “Audience Costs and Interstate Crises: An Empirical Assessment of Fearon's Model of Dispute Outcomes,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999), pp. 389-405.

¹⁴ Alexander B. Downes and Todd S. Sechser. “The Illusion of Democratic Credibility.” *International Organization* Vol. 66, No. 3 (2012), pp. 457-489.

¹⁵ McManus, *Statements of Resolve*.

¹⁶ Robert F. Trager. *Diplomacy: Communication and the Origins of International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

communications.¹⁷ These findings are puzzling for declaration theory, which would expect public statements to bear greater audience costs and therefore generate more credibility.

Survey experiments have consistently found evidence favoring declaration theory by examining whether the public evaluates leaders in line with its expectations. Tomz shows that the American public disapproves of an American President who pledged to intervene to stop an aggressor but then failed to follow through.¹⁸ Levendusky and Horowitz qualify this by demonstrating that presidents can mitigate this disapproval through messaging that justifies their decision. Kertzer and Brutger further show that American conservatives indeed disapprove of this inconsistency, but liberals more often disapprove of the use of blustery rhetoric in its own right.¹⁹ Most recently, 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 2014.²⁰ The study confirms that declaration theory is widely believed in Israel and the United States. Collectively, these survey experiments have convincingly established that domestic and foreign audiences do devalue the credibility of leaders who back down in conflicts, especially if they first pledged not to do so. However, survey experiments cannot directly assess how heavily leaders weigh these costs against other considerations, nor to what extent they affect state behavior.

Case studies have tended to reach the opposite conclusion about declaration theory. Examining a variety of cases after 1945, Snyder and Borghard indict it on three counts. First, leaders generally opt for ambiguous threats over clear declarations. Second, the public punishes leaders for poor outcomes regardless of the content of their verbal statements. Third, authoritarian regimes do not understand the domestic politics of democracies in the manner required by the theory.²¹ Trachtenberg examines the explanatory power of audience costs theory in twelve great power crises involving a democratic regime. He endorses Snyder and Borghard's charges and concludes that "it is hard to identify any case in which [the audience cost] mechanism played much of a role at all."²² Earlier studies by Press, Mercer and Hopf each conclude that backing down in crises did not critically damage leaders or states' credibility (reputation) in future encounters.²³ Press's paradoxical finding that policymakers routinely fret over

¹⁷ Azusa Katagiri and Eric Min, "The Credibility of Public and Private Signals: A Document-Based Approach," *American Political Science Review*, forthcoming.

¹⁸ Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach." *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2007), pp. 821-840. Also see 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.

¹⁹ Joshua D. Kertzer and Ryan Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2016), pp. 234-249.

²⁰ Joshua D. Kertzer, Jonathan Renshon, and Karen Yarhi-Milo, "Are Red Lines Red Herrings?"

²¹ They also, fourth, doubt that the importance of domestic political concerns relative to reputational concerns (foreign audiences). 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.

²² Marc Trachtenberg. "Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis," *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2012), pp. 3-42. Also see Stephen M. Walt. "Rigor or Rigor Mortis? Rational Choice and Security Studies," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1999), pp. 33-35.

²³ Provided that leaders declared their commitments, this literature assesses declaration theory over the long term. This article, in contrast, focuses on the short term. Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess*

reputation and yet rarely base their decisions on their adversary's past actions dovetails with the conclusions in this article. Finally, Schultz's case studies of the Fashoda, Boer, Rhineland, Suez, and Rhodesian Crises find support for a version of audience costs theory. However, Schultz's distinctive theory operates primarily through a mechanism separate from declaration theory. Credibility emerges from the decision by the political opposition in democracies to support or oppose the government more than that government's fear of penalties for failing to follow through on a pledge.

Snyder and Borghard as well as Trachtenberg base their critiques in part on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Both doubt that leaders deliberately risked audience costs for the purpose of tying their hands and thereby enhancing credibility. Trachtenberg allows that audience cost dynamics played "a certain role," but determines that they were not crucial. He further concludes that Khrushchev did not take into account American domestic politics "in any serious way."²⁴ Snyder and Borghard similarly characterize Khrushchev as "completely tone-deaf to the audience costs mechanism."²⁵ They further conclude that Washington consistently preferred ambiguity to clear threats that would truly tie hands in the eyes of the public. Does the case truly merit such a bleak verdict for declaration theory?

What Does the Cuban Missile Crisis Reveal about Declaration Theory?

The lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis emerge from the surprising number of instances in which leaders on each side understood the counsel of declaration theory, knowingly and intentionally departed from it, and paid little price for doing so. Those conclusions offer evidence against the potency of declaration theory. But, they also challenge criticisms of it that allege policymakers do not think in the manner required by theory. There is, consequently, evidence for and against declaration theory in the case. This nuance complicates the task of drawing useful conclusions from a single case study. Case studies as a method are comparatively ill-suited to answering probabilistic ("how much") questions about explanatory power. The challenge, therefore, is to do better than simply concluding that that declaration theory matters more than not at all but not enough to alone determine outcomes.

Rather than attempt to quantify the explanatory power of declaration theory with one case, I instead draw out and pare away some of the bolder claims of both proponents and critics. Case studies stand on firmer ground when they explore causal mechanisms or evaluate unusually rigid theoretical claims, most of all hypotheses that make claims of necessary or sufficient causation.²⁶ I derive several of these hypotheses from a strict interpretation of declaration theory, which I refer to as its "rigid variant." In the process, I cast doubt on several popular rules of thumb that often surface amid policy debates about red lines.

Military Threats (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

²⁴ Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs," pp. 30-32.

²⁵ Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats," p. 452.

²⁶ John Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (2004), p. 34; James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, "A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research," *Political Analysis*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2006), p. 232.

Declaration and Credibility

Is public declaration necessary for red lines to be credible? Although necessity is a high standard of causation, it is *prima facie* plausible here. An analogy helps to illustrate why. Suppose a detective interrogates a subject by first asking whether he is guilty. If the suspect proclaims his innocence, it reveals little; innocent and guilty suspects alike both normally swear to their innocence. However, if the subject confesses guilt, the case is all but closed. Absent special circumstances such as coercion by the detective, declaring guilt reveals a great deal even as declaring innocence reveals little.

Red lines could plausibly function the same way. States have a clear incentive to appear resolute so that the adversary will back down without a fight. Sometimes the resultant red lines are sincere; others are bluffs. Confessing low resolve by declining to even set a red line gives away the game without playing. From this perspective, declaring a red line may serve as a prerequisite for credibility. Put simply, if leaders will not even say aloud that they are willing to fight for something, why would anyone believe that they are actually willing to do so?

The U.S. experiences preceding the Korean and Gulf Wars are often cited as examples of the perils of failing to declare red lines.²⁷ After Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave a speech detailing the U.S. defensive perimeter in Asia – delimiting a line that unmistakably excluded Korea – North Korea proceeded to invade. 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. These cases have contributed to the firmly established conventional wisdom that declaring red lines is essential for credibility.

Imagine if the United States were to approach deterrence in Korea today as follows: Sign a secret alliance with South Korea but conceal it from the world. Station tens of thousands of American soldiers in South Korea but obscure their numbers and refer to them only as advisors. Deploy nuclear missiles to South Korea without revealing their presence. Demand that North Korea not invade but fail to clearly set any consequences if it does or make clear that an invasion would constitute an attack on the United States. Such an approach falls miles outside the bounds of the current policy debate about Korea and inimical to basic assumptions about the importance of declaratory policy for extended deterrence. Yet, strange as it may seem, this is essentially what the Soviet Union did in Cuba. And, in a sense, it succeeded. Soviet deterrence against attacking their troops in Cuba was credible to President Kennedy.

Enforcement and Credibility

In policy debates, an assumption often surfaces that even a limited violation of a red line – if not duly punished – deals crippling damage to the credibility of that red line going forward. It may further damage the credibility of the leader who declared it, and perhaps even of the state that leader

²⁷ 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.

governs.²⁸ Is that the case? Does failing to enforce a red line after limited violations necessarily cripple those red lines?

The rigid variant of declaration theory provides the basis for this view. Suppose a state declares a red line, then fails to enforce it after a first violation. Why would the adversary then perceive as credible the threat to retaliate for a second violation? By allowing the first offense to pass, the declarer revealed their unwillingness to enforce the red line. Schelling famously asked how, if the United States failed to fight back against an invasion of California, could it possibly have the credibility to deter a subsequent invasion further east.²⁹ The reasoning is, however, also akin to the argument that the United States needed to stand firm and fight on in Vietnam lest it damage its reputation and undercut the credibility of its commitments to defend NATO allies in Europe.³⁰ Critics have lambasted that rationale, citing among other flaws the illogic of assuming that a demonstrated willingness to fight a limited war in Vietnam would affect perceptions of the willingness to fight a nuclear war in Europe.³¹ Yet even conceding that critique, it remains plausible that failing to enforce a specific red line after a first violation would undercut the credibility of that same red line against the same type of violation.

The question of enforcement arose in infamous fashion in 2013 after Bashar al Assad's forces used sarin gas to massacre more than 1,400 in a Damascus suburb amid the Syrian Civil War. President Obama declared a red line against precisely that in 2012.³² Nonetheless, after the British Parliament and U.S. Congress failed to back the use of force, he ultimately chose to instead accept a Russian-brokered deal in which he forewent a strike in return for the Syrian regime's relinquishment of its chemical weapons capabilities. (The Assad regime later returned to using chemical weapons.) According to Senator John McCain, "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."³³ Senator McCain later attributed Russia's invasion of Crimea in part to the weakness President Obama revealed in Syria.³⁴ Even many Democrats now agree that President Obama damaged his own – and perhaps the nation's – credibility by deciding against airstrikes in Syria. Jim Jones, Obama's National Security Advisor until 2010, later called the Syria red line a "colossal mistake."³⁵

In the Cuban Missile Crisis, however, President Kennedy repeatedly allowed limited yet significant violations to pass without enforcement. Far from crippling his credibility, those choices contributed to the successful pursuit of a deal that achieved more important goals at less risk of

²⁸ On the distinction between state-specific and leader-specific credibility: 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; Danielle L. Lupton, "Reexamining Reputation for Resolve: Leaders, States, and the Onset of International Crises," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2018), pp. 198-216.

²⁹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 56.

³⁰ For example, Henry A. Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1969): 211-234.

³¹ Schelling termed this the "interdependence of commitments." Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 55-59.

³² Hisham Melhem, "How Obama's Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart," *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017.

³³ Mark Mandell, "Obama's Thick Red Line on Syria," *BBC News*, August 22, 2013.

³⁴ Jake Miller, "John McCain blames Obama's 'Feckless' Foreign Policy for Ukraine Crisis," *CBS News*, March 3, 2014.

³⁵ Olivia Beavers, "Former Obama National Security Adviser Blasts Decisions in Syria as a 'Colossal Mistake,'" *The Hill*, February 19, 2017.

subsequent escalation. In effect, enduring a first violation without retaliating became a useful concession. The credible threat to retaliate for the violation served as a useful source of leverage at the (figurative) bargaining table, facilitating a better outcome. History treated those decisions more kindly than it has treated Obama's.

Invalidating the idea that every small violation requires a robust enforcement response to preserve credibility matters in part because it speaks to the limits of declaration theory. It matters as well because most transgressions are not all-or-nothing in nature. Past literature provides scant guidance to policymakers on how to respond to violations that are small, limited, or partial in scope. This leaves some to fear that only a harshly punitive response can salvage their credibility after even the smallest violations. That belief can lead to escalation.

Ambiguity and Credibility

Policy debates about red lines frequently adopt simplifying language that refers to "setting" red lines. That is, leaders either do or do not declare red lines.³⁶ However, the choice extends to the shades of gray between those extremes. If declaring red lines with unmistakable clarity maximizes reputational and domestic hand-tying incentives rather than eschewing them, declaring red lines ambiguously allows states to optimize them at intermediate levels.

To elaborate on this further, unambiguously declaring commitments increases the reputational and audience costs of not fulfilling that commitment. But, by making it costlier to back down, clarity therefore ties the hands of the declarer to follow through. This renders the red line more credible.³⁷ A credibility-entrapment tradeoff lies at the core of declaration theory. By this logic, ambiguity may be beneficial or detrimental for the declarer, but it reduces credibility in either case. It is detrimental when the credibility loss leads to the avoidable failure of the red line. It is beneficial when avoiding entrapment into unwanted escalation matters more than the credibility loss.³⁸

The rigid variant of declaration theory postulates that states declare clear red lines in order to maximize their advantage by tying their hands. Critics have concluded that leaders consistently opt for ambiguity in order to preserve their freedom of action.³⁹ Both sides of this debate share the same premise: leaders confront a credibility-entrapment tradeoff. They differ on which side of that tradeoff tends to outweigh the other and thus which option leaders generally select. However, neither of the two conclusions describes most red lines from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

³⁶ I imply no criticism here. Simplification (parsimony) is frequently efficient.

³⁷ Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations*, 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.

³⁸ Or when backing down with reduced reputational cost is preferable to backing down with greater reputational cost.

³⁹ Note the irony: this argument seems to stipulate that public statements can tie hands. Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats"; Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs"; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations*.

Instead, a more nuanced picture emerges from asking the question: ambiguity about what? Ambiguity is not one singular characteristic of threats. Coercive threats consist of two main parts: demands (including red lines) and consequences.⁴⁰ I conjecture that ambiguity about where the line is drawn – the red line itself – damages credibility more than ambiguity about what happens if the line is crossed – the threatened consequences for violations.⁴¹ Resultantly, ambiguity about consequences occurs so often as to verge on normalcy, whereas ambiguity about demands occurs less frequently.⁴² 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.⁴³ Obama’s threat was relatively clear about the red line – what action was prohibited – but considerably more ambiguous about the punishment for a violation. This appears to be typical. President Obama’s Syrian red line took a similar form, with the most pointed language as follows: “We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that [using chemical weapons is] 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 weapons.”⁴⁴ The phrase “enormous consequences,” while more ominous than “costs,” is hardly specific; unlike the demand to refrain from chemical weapons use. In the Cuban case, all but one red line contained vague language about consequences; these red lines were often clearer about the demands themselves.

Even the language of the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO) mutual defense obligations is vaguer about consequences than often supposed. The NATO charter 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...”⁴⁵ In comparison, the demand not to attack any NATO member in Europe or North America (but not elsewhere) offers more clarity.

Three reasons explain why red lines tend towards clarity about demands but ambiguity about consequences. First, telegraphing the exact form that a punitive strike will take allows the adversary to take countermeasures to defeat it, to better absorb the blow, or to prepare a riposte. This particularly afflicts any punitive response reliant on a degree of surprise. Limited uses of force almost invariably fall

⁴⁰ Because I define red lines as part of demands, ambiguity about the consequences is not ambiguity about red lines *per se*. In that respect, the scope of this article extends beyond red lines in order to offer a more complete account of ambiguity in coercion.

⁴¹ 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 between these two types of ambiguity but makes no argument in favor of one versus the other. Tertrais, “Drawing Red Lines Right,” p. 18. McManus classifies statements of resolve that refer to consequences (ambiguously or clearly) as stronger by a tier than statements which merely articulate demands. McManus, *Statements of Resolve*, p. 51.

⁴² Typically, consequences take the form of punishments. However, there are other possibilities such as taking measures to reduce the target’s chancing of prevailing with their current strategy (denial). See Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁴³ David Beard, “‘There Will Be Costs’ – The Text of Obama’s Statement on Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 2014.

⁴⁴ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20, 2012.

⁴⁵ *The North Atlantic Treaty*, April 4, 1969.

into this category. When the United States followed through on President Trump's chemical weapons use red line with cruise missile strikes in Syria in April 2017 (and again with airstrikes in April 2018), Washington warned Moscow of the strikes in order to prevent Russia from suffering casualties.⁴⁶ This reduced the damage to the Assad regime, because the Russians surely relayed this information to it. Specifying the exact targets of a punitive strike as part of the red line – before the Assad regime used chemical weapons – would have given still more time to shift resources and minimize the damage.

Second, ambiguity about demands creates gray areas that can function like a “green light” to the adversary.⁴⁷ Either form of ambiguity offers an ‘out’ for a leader seeking to avoid entrapment. However, only ambiguity about demands creates specific gray areas that provide openings for the adversary to advance with reduced fear of consequences. By analogy, suppose a mother tells her daughter that she may not eat any dessert that evening only to discover that her child has dined on sugar-laden cereal and chocolate milk. With neither clearly a dessert and the demand left ambiguous in that regard, the violation might well go unpunished. In contrast, suppose that mother clearly phrases her red line to include both items in the red line as prohibited but opts instead for ambiguity about the consequences for consuming dessert without permission. The child may still cross that line, but they have no natural opening or loophole for doing so.

This claim that ambiguity about demands acts as a green light to the target is antithetical to a popular argument about the virtues of ambiguity. This argument proposes that ambiguity engenders uncertainty about exactly what will trigger retribution, thus promoting caution. Correspondingly, too much clarity functions as a green light that encourages the adversary to advance right up to the line. This logic seems compelling, but I argue that it is erroneous.

The choice between leaving something outside a red line and leaving it ambiguous is a false dichotomy. By analogy, the argument is that yellow lights better deter drivers from entering intersections than green lights. That is true but also misleading. Ambiguity appears the more constraining of the two only because the third option, a red light, has been neglected. Yet, whereas traffic lights operate on preset cycles, states always retain that option to set a clear red line. Doing otherwise is hardly a signal of resolve. Is a leader truly going to, for instance, use force over a marginal and ambiguous violation of a red line that he or she intentionally chose not to make clear? More likely that leader will abide the small loss and deny that any red line had in fact been crossed. Ambiguity is no panacea for a lack of credibility. It is, at best, a way to reduce the reputational damage of a non-credible red line's predictable failure.

Third, regardless of whether it is advantageous, specifying the exact consequences of a violation is frequently impractical.⁴⁸ Threats of specific responses are often at odds with the strategic and policy

⁴⁶ Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, “Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2017; Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neft and Ben Hubbard, “U.S., Britain and France Strike Syria Over Suspected Chemical Weapons Attack,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2018.

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 67.

processes with which states actually respond to violations of their red lines. These responses tend to be complex, contingent, unpredictable, and at least partially unplanned. In the Syria example, President Obama likely could not have predicted that the British Parliament and U.S. Congress would both decline to back a use of force. He would have been still harder pressed to anticipate that Russia would interject an offer and opportunity to convert the (perhaps) credible threat of force into a bargain in which the Assad regime handed over a significant part of its chemical weapons arsenal. Responses that feature economic and/or diplomatic sanctions are comparatively amenable to specificity in advance. Yet even there, anticipating the severity and composition of the eventual sanctions – how severe of restrictions, on what goods, how many diplomatic expulsions, etc. – remains difficult. The declarer will not know with certainty how other states and other domestic players will respond, in part because the nature and severity of the violation may be impossible to predict. Under such circumstances, threatening a specific response to any violation lacks credibility not because of a calculation about costs and benefits, but rather simply because it is impractical. The Cuban case provides clear examples of this.

In sum, there are good reasons to expect that leaders will gravitate toward clarity about demands but ambiguity about consequences. Future studies can better assess whether this combination truly outperforms the alternatives and thus offers a best practice for policymakers. Because both sides adopted it so consistently, the variation to do so is lacking in the Cuba case. Nonetheless, the fact that both the United States and the Soviet Union – two rather different regimes – shared this predilection during the Cuban Missile Crisis provides an initial reason to suppose that leaders may use this combination as something akin to an intuited rule of thumb.

The Cuban Missile Crisis in Red Lines

The remainder of this study investigates the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. It reveals the striking ways in which leaders on each side understood the counsel of declaration theory only to disregard it and take a different action. More formally, it provides evidence in support of the following four conclusions. First, undeclared red lines can be credible. Therefore, declaration is not a necessary condition for credibility. Second, letting limited violations go unenforced can occur without crippling the credibility of the red line or its declarer going forward. Therefore, enforcement after limited violations is not a necessary condition for credibility. Indeed, parlaying forbearance of enforcement into a concession to reach a larger deal can be an effective tactic. Third, leaders tend to set red lines that are comparatively clear about their demands but ambiguous about the consequences for failing to fulfill them. Fourth despite all these limitations on declaration theory's explanatory power, both Washington and Moscow consistently considered its implications for both their own incentives and their adversary's. Indeed, proponents of declaration theory (and audience costs theory) may take heart in the evidence to follow when compared to past qualitative studies. Nonetheless, the most remarkable aspect of the case is how often policymakers understood what declaration theory expected of them only to do something else in spite of it.

[Kennedy's Statement of September 4th](#)

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, 1962.⁴⁹ Or so it tends to be remembered. The language of the crucial second paragraph of the statement, however, is worth reading in full. 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.⁵⁰

This statement would go on to be remembered as a prohibition against nuclear missiles in Cuba. For instance, the *New York Times* reported at the peak of the ensuing crisis in October, “In the September statement, the President told the nation that he had no evidence of a ‘significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction.’ But he added that if it were otherwise, ‘the gravest issues would arise.’”⁵¹ That summary is accurate yet incomplete. 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 not known at the time.⁵² Nonetheless, the United States did not aggressively pursue demands other than the removal of missiles and, with less vigor, the IL-28s.⁵³ Contrary to the rigid variant of declaration theory, President Kennedy paid little or no short-term price for falling short of enforcing all his declared red lines.

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.”⁵⁴ This memo reflected the views of the hawkish minority in the administration who argued for a military strike to remove the missiles and the Castro regime. It advocated using the blockade as leverage to force Soviet troops out of Cuba. Curiously, however, in making that case the memo failed to mention that President Kennedy had publicly pledged to do just that. The September 4th red lines not only included the prohibitions against Soviet organized combat forces and bases in Cuba; it began with

⁴⁹ In the interest of brevity, I forgo discussing a similar statement of September 13th.

⁵⁰ 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 [WC].

⁵¹ Max Frankel, “Soviet Stressed Frankness to U.S.” *New York Times*, October 26, 1962.

⁵² Despite the U.S. decision not to prioritize this demand during the crisis, the Soviet Union eventually did remove most of its troop presence from Cuba in the aftermath of the crisis – including tactical nuclear weapons whose presence Washington never detected – but that decision owed more to the souring of relations with Cuba than U.S. threats. For the 41,000 figure: Naftali and Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 242.

⁵³ “Gromyko to Kuznetsov and Zorin,” November 5, 1962 [WC]; 103. Summary Record of the Tenth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Washington, October 28, 1962, 11:10 a.m. [FRUS]; “Khrushchev to Mikoyan,” November 11, 1962 [WC].

⁵⁴ “Smith to Taylor,” November 14, 1962 [GWU NSA].

them. Nonetheless, by November 14th, the exact words Kennedy used on September 4th had lost their importance.

Peculiarly, the language of Kennedy's five red lines was not originally written to set red lines. Recall that it culminated by saying, "Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise." That sentence was not in the original draft. Instead it ended, "There is nothing in the Soviet announcement that contemplates such capability." Until that sentence's replacement, the paragraph merely provided a five-part summary of U.S. intelligence on the limits of Soviet activities in Cuba. The next paragraph (eventually removed) contained the initial, vaguer red line separately from that five-part list:

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.⁵⁵

The associated decision to expand the threat to include bases and conventional troops did not come with angst about what might happen if the Soviet Union violated only those demands; anxiety that declaration theory would expect to exist.

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."⁵⁶ Ironically, Khrushchev would make much the same argument on October 27th:

...I assure you that your arguments regarding offensive weapons on Cuba are groundless. ...Let us take for example a simple cannon. What sort of means is this: offensive or defensive? A cannon is a defensive means if it is set up to defend boundaries or a fortified area. But if one concentrates artillery, and adds to it the necessary number of troops, then the same cannons do become an offensive means...⁵⁷

The eventual decision to link the threatened consequences specifically to ground-to-ground missiles left Khrushchev in a weaker position from which to make this argument.

As they moved toward greater clarity about the demands, Kennedy and his advisors sought to preserve and even increase the ambiguity about consequences. At one point, 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."⁵⁸ In the end, the threatened consequence was left vague: "gravest issues."

⁵⁵ Box 338, "Proposed Presidential Statement on Cuban Policy" [JFK PL].

⁵⁶ Due to poor tape quality, I removed background noise with the software Audacity. I am 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 [Miller Center John F. Kennedy Presidential Recordings].

⁵⁷ Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, October 26, 1962 [FRUS #84].

⁵⁸ "Draft Meeting on the Cuba Press Statement."

State Department Director of Policy Planning Walt Rostow presaged the September 4th statement in a September 3rd memo to President Kennedy 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.⁵⁹

This largely describes the resultant statement, with the exception of specifying military consequences. The decision, instead, was for clarity about demands but ambiguity about consequences.

One reason for the ambiguity about consequences was, quite simply, that the White House did not know how the United States would respond to a Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba. President Kennedy would have been hard pressed to threaten in advance to respond to a nuclear missile deployment with a naval blockade, aggressive brinkmanship that risked violent confrontations between Soviet and American forces, and further threats. That 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 blockade.⁶⁰ That strategy depended greatly on context that would have been difficult to anticipate. For instance, the U.S. policy was heavily shaped 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 that could be violated in any of dozens of combinations and each to various degrees. When Kennedy announced the decision to blockade Cuba after days of intense planning, he began the critical part of his address to the nation by saying, “I have directed that the following *initial* steps be taken immediately: ...” (emphasis in original).⁶¹ Even then he did not know events would unfold.

The breadth of Kennedy’s five demands becomes easier to understand in the context of his political vulnerability to the Cuba issue. It is doubtful that the primary purpose of the September 4th statement was deterrence. Kennedy sought to blunt domestic criticism of his Cuba policy.⁶² With the Bay of Pigs fiasco and ongoing Soviet arms shipments continuing to loom over the impending midterm elections, Cuba reigned at the top of the domestic political debate. In a poll of news editors and

⁵⁹ Walt Rostow, “Memorandum to the President,” September 3rd, 1962 [JFK PL Box 338].

⁶⁰ “White House Meeting Transcript,” October 16, 1962 [FRUS #18].

⁶¹ John F. Kennedy, “Address to the Nation,” October 22, 1962.

⁶² I am sympathetic to the critics’ conclusion that assertive public statements during the crisis were not an attempt to “tie hands” for advantage, but rather attempts to rebut charges of weakness on the issue. However, leaders regarded those statements with grave seriousness as means of conveying important messages, including threats, without articulating the mechanism through which that would happen. I am not comfortable ruling out (or in) the audience cost mechanism as the missing piece that completes their reasoning. For a thorough account of these domestic political motives, 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.

members of Congress taken shortly before the public learned of the missiles in Cuba, both groups ranked Cuba as the foremost issue for the elections.⁶³

The strongest evidence for declaration theory from the U.S. side of the crisis emerges from White House discussions after the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba. These discussions banish all doubts as to whether President Kennedy and his advisors thought about the risks of inconsistency with past statements as declaration theory predicts. They did. On October 16th, soon after learning of the missiles presence in Cuba, Kennedy privately ruminated to his advisors, “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...”⁶⁴ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara agreed, “this, this is a domestic, political problem. The announcement—we didn’t say we’d go in and not, and kill them, we said we’d act. Well, how will we act?” He then remarked, “I don’t believe it’s primarily a military problem. It’s primarily a, a domestic, political problem.”⁶⁵ Kennedy justified the blockade in these terms in a National Security Council meeting on October 22nd, “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.”⁶⁶ In a candid conversation between brothers, Attorney General Robert Kennedy stated, “I just don’t think there was any choice ... and not only that, if you hadn’t acted, you would have been impeached.” President Kennedy replied, “That’s what I think – I would have been impeached.”⁶⁷

It is important to bear in mind that mining such an extensive set of declassified documents produces this level of evidence (or more) in favor of numerous theories, including many rival explanations for the U.S. decision to blockade Cuba rather than accept the missiles. Participants voiced many different arguments during the extensive discussions of what to do about the missiles. It would be premature to regard those quotations as definitive evidence confirming declaration theory as the determinant of key decisions. Still, there is little doubt that the White House understood that they confronted some level of risks and costs due to verbal entrapment because of their past statements. With perhaps the strongest evidence for declaration theory now presented, I proceed below to highlight anomalies for it that cast doubt on its explanatory power.

The Soviet Union, meanwhile, did not react to the September 4th statement as Washington hoped. Rather than withdraw the missiles before their presence became known, Khrushchev ordered

⁶³ “Cuba and Aged Care Lead Poll of Issues,” *New York Times*, October 21, 1962

⁶⁴ The National Security Advisor then interrupted. “Off the Record Meeting on Cuba,” Washington, October 16, 1962 [FRUS #21].

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Trying to disentangle the importance of foreign audiences from domestic audiences is inherently difficult to do with qualitative evidence. Policymakers will tend to emphasize foreign audiences regardless of their true motives. Prioritizing partisan or personal domestic political self-interest over the national interest with nuclear war on the line is scandalous, whereas defending the national reputation is not (on this, see Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, p. 72). This makes the quotes emphasizing domestic politics somewhat more compelling. The fact that the Jupiter missile concession was secret from the U.S. public and NATO allies but not the Kremlin does reveal something significant about U.S. priorities.

⁶⁶ Minutes of the 507th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, October 22, 1962 [FRUS #41].

⁶⁷ Norman Polmar and John Gresham. *Defcon-2: Standing on the Brink of Nuclear War During the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Wiley, 2006, p. 144.

the immediate deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Cuba to strengthen its defenses against a possible U.S. attack. Moscow also sought to augment the speed and secrecy of the deployment.⁶⁸

Soviet Red Lines against Attacking Cuba

Washington wrestled with the decision about whether to strike Cuba throughout the Crisis. Soviet deterrence succeeded, at least for thirteen days, in deterring that attack. That process, more perhaps than any other aspect of the case, casts doubt on declaration theory. It is important to begin by distinguishing between Soviet attempts to deter A) an attack against Cubans in Cuba and B) an attack against Soviet troops in Cuba. A U.S. strike on the missiles would likely have hit both targets. Nonetheless, the distinction matters because Soviet rhetoric and American perceptions treated the two so differently.

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 declaration theory, 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 rhetorical stance of the Soviet Union.

Moscow announced its red line against invading Cuba in a September 11th statement released in response to the U.S. statement of September 4th. The statement sought primarily to rebut U.S. insinuations that the Soviet Union had deployed offensive forces to Cuba: "...the number of Soviet military specialists sent to Cuba can in no way be compared to the number of workers in agriculture and industry sent there. The armaments and military equipment sent to Cuba are designed exclusively for defensive purposes..." The statement then set the red line against attacking 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.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy J. Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), pp. 206-213.

⁶⁹ Soviet Statement as of September 11, 1962

<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/precrisis.htm>

Source listed as: The New York Times, September 12, 1962, p. 16

Taking both passages together, the Soviet Union declared a red line against attacking Cuba. However, the convoluted prose never plainly stated that a U.S. attack against Cuba would trigger a Soviet attack, nuclear or conventional, against the United States. The Soviet statement made clear the demand not to attack Cuba but evaded a clear description of the consequences for doing so. The combination of clear demands and ambiguous consequences, it seems, was not a distinctively American habit. The *New York Times* characterized the Soviet position as “a series of tough-sounding but vague commitments to defend Cuba against aggression.”⁷⁰ A CIA analysis of the statement concluded,

Statement designed to further a variety of Soviet objectives, foremost being to deter US from active intervention. 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.⁷¹

The rigid variant of declaration theory expects that the Soviet red line against attacking Soviet troops necessarily should not be credible because it was not declared. However, President Kennedy and most of his advisors largely disregarded the declared Soviet red line against attacking Cubans, whereas they feared far more the consequences of crossing the undeclared line of killing Soviet soldiers. The credibility of Soviet deterrence – as found in the statements and reasoning of American policymakers seeking to overcome it – came primarily from the presence of Soviet troops. The United States was willing to attack Cuba, but not those troops. 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, where substantial U.S. casualties would result...⁷²

By October 19th, McNamara was arguing against the airstrike option. He emphasized Soviet casualties, the costs of a Soviet response, and the difficulties of controlling subsequent events.⁷³ While explaining the decision for blockade to French President Charles de Gaulle, Dean Acheson cited “the high number of Soviet technicians that would have been killed” as the main reason President Kennedy rejected an airstrike.⁷⁴

From the standpoint of declaration theory, the Soviet Union adopted an ill-advised public position. Refusing to admit to the Soviet troop presence in Cuba precluded declaring a red line prohibiting an attack on those forces. In that regard, it is revealing that the 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 excuse in the context of a Soviet attempt to deploy the missiles

⁷⁰ Max Frankel, “U.S. Is Prepared for Any Moves Against Its Bases by Russians,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1962.

⁷¹ “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).

⁷² John McCone, “Memorandum for Discussion [The Cuban Discussion],” October 17, 1962 [FRUS #26]. The redaction could relate to the U.S. base at Guantanamo Bay.

⁷³ John McCone, “Memorandum for the File,” October 19, 1962 [FRUS #28].

⁷⁴ “Record of a Meeting between Charles De Gaulle and Dean Acheson, October 22, 1962 [WC].

secretly in a *fait accompli*. The persistence of that denial after October 22nd reveals that the Soviet Union valued the (seemingly threadbare) propaganda value of continuing to deny the missiles' existence over the deterrence value of declaring a red line to protect them. Khrushchev could, on October 23rd, have announced the large-scale presence of Soviet troops and missiles in Cuba and pledged to defend Cuba as an ally. He did not.

According to declaration theory, Soviet non-declaration left a fatal weakness in its deterrent posture. The United States could strike Cuba while denying that it has attacked the Soviet Union (whose troops and missiles, after all, were not there according to Moscow). 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.⁷⁵

This possibility factored into Washington's initial debate about whether to destroy the missiles in a surprise attack or impose a blockade instead. 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.⁷⁶ The fear was that the Soviet Union would correct their mistake and declare a red line. President Kennedy reiterated this fear five days later in the lead-up to his speech announcing the blockade.⁷⁷ Washington cared enough about Soviet public statements to prefer that the Soviet leaders never had a chance to tie their hands with a clear, public red line in Cuba. Nonetheless, Kennedy accepted that risk by choosing the blockade option.

A debate about the merits of a blockade versus airstrikes pitted Senator James Fulbright against McNamara and Kennedy and captured the two rival perspectives. Fulbright prioritized Soviet declaratory policy, but Kennedy and McNamara rejected that view.

Fulbright then repeated his position and stated in his opinion it would be far better to launch an attack and to take out the bases from Cuba [than to impose a blockade]. McNamara stated that this would involve the spilling of Russian blood since there were so many thousand Russians manning these bases. Fulbright responded that this made no difference because they were there in Cuba to help on Cuban bases. These were not Soviet bases. There was no mutual defense pact between the USSR and Cuba. Cuba was not a member of the Warsaw Pact. Therefore he felt the Soviets would not react if some Russians got killed in Cuba. The Russians in the final analysis placed little value on human life. The President took issue with Fulbright, stating that he felt that an attack on these bases, which we knew were manned by Soviet personnel, would involve large

⁷⁵ "SNIE 11-18-62: Soviet Reactions to Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba," October 19, 1962 [FRUS #32].

⁷⁶ He later changed his mind. "White House Meeting Transcript," October 16, 1962 (FRUS #18).

⁷⁷ Minutes of the 506th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, October 21, 1962 [FRUS #38].

numbers of Soviet casualties and this would be more provocative than a confrontation with a Soviet ship.⁷⁸

Soviet thinking mirrored Kennedy's. Despite the more limited documentary record from the Soviet side, the protocol from a Central Committee meeting on October 23rd makes clear that Khrushchev himself considered this exact possibility too:

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 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.⁷⁹

Khrushchev's thinking began with a clear appreciation of the vulnerability he created, in line with declaration theory'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 and claim not to have attacked the Soviet Union. Khrushchev anticipated the exact gambit that hawks in Washington thought they could use to get away with a strike without Soviet retaliation. He also understood the simple Soviet countermove that would prevent it: publicly declaring the Soviet alliance commitment (and, one suspects, the full extent of the troop presence). Yet he did not do so. He left the vulnerability in place for several more crucial days rather than release a mere press statement to remove it. Although such a concise record leaves some 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 even despite the lack of a declared Soviet red line against doing so. He did not see the deterrence benefit of declaring the troops presence as greater than the propaganda value of continuing to deny their presence.

The Soviet leadership beyond Khrushchev himself shared this view that declaration was not necessary 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."⁸⁰ 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."⁸¹ 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 before taking

⁷⁸ National Security Action Memorandum 196, Washington, October 22, 1962 [FRUS #42].

⁷⁹ "Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60," October 23, 1962.

⁸⁰ 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. 232.

⁸¹ 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.

such a step.⁸² He instead planned to announce the missiles in November after the U.S. midterm elections.⁸³

Soviet stonewalling about the presence of missiles in Cuba only began to wane on October 26th. Khrushchev's letter on that date vaguely acknowledged, "The weapons which were necessary for the defense of Cuba are already there."⁸⁴ By this point, U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson had already unveiled photographs of the missiles at the United Nations (on October 25th). Only with his oblique admission on October 26th did Khrushchev finally edge 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."⁸⁵ That language evinces Khrushchev's assumption that declaration was redundant because the red line was obvious even prior to it. Public perceptions of Soviet denials persisted until October 27th, the last full day of the crisis.⁸⁶ Khrushchev unambiguously acknowledged the presence of the missiles only in an October 27th letter to Kennedy, both to facilitate a deal and because doing so was necessary to reassure Washington that Soviet officers – not Cubans – controlled the missiles.⁸⁷

Overall, Soviet red lines against attacking Cuba paint a two-part picture. On the one hand, Khrushchev understood declaration theory and the incentives it created for both sides. On the other hand, however, Khrushchev deemed the advantages of declaration less valuable than secrecy and, after that collapsed, propaganda. Trusting that the United States would hesitate before attacking Soviet forces, Khrushchev chose to forgo declaring his red line until the last full day of the crisis. It was credible anyway.

Kennedy's Address to the Nation of October 22nd

President Kennedy learned of the Soviet missiles on October 16th. After a week of deliberations, he went public with that discovery and his decision to respond, initially, with the "quarantine" of 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 first draft of the speech used the term blockade, not quarantine.⁸⁸

Intriguingly, the line of the speech that most clearly invoked declaration theory was deleted: "Yet only last month, after I had clearly stated that ground-to-ground missiles would be regarded as an offensive threat, ..." ⁸⁹ This became the more innocuous, "Yet only last month, after I had made clear the

⁸² Naftali and Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 196.

⁸³ 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. 101.

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

⁸⁵ "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 26, 1962 (FRUS #84).

⁸⁶ Associated Press, "Premier's Letter Avoids Admitting U.S. Charges," *New York Times*, October 27, 1962.

⁸⁷ "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 27, 1962 (FRUS #91); 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. 247.

⁸⁸ Theodore C. Sorenson Papers Box 48 "TCS – 10/20/62 First Draft"

⁸⁹ Theodore C. Sorenson Papers Box 48 "TCS – 10/20/62 First Draft"

distinction between any introduction of ground-to-ground missiles and the existence of defensive anti-aircraft missiles.”⁹⁰ The White House sought here to minimize the degree to which its hands were tied.⁹¹ Kennedy’s sole remaining reference to his past statements was buried in a list. He declared that the missiles’ presence in Cuba “constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas, in flagrant and deliberate defiance of the Rio Pact of 1947, the traditions of this Nation and hemisphere, the joint resolution of the 87th Congress, the Charter of the United Nations, and my own public warnings to the Soviets on September 4 and 13.” Kennedy was notably more direct in letters to Khrushchev on October 22nd and October 25th; from the latter, “In early September I indicated very plainly that the United States would regard any shipment of offensive weapons as presenting the gravest issues.”⁹²

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.”⁹³ This change injected greater ambiguity about the consequences of defying the demand. Before this point, Kennedy had merely stated an objective, not a threat: “Our unwavering 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.”

The first draft of the address contained a line that might have provided the next day’s newspaper headlines had it remained in the text: “I tell you, therefore, that these missiles now in Cuba will someday go – and no others will take their place.”⁹⁴ Despite the ambiguity about the deadline (“someday”), this phrasing set out a clear promise to the American people that would, in theory, put audience costs at stake and thus bolster U.S. credibility. It too was deleted as the White House sought to avoid tying its hands.

The October 22nd Address set one further red line that remains a candidate for the best remembered piece of rhetoric from the crisis: “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.”⁹⁵ This phrase remained unchanged from the second draft to the final. The initial draft read, “I have directed our military forces ... to regard any missile launched from Cuba as an attack by the Soviet Union requiring a massive retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.”⁹⁶

This red line constituted the most bluntly-worded threat of nuclear war from the crisis. It was also the sole red line by either side to clearly specify the consequences for a violation. However, there is a striking dearth of evidence that the Kennedy Administration agonized over this line of the speech or perceived it as vital to their strategy. Although amenable to other interpretations, the purpose of the

⁹⁰ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation.”

⁹¹ This point is rightly emphasized by Snyder and Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats.”

⁹² “Kennedy to Khrushchev,” October 22, 1962 (FRUS); “Kennedy to Khrushchev,” October 25, 1962 (FRUS, #68).

⁹³ Theodore Sorenson, “Fourth Draft of JFK’s Address to the Nation,” October 21, 1962.

⁹⁴ Theodore C. Sorenson Papers Box 48 “TCS – 10/20/62 First Draft”

⁹⁵ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation.”

⁹⁶ Clarifying the demand to exclude non-nuclear missile attacks is seemingly an instance of polishing language. Theodore C. Sorenson Papers Box 48 “TCS – 10/20/62 First Draft”

threat was presumably to make clear that Moscow could not hope to fire nuclear missiles from Cuba, blame the Cubans, and thereby escape retaliation. Moscow was not thinking about such a catastrophic ploy, nor did Washington think they were likely to attempt it. The threat, therefore, covered the bases on a grave but unlikely eventuality. The second draft's extension of the red line to explicitly protect the rest of Latin America against nuclear attack sought to deter a threat that seemed even more improbable in the context of the immediate crisis. That revision may have had more to do with Washington's urgent need for the Organization of American States to back the "quarantine."

The basic threat itself – that the United States would retaliate after a Soviet first strike with nuclear weapons – merely restated the logic of Cold War deterrence. The Soviet press statement challenging the blockade responded in similar terms, albeit with less belligerent language, "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."⁹⁷ In contrast to these nuclear retaliation red lines, Kennedy's red lines with respect to the blockade and the removal of the missiles created issues that required rapid resolution to avert escalation. Seen in that light, Washington and Moscow's focus on those red lines becomes easier to understand.

Soviet Perceptions of Kennedy's Quarantine Speech

The atmosphere in the Kremlin grew tense as senior Soviet officials stayed up past midnight to learn whether their fears that the United States had discovered the missiles were correct. What course of action would President Kennedy announce? Declaration theory envisions a public statement such as Kennedy's was the sort of action that that, by putting his neck on the chopping block so publicly, could ultimately lead to entrapment into war. However, the immediate reaction of Soviet leaders to Kennedy's speech was a sense of relief.⁹⁸ 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.

Nonetheless, Soviet leaders fully thought through the implications of declaration theory for U.S. actions, particularly the speech announcing the quarantine of October 22nd. The evidence that verbal entrapment incentives determined policy choices is tenuous, but both sides did understand those incentives. Writing to Moscow on October 25th, Ambassador Dobrynin analyzed the likelihood of President Kennedy deciding to use force in Cuba. That analysis contained a remarkable step-by-step explication of declaration theory:

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

⁹⁷ "Text of Soviet Statement Challenging the U.S. Naval Quarantine of Cuba," October 24, 1962.

⁹⁸ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy J. Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), pp. 240-248.

exclude completely the possibility that he can, especially taking into consideration his circle, undertake such an adventurist step as an invasion of Cuba.⁹⁹

This chain of reasoning establishes that a senior official of an authoritarian regime did see the incentives of declaration theory (and audience costs theory) in line with theoretical expectations. Nonetheless, by this standard of evidence – one clear articulation by one relevant policymaker – many theories receive as much or more support. Indeed, two days prior, Dobrynin himself reached the opposite conclusion:

[I]t is necessary to stress that the events connected with Kennedy's announcement yesterday obviously have overtaken the significance of electoral considerations and that these considerations now are moving to the background.¹⁰⁰

Writing to Kennedy, Khrushchev implored him to set them aside, “We must not succumb to intoxication and petty passions, regardless of whether elections are impending in this or that country, or not impending. These are all transient things...”¹⁰¹ Two days earlier, he accused Kennedy of blockading Cuba “... also because of considerations of the election campaign in the United States.”¹⁰² A detailed understanding of politics in Washington was unnecessary to understand that Kennedy would pay a price for another humiliation in Cuba.

Robert Kennedy was quite open with the Soviet government about the domestic political punishment that awaited him and his brother if they publicly backed down over Cuba. He explained to Dobrynin why he would not put on paper the secret U.S. commitment to eventually withdraw Jupiter missiles from Turkey, “The appearance of such a document could cause irreparable harm to my political career in the future.”¹⁰³

Some of the most fascinating evidence comes from Soviet attempts to mollify the Cuban government in the aftermath of the crisis. Castro remained irate over the Soviet decision to remove the missiles without consulting Havana first. In December, Khrushchev made the case to a senior Cuban official, “We think that the non-aggression against Cuba is assured for six years. We know that Kennedy has two years left, and we are sure that he is a manipulator and will win a second term, which will give us four more years.”¹⁰⁴ That claim provides a measure of support to declaration theory.¹⁰⁵ Two weeks earlier, Mikoyan – Khrushchev’s emissary to Havana after the crisis – said much the same, “The problem was stopping the aggressors, and this has been accomplished in Kennedy’s promise not to invade Cuba. We must believe this promise. Besides, in the next election, he will doubtlessly be reelected and will need to keep his word. So we think Cuba will not have problems for the next five or six years.”¹⁰⁶ These

⁹⁹ “Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry,” October 25, 1962 [WC].

¹⁰⁰ “Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry,” October 23, 1962 [WC].

¹⁰¹ “Khrushchev to Kennedy,” October 26, 1962 (FRUS #84)

¹⁰² “Khrushchev to Kennedy,” October 24, 1962 (FRUS #61)

¹⁰³ “Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry,” October 30, 1962 [WC].

¹⁰⁴ “Record of Conversations between Rodriguez and Khrushchev,” December 11, 1962. (Cuban Source).

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115171>

¹⁰⁵ This is also interesting evidence of leader-specific reputations.

¹⁰⁶ “Dorticos to Castro,” November 25, 1962.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115169>

statements reveal both an attentiveness to the American political process and an expectation that Kennedy would fulfill his public pledge.

The Blockade Line

“We’re eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.” Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s reaction to reports that Soviet ships halted short of the blockade line remains a signature phrase in the public memory of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Khrushchev gave that order on October 23rd, and the White House received the good news on the morning of October 24th, the day the blockade went into effect.¹⁰⁷ Yet the blockade was not a total success, but rather merely mostly successful.

The first “initial step” specified in the October 22nd address stated, “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 back.”¹⁰⁸ Washington never detailed how it would handle a Soviet ship crossing the blockade line. Indeed, the extensive rules of engagement provided to the ships manning the blockade line speak to the difficulty of accounting for the wide range of eventualities that could have arisen.¹⁰⁹ Although perhaps self-evident, it is worth pausing to note that Soviet ships would not have stopped without a declared U.S. red line demanding it.

The Soviet Union did not unconditionally respect the blockade line. Even as most ships halted or turned back, Soviet tankers continued toward Cuba.¹¹⁰ The first tanker, the *Bucharest*, declared a cargo of petroleum products and was allowed to proceed without physical inspection.¹¹¹ After allowing the *Bucharest* through, Washington debated how to address the next Soviet ship approaching the line, the *Grozny*. Key figures fell on both sides, but the ship ultimately came to a halt before the final decision had to be made.¹¹² The East German passenger ship *Voelker Freundschaft* was also permitted through the line. Its lack of weaponry provided the public excuse for a decision motivated by the desire to avoid a first confrontation with a ship full of civilians.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ “Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60,” October 23, 1962 [WC]; “Record of Action of the Third Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Washington,” October 24, 1962 [FRUS #55].

¹⁰⁸ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation.”

¹⁰⁹ “Houser to Taylor,” October 19, 1962 [GWU NSA]; “Riley to the Deputy Secretary of Defense [“Rules of Engagement”],” October 22, 1962. (Attachments) [GWU NSA].

¹¹⁰ “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Ball and Bundy,” October 24, 1962 [FRUS #58].

¹¹¹ John McCone, “Memorandum for the Files,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #70]; “Hilsman to Rusk,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #76].

¹¹² “Summary Record of the Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council,” October 27, 1962 [FRUS #97]; John McCone, “Memorandum for the Files,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #70]; “Summary Record of the Fifth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #73].

¹¹³ “Summary Record of the Fifth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council,” October 25, 1962 [FRUS #73]; “Summary Record of the Sixth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council,” October 26, 1962 [FRUS #79].

Soviet submarines also successfully violated the blockade line. Although an unlikely way to move cargo, American officials did worry that submarines could eventually be used to deliver sensitive materials such as nuclear warheads.¹¹⁴ The submarines mattered more for the threat they posed to American warships conducting the blockade and to the general principle of enforcing the line. The U.S. Navy had success at discovering and harassing the Soviet submarines. Encounters between American naval vessels and Soviet submarines produced some of the tensest moments of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Soviet sources record submarines being forced to the surface by extremely high temperatures of up to 140 degrees Fahrenheit and lack of oxygen. The submarines then found themselves confronted with swarms of ships and aircrafts, blinding searchlights, numerous weapons aimed at them, and warning shots.¹¹⁵ Nonetheless, the blockade never stopped the four Soviet submarines. In the same Central Committee meeting where the decision was made to turn back the surface ships, the orders immediately following those were, "Keep the submarines on their approaches."¹¹⁶

Washington tolerated specific Eastern Bloc ships and submarines to pass through the blockade line rather than confronting them under unfavorable circumstances. There was no sense that general U.S. credibility required a sacrosanct line that was never violated without stiff consequences. Much like the ignored demands in Kennedy's September 4th statement, the Soviet Union violated Kennedy's red lines in part. Contrary to the rigid variant of declaration theory, those violations did not cripple the broader red line or Kennedy's credibility moving forward.

Moscow's initial response to the blockade is also damaging for declaration theory. The Kremlin halted most of the vessels *en route* to Cuba only after first suggesting that it would defy the blockade. Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy 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.¹¹⁷

For declaration theory, this amounts to a needless and significant self-inflicted reputational wound. Moscow implied that it would run the blockade and then failed to follow through, all within a matter of hours. Yet Khrushchev did not think enough of that cost to avoid incurring it. He opted instead to more clearly reject the legitimacy of the blockade. Nor did discussions in Washington emphasize any loss of Soviet credibility due to inconsistency, but instead focused on the decision to stop the ships itself.

¹¹⁴ According to President Kennedy, "Of course, I don't see how we could prevent further ones from coming in by submarine." "White House Meeting Transcript," October 16, 1962 [FRUS #18]. "Smith to McCone [Soviet Challenge to the Quarantine]," October 23, 1962 [FRUS #54].

¹¹⁵ 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].

¹¹⁶ "Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60," October 23, 1962 [WC].

¹¹⁷ "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 24, 1962 [WC].

The Undeclared Red Line against Firing on U.S. 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 demonstrated its reluctance to attack. Assembly of the missiles began to reach completion. Moscow had every reason to stall. Time was on their side. Then something changed. On October 27th, a Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) site opened fire. Two missiles downed an American U-2 over Cuba and killed Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr.

Despite long perceiving the killing of an American pilot as a grave pathway to escalation, the Kennedy Administration had not publicly declared a red line against shooting at its surveillance aircraft over Cuba. Khrushchev nonetheless perceived a credible red line against doing so. The White House, similarly, saw the red line as existing despite never declaring it. There does not appear to have even been any extensive discussion of making such a declaration. For instance, would such a demand – over sovereign Cuban airspace – be legal under international law? Could they devise a fig leaf of legality akin to the quarantine? Washington repeatedly fretted about what would happen when the Soviets fired on the surveillance aircraft and yet still declined to declare the red line.¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹ White House press statements on October 26th and 27th failed to mention the issue – this despite the fact that the former devoted its entirety (four paragraphs) to the topic of aerial surveillance over Cuba.¹²⁰ Only after Major Anderson’s death did this non-declaration policy belatedly begin to change.

The decision to fire on the U-2 was taken in Cuba, not Moscow. Two Soviet generals in Cuba – neither the overall Soviet commanding officer – ordered the missiles fired on their own initiative, but Washington did not know this.¹²¹ They did so to prevent images of the missiles from reaching the United States.¹²² Soviet Defense Minister Malinovsky reproached them for that decision, “We believe that you were too hasty in shooting down the US U-2 reconnaissance plane.” That same cable ordered the missiles withdrawn.¹²³

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.”¹²⁴ Khrushchev was furious that the SAMs fired without his orders.

¹¹⁸ 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.

¹¹⁹ “Transcript of Conversation between President Kennedy and McNamara,” October 27, 1962 in Widmer and Kennedy, *Listening In*. On another occasion, McNamara suggested that the U.S. declare a red line against shooting down U-2s after the first was shot down as part of the response. This is an oddity for declaration theory. Sherman and Tougias, *Above and Beyond*, p. 187.

¹²⁰ General Services Administration, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Print Office, 1964).

¹²¹ Sherman and Tougias, *Above and Beyond*, p. 248.

¹²² “Ivanov and Malinovsky to Khrushchev,” October 27, 1962 [WC].

¹²³ “Malinovsky to Pliev,” October 28, 1962 [WC].

¹²⁴ Sergei N. Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010), p. 608.

He feared how the United States would respond and the possibility that further firing without high-level orders (perhaps by Cubans) would lead to disaster. Sergei Khrushchev describes this moment as the tipping point for Soviet policy.¹²⁵

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 in retaliation.¹²⁶ Briefings to NATO allies described this as American policy.¹²⁷ McNamara advocated this policy only hours before learning of Major Anderson's death.¹²⁸ General Taylor's report of the shootdown came with a recommendation for an airstrike on that SAM site the next day, in line with the stated policy. Both he and McNamara expected this strike to escalate to a larger aerial campaign and – most likely – an invasion.¹²⁹ Kennedy had committed to retaliate after an airstrike to the Pentagon, but not the Soviets or the press. That combination is difficult to reconcile with declaration theory.

Fearful that a retaliatory airstrike would lead to uncontrolled escalation, Kennedy gave diplomacy one last chance. He seriously contemplated retaliatory attacks on SAM sites firing at American aircraft the next day if diplomatic negotiations did not show progress.¹³⁰

Robert Kennedy met with Ambassador Dobrynin the night of October 27th. Together they struck a bargain to end the crisis. The secret concession to eventually remove U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey contributed to that outcome, but the credible threat of U.S. military action in response to the U-2 shootdown also catalyzed it. Moscow was so worried that a military strike could occur within hours that the Kremlin accepted the deal by broadcasting its decision to remove the missiles on Radio Moscow without waiting for normal diplomatic channels or consulting Castro. Dobrynin's report on that meeting 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. The military is demanding that the President arm such planes and respond to fire with fire. The USA government will have to do this. ... 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.¹³¹

¹²⁵ Although N. Khrushchev's memoirs [edited by S. Khrushchev] identify the shootdown as an important reason why fears of war mounted, they do not place as much weight on it. Sergei Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 3*. Trans. George Shriver (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 338.

¹²⁶ "Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council," October 23, 1962 [FRUS #47].

¹²⁷ "Knappstein to the German Foreign Ministry," October 24, 1962 [WC].

¹²⁸ "Summary Record of the Eighth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council," October 27, 1962 [FRUS #94].

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ "Summary Record of the Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council," October 27, 1962 [FRUS #97].

¹³¹ "Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry," October 27, 1962 [WC].

The most remarkable feature of the red line against firing on surveillance aircraft, given its role in ending the crisis, is that Washington did not publicly declare it. Yet it was, at least to Khrushchev, credible anyway. Declaration theory struggles to explain both facts. Washington's decision against declaration evinces a lack of respect for its benefits or necessity. The credibility of this undeclared red line is also significant because the non-declarer was a democracy. The undeclared-yet-credible Soviet red line against attacking Soviet forces in Cuba was set by an autocracy, leaving open the possibility that declaration theory applies only to democratic declarers. The credibility of the undeclared U.S. red line against firing on surveillance aircraft belies that view. For democracies and autocracies alike, declaration is not a prerequisite for credibility.

Conclusion

This study examined the red lines of the Cuban Missile Crisis, reaching two basic conclusions. First, leaders on both sides understood, thought through, and took into account the implied counsel of declaration theory. The criticism that policymakers simply do not think that way is not sustained. Accounting for the pressures on opposing leaders to avoid looking weak by publicly backing down after pledging to stand firm did not require an imaginative or comprehensive understanding of the adversary's domestic politics; it is a reasonable general assumption about international politics. Second and more importantly, however, leaders on each side understood these incentives only to then disregard them. Prioritizing a variety of other concerns, they time and again took actions at odds with declaration theory. 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 valued declaration little enough to knowingly leave open the possibility that Washington could attack Cuba while denying that the United States had attacked the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's calculated decision not to issue a statement to foreclose this possibility speaks volumes about his dismissive attitude toward declaration theory. 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 saw them as credible nonetheless, the decision of his generals in Cuba to fire without permission notwithstanding. Many of the most important red lines appear to be obvious and therefore do not require public articulation. The act of attacking 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 denying the existence of red lines, the absence of U.S. forces in South Korea and Kuwait may have been the more important consideration.

Nor does the evidence sustain the notion that leaders must aggressively enforce their red lines after small violations lest deterrence begin to crumble. As Snyder and Borghard nicely put it, "the cost of empty threats is a penny, not a pound."¹³² 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 several attack submarines crossing the blockade

¹³² Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats."

line as long as the ships more likely to carry weapons shipments turned back. He then allowed the shutdown of Major Anderson's U-2 to go unpunished, parlaying the credible threat to do so into leverage to forge the deal that ended the crisis. This thrice-used tactic should be of interest to policymakers.

It paints the criticism of President Obama's Syria red line in an unflattering light, because he used the same approach. Eliminating a substantial fraction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal was an 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? His successor later did just that to little apparent effect. The notion that Syria led to Russia's invasion of Crimea is particularly overwrought.¹³³ A rigid approach to enforcing red lines is unnecessary and potentially dangerous.

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 contradiction emerges from distinguishing ambiguity about demands (red lines) from ambiguity about consequences. On balance, the former weakens deterrence more than the latter. Consequently, leaders can set clear red lines (demands) while mitigating entrapment risks and preserving flexibility via ambiguity about consequences. Every red line set by either side of the Cuban Missile Crisis, save one, settled on this combination. It appears to constitute an unacknowledged rule of thumb for setting red lines.

Although declaration theory offers a useful lens for thinking about diplomacy and statecraft, it would be a mistake to place too much emphasis on it relative to the array of other considerations competing to influence policy. Theoretical models of crises grounded in declaration theory will be hard-pressed to offer more than limited explanatory power. In practical terms, it would be a mistake to believe that declaring a red line publicly is essential for its credibility – or that an undeclared red line necessarily sacrifices it. It would be an error to regard either clarity or ambiguity as innately superior when the most common policy combines the two. And it could be a disaster to conclude that every small violation of a red line requires a military response.

¹³³ Julia Ioffe, "How Russia Saw the Red Line Crisis," *The Atlantic*, March 11, 2016.