

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

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

Updated: 2/29/2020

ABSTRACT

Two lessons dominate thinking about red lines. The U.S. red line against using chemical weapons in Syria reinforced longstanding fears that failing to punish violations damages credibility. The Korean and Gulf Wars taught leaders that they must declare unambiguous red lines to deter aggression. This study challenges both lessons by using declassified documents and recordings to closely examine the eleven red lines of the Cuban Missile Crisis. This evidence suggests that red lines need not be enforced to the letter or unambiguously declared to be credible. Two novel arguments explain why. First, violations of their red lines create fleeting periods in which leaders gain heightened credibility because violators fear reprisal. Capitalizing on this window of opportunity, leaders can convert non-retaliation into a bargaining chip and exchange it for concessions while avoiding escalation. Second, confronted with contradictory advice about the advisability of ambiguity and clarity for deterrence, leaders can optimize by combining clarity about their red lines (demands) with ambiguity about the consequences of crossing those lines.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two novel arguments help to explain why these hypotheses falter.⁵ First, when an adversary crosses a red line, the declarer has options other than punishing the violation or losing credibility. Instead, declarers enter a fleeting window of opportunity in which their credibility swells because the adversary fears retaliation for the violation. Even though unpunished violations undermine credibility eventually, violations initially augment credibility in the brief period before a response is revealed. By exploiting this credibility and parlaying a willingness to forgo retaliation as a bargaining chip in exchange for concessions, opportunistic declarers can take advantage of violations to make credible threats, sometimes even to forge deals that end crises. Second, there is a longstanding muddle of policy advice that alternatively praises clarity or lauds ambiguity in deterrence. However, this study explains why leaders generally formulate threats that are clear about their red lines (i.e., their demands) but ambiguous about the consequences of crossing those lines.

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

The Cuban Missile Crisis furnishes a wealth of evidence against the three hypotheses.⁸ Rather than immediately enforce his red line against Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba, President Kennedy held the potential for a military response in abeyance, exploiting Soviet fears to press for concessions. He used this tactic again when the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 over Cuba. Restraining from a military response became a bargaining chip that helped to forge the deal that ended the crisis. Two of Kennedy's five initial red lines – those against Soviet bases and organized combat forces in Cuba – quickly faded to the background. Further challenging the belief that red lines must be enforced to the letter, Washington allowed certain Soviet-bloc ships and submarines to transgress the blockade line and suffered no apparent credibility loss for it. The Soviet Union did not declare a crucial red line against attacking Soviet troops in Cuba, whose existence Moscow denied. It was credible to President Kennedy

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

⁶ Of course, a “case” in the sense of a case study contains a multitude of data points.

⁷ Andrew Bennett and Checkel, Jeffrey T., eds., *Process Tracing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 172-185.

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

anyway. Washington committed to the Pentagon that it would retaliate if the Soviet Union shot down a U.S. surveillance aircraft, but not to the public or the Soviets. It was credible to Premier Khrushchev anyway. All but one red line set during the crisis by either side combined clarity about the red line itself with ambiguity about the consequences of crossing it.

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

The Statecraft of Red Lines

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

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

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

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

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

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

red lines be publicly or verbally declared. Leaders can convey red lines implicitly, tacitly, privately, and ambiguously. These are better understood characteristics of red lines and thus as variables, not as criteria for whether a red line exists. This distinction allows for the important possibility of undeclared red lines that are nonetheless mutually understood.

Although this study investigates threats and coercion as much as red lines, using the term facilitates discussion of both enforcement and ambiguity. One can more easily speak of limited violations of red lines than of threats, which is important for analyzing decisions concerning enforcement after violations. The term also draws needed attention to the question of which part of a threat is ambiguous: where the line is drawn versus what happens if it gets crossed.¹²

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

Scholars' conclusions about audience costs have largely depended on research methodology. Analyzing large collections of U.S. government documents, McManus presents evidence that statements of resolve affect diplomatic outcomes, particularly in the absence of military and domestic political constraints against following through on those threats.¹⁴ Survey experiments consistently find that the American public disapproves of a President who pledges to intervene to stop an aggressor but fails to follow through.¹⁵ 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 2014.¹⁶ Statistical

¹² Secondarily, I find that the term eases discussion of threats that straddle the line between deterrence and compellence. Such threats abound.

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

¹⁴ McManus, *Statements of Resolve*. However, two studies find that private communications more often affect perceptions than public statements: Robert F. Trager, *Diplomacy: Communication and the Origins of International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Azusa Katagiri and Eric Min, "The Credibility of Public and Private Signals: A Document-Based Approach," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 113, No. 11 (2019), pp. 156–172.

¹⁵ Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach." *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2007), pp. 821–840; Robert F. Trager and Lynn Vavreck, "The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (2011), pp. 526–545; but see 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; R. Joseph. Huddleston, "Think Ahead: Cost Discounting and External Validity in Foreign Policy Survey Experiments," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* (2017), pp. 1–12.

¹⁶ Joshua D. Kertzer, Jonathan Renshon, and Karen Yarhi-Milo, "Are Red Lines Red Herrings?"

studies of crises and disputes have found some support for the theory by assuming that democracies more ably generate audience costs.¹⁷

Case studies have tended to reach less favorable conclusions about audience costs.¹⁸ Examining a variety of cases after 1945, Snyder and Borghard indict audience costs theory on several counts. First, leaders generally opt for ambiguous threats over clear declarations. Second, publics judge leaders based on policies and policy outcomes regardless of the content of their verbal statements.¹⁹ Third, authoritarian regimes do not understand the domestic politics of democracies as the theory requires.²⁰ Trachtenberg 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."²¹ This study challenges three hypotheses that these studies also critique, at least by implication. However, it does so by introducing new theoretical counterarguments and empirical evidence to raise doubts about each hypothesis. For instance, these scholars assail the enforcement hypothesis on the grounds that the "cost of empty threats" is "a penny, not a pound." I offer a distinct, separate argument against the hypothesis.

The Enforcement Hypothesis

The enforcement hypothesis is the implicit basis for much of the criticism directed at President Obama for his decision not to strike in Syria. It expects that allowing a violation of a declared red line to go unpunished damages the subsequent credibility of that red line. It may further damage the credibility of the leader who declared it and perhaps even of the state that leader governs, but the focus here is on the violated red line itself.²² In practical terms, this hypothesis advises policymakers that they must treat their red lines as inviolable and strictly enforce them after violations lest they erode or collapse.

Suppose a state declares a red line, then fails to enforce it after a first violation. By allowing the first offense to pass, the declarer reveals an unwillingness to enforce the red line. Thomas Schelling famously asked how, if the United States failed to resist an invasion of California, could it then credibly

¹⁷ Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, pp. 144-150; 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; but see Alexander B. Downes and Todd S. Sechser, "The Illusion of Democratic Credibility," *International Organization* Vol. 66, No. 3 (2012), pp. 457-489.

¹⁸ But see several case studies by Schultz, which find support for what is arguably a distinctive variant of audience costs theory that emphasizes the stances of opposition parties as a source of credible threats. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*.

¹⁹ Also see William G. Nomikos and Nicholas Sambanis, "What Is the Mechanism Underlying Audience Costs? Incompetence, Belligerence, and Inconsistency," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (2019), 575-588.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.

deter a subsequent invasion further east?²³ That reasoning underpins the enforcement hypothesis. It is, however, also akin to the argument that the United States needed to fight on in Vietnam lest it damage its reputation and undercut the credibility of its commitments to defend NATO allies in Europe.²⁴ Scholars have lambasted that rationale, particularly the illogic of assuming unwillingness to fight a limited war in Vietnam would affect perceptions of the willingness to wage nuclear war in Europe.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.

For example, after President Obama decided not to enforce his 2012 red line by striking the Assad regime, Senator John McCain remarked, "Our friends and enemies alike, both in the Middle East and across the world, are questioning whether America has the will and the capacity to do what it says."²⁷ McCain later attributed Russia's invasion of Crimea to the weakness President Obama revealed in Syria.²⁸ Even many Democrats agreed that President Obama damaged his own – and perhaps the nation's – credibility by deciding against airstrikes. Jim Jones, Obama's National Security Advisor until 2010, later called the Syria red line a "colossal mistake."²⁹

However, it is important to avoid simplifying how leaders respond to violations of their red lines to the binary of whether or not retaliation occurs. Leaders have a period a time in which to enforce their red lines after violations before it becomes clear that they will not do so. They can use that time to attempt other policy options besides immediate retaliation. In this period, the violator keenly understands that the declarer now confronts significant new incentives to punish them and to do so promptly. These post-violation incentives emerge from leaders' concerns about international reputation, domestic audience costs, and the strategic logic of tit-for-tat reciprocity.³⁰ These incentives create a temporary boost to the declarer's credibility. Although some declarers will simply react by taking punitive action, others can attempt to harness the aftermath of a violation as a window of opportunity to press the violator for concessions. In effect, they convert restraining from enforcement into a bargaining chip, then trade it for something of value. Figure 1 depicts the conventional understanding of post-violation credibility. Figure 2 presents the revised theory.

²³ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 56.

²⁴ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1969): 211-234.

²⁵ Schelling termed this the "interdependence of commitments." Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 55-59.

²⁶ Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); but see Frank P. Harvey, and John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility: US Reputation and International Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

²⁷ Mark Mandell, "Obama's Thick Red Line on Syria," *BBC News*, August 22, 2013.

²⁸ Jake Miller, "John McCain blames Obama's 'Feckless' Foreign Policy for Ukraine Crisis," *CBS News*, March 3, 2014.

²⁹ Olivia Beavers, "Former Obama National Security Adviser Blasts Decisions in Syria as a 'Colossal Mistake,'" *The Hill*, February 19, 2017.

³⁰ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984)

Figure 1: The Conventional Theory of Credibility after Violations of Red Lines

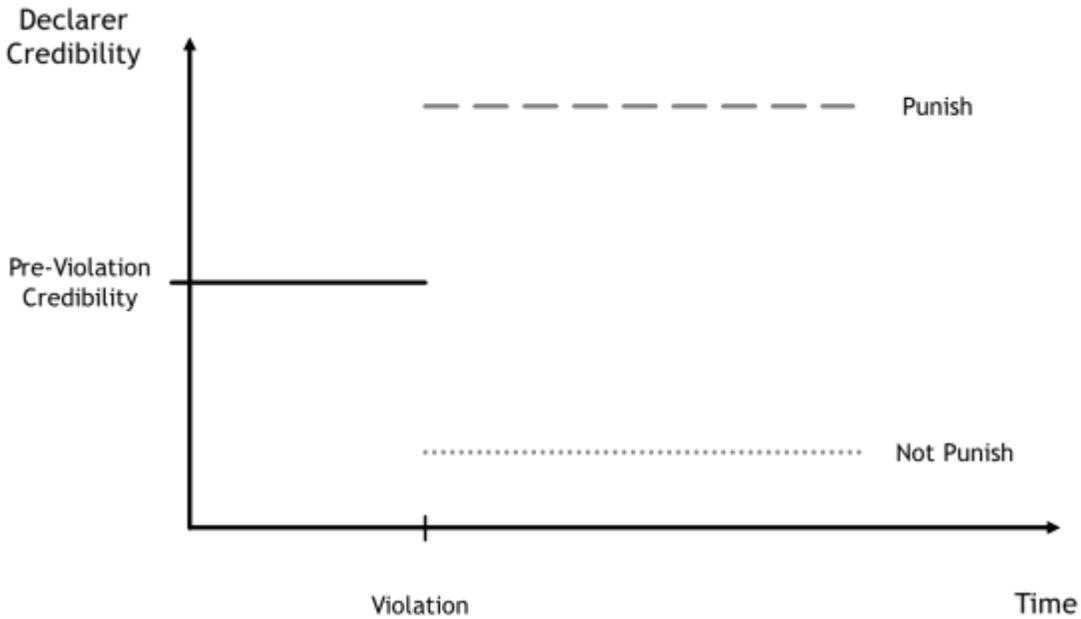
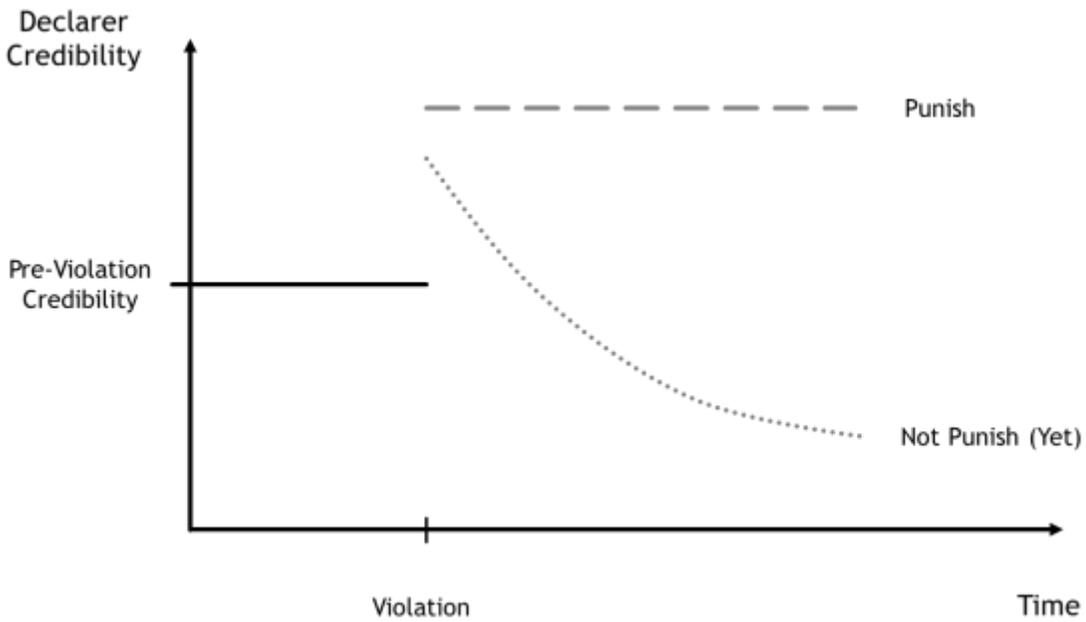


Figure 2: A Revised Theory of Credibility after Violations of Red Lines



In Figures 1-2, declarer credibility is the violator's perception of their willingness to impose costs. In the Syrian case, it reflects the Assad regime's perception of President Obama's willingness to strike.

This distinction surfaces an important yet neglected part of strategic competitions: states often endow their opponents with credibility through their own aggressive actions. Violations of red lines are themselves an important cause of the credibility of those red lines. This claim seems to flip on its head the conventional wisdom that violations undercut credibility, yet the two are compatible. Let us stipulate that *unpunished* violations undermine credibility *eventually*. Nonetheless, in the immediate aftermath of a violation before a response crystallizes, violators grow more frightened of the declarer than they were beforehand. The fact that violators will anticipate the potential for retaliation does not negate this. In effect, the violator accepts increasing the declarer's credibility as the price for reaping the benefits of the violation. The violator may hope that the declarer's response will be eventual non-enforcement, but opportunistic pressure by the declarer shortly after the violation may nonetheless lead the violator to grant concessions.

Describing President Obama's Syria policy as a decision not to enforce his red line misleadingly conflates what he did next with inaction. Obama did not immediately admit that he would not strike. After Congress failed to back the use of force, he instead leveraged what remained of his credible threat to strike to pressure the Assad regime into a Russian-brokered deal. The regime ostensibly gave up its chemical weapons in return for U.S. non-retaliation for their violation. Assad's decision to take this deal reflected, ironically, the credibility of the U.S. threat to punish Syria.³¹ Tragically, Assad relinquished only a substantial part of his chemical weapons arsenal and later used chemical weapons many more times.³² Nonetheless, the destruction of significant quantities of Syrian weapons of mass destruction was a substantive concession, quite possibly more than could have been achieved by airstrikes.

This tactic of converting non-retaliation into a bargaining chip unfolds in either of two ways. First, as already described, the violator can explicitly exchange a concession for non-enforcement after the violation. Such bargains can even provide the basis for settling conflicts, as the Cuban Missile Crisis will show.

Second, leaders can use non-retaliation as a bargaining chip implicitly: the declarer tolerates a limited violation of a red line if it is accompanied by the adversary otherwise respecting that red line and/or other red lines *when that compliance itself amounts to a concession*. In the Syria case, President Obama would have been hard pressed to do this. He would have needed to argue that the Assad regime's non-use of chemical weapons against other targets amounted to a success more important than the violation. Elsewhere, analogous arguments are more persuasive, particularly when leaders set new red lines or demand changes to the status quo. For example, when the Soviet Union blockaded the Western Sectors of Berlin in 1948, the United States respected the Soviet red line against forcing an armed convoy through to Berlin while defying occasional Soviet demands to limit or halt airlift operations. The Soviet Union tolerated this state of affairs, which amounted to an implicit bargain, and

³¹ Harvey, *Fighting for Credibility*, p. 27.

³² Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lütkefend, *Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria* (Global Public Policy Institute, 2019); Hisham Melhem, "How Obama's Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart," *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017.

experienced no clear loss of credibility for doing so.³³ This possibility further belies the notion that red lines must be enforced to the letter.

The Declaration Hypothesis

Suppose that the United States approached deterrence in Korea as follows: Sign an alliance with South Korea but conceal it from the world. Station tens of thousands of American soldiers in South Korea, obscure their numbers, and refer to them only as advisors. Deploy nuclear missiles to South Korea while denying their presence. Demand that North Korea not invade but fail to specify clear consequences. This deterrent posture would fall outside the boundaries of current policy debates in Washington. It is inimical to common assumptions about the importance of declaratory policy for deterrence. Yet, strange as it may seem, this is essentially what the Soviet Union did in Cuba. And, in a sense, it succeeded. The Soviet red line against attacking their troops in Cuba was credible to President Kennedy.

Such an approach in Korea would flagrantly disregard the declaration hypothesis, which proposes that publicly declaring a red line is necessary for that red line to be credible in the eyes of the adversary.³⁴ States have a clear incentive to appear resolute so that the adversary will back down. Sometimes the resultant red lines are sincere; others are bluffs. Confessing low resolve by declining to declare a red line gives away the game without playing. If leaders will not even say aloud that they are willing to fight for something, why would adversaries believe that they are truly willing to do so?

In a bitter irony, the Korean and Gulf Wars contributed to the belief in the need to declare red lines, yet both featured states willing to fight after the violations of red lines that they did not clearly declare. Moreover, historians have raised doubts about the significance of those non-declarations. Pyongyang began requesting Moscow's support for an invasion before Dean Acheson's speech leaving South Korea outside the U.S. "defensive perimeter," so the speech did not cause the intention to invade. Stalin's support came several months after the speech. Soviet documents rarely mention it. Well-placed Soviet spies furnished more reliable sources of information to Moscow. Stalin remained concerned about potential U.S. intervention despite the speech.³⁵

U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie stated only that the United States had "no opinion" on Iraq's "border disagreement with Kuwait" in her July 1990 conversation with Saddam Hussein.³⁶ This stance is not equivalent to having no opinion on a potential invasion. Her meaning was that the U.S. sought a peaceful settlement but was agnostic about the content of that deal. Hussein clearly stated his intention to pursue multi-round negotiations with Kuwait over their disagreements. He gave Glaspie no

³³ Dan Altman, "Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game around the Use of Force," *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2018), pp. 58-88.

³⁴ States can decline to declare a red line either by saying nothing or, less ambiguously, by clearly excluding the issue from what they seek to deter.

³⁵ Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined."

³⁶ New York Times, "Confrontation in the Gulf: Excerpts from Iraqi Document on Meeting with U.S. Envoy," *New York Times*, September 23, 1990.

clear indication of war that would have prompted her to scuttle the meeting by threatening him. Furthermore, Hussein likely did not base his views on one unprepared comment. For instance, earlier in the conversation, Hussein asked, "So what can it mean when America says it will now protect its friends [Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates]?"³⁷ In a 2008 interview, Glaspie mused, "Perhaps I was not able to make Saddam believe that we would do what we said we would do, but in all honesty, I don't think anybody in the world could have persuaded him."³⁸

Both the Korean and Gulf War precedents seem to underscore the damage that non-declaration inflicts on credibility. However, the evidence presented below will show that undeclared red lines can be surprisingly credible. Snyder and Borghard argue that publics and leaders alike care more about policy interests and outcomes than the content of verbal statements.³⁹ It follows that interests can make for credible red lines even without declaration. The evidence presented below better supports a different, albeit perhaps related, basis for the credibility of undeclared red lines. As Schelling explains, many red lines are obvious to adversaries without needing explicit declaration because a violation would transgress established salencies, especially those against using force, crossing borders, and using nuclear weapons.⁴⁰ That is, South Korea need not communicate to North Korea that it may not invade across the Demilitarized Zone for Pyongyang to appreciate the credibility of that red line. These salencies can render declaration irrelevant by making implicit red lines apparent to adversaries.

However, the question remains: even if declaration is largely redundant when salencies or interests suffice to convey red lines, why not declare them anyway to garner whatever contribution declaration makes to credibility? Inquiry reveals a diverse array of motives for non-declaration. Acheson feared emboldening South Korean President Syngman Rhee to initiate conflicts and wished to avoid pressures to declare a similar red line for Taiwan.⁴¹ China sought to preserve the element of surprise when it attacked in Korea. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, Moscow initially chose not to declare a red line protecting its troops in Cuba in order to deploy the missiles in secret. Once that failed, the public relations costs of admitting to the lie superseded the credibility-from-declaration incentive for several critical days.

The Unambiguity Hypothesis

The unambiguity hypothesis holds that states make their red lines clear in order to maximize their prospects of deterring adversaries. Precise red lines are thought to increase the reputational and audience costs of not enforcing them, tying leaders' hands and lending their threats greater credibility. By calibrating the level of ambiguity, leaders can attempt to optimize the degree to which they tie their hands. Ambiguity functions as a middle ground between declaring and not declaring red lines.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Glenn Kessler, "Ex-Envoy Details Hussein Meeting," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2019.

³⁹ Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats," p. 440.

⁴⁰ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Altman, "Advancing without Attacking."

⁴¹ I refer here to organized combat units, not military advisors. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, pp. 409-429.

The credibility-entrapment tradeoff underpins conventional thinking about ambiguity in red lines.⁴² 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 preventable failure of the red line. It is beneficial when avoiding entrapment into unwanted escalation is more valuable than the credibility loss; or when backing down with reduced reputational cost is preferable to backing down with greater reputational cost. From a perspective that prioritizes credibility, ambiguity is best avoided.

Audience cost critics reject this perspective and conclude that leaders consistently opt for ambiguity in order to preserve their freedom of action.⁴³ Both sides of the ambiguity debate share the same premise: the credibility-entrapment tradeoff. They differ on which side of that tradeoff tends to outweigh the other and thus which option leaders generally select.

However, a more nuanced picture emerges from asking the question: ambiguity about what?⁴⁴ Coercive threats consist of two main parts: demands, including red lines, and consequences. I posit 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.⁴⁵ Resultantly, ambiguity about consequences occurs more frequently than ambiguity about demands.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ Obama was relatively clear about the red line – what action was prohibited – but considerably more ambiguous about the punishment for a violation. President Obama’s Syrian red line took a similar form, “We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that’s a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons.”⁴⁸ The phrase “enormous consequences,” while more ominous than “costs,” is hardly specific;

⁴² 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.

⁴³ Note the irony: this argument seems to stipulate that public statements tie hands. Snyder and Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats”; Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs”; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations*.

⁴⁴ Snyder and Borghard explicitly discuss both types of ambiguity together and make the same claims about both. Snyder and Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats,” p. 439.

⁴⁵ For a brief discussion, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 48; Michael Quinlan, “Deterrence and Deterrability,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2004), pp. 12-13. Tertrais distinguishes these two types of ambiguity but argues only that it is best to avoid both at once. Tertrais, “Drawing Red Lines Right,” pp. 7,23. McManus classifies statements of resolve that refer to consequences (ambiguously or clearly) as stronger by a tier than statements that merely articulate demands. McManus, *Statements of Resolve*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ Consequences are typically punishments but also encompass threats of denial. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁴⁷ David Beard, “‘There Will Be Costs’ – The Text of Obama’s Statement on Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 2014.

⁴⁸ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20, 2012.

unlike the demand to refrain from chemical weapons use. Even the language of the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO) charter is surprisingly vague about consequences. It commits members to defend any attacked member by “taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force...”⁴⁹ In comparison, the red line against attacking any NATO member in Europe or North America (but excluding other regions) offers more clarity.

Red lines tend towards clarity about demands but ambiguity about consequences for three reasons. First, telegraphing the exact form of a punitive strike allows the adversary to take countermeasures to defeat it, blunt its impact, or prepare a riposte. When the United States enforced a chemical weapons 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.⁵⁰ This reduced the damage to the Assad regime, because the Russians relayed the information. Specifying the exact targets of a punitive strike as part of declaring the red line would have given the Assad regime still more time to minimize the damage.

Second, threats that specify exact consequences for violations are often at odds with the strategic and policy processes with which states respond to violations.⁵¹ These responses tend to be complex, contingent, unpredictable, and sometimes unplanned. The nature, extent, and context of the violation typically influences the response. In the case of Syria, President Obama could not easily have predicted that Congress and the British Parliament would both decline to back military force. The size of any punishment might have depended on the quantity of chemical weapons used and the number of people killed, among other considerations. Under such circumstances, threatening a specific, fixed response to a violation is impractical.

Third, although ambiguity about either demands or consequences offers an ‘out’ for a leader seeking to avoid verbal entrapment, only ambiguity about demands creates specific gray areas that provide openings for the adversary to advance with reduced fear of consequences. Consider Schelling’s classic example of a parent’s struggle to deter a child from entering a river only to see the child sitting with his feet in the water.⁵² Threatening to ground the child for a week if he enters the water (clear punishment; red line with a gray area) will leave the parent in a bind when the initial violation is feet in the water. In contrast, demanding that the child not put one toe in the water or else face consequences (ambiguous punishment; clear red line) provides no natural opening for limited deterrence failure.

My claim that ambiguous red lines function as green lights 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, clarity is said to function

⁴⁹ *The North Atlantic Treaty*, April 4, 1969.

⁵⁰ 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-Neff and Ben Hubbard, “U.S., Britain and France Strike Syria Over Suspected Chemical Weapons Attack,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2018.

⁵¹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 67.

⁵² Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 66.

as a green light that encourages the adversary to advance right up to the line.⁵³ This logic seems compelling, but I argue that it is erroneous.

Deciding between leaving something outside a red line and leaving it ambiguous is a false choice. By analogy, the argument is that yellow lights better deter drivers from entering intersections than green lights. That is true but misleading. Ambiguity appears the more constraining of the two only because the third option, a red light, has been excluded. Clarity has been falsely conflated with a green light. Yet states always retain the option to display a red light, i.e., to draw the line so that the adversary cannot advance before reaching it. Voluntarily doing otherwise is hardly a boon for credibility. Is a leader truly going to use force over an ambiguous violation of a red line that he intentionally chose not to make clear? More likely that leader will abide the setback and deny that any red line had been crossed.

In sum, there are good reasons to expect that leaders will gravitate toward clarity about their red lines and ambiguity about the consequences of crossing them. Future studies might better assess whether this combination truly outperforms the alternatives. Because both sides adopted it so consistently, the variation to draw inferences about effectiveness 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 provides reason to suppose that leaders frequently settle upon declaring red lines with this configuration.

Red Lines in the Cuban Missile Crisis

A close examination of the eleven red lines set during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 provides evidence against all three hypotheses. Although prominent studies by audience cost critics have examined the case, they focus principally on two issues not considered here. First, Trachtenberg joins Snyder and Borghard in doubting that leaders in the crisis deliberately created audience costs for the purpose of tying their hands and thereby enhancing credibility. Second, both studies conclude that Khrushchev did not take into account American domestic politics “in any serious way.”⁵⁴ This study sets both issues aside to focus on three other important dimensions of the conventional wisdom on red lines.⁵⁵

With respect to the enforcement hypothesis, the evidence will show that President Kennedy let smaller Soviet violations of two of his five initial red lines as well as his subsequent blockade line pass

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ Quotation from Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs,” pp. 30-32. Also see Snyder and Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats,” p. 452.

⁵⁵ On the role of U.S. domestic politics, see Jeremy Pressman, “September Statements, October Missiles, November Elections: Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy Making, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2001), pp. 80-114.

without enforcement as part of achieving compliance with his demands in other respects. He suffered no apparent credibility loss for these implicit bargains. Throughout the crisis, he avoided any admission that he would not use force to enforce his red lines in Cuba in order to exploit Soviet fears about his response to their violations. Washington doubled down on this tactic after the shootdown of an American U-2. Rather than retaliate immediately, Attorney General Robert Kennedy leveraged the threat to do so to make the deal that removed Soviet missiles from Cuba – along, of course, with the secret concession to remove missiles from Turkey.

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

Tables 1 and 2 (uploaded separately) about here

With respect to the unambiguity hypothesis, all but one red line declared during the crisis by either side embraced the combination of clarity about demands and ambiguity about consequences. Tables 1 and 2 depict this and provide a reference for readers as they proceed through the discussion below, which provides the basis for the determinations in the tables. Although Snyder, Borghard, and Trachtenberg note this ambiguity as evidence against audience costs theory, neither study explores this consistent combination ambiguity and clarity. For Kennedy's initial red lines, it is even possible to trace how initial language featuring ambiguous demands and clear consequences reversed course on both counts as he and his advisors crafted his statement of September 4th, 1962.

Kennedy's Initial Red Lines

Wary of the continuing flow of Soviet arms to Cuba and seeking to deflect intense Congressional criticism after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy released a portentous statement declaring a red line against Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba on September 4th, 1962. 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.⁵⁶

This statement would go on to be remembered as a prohibition against nuclear missiles in Cuba. The *New York Times* reported it that way at the peak of the ensuing crisis.⁵⁷ That summary is 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 unknown at the time.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the United States did not aggressively pursue demands other than the removal of missiles and, with less vigor, the IL-28s.⁵⁹ President Kennedy instead decided to allow the non-nuclear violations in implicit exchange for Soviet compliance with higher-priority demands.

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.”⁶⁰ This memo reflected the views of the hawkish minority in the administration who advocated invading Cuba. It recommended using the blockade as leverage to force out Soviet troops. Curiously, however, the memo failed to mention that President Kennedy had publicly committed to that red line. The September 4th statement not only included the prohibitions against Soviet organized combat forces and bases in Cuba; it began with them. Nonetheless, contrary to the enforcement hypothesis, by November 14th the exact words Kennedy used on September 4th had lost their importance.

The initial draft of the statement was vague about demands: “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.”⁶¹ 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

⁵⁶ John F. Kennedy, “Statement on Cuba,” September 4, 1962. Kennedy personally read this statement to Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko on October 18th. “Cable on the Conversation between Gromyko and Kennedy,” October 18, 1962. Available from the Wilson Center Digital Archive [hereafter WC].

⁵⁷ Max Frankel, “Soviet Stressed Frankness to U.S.,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1962.

⁵⁸ The Soviet Union eventually did remove most of its troop presence from Cuba. That withdrawal owed more to the souring of relations with Castro than U.S. threats. For the 41,000 figure: Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy J. Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 242.

⁵⁹ “Gromyko to Kuznetsov and Zorin,” November 5, 1962 [WC]; “Tenth Meeting of the Executive Committee,” October 28, 1962. Available from U.S. State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, #103 [hereafter FRUS]; “Khrushchev to Mikoyan,” November 11, 1962 [WC].

⁶⁰ “Smith to Taylor,” November 14, 1962. Available from the National Security Archive at George Washington University [hereafter GWU NSA].

⁶¹ Walt Rostow, “Proposed Presidential Statement on Cuban Policy,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, National Security Files, Box 338 [hereafter JFK PL].

is.”⁶² Khrushchev later made much the same argument.⁶³ The decision to specify ground-to-ground missiles left Khrushchev in a weaker position from which to make that argument.

At one point, and consistent with the unambiguity hypothesis, Kennedy suggested, “We can say that if it’s going to happen, we can take action against it.” Yet the drafting meeting drifted away from such direct language. In the words of one advisor, “You don’t want to say you’ll go in there.”⁶⁴ In the end, the threatened consequences were left vague: “gravest issues.”

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

[Soviet arms shipments to Cuba] require not merely that we explain what they are and why – up to a point – we are prepared to regard them as acceptable, but that we also clarify the kinds of installations and capabilities emplaced in Cuba that we would regard as unacceptable. ...it may, therefore, be appropriate to indicate what we would not be prepared to accept without direct military riposte. In general, that line should be drawn at the installation in Cuba or in Cuban Waters of nuclear weapons or delivery vehicles, sea or land based.⁶⁵

This largely describes the resultant statement, except with respect to specifying military consequences. The decision, instead, was for clarity about demands but ambiguity about consequences. Indeed, on September 13th, President Kennedy reiterated the U.S. position. He called rhetoric about military action, “Loose talk.” He listed comparatively clear demands but again left the consequences opaque: “this country will do whatever must be done.”⁶⁶

One reason for the ambiguity about consequences was, quite simply, that the White House did not know how the United States would respond. President Kennedy would have been hard pressed to threaten in advance to respond to a nuclear missile deployment with a naval blockade, aggressive brinkmanship, military mobilizations, 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.⁶⁷ That strategy depended greatly on context that would have been difficult to anticipate. For instance, U.S. policy was shaped by Washington’s detection of the missiles in the brief period after they arrived in Cuba but before they became operational. Kennedy’s five red lines could have been violated in any of dozens of combinations, each to various extents. When Kennedy announced the decision to blockade Cuba after days of intense planning, he began the critical part of his

⁶² Even after removing background noise with the software Audacity, I was not certain of my ability to recognize voices besides Kennedy’s from the poor-quality tape; hence the lack of specificity about advisors’ identities. “Drafting Meeting on the Cuba Press Statement,” September 4, 1962. Available from the Miller Center John F. Kennedy Presidential Recordings.

⁶³ “Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State,” October 26, 1962 [FRUS #84].

⁶⁴ “Draft Meeting on the Cuba Press Statement.”

⁶⁵ Walt Rostow, “Memorandum to the President,” September 3rd, 1962. JFK PL, National Security Files, Box 338.

⁶⁶ Because the two statements are similar, I omit a full discussion. John F. Kennedy, “Press Statement,” September 13, 1962.

⁶⁷ “White House Meeting Transcript,” October 16, 1962 [FRUS #18].

address by saying, "I have directed that the following *initial* steps be taken immediately: ..." (emphasis in original).⁶⁸ Even then he did not know events would unfold.

Soviet Red Lines against Attacking Cuba

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

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

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

Toward its end, the statement restated this oblique threat:

...the Soviet Government would like to draw attention to the fact that one cannot now attack Cuba and expect that the aggressor will be free from punishment for this attack. If this attack is made, this will be the beginning of the unleashing of war.⁶⁹

Taking both selections together, the Soviet Union declared a red line that made clear the demand not to attack Cuba. However, the convoluted prose never plainly stated that a U.S. attack against Cuba would trigger a Soviet attack, nuclear or otherwise, against the United States. The *New York Times* characterized the Soviet position as "a series of tough-sounding but vague commitments to defend Cuba against aggression."⁷⁰ A CIA analysis of the statement concluded,

⁶⁸ John F. Kennedy, "Address to the Nation," October 22, 1962.

⁶⁹ Soviet Statement as of September 11, 1962. Accessed from www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/precrisis.htm. Source listed as: *New York Times*, September 12, 1962, p. 16

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

Statement does not significantly alter nature of Soviet commitment to defend Castro. Moscow has once again used vague and ambiguous language to avoid clear-cut obligation of military support in event of attack.⁷¹

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

Consequences of action by the United States will be the inevitable “spilling of blood” of Soviet military personnel. This will increase tension everywhere and undoubtedly bring retaliation against U.S. foreign military installations, where substantial U.S. casualties would result...⁷²

By October 19th, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was arguing against the airstrike option. He emphasized Soviet casualties, the costs of a Soviet response, and the difficulties of controlling subsequent events.⁷³

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

The Soviets have no public treaty with Cuba and have not acknowledged that Soviet bases are on the island. This situation provides them with a pretext for treating US military action against Cuba as an affair which does not directly involve them, and thereby avoiding the risks of a strong response.⁷⁴

Hawks in Washington repeatedly raised this proposal to use Soviet non-declaration as an opportunity to strike. Kennedy rejected this approach on multiple occasions because he feared that a strike would cause war, Soviet rhetoric notwithstanding.⁷⁵

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

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

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].

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

⁷⁴ “SNIE 11-18-62: Soviet Reactions to Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba,” October 19, 1962 [FRUS #32].

⁷⁵ National Security Action Memorandum 196, Washington, October 22, 1962 [FRUS #42].

they might take no action. Another scenario: in case of an attack, all the equipment is Cuban, and the Cubans declare that they will respond.⁷⁶

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

Although such a concise record leaves scope for interpretation, the reason seems evident, "...they can attack, and we will respond. This could escalate into a large-scale war." Khrushchev concluded that the United States would fear attacking Soviet troops in Cuba even despite the lack of a declared Soviet red line. He did not see the deterrence benefit of declaring the troops' presence as greater than the propaganda value of continuing to deny it. Other Soviet leaders shared his view that declaration was unnecessary for the Soviet Union to be committed to retaliate for an attack on its troops in Cuba. In the words of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, "There is no consensus as to how and where this riposte would come, but it would happen – about this there is no doubt."⁷⁷ 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."⁷⁸

It is revealing that Soviet denials persisted even after the U.S. discovered and announced the presence of the missiles in Cuba. Forgoing the credibility boost of public declaration is easier to explain away as a Soviet attempt to deploy the missiles secretly as a *fait accompli*. When Castro proposed that publicizing a treaty of alliance between the Soviet Union and Cuba might suffice to protect Cuba, Khrushchev demurred because he preferred to deploy the missiles in secret.⁷⁹ He planned to announce the missiles in November after the U.S. midterm elections.⁸⁰

The persistence of Soviet denials after all hopes for secrecy died on October 22nd reveals that the Soviet Union valued the propaganda value of continuing to deny the missiles' existence over the deterrence value of declaring a red line to protect them.⁸¹ Khrushchev could, on October 23rd, have announced the large-scale presence of Soviet troops and missiles in Cuba and pledged to defend Cuba

⁷⁶ "Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60," October 23, 1962 [WC].

⁷⁷ Naftali and Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble* p. 232.

⁷⁸ 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.

⁷⁹ Naftali and Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 196.

⁸⁰ 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.

⁸¹ On the use of covert, deniable actions to attempt to avoid escalation: Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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

Soviet stonewalling about the presence of missiles only began to wane on October 26th. Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy on that date cryptically acknowledged, "The weapons which were necessary for the defense of Cuba are already there." He edged toward articulating a red line against attacking Soviet troops in Cuba, "...[W]e are of sound mind and understand perfectly well that if we attack you, you will respond the same way. But you too will receive the same that you hurl against us. And I think that you also understand this."⁸² That language evinces Khrushchev's assumption that declaration was superfluous. Public perceptions of Soviet denials persisted until the last full day of the crisis.⁸³ Khrushchev unambiguously acknowledged the presence of the missiles in an October 27th letter to Kennedy, both to facilitate a deal and to reassure Washington that Soviet officers – not Cubans – controlled the missiles.⁸⁴

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

Kennedy's Quarantine Speech

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

One easily overlooked drawback of the blockade was that it gave Moscow the opportunity to correct its mistake (from the standpoint of the declaration hypothesis) by declaring a clear red line against attacking Soviet forces in Cuba. According to President Kennedy, "... obviously you can't sort of announce that in four days from now you're going to take them out. They may announce within three days they're going to have warheads on 'em; if we come and attack, they're going to fire them. Then what'll, what'll we do?" He then stated his intention to destroy the missiles in an airstrike.⁸⁵ Kennedy reiterated this fear five days later in the lead-up to his speech.⁸⁶ Consistent with the declaration hypothesis, Washington preferred that the Soviet leaders never had a chance to tie their hands with a public red line. Nonetheless, Kennedy accepted that exact risk by selecting the blockade option.

⁸² "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 26, 1962 (FRUS #84).

⁸³ Associated Press, "Premier's Letter Avoids Admitting U.S. Charges," *New York Times*, October 27, 1962.

⁸⁴ "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 27, 1962 (FRUS #91); Naftali and Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 247.

⁸⁵ He later changed his mind. "White House Meeting Transcript," October 16, 1962 (FRUS #18).

⁸⁶ "Minutes of the 506th Meeting of the National Security Council," October 21, 1962 [FRUS #38].

In deciding how to enforce the September 4th red lines, the White House took seriously the domestic and international consequences of inaction.⁸⁷ Shortly after learning of the missiles, Kennedy ruminated, “My press statement was so clear about how we wouldn't do anything under these conditions and under the conditions that we would. He must know that we're going to find out...”⁸⁸ In an October 22nd meeting, Kennedy commented, “In September we had said we would react if certain actions were taken in Cuba. We have to carry out commitments which we had made publicly at that time.”⁸⁹ These and other similar remarks confirm that Kennedy took seriously the consequences of failing to enforce a red line.

Nonetheless, the binary of retaliating or relenting fails to capture the range of options available to the United States, nor the eventual policy. Instead, Kennedy held the potential use of force in abeyance, using it as coercive leverage during the window of opportunity before the Soviet Union gained confidence that he would not strike. The blockade, after all, was only an “*initial step*.” Although a significant signal of resolve, the blockade itself could not remove the missiles; it served a broader strategy of coercion predicated on the possibility that more enforcement was to come.

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.”⁹⁰ This change injected greater ambiguity about the consequences of defying the demand. Before this point in the speech, Kennedy had merely stated an objective, not a threat: “Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere.”

The speech also delivered the crisis’s most bluntly-worded nuclear threat: “It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.”⁹¹ This was the sole red line set by either side with clearly specified consequences for a violation. However, I found no evidence that the Kennedy Administration agonized over this line of the speech or perceived it as vital to U.S. strategy. The basic threat itself – that the United States would retaliate after a Soviet first strike with nuclear weapons – merely reprised the logic of Cold War deterrence.

The Soviet press statement challenging the blockade responded in similar terms, albeit with less bellicose language that opted for ambiguity about consequences, “The Soviet Government is taking all necessary measures for preventing our country from being taken unawares and to enable it to offer a condign reply to the aggressor.”⁹² In contrast, Kennedy’s red lines with respect to the blockade and the

⁸⁷ These domestic political motives have received extensive study and are not addressed here. Pressman, “September Statements, October Missiles, November Elections.”

⁸⁸ The National Security Advisor then interrupted. “Off the Record Meeting on Cuba,” October 16, 1962 [FRUS #21].

⁸⁹ “Minutes of the 507th Meeting of the National Security Council,” October 22, 1962 [FRUS #41].

⁹⁰ Theodore Sorenson, “Fourth Draft of JFK’s Address to the Nation,” October 21, 1962, Theodore C. Sorenson Papers, Box 48 [JFK PL].

⁹¹ Kennedy, “Address to the Nation.”

⁹² “Text of Soviet Statement Challenging the U.S. Naval Quarantine of Cuba,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1962.

removal of the missiles required rapid resolutions to avert escalation. Seen in that light, Washington and Moscow's focus on those red lines becomes easier to understand.

The atmosphere in the Kremlin grew tense as senior Soviet officials stayed up past midnight to learn what Washington would do. Audience costs theory envisions that a public statement such as Kennedy's generates credibility by tying hands. Interestingly, the immediate reaction of Soviet leaders to Kennedy's speech was a sense of relief.⁹³ 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.

The Blockade Line as a Red Line

"We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked." Secretary of State Dean Rusk's reaction to Soviet ships halting short of the blockade line remains a signature phrase in the public memory of the crisis. Khrushchev gave that order on October 23rd, and the White House received the news on the morning of October 24th, the day the blockade went into effect.⁹⁴ Yet the blockade line was not a total success, but rather merely mostly successful.

The October 22nd address declared, "To halt this offensive buildup, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation or port will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back."⁹⁵ In contrast to this clear demand, Washington never detailed how it would handle a Soviet ship crossing the blockade line. The lengthy rules of engagement provided to the U.S. Navy speak to the difficulty of accounting for the wide range of eventualities that could have arisen.⁹⁶

The Soviet Union did not unconditionally respect the blockade line. Even as most ships halted or turned back, Soviet tankers continued toward Cuba.⁹⁷ The first tanker, the *Bucharest*, declared a cargo of petroleum products and was allowed to proceed without physical inspection.⁹⁸ 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. The East German passenger ship *Voelker Freundschaft* was also permitted through the line.

⁹³ Naftali and Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble*, pp. 240-248.

⁹⁴ "Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60," October 23, 1962 [WC]; "Third Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 24, 1962 [FRUS #55].

⁹⁵ Kennedy, "Address to the Nation."

⁹⁶ "Houser to Taylor," October 19, 1962 [GWU NSA]; "Riley to the Deputy Secretary of Defense ["Rules of Engagement"]," October 22, 1962. (Attachments) [GWU NSA].

⁹⁷ "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Ball and Bundy," October 24, 1962 [FRUS #58].

⁹⁸ John McCone, "Memorandum for the Files," October 25, 1962 [FRUS #70]; "Hilsman to Rusk," October 25, 1962 [FRUS #76].

Its lack of weaponry provided the public excuse for a decision motivated by the desire to avoid confronting a ship full of civilians.⁹⁹

Four Soviet submarines successfully violated the blockade line. Although an unlikely way to move cargo, American officials did worry that submarines could deliver sensitive materials such as nuclear warheads.¹⁰⁰ The U.S. Navy's encounters with these submarines produced some of the tensest moments of the crisis, but the blockade never stopped them.¹⁰¹ The same Central Committee meeting where the decision was made to turn back the freighters ordered, "Keep the submarines on their approaches."¹⁰²

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 U.S. credibility required a sacrosanct line for which no violations could be tolerated. Contrary to the enforcement hypothesis, those violations did not cripple the broader red line or Kennedy's credibility moving forward. Instead, they formed part of an implicit bargain. Washington accepted them in return for more worrisome vessels turning back.

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

Our instructions to Soviet sailors are to observe strictly the generally accepted standards of navigation in international waters and not retreat one step from them. And, if the American side violates these rights, it must be aware of the responsibility it will bear for this act. To be sure, we will not remain mere observers of pirate actions by American ships in the open sea. We will then be forced on our part to take those measures we deem necessary and sufficient to defend our rights.¹⁰³

Khrushchev almost immediately backed off from this implied commitment to run the blockade. Presumably he prioritized rejecting the legitimacy of the blockade over that inconsistency. His red line against attacking Soviet ships came with the ambiguity about consequences: "measures we deem necessary and sufficient." Washington respected that red line in allowing certain ships to pass the line, but U.S. fears about attacking Soviet ships were already evident from the emphasis on lethal force as a last resort in the rules of engagement.

⁹⁹ "Fifth Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 25, 1962 [FRUS #73]; "Sixth Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 26, 1962 [FRUS #79]; "Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 27, 1962 [FRUS #97]; John McCone, "Memorandum for the Files," October 25, 1962 [FRUS #70].

¹⁰⁰ "White House Meeting Transcript," October 16, 1962 [FRUS #18]; "Smith to McCone [Soviet Challenge to the Quarantine]," October 23, 1962 [FRUS #54].

¹⁰¹ 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].

¹⁰² "Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60," October 23, 1962 [WC].

¹⁰³ "Khrushchev to Kennedy," October 24, 1962 [WC].

The Undeclared Red Line against Firing on Surveillance Aircraft

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

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 surveillance aircraft over Cuba. There does not appear to have been extensive discussion of making such a declaration before Major Anderson's death. For instance, would such a demand – over sovereign Cuban airspace – be legal under international law? Could they devise a fig leaf of legality akin to the quarantine? Washington repeatedly fretted about what would happen when the Soviets fired on surveillance aircraft and yet did not declare the red line.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵ White House press statements on October 26th and 27th failed to mention the issue – this despite the fact that the former devoted all four of its paragraphs to the topic of aerial surveillance over Cuba.¹⁰⁶

Unbeknownst to Washington, Two Soviet generals in Cuba ordered the missiles fired on their own initiative.¹⁰⁷ 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."¹⁰⁸ Nikita Khrushchev was furious that the SAMs fired without his orders. He feared how the United States would respond and the possibility that further firing, perhaps by Cubans, would lead to disaster. Sergei Khrushchev describes this moment as the tipping point for Soviet policy.¹⁰⁹

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.¹¹⁰ Briefings to NATO allies described

¹⁰⁴ 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.

¹⁰⁵ "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. Sherman and Tougias, *Above and Beyond*, p. 187.

¹⁰⁶ General Services Administration, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Print Office, 1964).

¹⁰⁷ Sherman and Tougias, *Above and Beyond*, p. 248.

¹⁰⁸ Sergei N. Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010), p. 608.

¹⁰⁹ Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs [edited by Sergei Khrushchev] place less emphasis on the shootdown. Sergei Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 3*. Trans. George Shriver (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 338.

¹¹⁰ "Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council," October 23, 1962 [FRUS #47].

this as American policy.¹¹¹ McNamara advocated this policy shortly before learning of Major Anderson's death. General Taylor's report of the shutdown came with a recommendation for an airstrike on that SAM site the next day, in line with the agreed policy. Like McNamara, he expected this strike to escalate to a larger bombing campaign and – most likely – an invasion.¹¹² Remarkably, Kennedy committed to retaliate after a shoot-down to the Pentagon, but not the Soviets or the press. That combination is difficult to reconcile with the declaration hypothesis.

Still fearful of crossing the Soviet red line against attacking Soviet forces in Cuba, President 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 progress.¹¹³ What he did instead helps to reveal the limitations of the enforcement hypothesis.

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

The Cuban crisis, R. Kennedy began, continues to quickly worsen. We have just received a report that an unarmed American plane was shot down while carrying out a reconnaissance flight over Cuba. ...Because of the plane that was shot down, there is now strong pressure on the president to give an order to respond with fire if fired upon when American reconnaissance planes are flying over Cuba. The USA can't stop these flights, ... [b]ut if we start to fire in response—a chain reaction will quickly start that will be very hard to stop.¹¹⁴

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

Conclusion

Conventional thinking counsels policymakers that they must declare clear red lines in order to deter. They must enforce those red lines after violations or else lose credibility. Although popular narratives about the Syrian, Gulf, and Korean Wars support this view, the red lines of the Cuban Missile Crisis tell a different story. Soviet and American leaders consistently evinced an intuitive understanding of what I have referred to as the enforcement, declaration, and unambiguity hypotheses. They

¹¹¹ "Knappstein to the German Foreign Ministry," October 24, 1962 [WC].

¹¹² "Eighth Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 27, 1962 [FRUS #94].

¹¹³ "Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee," October 27, 1962 [FRUS #97].

¹¹⁴ "Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry," October 27, 1962 [WC].

understood what policies would enact their proscriptions. However, prioritizing a surprising variety of other concerns, they time and again chose different policies. In each instance, there is little reason to believe that they paid a price for doing so.

The Kremlin waited almost until the last day of the crisis to declare its most important red line: a prohibition against attacking their missiles and soldiers deployed to Cuba. Moscow knowingly left open the possibility that Washington could attack Cuba while denying that the United States had in fact attacked the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's calculated decision not to issue a statement to foreclose this tactic speaks volumes about how little he prioritized the credibility benefits of declaration. Kennedy, meanwhile, made internal commitments to the Pentagon to retaliate after the shootdown of a U.S. surveillance aircraft without publicly conveying the red line to the Soviet Union. Khrushchev saw the threat as credible nonetheless, the decision of his generals in Cuba to fire notwithstanding. The reluctance to attack the other side took precedence over rhetoric. This suggests that the lessons of the Korean and Gulf Wars are, perhaps, not what they have seemed. Rather than blame solitary verbal statements that failed to declare red lines, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea in June 1949 and the absence of a tripwire in Kuwait may have mattered more.¹¹⁵

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

Indeed, Soviet violations arguably did more to build U.S. credibility than U.S. actions. Soviet leaders' fears of U.S. escalation spiked twice during the crisis, once when they learned that Washington had detected the missiles – but before Kennedy revealed his response – and once when Soviet forces shot down Major Anderson. Both resulted from Soviet violations, not U.S. policies. The standard account of the Cuban Missile Crisis credits U.S. brinkmanship, particularly the October 22nd address and the blockade, with providing the credibility to coerce the Soviet Union into withdrawing its missiles. However, the Soviet "blink" notwithstanding, those steps failed to halt Soviet progress toward readying the missiles. The final impetus came from Robert Kennedy's adept leveraging of the potential U.S. response to the Soviet shootdown of a U.S. aircraft. This mirrored and built on President Kennedy's initial decision to hold the potential for a military response to the missiles in abeyance while exploiting Soviet fears of it. Both gambits helped pave the road to eventual success.¹¹⁶

This success 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

¹¹⁵ Although Pyongyang pursued Soviet support for an invasion before the U.S. withdrawal, Stalin did not grant it. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, p. 382; Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined."

¹¹⁶ I seek here to highlight neglected elements, not to rewrite the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis. U.S. brinkmanship contributed to the Soviet withdrawal, as did the secret concession of the Jupiter missiles.

power or turning the tide of the Syrian Civil War?¹¹⁷ His successor did just that to little apparent effect. The notion that Syria led to Russia's invasion of Crimea is particularly overwrought.¹¹⁸

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

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

¹¹⁷ On the ineffectiveness of such airstrikes, see Pape, *Bombing to Win*.

¹¹⁸ Julia Ioffe, "How Russia Saw the Red Line Crisis," *The Atlantic*, March 11, 2016.