



Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game around the Use of Force

Dan Altman

To cite this article: Dan Altman (2018) Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game around the Use of Force, *Security Studies*, 27:1, 58-88, DOI: [10.1080/09636412.2017.1360074](https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360074)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360074>



Published online: 16 Aug 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1586



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)



Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game around the Use of Force

Dan Altman

ABSTRACT

What is the nature of the strategic game that states play during crises? Extensive research examines the leading answer: coercive bargaining. States prevail by signaling resolve, establishing the credibility of their threats, and coercing their adversaries into backing down. However, instead of (or in addition to) traditional coercive bargaining, this article shows that states frequently play out a different game with its own set of rules and tactics. The article explores how states outmaneuver their adversaries: working around their red lines, taking gains by fait accompli and imposing pressure where it is possible to do so without quite crossing the line of unambiguously using force. Based on this premise, the article develops a theoretical framework for understanding strategic interaction during crises, referred to as advancing without attacking, and shows that it best explains the course of the Berlin Blockade Crisis of 1948–49 while also shedding light on other prominent crises.

In 2014, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula without starting a war. Russia could have issued an ultimatum to Ukraine, demanding Crimea and backing that threat with its overwhelming advantage in military power. Russia could, alternatively, have attacked and overpowered Ukrainian units in Crimea. Instead, Russia adopted a third approach, invading Crimea while working around the need to assault Ukrainian soldiers. Where Ukrainian forces were absent, Russians took charge. Upon arriving at Ukrainian bases, Russian forces surrounded them without firing, often imposing what amounted to blockades, even contacting Ukrainian base commanders to reach agreements that neither side would open fire. When Russian units eventually took control of these bases, soldiers scaled walls and rammed gates to enter without firing more than warning shots, in the process exposing themselves to Ukrainian fire, wagering their lives on the assumption that the Ukrainians would not fire first. To prevent resistance from aircraft at a Ukrainian airbase, Russian soldiers did not rely on threats to shoot the aircraft down. Instead, they drove military vehicles through an unguarded gate and parked them on the runway, blocking it by nonviolent means in a manner that the Ukrainians would need to use violence to

Dan Altman is an assistant professor of political science at Georgia State University.

© 2018 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

reverse. To prevent the escape of Ukrainian warships in Crimea, Russian vessels took positions blocking the entrances to the ports, forcing the Ukrainian ships to either attack or remain stuck.¹ Russia sought to push as far as possible without overtly using force and, if that failed, to put itself in a position to deny that the combatants were in fact Russian. To that end, Russian soldiers removed identifying markers from their uniforms, entering as anonymous “Green Men.”²

Russia’s tactics left Western policymakers scrambling, sowing fears that Russia had pioneered a novel, 21st-century mode of limited aggression.³ However, there is nothing new or exceptional about such tactics. They fit squarely within a long history of states prevailing in crises by maneuvering around red lines prohibiting the use of force, taking what they could without unmistakably attacking. Others have identified past cases of similar tactics,⁴ but what remains missing is a conceptual framework that makes sense of them.

The temptation has been for scholars to apply what I refer to as the established view of strategy and tactics during crises, which places central emphasis on coercion, signaling resolve, and brinkmanship. Yet this framework only goes so far in explaining state behavior. Reviewing the literature on strategic interaction during crises, James D. Fearon drew a basic distinction between conceptualizing crises either as competitions in risk taking or as competitions in tactical cleverness, that is, as attempts to outmaneuver the adversary.⁵ He argued for the importance of both before focusing on the former. Since then, international relations scholars have performed admirably at elucidating the former while leaving the latter underdeveloped. There remains tremendous opportunity to better understand the chess game—not just the poker game—at play in crises.

The advancing without attacking framework for understanding strategic interactions during crises is one piece of that larger undertaking. It aligns to a broader conceptualization of crises as strategic games played by one overarching rule: do not overtly attack the other side.⁶ Both sides compete intensely—unilaterally taking

¹ I refer here only to events in Crimea. During the subsequent fighting in the Donbas region, Russia utilized fewer (two) tactics from the advancing without attacking framework: the deniability of forces out of uniform and attacking by proxy. Anton Lavrov, “Russian Again: The Military Operations for Crimea,” in *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, ed. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (Minneapolis: East View Press, 2014). For video, see the “Russian Roulette” series by *VICE News* throughout February 2014.

² Lavrov, “Russian Again: The Military Operations for Crimea,” in Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*.

³ Terms such as “hybrid warfare” and “gray zone” have come to refer to these tactics. Due to the vagueness of these terms, I eschew them and discuss instead one important subset of these tactics. “NATO to Counter ‘Hybrid Warfare’ from Russia,” *BBC News*, 14 May 2015; Michael Kofman, “Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts,” *War on the Rocks*, 11 March 2016.

⁴ For example, see Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, eds., *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Dan Altman, “The Long History of ‘Green Men’ Tactics—And How They Were Defeated,” *War on the Rocks*, 17 March 2016.

⁵ James D. Fearon, “Threats to Use Force: Costly Signals and Bargaining in International Crises” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1992), 73–77.

⁶ To define crisis, I utilize the conventional definition from the Interstate Crisis Behavior (ICB) project with one change (italicized). A crisis exists when the highest-level decision makers of *at least one involved state* perceive all three of the following: “a threat to one or more basic values, an awareness of finite time for response to the value threat, and a heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities.” Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 3.

what they can and applying pressure where they can—without quite crossing this red line of using force. It comes as no surprise that states are frequently reluctant to use force. It is also apparent that there are innumerable exceptions to this reluctance; the use of force is far from rare. What has been underappreciated, however, is just how much scope there is for maneuvering that works around the edges of using force without clearly doing so and just how important these tactics have been in some of the major crises of the modern era.

The article begins with a review of the established view of strategic interaction during crises. Building on since-neglected insights from Thomas C. Schelling, the article then develops advancing without attacking as an alternative theoretical framework with implications for both state behavior and crisis outcomes.⁷ Although the intuition underlying advancing without attacking is not novel in itself, this article contributes to understanding the mechanics of this approach to crisis strategy.

The article then presents a case study of the Berlin Blockade Crisis of 1948–49, best known for the Berlin Airlift. If Korea is “the Forgotten War,” then the First Berlin Crisis is the forgotten crisis, the recipient of far less scholarly attention than the 1958–61 Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Nonetheless, the Berlin Blockade Crisis played a major role in the onset of the Cold War. Beyond its historical significance, this case offers a particularly rich array of observable implications for evaluating the explanatory power of the advancing without attacking framework against the established view of crisis strategy (see next section).⁸ As rival frameworks for explaining strategic interaction in crises, both imply that certain actions are more likely to occur than others, certain lines of reasoning about why to take actions (that is, strategies) are more likely to win internal debates than others, and certain overall outcomes are more likely to transpire than others. After detailing the competing predictions of the two frameworks, I show that advancing without attacking better explains the actions taken by both sides and the strategic thinking guiding the decisions of the Western powers.⁹ Because the Western powers held the upper hand after each pushed as far as they could without using force, advancing without attacking offers a compelling explanation for the final outcome: the Soviet decision to

⁷Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1966); idem., *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁸Observable implications are visible predictions of a theory that can be checked against evidence. I focus special attention on unique observable implications, which Stephen Van Evera defines as predictions of a theory that alternative theories do not expect to observe. Sometimes buried within case narratives, I believe these aspects of a case best facilitate inference in case studies. Nonetheless, no single case can provide a determinative test of a general theory, nor ascertain its generalizability across cases. On this approach to case methods, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 30–35; Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in *Handbook of Political Science: Volume 7*, ed. Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 118–20. On observable implications: Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 24.

⁹Unfortunately, few Soviet documents have been declassified. My account relies primarily on American documents, which contain the behavior of both sides but the reasoning and intentions of only one.

abandon the Berlin Blockade in return for negligible concessions. Despite entering the crisis in an extremely difficult position, the Western powers achieved this victory without a serious attempt to coerce the Soviet Union or convince Soviet leaders of their willingness to use force to obtain their desired outcome.

The Established View of Crisis Strategy

Crises, like wars, are clashes of power and will. Each side leverages the prospect of war to attempt to intimidate their adversary into giving in to their coercive demands. Because the willingness to fight is not easily observed, states must find ways to signal their resolve in order to establish the credibility of their threats. This is often done through brinkmanship, aggressive actions that incur a calculated risk of escalation. The established view of crisis strategy, in sum, has three pillars: coercion, signals of resolve, and brinkmanship.¹⁰

When explaining crisis behavior—troop deployments, public statements, limited attacks, etc.—the established view applies the concept of signaling. The classic signal of resolve is a show of force.¹¹ In 1996, for example, China signaled its displeasure with the American decision to grant a visa to Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui by testing missiles in waters near Taiwan. The United States responded by deploying two carrier battle groups to the region, sending one through the Taiwan Strait.¹² Public statements offer another traditional means of signaling resolve. These statements are thought to enhance credibility by putting the reputation of the nation and the leader on the line in the eyes of the adversary, allied nations, and the domestic political audience.¹³ After the United States discovered Soviet nuclear missiles under construction in Cuba, for example, President John F. Kennedy addressed the nation to announce the “quarantine” of Cuba and demand that the Soviet Union withdraw its missiles. Beyond signals of a primarily symbolic nature, military mobilization provides one of the most important methods of conveying resolve.¹⁴ After Iraq created a crisis by moving elite units of its army toward the Kuwaiti border in 1994, the United States responded by mobilizing

¹⁰ One might also begin with a fourth pillar: bargaining. Coercion is a form of bargaining. James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997): 68–90; Paul K. Huth, “Deterrence and International Conflict: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Debates,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (June 1999): 25–48; James D. Morrow, “The Strategic Setting of Choices: Signaling, Commitment, and Negotiation in International Politics,” in *International Relations: A Strategic Choice Approach*, ed. David Lake and Robert Powell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Branislav L. Slantchev, *Military Threats: The Costs of Coercion and the Price of Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

¹² Robert S. Ross, “Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and US–China Relations,” *International Security* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 48–85.

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

¹⁴ Slantchev, *Military Threats*.

elements of its ground, air, and naval forces, forward deploying them to the Persian Gulf region until Iraqi forces pulled back.¹⁵

When lesser signals are insufficient, demonstrating the willingness to risk war (brinkmanship) signals resolve and puts pressure on the adversary to end the crisis.¹⁶ For those who see brinkmanship as the cornerstone of crisis strategy, a common assumption for studies of the role of nuclear weapons in crises,¹⁷ crises are not just a clash of wills but also a war of nerves. The side to flinch first loses. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the American blockade of Cuba, harassment of Soviet submarines, and intensive reconnaissance overflights risked armed confrontations with the potential to generate escalation. Brinkmanship can also involve limited uses of force to signal a willingness to go further if necessary.¹⁸

This perspective on how states make gains during crises has two cornerstones: sending signals of resolve to create perceptions of credibility and leveraging the credible threat of future escalation to coerce concessions. Advancing without attacking requires neither. Rather than attempting to convince the adversary of one's willingness to use force, it succeeds by taking advantage of both sides' reluctance to use force. Rather than using credible threats of escalation to coerce concessions, it more often takes gains by *fait accompli*. The established view of crisis strategy has proven itself both theoretically rich and empirically fruitful. Nonetheless, this article explores an alternative meant to explain events that fit uneasily with the established view.

Advancing without Attacking

What if crises are strategic competitions in which each side tries as hard as it can to prevail—taking whatever it can and applying pressure wherever it can—without unmistakably crossing the line of firing on the adversary? This article explores how states have conducted crises as a game played out on that basis.

States cannot abide an enemy that is unconstrained from using force against them. This fundamental national interest is the basis for advancing without attacking. States must draw red lines against uses of force in order to deter attack. A red line distinguishes acceptable actions from unacceptable actions; in this context, it means distinguishing uses of force from actions short of an attack.¹⁹ Using the term red line rather than merely deterrence will make it possible to speak of working around red lines.

¹⁵ Michael R. Gordon, "Pentagon Moving a Force of 4,000 to Guard Kuwait," *New York Times*, 9 October 1994.

¹⁶ Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, chap. 3; Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ For example, see Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 141–71; but see also: Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013): 173–95.

¹⁸ The salience of use-of-force red lines means that even a small use of force can often provide a potent signal of resolve.

¹⁹ On the dual roles of threats and assurances in coercion, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 4, 74.

Red lines come in many varieties, including prohibitions against crossing borders, using force, or building nuclear weapons. Each is important, but use-of-force red lines are perhaps the most ubiquitous. In crises over a wide range of issues, states consistently set use-of-force red lines barring attack by adversaries. These red lines provide a measure of clarity and stability when both sides choose to respect the nonuse of force as a limit. Accepting the use-of-force red line as a constraint creates a competition in which both sides vie to make gains with reduced fears of escalation past that limit. Retaining the rule and thereby avoiding the risk of war is often worth even the price of losing the crisis. Once that line is crossed, no natural stopping point exists against escalation to war. I return to the issue of the salience of red lines against the use of force in a later section, where I explain why these red lines constrain behavior even in the absence of public statements specifically declaring them.

However, it is precisely because this limit on escalation is so valuable to states that there come to be games played around its edges. The next section explores the two characteristics of these red lines that make this gamesmanship possible—that is, the conditions under which advancing without attacking is possible. The following section then explains how states exploit these opportunities to make gains. These are the core elements of advancing without attacking.²⁰

How to Outmaneuver Use-of-Force Red Lines

Advancing without attacking is possible when there is a way to take something or impose pressure without having to overtly attack. The key to prevailing in a crisis that unfolds along these lines is to find and exploit opportunities to outmaneuver the adversary's red line against using force. By analogy, these red lines are like medieval suits of armor. Despite their overall strength, they may contain weak spots and leave certain areas exposed to a well-placed strike. Winning a crisis can be as simple as targeting these vulnerabilities, taking advantage of them to push forward without ever unmistakably crossing core red lines like those against the use of force.²¹ These opportunities take two forms. First, states can outflank these red lines by finding ways to make gains while bypassing adversary forces. Second, states can target gray areas where it is ambiguous whether or not an action is unmistakably an attack.

It is often possible to work around use-of-force red lines in what amounts to a flanking maneuver: taking something of value without opening fire. The location

²⁰ I define advancing without attacking as a framework consisting of these four main elements and the logic underpinning them. It is not an umbrella for all nonviolent methods of making gains.

²¹ There are parallels to several tactics of nonviolent resistance, particularly sit-ins. These similarities are intriguing because, entirely unlike advancing without attacking, nonviolent resistance often pursues far more expansive aims—including regime change—and relies heavily on delegitimization. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Part II: The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973); Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

of a use-of-force red line depends on the exact placement of “tripwire” forces, which are forward deployed in part to limit the adversary’s freedom of action.²² Tripwires fail when the adversary can go around them or step over them. Moving troops forward into an area unoccupied by the adversary is only the most direct of many ways in which one can outflank a use-of-force line. In the Berlin Blockade Crisis, the Soviets could interdict supplies to Berlin by blocking transit corridors in their own zone in Germany without dislodging American forces. The United States, conversely, could fly over Soviet forces to supply Berlin without needing to push through them.

When a Turkish commercial vessel ran aground on Imia (Kardak), a small island claimed by both Turkey and Greece, the incident thrust the dispute over the islands into the media spotlight. The ensuing events would become the 1995–96 Aegean Sea Crisis. After civilians from each side ventured to the island to plant their respective national flags, Greece stationed a small group of commandos there to guard the Greek flag. Greece exploited the absence of Turkish troops to advance without attacking. Those marines put Turkey in a more difficult position. Turkey’s options seemed limited to attacking Greek troops or suffering the humiliation of backing down. Greece had the upper hand. However, two days later Turkey landed a small group of commandos on the nearby island of Akrogialia, a heretofore-neglected islet similar to Imia except for the absence of Greek forces. Turkey outflanked the Greek use-of-force red line. The two sides stared each other down from these positions amid considerable tension before mutually agreeing to withdraw soldiers and flags, restoring the status quo ante. Both sides advanced without attacking. Turkey found a way to use it to escape from a difficult position, achieving a draw rather than a defeat and doing so without undue risk of war.²³

Second, some use-of-force red lines contain gray areas that provide openings for advancing without unmistakably attacking. This is why so many crises feature pugnacious shoving matches between soldiers equipped with loaded firearms. Shooting is an overt attack, but shoving is more ambiguous. Use-of-force red lines unambiguously prohibit intentional, politically sanctioned attacks on the soldiers or citizens of the state setting the red line. But what exactly is an attack? When one soldier jostles another? When one boat collides with another? When one plane buzzes another? Warning shots? Moreover, what about inadvertent attacks? There is an important distinction between a deliberate attack ordered by a head of state and a single officer or enlisted soldier firing without orders. States may decide to tolerate an accidental engagement if the aggressor disavows the intent to attack, whereas

²² On tripwire forces (as a commitment mechanism and signal of resolve): Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests,” 70; Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*; idem., *Arms and Influence*; Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, “Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 923.

²³ M. G. Jacobides, “The Inherent Limits of Organizational Structure and the Unfulfilled Role of Hierarchy: Lessons from a Near War,” *Organizational Science* 18, no. 3 (May–June 2007): 455–77; Martin Pratt and Clive Schofield, “The Imia/Kardak Rocks Dispute in the Aegean Sea,” *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin* (Spring 1996).

even a small deliberate attack carries graver implications. Finally, who or what must not the adversary attack, and who is doing the attacking? In Berlin circa 1948, a Soviet decision to fire on German civilians (still under postwar occupation) did not carry with it the same implications as an attack on American or British forces. Similarly, destroying unmanned equipment without inflicting casualties is not clearly an attack. French forces dynamited two Soviet radio towers in the French sector of Berlin in December 1948, eliciting loud Soviet protests but no direct retaliation.²⁴ Although use-of-force red lines unmistakably prohibit overt attacks, there are many forms of ambiguous attack that take advantage of gray areas within them.

Consider the Cod Wars, two crises between Britain and Iceland over fishing rights in the waters around Iceland. Each unwilling to shoot at their NATO ally, Icelandic and British ships reverted to tactics that one might have believed to be anachronistic: ramming. Because collisions occur by accident as well as by malice, ramming falls inside a gray area in the red line against overt attack. Between the two “wars,” the Icelandic Coast Guard invented and deployed a new weapon system, the warp-cutter. Resembling an anchor in appearance, this device would drag behind the ship before snaring and severing the lines connecting British fishing trawlers to their nets, preventing fishing while circumventing the need to attack the trawler to accomplish that objective. The Royal Navy responded not by firing on the Icelandic vessels; instead, it interposed warships between the Icelandic vessels and the trawlers in a tactic referred to as “riding-off.”²⁵ These British warships could not be everywhere. Iceland prevailed.

A similar game played out in the Cuban Missile Crisis, an unlikely candidate for commonalities with the Cod Wars. After deciding to attempt to work around the Soviet red line against an attack on Cuba rather than cross it, the United States confronted a challenge in implementing the resultant blockade. Soviet ships could simply steam ahead, leaving the United States in the position of having to fire first to prevail. To uphold the blockade without escalating the crisis, the United States needed to solve this problem.

American officials at the highest levels devoted careful attention to the Rules of Engagement for intercepting Soviet freighters and devised a two-part solution.²⁶ These Rules of Engagement called for boarding as the preferred measure with firing to disable (but not kill or destroy) as the primary fallback option: “If forced to engage, an attempt would be made to stop the ship by damage in nonvital areas, such as the rudder, and with minimum loss of life.”²⁷ The intent was to stop the

²⁴ Lucius D. Clay, *Decision in Germany* (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 384; Roger G. Miller, *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948–1949* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 113–14.

²⁵ Paddy Johnston, “The Cod Wars against Iceland: The Royal Navy as a Political Instrument,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 2 (1991), 9–15.

²⁶ John McCone, “Memorandum for the Files [Executive Committee Meeting],” 23 October 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter *FRUS*] 1961–1963, vol. 11 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office [GPO], 1996), #51.

²⁷ Although the full Rules of Engagement explicitly left open the possibility of firing to destroy the ship, they specified no circumstances in which this would occur for an unarmed merchant ship. Riley to the Deputy Secretary of Defense [“Rules of Engagement”], 22 October 1962, National Security Archive at George Washington University [hereafter GWU NSA].

ships with minimum force, disabling only if required and “not sinking ships unless absolutely necessary.”²⁸ The effect and intent of disabling are both distinct from firing to kill or destroy. Therefore, disabling falls (just barely) ambiguously short of unmistakably attacking. American policymakers feared the consequences of a disabling shot, but not as much as they feared the consequences of deliberately sinking a Soviet ship.

Because the ability to board and—if necessary—disable was a critical element in its effectiveness, the US blockade of Cuba succeeded in stopping Soviet freighters but not Soviet submarines or aircraft.²⁹ Unlike freighters, neither aircraft nor submarines could be boarded or disabled without being destroyed. The gray area in the use-of-force red line existed for surface ships alone. This was an important flaw in the blockade, because either submarines or aircraft could have carried nuclear warheads to Cuba. Washington had yet to determine whether these warheads were already in Cuba (they were); the blockade line held only to the extent that it could take advantage of a gray area in the Soviet use-of-force red line.

How to Make Gains

States exploit these opportunities to outmaneuver use-of-force red lines by two methods: the *fait accompli* and imposed pressure. Both methods make gains by unilaterally imposing changes to the status quo. Both can—but do not always—do so without crossing use-of-force red lines. Whereas the *fait accompli* entails seizing the object of the dispute (or part thereof) outright, imposed pressure involves creating a new state of affairs that is costly to the adversary as part of a coercive effort to obtain a concession.³⁰ Distinct from the established view of crisis strategy, neither method requires signaling resolve in order to establish the credibility of threats to use force in the future if concessions are not forthcoming.

Although the academic literature has devoted surprisingly little attention to *faits accomplis* until recently, this tactic has played an important role in crises across history.³¹ In a recent study, Ahmer Tarar integrates the *fait accompli* into formal models of crisis bargaining as an alternative to coercion.³² I examined territorial acquisitions since 1918 and found that states seized territory by *fait accompli* 112 times while only coercing adversaries into agreeing to cede territory in thirteen

²⁸ Houser to Taylor, 19 October 1962, GWU NSA.

²⁹ CIA, “SNIE 11-19-62: Major Consequences of Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba,” 20 October 1962, in Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992).

³⁰ “Coercion” refers specifically to compellence. Whereas deterrent threats aim to sustain the status quo, compellent threats demand changes to it. The *fait accompli* is an alternative to coercion, whereas imposed pressure is a distinctive type of coercion. Imposed pressure is also a type of coercive diplomacy, whereas I define the *fait accompli* as an alternative to coercive diplomacy. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, chap. 2.

³¹ Exceptions: George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 536–40; Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 44–45; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict among Nations*, 227; Stephen Van Evera, “Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War,” *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 10.

³² Ahmer Tarar, “A Strategic Logic of the Military *Fait Accompli*,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 742–52.

instances.³³ Moscow did not use the threat of war to coerce Kiev into agreeing to relinquish Crimea. Russia simply took Crimea.

A *fait accompli* imposes a limited unilateral gain at an adversary's expense in an attempt to get away with that gain when the adversary chooses to relent rather than escalate in retaliation.³⁴ Each *fait accompli* is a calculated gamble that the adversary will let go what was seized rather than escalate. Whereas coercion involves leveraging a credible threat to intimidate the adversary into granting a concession, a *fait accompli* imposes the change unilaterally. Coercion and the *fait accompli* are two fundamentally different ways of making a gain at the expense of an adversary. The Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, began with a Soviet *fait accompli* attempt—the missile deployment—that the United States reversed using coercion. Many *faits accomplis* succeed, as Russia's did in Crimea. Other *faits accomplis* provoke a stronger response than had been hoped, as Argentina experienced after seizing the Falkland Islands in 1982. Some *faits accomplis* use force, but I focus below on those that take gains without force.

It is not unusual for scholars to focus on coercive threats even when a *fait accompli* changed the status quo.³⁵ When Soviet threats against Berlin in 1958 and 1960 failed to coerce the United States into agreeing to make concessions, for example, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. This *fait accompli* curtailed the hemorrhaging of skilled labor from East Germany.³⁶

Faits accomplis are more likely to succeed at making a gain without provoking war when they take that gain without crossing use-of-force red lines. In the Fashoda Crisis of 1898, Britain and France raced to Fashoda precisely because the first to arrive would have the advantage of putting the adversary in a position of having to fire first to prevail.³⁷ Control of Fashoda meant control of much of what later became Sudan. Both sides sought to impose a *fait accompli* that would interpose the use-of-force red line and so deter a *fait accompli* by the loser of the race. The same dynamic emerged in 1999 when NATO and Russian forces raced for control of Pristina Airport after the end of the Kosovo conflict.³⁸

Arriving first puts the adversary in the unenviable position of having to choose between attacking and relenting. Schelling referred to this as the “last-mover disadvantage.”³⁹ However, contra Schelling, I doubt the existence of true last moves. Even on the day after a massive unprovoked invasion, it usually remains possible to negotiate an end to war if both sides wish to do so. The last move, therefore, is

³³ Dan Altman, “By *Fait Accompli*, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries,” *International Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ On this problem: Todd S. Sechser, “Militarized Compellent Threats, 1918–2001,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no. 4 (2011): 385.

³⁶ Ingo Wolfgang Trauschweizer, “Tanks at Checkpoint Charlie: Lucius Clay and the Berlin Crisis, 1961–62,” *Cold War History* 6, no. 2 (2006): 205–28.

³⁷ David Levering Lewis, *The Race to Fashoda: European Colonialism and African Resistance in the Scramble for Africa* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987).

³⁸ “Confrontation over Pristina Airport,” *BBC News*, 9 March 2000.

³⁹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 44–47.

not an innate feature of the strategic game; it is a construct predicated on the salience of crossing certain red lines. States treat these attacks as last moves even though this is not inherently so.

Crises vary in whether they provide an opportunity for a nonviolent fait accompli. If one imagines that the tables were turned in Berlin, meaning that the Soviets needed to breach an American blockade, the Soviets would have lacked the airlift capabilities to do so. Because they could not have advanced without attacking, the framework predicts that they would have been less likely to attempt to advance at all.

The second method for making gains is imposed pressure. Imposed pressure is, in essence, a middle ground between faits accomplis and traditional coercive threats. States impose pressure by unilaterally enacting a new state of affairs that inflicts costs until and unless a concession is forthcoming. Blockades, like sanctions, are a recurrent form of imposed pressure.⁴⁰ Although blockades like the one in the Berlin case considered below inflict costs to coerce concessions, they do not need to threaten future escalation past the newly imposed status quo. The threat is only to continue the blockade that is already in place, a threat whose credibility is established without traditional signals of resolve like shows of force.

States have found a variety of ways to impose costs and pressure adversaries without overtly attacking, often by exploiting ambiguity about who is attacking. One pervasive technique is to attack via proxy rather than attack directly. For decades, Pakistan has supported insurgent groups in conflict with India.⁴¹ These policies have generated a series of crises, including those following the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament and the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Neither, however, provoked a wider war. The United States supplied arms to Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s without anything resembling the risk of escalation that would have accompanied a direct intervention. A related technique is to attack with soldiers out of uniform or in the uniform of another armed force.⁴² Russia's "Green Men" in Crimea in 2014 offer an example, as do the Russian "volunteers" during the subsequent fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk. Soviet pilots in the guise of Chinese airmen attacked American forces during the Korean War without bringing in the Soviet Union as an active combatant. Stalin ordered these pilots to engage American aircraft only behind the front lines. He sought to prevent the capture of a downed Russian pilot, which would confirm Soviet involvement.⁴³ Some of these gambits worked better than others, but only rarely have these tactics provoked a wider war.

⁴⁰ However, not all blockades or blockade measures are imposed pressure. American harassment of Soviet submarines during the Cuban Missile Crisis—specifically the dropping of hand grenades and practice depth charges (nonlethal to submarines)—provides an example of signaling and brinkmanship, not imposed pressure. The measure did not in itself impose a costly state of affairs. The British blockades of Germany during the World Wars were violent elements of a warfighting campaign.

⁴¹ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴² For a thorough study of how covert interventions avoid provoking escalation, see Austin Carson, "Facing Off and Saving Face: Covert Intervention and Escalation Management in the Korean War," *International Organization* 70, no. 1 (January 2016): 1–29.

⁴³ Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 190.

Table 1. How states make gains in crises.

Crisis Strategy	Coercive Threat	Unilateral Imposition	Signals of Resolve
Coercion	Necessary	No	Necessary
Imposed pressure	Necessary	Partially (costs only)*	Inherent to the imposition
Fait accompli	Unnecessary	Yes	Unnecessary**

*Whereas a fait accompli unilaterally imposes the desired outcome, imposed pressure creates a costly state of affairs intended to aid in bringing about the desired outcome through coercion.

**Faits accomplis require no signaling to make a gain but may require it to hold that gain. Like imposed pressure, that signaling is often inherent to the imposition of the fait accompli.

Table 1 summarizes the distinctions among the crisis strategies of coercion, imposed pressure, and the fait accompli. It does not exhaustively survey all possible crisis strategies, omitting others like brute force and positive inducements.⁴⁴ Table 1 underscores that, although imposed pressure is a form of coercion, it differs from traditional coercion in several respects. It imposes ongoing costs rather than threatening future costs (escalation). It does not require separate actions—signals of resolve like shows of force—to make a credible a threat to escalate in the future if concessions are not forthcoming. The imperative to make that prospect of future escalation credible via signaling is fundamental to coercion as it is traditionally understood.

Although faits accomplis require no signaling to make a gain, they may require it to hold that gain. Like imposed pressure, however, that signaling is often inherent to the imposition of the fait accompli. For instance, that Russia simply took the risk of seizing Crimea is by far the strongest signal that Russia would fight to hold it. At issue is the importance of separate actions (signals) like shows of force, military mobilization, public declarations of resolve, and more. These actions, regarded as ranking among the most important types of state behavior during crisis by the established view, have far less of a role when states instead use advancing without attacking. The contrast between signaling and advancing without attacking is specific to this concept of signaling a greater willingness to use force (resolve), the primary type of signaling considered in the literature, not to signaling in general.

Advancing without attacking is not always successful. In 1961, India sought to gain the upper hand in its ongoing border disputes with China via the “forward policy.” India gradually constructed dozens of military posts in disputed areas unoccupied by Chinese forces, creating faits accomplis without using force. Where possible, Indian units took up positions on ground that threatened existing Chinese posts, either overlooking them or cutting their supply lines. China initially responded with restraint. Chinese forces built new border posts in the disputed territory without engaging India’s, including positions blocking further Indian advances. Mao instructed: “Resolutely do not yield, but strive to avoid bloodshed; create interlocking positions for long-term armed coexistence.” When this proved insufficient, Chinese forces resumed patrols, risking clashes, and began to create posts in positions that threatened India’s. By August 1962, Chinese leaders determined that they could not arrest Indian

⁴⁴ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

encroachment by these means. Only then did China resort to a more aggressive strategy, attacking Indian forces in what became the Sino-Indian War.⁴⁵

Although the mutual use of advancing explains months of strategic interaction during the crisis, the Sino-Indian War offers a cautionary tale of what can happen when one side advances too far at the other's expense. It also illustrates what I observe to be common: advancing without attacking often functions as the strategy of first resort in crises, with riskier alternatives in reserve as fallback options.

The Salience of Use-of-Force Red Lines

Why do use-of-force red lines act as such potent constraints on statecraft during crises? The desire to avoid a costly war is straightforward, but why would a small use of force that inflicts only a few casualties carry such large ramifications?

Because war is costly, there generally exists a range of potential war-avoiding bargains that both sides of a crisis prefer to war. For instance, both sides would be better off agreeing to the eventual outcome of the war, or something like it, without the costs of actually fighting the war.⁴⁶ The problem, however, is that these incentives in favor of reaching a bargain are indeterminate as to exactly where in the range of possible bargains the two sides will agree and which side will get the better of the deal.⁴⁷ This leaves tremendous scope for strategic maneuver. Absent any constraints, what prevents both sides from each seizing what they can in small faits accomplis? From low-level fighting over these faits accomplis? If states disregard natural limits on escalatory behavior, the results could all too easily include simmering tensions, frequent skirmishing, greater uncertainty, and a heightened risk of escalation. From the desire to avoid this instability comes the value states place on finding clear limits, with the nonuse of force prominent among them.

The use of force is a naturally salient focal point at which both sides can choose to limit escalation. Schelling explained why this is so valuable for deterrence: "A focal point for agreement often owes its focal character to the fact that small concessions would be impossible, that small encroachments would lead to more and larger ones." These focal points are different from the potential alternative places to draw red lines in a manner that is "qualitative rather than a matter of degree."⁴⁸ In other words, states are much more likely to set a red line such as "do not fire on my forces" than an alternative such as "do not fire at more than twelve of my soldiers"—and for good reason. How could the threat to retaliate for the thirteenth soldier be credible? If states begin to tolerate attacks on their forces,

⁴⁵ M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 174–78.

⁴⁶ For this perspective on the causes of war and a discussion of the conditions that make bargaining failure—and thus war—likely, see James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (July 1995): 379–414; Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 111; *idem.*, *Arms and Influence*, 138.

where does it end? Recent research has identified focal points as an important factor in the strength of borders at deterring challenge, the resolution of territorial conflicts, and the durability of peace agreements.⁴⁹ The role and function of focal points is to provide clear, mutually understood limits that aid both sides in reducing the risks of escalation.

In an escalation ladder spanning the full range from peacetime cooperation to crisis to limited war to total nuclear war, two lines inherently stand out as natural firebreaks: the use of any force and the use of nuclear weapons. From that standpoint, an analogy between use-of-force red lines and nuclear-use red lines is a natural one. During the Cold War, strategists contemplated high-intensity conventional wars in Europe in which both sides refrained from using nuclear weapons.⁵⁰ By this analogy, nonviolent crises are like these limited wars, strategic competitions played within a constraining rule. To explain the significance of the red line against using nuclear weapons, nuclear strategists have made the case for the importance of focal points, salient points, saliciencies, firebreaks, conspicuous points, discontinuities, and stark distinctions—all referencing the same idea.⁵¹ The logic extends to use-of-force red lines.

Statesmen often keenly perceive the perils of crossing use-of-force red lines. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, American policymakers feared destroying Soviet ballistic missiles because it meant attacking Soviet troops. According to CIA Director John McCone, “Consequences of action by the United States will be the inevitable ‘spilling of blood’ of Soviet military personnel. This will increase tension everywhere and undoubtedly bring retaliation against U.S. foreign military installations.”⁵²

Soviet leaders shared this view. Khrushchev said as much: “The tragic thing—they can attack, and we will respond. This could escalate into a large-scale war.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Douglas M. Gibler, “Bordering on Peace: Democracy, Territorial Issues, and Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (September 2007): 509–32; David B. Carter and H. E. Goemans, “The Making of the Territorial Order: New Borders and the Emergence of Interstate Conflict,” *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (April 2011): 275–309; Paul K. Huth, Sarah E. Croco, and Benjamin J. Appel, “Bringing Law to the Table: Legal Claims, Focal Points, and the Settlement of Territorial Disputes since 1945,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 1 (January 2013): 90–103; Virginia Page Fortna, “Scraps of Paper? Agreements and the Durability of Peace,” *International Organization* 57, no. 2 (April 2003): 343; idem., *Peace Time: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 22–23.

⁵⁰ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965); Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979); Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁵¹ George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 41; Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*; Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, 55–75; idem., *Arms and Influence*, 132–41; Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977). More recent research explores a normative taboo and/or entrenched tradition of the nonuse of nuclear weapons. Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); T. V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2009); but see also Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, “Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 188–206.

⁵² John McCone, “Memorandum for Discussion [The Cuban Discussion],” 17 October 1962, *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 11, #26.

⁵³ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 60, 23 October 1962, Wilson Center Digital Archive [hereafter WC].

Particularly striking are Khrushchev's instructions to his emissary tasked with persuading the Cubans not to fire at American reconnaissance aircraft violating their airspace. Despite acknowledging the lack of a vital American or Soviet interest at stake in the fate of one aircraft, Khrushchev saw the risk of provoking a war as grave because of the use-of-force red line: "We believe—and this is very important—that, even if they [the Cubans] opened fire against the American aircraft, and we would regret if such a development occurred, if that would have been done, that fire would not be effective. It would not result in a real strengthening of Cuban security by military means. But it could cause an onset of U.S. military actions against Cuba."⁵⁴

These fears came to the fore when a Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) site shot down an American U-2, killing Major Rudolf Anderson. Unbeknownst to Washington, a Soviet general ordered the missiles fired on his own initiative.⁵⁵ Soviet Defense Minister Malinovsky reproached him the next day: "We believe that you were too hasty in shooting down the US U-2 reconnaissance plane."⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷ The plane's downing brought fears of imminent escalation to a crescendo in Washington, with President Kennedy seriously considering immediate retaliation before deciding to first give diplomacy one final chance.⁵⁸ The resultant conversation later that day between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin produced the agreement that ended the crisis. They began the meeting with a discussion of their mutual fears surrounding the implications of the U-2 incident.⁵⁹

Despite its importance, any small violation of a use-of-force red line does not make war inevitable. Instead, the consequences are threefold. First, what is often the single most salient line constraining further escalation is gone, generating an increased risk of escalation and greater uncertainty. Second, because advancing without attacking is no longer a viable option, states must resort to riskier alternative strategies such as brinkmanship. Third, the attacked state will face strong pressures to retaliate. Even if this reciprocity seeks only to uphold the status quo, it is all too easy for tit-for-tat retaliation to fuel an escalatory spiral.⁶⁰ Overall, the result of crossing a use-of-force red line is not automatically war but rather a greater risk of escalation to war.

⁵⁴ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Presidium Protocol 66 (Instructions to Comrade A. I. Mikoyan), 16 November 1962, WC.

⁵⁵ Ivanov and Malinovsky to Khrushchev, 27 October 1962, WC.

⁵⁶ The same cable ordered the missiles removed. Malinovsky to Pliev, 28 October 1962, WC.

⁵⁷ Sergei N. Khrushchev, *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower*, trans. Shirley Benson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 608.

⁵⁸ "Summary Record of the Ninth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council," 27 October 1962, *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 11, #97.

⁵⁹ Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry, 27 October 1962, WC.

⁶⁰ Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*, 278–81. For a more optimistic perspective that still acknowledges this problem: Robert M. Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

Two Competing Frameworks for Understanding Crisis Strategy

Advancing without attacking offers a conceptual framework for understanding strategic interaction during crises that diverges from the traditional emphasis on coercion, signaling resolve, and brinkmanship. Gains made by fait accompli are not concessions elicited by credible coercive threats. Signals of resolve like shows of force lose their central role in crisis tactics and are no longer a major determinant of credibility. Instead, threats to retaliate for clear-cut uses of forces are generally presumed to be credible, whereas threats to retaliate for other actions are presumed not to be credible, irrespective of signals. Rather than embracing brinkmanship as a means of signaling resolve, advancing without attacking attempts to make gains while avoiding its risks.

Nonetheless, even as these distinctions are stark in theory, elements from both frameworks combine in many different ways in practice. For instance, any fait accompli—indeed, any action or inaction in a crisis—may signal something to the adversary. The Berlin Airlift illustrates. The question is not whether the airlift could convey a signal of resolve to the Soviet Union—it could—but rather whether this signaling was the primary purpose of the airlift in the Western Powers’ strategy—it was not.

Finally, states often utilize advancing without attacking as part of a broader strategy that integrates elements from multiple approaches to crisis strategy. This is typical for concepts of strategies and theories of strategic interaction.⁶¹ Although this poses challenges for empirical analysis, the Berlin Blockade Crisis offers one case where the two frameworks at issue make enough competing predictions to determine which better accords with the case.

The Berlin Blockade Crisis, 1948–49

At first glance, the established view of crisis strategy offers a compelling account of the Berlin Blockade Crisis. The Soviet Union demanded the cessation of progress toward a unified West German state and signaled its displeasure by blockading Berlin. The United States responded with signals of its own: the airlift itself and the deployment of B-29 bombers to Britain. These signals established Western resolve. The Soviet Union desisted.

On closer examination, however, this narrative struggles to explain several important aspects of the case. After providing a brief background to the crisis, I discuss the observable implications of the two rival frameworks and then present the evidence. I highlight aspects of the case that are difficult to explain unless the crisis unfolded with each side relying on an advancing without attacking strategy.

⁶¹ Consider, by analogy, Robert A. Pape’s distinction between punishment and denial. Virtually any military operation designed to pursue denial also inflicts a measure of punishment, and yet this does not invalidate the conceptual distinction between them. More generally, social science outcomes are rarely the consequence of single theories, but it is standard practice to isolate individual theories for development and testing. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Historical Overview

Defeat in the Second World War left Germany divided into four zones by the occupying powers: Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Berlin, despite its location at the center of the Soviet Zone in Eastern Germany, was similarly divided into four sectors. This arrangement was fraught with difficulties from the start. As the Cold War intensified, the situation began to deteriorate.

At a conference in London in February 1948, the Western powers agreed to the fusion of their three zones in Western Germany and the gradual formation of a new, pro-Western German state. The creation of the “West Mark,” a separate currency for Western Germany, triggered the crisis. As *Pravda* wrote on 1 April 1948, “The division of Germany has become an accomplished fact.”⁶²

The Soviet Union bitterly objected to these developments. Soviet restrictions on train traffic to the Western sectors of Berlin began on 1 April. By the end of June, the Soviets had withdrawn from the *Kommandatura* council governing Berlin and severed all road, rail, and river (barge) access to Berlin.

In response, the United States and the United Kingdom began the airlift. Initially it relied mainly on the C-47 Skytrain and fell well short of the quantities of food and coal needed to supply the German population of the Western sectors. Doubts about the capacity of the airlift were pervasive. The initial intent of the airlift was to buy time, a critical tactical advantage, but not a complete strategy for victory. At the time, no such strategy existed. Nonetheless, even during the first weeks of the crisis the airlift was the central proactive element in the Western response to the blockade. Gradually it became clear that the airlift could supply the entire population of the three Western sectors indefinitely. Over time, improved procedures, a new airfield in Berlin (Tegel), and hundreds of C-54 Skymasters turned the tide.⁶³

In blockading the Western sectors of Berlin, the Soviet Union sought above all to convert Berlin into leverage in order to pressure the Western powers to stop the process of forming a state from the three Western zones. Control of Berlin was a secondary objective and a worthy consolation prize.⁶⁴ The Western powers’ objectives mirrored those of the Soviets. Keeping Western Germany in the Western camp took precedence. Control of the Western sectors of Berlin was valued, but less so than progress in Western Germany. American policymakers also believed

⁶² Division of Research on Europe [State Department], Soviet Intentions in Berlin, 27 April 1948, National Archives at College Park [hereafter NA-CP].

⁶³ Michael D. Haydock, *City under Siege: The Berlin Blockade and Airlift, 1948–1949* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1999), 270; Miller, *To Save a City*, 26–27.

⁶⁴ Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 106; Michail M. Narinskii, “The Soviet Union and the Berlin Crisis, 1948–9,” in *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943–53*, ed. Francesca Gori and Silvio Pons (New York: St. Martin’s Press: 1996), 63–69; Geoffrey Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics: Coexistence, Revolution and Cold War, 1945–1991* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 31; Vladislav Zubok, “Stalin’s Plans and Russian Archives,” *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 2 (1997): 301. From Western sources: Hillenkoetter to Truman, 10 December 1948, Truman Presidential Library; Smith to Marshall, 24 July 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), 984; Smith to Marshall, 16 September 1948, *ibid.*, 1160; “Department of State Policy Statement,” 26 August 1948, *ibid.*, 1287.

that capitulating to Soviet pressure in Berlin would damage the reputation of the United States and embolden the Soviets. Both sides cared greatly about these interests, but neither wanted to use force to achieve them.

Washington was keenly sensitive to the imbalance of conventional power in Europe in favor of the Soviet Union, often finding cold comfort in the US nuclear monopoly. The United States had only a few divisions in continental Europe. These forces were dispersed in order to carry out the occupation.⁶⁵ Still recovering from World War II, Western Europe was unready for war. According to a 1948 estimate, the Red Army could seize continental Europe and hold it for at least two years.⁶⁶ Although confident about its ability to ultimately outproduce and defeat the Soviets,⁶⁷ the US Army drew up war plans for a withdrawal to the Pyrenees Mountains in order to retain a “foothold” Europe.”⁶⁸

The Berlin Blockade Crisis lasted nearly a year and consisted of more than just the airlift. Dispatching an armed convoy to break the blockade was debated throughout but always rejected. Efforts to supply Berlin by train failed at the border. Several tense standoffs took place in Berlin itself. The city government disintegrated. Two separate city governments emerged. The Western powers imposed a “counter-blockade” consisting of economic sanctions against the Soviet zone. Negotiations took place throughout the crisis: in Moscow with Stalin directly, in Berlin among the military governors, and in the United Nations with third-party mediation. None of these negotiations led to agreement.

Instead, Soviet leaders eventually accepted that the airlift’s ability to supply the Western sectors indefinitely meant that the blockade had failed. This led to an offer to end the blockade in exchange for lifting the counter-blockade and a conference of foreign ministers. These were negligible concessions. The Soviet Union terminated the Berlin Blockade on 12 May 1949, marking a victory for the Western powers.

The Course of the Crisis

The established view of crisis strategy provides a straightforward narrative of these events. The crisis was a clash of wills in which each side sought to signal their resolve.⁶⁹ The Western powers cultivated a perception of resolve through signals such as the forward deployment of nuclear-capable B-29s to England, resolute statements, and the airlift. The Soviets, in turn, did so with the blockade. Once the Western powers established their resolve, the Soviet Union backed down.

⁶⁵ William H. Tunner, *Over the Hump* (Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1985), 158.

⁶⁶ Joint Intelligence Committee, American Embassy, Moscow, “Soviet Intentions,” 1 April 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), 551; Joint Intelligence Committee, American Embassy, Moscow, “Soviet Intentions,” 5 April 1949, *FRUS 1949*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1975), 604.

⁶⁷ Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 218–19.

⁶⁸ Wedemeyer to Clay, 20 September 1948, Record Group 549, Box 443, NA-CP; Clay to Huebner, 8 October 1948, Record Group 549, Box 443, NA-CP.

⁶⁹ For example, Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 217.

However, the evidence presented below contradicts the established view's narrative in several respects. First, the Western powers' strategy did not utilize coercive threats or ultimatums, something the Soviet Union also largely avoided aside from the threat to continue the blockade. Second, Washington never seriously attempted to do what the established view assumes to be essential: convince Soviet leaders that they were more willing to use force first to prevail. Like the Western powers, the Soviet Union chose not to mobilize, even when the tide of the crisis turned against them. The Western powers did send signals of resolve but only rather tepid signals from which they expected little. Third, the deployment of B-29 bombers to Britain as a signal of resolve—the most frequently mentioned event of the crisis in the international relations literature—had no observable impact on Soviet policy. More damningly, Western policymakers never expected otherwise. Fourth, calls to engage in brinkmanship—such as an armed convoy to Berlin in defiance of the blockade—fell on deaf ears in Washington. Fifth, neither side's red lines were credible in general. Each side's red lines were credible only when threatening to retaliate after being attacked first. Purely verbal red lines (when distinct from use-of-force red lines) did not arrest adversary behavior.

In contrast, advancing without attacking figured prominently in the Western powers' strategy and accords with Soviet behavior. Despite West Berlin's indefensible position, the Soviet Union declined to seize it outright. Doing so would have required attacking American, British, and French forces. Nor did the Soviets attempt to make credible the threat to conduct such an operation. Instead, facing a red line protecting Berlin from direct seizure by force, the Soviet Union outflanked the line by interposing its forces and other barriers in the transit corridors connecting Berlin to the Western zones.

The blockade was a form of imposed pressure that immediately gave the Soviet Union the upper hand in the crisis. As US Ambassador to the United Kingdom Lewis Douglas wrote in a telegram to the State Department, "I am sure you will agree that we should, if possible, avoid a situation where we are forced, say, to withdraw from Berlin or use an armed convoy to remain there."⁷⁰ The Soviet strategy was to create such a situation, and for a time they believed they had done so.⁷¹ US Army Chief of Staff Bradley put it as follows: "At present with our passenger trains completely stopped, Russians in effect have won the first round."⁷²

However, the new Soviet red line denying Western land access to Berlin was also susceptible to flanking, this time by air. To stop trucks or trains, the Soviets could interpose barriers and forces that left the Western Powers with the decision to use force or relent. To stop the airlift, in contrast, the Soviets would have needed to fire on or otherwise attack Western aircraft. Once the airlift proved capable of sustaining Western Berlin indefinitely, the advantage returned to the Western side. Each

⁷⁰ Douglas to Acheson, 22 February 1949, *FRUS 1949*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1975), 681.

⁷¹ Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, 106–7.

⁷² Teleconference TT-9341 [Clay, Bradley], 10 April 1948, in Jean E. Smith, *The Papers of Lucius D. Clay: Germany 1945–1949* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974) [hereafter Clay Papers].

side played out its unilateral options to the extent possible while skirting the adversary's use-of-force red line.

If advancing without attacking best explains the pattern of strategic interaction of the crisis—and influenced the outcome—one should expect to observe the following. Some of these observable implications are small in themselves but no less revealing. First, each side should eschew threatening to attack if their minimum demands go unfulfilled. They should instead accept significant setbacks rather than attack or seriously threaten to attack. Second, despite rejecting the use of threats to attack first, each side should nonetheless believe that they could achieve their objectives by outmaneuvering the other. Each side should try to do so while taking care not to use force. Third, the Western powers should regard one logistical means of breaching the Soviet blockade (airlift) as fundamentally different from the other three: truck, train, and barge. Whereas the Soviets could block the other three means of transit by passive means, they would need to fire first to stop transport aircraft. This subtle physical difference between different modes of transportation should greatly influence the outcome of the crisis. Fourth, the Western powers should seriously evaluate seemingly farfetched scenarios in which they succeed in dispatching a convoy into the Soviet zone without shots fired, whereupon Soviet forces endeavor to block the convoy by passive means up to and including the deliberate destruction of their own bridges. Fifth, the decisive consideration in whether the Western powers could supply Berlin by rail, as they had before the crisis, should not be any strategic-level calculus of resolve or coercive leverage. Instead, the Soviet control of rail switches should give them a means to passively block trains without needing to shoot.⁷³ Sixth, the Soviets should be unwilling to fire overtly on the airlift but willing to assail it by means less than a clear attack, including firing searchlights into the eyes of pilots landing in Berlin at night. Finally, both sides and third parties should view the Western powers as being in a disadvantaged position and likely to lose the crisis up until they unexpectedly prove that they too can advance without attacking via a sustainable airlift. Because of that, rather than signals of resolve, perceptions of the likely outcome should flip. The Western powers then and therefore should achieve their goals of progress in Western Germany and remaining in Berlin. Subsequent sections present evidence on these points.

Western policymakers did not follow an advancing without attacking strategy through an initial, holistic plan for victory.⁷⁴ They came to it over time in a simple, pragmatic manner. After considering all possible actions that could take gains, apply pressure, or otherwise improve their position, they implemented those that they felt benefitted them without undue risk of war. Consistently, that meant taking only those actions that avoided attacking the Soviets. The calculus was of what they could get away with doing rather than of convincing the Soviets of their

⁷³ The same holds for barges due to canal locks.

⁷⁴ Initial skepticism about the logistical capacity of an airlift precluded this.

willingness to fight for Berlin. By and large, they expected the Soviets to play out the resultant game by that same central rule. The key to understanding the course of the Berlin Blockade Crisis is to map out the game each side played as they applied pressure where they could, and got away with what they could, without crossing the line of unmistakably attacking.

To Deploy an Armed Convoy?

Whether to supplement the airlift with an armed convoy became perhaps the most important policy decision for the United States throughout the crisis. Why did most American policymakers believe that the Soviets would acquiesce to the resupply of Berlin by air but that attempting to supply it by road would lead to war, a humiliating retreat, or both? A shipment of food or coal reaching Berlin would harm Soviet interests regardless of the exact mode of transport. The airlift–convoy discrepancy is difficult to explain in any way other than one: trucks could be blocked, but planes could only be shot down. In the air, unlike on the ground, the Soviet Union had to fire first to uphold the blockade. Consequently, a mundane difference in the physical properties of two modes of transportation heavily influenced the outcome of one of the Cold War’s most significant crises.

The armed convoy option came in several forms, all of which called for a convoy of trucks and military vehicles manned by uniformed soldiers advancing toward Berlin. A May 1948 version of the plan envisioned assembling three divisions—one from each of the three Western powers—at Helmstedt and informing the Soviets that these forces would proceed to Berlin at a certain time.⁷⁵ A June 1948 version consisted of a constabulary regiment, an engineer battalion, bridging equipment, road repair equipment, two hundred trucks, a British infantry battalion, and French tank destroyers. Their orders would be to advance, not to fire unless fired upon, and to clear obstacles even under threat of force.⁷⁶ Later versions of the plan envisioned a purely American effort due to British and French opposition.

The two senior American officials in Germany, Military Governor Lucius Clay and top political representative Robert Murphy, both supported an armed convoy. They believed it would reach Berlin and signal resolve to the Soviet Union. Around the peak of the crisis, Clay wrote, “I am still convinced that a determined movement of convoys with troop protection would reach Berlin and that such a showing might well prevent rather than build up Soviet pressures which could lead to war.”⁷⁷ Clay justified this position in part by arguing, “If the USSR does intend war, it is because of a fixed plan. Hostilities will not result because of action on our part to relieve the blockade unless there is such a fixed plan.”⁷⁸ Murphy added: “If

⁷⁵ Civil Administration Division, OMGUS, The Berlin Blockade, 17 May 1949, NA-CP; Avi Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade, 1948–1949: A Study in Crisis Decision-Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 137.

⁷⁶ Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], 13 July 1948, Clay Papers.

⁷⁷ Clay to the Department of the Army, 25 June 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 917.

⁷⁸ Clay to the Department of the Army, 10 July 1948, *ibid.*, 956. For the same view: Murphy to Marshall and Lovett, 11 July 1948, Record Group 84, UD 2534, NA-CP.

an unfortunate incident should occur, there would be no good reason to regard it as more than local and not a *casus belli*.”⁷⁹

Clay and Murphy were overruled. The dominant view in the White House, State Department, Defense Department, London, and Paris held that a convoy was unlikely to reach Berlin and quite likely to lead to war.⁸⁰ According to Clay, President Harry Truman informed him that he had been open to the convoy option until confronted with the strong unified opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Truman later described the convoy option as overly risky.⁸¹

Opposition to an armed convoy was particularly strong in the Defense Department. Secretary of Defense James Forrestal opposed an armed convoy because its chances of success were “remote,” with the “distinctly probable consequence of war.” The armed convoy was opposed due to the “inadequacy of United States preparation for global conflict.”⁸² Both the US Department of Defense and the British government called for military mobilization prior to an armed convoy attempt in order to prepare for its consequences.⁸³ A report to the National Security Council offers perhaps the clearest verdict on the armed convoy option: an “armed motor convoy ... was thoroughly considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff shortly after the Berlin blockade was first imposed and the conclusion then reached is still considered sound, that such an attempt would be fraught with the gravest military implications, including the risk of war, and would probably prove ineffective even if faced with only passive interference.”⁸⁴

The British military informed the US Army that they considered an armed convoy attempt to be “militarily unsound and politically undesirable.”⁸⁵ Even Clay’s top subordinate in Berlin, Colonel Frank Howley, responded to a question months into the crisis about how an initial armed convoy attempt would have gone by saying simply, “We would have gotten our asses shot off.”⁸⁶ When interviewed decades later, Soviet junior officers who manned the border posts expressed the belief that they would have fired on what would, to them, have looked like an attack by an invasion force.⁸⁷

The decisive advantage of the airlift over the armed convoy was that it could be accomplished as a *fait accompli* without needing to cross the red line against attacking Soviet forces deployed to block access to Berlin.⁸⁸ Even Clay appreciated

⁷⁹ Robert D. Murphy, “Comments on JCS Analysis,” 1 June 1949, *FRUS 1949*, vol. 3, 825. Italics in original.

⁸⁰ Haydock, *City under Siege*, 144–45.

⁸¹ Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade*, 262–64.

⁸² Forrestal to Marshall, 28 July 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 994; James Forrestal, Report to the National Security Council: U.S. Military Courses of Action with Respect to the Situation in Berlin, 28 July 1948, Truman Presidential Library.

⁸³ Douglas to Marshall, 26 July 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 986.

⁸⁴ The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade,” 1 June 1949, *FRUS 1949*, vol. 3, 820.

⁸⁵ HQ Dept of the Army from Dir Plans and Operations to EUCOM, 10 September 1948, Record Group 549, Box 443, NA-CP.

⁸⁶ Haydock, *City under Siege*, 255.

⁸⁷ Victor Gobarev, “Soviet Military Plans and Actions during the First Berlin Crisis, 1948–49,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 10, no. 3 (1997): 15–17.

⁸⁸ More precisely, the airlift was a series of *faits accomplis*, each plane its own. An armed convoy would also have been a *fait accompli*, but one that was ill suited to advancing without attacking.

this advantage: “It must be remembered that the surface convoy places the responsibility for the first use of force on our hands, whereas the airlift can be interfered with only by aggressive action on the part of the Soviet Government.”⁸⁹ The Soviets heeded the red line against firing on Western aircraft.

A State Department Policy Planning Staff report dealt with the question of how to respond to such an incident. This report recommended that the United States should react to the downing of a US aircraft by demanding an explanation and implementing “defensive measures” (fighter escorts for the airlift, presumably). Unless the Soviet Union denied responsibility for an intentional attack and avoided further attacks, the United States should “assume that there exists a grave risk of imminent war.”⁹⁰

The established view of crisis strategy does not offer a compelling alternative explanation for this difference in expected outcomes between an airlift and an armed convoy. To explain the airlift, it would apply the concept of a signal of resolve, a plausible interpretation of the airlift in itself. However, although the established view can explain airlift in that manner, it cannot explain why Washington perceived the convoy as so much less desirable. Washington took for granted that the armed convoy entailed far greater risk of escalation. If anything, therefore, the armed convoy would have sent the stronger signal of resolve. Convoy advocate Robert Murphy made the case for the airlift without a convoy as a signal of weakness rather than resolve, stating that the choice for an airlift without a convoy “carries with it also a confession of inability or unwillingness to enforce a well-earned right of surface passage.”⁹¹ Moreover, the decision was not between airlift and convoy, but whether to supplement the airlift with a convoy; how could doing just one be a stronger signal than doing both?

In one of the few declassified Soviet documents from the crisis, Soviet officials made policy recommendations regarding the airlift based on its logistical capacity (which determined the Western ability to advance without attacking), not what it revealed about Western resolve. Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky (Clay’s counterpart) and Vladimir Semenov wrote to Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov: “With the onset of autumn, flight conditions have changed for the worse ... a significant change for the better for us. The Western powers are now interested in speeding up an agreement. Therefore it is considered inappropriate to make further concessions.”⁹² The airlift had to survive bad winter flying weather to change the Soviet perspective. That perspective changed more than six months after the airlift began, hardly consistent with a newfound Soviet respect of Western political resolve from the decision to conduct the airlift. To the extent that the airlift mattered as a signal,

⁸⁹ Clay to Gruenther [Secretary of the Joint Staff], 15 May 1949, Clay Papers. This advantage was widely recognized, for example: Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], 13 July 1948, Clay Papers.

⁹⁰ “Report by the [State Department] Policy Planning Staff,” 1 October 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 1198.

⁹¹ Murphy to Marshall and Lovett, 11 July 1948, Record Group 84, UD 2534, NA-CP.

⁹² “Sokolovsky and Semenov to Molotov,” 30 August 1948, in Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, *Documents from the Archives of the Russian Federation: The USSR and the German Question, 1941–1949*, vol. 4.

it functioned as a signal of the capability to advance without attacking on a sustained basis—a far cry from a signal of the willingness to use force.

As the Berlin Blockade Crisis came to a successful conclusion, and with the benefit of hindsight, American policymakers embarked on an extensive analysis of what to do if the blockade were reimposed. The recommendation was to adopt the same strategy: airlift without an armed convoy. A National Security Council report on this question regarded an armed convoy probe as “impractical” and a renewed airlift as “the only practicable step short of great risk of hostilities or [a] decision to leave Berlin.”⁹³ Undersecretary of State James Webb described President Truman’s views as follows: “He agrees that the reinstatement of the air lift is probably the only answer, he would like to come up with a better answer, and would not be averse to reconsidering the possibility of breaking the blockade if some means of surface transportation showing reasonable possibilities of success could be found.”⁹⁴ Truman ordered that, if the blockade were reimposed, American traffic should only stop when the Soviets emplace a physical barrier or an armed guard. Purely verbal warnings were to be disregarded. However, Truman also ordered that no “show of force” such as an armed convoy then be made if a physical barrier was in place.⁹⁵ This balancing act mirrors the strengths and weaknesses in Soviet red lines, with the United States willing to act unilaterally and defy the Soviets when doing so did not require directly attacking Soviet forces.

A Stranded Convoy?

Although some convoy skeptics foresaw hostilities starting at the border as American vehicles sought to force their way through Soviet lines, others anticipated a different scenario in which the convoy succeeded in bypassing Soviet border guards without any shooting. They envisioned the convoy entering Eastern Germany only to find itself trapped in an impossible position after the Soviets destroy their own bridges, erect obstacles, and interpose troops as roadblocks.⁹⁶ According to one study, “Soviet passive interference, such as road and bridge obstruction or destruction, could make an armed convoy method abortive.”⁹⁷ Clay’s British counterpart, General Brian Robertson, feared that the Soviets would simply block the road with tanks.⁹⁸ This would leave the convoy with no choices beyond violating the use-of-force red line and halting its progress. In response to these concerns, Clay and Murphy increasingly emphasized bridging equipment as part of their armed

⁹³ The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade,” 1 June 1949, *FRUS 1949*, vol. 3, 820.

⁹⁴ The Acting Secretary of State, “Possible Courses of Action in Event Berlin Blockade is Renewed,” 31 May 1949, *FRUS 1949*, vol. 3, 819.

⁹⁵ Director of Plans and Operations, US Army to CINCEUR, 17 June 1949, Record Group 549, Box 444, NA-CP.

⁹⁶ Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], 13 July 1948, Clay Papers.

⁹⁷ James Forrestal, Report to the National Security Council: U.S. Military Courses of Action with Respect to the Situation in Berlin, 28 July 1948, Truman Presidential Library.

⁹⁸ Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade*, 131.

convoy plans, but there was little confidence in Washington or London that this would solve the problem of Soviet tanks blocking the road.⁹⁹ Looking back on the crisis, US Army Chief of Staff Omar Bradley reiterated these concerns: “General Clay recommended a military convoy, but the chiefs would never go along with it. I don’t know whether it was right or wrong. Our contention was that they might not oppose it by armed force, which of course would be war, but they could stop you in so many ways short of armed resistance. A bridge could go out or roads closed for repairs ... A bridge could go out ahead of you and another bridge behind, and you’d be in a hell of a fix.”¹⁰⁰

Western policymakers took seriously this bizarre scenario that leaves a Western convoy stranded in Eastern Germany when Soviet forces destroy their own bridges rather than the invading forces. This scenario makes sense only if the tactics of both sides were derived from a calculus of pushing the other as far as possible without using force. Taking that tactic, used by both sides, to one logical extreme produces a convoy stranded in the middle of Eastern Germany, all without shots fired.

The Rail Option

The armed convoy debate only arose after attempts to supply Berlin by rail failed. The manner of that failure is revealing. Trains were the first tool used to test the Soviet announcement of new, intrusive inspections on traffic to and from Berlin, an initial step in what became the blockade. On 1 April, the United States and United Kingdom dispatched five trains with orders to proceed to Berlin. All were repulsed at the border, save for one American train that submitted to inspections in contravention of its orders. The commandant of that train was immediately court-martialed by the US Army, but he was later acquitted on the grounds that his orders to reach Berlin and to refuse inspections were contradictory.¹⁰¹

Why were trains so ineffective? Why did this option quickly come to be disregarded even by advocates of a land supply approach? The problem was that the Soviets could easily stop trains using passive measures that did not require attacking Western forces. These measures took two forms, neither of which required directly interposing military forces on the tracks, let alone firing on trains. First, the Soviets announced “technical difficulties” with the main lines of track, requiring repairs. They created some of these difficulties by dismantling rail lines near the border. Second, the Soviets made use of their control over switches that determined the line of track a train would take. With these switches, they could shunt an intruding train along a dead-end line.

⁹⁹ Clay to the Department of the Army, 10 July 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 956; Murphy to Marshall and Lovett, 11 July 1948, Record Group 84, UD 2534, NA-CP.

¹⁰⁰ William Hillman and Francis Heller, “Interview with Omar Bradley,” 29 March 1955, in *HST: Memories of the Truman Years*, ed. Steve Neal (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

¹⁰¹ Clay to Bradley, 1 April 1948, Clay Papers; Haydock, *City under Siege*, 126–28; Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade*, 128.

When Clay ordered a US train to try to reach Berlin on 21 June 1948, the Soviets prevented the train from proceeding by diverting it down a siding. Eventually, the Soviets attached their own locomotive and sent it back to Western Germany, tail between its legs.¹⁰² The rail switch problem relegated the rail supply option to irrelevance. It may seem incongruous that the control of rail switches could take on such strategic significance, but rail switches mattered for the overall outcome of one of the major superpower crises of the Cold War simply because they determined which side needed to fire first to prevail.

The debate over how to conduct the initial train probe also revealed the keen sensitivity to the use-of-force red line. Clay initially sought to challenge the new Soviet restrictions by sending a train to Berlin defended by armed guards with orders to fire upon any Soviet personnel attempting to board the train for inspections. Boarding, of course, falls short of an overt attack. Clay's superiors in the Defense Department immediately suspended the departure of the train due to their grave reservations about this course of action. President Truman, per their advice, instead ordered the train to proceed with the guards ordered to fire only if fired upon.¹⁰³ After repeatedly overruling Clay, the commander on scene, Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall offered him an apology: "We are sorry that so much chaperonage was necessary but the war danger element made it necessary."¹⁰⁴ Clay repeatedly tried to impose a more aggressive strategy that embraced brinkmanship to signal resolve. He found little support in Washington.

Searchlights versus Gunfire

Units of the Soviet military did fire on American transport aircraft flying food and fuel into Berlin. Far from causing war, these incidents scarcely caused a stir. The reason: the Soviets fired high-powered searchlights at the aircraft with the potential to blind pilots as they landed in Berlin. Specifically, Soviet units fired searchlights at times to interfere with night landings at Gatow, an airfield near the outer edge of the British sector of Berlin. Although occasionally forcing pilots to put up newspapers on cockpit windows to avoid temporary blinding, this tactic never caused a crash.¹⁰⁵

Had Soviet forces fired bullets or shells to prevent landings, the consequences might have been far more severe. The Soviets were deterred from an overt attack, but not from a more ambiguous form of attack—searchlights—that targeted a gray area in Western powers' use-of-force red line.

¹⁰² Murphy to Marshall, 21 June 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 911; Murphy to Saltzman and Hickerson, 21 June 1948, Record Group 84, UD 2534, NA-CP; Miller, *To Save a City*, 31.

¹⁰³ Teleconference TT-9285 [Clay, Bradley, Noce], 31 March 1948, Clay Papers; Teleconference TT-9286 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Collins, Wedemeyer], 31 March 1948, Clay Papers; Teleconference TT-9287 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Wedemeyer], 31 March 1948, Clay Papers; Murphy to Marshall, 31 March 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 155; Murphy to Marshall, 1 April 1948, *ibid.*, 886; Miller, *To Save a City*, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Teleconference TT-9287 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Wedemeyer], 31 March 1948, Clay Papers.

¹⁰⁵ Tunner, *Over the Hump*, 185; Haydock, *City under Siege*, 224.

The airlift cost seventy-two lives, thirty-one of them American, many in plane crashes directly attributable to Soviet policy (the blockade).¹⁰⁶ Yet, enduring the loss of a plane and its crew to an accident was acceptable. Losing lives to Soviet searchlights would have sown more controversy but not risked open war. Losing lives to a Soviet fighter or anti-aircraft artillery battery, however, would have created a real risk of war. At a minimum, it would have escalated the crisis to a level of tension that it never reached.

In all three scenarios, a plane crashes and the crew's lives are lost due to Soviet policy. The difference was the relationship to the use-of-force red line. The searchlights were not of any great strategic importance in themselves, but it is revealing that the Soviets were willing to attack the airlift in this manner but never with overt force. This was a microcosm of the tactics in the crisis. Each side would apply pressure and take gains where it was possible to do so without unmistakably using force but halt just short of crossing that line.

The Ineffectiveness of Purely Verbal Red Lines

Both the Soviets and the Western powers set credible red lines that successfully constrained the other side, yet neither side ever established an overall image of resolve that made their red lines credible in general. On the contrary, only those red lines that threatened retaliation after being attacked first arrested encroachments.

As Clay wrote early in the crisis, "Overflight privileges have been constantly under discussion at Soviet insistence but only actual interference possible would be overt attack. Airport is in our sector and flights could be stopped only by Soviet use of force."¹⁰⁷ In one incident on 4 May 1948, a Soviet officer phoned the US Berlin Air Safety Center to inform them that a particular scheduled flight would not be permitted. The flight landed in Berlin that night.¹⁰⁸ In September, the Soviet Union demanded a halt to the airlift to create space for "annual" (in reality, new) military exercises in that airspace. This warning elicited alarm in Washington that the Soviets would resort to a more aggressive brinkmanship strategy of harassing the airlift.¹⁰⁹ However, the airlift continued and the Soviet exercises never materialized.

Whereas the Soviet Union made tepid efforts to constrain the airlift with purely verbal red lines, the Western powers largely eschewed uttering threats and demands that they expected to fail. Early in the crisis, Clay made the case for an armed convoy: "I believe if we advised Soviet authorities of our intent to move supplies into Berlin with armed escort and gave 48 hours' notice, [the] convoy would get through." This view is at odds with the logic of advancing without attacking.

¹⁰⁶ Turner, *Over the Hump*, 218.

¹⁰⁷ Clay to Bradley, 2 April 1948, Clay Papers.

¹⁰⁸ Civil Administration Division, OMGUS, *The Berlin Blockade*, 17 May 1949, NA-CP.

¹⁰⁹ Murphy to Marshall, 4 September 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 1118.

The Soviets could disregard merely verbal warnings, interpose their forces, and hold fast behind the red line against a direct attack on their forces. Clay added, “[I am] sure neither British nor French would join us.”¹¹⁰ Washington shared their concerns and rejected Clay’s proposals. There was, more importantly, no appetite for setting an ultimatum demanding an end to the blockade. Such policy options were available but roundly rejected.

B-29s to Britain: Nuclear Saber-Rattling?

No event from the Berlin Blockade Crisis has received more scholarly attention than the deployment of two groups—sixty planes in total—of nuclear-capable B-29 heavy bombers to Britain.¹¹¹ This action was a prototypical show-of-force signal of resolve. Although the B-29s were not the only signal sent during the crisis, the level of attention devoted to this action suggests that it provides a basis on which to evaluate the significance of signaling during the crisis.

The interpretation of the B-29s as a signal of resolve is warranted. That was the intent, and the deployment was understood not to entail any great military significance in itself.¹¹² In advocating this action, Clay described the deployment as “essential” and British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin called it “highly important.”¹¹³ However, there are six reasons to doubt the significance of the B-29 deployment.

First, the deployment generated no observable change in Soviet policy. The enthusiastic British request for the deployment came on 27 June 1948, shortly after the full imposition of the blockade. President Truman approved the request the next day. After several ebbs and flows, the crisis ended ten months later. There was no apparent change in Soviet policy during the period following the decision to deploy, nor after the deployment itself.

Second, Washington delayed the bombers for nearly a month due to a desire to avoid having them come across as a response to specific Soviet diplomatic notes. This concern stalled implementation until an appropriate lull in the correspondence.¹¹⁴ The bombers did not reach Britain until late July. If this signal was seen as a potentially decisive tool rather than a minor act more on par with yet another diplomatic note, this long delay at the peak of the crisis becomes difficult to explain. It is revealing that the diplomatic notes took priority, because little was expected from them.

¹¹⁰ Teleconference TT-2066 [Clay, Haislip], 30 March 1949, Clay Papers.

¹¹¹ For example: Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987), 28–29; Paul K. Huth, *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 1988, 42; Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, 198.

¹¹² Douglas to Marshall, 26 June 1948 *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 921.

¹¹³ Clay to Bradley, 28 June 1948, Clay Papers; “Message from the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Bevin],” 14 July 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 966.

¹¹⁴ Marshall to Riddleberger, 12 July 1948, Record Group 84, UD 2535B, NA-CP; “Message from the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Bevin],” 14 July 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 966.

Third, the British insisted that both they and the Americans be disingenuous about the purpose of the deployment, recommending the phraseology of “routine training flights” and publicly denying any link to events in Berlin.¹¹⁵ Although this fooled no one, it hardly seems consistent with a strong signal of resolve.

Fourth, there was no public announcement of the deployment of nuclear weapons. None were deployed. The bomber squadrons selected were not those used for the nuclear mission. Some B-29s even seem to have been moved back from Germany to England to reduce vulnerability in the event of Soviet attack.¹¹⁶

Fifth, despite some strongly worded support for the deployment, nowhere in the documentary record do Western policymakers state that they expected the B-29 deployment to lead to a change in Soviet policy. They viewed the deployment as worthwhile, but its primary virtues were its lack of risk and that it created a semblance of a firm, proactive policy. It played well in the press at a time when the Western powers had few appealing options and the Soviets appeared to have the upper hand.

Finally, in the aftermath of the B-29 deployment, it receives virtually no further discussion. There were no expressions of surprise or disappointment at the lack of impact. The B-29s faded from high-level attention immediately upon arrival.

Western policymakers never perceived the B-29 deployment as nearly as significant an element of their strategy as it has since come to be viewed. These policymakers regarded the deployment as a desirable measure with scant prospects of changing Soviet perceptions, eliciting concessions, or risking war. The limited significance of the B-29 deployment suggests that the Western strategy during the crisis was less a matter of signaling—let alone brinkmanship—than the established view of crisis strategy would expect. The Western powers could have found ways to send stronger signals, including through large-scale mobilization or an armed convoy attempt. They chose not to do so. In the words of Harry Truman, “This is no time to be juggling an atomic bomb around.”¹¹⁷

Implications

Risking war, military mobilization, and bellicose public statements are widely regarded as ranking among the most common consequential forms of statecraft during crises. These actions fit within a broader established view that emphasizes brinkmanship, signals of resolve, and coercion. However, as the Western powers demonstrated in the Berlin Blockade Crisis, it is possible to prevail in a crisis without relying on those policy tools. Both sides instead sought to outmaneuver the other, the Soviets with the blockade and the Western powers with the airlift. Each side worked around the need to use force

¹¹⁵ “Message from the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Bevin],” 14 July 1948, *FRUS 1948*, vol. 2, 966; HQ Dept of the Air Force to Lemay, 15 July 1948, Record Group 549, Box 443, NA-CP.

¹¹⁶ Wedemeyer to Clay, 27 July 1948, Record Group 549, Box 443, NA-CP; Clay to Wedemeyer, 28 July 1948 Clay Papers.

¹¹⁷ Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade*, 255.

first and pushed forward only where they could do so without attacking. Because the unexpected logistical capacity of the airlift left the Western powers with the upper hand in this strategic game, they overcame the disadvantageous geography of the crisis, keeping Berlin without granting significant concessions concerning West German state formation.

The central policy debate of the Berlin Blockade Crisis—whether to dispatch an armed convoy to Berlin—pitted a vocal minority advocating a strategy predicated on signaling resolve through brinkmanship against a majority intent on first exhausting all options short of using or threatening force. The arguments put forth by that minority, spearheaded by Lucius Clay and Robert Murphy, underscore the divide between two different ways of thinking about how to conduct a crisis. Had their view—an application of the established view of crisis strategy in the international relations literature—guided policy, the United States would have embarked on a course with a greater risk of escalation. That risk that would have been entirely unnecessary.

This study began with a discussion Russia's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and tested the framework with evidence from the Cold War, but it readily applies across the globe. For instance, as China continues to rise, disputes over the Spratly and Senkaku Islands persist as sources of tension. Control of the Spratlys today consists of a curious patchwork of intermingled Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Malaysian, and Taiwanese outposts.¹¹⁸ The islands were taken and retained by whichever state arrived first, as much in order of size (largest first) as location. Other disputants, reluctant to attack occupying garrisons, instead seized smaller vacant islands. Advancing without attacking thereby resulted in a peculiar hodgepodge of interspersed outposts.

Identifying opportunities to advance without attacking can contribute to anticipating not just the course of crises, but also whether challengers choose to initiate them. Just as the geography of Berlin left it vulnerable to a blockade that did not require force to implement, the absence of a Japanese garrison in the Senkaku Islands leaves an opening for China to seize the islands without using force. If had Japan anticipated and fixed that problem decades ago, it would find itself in a stronger deterrent position today.

In recent years, China has pursued the only remaining means of gaining territory in the Spratlys without attacking: expanding its islands via extensive land reclamation. Unsurprisingly, verbal opposition to nonviolent reclamation failed. China can reclaim land without attacking. Similarly, Chinese verbal declarations of sovereignty and Air-Defense Identification Zones (ADIZs) over disputed waters have failed to deter the United States and regional powers from entering. Entering disputed waters does not require attacking. Each side can play these cards without great risk of war.

¹¹⁸ There was, however, an incident with fighting between China and Vietnam in 1988. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 333–35.

Assumptions about the nature of strategic interaction in crises anchor a variety of international relations theories. For instance, democracies are often believed to be better able to signal resolve in crises, giving them a fundamental advantage over autocracies.¹¹⁹ This advantage has even been used to explain the democratic peace.¹²⁰ Yet, if states often prevail in crises by outmaneuvering adversaries rather than by convincing adversaries of their willingness to use force, this mechanism cannot apply as widely as is currently assumed. Similarly, nuclear weapons and, more controversially, nuclear superiority, are often assumed to provide coercive leverage to states possessing them because they augment brinkmanship.¹²¹ If states often eschew brinkmanship, including in Berlin during one of the signature crises of the nuclear age, then it is worth questioning these broader theories of nuclear weapons in international politics. The assumption that states seek to outcoerce—rather than outmaneuver—their adversaries during crises is customarily taken for granted, but both are important.

Although coercion, signaling resolve, and brinkmanship remain important tools of statecraft in crises, states do not always play poker. Sometimes they play chess, finding ways to outmaneuver their adversaries, working around certain high-salience red lines like those against the use of force to apply pressure and take gains without quite crossing the lines that make war likely.¹²²

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Noel Anderson, Mark Bell, Steve Brooks, Ben Buch, James Cameron, Christopher Clary, James Fearon, Jeffrey Friedman, Edward Geist, Phil Haun, David Holloway, Liviu Horowitz, Nicholas Miller, Norman Naimark, Vipin Narang, Katy Powers, Daryl Press, Kenneth Oye, Scott Sagan, Kenneth Schultz, Josh Shiffrin, David Traven, Bill Wohlforth, the editors, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments and insights. Special thanks to Barry Posen.

¹¹⁹ Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*.

¹²⁰ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James D. Morrow, Randolph M. Siverson and Alastair Smith, "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (December 1999): 791–807.

¹²¹ Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve."

¹²² I am currently exploring this premise in two issue areas—territorial conflict and nuclear nonproliferation—other than the use of force: Dan Altman, "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest" (paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Baltimore, MD, February 2017); Dan Altman and Nicholas Miller, "Red Lines in Nuclear Nonproliferation," *Nonproliferation Review* (forthcoming).