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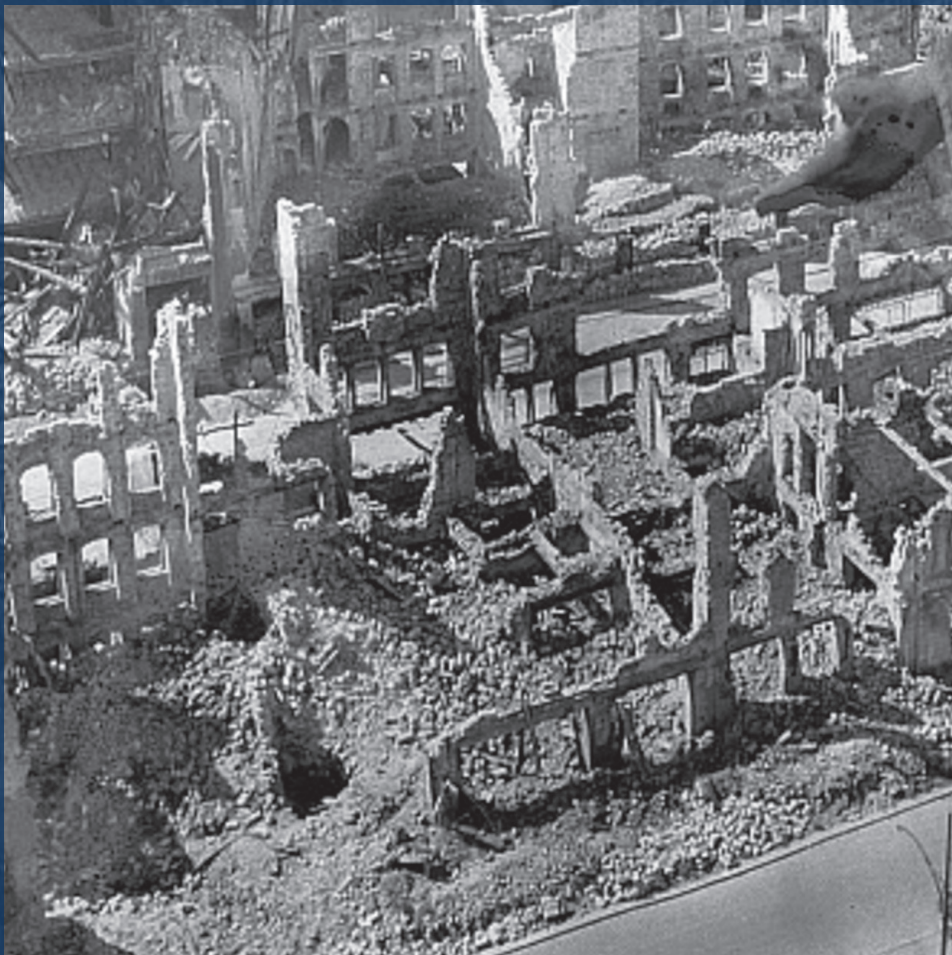
Comparing Deterrence in Europe and Asia

# Deterrence and War Initiation Decisions

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When deciding whether to wage war, leaders will be cognizant of the risks of domestic unrest if the war goes badly, defined in terms of excessive cost (blood and treasure), a failure to achieve the objective, or both.

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Two simple propositions are at the heart of contemporary policy discussions about interstate war. The first proposition is that war should be understood as a failure of deterrence. Conversely, a state of non-belligerence between adversarial powers is equated with deterrence success. Should deterrence fail and hostilities occur a return to non-belligerence is referred to as 'restoring' deterrence. Therefore, deterrence, whether successful or not, is a constant feature of adversarial state relationships. The second proposition is that a failure of deterrence largely results from a perception of a military imbalance, either at a tactical or strategic level, or in military-technological terms, with military superiority viewed as a necessary condition for any decision to initiate a war. To simplify the two propositions, war principally results from a perception of a military imbalance. Therefore, the obvious policy prescription to avoid war is to ensure there is no perception of a military imbalance. In practical terms, this means greater investment in the armed forces or building stronger relationships with countries that maintain powerful armed forces.

This paper argues that these propositions are not just overly simple but misleading. Furthermore, the policy prescriptions that logically flow from them are unnecessarily costly, not necessarily effective, and have the potential to backfire either by undermining efforts at political reconciliation, generating an arms race, or initiating a conflict spiral that could lead to war. The principal reason for the weakness of the propositions is a fundamental lack of understanding about contemporary interstate war, specifically why and how states decide to go to war. The emphasis on capabilities, as opposed to intentions, is evident in the terms employed in the discourse. For instance, deterrence is typically discussed in terms of 'nuclear' or 'conventional', thus focusing on means to be employed *in* a war, whereas deterrence *of* war – understood in broader terms – receives much less attention. Similarly, the use of military force is often viewed as being distinct from the totality of a state's foreign and domestic policy, nor is it adequately considered in relation to the norms of international society and the realities of international politics. In other words, the wider context of war is mostly absent in the discourse on deterrence.

What then is this wider context and how does it relate to a state's decision to go to war as well as the immediate problem of deterring that state from deciding to go to war? Any country's leaders wrestling with a decision to go to war must deal with the question of whether war will lead to a favorable outcome. Based on an assessment of what they consider to be relevant factors, if these leaders decide an outcome will be unfavorable then war will not follow. But what are the relevant factors? As mentioned above, a common belief is that military factors are the most critical. If the armed forces of State A are perceived to be more powerful than those of State B, then State A is not deterred and will launch a war against State B, if sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo. Without doubt, the possession of superior military forces can at least give a state the option of employing them, not merely to act as a coercive tool whose primary purpose is intimidation, but to wage war and seize territory. On the other hand, what does it mean to have inferior or superior forces? Is it not possible to simultaneously maintain superior forces at a tactical level but remain inferior at the strategic level, or vice versa? Alternatively, is it not possible to remain inferior numerically but qualitatively superior, based on better weapons, training, morale, leadership, doctrine, geographic position? This is precisely why an appreciation of context is crucial.

Yet the military context is inseparable from the political context, both domestic and international. When deciding whether to wage war, leaders will be cognizant of the risks of domestic unrest if the war goes badly, defined in terms of excessive cost (blood and treasure), a failure to achieve the objective, or both. In this sense, leaders that have little confidence in a relatively quick and easy victory are unlikely to view war as an attractive option. A counterargument is

that due to domestic unrest and a public clamoring for war, leaders will find it difficult *not* to go to war, even if the negative outcome is known beforehand. It is not inconceivable that leaders worried about staying in power in the short term will embark on a war that is popular at the time, if only to prolong their tenure in office.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, leaders may convince themselves of the prospects of success despite a more objective analysis predicting defeat.<sup>2</sup> Misperception can also account for any number of deterrence failures.<sup>3</sup> In such instances of ostensibly irrational or misguided behavior, deterrence becomes meaningless.

That being said, an effective deterrent is not one that is guaranteed to be foolproof in every contingency as this is impossible.<sup>4</sup> Instead, an effective deterrent is one that deliberately minimizes the prospect of aggression not only by making aggression an irrational policy choice for rational decision-makers, but also by ensuring that the idea of war as an unattractive policy option becomes an unconscious assumption that is widely held. Put another way, war should become an unthinkable, or at least a highly undesirable, means to settle political disputes, not just among the adversary state's key decision-makers, but also among the broader political establishment, the bureaucracy, the population and the allies of that state. Thus, a strategy of deterrence should not only aim to make war an irrational option for rational decision-makers, but also be designed to reduce the prospect of an adversary's leaders making an irrational policy choice by appealing directly to other sources that would influence the decision-makers of that state.

- 1 Lebow, for instance, has noted in relation to Spanish-American (1898) and German-American (World War I) crises, how 'aroused public passions ... pushed reluctant leaders towards war'. Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: 40th Anniversary Revised Edition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 59.
- 2 In relation to Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor, Russett observed that 'Certain key elements such as the probable effect of the Pearl Harbor attack on the American will to win were left completely unanalyzed' and that Japanese leaders were counting 'in an extremely vague and ill-defined way, on the American peoples' softness to end the war'. He attributes this to a situation in which high stress leads decision-makers to fail 'to perceive information or alternatives that would otherwise be apparent'. Bruce M. Russett, 'Pearl Harbor: Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1967, p. 99. Separately, Sagan contradicts the belief that Japanese leaders were irrational when they opted for an attack on the US, arguing instead that their internal debate revealed them to be agonizing between two bad alternatives, with war the 'least repugnant alternative'. Scott D. Sagan, 'The Origins of the Pacific War', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, 1988, p. 895. Other analyses utilize Prospect Theory to demonstrate the Japanese were willing to take risks in order to avoid significant losses. See for instance: Ariel S. Levi and Glen Whyte, 'A Cross-Cultural Exploration of the Reference Dependence of Crucial Group Decisions under Risk', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6, 1997, pp. 792-813. In terms of judging rationality, this should, to some degree, be related to an analysis of the validity of Japan's 'theory of victory', which was effectively enunciated in this policy document: 'A war with the US and Great Britain will be long, and will become a war of endurance. It is very difficult to predict the termination of war, and it would be well-nigh impossible to expect the surrender of the US. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the war may end because of a great change in American public opinion, which may result from such factors as the remarkable success of our military operations in the South or the surrender of Great Britain. At any rate, we should be able to establish an invincible position: by building up a strategically advantageous position through the occupation of important areas in the South; by creating an economy that will be self-sufficient in the long run through the development of rich resources in the Southern regions, as well as through the use of the economic power of the East Asian continent; and by linking Asia and Europe in destroying the Anglo-American coalition through our cooperation with Germany and Italy. Meanwhile, we may hope that we will be able to influence the trend of affairs and bring the war to an end'. 'Reference Materials for Answering Questions at the Imperial Conference on September 6 Regarding "The Essentials for Carrying Out the Empire's Policies"' cited in Nobutaka Ike, *Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967) p. 153.
- 3 Jack S. Levy, 'Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems', *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 1983, pp. 76-99.
- 4 As Diodotus discusses in his speech in the Mytilenian Debate: 'In a word it is impossible ... for human nature, when once seriously set upon a course, to be prevented from following that course by the force of law or by any other means of intimidation whatever'. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 221. Earlier Diodotus states 'Either ... we must discover some fear more potent than the fear of death or we must admit that here certainly we have not got an adequate deterrent. So long as poverty forces men to be bold, so long as the insolence and pride of wealth nourishes their ambitions, and in the other accidents of life they are continually dominated by some incurable master passion or another, so long will their impulses continue to drive them into danger'. p. 220.

If an adversary's understanding of war is that it will be relatively short, painless, popular and will result in a favorable post-war geopolitical outcome, then it is essential to redefine this understanding so that war appears long, painful, unpopular and geopolitically disadvantageous (i.e. a strategic defeat).

It is precisely because war encompasses so many spheres beyond the military that non-military factors can be utilized to great effect as part of a deterrence strategy and in the communication of threats intended to deter an adversary from taking a particular action.<sup>5</sup> This becomes especially evident when a deterrence strategy is formulated and communicated in such a way not only to convince the adversary that defeat is more likely than victory in an immediate sense, but that even a military victory will still result in a strategic defeat. Doing so requires redefining for the potential adversary the terms of their success or failure. For instance, if an adversary's understanding of war is that it will be relatively short, painless, popular and will result in a favorable post-war geopolitical outcome, then it is essential to redefine this understanding so that war appears long, painful, unpopular and geopolitically disadvantageous (i.e. a strategic defeat). Such measures can include convincing an adversary that consolidating a military victory will be incredibly difficult, especially in the absence of a formal surrender and transfer of legitimate authority, that aggression will alienate the country from the international community resulting in diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions, and that the adversary's geopolitical opponents will respond in unfavorable ways, such as direct or indirect involvement in the war, or by embarking on a major military buildup of their own. By widening the discourse from one mostly limited to an appreciation of the balance of forces to one that stresses a broader array of permutations and implications of war, the nature of an adversary's assessment of costs and benefits might be altered.

Recognizing the natural unattractiveness of war as a means of resolving political disputes compared to other non-violent means should ideally be the starting point in the crafting of a deterrence strategy. After all, peace, if defined narrowly as non-belligerence, or more crudely as deterrence success, is the normal state of interstate relations. By contrast, war is abnormal. This abnormality should be understood on three levels.

At the general level, wars have evolved both quantitatively and qualitatively due to shifts in the norms of international society, developments in the international system, advances in military technology, and so forth. The impact of nuclear weapons on great power relations, for instance, is undeniable. Although nuclear powers might engage in hostilities with each other (e.g. Soviet Union and China in 1969, or India and Pakistan during the Kargil War in 1999 as well as subsequent incidents), the prospect of nuclear escalation has probably ensured these conflicts have been kept more limited than they would otherwise have been. Even in cases of nuclear asymmetry, in which only one of the two contenders had nuclear weapons (e.g. UK vs Argentina, US vs North Vietnam/Viet Cong and Iraq, China vs Vietnam) nuclear use was avoided due to policymakers' assumptions about the broader political consequences.<sup>6</sup> In the 21st century, fears of a cyberwar have, thus far at least, proved groundless. Not only have the great cyber powers been reluctant to launch major cyberattacks against one another, but they have also avoided attacking smaller countries with little or no ability to defend themselves from this sort of attack.<sup>7</sup> Even in the absence of a formal limitation, such as a ban on chemical

5 'Deterrence is a function of the *total* cost-gain expectations of the party to be deterred, and these may be affected by factors other than the apparent capabilities and intentions of the deterrer. For example, the incipient aggressor may be inhibited by his own conscience or, more likely, by a prospect of losing moral standing, and hence political standing, with uncommitted countries. Or, in the specific case of the Soviet Union, he may fear that war will encourage unrest in, and possibly dissolution of, his satellite empire and perhaps dissatisfaction among his own population. He may anticipate that his aggression would bring about a tighter welding of the Western alliance or stimulate a degree of mobilization in the West which would either reduce his own security or greatly increase his own cost of maintaining his position in the arms race'. Glenn H. Snyder, 'Deterrence and Power', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1960, p. 166. Emphasis added.

6 Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

7 Joseph S. Nye Jr., 'Deterrence and Dissuasion in Cyberspace', *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2016/2017, pp. 44-71.

weapons use, generally accepted rules of behavior are observable in most wars in large part due to the perceived risks of blatantly violating international norms, albeit lesser norm violations are a frequent, if not inevitable, occurrence.

Unless one understands why states refrain from war or avoid using all the military force they have available to them to defeat an adversary, one cannot hope to maximize one's own ability to deter. This is precisely why an appreciation of theoretical arguments about the decline of major power war and to a lesser degree interstate war (as distinct from violent conflict generally<sup>8</sup> or intrastate wars specifically) are so important.<sup>9</sup> For some scholars, major power war was becoming unfashionable since the end of the First World War, whereas for others it became increasingly unthinkable as it grew economically and politically unprofitable. To put it slightly differently, peace became more profitable, particularly as the rise of global capital markets provided a new mechanism for competition for states that would previously have been settled by war. Numerous other reasons have been cited, such as the declining attractiveness of territorial conquest due to the spread of international legal sovereignty, the growing lethality of war, the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons, the absence of colonial competition, and the widespread discrediting of bellicose ideas such as social Darwinism.<sup>10</sup> Irrespective of these specific interpretations, or even if the decline of war is rejected as an assumption, the importance of trends in international society, global governance, and so forth, as they relate to the utility of force, need to be accounted for in any analysis of the prospect of war erupting and how a war would be fought, and relatedly in the formulation of deterrence policies.

At the specific level of analysis is an historical appreciation of the circumstances in which a designated country has gone to war. These circumstances can include the nature of the decision-making system, the stakes involved, the military balance, the expected duration and scale of the conflict, the degree of popular support existing at the time and the limits that were placed on the use of force in terms of geographic scope, conflict intensity and weapons employed. Because of the historical nature of this enquiry it should be possible to make fairly reliable judgements about these issues even in the absence of internal documentation of the decision-making process that led to war. In contrast, cases of non-war are incredibly difficult to analyze without some first-hand information about the internal deliberations.

Fortunately, there are many cases where extremely detailed information exists, including audio recordings of the deliberations, that reveal a great deal about the reasons actors refrained from military action. For instance, the Cuban Missile Crisis, including the American

8 The most popular and controversial work on the decline of violence thesis is: Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York, Viking, 2011).

9 As Lemke notes: 'Those scholars who study international security have an unfortunate tendency to ignore the fact that deterrence studies and analyses of the causes of war ask fundamentally similar questions. Deterrence success is often the same thing as war avoidance. Deterrence failure often coincides with the occurrence of war. Consequently, deterrence encounters themselves may be an important cause of war. By failing to recognize the common ground between deterrence and war studies, students of the causes of war have not made full use of the body of research on deterrence'. 'High Stakes Indeed: Review by Douglas Lemke', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5, 2003, p. 367. I take the opposite view – students of deterrence have not made full use of the body of research on the causes of war, much less the literature on the decline of war.

10 See for instance: John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Raimo Väyrynen (ed.), *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates* (Routledge, 2005); Nils Petter Gleditsch, Steven Pinker, Bradley A. Thayer, Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, 'The Decline of War', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, September 2013, pp. 396–419; Carl Kaysen, 'Is War Obsolete: A Review Essay', *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Spring 1990; Siniša Malešević, 'Is War Becoming Obsolete? A Sociological Analysis', *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2014, pp. 65–86; Bear F. Braumoeller, 'Systemic Trends in War and Peace', in Asle Toje and Bård Nikolai Vik Steen (eds.) *The Causes of Peace: What We Now Know—Nobel Symposium 161* (Oslo: Norwegian Nobel Institute, 2019); Erick Gartzke, 'The Capitalist Peace', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 51, No. 1, January 2007, pp. 166–191; Azar Gat, 'Is War Declining – and Why?' *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2012, pp. 149–157.

The importance of trends in international society, global governance, and so forth, as they relate to the utility of force, need to be accounted for in any analysis of the prospect of war erupting and how a war would be fought, and relatedly in the formulation of deterrence policies.

In many cases, 'self-deterrence' provides a better explanation than deterrence for why powerful states that have a political conflict with a less powerful state will choose economic sanctions, or some other non-militarily aggressive means of dealing with it, despite the prospects of success perceived to be low compared to using military force.

deliberations to invade Cuba in October 1962, is remarkably well documented.<sup>11</sup> Even though US military forces were technically capable of overthrowing the Cuban Government with an invasion, American leaders expressed numerous reservations, among them: the negative impact on world opinion if the US were the lone aggressor, the large number of military forces needed and the lengthy time it would take to organize the invasion, the expected casualties, the prospect of counterattacks on US soil, the problem of installing a new government in Havana, as well as the possibility of triggering Soviet counteraction elsewhere, such as a seizure of West Berlin.<sup>12</sup> Prior to the Missile Crisis, the policy of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations to rely on covert action to overthrow Castro, and the unwillingness to overtly support the Bay of Pigs invasion, reflected a fundamental fear about damaging America's international reputation by employing the US military.<sup>13</sup> Other cases, such as the deliberations of the Johnson and Nixon administrations about attacking North Korea in response to the USS Pueblo and EC-121 incidents respectively, are similarly revealing, particularly about the fear of escalation on the Korean Peninsula at a time when the US was heavily committed in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> The more recent cases of limited intervention by the US in Libya and Syria, as well as in Iraq following the rise of ISIS, all clearly highlight a political reluctance to risk a repetition of the earlier quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Importantly, these cases reflect examples of 'self-deterrence' rather than deterrence. Whereas the latter are defined by an adversary's implicit or explicit threats, the former result from one's own psychological anxieties<sup>15</sup> and 'moral, legal and other normative considerations',<sup>16</sup> typically associated with a wider range of consequences that are feared beyond any adversary threats, such as domestic unpopularity, international opposition, and excessive political or strategic cost. To be clear, self-deterrence can occur in the absence of an adversary's threat of retaliation, or if an adversary's threat of retaliation is inconsequential relative to other considerations. In many cases, 'self-deterrence' provides a better explanation than deterrence for why powerful states that have a political conflict with a less powerful state will choose economic sanctions, or some other non-militarily aggressive means of dealing with it, despite the prospects of success perceived to be low compared to using military force.<sup>17</sup>

11 Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow (eds) *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2002); William Burr (ed), 'Pentagon Estimated 18,500 U.S. Casualties in Cuba Invasion 1962, But If Nukes Launched, "Heavy Losses" Expected', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 397, October 16, 2012.

12 It is important to note that US fears about a Soviet seizure of West Berlin were based on *assumptions* about Soviet behavior rather than the result of a Soviet threat of retaliation that was communicated to the US.

13 Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). According to O'Rourke, covert regime change is less effective than overt regime change.

14 John Prados and Jack Cheevers (eds) 'USS Pueblo: LBJ Considered Nuclear Weapons, Naval Blockade, Ground Attacks in Response to 1968 North Korean Seizure of Navy Vessel, Documents Show', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 453, January 23, 2014; Robert Wampler (ed), 'How Do You Solve A Problem Like Korea?' National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 322, June 23, 2010.

15 'Because actors can perceive things that are not there, they can be deterred by figments of their own imagination – "self-deterrence," if you will'. Robert Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1982/1983, p. 14.

16 T.V. Paul, 'Self-Deterrence: Nuclear Weapons and the Enduring Credibility Challenge', *International Journal*, Vol. 71, No. 1, 2016, pp. 20–40. As Paul concludes: 'in light of the historical record – especially instances from US nuclear history – reputational considerations appear to be crucial in explaining self-deterrence'. p. 20.

17 Unfortunately, the literature on self-deterrence remains extremely thin. The concept has mainly been discussed in relation to nuclear non-use (nuclear taboo) rather than war initiation. Nevertheless, despite his focus on nuclear use, Paul's definition highlights 'coercive military power' rather than nuclear weapons per se: 'Self-deterrence can be defined as the unwillingness to use coercive military power against an adversary, despite a declaratory threat to do so, due to self-imposed as opposed to other imposed constraints. ... (self-deterrence) describes situations in which a powerful actor, even when it is capable of inflicting unacceptable punishment on an opponent, is held back due to factors that are not connected to capability or military retribution by the opponent. The actor expects that it would suffer more harm than is acceptable, even though that harm is not physical. That is, the state desists from using its military capability for such reasons as the fear of losing reputation among domestic and international audiences for acting contrary to normative, moral, or legal principles'. Paul (2016), p. 26.



One of the most debatable questions to emerge from the Cold War that has been resurrected with recent scenarios of Russian aggression in the Baltic States is why a *fait accompli* military operation aimed at NATO was never attempted.

In addition to the general and specific levels, an intermediate level is also observable. This is the level of the region (e.g. East Asia, Latin America, Nordic) or category of state (e.g. great powers, small powers, nuclear powers). In some regions, interstate wars are more common than others.<sup>18</sup> The lack of interstate wars in East Asia since 1979 has led some scholars to refer to an 'East Asian Peace' that is mainly explained by a prioritization of economic growth 'before anything else'.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, for some regime types, wars are more common than others (e.g. Democratic Peace Theory argues democracies don't fight other democracies but do fight non-democracies). Nor have any two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council fought a war against one another (proxy wars are another matter), perhaps suggesting that concerns about the future of the UN and the international political order might figure into the calculations of the leadership of one P5 country contemplating war against one or more of the others – hardly an unimportant consideration, for instance, when contemplating the prospect of a US-China war.

Notably, not only have major wars involving major powers become difficult to conceptualize, but so too have limited wars involving major powers. Even Soviet military interventions and potential interventions in Eastern Europe, where military opposition was limited if non-existent, gave the Soviet leadership a great deal of pause due to the negative effect on the USSR's international reputation, as well as fear that intervention would undermine Soviet leadership of the Communist bloc.<sup>20</sup> One of the most debatable questions to emerge from the Cold War that has been resurrected with recent scenarios of Russian aggression in the Baltic States is why a *fait accompli* military operation aimed at NATO was never attempted. For the bulk of the Cold War, NATO devised numerous scenarios of Soviet aggression that it had to defend against, including seemingly small-scale operations aimed at the seizure of West Berlin, a 'Hamburg grab', and an attack on the Alliance's northern or southern flanks. More recently, the prospect of a Russian seizure of two of the Baltic States in 60 hours, or all three states in a similar timeframe, has received considerable attention.<sup>21</sup> Has Moscow refrained from aggression only due to a fear of nuclear escalation? Or has the lack of aggression simply been a matter of the level of dissatisfaction with the status quo being insufficient to justify even a small war relative to the perceived longer-term consequences, such as a reinvigorated Alliance?

The record of the Cold War is particularly instructive when thinking about similar issues today. Throughout the period, numerous militarized interstate disputes occurred. Yet in each case, there is ample evidence concerns about provoking a wider conflict meant that any limited short-term benefits gained would be far outweighed by the longer-term consequences. Examination of these cases can help inform contemporary analysts about some of the

18 See for instance: Clive Archer, 'The Nordic Area as a "Zone of Peace"', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1996, pp. 451-467; Etel Solingen, 'Pax Asiatica versus Bella Levantina: The Foundations of War and Peace in East Asia and the Middle East', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 4, November 2007, pp. 757-780; Benjamin Miller, 'When and How Regions Become Peaceful: Potential Theoretical Pathways to Peace', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2005, pp. 229-267.

19 Stein Tønnesson, 'What Is It That Best Explains the East Asian Peace Since 1979? A Call for a Research Agenda', *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2009, pp. 111-136; Stein Tønnesson, *Explaining the East Asian Peace: A Research Story*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Asia Insights, No. 9 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017).

20 Jiri Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Kieran Williams, 'New Sources on Soviet Decision Making during the 1968 Czechoslovak Crisis', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (May 1996), pp. 457-470; Mark Kramer, 'New Evidence on Soviet Decision-Making and the 1956 Polish and Hungarian Crises', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8-9 (Winter 1996-Spring 1997); Mark Kramer, 'The Kremlin, The Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine', CIA, 2009.

21 See for instance: Daniel A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, 'Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank', RAND Corporation, 2016; Richard D. Hooker Jr., 'Major Theatre War: Russia Attacks the Baltic States', *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 165, No. 7, 2020.



factors decision-makers wrestle with when similar cases have arisen more recently or are likely to in the future. Indeed, they should be the starting point for any war scenario rather than being treated as irrelevant, not least because maintaining a lid on these militarized interstate disputes was always a top priority. Given how unattractive the prospect of war was then, what has changed since that might make it more attractive today or in the future?

In recent years, scenarios of Chinese aggression have gained a great deal of renewed attention. However, it is worth highlighting that similar to NATO scenarios of Soviet/Russian aggression, China's actual behavior often bears little resemblance to its highly aggressive portrayal in the scenarios.<sup>22</sup> As early as 1965, Herman Kahn observed:

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“Everybody of course is worried about China ... But I don't think the Chinese are crazy ... the Chinese seem to spend about half their time trying to convince us they are crazy, and the Russians spend all of their time trying to convince us the Chinese are crazy ... But if you examine Chinese behavior you find it is amazingly cautious. You know, they don't attack Formosa, they don't attack Quemoy and Matsu, they don't take over Macao, Hong Kong is still independent, they attack India, but India is not prepared. You know, they're careful.”<sup>23</sup>

Since the 1949 establishment of the PRC, scholars have had ample time to observe its use of force in various international crises, as well as the lack of use.<sup>24</sup> Only in three cases during this period has China fought wars (Korean War, 1950–53; Sino-Indian War, 1962; Sino-Vietnamese War, 1979) and in each of these instances the wars were relatively limited in their size and

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22 As can be observed in numerous mainstream scenarios from the past decade, at best only superficial attention is devoted to the Chinese decision to go to war, with practically no discussion of Chinese decision-making dynamics. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the fighting that occurs once the war has already started. See for instance: David P. Rapkin and William R. Thompson, *Transition Scenarios: China and the United States in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2013); David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Cristina L. Garafola, 'War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable', RAND Corporation, 2016; Joshua Rovner, 'Two Kinds of Catastrophe, Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 5, 2017, pp. 696–730; Robert Farley, 'We Asked an Expert to Imagine a US-China War. We Wish We Hadn't', *The National Interest*, October 17, 2019; Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War Over Small Stakes* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019); Todd Smith, 'What a War with China Could Look Like', *Military Times*, September 1, 2020; Michele A. Flournoy, 'How to Prevent a War in Asia: The Erosion of American Deterrence Raises the Risk of Chinese Miscalculation', *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2020; Michael Peck, 'Slaughter in the East China Sea', *ForeignPolicy.com*, August 7, 2020; Fiona S. Cunningham, 'The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder: Naval Blockades in a US-China Conflict', *Security Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2020, pp. 730–768.

23 Herman Kahn, 'The Likelihood of Nuclear War at Some Point in the 20th Century', Speech to the Overseas Press Club, 1965. My transcript. Audio available at: <https://www.wnyc.org/story/191163-herman-kahn/>

24 Alastair Iain Johnston, 'China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behaviour, 1949–1992: A First Cut at the Data', *The China Quarterly*, No. 153, 1998, pp. 1–30; Allen S. Whiting, 'China's Use of Force, 1950–96, and Taiwan', *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2001, pp. 103–131; M. Taylor Fravel, 'Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes', *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2007/2008, pp. 44–83; Andrew Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015', *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2020/21, pp. 79–121.

scope.<sup>25</sup> China's 1950 intervention in Korea, for instance, was only reluctantly undertaken.<sup>26</sup> The same was also true for the numerous militarized interstate disputes that occurred but *did not* escalate to war (e.g. Taiwan Strait crises in 1954-55, 1958, 1995-1996; border clashes with the Soviet Union, 1969; Paracel Islands, 1974; Spratly Islands, 1988; EP-3 incident, 2001, USS Cowpens incident, 2013; border clashes with India, 2020). Despite the numerous conflicts and minor provocations, this record clearly demonstrates Chinese leaders have been reluctant to use their armed forces in any large-scale aggression, with the possible exception of the intervention during the Korean War and its invasion of Vietnam in terms of the size of the military commitment (the Sino-Indian war was, at best, a medium-scale operation) though both were still limited wars in terms of geographic scope (i.e. no extension beyond the Korean peninsula and only a short advance into Vietnam – likewise the advance into disputed Indian territory was limited). Based on the empirical record, two sets of questions follow. First, assuming China was deterred from using larger-scale forces to achieve broader policy goals in these past cases, what accounts for this? Second, given the rapid rise of Chinese diplomatic, economic and military power in the last two decades, and the projected increase of this power, will the reasons China was previously deterred continue to be relevant in the future?<sup>27</sup> These are questions requiring significantly more scholarly attention than has been devoted to them hitherto.

As noted, although wars between major powers have declined considerably, wars between major powers and minor powers have declined at a lesser rate. Most small- or medium-sized states, especially when located adjacent to larger states with whom their political relations

25 During the Korean War, American officials differentiated between three different types of war with China: limited war (confined to Korea), general or unlimited war (with China only), and global war (China + Communist Bloc). See, for instance: Memorandum by the United States Member of the Five-Power Ad Hoc Committee on Southeast Asia (Davis) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 5, 1952. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, East Asia and the Pacific, Vol. XIII, Part 1. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v12p1/d8>. Options for China to escalate its actions beyond Korea included invading Indochina or seizing Hong Kong. For a discussion of the latter, see: Chi-Kwan Mark, 'A Reward for Good Behaviour in the Cold War: Bargaining over the Defence of Hong Kong, 1949-1957', *The International History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2000, pp. 837-861. According to a September 1950 CIA estimate: 'Communist China at present possesses the capability for a successful invasion of Indochina. ... Chinese Communist military commitments elsewhere would not necessarily militate against an invasion of Indochina because the Chinese Communists possess the forces necessary for military action—separately or simultaneously—against Indochina, Korea, Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and Macao'. Central Intelligence Agency, 'Prospects for the Defense of Indochina Against a Chinese Communist Invasion, ORE 50-50', September 7, 1950, p. 9. Available online at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A004100010001-4.pdf>

26 See, for instance: Donggil Kim, 'New Insights into Mao's Initial Strategic Consideration Towards the Korean War Intervention', *Cold War History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2016, pp. 239-254. As Mao conveyed to Stalin on October 3, 1950: 'We originally planned to move several volunteer divisions to North Korea to render assistance to the Korean comrades when the enemy advanced north of the 38th parallel. However, having thought this over thoroughly, we now consider that such actions may entail extremely serious consequences. In the first place, it is very difficult to resolve the Korean question with a few divisions (our troops are extremely poorly equipped, there is no confidence in the success of military operations against American troops), the enemy can force us to retreat. In the second place, it is most likely that this will provoke an open conflict between the USA and China, as a consequence of which the Soviet Union can also be dragged into war, and the question would thus become extremely large [kraine bol'shim]. Many comrades in the CC CPC [Central Committee of the Communist Party of China] judge that it is necessary to show caution here. Of course, not to send out troops to render assistance is very bad for the Korean comrades, who are presently in such difficulty, and we ourselves feel this keenly; but if we advance several divisions and the enemy forces us to retreat; and this moreover provokes an open conflict between the USA and China, then our entire plan for peaceful construction will be completely ruined, and many people in the country will be dissatisfied (the wounds inflicted on the people by the war have not yet healed, we need peace). Therefore it is better to show patience now, refrain from advancing troops, [and] actively prepare our forces, which will be more advantageous at the time of war with the enemy. "Ciphered Telegram from Roshchin in Beijing to Filippov (Stalin)," October 03, 1950, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 334, listy 105-106 and RGASPI F. 558 Op. 11 D. 334 pp. 105-106. Translated by Kathryn Weathersby and Alexandre Mansourov. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113732>.

27 Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, "'Starting a Fire': U.S. and China Enter Dangerous Territory Over Taiwan", *The New York Times*, 15 October 2021.

are antagonistic, will, almost as a matter of course, know their limits, and will do their best not to act too provocatively – in other words, they are self-deterred. On the other hand, precisely because of the power imbalance, larger states are more likely to use military coercion to obtain concessions, which in some cases might amount to a major concession such as a demand for territory or a change of regime. How can small- or medium-sized states resist this coercion, particularly when threatened with a war they are almost certain to lose in strictly conventional terms? Put slightly differently, how can they deter the larger states by using a combination of military and non-military means? Based on the earlier discussion about conceptualizing war in broad terms, at least four approaches would suggest themselves.

The first would be to minimize the level of dissatisfaction of the larger state so that war is viewed as excessive, relative to the stakes involved. This should not be misconstrued as completely giving in to the adversary's demands. Instead, wherever possible, efforts should be made to minimize differences, which will likely entail some compromise, or at least the appearance of compromise. For instance, if the larger state recognizes benefits from employing diplomacy, and sees progress occurring in negotiations, then using military force will be a less attractive prospect. Conversely, a failure of diplomacy to achieve even modest gains will make military force more attractive. The second approach involves making oneself an unattractive target in the fullest sense of the term – effectively a synonym for quagmire. A prospective invader should be under no illusions that a military conquest in the short-term will entail problems over the longer term, including sustained insurgency, mass civil disobedience and a poor economy requiring a massive bailout by the occupying power. A third approach is to ally oneself with other powerful states to act as a balance. Finally, one can transform a bilateral confrontation into an international one through effective propaganda and political maneuver. In theory, using more than one of these approaches simultaneously should offer a greater degree of deterrence than utilizing a single one. However, it must be emphasized that utilizing one of these approaches may be successful whereas using all four combined may be unsuccessful – this will always be dependent on the nature of the adversary and the stakes involved. At the end of the day, no formula for guaranteed deterrence exists. Nevertheless, as this paper has argued, the best way of ensuring deterrence is to dissuade a potential aggressor from going to war in the first place by expanding the range of costs their leadership will need to consider when deciding whether to go to war.

To conclude, the problem with the vast majority of contemporary war scenarios is that they tend to focus on how a military conflict might play out with only a superficial discussion of the motives and cost-benefit calculus of the enemy leadership leading up to the decision to embark upon war. Despite the long empirical record of crisis decision-making and extensive datasets of militarized interstate disputes that illustrate the *inability* to get a fight started, the designers of most scenarios, as well as most deterrence theorists, generally avoid discussion of the above-mentioned hurdles to war. The result is that debates about deterrence are limited to an analysis of alternative types of military postures, balance of forces and equipment, and ways and means of conducting aggression, but avoid substantive discussion of the ends to be achieved and the non-military factors involved. In short, the enemy leadership is presumed to base its decisions on conducting aggression, either out-of-the-blue or escalating from a minor crisis, almost entirely on an assessment of some degree of short-term military success. Yet as the discussion above illustrates, for a NATO-Russia, US-China, or some other large-scale war to occur, numerous other hurdles would need to be overcome before the political leadership would decide to initiate such a war, or to allow a minor conflict to escalate to that level.

By approaching a deterrence strategy from the perspective of how an adversary could translate military success into a favorable *political* outcome, very different light can be shed on an

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aggressor's cost-benefit calculus and campaign design for waging a successful war, and hence the most appropriate means of deterring them. Through the manipulation of an adversary's discourse in relation to war outcomes, positive expectations of what a war may achieve can be altered so that negative expectations lead the adversary's leadership to refrain from war. Clearly, in most, if not all, scenarios of large-scale aggression, or even lower levels of aggression, it is taken for granted that no adversary would initiate a war unless they were confident of achieving at least some degree of military victory. And yet, precisely because in many scenarios where a military victory was predicted to be a foregone conclusion but an actual war did not take place, this begs the question of the degree to which non-military factors play a more important role in influencing decisions to wage war than have hitherto been appreciated. A revised appreciation along these lines should ideally motivate a fundamental rethink of existing deterrence measures and an expansion of the range of options available to deter future wars.

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