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Deterrence Warning Messages

A Short Guide for NATO

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RUSSIA WAR СДЕРЖИВАНИЕ RUSSIA
ESCALATION AVSKRÄCKNING
DETERRENZA
DISSUASION
Стримування
DETERRENCE
DETERRENCE
USA 제지
THREAT
CHINA NATO 抑止力 WARNING
الردع
威懾
DISUASIÓN
COMMUNICATION
ODSTRASZENIE AFSCHRIKKING NATO



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Abstract

Deterrence failure has often been attributed to poor communication. If only a stronger or clearer message had been communicated, so the argument goes, aggression would not have occurred. Whilst deterrence scholars have typically focused on evaluating threats communicated by states in terms of why they were unsuccessful, they have generally avoided exploring the *form* of these threats and *how* they were communicated. This is despite the fact policymakers devote considerable attention to the words they employ in their public and private statements as well as the means they choose to convey them. The research presented here argues that to improve the prospects of successful deterrence necessitates improving the way deterrence threats are communicated. To support this argument, this paper examines deterrence warning messages, an aspect of deterrence communication consisting of statements conveyed orally by high-level officials and written statements issued by governments and international organizations. This aspect of signaling is distinct from physical actions, such as the mobilization or deployment of military forces. Numerous historical cases from World War One through the War in Ukraine are examined, with a focus on how NATO has attempted to deter with words since its founding. A series of lessons are then identified to improve the Alliance's future ability to deter.

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1. Introduction

Communication is intrinsic to deterrence. Not to communicate a warning, in some form, means there is no attempt to deter. When warnings are communicated but the unwanted action occurs anyway, this constitutes a deterrence failure. Such a failure occurred on February 24, 2022 with Russia's large-scale renewed aggression against Ukraine. In the words of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg:

This invasion does not come as a surprise ... We have tried to prevent it by calling Russia to engage in diplomatic efforts, by telling Russia that there will be severe costs or economic sanctions if they invade Ukraine further. But what happened over the last hours demonstrates that Russia, despite our diplomatic efforts and despite our clear messages of economic sanctions, decided to once again invade Ukraine.¹

The basis of deterrence theory is the assumption that to prevent an unwanted action requires communication of a threat sufficiently dire the costs of taking that action outweigh the conceivable benefits, and are sufficiently frightening as to make inaction, or some alternative action, preferable. Calculating what such a threat consists of is therefore one half of the deterrence equation. A good deal of attention is paid to *what* sort of action would be perceived as sufficiently dire, and also constitutes a *credible* threat. The other half of the deterrence equation is determining *how* that threat is communicated. If only a stronger or clearer message had been communicated, so the argument goes, aggression would not have occurred. Regrettably, the overwhelming majority of deterrence scholarship focuses on the substance of threats rather than how they are communicated.² This is despite the fact policymakers devote considerable attention to the words they employ in their warning messages and the means they convey them.

This paper argues deterrence failure is likely to be as much a consequence of a poor communication of threats (i.e. how threats are communicated) as it is about a poor calculation of threats (i.e. what threats to communicate), and to improve the prospects of successful deterrence necessitates improving the way deterrence threats are communicated. In particular, the paper examines deterrence warning messages, an aspect of deterrence communication consisting of warnings conveyed by high level officials and formal statements issued by governments and international organizations, either orally or in written form. This aspect of deterrence signaling is distinct from physical actions, such as the mobilization or deployment of military forces.

¹ Press briefing by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council, February 24, 2022.

² Only a handful of deterrence studies, mostly quantitative, focus squarely on signalling, particularly the issue of credibility. See, for example: James D. Fearon, "Signaling versus the Balance of Power and Interests: An Empirical Test of a Crisis Bargaining Model," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1994, pp. 236-269; James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1997, pp. 68-90; Roseanne W. McManus, "The Impact of Context on the Ability of Leaders to Signal Resolve," *International Interactions*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2017, pp. 453-79; Roseanne W. McManus, *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Kai Quek, "Are Costly Signals More Credible? Evidence of Sender-Receiver Gaps," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 78, No. 3, 2016, pp. 925-940. Similar scholarly work on coercive diplomacy signalling, specifically the use of ultimatums, also provides useful insights. See: Tim Sweijs, *Use and Utility of Ultimatums in Coercive Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

Deterrence failure is likely to be as much a consequence of a poor communication of threats (i.e. how threats are communicated) as it is about a poor calculation of threats (i.e. what threats to communicate).

As will be shown, in the post-mortem of many deterrence failures, one of the primary culprits is a failure to issue a warning, issuing a lackluster warning, or conveying a warning in such a way it is not taken seriously. In other words, it is often assumed a weak deterrence message, a poorly conveyed deterrence message, or simply the lack of a deterrence message, may have facilitated a war or some other unwanted violent action. Conversely, it has been argued a stronger message, properly communicated, may have averted its occurrence. The essential point here is not whether this argument is true, as this is difficult if not impossible to prove, but rather that high-level policymakers have claimed this to be true. As such, improving deterrence messages, can, at a minimum, be useful for denying this as an excuse for a deterrence failure, or, at a maximum, lead to a deterrence success.

For NATO, getting deterrence 'right' could not be a more pressing challenge. With the failure of numerous international actors, including the Alliance, to deter Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine that commenced on February 24, 2022, despite the multiple warnings conveyed in the months leading up to the war (see Annex 3), NATO faces three principal deterrence challenges with respect to Russia. The immediate challenge is intra-war deterrence, or the deterrence of specific actions as part of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the most important of which is deterring Russian nuclear use. The second challenge will become relevant in the future, namely the deterrence of further Russian aggression against Ukraine in the *aftermath* of a ceasefire, albeit ideally the design of the ceasefire arrangements will incorporate some form of deterrence warning. Finally, there is the ever-present challenge of deterring Russian aggression against NATO. In addition to Russia-related threats, the Alliance will almost certainly be confronted with many other direct and extended deterrence problems in the years ahead for which it will be essential to deliver effective warnings.

In contrast to deterrence reforms aimed at NATO's military apparatus, this paper argues deterrence is also largely a function of statements emanating from, or delivered by, the NATO Secretary General, the North Atlantic Council, the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, and other organizations responsible for Strategic Communications, none of whom are typically treated as key deterrence actors by scholars working on the topic. As such, a major objective of this paper is to draw attention to this overlooked and underappreciated aspect of NATO's ability to deter.

However, the paper is not strictly focused on the Alliance. Despite NATO's long history in the deterrence business, which offers useful insights on some important aspects of deterrence warning messages, a broader appreciation of the complexities of these messages requires not only that these messages be placed in a conceptual context but also a historical one. This type of examination, mainly relying on the historical investigation of high-level policy discussions, is essential, because understanding how policymakers construct and deliver warnings can provide important clues into how these messages are deconstructed and interpreted by the other side, and hence why they are more likely to succeed or fail.

To provide a broad overview of the topic, this paper is divided into three substantive sections. It begins with a conceptual discussion about what deterrence messages are, how they relate to signaling and credibility, and what 'best practices' have been identified by other researchers. The second section consists of a series of historical anecdotes showcasing various dimensions of deterrence warning messages, including internal debates about their content and how to convey them, the perceived necessity to issue them, and how they have been used in attempts to deter wars, unwanted actions within wars and

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international crises, and their role augmenting ceasefire agreements. The third section focuses on four different aspects of the subject in relation to NATO: the definition, clarification and reaffirmation of the North Atlantic Treaty's Article 5; how NATO contemplated warning the Soviets about nuclear use; extended deterrence warnings NATO issued from 1980 through 2014; and the warnings the Alliance conveyed to Russia prior to its 2022 large-scale invasion of Ukraine. A final section provides a discussion of lessons identified in the preceding analysis.

2. Deterrence Warning Messages: A Conceptual Note

Such is the desire to maintain friendly, or at least non-belligerent relations, that most warnings will include a carrot as well as a stick.

What precisely is a “deterrence warning message”? How does it differ from similar terms, such as “signals” and “threats.”³ Put simply, a deterrence warning message is a public or private statement intended to deter an unwanted action. Such a message consists of two parts. First, it must identify some action as unacceptable. Second, it must contain a warning. In many instances, the warning will take the form of a threat of consequences to be imposed if the unacceptable action is taken. The reason why threats do not always have to be included in the message is because in some cases it may be deemed sufficient merely to *inform* the other party that some act is unacceptable. This being so, a *threat* will be considered as one of two types of warning, the other being a *caution*. Whereas a threat will include a reference to consequences (i.e. if you do X, it will have Y consequence), a caution is a relatively mild form of warning intended to put the other actor ‘on notice’ by informing them that some action they are preparing to carry out is opposed in principle (e.g. State A views with ‘grave concern’ State B’s anticipated action X).

Distinguishing among these types of warning is particularly important for a couple of reasons. From a deterrence perspective, it may be possible to distinguish between a general deterrent and an immediate deterrent, or from a crisis perspective, to distinguish between warnings conveyed early on during a crisis versus the latter stage of a crisis. In this sense, it might be possible to anticipate that in a long crisis that stretches over weeks or months, states will prefer issuing a cautionary warning early on and then ‘escalate’ to issuing threats later. This is because states generally will try to avoid making threats unless they believe there is no other choice. Such is the desire to maintain friendly, or at least non-belligerent relations, that most warnings will include a carrot as well as a stick, such as referring to the possibility of mediation, thereby offering a face-saving means of backing down (an ‘off-ramp’ in contemporary parlance).

Whilst many of the ideas presented here about deterrence warning messages, especially their utility, content and effectiveness, have been influenced by scholarship on deterrence theory generally and deterrence signaling in particular, they are also sufficiently distinct to be treated as a separate category. Moreover, deterrence warning messages must also be subdivided into several additional categories to ensure the nuances of different types of deterrence are accounted for. For example, there are important distinctions to be made about warning

³ There is also some overlap with “declaratory policy” which Snyder defined as: “in its broadest sense involves decisions as to what we shall communicate to the enemy about our intentions and capabilities and how we shall communicate it.” Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 239.

messages that are communicated in peacetime versus in international crises versus during wartime, as well as warning messages a state communicates on their own behalf, on another's behalf, or those created by states on their own versus in collaboration with other members of an alliance, and so forth.

Many differences are also observable in terms of how warning messages are communicated: purely on their own or in conjunction with some type of action; a single message issued once, the same message issued multiple times, or different messages conveying stronger content over time; as a high level public statement by a head of state, by a lower level official, or as a press leak; as a formal statement or as an off the cuff remark in response to a journalist's question; a message conveyed in private or public; a message containing carefully crafted language designed to maximize its deterrence potential or a message containing language that reflects the lowest common denominator of what is deemed politically acceptable.

For those policy practitioners responsible for devising and communicating warnings, the lack of any specific guidance to draw upon constitutes an important weakness. In the absence of guidance about essential dos and don'ts, there is a higher likelihood the warning messages will fail to deter. But what sort of guidance might be useful? One of the notable aspects of the deterrence literature, to the extent it is prescriptive, is that 'best practices' are effectively drawn from deterrence failures rather than deterrence successes. In other words, we know what messages were ineffective because they failed to deter, and one can then try to explain the reasons why they failed, but we don't have any good idea about deterrence messages that succeeded in deterring for the simple reason it is next to impossible to identify cases of deterrence success.⁴

Among the key weaknesses of the extant literature is a lack of attention to how states communicate warnings and why their communications appear in the way they do. Specifically, they ignore the historical record of internal debates about the choices policymakers make when crafting and delivering warnings. It is only by examining this record that the complexities and dilemmas associated with these messages become apparent. For instance, there are various ways a warning message may be conveyed, such as a public statement, a communiqué, a treaty clause, a tweet, a private conversation, and so forth. Sometimes these messages are intended as a general deterrent; at other times, they are utilized amid a crisis or war. Verbal communications might also be complemented by some type of action, such as raising military readiness levels or deploying military forces, that are intended to be observed by the adversary. As Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing note, "Often the most potent moves or strategies combine verbal and non-verbal acts, the words explicate the contingency that will activate the threat and describe the specific nature of the sanction, the physical moves provide credibility by giving the impression of seriousness, and perhaps by taking steps toward actual fulfilment of the threat."⁵ However, unlike taking action as a standalone gesture without an accompanying statement, which might leave the intended deterree unclear as to its purpose, a deterrence warning message clarifies this linkage.

The duration of a crisis and the timing of deterrence warning messages are highly relevant factors for appreciating the utility of their form and content. In some instances, such as with Russia's months-long military build-up opposite Ukraine in late 2021-early 2022, there is a good deal of time to convey warnings. The reason this affects the content is that when an

⁴ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *When Does Deterrence Succeed and How Do We Know?* (Ottawa: Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, 1990).

⁵ Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 213.

In the absence of guidance about essential dos and don'ts, there is a higher likelihood the warning messages will fail to deter.

unwanted action is detected well in advance of its occurrence, the tone of the initial warning messages is more likely to be cautionary than threatening in nature. They are also unlikely to be accompanied by significant action, such as deploying military forces. If the warning goes unheeded, and the unwanted action appears more imminent, then more threatening language is likely to appear, the means of conveying the message may switch from less authoritative to more authoritative, and with a greater likelihood of accompanying action to bolster the warning's credibility. A key reason for issuing a cautionary statement at an early stage is to allow sufficient time for the adversary's leadership to back down before they've fully committed themselves. A less threatening statement also has the advantage of not undermining relations prematurely. If the adversary disregards the hint, and continues with their preparations, it will then be necessary to strengthen the warning.⁶ In other cases, however, in which the time period is compressed, merely issuing vague cautionary statements are almost certain to fail as a deterrent.

Expectations of what types of warnings are issued at different stages in a crisis are often blurred in practice. Prior to the aforementioned autumn 2021 Russian military build-up, there had been the previous instance of Russian aggression in 2014, followed by years of tension, including an earlier military buildup opposite Ukraine in April 2021. Public warnings issued by numerous international actors that involved threats of consequences started appearing in November 2021, albeit this was still at an early stage of the Russian military build-up. But as the Russian military force opposite Ukraine grew larger over the subsequent months, thus indicating a failure of the earlier warnings, it might have been viewed as prudent to increase the degree and explicitness of threatened sanctions. At one end of the spectrum were those threats referred to in general terms, such as "consequences", "massive consequences", "severe consequences", etc. At the other end were those threats that defined what the consequences amounted to in practical terms (e.g. economic sanctions). An examination of these warnings (see Annex 3 for a list) shows there was little progression in the level or degree of threats conveyed despite the worsening situation. Importantly, threats of direct military consequences, including the provision of substantial lethal military assistance to Ukraine, or making ambiguous statements that left open the option of direct intervention, were avoided. In NATO's case, to the extent any military consequences were mentioned, these were limited to the defence of the Alliance's territory, not Ukrainian territory.

Deterrence warning messages fail for many reasons, or at least, they are *perceived* to fail for many reasons. An insufficiently strong tone is often identified as one of the main causes of failure. The context of who delivers the message, how it is delivered, and when it is delivered are also crucial to understanding why some messages have little effect. With respect to 'who' delivers the message, an appreciation of hierarchy is essential. A joint statement by the leaders of militarily or economically powerful countries may send a strong message simply due to the multi-headed nature of the messenger. That being said, the content of the message may be couched in such vague terms, effectively reflecting the lowest common denominator that could be agreed, that it lacks sufficient threatening tone.⁷ Conversely, if a strong statement is uttered by a relatively low-level official, this too is likely to have implications for how the message is received. After all, it may be assumed higher level officials fear being linked to the statement, and really have no intention of carrying out the threat. Similarly, threats issued by leaders with a reputation for using force are more likely to be believed than those with a reputation for bluffing or backing down in crises.

⁶ Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, p. 224.

⁷ See discussion in: Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, pp. 239-245.

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A related issue is *how* deterrence warnings are conveyed, and the means employed. In principle, warnings can be conveyed privately or publicly, with different types of means employed for each. During the Cold War, private communications between the US and Soviet leaders discussed over the 'hot line' (established in 1963), were often held up as a particularly important and urgent form of crisis communication. Similarly, leaders would often send written private messages to each other, such as those Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged during the Cuban Missile Crisis (the perceived limitations of which led to the hot line's establishment). Warnings might also be conveyed when leaders met face-to-face. Often, high-level officials such as a Foreign Minister, Ambassador, or Special Emissary, were tasked with delivering sensitive messages rather than the head of state or government. Private messages provided three potential advantages over public messages. First, a private message offered a face-saving means of pulling back from the brink since leaders who did so would not appear to be caving in to threats. Second, a private message could be more explicit than a public one, all the more so if it was not committed to paper. For instance, in December 2021, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated that in terms of the specific consequences the US would impose on Russia if it invaded Ukraine, "we would prefer to communicate that directly to the Russians, to not negotiate in public, to not telegraph our punches."⁸ The third potential advantage relates to the tone in which a private message is conveyed, especially one delivered directly from one leader to another. If the leader issuing the warning does so in a determined way, this 'body language' might convey seriousness of intent. Alternatively, this could also be a disadvantage if a lack of seriousness is inadvertently conveyed.

Public means of conveyance can take many forms ranging from a nationally televised address by the leader, such as Kennedy's public address on October 22, 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, to a formal statement issued by a government, to a press conference, to a tweet by a head of state from his or her private account, and so forth. During his first administration, US President Donald Trump's heavy reliance on Twitter, which included issuing threats to foreign countries, raised the question of the degree to which threats issued via social media were more or less credible than threats issued by more traditional means.⁹ According to one recent study, tweets are probably less credible than traditional forms of conveying warnings, such as a public address by a head of state or an official press release. This is largely because these traditional forms normally reflect intra-governmental deliberation, with statements receiving formal approval, and therefore are perceived to reflect official policy. In contrast, threats issued by a leader acting on their own initiative, and who may have a record of making informal statements that do not reflect official policy, are likely to be taken less seriously.¹⁰

Generally speaking, scholars have viewed public warnings more favorably than private warnings, at least from the perspective of credibility. Thomas Schelling stated that "making threats public enhances their credibility because the threatener is then more likely to be committed by maximum engagement of his prestige and bargaining reputation."¹¹ This is particularly the case when the leader of a state makes a public statement, thereby attaching his reputation to it, as opposed to a warning delivered by an underling.¹²

⁸ White House Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. Sullivan, December 7, 2021.

⁹ See, for instance: Vipin Narang and Heather Williams, "Thermonuclear Twitter?" in Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan, *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), pp. 63-89.

¹⁰ Benjamin Norwood Harris and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Cheap Tweets?: Crisis Signaling in the Age of Twitter," *International Studies Quarterly*, (Forthcoming).

¹¹ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 251.

¹² Roseanne W. McManus, "Making it Personal: The Role of Leader Specific Signals in Extended Deterrence," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2018, pp. 982-995; Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, p. 239.

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In some instances, an off-the-cuff remark by a head of state or some other senior official at a press conference or during a media interview might be interpreted as a warning, even if not intended as such. In this regard, some warnings may not have been the result of a deliberative process but instead were conveyed unintentionally and without much forethought. Regardless, they may still be perceived as sufficiently authoritative to be taken seriously. One such instance of a seemingly 'inadvertent' deterrence warning message occurred in August 2012 when President Barack Obama, in response to a question raised at a press conference, referred to a "red line" he had conveyed to the "Assad regime" in Syria. In Obama's words:

We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation. ... We have put together a range of contingency plans. We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons.¹³

These remarks were heavily criticized when the US did not react to chemical weapons use in Syria a year later. As this 'warning' has often been held up as a prominent example of a failed deterrence warning, it is worthwhile briefly reflecting on both its content and method of delivery. Regarding the latter, a 'red line' conveyed in this informal way is arguably one of the weakest methods, so much so that the central question is whether Obama's remarks were really intended as a warning at all, or was he merely announcing, in an informal way, that a private warning had been conveyed. On the one hand there are reasons to be skeptical a public warning was intended. For one thing, it makes little practical sense. Why not convey a public warning in the prepared remarks that preceded the questions from the press? Obama's references to "We have been very clear to the Assad regime" implied that a private warning had already been conveyed to the Syrian government, and therefore his reference to a 'red line' was a public acknowledgement of this. Similarly, Obama's mention of preparing "contingency plans" suggested the US had been contemplating a military response, albeit without explicitly saying so. On the other hand, it was only in response to Obama's remarks, rather than preceding them, that his Administration embarked on finding a legal pretext to justify some type of US military action in Syria, which suggests any contingency plans that existed were still in their formative stage of development.¹⁴

Regarding the warning's content, two unwanted actions were mentioned: movement of chemical weapons and use of chemical weapons. What would be the consequences imposed by the US in response to these actions? Obama's statement vaguely refers to "enormous consequences". Such was the degree of vagueness that the statement raised more questions than answers. For example, what sort of movement of chemical weapons would lead to "enormous consequences," whatever those might entail? Likewise, what sort of chemical weapons use might precipitate an American response: demonstrative use of chemical weapons in an isolated area, use against military targets, use against civilian targets, a one-off use, massive use, etc.? As such, there were multiple reasons why this warning would not have constituted an effective deterrent.

¹³ Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps, August 20, 2012.

¹⁴ Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: The Rise of Presidential Authority and Secrecy* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2017), p. 628.

If warnings are issued in the absence of accompanying action, such as a display of military power, they will carry less weight than if they are accompanied by action.

The wider context of warnings, whether issued privately or publicly, also needs to be accounted for. If warnings are issued in the absence of accompanying action, such as a display of military power, they will carry less weight than if they are accompanied by action. To again take the Obama 'red line' case as an example, had the statement been made at a time when a US aircraft carrier was being dispatched to the eastern Mediterranean, it would have been interpreted in a more serious way than in the absence of this type of show of force. Indeed, following the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel, the Biden administration, in an effort to deter Hezbollah – and its Iranian backer – from opening up a 'second front' against Israel, dispatched an aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean. As Biden mentioned in a prepared statement:

The United States has ... enhanced our military force posture in the region to strengthen our deterrence. The Department of Defense has moved the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group to the Eastern Mediterranean and bolstered our fighter aircraft presence. And we stand ready to move in additional assets as needed. Let me say again — to any country, any organization, anyone thinking of taking advantage of this situation, I have one word: Don't. Don't.¹⁵

In this instance, the objective of strengthening deterrence is specifically highlighted, with the announced carrier deployment and willingness to increase the US military presence in the region being mentioned to give the warning added credibility. Less clear, however, was what Biden meant by "taking advantage of the situation." Did this, for instance, mean a large-scale Hezbollah rocket attack against Israel? If so, were smaller-scale Hezbollah rocket attacks permissible? Nor did Biden specify what consequences the US would impose, though in the context of the parallel military deployment it presumably referred to military action. These shortcomings of the message's content notwithstanding, when comparing the Obama and Biden statements, the latter appears more menacing due to the military deployment.

The question about what makes threats appear credible is at the heart of the literature on deterrence signaling. For instance, when seeking to extend deterrence to an ally, is reliance on a mutual defence or security treaty sufficient, or is the deployment of military forces, potentially to include the deployment of nuclear weapons, necessary for deterrence to be credible? This question is not merely an academic one. For NATO, it was a practical one that policy-makers had to reckon with at different points in the Alliance's history. Two examples illustrate this point. At the time of NATO's birth, relying on a treaty commitment was initially deemed a sufficient deterrent, but with the outbreak of the Korean war a year later, the dispatch of US combat forces to Europe was viewed as necessary.¹⁶ Similarly, whereas before the 2016 Warsaw Summit reliance on Alliance membership was regarded as adequate to deter Russian aggression against the Baltic states, after this period it was felt the Article 5 commitment needed to be supplemented with the forward deployment of NATO military forces to the Eastern Flank.¹⁷ Although in both cases these military deployments had as much to do, if not more so, with reassuring NATO member states, as opposed to rectifying a deterrence shortfall, the underlying assumption was that military deployments are more credible than treaty commitments. To put it in crude terms, dispatching military forces takes deterrence up a notch.

¹⁵ Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel, October 10, 2023.

¹⁶ Jeffrey H. Michaels, "Visions of the next war or reliving the last one? Early alliance views of war with the Soviet Bloc," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43:6-7, 2020, pp. 990-1013.

¹⁷ Technically speaking, the Baltic states had been insisting on this shift years earlier but it was only at the Warsaw Summit that the Alliance as a whole agreed to the military deployment.

As an examination of the histories of defence treaty negotiations demonstrate, particular word choices are deemed to have greater deterrent value than others.

In theory, a legally binding treaty commitment to go to war on behalf of an ally might be deemed a sufficient deterrent without the need for a complementary military deployment.¹⁸ Indeed, in many, if not most cases, a 'pledge' to support an ally if it is attacked has constituted the basis of deterrence. NATO constitutes a rare case in which mutual defence commitments are supplemented by an integrated military command structure and forward deployed forces. In reality, the problem is much more complicated because defence treaties are not 'blank checks'. The precise military aspects of deterrence, such as what sort of forces are located where, are of course extremely important, but this is a secondary consideration. The primary consideration is what sort of commitment a defence treaty entails. In other words, does the treaty text really commit State A to go to war on behalf of State B, and in what circumstances are those commitments binding, and in which circumstances are those commitments optional? It could be the case a treaty-based alliance will be more credible in certain circumstances than in others based on the definitions contained in the treaty text. Thus, an ambiguously worded treaty commitment that allows states sufficient wiggle room to avoid coming to the defence of an ally may be an insufficient deterrent, at least in certain circumstances.¹⁹ As an examination of the histories of defence treaty negotiations demonstrate, particular word choices are deemed to have greater deterrent value than others. In some cases, the defence commitments are straightforward whereas in others they are vaguely hinted at (see Annex 1 for a list of examples).

One aspect of the signaling literature that is pertinent to an analysis of deterrence warning messages are those works addressing 'red lines'. Bruno Tertrais defines 'red lines' as "the manipulation of intents through (mostly public) statements for deterrence purposes, referring to the deliberate crossing of a certain threshold by an adversary, and relevant counteraction if this threshold is crossed."²⁰ When leaders publicly announce that some action is unacceptable and will result in consequences, particularly in those instances not covered under the terms of a defence treaty, the very act of putting one's reputation, and by extension, that of their state, on the line, is perceived to increase the credibility of the commitment. As Dan Altman describes, "Leaders confronted with a crisis often cannot swiftly improve the balance of power or forge new alliances, but one policy tool leaders always have immediately available is rhetoric."²¹ He goes on to say, "the time policymakers dedicate to crafting their red lines, even on the brink of nuclear war, underscores their importance."²² Where red lines seem to depart from deterrence warning messages is that the former, according to Altman, do not have to be "verbally declared" and may be conveyed "implicitly, tacitly, privately, and ambiguously," whereas the latter are verbally declared, usually in the form of an official statement. Acts like military maneuvers may feature *alongside* a deterrence warning statement but they are not a substitute for it.

For Lawrence Freedman, "Deterrence works best with unambiguous red lines, established over time, linked with vital interests, and backed by clear and credible messages, reinforced by known capabilities, about what will happen if they are crossed."²³ In contrast they will

¹⁸ Brett Leeds, Jeffrey Ritter, Sara Mitchell & Andrew Long, "Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions, 1815-1944," *International Interactions*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2002, pp. 237-260.

¹⁹ Brett Ashley Leeds, "Alliance Reliability in Times of War: Explaining State Decisions to Violate Treaties," *International Organization*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 2003, pp. 801-827.

²⁰ Bruno Tertrais, 'Drawing Red Lines Right', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, no. 3, 2014, p. 8.

²¹ Dan Altman, "Red lines: Enforcement, declaration, and ambiguity in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 5, 2023, p. 980.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 981.

²³ Lawrence Freedman, "Introduction-The Evolution of Deterrence Strategy and Research" in Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijts (eds) *Deterrence in the 21st Century – Insights from Theory and Practice*, Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020 (The Hague: TMC Asser Press, 2021), p. 9.

“work less well as more uncertainties are introduced – about where the lines actually are, how much any transgressions will actually matter, whether there will be much of a response if they are crossed and what difference they will actually make.”²⁴ One of the most important challenges of constructing deterrence warning messages and red lines is the degree of ambiguity regarding the identification of the unwanted action as well as the consequences to be imposed. When clearly describing the circumstances in which consequences will be imposed, there is always the risk that anything not covered in this description will be interpreted as a ‘green light’, with no consequences attached. On the other hand, if the description of circumstances is vague, and can conceivably cover numerous actions, some less menacing than others, then any threat of consequences is likely to lack credibility. When investigating choices regarding the ambiguous wording of deterrence warning messages, one theme that often comes up is that policymakers are unclear themselves about their own red lines and willingness to impose consequences, and these internal dilemmas are often reflected in the ambiguous nature of the official statements issued.

Regardless of the strength of deterrence warning messages, including the nature of their content, how they are conveyed, by whom, and so forth, there is one point that cannot be stressed enough. They are not a panacea guaranteeing successful deterrence. All that can be claimed with confidence is that attempting to deter without warning messages is considerably more difficult than deterring with these messages. Moreover, stronger messages are more likely to deter than weaker ones. For those policymakers charged with constructing messages, the aim should always be to strengthen deterrence warnings. To do so, however, requires an understanding of what sorts of messages are viewed as stronger than others and what sort of mistakes to avoid. For this, a study of historical cases of deterrence warning messages can provide numerous clues, not for the least of reasons we can not only identify why these messages were constructed and conveyed in the way they were, but we also know when they failed to deter. It is to this study of the past the remainder of the paper will now turn.

²⁴ Ibid.

3. Historical Overview

Ambiguous Private Warnings and Deterrence Failure: The 1914 Case

When wars erupt, blame for a failure to prevent war often falls on those policymakers responsible for formulating and communicating threats. In some cases, it is the *substance* of the policy that is to blame. In other cases, it is the perceived failure to *communicate* sufficient resolve. According to this type of argument, if only the adversary had realized prior to embarking upon a war that there would be substantial opposition, then they might not have embarked on war in the first place.

Among the most well-known examples of this phenomenon was the perceived British failure to warn Germany during the 1914 'July Crisis' about the circumstances that would trigger Britain's entry into a continental war. In his memoirs, the former British Prime Minister Lloyd George assigned blame for the outbreak of the First World War to Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey's inability to clearly communicate to the German leadership that Britain would go to war rather than remain neutral.²⁵ According to Lloyd George:

Had [Grey] warned Germany in time of the point at which Britain would declare war – and wage it with her whole strength – the issue would have been different. ... in the name of a united people he could have intimated to the German Government that if they put into operation their plan of marching through Belgium they would encounter the active hostility of the British Empire. And he could have uttered this warning in sufficient time to leave the German military authorities without any excuse for not changing their dust-laden plans.²⁶

In at least one key respect, many of Grey's critics were perhaps being somewhat unfair. Prior to July 1914, threats of this kind were typically couched in vague diplomatic language, but the underlying message still came across. For instance, during a previous war scare in December 1912, in which Grey was concerned Germany might go to war against the Franco-Russian alliance, he conveyed to the German Ambassador to Britain, Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky, the message that if war erupted Britain would support Germany's enemies.²⁷ According to the historian Christopher Clark, Grey's warning "triggered panic in Berlin, or more precisely in the Kaiser, who, ever sensitive to signals from London, claimed to discern in Grey's warning

²⁵ The Oxford military historian Cyril Falls went so far as to write "Grey could not say to Germany that if she attacked France, Britain would go to war, because neither the government nor Parliament would have backed him. The most he could do was to tell Germany not to count on her standing aside. It may be that if he could have spoken out earlier the war would not have occurred." Cyril Falls, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), p. 30.

²⁶ Lloyd George cited in Keith Wilson, "Britain" in Keith Wilson, *Decisions for War, 1914* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 175-176.

²⁷ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 329.

If only the adversary had realized prior to embarking upon a war that there would be substantial opposition, then they might not have embarked on war in the first place.

a 'moral declaration of war'.²⁸ Yet, what were the actual words Grey used in this instance? According to Lichnowsky, Grey warned:

If a European war were to arise through Austria's attacking Serbia, and Russia, compelled by public opinion were to march into Galicia rather than again put up with a humiliation like that of 1909, thus forcing Germany to come to the aid of Austria, France would inevitably be drawn in and no one could foretell what further developments might follow.²⁹

Despite the vagueness of this language, Lichnowsky nonetheless noted, "This is the second time that Sir Edward Grey has given me this hint, a hint that cannot be misunderstood."³⁰ Moreover, Grey's sentiments were corroborated by other British interlocutors who insisted "it was vital for England ... to prevent [France] from being crushed by Germany" and that England "would have no alternative but to come to the aid of France should Germany ... prove victorious over the French."³¹ In this instance, the vagueness of the language Grey employed did not jeopardize the deterrent effect his words were intended to achieve.

Unfortunately for Grey, when he employed similar vague language in July 1914, and his warnings failed to deter, it was easy to blame this failure, at least in part, on his reluctance to use stronger language. In fairness to Grey, his decision not to use stronger language was due both to his limited authority to issue a stronger statement, as the matter of deciding to go to war was really one for the British Cabinet to decide upon, as well as his desire not to undermine Britain's relations with Germany at a time when he was still hoping a peace deal could be reached.³² Whether or not a stronger statement would have deterred the German leadership from invading Belgium is hard to say, but what can be said with certainty is that Grey received a significant amount of blame *after* the fact for not issuing a stronger warning. Yet, even *before* the fact, there was a belief among some, that a stronger warning statement from the British might be sufficient to deter German aggression. For example, the French President told the British Ambassador he was "convinced that preservation of peace between Powers is in hands of England, for if His Majesty's Government announce that, in the event of conflict between Germany and France, resulting from present differences between Austria and Serbia, England would come to the aid of France, there would be no war, for Germany would at once modify her attitude."³³

As is evident from the choice of words Grey used in his private conversations with Lichnowsky, a deliberate effort was made to avoid the sort of threatening language the French President was recommending. For example, on July 29, 1914, Lichnowsky informed his superiors in Berlin: "Sir E. Grey made here, half in joke, the remark that one never could tell whose house might remain unscorched in the midst of such a conflagration; that even little Holland was now arming herself."³⁴ In a separate conversation later the same day, Grey told Lichnowsky:

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Cited in Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 354.

³⁰ Prince Max von Lichnowsky, *Heading for the Abyss* (New York: Payson and Clark, 1928) p. 168.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Michael G. Eckstein and Zara Steiner, 'The Sarajevo Crisis' in F.H. Hinsley (ed), *British Foreign Policy Under Sir Edward Grey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 397-410.

³³ Bertie to Grey, 30 July, 8:15pm, Telegram 95, in Ibid., p. 316.

³⁴ Lichnowsky to Jagow, 29 July 1914, Telegram 174, 2:08 pm in Immanuel Geiss (ed) *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 286.

There was a belief among some, that a stronger warning statement from the British might be sufficient to deter German aggression.

The British Government desired now as before to cultivate our previous friendship, and it could stand aside as long as the conflict remained confined to Austria and Russia. But if we (Germany) and France should be involved, then the situation would immediately be altered, and the British Government would, under the circumstances, find itself forced to make up its mind quickly. In that event it would not be practicable to stand aside and wait for any length of time. 'If war breaks out, it will be the greatest catastrophe that the world has ever seen'. It was far from his desire to express any kind of threat; he only wanted to protect me from disappointments and himself from the reproach of bad faith, and had therefore chosen the form of a private explanation.³⁵

As Lichnowsky later put it, Grey issued a warning “couched in very friendly terms, to the effect that England, in the case of a European war, would not be able to remain aloof for very long.”³⁶ Despite the vagueness of Grey's language, there is some evidence the Germans still interpreted it as a threat. Upon reading Lichnowsky's description of the meeting, Kaiser Wilhelm II wrote: “This means they will attack us.”³⁷

Nevertheless, there is also some evidence the Germans remained unsure about Britain's intentions, especially what actions might trigger British intervention. The clearest indication of this is the fact that in the days after July 29th, Lichnowsky continued to ask Grey for clarification. On July 31st, Lichnowsky enquired whether Britain would remain neutral, to which Grey reportedly replied, “if the conflict became general, Great Britain would not be able to remain neutral, and especially that if France were involved Great Britain would be drawn in.”³⁸ As Lichnowsky reported back to Berlin, when he asked Grey the following day “whether he could give me a definite declaration on the neutrality of Great Britain,” he was told that should the Germans “violate Belgian neutrality in a war with France, a reversal of public opinion would take place that would make it difficult for the Government here to adopt an attitude of friendly neutrality.”³⁹ As will be discussed further below, Grey's non-threatening and ambiguous language was later held up as an example of the sort of language to *avoid* when attempting to deter a war.

Failure Revisited

The lesson ‘identified’ after war erupted in August 1914, namely to avoid ambiguity in warning messages, was revisited in the late 1930s during the Sudeten crisis. Despite being critical of Sir Edward Grey's failure to deliver a strong warning to Germany, British policymakers nevertheless repeated the same mistakes they criticized Grey for when trying to deter Adolf Hitler. In September 1938, the British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Nicholas Henderson, recommended that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain write a letter to Hitler warning him not to attack Czechoslovakia. As a means of framing the warning message, Henderson suggested the letter explicitly mention the 1914 analogy because after the First World War erupted, Britain was reproached “for not having made her position known beforehand.”⁴⁰ Henderson insisted it was “better to speak straight out now than wait till too late.”⁴¹

³⁵ Lichnowsky to Jagow, 29 July 1914, 6:39 pm, Telegram 178, in *Ibid.*, p. 289.

³⁶ Lichnowsky, *Heading for the Abyss*, p. 12

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Paul Cambon to Viviani, 31 July 1914, Despatch 357, in Geiss, *July 1914.*, p. 327.

³⁹ Lichnowsky to Jagow, 1 August 1914, Telegram 212, in *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁴⁰ Sir N. Henderson (Berlin) to Viscount Halifax, September 12, 1938, [C 9619/1941/18], DPBO.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Chamberlain adopted a polite rather than threatening tone when speaking to Hitler, making only ambiguous references to the possibility of Britain going to war against Germany.

In his conversations with Hitler at Berchtesgaden on September 15, 1938, Chamberlain explicitly referred to the 1914 analogy. According to Chamberlain's account of the meeting, he told Hitler, "after 1914 it was said that if we had then told Germany that we would have come in, there would have been no war."⁴² Therefore, Chamberlain continued, "if nations went to war it was desirable that they should understand beforehand what were the necessary implications, and that he (Hitler) would have some justification for complaint against me if I allowed him to think that in no circumstances would we go to war, when in fact there might well be conditions when we might have to come in."⁴³ The German minutes of the meeting convey a similar account: "After 1914 England had been reproached on many sides because she had not made her intentions clear enough. The war might perhaps have been avoided, these critics objected, if England had taken up a clearer attitude ... No reproach could be made against England for giving this warning: on the contrary, she could have been criticised for failing to give it."⁴⁴ Yet as the minutes of the meeting make clear, apart from Chamberlain referring to the 1914 analogy to highlight the dangers of not delivering a strong warning, he still failed to deliver a strong warning. As with Grey's private conversations with Lichnowsky, Chamberlain adopted a polite rather than threatening tone when speaking to Hitler, making only ambiguous references to the possibility of Britain going to war against Germany.

Months earlier, at a time when there were similar concerns about a German attack on Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain delivered a speech in the House of Commons on March 24, 1938 in which he justified a reluctance to provide formal security guarantees to the Czechs and then combined this with a vague warning: "if war broke out it would be unlikely to be confined to those who have assumed such obligations. ... Other countries would almost immediately become involved. This is especially true in the case of two countries like Great Britain and France."⁴⁵ As the political crisis intensified in subsequent months, Chamberlain was again under pressure to clarify British intentions. Rather than issue a stronger warning himself, he chose instead to delegate the matter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, at a Conservative Party conference in Lanark, Scotland.⁴⁶ Notably, 10 Downing Street briefed journalists in advance to expect a major policy announcement.⁴⁷ As Simon later wrote: "every sentence in my speech about Czechoslovakia was, of course, agreed with Halifax (Foreign Secretary). The substance of what I said amounted to a warning that if Hitler used force against Czechoslovakia, it might well be impossible to localise the resulting war, and we might ourselves be involved. ... This was, in substance, repeating what the Prime Minister had said earlier in the year."⁴⁸

In his August 28 speech, Simon stated: "The beginning of a conflict is like the beginning of a fire in a high wind. It may be limited at the start but who can say how far it would spread or how much destruction it would do or how many may be called upon to beat it out? ... This very

⁴² Notes by Mr. Chamberlain of his conversation with Herr Hitler at Berchtesgaden on September 15, 1938, [C 10084/1941/18], DPBO.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Translation of notes made by Herr Schmidt of Mr. Chamberlain's conversation with Herr Hitler at Berchtesgaden, September 15, 1938, [C 11970/11169/18], DPBO.

⁴⁵ Cited in "Premier's Statement of Policy: No Direct Pledge to Protect Czechoslovakia", *The Manchester Guardian*, March 25, 1938.

⁴⁶ The warning's messenger, content, and method of delivery all came under criticism, as illustrated by the following American newspaper editorial: "couched in the measured, subtle, somewhat ambiguous phrases that diplomats love. The eagerly awaited, well-advertised warning to which all the chancelleries of the world were listening, was delivered to an otherwise unimportant Conservative Party meeting at Lanark by Sir John Simon." Joseph Driscoll, "War is Likely to Embroil Her, Britain Warns Hitler", *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1938.

⁴⁷ Joseph Driscoll, "Beware War with Czechs, Britain Will Warn Hitler", *The Washington Post*, August 26, 1938.

⁴⁸ *Retrospect: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Viscount Simon* (London: Hutchinson, 1952), pp. 244-245.

case of Czechoslovakia may be so critical for the future of Europe that it would be impossible to assume a limit to the disturbance that a conflict might involve, and everyone in every country who considers the consequences has to bear that in mind." Even within the British Government it was recognized this warning statement was insufficient to deter Hitler. As Foreign Secretary Halifax noted in a Cabinet meeting several days later "The only deterrent which would be likely to be effective would be an announcement that if Germany invaded Czechoslovakia we should declare war upon her. He thought this might well prove an effective deterrent."⁴⁹ The problem, however, was that this sort of announcement could not be kept secret, it would divide public opinion throughout the British Empire, nor was it certain the British would choose to carry out the threat, particularly as no preparations had been made.⁵⁰ A related issue, mentioned shortly afterwards by the British Ambassador in Berlin, was that public warnings were more likely to have the opposite effect as intended since Hitler would be afraid of appearing to concede due to "outside pressure."⁵¹

As a public warning, Simon's speech received a good deal of public criticism. The reaction in the press is of interest because his words were not only viewed as ineffectual in hindsight, but were widely regarded as such at the time. One British editorial complained: "Does he (Hitler) believe that the warnings uttered by Mr. Neville Chamberlain and Sir John Simon are serious, or does he think them bluff. The answer can hardly be in doubt. Hitler is not convinced that if Germany goes to war with Czechoslovakia the conflict will spread and, in the end, involve the Western powers."⁵² According to an American editorial: "For months the British have attempted to head off such an adventure by Der Fuehrer by repeated gentlemanly warnings that he might start a fire which could not be beaten out and which would probably find Britain, possibly joined by the United States, on the side of France and Czechoslovakia. From all accounts, the warnings have had no effect."⁵³ Another American editorial observed:

The hesitancy and uncertainty of British policy in July 1914 reappeared in London today as the Czechoslovak-German quarrel approached its decisive stage ... Hitler and his advisers apparently believe Britain will not fight if they invade Czechoslovakia... there were newspaper warnings in 1914, yet the Kaiser did not believe the British would intervene. The analogy becomes more striking every day. Less than a fortnight ago Sir John Simon refused to pledge British help to the Czechoslovaks, but said a German attack might drag Britain into another World War. This was just as true but just as vague as Sir Edward Grey's warning on July 25, 1914 that although public opinion would not sanction going to war for Serbia 'we may be drawn into it by the development of other issues'.⁵⁴

Around this time, Winston Churchill proposed a stronger message be sent to "increase the deterrents against violent action by Hitler."⁵⁵ He suggested to Halifax the delivery of a Joint Note to be signed by Britain, France, Russia, and potentially the United States, protesting German threats to Czechoslovakia. For Churchill, the wording of the note was less important than the fact it had been delivered by the key powers. As he separately told the Soviet Ambassador to the UK, Ivan Maisky, "A demarche of this kind, which would undoubtedly

⁴⁹ CAB 23/94/10, Cabinet meeting minutes, 30 August 1938, UK National Archives (UKNA)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Viscount Halifax to Sir E. Phipps (Paris), September 5, 1938, No. 2002 [C 9218/1941/18].

⁵² "Britain and Hitler: A Further Warning? Fuehrer Not Yet Convinced", *Manchester Guardian*, September 9, 1938.

⁵³ Frank Kelley, "British Find Hitler Hard to Convince: Despite Warnings, Fuehrer Still Believes London is Bluffing", *The Washington Post*, September 11, 1938.

⁵⁴ Ferdinand Kuhn Jr., "British Wavering; See Climax Near," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1938.

⁵⁵ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Gathering Storm, Vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 262.

Winston Churchill proposed a stronger message be sent to "increase the deterrents against violent action by Hitler."

receive the moral support of Roosevelt, would scare Hitler.”⁵⁶ Maisky concurred, telling his superiors in Moscow, “A joint declaration made by Great Britain, France and the USSR, with the guaranteed moral support of Roosevelt, could do more than anything else to prevent violent acts on the part of Hitler.”⁵⁷

No such warning message was ever composed. Instead, the dispute over Czechoslovakia was temporarily settled at Munich in late September. Following the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the prospect arose of a German invasion of Poland, and questions were raised about the possibility of Britain providing a formal security guarantee, or at the very least issuing some other type of public warning, to deter this. Although there was no evidence at the time that Germany was planning an invasion of Poland, Chamberlain, cognizant of the criticism of his earlier failure to deter Hitler over Czechoslovakia, announced in the House of Commons:

I now have to inform the House that during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. ... I may add that the French Government have authorised me to make it plain that they stand in the same position in this matter as do His Majesty's Government.⁵⁸

According to Halifax: “There had been many rumours in circulation about Germany's intentions against Poland, of which ... we had no official confirmation. None the less, we thought it would be valuable at the present juncture that there should be no doubt as to the position of this country.”⁵⁹

Within days of the “temporary assurance” conveyed in Chamberlain's speech, it was announced a “permanent agreement” would follow.⁶⁰ However, largely due to a reluctance to immediately enter into a formal agreement, the drafting of the treaty was delayed by months.⁶¹ The new “mutual assistance” agreement was eventually announced on August 25, 1939. It contained the pledge that Britain would provide Poland with “all the support and assistance in its power” in response to German aggression.⁶² This commitment proved insufficient as a deterrent. Why it did so remains debated though among the key reasons cited was that the commitment came too late and lacked military credibility, particularly as no corresponding military preparations had been made.

Two years later, an attempt was made to deter Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia with a warning message. In July 1941, the British military commander in the Far East, Air Chief Marshal Brooke-Popham, recommended issuing a joint British, American and Dutch warning to prevent Japan from occupying Indochina. He noted, “If a warning of these proposed measures (referring to economic sanctions, including an embargo of iron ore) were issued in

⁵⁶ Gabriel Gorodetsky (ed) *The Maisky Diaries: The Wartime Revelations of Stalin's Ambassador in London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 122.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

⁵⁸ Text of Chamberlain speech, March 31, 1939. [The Avalon Project : The British Bluebook \(yale.edu\)](https://www.avalonproject.org/docs/1939/193903311.shtml).

⁵⁹ Viscount Halifax to Sir W. Seeds (Moscow), No. 232 [C.4528/54/18], Foreign Office, March 31, 1939.

⁶⁰ Anglo-Polish communique issued on April 6, 1939, [The Avalon Project : The British Bluebook \(yale.edu\)](https://www.avalonproject.org/docs/1939/193904061.shtml).

⁶¹ Wladyslaw W. Kulski, “The Anglo-Polish Agreement of August 25, 1939: Highlight of My Diplomatic Career,” *The Polish Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1/2 (1976), pp. 23-40.

⁶² Agreement of Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and Poland, August 25, 1939. [The Avalon Project : The British Bluebook \(yale.edu\)](https://www.avalonproject.org/docs/1939/193908251.shtml).

The commitment came too late and lacked military credibility, particularly as no corresponding military preparations had been made.

advance, it might suffice to deter the Japanese.”⁶³ The US Ambassador to Japan, Joseph C. Grew, similarly believed “A clear unambiguous statement of such intentions might conceivably exert a deterrent effect,” but only if the statement were made privately, and well in advance of any Japanese move to occupy Indochina.⁶⁴ Grew insisted such a warning was needed to ensure there was no “possible misconception on the part of the Japanese Government as to the determination of the United States to take positive action in the event of certain contingencies.”⁶⁵ However, while this matter was still under consideration, the Japanese occupied Indochina. Shortly thereafter, President Roosevelt issued a veiled warning to deter further Japanese aggression. On July 24, 1941, Roosevelt told the Japanese ambassador that “if Japan attempted to seize oil supplies by force in the Netherlands East Indies, the Dutch would, without the shadow of doubt, resist, the British would immediately come to their assistance, war would result between Japan, the British and the Dutch and, in view of our policy of assisting Great Britain, an exceedingly serious situation would immediately result.”⁶⁶ As can be discerned from the substance and tone of Roosevelt’s warning, it differed little from the British warnings to Germany in 1914 and 1938.

Apart from the Japanese threat to Southeast Asia, Soviet leaders were also concerned Japan might attack the Soviet Union in support of their German allies and requested the United States to issue a warning. Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov told Roosevelt’s special assistant, Harry Hopkins, that “the one thing he thought would keep Japan from making an aggressive move would be for the President to find some appropriate means” of giving Japan a warning, such as a statement that the US would come to the assistance of the Soviet Union if it were attacked.⁶⁷

In addition, the US was asked to issue a warning statement to deter a Japanese attack on Thailand. To persuade the US about the merits of conveying a warning, the British Ambassador in Washington observed that due to “Japan’s fear of the United States ... nothing is likely to deter the Japanese ... so much as a warning from that quarter.”⁶⁸ The Dutch Foreign Minister concurred, stating “nothing short of a warning to Japan that a move into Thailand would constitute a *casus belli*, would prevent the Japanese from eventually walking in.”⁶⁹ Churchill also recommended a simultaneous British, American and Dutch warning to the Japanese that further encroachments in Asia would lead to immediate counter-measures and potentially a war.⁷⁰ For Churchill, “only the stiffest warning from the United States could possibly have any concrete counteracting effect.”⁷¹ Initially, however, Roosevelt was skeptical, and did not consider that “a stern warning would produce the desired effect.”⁷² He was also concerned that a public and joint warning was likely to “precipitate further Japanese

⁶³ Referred to in: The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State, July 22, 1941, FRUS, 1941, The Far East, Vol. V.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Memorandum by the Acting Secretary of State, July 24, 1941, FRUS, Japan, 1931-1941, Vol. II.

⁶⁷ Memorandum by Harry L. Hopkins, Special Assistant to President Roosevelt, July 31, 1941, FRUS, 1941, the Far East, Vol. IV.

⁶⁸ The British Ambassador (Halifax) to the Acting Secretary of State, August 2, 1941, FRUS, 1941, The Far East, Vol. IV.

⁶⁹ Memorandum by the Minister to the Netherlands Government in Exile, August 8, 1941, FRUS, 1941, The Far East, Vol. V.

⁷⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Under Secretary (Welles), August 11, 1941, FRUS, 1941, General, The Soviet Union, Vol. I.

⁷¹ Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles) of a Conversation with the British Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Cadogan), August 9, 1941, FRUS, 1941, General, The Soviet Union, Vol. 1.

⁷² Draft of Proposed Communication to the Japanese Ambassador (Nomura), August 15, 1941, FRUS, 1941, The Far East, Vol. IV.

aggression rather than to discourage it.”⁷³ Nevertheless Roosevelt eventually conceded to convey a national warning rather than a joint one.

The subsequent State Department effort to compose a warning highlighted the overriding prerogative to significantly tone down the warning and to balance the warning with a “friendly gesture,” thereby weakening its deterrent effect. The original draft of the warning stated the United States “will be forced to take immediately any and all steps of whatsoever character it deems necessary in its own security notwithstanding the possibility that such further steps on its part may result in conflict between the two countries.”⁷⁴ As the tone of this statement was viewed as too belligerent, it was changed to: “will be compelled to take immediately any and all steps which it may deem necessary toward safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of the United States and American nationals and toward insuring the safety and security of the United States.”⁷⁵ Notably, when Roosevelt read this statement to the Japanese Ambassador he added that it was not to be considered as an oral statement, but was intended to be relayed to the Japanese Government as “reference material.”⁷⁶

This warning was later characterized as being “pitched in a minor key”, particularly in contrast to a proposed British warning, intended to be delivered publicly and simultaneously by the British, American and Dutch leaders. According to the proposed British text: “Any further encroachment by Japan in the Southwestern Pacific would produce a situation in which the United States Government would be compelled to take counter measures even though these might lead to war between the United States and Japan.”⁷⁷ Due to the opposition of US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who viewed this warning as too aggressive, the warning was never sent.

Ironically, despite the weak verbal messages Roosevelt conveyed to the Japanese, they were actually sufficient to convince Tokyo of America’s intent to fight in the Pacific if Japan continued its military expansion in the region, particularly to the territory controlled by the British and Dutch. Indeed, the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor was predicated on the belief that the United States posed a military threat.⁷⁸

Ambiguous Public Warnings

A notable instance of an ambiguous *public* warning being blamed for the outbreak of war was the widely held belief that Dean Acheson’s failure in his January 12, 1950 National Press Club speech to mention South Korea as falling within the US defence perimeter in Asia led North Korea, and its Soviet and Chinese allies, to pursue a war of aggression in June 1950. Whilst there is no conclusive evidence Acheson’s speech was a direct cause of the war, it was nevertheless *interpreted* both at the time, and thereafter, as a policy statement that

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See discussion in: William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War* (New York: Harper, 1953), pp. 695-697.

⁷⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Under Secretary of State (Welles), August 10, 1941, FRUS, 1941, General, The Soviet Union, Vol. I. It was proposed the other two governments deliver the same text but with the British and Netherlands substituted in place of the United States.

⁷⁸ Bruce M. Russett, “Pearl Harbor: Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1967, pp. 89-106.

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encouraged rather than discouraged aggression.⁷⁹ Shortly after the speech, the South Korean Ambassador to the United States complained that Acheson's remarks, combined with a recent failure of the US House of Representatives to agree to further economic aid for Seoul, had led to a public perception "as to whether the United States might now be considered as having abandoned Korea."⁸⁰ Critics later claimed the speech gave North Korea a 'green light' to attack South Korea by strengthening the beliefs of Stalin, Mao and Kim Il-Sung that such an attack would not lead to a military confrontation with the United States and therefore had a higher chance of success. According to this criticism, even if the US had no intention of defending South Korea, it was still a mistake to openly broadcast this rather than leaving it ambiguous.

What is notable about the Acheson speech is that it reflected a policy that was inconsistent with the policy the US eventually adopted following North Korea's invasion. In other words, the speech gave the impression the US would *not* directly intervene following a North Korean aggression, whereas in fact the US immediately intervened. Thus, had America's actual response been anticipated and announced beforehand as a warning, it may have had the effect of deterring the war in the first place. The problem, however, was that until the war occurred, US policymakers were unwilling to seriously entertain the possibility that it might need to go to war to defend South Korea.⁸¹

Upon learning of the invasion, US policymakers grew concerned North Korea's attack might constitute the first in a series of similar attacks by the Communist bloc. Despite the lack of evidence that a larger war was being contemplated by the Soviet Union and Chinese, the fear existed that if the US did not issue a public warning, as well as react militarily in defence of South Korea, then deterrence would be undermined. In this sense, a 'preventive deterrence' warning was deemed necessary. To this end, Truman made a public statement on June 27, 1950. In addition to announcing the dispatch of US forces to defend South Korea, Truman's statement outlined other steps the US would take to prevent conflict from erupting elsewhere in Asia, particularly a Chinese attack on Formosa or Indochina:

...the occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area. Accordingly, I have ordered the 7th Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. ... I have similarly directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France and the Associated States in Indochina and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close working relations with those forces.⁸²

Several months later, in an effort to deter United Nations forces from crossing the 38th parallel into North Korea, the Chinese conveyed several warnings, both through an Indian diplomatic mediator, as well as openly broadcast. Chinese Foreign Minister Chou En-lai publicly warned on September 30, 1950: "The Chinese people ... will not supinely tolerate seeing their

⁷⁹ According to a study by James Matray based on "evidence from recently released Soviet documents" showed that "Acheson's address had little if any impact on Communist deliberations." James I. Matray, 'Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Re-examined', *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, Spring 2002, p. 28. Notably, General Douglas MacArthur had given a speech in March 1949 that also placed South Korea outside the US defence perimeter.

⁸⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, by Mr. John Z. Williams of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, January 20, 1950, FRUS, 1950, Korea, Vol. VII.

⁸¹ Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Re-examined."

⁸² Statement by the President on the Situation in Korea, June 27, 1950.

Even if the US had no intention of defending South Korea, it was still a mistake to openly broadcast this rather than leaving it ambiguous.

neighbors savagely invaded by the imperialists.”⁸³ The tone of a subsequent Foreign Ministry statement, issued on October 10, 1950, was also quite cautionary: “The Chinese people cannot stand idly by with regard to such a serious situation created by the invasion of Korea by the United States and its accomplice countries and to the dangerous trend toward extending the war.”⁸⁴ Thereafter, the Chinese avoided additional statements of this kind, and none formally committing themselves to intervention in Korea.

Many reasons have been attributed to this failure to heed Chinese warnings of intervention, among them the belief Chinese forces were so poorly equipped they would suffer a military disaster. Probably the most credible explanation is that earlier Chinese threats, particularly to invade Taiwan, never materialized, leading to a widespread belief that Chinese threats regarding Korea were bluffs.⁸⁵ As one scholar concluded: “Had the United States believed the threats, it might have refrained from crossing the parallel. Since neither China nor the United States appears to have wanted to fight the other, successful signaling on China’s part might have avoided a tragedy.”⁸⁶ Regardless of the merit of these explanations, the cautionary rather than threatening tone of the Chinese warnings almost certainly reinforced US skepticism of their intent to intervene.

A similar situation occurred with the failure to provide a strong warning to Saddam Hussein ahead of his August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The Bush administration, and particularly US Ambassador to Iraq April C. Glaspie, were later pilloried for conveying the impression to Saddam that although the US was *concerned* about Iraq’s military build-up, it was essentially indifferent to the country’s border dispute with Kuwait, and that Washington had no commitments to defend it. For instance, one week prior to Iraq’s invasion, a State Department official publicly reaffirmed the US did not have “any defence treaties with Kuwait, and there are no special defence or security commitments to Kuwait.”⁸⁷ The only reference to supporting Kuwait was that the US “also remains strongly committed to supporting the individual and collective self-defence of our friends in the Gulf.”⁸⁸ Likewise, President Bush sent a three-paragraph message to Saddam that only included the statement: “United States and Iraq both have a strong interest in preserving the peace and stability of the Middle East. For this reason, we believe these responsibilities are best resolved by peaceful means and not by threats involving military force or conflict.”⁸⁹

It has been argued US officials at the time assessed an Iraqi invasion as unlikely and were therefore reluctant to threaten Saddam fearing it would undermine relations.⁹⁰ Consequently, the non-threatening messages the US communicated were probably interpreted as a ‘green light’ rather than as a “stern warning to cease and desist.”⁹¹ As with the Korea example cited earlier, had Saddam been told in advance the US was willing to use military force to eject his

⁸³ Cited in Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, “China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 121, 1990, p. 102.

⁸⁴ Cited in Kai Quek, “Discontinuities in signaling behavior upon the decision for war,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2015, p. 291.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 279–317.

⁸⁶ Anne E. Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 20.

⁸⁷ Cited in: Elaine Sciolino and Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Gave Iraq Little Reason Not to Mount Kuwait Assault: Before Invasion, Soft U.S. Words for Iraq”, *The New York Times*, September 23, 1990.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Cited in R. Jeffrey Smith, “State Department Cable Traffic on Iraq – Kuwait Tensions, July 1990,” *Washington Post*, October 21, 1992.

⁹⁰ Michael R. Gordon, “A Dispute on Warning to Iraq: Pentagon Objected to Bush’s Pre-war Message to Iraq”, *The New York Times*, October 25, 1992.

⁹¹ Barry R. Schneider, *Deterrence and Saddam Hussein: Lessons from the 1990–1991 Gulf War* (US Air Force Counterproliferation Center Future Warfare Series No. 47).

The cautionary rather than threatening tone of the Chinese warnings almost certainly reinforced US skepticism of their intent to intervene.

forces from Kuwait, the invasion may never have taken place. Similarly, US policymakers were hesitant to seriously contemplate their own policy response to an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, despite Iraq's military build-up along the Kuwaiti border making this a plausible contingency.

Deterrence by Policy Clarification

Among the problems of leaving treaty obligations and other deterrence warnings ambiguous is that adversaries may attempt to exploit loopholes. One such instance was the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, sparked by Chinese shelling of the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu controlled by Taiwan. Despite having dealt with a crisis over the same territory several years earlier (the 1954-1955 First Taiwan Strait crisis), the Eisenhower administration still struggled with how to craft and deliver an effective deterrence message. After some hesitation, it was decided the principal verbal warning would come in the form of a clarification of an earlier policy statement.

On August 23, 1958, China began shelling the offshore islands following several weeks of a military build-up. As one senior policymaker informed US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: "there is need to warn the Chinese Communists that, if they attempt to seize Quemoy or Matsu by assault or interdiction, they run the clear risk of US military countermeasures ... This seems to be the most effective way to preserve these islands and the peace."⁹² Initially, an explicit public statement was dismissed; instead an "effective confidential diplomatic channel" was the preferred option. Specifically, this referred to conveying a message to Soviet diplomats that the US would oppose any Chinese seizure or interdiction of the offshore islands.⁹³ A key reason the Soviet option was preferred was due to the belief that Moscow would be particularly concerned about the prospect of being dragged into a war and therefore likely to be more effective than the Americans in conveying a warning to their Chinese ally. As the Eisenhower administration equivocated and the Chinese buildup continued, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended both conveying a public warning as well as setting in motion the military measures to "make good on our warning."⁹⁴ They insisted a warning should only be conveyed if the US was serious about defending the islands.⁹⁵ But even if an explicit threat wasn't conveyed, it was argued a cautionary warning should still be issued. One possibility mentioned was for the President or Secretary of State to announce: "a Communist attack of the Offshore Islands would be disturbing to the peace of Asia."⁹⁶

The option the administration settled upon was to publicly release a letter written by John Foster Dulles to the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Thomas Morgan, in which he addressed US policy on the issue. In the letter, Dulles included a deliberately vague warning: "I think it would be highly hazardous for anyone to assume that if the Chinese Communists were to attempt to change this situation by force and now to attack and seek to conquer these islands, that it could be a limited operation. It would, I fear, constitute a threat to the peace of the area."⁹⁷ The warning appeared in the press on August 23, the

⁹² Memorandum from Acting Secretary of State Herter to Secretary of State Dulles, August 15, 1958, FRUS, 1958-1960, China, Vol. XIX.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to Secretary of State Dulles, August 20, 1958, FRUS, 1958-1960, China, Vol. XIX.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Cited in Robert J. Watson, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense: Into the Missile Age, 1956-1960* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 227.

It was decided the principal verbal warning would come in the form of a clarification of an earlier policy statement.

same day China began an artillery bombardment of Quemoy, thus too late to affect Chinese calculations.

China's bombardment drastically raised the stakes in an international crisis the Eisenhower administration had long been reluctant to become involved in. Until that time, US policy with respect to protection of the offshore islands was deliberately ambiguous.⁹⁸ When asked in a high-level policy meeting on August 25th whether he would consider making a public statement, Eisenhower declined because statements "could be dangerous as they tended, sometimes unnecessarily, to limit and commit us."⁹⁹ Although the US maintained a mutual defence agreement with Taiwan, and was prepared to defend the main island, Formosa, policy towards the offshore islands was guided by the 1955 Formosa Resolution. This Congressional resolution stated that the US would defend the offshore islands if the President determined that the defence of those islands was necessary for the defence of Formosa.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the key question mark hanging over the administration was whether Eisenhower would issue a statement clarifying the matter, thereby committing the US to the defence of the offshore islands. In his memoir, Eisenhower highlighted his initial preference for leaving the policy ambiguous: "We could not say that we would defend with the power of the United States every protruding rock that was claimed by the Nationalists as an 'offshore island'. On the other hand, if we specified exactly what islands we would defend, we simply invited the Reds to occupy all the others of those groups."¹⁰¹

With the looming threat of China attempting to blockade or seize the island, some senior US military officials advocated issuing a nuclear threat.¹⁰² However, this was opposed as being too drastic an option.¹⁰³ Instead, the principle deterrent to aggression relied on convincing the Chinese that the US would defend the islands, whereas if they were convinced the US would not defend the islands then this would increase the prospect of war. As such, a warning conveying US determination to defend the islands was deemed sufficient at that stage of the crisis for deterrence. After further delay, Eisenhower agreed to Dulles releasing a statement that would try to balance committing to the defence of the offshore islands without actually formally saying so. Eisenhower had originally planned to issue the statement himself, but then chose to let Dulles deliver it instead so that it left open the option of the President delivering a possible second statement based on the reaction to the first.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ For a useful discussion of this point, see: Morton H. Halperin, *The Taiwan Straits Crisis: An Analysis*, Memorandum RM-4803-ISA, RAND, January 1966, pp. 46-52.

⁹⁹ Memorandum of Meeting, August 25, 1958, FRUS, 1958-1960, China, Vol. XIX.

¹⁰⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), p. 294.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

¹⁰² The Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed a public statement that read: "The US Government will not permit the loss of the offshore islands to Chinese Communist aggression. In case of major air or amphibious attacks which in the opinion of the US seriously endanger the islands, the United States will concur in CHINAT (Chinese Nationalist) attack of CHICOM (Chinese Communist) close-in mainland bases. In such an event, the United States will reinforce the CHINAT to the extent necessary to make sure the security of these islands. This action may include joining in the attack of CHICOM bases, with atomic weapons used if needed to gain the military objective." Cited in Halperin: *The 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis: A Documented History* | RAND. Even Dulles privately noted that if the Chinese "believe the US would actively intervene to throw back an assault, perhaps using nuclear weapons, it is probable there would be no attempt to take Quemoy by assault and the situation might quiet down, as in 1955." Memorandum Prepared by Secretary of State Dulles, September 4, 1958, FRUS, 1958-1960, China, Vol. XIX.

¹⁰³ Zhang, Shu Guang. *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 246

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum of Conference with President Eisenhower, September 4, 1958, FRUS, 1958-1960, China, Vol. XIX

With the looming threat of China attempting to blockade or seize the island, some senior US military officials advocated issuing a nuclear threat.

On September 4th, Dulles issued a public statement that essentially reiterated an ambiguous position, while hinting the US was likely to defend the islands: “we have recognized that the securing and protecting of Quemoy and Matsu have increasingly become related to the defence of Taiwan ... Military dispositions have been made by the United States so that a Presidential determination, if made, would be followed by action both timely and effective.”¹⁰⁵ To emphasize the gravity of the situation, the statement added: “Any such naked use of force would pose an issue far transcending the offshore islands and even the security of Taiwan (Formosa). It would forecast a widespread use of force in the Far East which would endanger vital free world positions and the security of the United States.”¹⁰⁶ One week later, Eisenhower reiterated this wider link in a televised national address.¹⁰⁷ In the address he clarified any ambiguities regarding whether the Formosa Resolution applied in this case:

Today, the Chinese Communists announce, repeatedly and officially, that their military operations against Quemoy are preliminary to attack on Formosa. So it is clear that the Formosa Straits Resolution of 1955 applies to the present situation. If the present bombardment and harassment of Quemoy should be converted into a major assault, with which the local defenders could not cope, then we would be compelled to face precisely the situation that Congress visualized in 1955.¹⁰⁸

In subsequent weeks, both sides pulled back from the brink. On October 6, 1958, the Chinese Government announced that it had halted the shelling of the offshore islands. For all practical purposes the crisis had ended.

US and Soviet Deterrence Warning Messages Prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis

The lead-up to the Cuban Missile Crisis provides several useful illustrations of deterrence warning message failures. Following intelligence the US received of a Soviet conventional military build-up in Cuba during the summer 1962, and due to concerns within the Kennedy administration they would be attacked by domestic critics for not taking the build-up seriously, the White House released the following cautionary statement on September 4, 1962:

There is no evidence of any organized combat force in Cuba from any Soviet bloc country; of military bases provided to Russia; of a violation of the 1934 treaty relating to Guantanamo; of the presence of offensive ground-to-ground missiles; or of other significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance. Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise.¹⁰⁹

The reference to ‘gravest issues’ was inserted late in the drafting process. Earlier that day, Kennedy and his advisers debated the wording of the statement. An earlier version referred to

¹⁰⁵ Authorized Statement by the Secretary of State Following His Review with the President of the Situation in the Formosa Straits Area, September 04, 1958. Text available at: [Authorized Statement by the Secretary of State Following His Review With the President of the Situation in the Formosa Straits Area | The American Presidency Project \(ucsb.edu\)](#).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ [Radio and Television Report to the American People Regarding the Situation in the Formosa Straits. | The American Presidency Project \(ucsb.edu\)](#).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Editorial Note, No. 411, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962.

Among the issues Kennedy and his advisers considered was where to draw a 'red line' in terms of what Soviet actions were so unacceptable they would lead to a US military attack on Cuba.

"would warrant immediate and appropriate (forceful) action."¹¹⁰ However, these words were not included in the final version.

Among the issues Kennedy and his advisers considered was where to draw a 'red line' in terms of what Soviet actions were so unacceptable they would lead to a US military attack on Cuba. As one administration official noted, "To the extent that the Soviets are probing to see how far they can go, a firm commitment of US prestige to stopping the build-up of a nuclear military threat in Cuba could cause the Soviets to weigh the risks of provoking us into action in a part of the world where we hold all the geographic advantages."¹¹¹ This official argued a further advantage of issuing a "warning statement keyed to the nuclear threat" was that it would underscore "US tolerance and patience," and that the "US image would be improved by statements and action showing determination of purpose and a clear concept of vital national interest."¹¹² On the other hand, by confining the warning statement to a 'nuclear threat', this was viewed as inferring the US intent "to do nothing unless Cuba actually established a nuclear capability, which would tend to increase Castro's freedom of action in other matters and lower the morale of Cuban resistance elements."¹¹³ Therefore, it was advised that a warning statement should "not be confined only to the nuclear aspect of the Cuban military buildup, and should not be made at all unless the US is prepared to take action to thwart the buildup."¹¹⁴ In terms of the form such a warning might take, another senior official suggested "two major statements: one by the President; the other, a substantial speech" by the Secretary of State.¹¹⁵ It was suggested the 'general tone' of the latter speech should be "low key, factual, somewhat legalistic, confident, with its warning to Moscow and Havana."¹¹⁶

The importance of the domestic political context of Kennedy's statement cannot be understated, particularly in relation to how it was formulated as well as understood by the Soviets. According to Jeremy Pressman, "Kennedy issued the statements to combat domestic critics, not because he ever thought the Soviets would actually consider deploying offensive weapons in Cuba" and that absent the "press coverage and Republican pressure, the wording, timing, and public nature of the statements might have been different or a statement might not have been made at all."¹¹⁷ As Alexander George and Richard Smoke further observed:

Kennedy's statements were issued more out of desire to calm the American public than to warn the leaders of the Soviet Union. ... It seems likely that the Soviet leaders heavily discounted the President's declarations, perhaps virtually to the point of ignoring them, precisely because they were so obviously motivated by internal political needs.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰ Transcript of meeting on September 4, 1962 in Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow (eds) *The Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy, Vol. 2, September–October 21, 1962* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001).

¹¹¹ Memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kaysen) to the President's Military Aide (Clifton), September 1, 1962, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Memorandum from the Counselor of the Department of State and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council (Rostow) to President Kennedy, September 3, 1962, FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Jeremy Pressman, "September statements, October missiles, November elections: Domestic politics, foreign policy making, and the Cuban missile crisis," *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2001, p. 80.

¹¹⁸ Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 467.

Although Khrushchev might have responded by changing course and recalling the weapons, he chose not to do so, and it is in this sense the warnings were ineffective.

The Soviets responded to Kennedy's statement with a lengthy one of their own. On September 11, 1962, they authorized the TASS news agency to publish a statement that included the following warning: "one cannot now attack Cuba and expect that the aggressor will be free from punishment for this attack. If this attack is made, it will be the beginning of the unleashing of war."¹¹⁹ In addition, the statement warned: "We have said and we repeat that if war is unleashed, if the aggressor makes an attack on one state or another, and this state asks for assistance, the Soviet Union can render assistance to any peace-loving state – and not only to Cuba – from its own territory."¹²⁰ Whilst on its own this mention of rendering assistance from Soviet territory might be interpreted as a reference to nuclear use, any ambiguity was removed with the subsequent reference to: "just as it was ready in 1956 to render military assistance to Egypt at the time of the Anglo-French-Israeli aggression in the Suez Canal region."¹²¹ In 1956, the Soviets had made veiled nuclear threats against both the British and French unless they adhered to a UN ceasefire resolution.¹²² According to a CIA evaluation of the Soviet statement: "The Soviets have once again used deliberately vague and ambiguous language to avoid a clear cut obligation of military support for Cuba in the event of an American invasion. Nevertheless, they appear to have taken a long step in this statement toward staking the prestige of the USSR on the (Communist) Bloc's ability to ensure the survival of the Cuban Government."¹²³

In response to the Soviet statement, Kennedy reiterated his earlier warning at a press conference on September 13, 1962: "But let me make this clear once again: If at any time the Communist build-up in Cuba were to endanger or interfere with our security in any way, including ... become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies."¹²⁴ In the same press conference, Kennedy dismissed the Soviet warning. When asked whether the implied Soviet threat of military intervention if the US attacked Cuba would play a major factor in any decision, the president responded in the negative. In Kennedy's view: "the United States will take whatever action the situation as I described it would require. As far as the threat, the United States has been living with threats for a good many years, and in a good many parts of the world."¹²⁵

Among the problems with Kennedy's statements were their timing as the Soviets had previously decided on their course of action and Soviet nuclear-capable missiles were already en route to Cuba. Although Khrushchev might have responded by changing course and recalling the weapons, he chose not to do so, and it is in this sense the warnings were ineffective.¹²⁶ One month later, once the missiles had been discovered, US policymakers reflected on their earlier warnings, and how it now tied the hands of the administration. In a White House meeting on October 16, 1962, Secretary of State Dean Rusk recalled:

¹¹⁹ For text, see: [SOVIET STATEMENT ON U.S. PROVOCATIONS | CIA FOIA \(foia.cia.gov\)](#).

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² [Soviet Threats to Intervene in the Middle East 1956-1973 \(rand.org\)](#).

¹²³ Memorandum for the Acting Director of Central Intelligence, Subject: Implications of the Soviet Warning on Cuba, Office of National Estimates, CIA, September 12, 1962.

¹²⁴ News Conference, President John F. Kennedy, State Department Auditorium, Washington, D.C., September 13, 1962: [News Conference 43, September 13, 1962 | JFK Library](#).

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 166; Raymond L. Garthoff, "US intelligence in the Cuban missile crisis," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1998, pp. 21-22.

Now that statement (referring to the September 4 warning) was not made lightly at that time. These elements that were mentioned were pointing our fingers to things that were very fundamental to us. And it was intended as a clear warning to the Soviet Union that these are matters that we will take with the utmost seriousness. When you talk about the gravest issues, in the general language of international exchange, that means something very serious.¹²⁷

When Kennedy addressed the Soviet nuclear buildup in Cuba publicly for the first time in a televised address on October 22, he issued several additional warnings. The first referred to the continued buildup of offensive missiles: "Should these offensive military preparations continue ... further action will be justified. I have directed the Armed Forces to prepare for any eventualities."¹²⁸ This warning addressed the most immediate problem as Soviet weapons were then believed to be on board ships sailing towards Cuba. The second warning referred to a problem likely to emerge later: "It shall be the policy of this Nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union"¹²⁹ The final warning effectively reaffirmed longstanding US policy with respect to its treaty commitments: "Any hostile move anywhere in the world against the safety and freedom of peoples to whom we are committed – including in particular the brave people of West Berlin – will be met by whatever action is needed."¹³⁰

The language Kennedy employed in his television address was far more direct and threatening than any of his warnings prior to the crisis, despite his use of ambiguous phrases such as "prepare for any eventualities" and "whatever action is needed." More importantly though was Kennedy's decision to deliver a television address and the serious tone he adopted in his delivery. This form of address underscored the gravity of the situation in a way no written communication was likely to convey.

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Detering Allies

Political scientists have mostly failed in identifying cases of deterrence 'success'. In those relatively rare instances in which a case *seems* as though it counts as a success, subsequent research tends to show they have been incorrectly classified as such.¹³¹ One possible exception to this was the case of US warnings to Turkey in 1964 intended to deter a Turkish military intervention in Cyprus. As Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein described, "The case is unambiguous in that Turkey intended to invade Cyprus; deterrence was successful to the degree that it gained a reprieve of ten years."¹³² The principal objection to classifying this as a deterrence success was that a "non-military threat was employed."¹³³ Nevertheless, the case is interesting for two reasons. First, it is a case of one ally warning another. Second, the

¹²⁷ Transcript, Meeting on the Cuban Missile Crisis on 16 October 1962 in Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow (eds), *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 127.

¹²⁸ [Address During the Cuban Missile Crisis | JFK Library](#).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Lebow and Stein, *When Does Deterrence Succeed and How Do We Know?*

¹³² Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence: The Elusive Dependent Variable," *World Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1990, pp. 336-369.

¹³³ Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "Deterrence Failure and Crisis Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1988, pp. 29-45.

framing of the warning is unusual because rather than threatening action, the threat was to withhold action. In a July 5, 1964 letter to Turkish Prime Minister Inonu, President Lyndon Johnson wrote:

... a military intervention in Cyprus by Turkey could lead to a direct involvement by the Soviet Union. I hope you will understand that your NATO Allies have not had a chance to consider whether they have an obligation to protect Turkey against the Soviet Union if Turkey takes a step which results in Soviet intervention without the full consent and understanding of its NATO Allies.¹³⁴

US Undersecretary of State for Policy George Ball referred to Johnson's letter as "the most brutal diplomatic note I have ever seen" and "the diplomatic equivalent of an atomic bomb."¹³⁵ As with any threatening letter of this sort, whilst the overriding imperative was to deter conflict, there was also hesitation lest it lead to a major break in bilateral relations, in this case, amongst NATO allies. Prior to sending this letter, other US officials, including the US Secretary of State, had privately conveyed cautionary warnings.¹³⁶ However, when these attempts were unsuccessful, and the US was informed a Turkish decision to intervene was imminent, Johnson chose to personally issue a stronger statement in a last-ditch effort to deter the Turks. After reading Johnson's letter, Inonu decided to postpone the intervention.¹³⁷

Deterring the Soviets with Non-Military Threats

In the previous section of this paper that dealt with pre-February 24, 2022 warnings to Russia, it was observed non-military threats had failed to deter the invasion of Ukraine, but military threats, especially had they been issued by NATO, might have stood a better chance. Whilst there are many important differences in the two cases, it is nevertheless worthwhile comparing the threats that failed to deter in 2022 with those that were issued in 1980 which may have deterred a Soviet invasion of Poland, or at least contributed significantly to this. In late 1980, domestic political tensions in Poland, combined with a Soviet military buildup and extensive Soviet propaganda campaign blaming Western interference for the discord, led to fears of a Soviet invasion. To deter this, Western governments and institutions issued a series of warnings. As will be discussed in more detail later, the North Atlantic Council issued a communiqué on December 12, 1980 that included a warning to the Soviets not to invade Poland. Ten days before the NATO statement was released, the leaders of the European Economic Community (EEC), then consisting of nine nations, issued their own statement warning that an invasion would result in "very grave consequences."¹³⁸

Immediately following the EEC warning, senior officials in the Carter administration debated the merits of issuing a US warning as well as the most effective means to convey it. At the

¹³⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Turkey, June 5, 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XVI, Cyprus; Greece; Turkey.

¹³⁵ George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 350

¹³⁶ For example: Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, June 4, 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XVI, Cyprus; Greece; Turkey.

¹³⁷ Telegram from the Embassy in Turkey to the Department of State, June 5, 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XVI, Cyprus; Greece; Turkey.

¹³⁸ Cited in Michael Getler, "US Warns Soviets Against Invasion of Poland," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1980

The North Atlantic Council issued a communiqué on December 12, 1980 that included a warning to the Soviets not to invade Poland.

Under certain circumstances threats of political and economic sanctions can be a sufficient deterrent without the need to also threaten military consequences.

center of the debate was whether to issue a private message over the US-Soviet 'hot line', a public statement, or a combination of both. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski said he thought a public warning "could serve as a deterrent."¹³⁹ Whilst it might not be decisive, it would at least provide "an indication of the seriousness of our concern and would put down a marker."¹⁴⁰ Moreover, even if it failed to deter the Soviets "it was preferable to ambiguity and silence."¹⁴¹ The Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, felt a warning message would be most effective "if the Soviets were not sure whether they were going to intervene" and therefore "the more we made clear to them the consequences of their actions ahead of time, the better was the chance of deterring an intervention."¹⁴² Brown also insisted any public warning would have "a greater effect if it was supported by the Allies."¹⁴³ A presidential statement released by the White House later that day included the following warning: "Foreign military intervention in Poland would have most negative consequences for East-West relations in general and U.S.-Soviet relations in particular. ... I want all countries to know that the attitude and future policies of the United States toward the Soviet Union would be directly and very adversely affected by any Soviet use of force in Poland."¹⁴⁴ To strengthen the substance of this vague public warning and ensure the Soviets took notice of it, US officials recommended President Carter supplement the official statement with a 'hot line' message to Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. As Carter later recounted, "I sent Brezhnev a direct message warning of the serious consequences of a Soviet move into Poland, and let him know more indirectly that we would move to transfer advanced weaponry to China."¹⁴⁵

Though it is difficult to determine with any degree of confidence the impact the official public statements and private warnings had on Soviet deliberations, it is noteworthy that a highly-placed US intelligence source reported in mid-December that the Soviets had decided to indefinitely postpone their invasion plans and the "principal reason" for this "was the effectiveness of the Western counter propaganda campaign which convinced the Kremlin the West would retaliate 'massively' with political and economic sanctions."¹⁴⁶ Assuming this assessment of the Soviet decision calculus was accurate, it would suggest that under certain circumstances threats of political and economic sanctions can be a sufficient deterrent without the need to also threaten military consequences. In this instance, Carter's private threat to increase arms sales to China, then a Soviet adversary, might have given added impetus to the public warnings, but it scarcely constituted a direct military challenge to a Soviet intervention.

Intra-War Deterrence of WMD Use

Among the most important challenges of modern warfare has been deterring the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against both military and civilian targets. Whilst deterring WMD use has typically been associated with possessing an equivalent retaliatory capability, it has also involved issuing verbal warnings. This occurred on several occasions during

¹³⁹ Summary of Conclusions of an Ad Hoc Meeting, December 3, 1980, FRUS, 1977-1980, Vol. VI, Soviet Union.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Statement by the President, Situation in Poland, White House, December 3, 1980.

¹⁴⁵ Cited in editor's footnote: Summary of Conclusions of an Ad Hoc Meeting, December 3, 1980, FRUS, 1977-1980, Vol. VI, Soviet Union.

¹⁴⁶ Editorial Note, FRUS, 1977-1980, Vol. XX, Eastern Europe, Doc. 42.

the Second World War, when the British and American leaders made public statements warning the Axis powers from using poison gas targeting other allied powers.

The first warning statement was only issued in May 1942, more than two and a half years into the war.¹⁴⁷ Due to concerns about the prospect of German use against Soviet troops, Churchill insisted on making a public statement to deter this. As Churchill noted in his memoirs: “In the general desire to find ways of helping the Soviet armies in the forthcoming German offensive, and the fear that gas, probably mustard gas, would be used upon them, I procured the consent of the Cabinet to our making a public declaration that if gas were used by the Germans against the Russians we would retaliate by gas attacks on Germany.”¹⁴⁸ In an effort to reassure Stalin of British support, Churchill told him: “It is a question to be considered whether at the right time we should not give a public warning ... as the warning might deter the Germans from adding this new horror to the many they have loosed upon the world.”¹⁴⁹ Stalin replied that the warning message should not only be directed at Germany, but also Finland. He told Churchill:

I should like what you say in your message about retaliation with gas attack upon Germany to be extended to Finland in the event of the latter assaulting the U.S.S.R. with poison gas. I think it highly advisable for the British Government to give in the near future a public warning that Britain would treat the use of poison gas against the U.S.S.R. by Germany or Finland as an attack on Britain herself and that she would retaliate by using gas against Germany.¹⁵⁰

Churchill chose to ignore Stalin's request regarding Finland. In a public broadcast dealing with the state of the war, Churchill inserted the following warning message:

I wish now to make it plain that we shall treat the unprovoked use of poison gas against our Russian ally exactly as if it were used against ourselves and if we are satisfied that this new outrage has been committed by Hitler we will use our great and growing air superiority in the West to carry gas warfare on the largest possible scale far and wide against military objectives in Germany.¹⁵¹

There are three noteworthy aspects to this warning. Firstly, there are important qualifications. Before using poison gas in retaliation, the British Government would have to satisfy itself that the use of poison gas by the Germans had been “unprovoked” and that it “has been committed by Hitler”, presumably distinct from a decision taken by a lower-level commander. Secondly, there was a potential imbalance between limited German use of poison gas leading to British retaliation “on the largest possible scale.” As would later be the case with nuclear threats of “massive retaliation,” there was an inherent credibility problem when it came to minor infractions. Thirdly, retaliation would be aimed “against military objectives in Germany.” However, as it is difficult to conceive of significant military targets in Germany isolated from large civilian population centers, the threat could also be seen as a threat to civilians as well.

¹⁴⁷ Raymond Daniell, “Premier Ominous: Churchill Says Britain will use Gas if Reich Tries it in Russia,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 1942.

¹⁴⁸ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. IV, The Hinge of Fate* (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1951), p. 294.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁵⁰ Message from Stalin to Churchill, March 29, 1942. Text available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/correspondence/01/42.htm>.

¹⁵¹ Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Broadcast Report on the War, May 10, 1942. Text available at: <https://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/1942-05-10a.html>.

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Several weeks later, Roosevelt issued a warning to Japan against the use of poison gas in China. Using the British warning as a precedent, the Nationalist Chinese government requested a similar statement be issued.¹⁵² Accordingly, Roosevelt issued the following statement:

Authoritative reports are reaching this Government of the use by Japanese armed forces in various localities of China of poisonous or noxious gases. I desire to make it unmistakably clear that, if Japan persists in this inhuman form of warfare against China or against any other of the United Nations, such action will be regarded by this Government as though taken against the United States, and retaliation in kind and in full measure will be meted out.¹⁵³

Unlike Churchill's warning, Roosevelt's applied not only to the use of "poisonous or noxious gases" against China, but also against "any other of the United Nations." Moreover, rather than "massive retaliation," Roosevelt limited his warning to "retaliation in kind."

A year later, the British and American governments reaffirmed and expanded upon their original warnings. The new British warning, issued on April 21, 1943, referred to the use of poison gas by "Nazi or other satellites" and threatened "fullest possible use ... upon German munition centres, seaports and other military objectives throughout the whole of Germany."¹⁵⁴ Thus, in contrast to the original warning, the new version not only lowered the threshold for triggering British use of poison gas by also including the reference to Germany's allies, but it also clarified the potential targets of British retaliatory use. The mention of "munitions centres" and "seaports" would have been easily recognizable as population centres despite the stress on "military objectives."

On June 8, 1943, Roosevelt also issued a more wide-ranging warning, applicable to "the Axis armies and Axis peoples, in Europe and Asia."¹⁵⁵ Similar to his earlier statement, it referred to "swift retaliation in kind" if poison gas were used against "any one of the United Nations." The statement also utilized the references in the British warning to "munitions centers, seaports and other military objectives." One notable aspect of the new American warning was its reference to "Any use of gas" leading to attacks on military objectives. This stress on military objectives in response to 'any use of gas' is somewhat awkward. Had the Germans attacked an Allied city with poison gas, would the US had responded in kind by attacking a German city, or would they have only attacked an isolated military target? On the other hand, the reference to seaports and munition centers might suggest that 'military objectives' was being used euphemistically given that most seaports and munition centers were either in, or adjacent to, cities. Due to the fear of making an explicit statement about retaliating against enemy cities, presumably on the basis it would run contrary to public opinion, the US was willing to undercut the likely deterrent effect of its own threat.

¹⁵² Memorandum of Conversation, by the Under Secretary of State (Welles), June 1, 1942, FRUS: Diplomatic papers, 1942, China. According to the instructions given to Chinese Foreign Minister Dr. Soong: "Please approach the United States Government with a view to their taking measures to support our protests, and to denouncing the enemy along the lines of the statement made by the British Prime Minister recently, where he threatened retaliation should Germany start gas warfare on the Russian front. We hope that a statement couched in sternest tones will be made."

¹⁵³ Statement on Japanese Use of Poison Gas, June 05, 1942. Text available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-japanese-use-poison-gas>

¹⁵⁴ Cited in: The British Embassy to the Department of State, 22 April 1943, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, General, Vol. I.

¹⁵⁵ "Statement Warning the Axis Against Using Poison Gas." June 8, 1943.

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The warnings that occurred in 1991 preceded the actual fighting, and in some ways were intended to create the boundaries of tolerable behaviour in the war that was about to occur.

Several months later, the Allies were concerned Germany might use poison gas against Italy if it withdrew from the war. To deter such use, the Combined Chiefs of Staff recommended “a special warning ... as to the retaliatory measures” Germany could expect.¹⁵⁶ According to the draft statement prepared in anticipation of this eventuality: “the use of poison gas against the Italians will call forth immediate retaliation upon Germany with gas, using the Allied air superiority to the full.”¹⁵⁷ Although the draft was never issued it is noteworthy the statement referred to “immediate” retaliation, and it did not specify “military” targets in Germany.

The 1990-1991 Gulf War is another case in which warning messages were conveyed to deter WMD use. As with the warnings of Churchill and Roosevelt directed against the Axis to prevent their use of chemical weapons, the Bush administration sought to prevent Saddam Hussein from using these weapons against the US and Coalition forces, as well as against Israel. Unlike the warnings that occurred *amidst* the Second World War, the warnings that occurred in 1991 *preceded* the actual fighting, and in some ways were intended to create the boundaries of tolerable behaviour in the war that was about to occur.¹⁵⁸

In late December 1990, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney stated publicly: “were Saddam Hussein foolish enough to use weapons of mass destruction, the US response would be absolutely overwhelming and it would be devastating.”¹⁵⁹ On January 5, 1991, Bush addressed a private letter to Saddam Hussein, made public a week later, in which he warned: “the United States will not tolerate the use of chemical or biological weapons ... The American people would demand the strongest possible response. You and your country will pay a terrible price if you order unconscionable acts of this sort.”¹⁶⁰ He then added: “I write this letter not to threaten, but to inform.”¹⁶¹ This letter was augmented by US Secretary of State James Baker who told Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz on January 9, 1991:

If the conflict involves your use of chemical or biological weapons against our forces, the American people will demand vengeance. We have the means to exact it. With regard to this part of my presentation, this is not a threat, it is a promise. If there is any use of weapons like that, an objective won't just be the liberation of Kuwait, but the liberation of the current Iraqi regime and anyone responsible for using those weapons will be held accountable.¹⁶²

These types of statements implied that the US might be willing to use nuclear weapons if Iraq first used chemical or biological weapons. At the time, questions were asked about this, to which the Bush administration refused to give a clear answer. Admittedly, there was a degree of bluff to this approach. The National Security Adviser, Brent Scowcroft, later wrote that the Bush administration had privately rejected using nuclear weapons in this scenario but that

¹⁵⁶ The Combined Chiefs of Staff to President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, 3 September 1943, FRUS, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943.

¹⁵⁷ Enclosure: Declaration on Gas Warfare, Prime Minister Churchill's Assistant Private Secretary (Rowan) to the President's Naval Aide (Brown), September 7, 1943.

¹⁵⁸ David Szabo, “Disarming Rogues: Deterring First-Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Parameters*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2007, pp. 74-75.

¹⁵⁹ Cheney cited in Robert C. Toth, “American Support Grows for use of Nuclear Arms,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1991.

¹⁶⁰ Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on President Bush's Letter to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, January 12, 1991: [Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on President Bush's Letter to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq | The American Presidency Project \(ucsb.edu\)](#).

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 359.

in their public communications “we left the matter ambiguous. There was no point in undermining the deterrence it might be offering.”¹⁶³

In addition to raising the vague prospect of nuclear retaliation, Baker also included a specific threat of regime change. This combination of vague nuclear threats and specific regime change threats to deter WMD use have also been employed more recently with respect to North Korea. In November 2022, for instance, the US Department of Defense released a statement in which Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III committed to:

providing extended deterrence to the ROK (Republic of Korea) utilizing the full range of US defence capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, and missile defence capabilities and advanced non-nuclear capabilities. He noted that any nuclear attack against the United States or its Allies and partners, including the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, is unacceptable and will result in the end of the Kim regime.¹⁶⁴

When further assurances were deemed necessary to reassure Seoul, the US and South Korean presidents issued the Washington Declaration in April 2023. This included the following statement:

President Biden reaffirmed that the United States’ commitment to the ROK and the Korean people is enduring and ironclad, and that any nuclear attack by the DPRK against the ROK will be met with a swift, overwhelming and decisive response.¹⁶⁵

Despite the overall purpose of these two statements being to reassure South Korea *and* deter North Korea, with the language used effectively repeating the words found in earlier statements,¹⁶⁶ there is a noteworthy reluctance to bluntly refer to nuclear retaliation. Instead, the statements use ambiguous phrases such as “swift, overwhelming and decisive response.” Austin’s statement, like Baker’s, was unusual in that it threatened “the end of the Kim regime.”

US Deterrence Messages and Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine

Bob Woodward, in his account of the Biden administration’s deliberations in late 2021-early 2022 about how to deter Russia from invading Ukraine, described the content of several high-level debates.¹⁶⁷ These administration debates essentially followed the same pattern as many similar deliberations in earlier US and non-US attempts to deter war with words. Three issues dominated these deliberations: how to communicate, who would do the communicating, and what messages would be communicated. This last issue took on particular importance

¹⁶³ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 463.

¹⁶⁴ US Department of Defense, 54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué, November 3, 2022: [54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué > U.S. Department of Defense > Release.](#)

¹⁶⁵ White House, Washington Declaration, April 26, 2023: [Washington Declaration | The White House.](#)

¹⁶⁶ For instance, according to a September 2022 Joint Statement: “The United States and the ROK made clear that any DPRK nuclear attack would be met with an overwhelming and decisive response.” See: US Department of Defense, Joint Statement on the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group Meeting, September 16, 2022. [Joint Statement on the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group Meeting > U.S. Department of Defense > Release.](#)

¹⁶⁷ Bob Woodward, *War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2024). For a full discussion of these deliberations, see chapters 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23 and 25.

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because in conveying what the US response would amount to, it would also convey the limits of the US response.

Having received intelligence of a Russian military buildup in the autumn 2021, Biden met several times with senior officials in mid-to-late October to discuss how to warn Putin against an invasion. Initially, it was decided a private warning would be delivered by CIA Director William Burns. This decision reflected a deliberate choice not to have Biden communicate directly with Putin despite the fact it was assumed a warning from Biden in person would have carried more weight. Nevertheless, Burns was to deliver a private letter from Biden. According to Woodward, the letter was intended to let Putin know the US was aware of Russia's invasion plans and to warn against this. While in Moscow, Burns also conveyed to Putin by phone a list of retaliatory actions Russia could expect if it invaded. These included diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, removal of Russia from the Swift banking system, a reinforcement of the US military presence in Europe, and military assistance for Ukraine. A key message was that these consequences would be much more severe than those imposed on Russia after it annexed Crimea in 2014.

In the months that followed, and amidst growing signs of a Russian military buildup and intent to attack Ukraine, the message's content was never adjusted. For instance, in early December 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that the US would impose severe economic sanctions on Russia if it invaded. Shortly thereafter, Biden spoke to Putin and warned vaguely of 'enormous costs'. In choosing how to deal with the rising threat, US leaders were confronted with the most controversial deterrence message choice – whether to threaten the prospect of direct military intervention or, conversely, clearly foreclose this option. This choice contained several dilemmas. Firstly, would the threat of military intervention provoke rather than deter a Russian invasion? Secondly, would such a threat undermine US diplomatic efforts to assemble a diplomatic coalition to support Ukraine? Thirdly, would threatening direct military intervention, even in a highly ambiguous way, risk committing US prestige to such an extent the administration would then be placed under enormous political pressure to militarily come to Ukraine's aid if Russia invaded?

Traditionally, using phrases such as 'all options are on the table' were viewed as valuable for deterrence purposes not so much because they conveyed an explicit threat but rather because they avoided explicitly taking the military option 'off the table' – a message believed to encourage aggression. In this case, Biden decided in early December 2021 to publicly announce the US would *not* directly intervene. This policy decision remained unalterable, and it continued to be reiterated despite the continued Russian military buildup. Instead, attention tended to be placed on how often messages were delivered and by whom rather than the content of those messages. What followed were a stream of high-level statements warning Russia of consequences that were conveyed both publicly and privately but that merely repeated the same themes and showed no signs of having an impact.

One month prior to the invasion, Biden made the following off-hand remark at a press conference: "There is not going to be any American forces moving into Ukraine."¹⁶⁸ This type of statement, effectively excluding direct US military involvement, even if an accurate characterization of American policy, was nevertheless unfortunate from the perspective of deterring Russia. Instead, leaving the matter ambiguous would have been preferred. Biden was also

¹⁶⁸ Remarks by President Biden in Press Gaggle, White House, January 25, 2022.

US leaders were confronted with the most controversial deterrence message choice – whether to threaten the prospect of direct military intervention or, conversely, clearly foreclose this option.

criticized for distinguishing between consequences imposed in response to a “minor incursion” as opposed to a large-scale invasion. At a press conference he stated:

I think what you're going to see is that Russia will be held accountable if it invades. And it depends on what it does. It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do, et cetera. But if they actually do what they're capable of doing with the forces amassed on the border, it is going to be a disaster for Russia ...The cost of going into Ukraine, in terms of physical loss of life, for the Russians, they'll — they'll be able to prevail over time, but it's going to be heavy, it's going to be real, and it's going to be consequential.¹⁶⁹

In response to the criticism generated by Biden's reference to “minor incursion”, the White House Press Secretary immediately issued a statement attempting to clarify Biden's remarks:

If any Russian military forces move across the Ukrainian border, that's a renewed invasion and it will be met with a swift, severe, and united response from the United States and our Allies. President Biden also knows from long experience that the Russians have an extensive playbook of aggression short of military action, including cyber-attacks and paramilitary tactics. And he affirmed today that those acts of aggression will be met with a decisive, reciprocal, and united response.¹⁷⁰

However, this wording was problematic for two reasons. First, it distinguished between two types of consequences: a “swift, severe, and united response” to a large-scale invasion, and a “decisive, reciprocal, and united response” for a lesser attack. Curiously, the consequences for the minor offense were stronger than those for a major one. Whereas the words ‘swift’ and ‘severe’ could refer to diplomatic or economic consequences, the word ‘reciprocal’ in the case of a Russian use of military force would have meant a corresponding American use of military force. This relates to the second problem, namely threatening a ‘reciprocal’ response to Russian cyber-attacks. If Russia conducted cyberattacks against Ukraine, did this mean the US would conduct cyberattacks against Russia? Despite the significance of this point, insofar as it potentially represented a major threat of consequences, the implications were later recognized by the White House and subsequent statements only referred to cyberattacks against US companies and critical infrastructure provoking a response.¹⁷¹

It is impossible to say if threatening military intervention, regardless of whether the threat was blatant or ambiguous, would have deterred Russia. What is certain is that the failure to make such a statement was later used to criticize the Biden administration for not doing enough to deter the attack. Beyond this, it can be argued insufficient effort was placed on crafting more effective deterrence messages despite officials not being allowed to hint at the prospect of military intervention. It might have been the case, for instance, that messages about the amount and types of military equipment the US would supply to Ukraine, or the types of economic sanctions that would be placed on Russia, could have been devised in such a way as to enhance their deterrence effect. Furthermore, other options US officials considered, such as backing a Ukrainian insurgency,¹⁷² but did not publicly enunciate, might have been

¹⁶⁹ Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference, White House, January 19, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Statement from Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine, White House, January 19, 2022.

¹⁷¹ See, for instance: Remarks by President Biden on Russia's Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine, White House, February 24, 2022.

¹⁷² Alexander Bick, ‘Planning for the Worst The Russia-Ukraine “Tiger Team” in Hal Brands (ed) *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), p. 146.

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included in the public warnings. To reiterate a point made elsewhere in this paper, all-inclusive deterrence warnings are no guarantee of success nor are vague warnings a guarantee of failure. Nevertheless, as a general rule, messages that warn of consequences are more likely to succeed when the consequences are stronger rather than weaker, have an impact on a larger audience rather than a smaller one, are to last for a longer period rather than a shorter period, etc.

Deterring WMD Use by Russia in Ukraine

Similar to the Second World War experience of the British and Americans broadcasting warnings to deter the use of chemical weapons by the Axis powers, the war in Ukraine has witnessed numerous public warnings being issued by a wide range of international actors seeking to ensure Russia is deterred from using weapons of mass destruction. At the start of the conflict, President Vladimir Putin publicly stated:

modern Russia ... is one of the most powerful nuclear powers in the world and possesses certain advantages in some of the newest types of weaponry. In this regard, no one should have any doubts that a direct attack on our country will lead to defeat and horrible consequences for any potential aggressor. ... Whoever tries to hinder us or threaten our country or our people should know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history.¹⁷³

Putin's statement, combined with the inherent recklessness of the Russian invasion, as well as subsequent high-level statements and battlefield reverses, led to elevated concerns Russia might employ tactical nuclear weapons or other types of WMD against Ukraine. To deter this, many private and public messages were communicated (see Annex 4), though as far as can be determined, these have not been accompanied by Western military actions, such as increasing nuclear alert levels or the forward deployment of military capabilities associated with some type of threatened counter-action.¹⁷⁴ Apart from a handful of exceptions, many of these warnings have provided little insight into what sort of response Russia could expect if it used WMD in different types of scenarios (e.g. demonstrative use in an isolated area, use against military targets, use against urban targets). In this respect they are considerably different from the warnings Churchill and Roosevelt publicly conveyed that referred to specific categories of targets that would be attacked 'in kind' as retaliation for Axis use of chemical weapons.

Instead, two key themes have predominated in the more recent public warnings about Russian nuclear use: 1) that use of nuclear weapons would "change the nature of the conflict", 2) "severe" consequences would be imposed. None of the official statements have included reference to specific consequences. Instead, they have been couched in vague terms.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Mark Trevelyan, "What Putin Has Said About Nuclear Weapons Since Russia Invaded Ukraine," *Reuters*, October 17, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ "We've been very clear with President Putin directly and privately about the severe consequences that would follow from any – any use of a nuclear weapon. We're watching this very, very carefully. We have not seen reason at this point to change our own nuclear posture." Television Interview with US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, October 19, 2022.

¹⁷⁵ "We've used a number of adjectives. We have said there would be catastrophic, severe, strong, profound implications for Russia. All of those are accurate. We are – we stand by all of those descriptors. The point that we have made both publicly and privately to the Russians is that the consequences would be real, and they would be extraordinary." Press Briefing, State Department Spokesman Ned Price, September 28, 2022.

The war in Ukraine has witnessed numerous public warnings being issued by a wide range of international actors seeking to ensure Russia is deterred from using weapons of mass destruction.

One novel aspect of the warnings conveyed to Russia since February 2022 is that they have not only been delivered by Russia's adversaries but also by its friends.

As NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg put it, "we will not go into exactly how we will respond."¹⁷⁶ Similar vague threats were also conveyed through official channels, though possibly with some additional details not contained in the public discourse. As US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan stated in a press interview: "If Russia crosses this line, there will be catastrophic consequences for Russia. The United States will respond decisively. Now in private channels, we have spelled out in greater detail exactly what that would mean."¹⁷⁷

In Woodward's account of the Autumn 2022 nuclear crisis, fears of Russian nuclear use reached a high point. At a time when Russian forces were being driven back during a Ukrainian offensive, several indicators pointed to the Russian leadership contemplating use of tactical nuclear weapons. One of these indicators was that Russia was preparing to conduct a 'false flag' attack on its own territory using a 'dirty bomb'. It was assumed this would be used as an excuse to 'retaliate' against Ukraine with nuclear means. To deter Russian nuclear use, many international leaders conveyed both private and public messages. According to Woodward, Biden ordered Sullivan to "find language that is threatening without being directly threatening" to avoid a Russian over-reaction. Biden personally spoke with Putin and ordered other senior US officials to speak with their Russian counterparts. All would convey a message of "catastrophic consequences" resulting from Russian nuclear use. The most explicit threat was delivered by US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. In an October 21, 2022 phone call with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Austin emphasized that Russian nuclear use would "implicate the vital national interests of the United States." He then went on to warn that all self-imposed restrictions the US had observed in the war – including limitations on weapons supplies to Ukraine and avoidance of direct US military intervention – would be lifted.¹⁷⁸

Over the course of the war, to the extent any specific warnings were issued publicly, these were often remarks made in response to questions from the press rather than prepared statements. For instance, during a television interview, Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau stated: "To the best of our knowledge, Putin is threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil, not to attack NATO, which means that NATO should respond in a conventional way, but the response should be devastating."¹⁷⁹ In some instances, threats have been made by actors that lack the capability to carry out those threats, such as EU High Representative Josep Borrell's remarks at an event for EU diplomats where he said: "any nuclear attack against Ukraine will create an answer, not a nuclear answer but such a powerful answer from the military side that the Russian Army will be annihilated."¹⁸⁰

One novel aspect of the warnings conveyed to Russia since February 2022 is that they have not only been delivered by Russia's adversaries but also by its friends. Most notably, China publicly cautioned Russia against the use of nuclear weapons, and also reportedly conveyed private warnings, including a message Xi Jinping told Putin in person.¹⁸¹ As CIA Director William Burns noted, "I think it's ... been very useful that Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi in India have also raised their concerns about use of nuclear weapons as well. I think

¹⁷⁶ Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers, October 13, 2022.

¹⁷⁷ US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, *Meet the Press*, September 25, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ See discussion in Chapter 35: Woodward, *War*.

¹⁷⁹ Polish Foreign Minister Rau, *Meet the Press*, September 27, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Opening remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the European Diplomatic Academy, October 13, 2022

¹⁸¹ Max Seddon, James Kynge, John Paul Rathbone and Felicia Schwartz, "Xi Jinping warned Vladimir Putin against Nuclear Attack in Ukraine," *Financial Times*, July 5, 2023.

that's also having an impact on the Russians."¹⁸² It is unclear whether China or India have conveyed threats privately in addition to the cautionary statements they have made in public. Regardless, as Burns observed, simply 'raising concerns' might have had an impact on Russia's cost-benefit calculus.

Deterring Attacks on Prisoners of War

States have also sought to deter many 'lesser' actions within war by issuing warnings. One example was ensuring the safety of millions of Allied prisoners of war (POWs) held in German captivity at the end of World War II. In October 1944, there was a fear that as Germany continued to lose the war, the Nazi regime might kill or threaten to kill Allied POWs as a last ditch means to gain diplomatic leverage and avoid unconditional surrender. To deter this, the British government proposed issuing a joint Anglo-American-Soviet warning statement "to the effect that individual commandants and guards, no less than the German military authorities, will be held individually responsible for the safety of the prisoners of war in their charge."¹⁸³ They further argued the text of such a warning be agreed in advance and held ready should it be the case a threat to murder prisoners materialized.¹⁸⁴

In the months that followed, the three governments proposed and debated different types of warning messages. An early British draft of the "solemn warning" stated "Any person guilty of maltreating or allowing any Allied prisoners of war to be maltreated ...will be ruthlessly pursued and brought to punishment."¹⁸⁵ US military officials did not believe this warning was sufficiently robust and proposed two alternatives. The first option was to refer to "immediately adopt the most drastic retaliatory measures."¹⁸⁶ A second option elaborated on what this meant in practical terms:

... for each Allied prisoner murdered by the Germans, 1,000 German prisoners or other German males who will later be selected and taken into custody, will be detained subsequently to the imposition of peace terms, for such substantial period as these Allied Governments deem proper. Should the German Government commit additional crimes against Allied prisoners of war, the period of detention and/or the number of German males will be increased accordingly.... Moreover, upon the conclusion of hostilities every person found responsible for these crimes, including the Judges, will be pursued, arraigned before Allied courts and punished accordingly.¹⁸⁷

Such a strong statement was opposed by other US officials because allied policymakers still needed to work out what such a reprisal would amount to, particularly how to select which German males would be detained, and to ensure individual categories, such as German Social

¹⁸² Judy Woodruff, "CIA Director Bill Burns on war in Ukraine, intelligence challenges posed by China," PBS, December 16, 2022. Available at: [CIA Director Bill Burns on war in Ukraine, intelligence challenges posed by China | PBS NewsHour](#).

¹⁸³ The British Ambassador (Halifax) to the Secretary of State, 740.00116 EW/10-1944, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, General Vol. I.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of State, 22 December 1944, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, European Advisory Commission, Austria, Germany, Vol. III.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

Democrats, were not disproportionately targeted by the Soviets.¹⁸⁸ Taking these objections into account, the allies agreed at Yalta in February 1945 on the original British text. They also agreed “the proper time” to issue the message “would be when the German collapse seemed imminent or when some German outrage was threatened.”¹⁸⁹ There was considerable skepticism of the degree to which a warning would result in the desired effect, yet it was nonetheless deemed a worthwhile gesture. As Churchill explained to Roosevelt in late March 1945:

An S.S. General is now in charge of prisoners of war matters in the German Ministry of Defence and S.S. and Gestapo are believed to be taking over the control of camps. On such people a warning will have only limited effect, though, at the worst it can do no harm. On the other hand, it is by no means certain that S.S. have completely taken over from regular army officers and on the latter the warning might have real effect. We should be sure to miss no opportunity of exploiting any duality of control.¹⁹⁰

The warning was eventually issued on April 23, 1945. Allied planes dropped leaflets that contained the agreed text over the signatures of Truman, Churchill and Stalin.¹⁹¹ A similar warning was prepared for Japan. In contrast to the wording of the German warning, the warning for Japan stated “the Allied Governments will persistently pursue and punish each individual who has mistreated an Allied prisoner of war or civilian or who has consented to or permitted such mistreatment.”¹⁹² It was anticipated this new warning would include the signatures of the leaders of ten governments.¹⁹³ Shortly after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, US Secretary of State James Byrnes recommended issuing the warning if Japan persisted in fighting. However, within a matter of days Japan surrendered and no warning was issued.¹⁹⁴

Deterrence Warnings as Ceasefire Necessity

In late 1951, as the United Nations forces fighting in Korea were also negotiating an armistice agreement with the North Koreans and Chinese, American officials began to contemplate the longer-term requirement for deterring renewed aggression *after* a ceasefire. Of principal concern was that if the UN forces withdrew it would be much more difficult to fight a large-scale war on the Korean Peninsula, whereas it would be much easier due to their proximity for the Chinese to reinforce their North Korean allies. One option that appealed to these officials was the issuing of a declaration by the allied forces that would not only commit them to the

¹⁸⁸ Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Eastern European Affairs (Durbrow), January 18, 1945, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, European Advisory Commission, Austria, Germany, Vol. III. As this official noted: “from an internal American point of view, consideration should be given to the reaction of labor groups to the use of ‘slave labor’ which might be considered as competing with American labor.”

¹⁸⁹ Agreed Minutes, Anglo-American Warning to Germany About Allied Prisoners of War, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945.

¹⁹⁰ The British Prime Minister (Churchill) to President Roosevelt, March 1945, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, European Advisory Commission, Austria, Germany, Vol. III.

¹⁹¹ Sidney Shalett, “Big 3 in Stiff Note Warn on Captives,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1945.

¹⁹² Memorandum by the Secretary of State to President Truman, August 10, 1945, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East, Vol. VI.

¹⁹³ Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

¹⁹⁴ Memorandum by the Secretary of State to President Truman, August 10, 1945, FRUS: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East, Vol. VI.

Allied planes dropped leaflets that contained the agreed text over the signatures of Truman, Churchill and Stalin.

longer-term defence of South Korea, but also put the Chinese government on notice that their territory would no longer be considered a sanctuary from attack.

What followed was an effort to gain consensus on a public declaration intended to deter renewed aggression. As will be highlighted below, this effort was characterized by divergent views on how strong of a warning should be conveyed, the circumstances that would trigger retaliatory action, the geography this action covered, the duration of the threat, which countries should sign up to it, when to announce it and how to announce it. Unlike deterrence of war during peacetime, or deterrence of controversial acts of war in wartime, the deterrence of a future war during an ongoing one, and the perceived value of a strong warning message as an alternative to indefinitely maintaining large forward deployed military forces, makes this case particularly unusual and interesting.¹⁹⁵

Among the reasons for the declaration was that in contrast to the North Atlantic Treaty in Europe, no such official commitment designed to deter aggression existed for South Korea. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson wanted to find some way to make clear to the Communist countries that if an armistice was broken, “we should have to go after them,” and not only in Korea. In other words, unlike the geographic restrictions imposed on the UN forces, which effectively meant not striking targets in Chinese territory, these restrictions would be lifted in the future.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, the deterrence value of the declaration would be linked to its reassurance value, so that Allied governments could confidently withdraw their troops from Korea knowing that an adequate deterrent to a resumption of fighting existed. As Acheson put it, “Only by such a clear statement our intentions can we achieve maximum deterrent effect upon Commies and thereby safeguard our forces against treachery ... We do think that, so far as words can do it, such a statement of our determination would give Commies pause before they embarked on new acts of aggression.”¹⁹⁷ Several additional motives for issuing the declaration were cited. First, it would help a US administration ‘sell’ a ceasefire deal domestically. Second, because it was viewed as having a deterrent effect in its own right, more troops could be withdrawn. Third, the declaration would tie the hands of allied governments, obliging them to recommit troops if hostilities were renewed.¹⁹⁸

If wanting to deter a future war amidst ongoing ceasefire negotiations, how strong should the wording be? This question hinged on the answers to four other questions. First, how to ensure the language used did not undermine the ceasefire negotiations or jeopardize a longer-term peace deal? Second, how to ensure the wording was strong enough to gain the support of military commanders, as well as key allies, especially the South Koreans? Third, how to ensure the language was not too strong for other allies who were afraid of being viewed as too provocative? Fourth, how to ensure the wording would be sufficiently strong as a deterrent, or as one official put it, to “make Chinese government and people conscious of the grave consequences of any treachery.”¹⁹⁹ Considerable debate was generated for the first three of these questions. Somewhat ironically, very little attention was paid to the fourth.

¹⁹⁵ A related area of enquiry that recently emerged in the deterrence literature deals with the provision of arms as a deterrent to both current and future aggression. See: Amir Lupovici, “Deterrence by delivery of arms: NATO and the war in Ukraine,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2023, pp. 624-641.

¹⁹⁶ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly, December 1, 1951, DCER.

¹⁹⁷ The Secretary of State to the Embassy in France, January 2, 1952, FRUS, 1952-1954, Korea, Vol. XV, Part 1.

¹⁹⁸ Secretary of State for External Affairs to High Commissioner in United Kingdom, December 7, 1951, DCER.

¹⁹⁹ The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, December 26, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. VII, Part 1. See also: Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly, December 1, 1951.

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An early draft prepared by the US State Department included the key warning text: “our resolution that aggression committed again in Korea will bring upon any country whose forces are involved the full retribution without geographic limitation it will in justice have earned.”²⁰⁰ However, the British government with whom the draft was shared objected to this text as it was viewed as “too strong” and “menacing.”²⁰¹ Likewise, Canadian officials preferred that the “warning statements should be in very general terms ... It would be unwise to be precise about the nature of the counter action.”²⁰² Instead, they suggested: “it might prove impossible to localize hostilities as hitherto.”²⁰³ In contrast to the American draft that stated aggression “after the armistice will result in hostilities outside Korea,” the British rephrased it so that it emphasized “it might not be possible to avoid the extension of hostilities.”²⁰⁴ The Canadian government also preferred the reference to consequences should be in “less specific language.”²⁰⁵ But the text proposed by the British – “might then prove impossible to confine hostilities within the frontiers of Korea” – was viewed as “too weak.”²⁰⁶ The Americans insisted this be changed to “in all probability.”²⁰⁷

Another problem concerned the number of countries that would join the declaration. Here the concern was that if too many countries were invited some would oppose a stronger tone which would then reduce the declaration's deterrent value. Different options were considered. If the US issued the declaration on its own, this risked a propaganda disaster as it would appear the US was the only country with a long-term interest in defending South Korea. Another option was a declaration by the US and several Commonwealth governments. However, the fact no Asian countries would be represented was also viewed as problematic from a public relations perspective. A third option was to invite the sixteen countries that had sent troops to Korea. The only objection raised with this option was that it might offend those countries who supported the war by voting for it in the UN or sending non-military support such as medical aid. Finally, there was the option of including all governments that had voted in support of UN action in Korea. This was rejected on the grounds so many countries would be included that the declaration “would not resemble the original design fashioned by the sponsoring governments.”²⁰⁸ Consequently, the third option was viewed as the most appropriate option, particularly since the inclusion of more countries added to the declaration's deterrent value, albeit there was no guarantee all sixteen nations would ultimately participate.²⁰⁹

In addition to the ‘who’, the question of ‘when’ the declaration should be released caused further complications. At issue was whether the declaration was meant to serve as a ‘general deterrent’, and thus issued immediately after the signing of the armistice, or whether it should

²⁰⁰ The Acting Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, December 5, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. VII, Part 1.

²⁰¹ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly, December 1, 1951, DCER, 1951.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Gifford) to the Secretary of State, December 12, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. VII, Part I.

²⁰⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Johnson), December 24, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. VII, Part I.

²⁰⁶ Ambassador in United States to Secretary of State for External Affairs, December 17, 1951, DCER.

²⁰⁷ The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, December 26, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. VII, Part 1.

²⁰⁸ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly, December 5, 1951, DCER.

²⁰⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Johnson), December 24, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. VII, Part 1; Memorandum of Conversation, by the Deputy Director, Office of Northeast Asian Affairs (McClurkin), July 21, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, Korea, Vol. XV, Part 2

be held in reserve to be used as an 'immediate deterrent' if a new war appeared imminent.²¹⁰ This question related to the bigger one of the 'red line' that if crossed would trigger an Allied military response. For example, would a 'minor' infringement of the armistice trigger a military response, or would the Allies only respond to a 'major' infringement?²¹¹ US officials were principally concerned about a major infringement rather than a minor one, but finding the appropriate language to clarify this issue presented difficulties. For example, the British proposed the red line as "another act of aggression" rather than a "major breach of the armistice."²¹² The problem with the British proposal was that it was too broad and could be interpreted as an indefinite commitment against aggression regardless of any potential peace settlement. The Canadian government objected that reference to "renewal of an aggression" might require a new finding by the United Nations before action could be authorized. Therefore, a simple reference to "breach of the armistice" was preferred since this dealt with a "renewal of hostilities in Korea during the life of the armistice."²¹³ By contrast, the Americans objected the phrase "breach of the armistice" might cover any lesser violation below what the declaration was intended for, namely a renewal of hostilities. Furthermore, the phrase "a major breach of the armistice" was viewed as too ambiguous. Therefore, they preferred a reference to "renewal of the armed attack."²¹⁴

The question of how to communicate the declaration also elicited mixed views. One objection to a public declaration was that it might be unnecessarily provocative for the Chinese. Instead, it was suggested the declaration could be conveyed privately to the Chinese military representatives at the armistice talks or through diplomatic channels, probably with the expectation the declaration would be leaked to the press anyway.²¹⁵ Another advantage was that unlike a public declaration that would "tie the hands of governments subscribing to it," telling the Chinese privately would allow more flexibility.²¹⁶ On the other hand, not to make a public declaration risked failing to reassure the South Koreans, particularly prior to a formal American security pact, that they would not be fighting alone should hostilities resume after a ceasefire.²¹⁷ Were the South Koreans to believe they'd be abandoned after a ceasefire, they would be reluctant to agree to a ceasefire in the first place.

One sticking point raised by the French government had to do with the geographic limitations of the declaration as it was only focused on the renewal of aggression in Korea. French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman warned that declaring a red light for Korea might be misinterpreted by the Chinese as a green light in Indochina.²¹⁸ They therefore insisted the declaration be extended to include a reference to Indochina.²¹⁹ However, there were two

²¹⁰ Memorandum from Secretary of State for External Affairs to Prime Minister, January 11, 1952, DCER.

²¹¹ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly, December 1, 1951, DCER.

²¹² Personal Message from Secretary of State for External Affairs to Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations of United Kingdom, December 14, 1951, DCER; The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Gifford) to the Secretary of State, December 24, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. 7, Part I.

²¹³ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Johnson), December 24, 1951, FRUS, 1951, Korea and China, Vol. VII, Part 1.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly to Secretary of State for External Affairs, December 3, 1951, DCER; Memorandum by the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State, January 2, 1952, FRUS, 1952-1954, Korea, Vol. XV, Part 1.

²¹⁶ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly, December 5, 1951, DCER.

²¹⁷ Trulock Minutes, July 15, 1953, FRUS, 1952-1954, Western European Security, Vol. V, Part 1.

²¹⁸ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Chairman, Delegation to United Nations General Assembly, December 5, 1951, DCER.

²¹⁹ Memorandum by the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State, January 2, 1952, FRUS, 1952-1954, Korea, Vol. XV, Part 1.

Ukraine's Western backers, including NATO, will eventually need to decide on what sort of guarantees they can offer, possibly to be accompanied by a public warning declaration.

objections. First, the UN had only authorized military action in Korea, and therefore to extend the declaration to other threats of aggression was potentially open-ended. Instead, it was agreed that if and when the Chinese committed aggression elsewhere, the UN would then deal with the matter, rather than attempt a blanket declaration. Second, there was very little support among the other countries with military forces in Korea to also contemplate action in Southeast Asia.²²⁰

After reaching agreement on the draft text in January 1952, the failure to achieve an armistice until the summer 1953 meant the declaration was held in limbo for more than one and half years. The draft was revisited shortly before the armistice agreement. Again, France insisted some reference be made to Indochina before they would sign. In due course, one sentence was added to the end of the declaration: "Finally, we are of the opinion that the armistice must not result in jeopardizing the restoration or the safeguarding of peace in any other part of Asia."²²¹ Sixteen governments signed the statement on July 27, 1953. Shortly beforehand, when South Korean President Syngman Rhee requested a bilateral security treaty with the United States, he was told the Joint Policy Declaration actually constituted a more effective deterrent because it not only bound the United States and fifteen other countries to the defence of South Korea, but also included a more explicit warning to China than could otherwise be accommodated in a security treaty.²²² Moreover, as the bilateral treaty would take some time to be drafted, signed and ratified, the declaration would cover any deterrence gap.²²³

As of this writing, hostilities remain ongoing between Russia and Ukraine. Ceasefire negotiations have been ongoing for some time and it is widely assumed an agreement will be forthcoming at some point. Among the reasons for delay are Ukrainian fears that in the absence of strong security guarantees, they will be extremely vulnerable should Russia choose to resume hostilities later. Ukraine's Western backers, including NATO, will eventually need to decide on what sort of guarantees they can offer, possibly to be accompanied by a public warning declaration, like the one issued by the UN forces in 1953, to deter future Russian aggression.

²²⁰ The Secretary of State to the Embassy in France, January 3, 1952, 1952–1954, Korea, Vol. XV, Part 1.

²²¹ For final text, see: <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0337/24468965.pdf>

²²² The Acting Secretary of State to the Embassy in Korea, May 22, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, Korea, Vol. XV, Part 1.

²²³ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Deputy Director, Office of Northeast Asian Affairs (McClurkin), July 21, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, Korea, Vol. XV, Part 1.

4. The Nato Experience

Article 5: Textual Choices, Clarifications and Reaffirmations

A common way to deter future conflict by words is the codification of specific language in the text of defence pacts, the periodic reaffirmation of treaty commitments by member governments, clarification of ambiguous wording, especially when developments unforeseen by the treaty drafters arise, as well as reaffirmation of treaty commitments during international crises.²²⁴ The North Atlantic Treaty²²⁵ offers a classic case in point. During its drafting, considerable attention was placed on 'the pledge' committing the members of the future alliance to the defence of one another.²²⁶ Precisely because it was an 'open' text, unlike the secret treaties that were common prior to the First World War, the wording of 'the pledge' had to be sufficiently robust as it would be scrutinized for its deterrent value. On the other hand, entering into a mutual defence agreement is a highly political act, with many non-deterrence factors to account for. One of the drafters of the North Atlantic Treaty, Canadian diplomat Escott Reid, noted:

The arguments over the language to be used in the pledge went on over the whole 12 months of negotiations. The basic considerations were simple: the firmer the pledge, the greater effect the treaty might be expected to have in deterring the Soviet Union ... the weaker the pledge, the less difficulty the United States administration would have in securing the necessary two-thirds vote in the Senate for ratification of the treaty. The European countries stressed the importance of the first consideration; the United States stressed the importance of the second.²²⁷

Central to the deterrence pledge was the undertaking of *military* action in defence of other member states, but so too were the circumstances of when the pledge could be invoked. Three types of circumstances stood out. The first was the sort of action taken by an adversary sufficient to warrant invoking the mutual defence obligation. Second, was the location of the adversary's action. And third, was how soon the response from other members was expected to occur. In other words, was the response to occur immediately or might the response be

²²⁴ Jesse C. Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds Source, "Defense Pacts: A Prescription for Peace?" *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2011, pp. 45-65.

²²⁵ In this section I will use the term 'North Atlantic Treaty' as a shorthand label for the period up to April 4, 1949, despite the fact during most of its drafting it was unclear what name would be given to the treaty.

²²⁶ As Alex Danchev noted: "This pledge was the crux of the treaty, the provision for collective defence against armed attack. The clause embodying this provision was described in various ways, all more or less euphemistic. It was called the solemn engagement, the obligation, the commitment and the guarantee. The implication that a guarantee would be invoked automatically meant that this term was taboo in Washington, in spite of its accepted usage elsewhere." See his: "Taking the Pledge: Oliver Franks and the Negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1991, p. 211.

²²⁷ Escott Reid, *Time of Fear and Hope* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1977), p. 143.

"The firmer the pledge, the greater effect the treaty might be expected to have in deterring the Soviet Union."

delayed? For guidance, the drafters of the Treaty reviewed earlier pledges. For instance, the August 1939 Anglo-Polish treaty referred to the obligation if one of the two countries became “engaged in hostilities with a European power” to “at once give ... all the support and assistance in its power.”²²⁸ Likewise, the 1948 Brussels Treaty referred to “an armed attack in Europe” with the obligation of “all the military and other military aid and assistance in their power.”²²⁹ In contrast, the 1947 Rio Treaty covered “an armed attack by any State against an American State” but the obligation only mentions “to assist in meeting the attack.”²³⁰ These examples highlighted some of the different types of language that might be incorporated into the North Atlantic Treaty, with some recognized as having more of a deterrent effect than others.

At the start of the drafting process in March 1948, there was a clear preference to include a stronger pledge than that which would later be agreed upon. An early Canadian draft referred to “give immediately ... all the military, economic and other aid and assistance in its power.”²³¹ At this time, the American draft was also quite robust: “take armed action against the aggressor.”²³² However, a gradual recognition of isolationist sympathies within the US Senate led to a dampening down of the language along the lines of the Rio Treaty model so that a subsequent draft only mentioned “assist in meeting the attack” without referring specifically to the use of armed force. It also stated the pledge would apply if one of the states “considers” an armed attack to have occurred; thus each state could decide for itself. One Canadian policymaker derisively noted that hostile critics could say that “using the vague term ‘assist in meeting the attack’ ... means the kind of assistance Mexico gave in the last war.”²³³ To strengthen the American draft therefore required guaranteeing a collective response, as well as an explicit reference to *military* assistance. By the end of 1948, the draft referred to “shall be considered an armed attack” and “taking forthwith such military or other action ... as may be necessary to restore and assure the security of the North Atlantic area.”²³⁴

This formulation was criticized by two Senators on the Foreign Relations Committee who objected to the words “forthwith” and “military.”²³⁵ At issue was the degree of flexibility the US would retain both in terms of how it assisted allies, as well as how soon, the latter consideration potentially impacting on the question of forward deployed forces. Yet deleting these terms meant undermining the deterrence value of the treaty. Consequently, it was deemed necessary to find some compromise language that would satisfy both the need to deter as well as the need for flexibility. After much debate, agreement was reached on the wording: “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force”.²³⁶ The word “forthwith” was also retained.

There was also some debate about whether the term “aggression” should replace “armed attack.” The problem with the former term was that it potentially opened up a can of worms.

²²⁸ See Annex I.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid

²³¹ Cited in Reid, *Time of Fear and Hope*, p. 145

²³² Cited in Ibid.

²³³ Cited in Ibid., pp. 146-147.

²³⁴ Cited in Ibid., p. 148.

²³⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Secretary of State, February 14, 1949, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1949, Western Europe, Vol. IV.

²³⁶ Other proposed formulations included: “such military or other action as it deems necessary” and “the actions it deems necessary”. See Enclosures in: Memorandum by the Counsellor of the Department of State (Bohlen) to the Secretary of State and the Under Secretary of States (Webb), February 16, 1949, FRUS, 1949, Western Europe, Vol. IV.

Despite the formation of the NATO Alliance in 1949, the Article 5 treaty commitment was not viewed as sufficient in its own right to act as a deterrent, at least not after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950.

Whereas “armed attack” was fairly straightforward and “emphasized the connection with Article 51” of the United Nations Charter, “aggression” could refer either to “direct aggression,” similar to “armed attack,” or alternatively to “indirect aggression,” which would include any number of other subversive activities, among them, those generated from within a member state. After some debate, “armed attack” was retained for Article 5, though it was recognized that “aggression,” despite the term not being used, would be covered in substance by Article 4, which referred to consultations if “the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened.”²³⁷

Another issue was the relevant geography covered by the pledge. One US draft contained no definition of the area beyond “Europe or North America.”²³⁸ Clarification on this issue was essential not only for internal political reasons, most notably the French insistence on inclusion of Algeria, but also to ensure deterrence would not be undermined if loopholes could be identified and exploited.²³⁹ Of particular importance was the thorny problem of western Germany, then under Allied occupation, and especially West Berlin due to its location within the Soviet occupation zone. As such, Article 6 in the final text would refer to “the occupation forces of any Party in Europe.” There were also some awkward implications of the definition of the area, such as what counted as the “territory” of “North America.” It was observed, for instance, that the definition could conceivably include covering “an attack by Guatemala on British Honduras.”²⁴⁰ Some of these references would later become somewhat controversial. For instance, as early as 1950, there was concern about the phrase “occupation forces” since the Federal Republic of Germany was not a member of the Alliance.²⁴¹ In due course, the US, UK, and France would issue a Tripartite Declaration reaffirming their commitment to defend West Germany, and that this commitment extended to NATO more generally under Article 5.²⁴² Furthermore, in the mid-1960s, the Alliance’s geographic boundaries would come under scrutiny due to the reference in Article 5 to “North America” instead of “United States” because the latter included Hawaii (at least after 1959 when it became the 50th state) whereas the former did not.²⁴³

Despite the formation of the NATO Alliance in 1949, the Article 5 treaty commitment was not viewed as sufficient in its own right to act as a deterrent, at least not after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950.²⁴⁴ Not only was it deemed necessary to complement the treaty commitment with forward deployed forces and an international military command structure, but over the course of the Alliance’s subsequent history there have been repeated instances of both collective and individual member state public declarations reaffirming their commitment to the Alliance, and specifically Article 5. Notably, when President Donald Trump was initially unwilling in 2017 to publicly reaffirm Article 5, there was much speculation about the

²³⁷ Minutes of the Eighteenth Meeting of the Washington Exploratory Talks on Security, March 15, 1949, FRUS, 949, Western Europe, Vol. IV.

²³⁸ See, for instance: Sir. O. Franks (Washington) to Mr. Bevin, 4 February 1949, Documents on British Policy Overseas (DPBO).

²³⁹ See, for instance: Mr. Bevin to Sir O. Franks (Washington), 7 February 1949, DPBO.

²⁴⁰ Memorandum from Secretary of State for External Affairs to Prime Minister, January 4, 1949, Documents on Canadian External Relations (DCER), Vol. 15, 1949, p. 480.

²⁴¹ Brief for the UK Delegation, ‘Security Guarantee for the Federal Republic’, May 4, 1950 [C 3136/27/18], DPBO

²⁴² Draft Communiqué on Berlin, September 13, 1950 and Draft Agreement on Berlin Security, September 14, 1950 in FRUS, 1950, Western Europe, Vol. III. Also: The United State High Commissioner for Germany (McCloy) to the Acting Secretary of State, November 16, 1951 and The Secretary of State to the President and the Acting Secretary of State, November 23, 1951 in FRUS, 1951, European Security and the German Question, Vol. III, Part 2.

²⁴³ See discussion in: Jeffrey Michaels, “‘A very different kind of challenge’? NATO’s prioritization of China in historical perspective,” *International Politics*, Vol. 59, 2022, pp. 1045–1064.

²⁴⁴ Michaels, “Visions of the next war.”

degree to which the US remained committed to NATO.²⁴⁵ Congressional supporters of the Alliance were likewise concerned about this and responded by voting for resolutions reaffirming America's commitment.²⁴⁶ In the months prior to Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine, and particularly after February 24, 2022, Alliance public statements have repeatedly reaffirmed the commitment to Article 5.²⁴⁷

The perceived need to publicly reaffirm treaty commitments, and specifically issuing clarifications of the circumstances in which treaty obligations will be invoked, has been understood as a necessity to ensure 'general deterrence' for at least two reasons. First, the absence of such statements may convey an image that the commitments have weakened, thereby risking a general deterrence problem transforming into an immediate one. Second, new circumstances may arise that necessitate clarifying whether existing commitments cover these or not. For example, there has been much debate within NATO about whether Article 5 can be invoked in response to cyberattacks (as opposed to "armed attack").²⁴⁸ Similarly, official NATO statements discussing the applicability of Article 5 to 'hybrid' attacks, as well as attacks in space, only mention that the article *could* be invoked, but do not specify the circumstances in which this might occur.²⁴⁹

Communicating NATO's Intention to Use Nuclear Weapons

With NATO's adoption of the 1967 Strategic Concept emphasizing "flexible response", and the subsequent development of the Provisional Political Guidelines for the Initial Defensive Tactical Use of Nuclear Weapons, the Alliance's nuclear strategy was to be based on the principle of limited initial nuclear use if deemed necessary in response to Soviet aggression. If this initial use failed, NATO would escalate to follow-on use, and if this too failed, it would escalate to general nuclear use. The fundamental purpose of using nuclear weapons in this 'controlled' way, whilst simultaneously threatening further escalation, was to get the Soviets to cease their conventional aggression at the earliest possible stage. The question of whether to warn the Soviets in advance of NATO's intention to use nuclear weapons arose during a Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) meeting in May 1973. The NPG Staff were tasked with examining the problem. Over the next two years, the problem was studied and debated, albeit the real value of this effort was to highlight the complexities involved rather than prescribing a particular course or set of procedures.

²⁴⁵ "Trump endorses NATO's mutual defence pact in Poland, after failing to do so on first Europe trip," CNBC, July 7, 2017.

²⁴⁶ Joe Gould, "US Senate votes to defend NATO as Trump attacks alliance," *Defense News*, July 11, 2018.

²⁴⁷ For an early example, see: Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the situation in and around Ukraine, December 16, 2001.

²⁴⁸ Ines Kagubari, "When would a cyberattack trigger a NATO response? It's a mystery," *The Hill*, November 24, 2022.

²⁴⁹ Brussels Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021. In relation to hybrid war, the communiqué states "In cases of hybrid warfare, the Council could decide to invoke Article 5." For attacks in space, it states: We consider that attacks to, from, or within space present a clear challenge to the security of the Alliance ... and could be as harmful to modern societies as a conventional attack. Such attacks could lead to the invocation of Article 5. A decision as to when such attacks would lead to the invocation of Article 5 would be taken by the North Atlantic Council on a case-by-case basis."

The question of whether to warn the Soviets in advance of NATO's intention to use nuclear weapons arose during a Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) meeting in May 1973.

Whilst NATO had, for the purposes of 'general deterrence', conveyed ample warnings about its willingness and capability to use nuclear weapons, it was uncertain what type of 'immediate deterrence' warning would be appropriate. If there was some advanced warning of a Soviet attack, it would probably be necessary to reaffirm and reinforce these warnings, but should deterrence fail and Soviet aggression occur, it was recognized these would be insufficient. In the event NATO were seriously considering, or had already decided, to use nuclear weapons, officials realized it might be advantageous to provide the Soviets with a specific explanation and warning. Most likely a further explanation and warning would be required *after* the initial use that would inform the Soviets of the conditions leading to follow-on nuclear use.

The reason for communicating a nuclear use warning would be to control escalation and reduce the prospect of the Soviets miscalculating NATO's response for something greater or lesser than it was intended to be. For example, although any use of nuclear weapons would implicitly signal NATO's resolve, it was no guarantee the Soviets would believe NATO was imposing limitations on nuclear use, or conversely, that the Alliance was prepared to use additional nuclear weapons. If the Soviets took the view NATO's first use was not deliberate and limited, they might respond with massive nuclear use of their own. On the other hand, if the Soviets believed NATO was only willing to use nuclear weapons once, they would be less likely to halt their aggression. Having agreed in principle about the need for this type of warning, the challenge was determining when messages would be delivered, their content, and how they would be delivered.

Among the most complicated problems associated with the initial warning message was when to send it. NATO officials had to wrestle with two questions. First, should the message be sent *prior* to NATO deciding to use nuclear weapons, or *after* that decision had been taken but prior to nuclear use? Second, how much time should elapse between issuing a warning and using a nuclear weapon to allow for the Soviets to respond, ideally by agreeing to a cease-fire? After all, as the ideal aim of issuing a warning was to change Soviet behavior *without* having to use nuclear weapons, the Soviet leadership would need some time to arrive at their own decision to cease aggression and communicate this to NATO. However, this timeframe would need to be kept relatively short as fighting would be ongoing during the period. Once NATO had used nuclear weapons in a limited way, an additional message would need to be sent warning of further use.

Deciding on the content of these messages was no easy task. Even prior to devising the content it had to be determined who in NATO would be authorized to issue messages of this type. It was preferred that the North Atlantic Council/Defense Policy Committee, which was charged with consulting on the decision to use nuclear weapons, would also be charged with issuing a warning. However, similar to any decision to use nuclear weapons it was understood that the views of the NATO member whose nuclear weapons would be used, almost certainly the United States, would be given added weight since they had the final authority. In contrast, for general warning messages issued at an earlier stage of the crisis, it was assumed the content would be reached by consensus decision.

It was anticipated the content of the message would include a statement explaining what NATO intended to do, or had already done, by using nuclear weapons, and a statement of warning of what NATO would do if the Soviets did not comply with the Alliance's terms. The precise terms would only be decided based on the circumstances of the situation but would likely include either a demand for a ceasefire in place or a ceasefire and withdrawal. Among the issues Alliance officials debated was how specific to make the message in order to ensure a maximum degree of clarity and demonstration of resolve without jeopardizing the nuclear

The reason for communicating a nuclear use warning would be to control escalation.

use itself. It was suggested the message might include reference to the number of warheads NATO would use and the duration of use, the general area where they would be employed, and the type of targets. For security reasons the specific targets of NATO nuclear use would not be mentioned, yet it was also recognized too vague a warning was unlikely to be taken seriously by the Soviets.

Once a message was devised, it then had to be communicated. The question was how to do this? For example, would the Alliance try to communicate the warning privately through diplomatic channels, including the US-Soviet 'hotline'? If so, a message sent over the hotline from the US president that was *authorized* by the Alliance was believed to constitute the best means of conveying a strong private message. Or was a public message preferable? A private message had the advantage of not causing public alarm, which would place pressure on the Alliance not to use nuclear weapons. Moreover, a private message might allow the Soviets a face-saving means to de-escalate the conflict, rather than being seen as succumbing to nuclear blackmail. On the other hand, a public warning was viewed as more credible because it would tie the hands of NATO leaders. Thus, a communiqué issued by the North Atlantic Council and conveyed by all public means was believed to constitute the best method of conveying a strong public message.

While studying these issues, NATO officials devoted a good deal of time to debating the merits and drawbacks of conveying warning messages. Clearly, there were many advantages to sending these messages, the most important of which was to induce Soviet leaders to cease further aggression prior to NATO using nuclear weapons, or, if nuclear weapons were used in a limited way, to ensure the aggression ceased before further use became necessary. Whereas the actual use of nuclear weapons would convey NATO's resolve to a degree, ensuring the Soviets clearly understood NATO's intentions was necessary for intra-war deterrence. This could only be achieved with an explicit warning message.

It was hoped clarification of the Alliance's intentions in a warning message might result in a more limited Soviet use of nuclear weapons than their doctrine called for in response to NATO nuclear use. Ideally it might induce sufficient fear in the Soviet leadership they would recognize their aggression was not going to be contested solely with non-nuclear means and desist from further offensive action. So much, however, depended on the nature of the Soviet leadership. If they were inflexible, even the strongest possible warning message was unlikely to have a positive effect. But if the Soviet leadership were flexible, or internally divided, a strong message might have a positive effect on the moderate element and lead to a ceasefire.

Another advantage to conveying an explanation and warning was simply that not to do so would carry its own risks, most notably that it might lead the Soviets to misinterpret NATO's limited nuclear use for something worse, thereby leading to a pre-emptive nuclear escalation of their own. Conversely, a message explaining NATO's action would also be intended to prevent the Soviets thinking NATO lacked resolve and was unwilling to risk further escalation. At the very least, such a message would convey to the Soviets the impression that NATO nuclear use was the result of a deliberate decision, it would be controlled, and that further use was dependent on the Soviet response.

Conveying warning messages also carried risks. It was feared, especially by NATO military commanders, that informing the Soviets of future NATO nuclear use could result in loss of tactical surprise, lead the Soviet military to take countermeasures such as dispersing their forces, or push Soviet leaders into authorizing pre-emptive nuclear use. Likewise, they were concerned the need to gain Alliance consensus on a warning message might reduce NATO

A message explaining NATO's action would also be intended to prevent the Soviets thinking NATO lacked resolve and was unwilling to risk further escalation.

flexibility deciding on nuclear use. Related to this was the prospect the Soviets might respond to a warning message with an ambiguous or deceptive message of their own for the purpose of undermining Alliance resolve, or at the very least to play for time.²⁵⁰

NATO and Extended Deterrence Warnings (1980-2014)

NATO's involvement in extending deterrence to non-members, and of utilizing warning messages for this purpose, began during the Cold War. To deter a Soviet invasion of Poland in 1980, discussed in more detail earlier, the North Atlantic Council issued a communiqué containing the following warning:

Détente has brought appreciable benefits in the field of East-West co-operation and exchange. But it has been seriously damaged by Soviet actions. It could not survive if the Soviet Union were again to violate the basic rights of any state to territorial integrity and independence. Poland should be free to decide its own future. The Allies will respect the principle of non-intervention and strongly urge others to do likewise. Any intervention would fundamentally alter the entire international situation. The Allies would be compelled to react in the manner which the gravity of this development would require.²⁵¹

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, NATO also extended deterrence to include protecting civilians during the conflict in Bosnia.²⁵² In August 1993, for instance, NATO threatened airstrikes to prevent “the strangulation of Sarajevo and other areas ... including wide-scale interference with humanitarian assistance.”²⁵³ Months later this threat was publicly reaffirmed.²⁵⁴ The threat of airstrikes was subsequently extended to include preventing the Bosnian Serbs from using heavy weapons against UN-designated ‘safe areas’ in Gorazde, Bihac, Srebrenica, Tuzla and Zepa.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ The content of this section has been drawn from numerous declassified US diplomatic cables from the mid-1970s. See: Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 251330Z Sep 74, Subject: NPG Revised Draft Permreps Report on Communicating NATO's Intention to Use Nuclear Weapons. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?Rid=205407&dt=2474&dl=1345>; Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 112000Z Sep 74, Subj: NPG Study on Communicating NATO's Intentions to Use Nuclear Weapons. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=204994&dt=2474&dl=1345>; Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 132055Z Sep 74, Subject: September 13 NPG Staff Group Meeting. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=205412&dt=2474&dl=1345>; Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 031430Z Sep 74, Subject: NPG Study on Communicating NATO's Intentions to Use Nuclear Weapons. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=204986&dt=2474&dl=1345>; Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 181330Z Nov 75, Subject NPG-November 17 NPG Staff Group Meeting. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=253991&dt=2476&dl=1345>; Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 161710Z Oct 75, Subj: NPG: CNI: Messages of Warning. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=290937&dt=2476&dl=1345>; Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 121530Z Apr 75, Subject: NPG-Permreps Report on Wintex-75. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=13929&dt=2476&dl=1345>; Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 071424Z May 77, Subject: NPG: Ambassador Pauls Remarks at May 5 NPG Permrep meeting. Available at: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=103175&dt=2532&dl=1629>.

²⁵¹ North Atlantic Council Final Communiqué 11-12 December, 1980.

²⁵² The author appreciates a distinction can be made here between deterrence and compellence and that valid arguments can be made for either characterization given that in some of the instances referred to, the NATO objective was to stop attacks that were then in progress in some areas, although in other areas it was to stop attacks that had not yet occurred.

²⁵³ Press Statement by the Secretary General following the Special Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, August 2, 1993.

²⁵⁴ Decisions taken at the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Permanent Session 1, February 9, 1994.

²⁵⁵ Decisions on the protection of safe areas taken at the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, April 22, 1994.

In a July 19, 1995 telephone call with French President Jacques Chirac, President Clinton stated, "We propose issuing a clear warning to Bosnian Serbs that any attack on Gorazde or Sarajevo will be met by a sustained air campaign that will ... cripple their military capability."²⁵⁶ Clinton then went on to say that if such a warning was issued, it might be sufficiently persuasive that the threatened use of force might be unnecessary.²⁵⁷ US Secretary of State Warren Christopher similarly told his French counterpart that "warning the Serbian leadership publicly and privately as to what airstrikes could do to any Serbian incursion force into Gorazde will deter such an attack better than reinforcement" with more international troops.²⁵⁸

On July 25, 1995, the Alliance issued a statement noting: "a specific warning was issued that any attack by the Bosnian Serbs on Gorazde would be met with a substantial and decisive response."²⁵⁹ Prior to the announcement of the NATO warning, the US, UK and French governments agreed to dispatch senior military officers of each country to deliver a private warning.²⁶⁰ In the course of discussing a NATO warning, policymakers also debated whether to limit the geographic scope to Gorazde, or to extend it to other 'safe areas'. Whilst initially the scope was limited to Gorazde, a second statement issued a week later by NATO Secretary General Willy Claes extended this to three other Bosnian 'safe areas':

The warning we issued on that occasion has thus far been heeded - and we expect it to continue to be heeded. For any attack on Gorazde will be met with the firm and rapid response of NATO's airpower. Today NATO is ready to take the same robust action to defend the other Safe Areas in Bosnia - Bihac, Tuzla and Sarajevo. ... The Council has today approved the necessary planning to deter attacks by any party - I stress any party - on the Safe Areas of Bihac, Tuzla and Sarajevo. As is the case already with Gorazde, our planning will ensure that military preparations which are judged to represent a direct threat to the UN Safe Areas or direct attacks upon them will be met with the firm and rapid response of NATO's airpower.²⁶¹

During the 1999 Kosovo war, NATO issued several warnings intended to dissuade the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from attacking Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, both of which were hosting NATO troops, as well as to deter a move against Montenegro. Initially, the somewhat cautionary phrase "appropriate response" was used to warn the Serbs against attacking NATO forces based in Macedonia.²⁶² NATO Secretary General Javier Solana also wrote to the leaders of Bulgaria, Slovenia and Romania assuring

²⁵⁶ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with French President Chirac," July 19, 1995 in "Declassified Documents concerning Bosnia," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed January 23, 2024. Prior to this call, the British Government recommended a private warning to the Bosnian Serbs that NATO would retaliate with a massive air campaign if they attacked Gorazde. US officials discussed leaking the private warning. Alexander Vershbow, "Options Paper," July 17, 1995 in "Declassified Documents concerning Bosnia," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed January 23, 2024.

²⁵⁷ "Telcon with French President Chirac," July 19, 1995.

²⁵⁸ State Department Cable from SECSTATE to AMEMBASSY Paris, 210226ZJUL95, Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between US Secretary of State Christopher and French Foreign Minister De Charette, July 19, 1995, *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed January 23, 2024.

²⁵⁹ NATO, Press Statement by the Secretary General Following the North Atlantic Council Meeting, July 25, 1995.

²⁶⁰ Information Memorandum for the President from Anthony Lake, Subject: "Your Meeting with Christopher and Shalikashvili on the London Meeting on Bosnia," July 22, 1995, *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed January 23, 2024.

²⁶¹ NATO, Press Statement by the Secretary General Following the North Atlantic Council Meeting, August 1, 1995.

²⁶² For example: Statement by NATO Secretary General Solana on behalf of the North Atlantic Council on the 19+1 Meeting with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (1), April 9, 1999.

Clinton then went on to say that if such a warning was issued, it might be sufficiently persuasive that the threatened use of force might be unnecessary.

them that NATO would treat a Serbian attack with “utmost seriousness.”²⁶³ For example, a statement issued following an Extraordinary Ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Council on April 12, 1999, contained the following warning:

NATO has repeatedly stated that it would be unacceptable if the FRY were to threaten the territorial integrity, political independence and security of Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia ... We will respond to any challenges by the FRY to the security of Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia stemming from the presence of NATO forces and their activities on their territory. ... We are concerned over the situation in the Republic of Montenegro. ... President Milosevic should be in no doubt that any move against President Djukanovic and his government will have grave consequences.²⁶⁴

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Alliance threatened Moscow with consequences if they continued their aggression. At a press conference, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated:

We are not discussing military options. I have warned against further Russian intervention in Ukraine and made clear that it will have grave consequences for our relationship with Russia. It will lead to further international isolation of Russia. While this is not a NATO issue to deal with economic consequences of such intervention, I have no doubt based on statements from the international community that further Russian intervention in Ukraine might lead to severe economic sanctions that would have a very, very negative impact on the Russian economy.²⁶⁵

In another instance, Rasmussen stated:

... we have seen a very massive Russian military build-up along the Ukrainian borders. ... If Russia were to intervene further in Ukraine, I wouldn't hesitate to call it an historic mistake. That would lead to further isolation... international isolation of Russia. It would have far-reaching consequences for the relations between Russia and what we, as a whole, might call the Western World. It would be a miscalculation with huge strategic implications. Now, we're not discussing military options. We do believe that the right way forward is to find a political and diplomatic solution.²⁶⁶

Importantly, in both these statements the emphasis is placed on consequences *other* than those imposed by NATO. At best, these statements mentioned the Alliance's opposition to further Russian intervention as a matter of principle, and they noted there would be some consequences, most notably economic sanctions and international isolation, but no “NATO threat” is observable; indeed, ‘military options’ were specifically highlighted as something the Alliance was *not* considering.

²⁶³ Craig R. Whitney, “NATO Assures 5 Neighbors That Fear Serbian Attack,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1999; Neil Buckley and John Thornhill, “Apache Plan Draws Albania into Conflict,” *Financial Times*, April 6, 1999.

²⁶⁴ Statement issued at the Extraordinary Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council Brussels, Belgium, April 12, 1999. This threat was reiterated two weeks later. Statement on Kosovo Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council Washington, D.C., USA, April 23, 1999; See also: Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government with Countries in the Region of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Washington D.C., USA, April 25, 1999.

²⁶⁵ NATO - Opinion: Joint press point by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, Bohuslav Sobotka, 10-Apr.-2014

²⁶⁶ NATO - Opinion: Final press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen following the second day of meetings of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 02-Apr.-2014

‘Military options’ were specifically highlighted as something the Alliance was not considering.

In the hierarchy of Alliance warnings, an even more authoritative type would have been an emergency Summit declaration in which the leaders of all NATO member states joined together to issue a collective warning.

Before leaving the topic of NATO and extended deterrence warnings, it is worth noting that this issue has also arisen with respect to those countries that have been *invited* to join the Alliance but are still in the *process* of joining. This period represents something of a gray area, as well as one in which these incoming members remain vulnerable, as they are not formally covered by Article 5. For instance, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg provided extended deterrence warnings, albeit vague, to ensure Finland and Sweden could rely on security assurances in the 'limbo' period in which they were awaiting formal admission. In June 2023, for instance, Stoltenberg stated: "it is absolutely inconceivable that there will be any threat or any attack against Sweden without NATO reacting."²⁶⁷ On the other hand, when asked to clarify this statement, Stoltenberg only referred to the fact "several NATO Allies including the biggest ones, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France and others, have issued bilateral security assurances to Sweden as part of the accession process."²⁶⁸ Similar Alliance statements referred to "NATO allies" rather than "NATO" as giving security assurances to the two NATO aspirants.²⁶⁹ Indeed, in this instance, NATO members, including the United States, essentially provided bilateral security assurances *instead of* NATO despite the issue at hand being *related to* NATO. As President Biden put it, "I committed that we're going to work together to remain vigilant against the threats to our shared security and to deter and confront any aggression while Finland and Sweden are in this accession process ... There's nothing going to be missed", as my mother would say, 'between the cup and lip'.²⁷⁰

NATO Deterrence Warning Messages Prior to February 24, 2022

In the months leading up to the Russian invasion, only three brief consensus-based statements were issued by the Alliance.²⁷¹ These statements are worthy of scrutiny because they constituted the most authoritative type of NATO public warning issued at the time. In the hierarchy of Alliance warnings, an even more authoritative type would have been an emergency Summit declaration in which the leaders of all NATO member states joined together to issue a collective warning. Below that were similar statements issued at Foreign Ministerial and Defense Ministerial level. A distinction also needs to be made here between statements issued after 'emergency' or 'extraordinary' meetings relative to normally scheduled ministerial meetings. One step below these are statements issued following North Atlantic Council meetings held at ambassadorial level. Further down the hierarchy are formal statements issued by the NATO Secretary General, and near the bottom are the Secretary General's responses to questions at press conferences and similar public events. The vast majority of NATO warnings issued prior to February 24, 2022 were of these latter two types, with not a single warning issued at the level of Alliance heads of state and government (see Annex 3).²⁷² Nor did the Alliance's two senior military officers – the head of the NATO Military Committee and the

²⁶⁷ NATO - Opinion: Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the Informal meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Oslo, Norway, 01-Jun.-2023

²⁶⁸ NATO - Opinion: Joint press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with the Prime Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre, 30-May.-2023

²⁶⁹ See, for instance: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_212941.htm

²⁷⁰ White House, Remarks by President Biden, President Niinistö of Finland, and Prime Minister Andersson of Sweden after Trilateral Meeting, May 19, 2022.

²⁷¹ Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the situation in and around Ukraine, December 16, 2021; NATO Foreign Ministers address Russia's military build-up in and around Ukraine, January 7, 2022; Statement by NATO Defence Ministers on the situation in and around Ukraine, February 16, 2022.

²⁷² An extraordinary summit meeting was held on February 25, 2022, one day after the invasion.

Supreme Allied Commander Europe – deliver any *public* warnings. Various other statements were made by the leaders of NATO member states but these only covered national-level warnings rather than representing the Alliance.

The three consensus-based statements offered few details about the consequences NATO would impose. For example, the North Atlantic Council statement issued in mid-December warned: “Any further aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and would carry a high price.” No further explanation of what these “massive consequences” or “high price” amounted to in practical terms was provided. The statement’s only reference to military action was to take “all necessary measures to ensure the security and defence of all NATO Allies.” Likewise, the brief statement describing the NATO Foreign Ministers’ meeting in early January 2022 noted “ministers stressed that any further aggression against Ukraine would have significant consequences and carry a heavy price for Russia.” Apart from the diminution of the adjective preceding ‘consequences’, the statement retained the reference to ‘high price’, but as with the NAC statement two weeks earlier, no explanation was provided. Finally, one week prior to Russia’s invasion, NATO Defense Ministers agreed to a statement repeating the same language as the mid-December statement. No further explanation was provided about consequences. Instead, stronger language was included that referred to the actions NATO was taking to defend Alliance territory.

To the extent any details about consequences were provided, these were contained in statements made by the NATO Secretary General. Although a Secretary General’s speech or response to questions will carry less weight than a statement by the North Atlantic Council, his ability to provide policy clarification means that the words he uses, and the tone in which they are delivered, can deliberately or inadvertently strengthen or weaken NATO threats. In late November 2021, Stoltenberg referred to a more significant version of the consequences that resulted from the 2014 annexation, namely imposing “heavy economic sanctions, financial sanctions on Russia,” as well as reinforcing the NATO eastern flank.²⁷³ A few days later, Stoltenberg referred to “a wide range of options to make sure that Russia will be confronted with serious consequences ... Everything from economic sanctions, financial sanctions, political restrictions. But also, as we saw after 2014 ... the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War.”²⁷⁴ By mid-January, Stoltenberg expanded on this to also refer to providing “practical support to Ukraine to strengthen their ability to defend themselves.”²⁷⁵ In early February, despite making repeated references to economic sanctions, Stoltenberg nevertheless admitted “it’s not for NATO to decide sanctions.”²⁷⁶

In her analysis of NATO’s efforts to deter a large-scale invasion of Ukraine in late 2021-early 2022, Bettina Renz was highly critical of the content of the Alliance’s deterrence messaging.²⁷⁷ Renz concluded:

²⁷³ Joint Press Conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nauseda and Prime Minister of Lithuania Ingrida Simonyte, November 28, 2021.

²⁷⁴ Closing press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Foreign Ministers in Riga, Latvia, December 1, 2021.

²⁷⁵ Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, January 12, 2022.

²⁷⁶ Press conference by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, February 7, 2022.

²⁷⁷ Bettina Renz, “Was the Russian Invasion of Ukraine a Failure of Western Deterrence?” *Parameters*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 2023.

To the extent any details about consequences were provided, these were contained in statements made by the NATO Secretary General.

Whilst it is relatively easy to find fault in warning statements issued prior to 24 February 2022, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to say whether a stronger message conveyed to Russia would have been sufficient to deter them from invading Ukraine. Nevertheless, if these messages are intended to deter, either on their own or in conjunction with action, then it is essential they be constructed as effectively as possible. ... As is well known, many Western states were unprepared to risk their political and economic ties with Russia, and there were also concerns over the possible escalation of tensions. With the direct involvement of NATO forces in Ukraine ruled out, the options for ramping up deterrent threats were in fact severely limited. ... Realistically, it is hard to envisage how any combination of threats that did not involve the prospect of devastating military retaliation could have been credible enough to deter the Kremlin from invading.²⁷⁸

NATO's messaging referred to several consequences, including political and economic sanctions, an enlargement of NATO's military presence on the Eastern Flank, and the provision of non-lethal military assistance to Ukraine.

As noted, NATO's messaging referred to several consequences, including political and economic sanctions, an enlargement of NATO's military presence on the Eastern Flank, and the provision of non-lethal military assistance to Ukraine. Nevertheless, Renz observed the threat of economic sanctions was not credible given Russia's earlier experience of withstanding the limited sanctions placed on it, as well as the West's reluctance to clearly and publicly articulate the magnitude of a new sanctions policy. Had the magnitude of sanctions placed on Russia after February 24, 2022 been effectively communicated before the invasion, this may have had a much stronger deterrent effect. That being said, it is unclear why the threat of economic sanctions was the *principal* threat referred to in NATO statements as it is a *military* alliance which doesn't have responsibility for implementing *economic* sanctions – a point that both Stoltenberg, and his predecessor Rasmussen, admitted publicly. Although other international actors with responsibility for sanctions made threatening statements, and were almost certainly taken more seriously than NATO's statements on this issue, this is beside the point as far as Alliance deterrence messaging is concerned.

When seeking to diagnose the failure of the Alliance's warning, as well as to suggest some alternative that would have been more likely to succeed, it is reasonable to assume the content of NATO's principal threats *should* have been military in nature rather than economic given this is the Alliance's core competency. At the very least, this ought to have been the *expectation* given NATO is a military alliance, and therefore any statement not including a reference to military consequences would almost certainly have been understood by Russia as reflecting the Alliance's lack of consensus agreement to impose any military consequences. This being so, it should have been assumed a NATO extended deterrence warning statement *not* referring to military consequences was likely to be of limited value, perhaps to the extent there was little purpose in making it. On the other hand, was it necessary, as Renz argues, that military consequences, had they been mentioned in a statement, refer to "the prospect of devastating military retaliation"? Or were there other military threats that could have been made, or at least hinted at, which were likely to increase the risk for Russia that some NATO military intervention was 'on the table'?

Admittedly, two references to indirect military consequences were included in Alliance statements, but in a less prominent way than the references to direct economic sanctions. Threats to increase NATO defences on the Eastern Flank were highly unlikely to produce any deterrent effect. There are at least two reasons for this. First, there was no articulation of the size, scale and timing of this potential reinforcement. Had it been sufficient to radically alter the military balance in NATO's favor, such as opposite Kaliningrad, then it might have induced some fear among the Russian leadership about their forces being vulnerable whilst the bulk

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

of the Russian army was engaged in Ukraine. However, there was no consideration within NATO of adopting a policy of threatening Russian territory as a retaliatory measure, nor any desire to hint of this in their official statements. Second, reinforcing NATO's defences on the Eastern Flank could easily be interpreted as a geographic 'stop sign' for NATO military action as it implied there was no fundamental change to the status quo policy of not deploying forces outside Alliance territory.

The other military threat that was sometimes referred to in Stoltenberg's statements, and always in a vague way, had to do with providing military assistance to Ukraine. Here some context is essential. In the years following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO did provide some non-lethal military support to Ukraine, with a handful of individual NATO member states providing lethal arms, such as anti-tank weapons. However, there was no explicit NATO threat, nor even a hint, of supplying Ukraine with lethal arms on the substantial scale that would eventually be sent in the weeks and months after the war commenced. Thus, there was little credibility to the threat to provide military assistance, due to the way this type of assistance was understood at the time.

At the root of the problem of conveying threats to provide Ukraine with additional military aid was an inability to contemplate the way different scenarios of a Russian invasion might play out, and therefore what roles the Alliance might play in each of these. It was this failure that had direct implications for what threats were likely to be most relevant, and how these threats were conveyed. For example, there were at least two plausible scenarios that might have served as the basis for thinking about what type of military aid might affect Russian calculations. Had Russia attempted a limited invasion, or had their invasion succeeded in capturing significant amounts of territory, but with the Ukrainian government remaining intact and the Ukrainian armed forces still resisting, NATO could have publicly referred to resupplying Ukraine with sufficient military aid to continue active resistance. Another plausible scenario was one in which the Ukrainian armed forces were decisively defeated, but with continued Ukrainian resistance by guerrilla-type units. In this scenario, NATO could have threatened to arm this resistance.

Both these scenarios implied Russia might win some degree of military victory but was almost certain to get bogged down in a quagmire, with the most dangerous quagmire being one in which Ukrainian forces were armed with advanced weaponry. By not specifically linking the provision of lethal aid to creating a quagmire for a Russian invasion, there was little deterrent value in the few vague references made to the subject. Beyond these shortcomings, the unwillingness to threaten the use of force, if not explicitly, then at least implicitly, rather than effectively ruling this possibility out altogether, almost certainly, as Renz points out, undermined the credibility of NATO's references to "massive consequences." As an example of an implicit and non-committal threat, NATO statements might have mentioned the Alliance was *exploring* a range of military options in response to a Russian invasion, possibly to include framing it in terms of reserving the right to intervene in the event of a humanitarian catastrophe, as had been the case with its earlier interventions in the Balkans and Libya, whilst refraining from references to the specific types of options it was contemplating. Such statements would have been given added weight had they been delivered by the head of the NATO Military Committee or by SACEUR.

Many of the shortcomings of NATO pre-war messaging were reflected in the messages sent by individual member states, the EU, the G7, etc. As can be observed by a review of the warning messages listed in Annex 3, multiple messages were sent, these messages often overlapped and in most cases were uncoordinated, and the vast majority contained little or

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no explanation of the sort of consequences Russia could expect. Although many of these messages implied, if not explicitly stated, that the consequences would be worse than those imposed after 2014, the extent to which they would be worse didn't come across clearly. Moreover, some countries not only ruled out the use of military force, but also ruled out supplying Ukraine with lethal weaponry. Germany, for instance, ruled out sending weapons to Ukraine. Its public warnings of economic sanctions also deliberately avoided references to abandoning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as well as the possibility of excluding Russia from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT).²⁷⁹ Curiously, a specific threat to "bring an end" to Nord Stream 2 was uttered by President Biden in the presence of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, but the latter was reluctant to publicly reaffirm this threat in answers to questions.²⁸⁰

One overarching feature about NATO deterrence warnings prior to February 24, 2022 was that in almost all the cases, two types of warnings were simultaneously mentioned in the same statement. The first type was for extended deterrence on behalf of Ukraine. The second type was for direct deterrence. Whereas military consequences were included in the latter, they were excluded in the former. For example, at a January 12, 2022 press conference, Stoltenberg said it was important to understand that:

Ukraine is a partner. We provide them support: political, practical support, in many different ways. But Ukraine is not a NATO member. The security guarantees, what we call Article 5, "one for all and all for one" - that applies for NATO members. And that's also reason why we have so clearly stated that we will do what it takes to defend all NATO Allies. And attacking one Ally will trigger the response from the whole Alliance. And that is clearly conveyed.²⁸¹

Following a February 16, 2022 NATO Defence Ministerial, the official statement summarizing the meeting reaffirmed: "Our commitment to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty is iron-clad. We stand united to defend each other." The statement also referred to the deployment of additional military assets to the "eastern part of the Alliance" and warned "We are prepared to further strengthen our defensive and deterrent posture to respond to all contingencies."²⁸² From February 24, 2022 onwards, references to defending "every inch" of NATO territory began to be included in official statements, particularly from Stoltenberg.²⁸³

These statements were cautionary in nature but constituted warnings nevertheless given the context in which they were made. There was nothing particularly new about the content of the warnings. As a 'general deterrent', public reaffirmations of Article 5 have been a regular feature of the Alliance discourse since 1949. The principal reason given for periodically reaffirming this commitment is to ensure adversaries do not gain the wrong impression that this commitment has weakened. A related reason is that allied governments demand periodic reassurances lest they seek some alternative security arrangement. In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the situation could not be classed as one of "immediate deterrence," despite the risks of the conflict spilling over into Alliance territory. Compared to many of the

²⁷⁹ Jonas J. Driedger, "Did Germany Contribute to Deterrence Failure against Russia in Early 2022?," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, Vol. 16, issue 3, 2022, pp. 152–171.

²⁸⁰ Remarks by President Biden and Chancellor Scholz of the Federal Republic of Germany at Press Conference Scholz, White House, February 7, 2022.

²⁸¹ Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, January 12, 2022.

²⁸² Statement by NATO Defence Ministers on the situation in and around Ukraine, February 16, 2022.

²⁸³ According to a search of the NATO website, the first reference to "every inch" was on February 24, 2022 when Stoltenberg used the phrase in response to a question. Press briefing by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council, February 24, 2022.

As a 'general deterrent', public reaffirmations of Article 5 have been a regular feature of the Alliance discourse since 1949.

scenarios of a full-scale invasion of the Baltic states that preoccupied the Alliance after 2014, the invasion of Ukraine represented an 'elevated' threat due to the spillover risk rather than an 'immediate' threat.

Looking ahead, several questions arise from this. Are the Alliance statements reaffirming Article 5 sufficient if the spillover risks from the ongoing war increase? Would these statements be sufficient if Alliance territory were directly threatened, for instance, if there was a Russian military buildup directly opposite a NATO member state similar to the Russian buildup in the months prior to the invasion of Ukraine, or would stronger statements be needed? In addition to reaffirming Article 5, would the Alliance repeat the references to "massive consequences" and "pay a high price" that featured in its pre-February 24, 2022 statements, or would different language be preferred, such as emphasizing the military consequences to an attack? Should such a situation ever develop, NATO will need to find good answers to these questions. It is one thing to deploy military forces in an attempt to deter an attack. But such a deployment would not occur in the absence of a private or public communication warning Russia not to attack. To increase the chances of deterring Russia, the language chosen to warn Russia of consequences must be strong enough to achieve this objective, whereas choosing the wrong language might increase the risk of a deterrence failure.

5. Lessons

In his analysis of ‘red lines’ and prescriptions for drawing them right, Bruno Tertrais highlighted a handful of lessons. Among the most important of these is clarity. This conclusion logically follows from an appreciation that a lack of clarity regarding the circumstances that would trigger consequences, and the nature of those consequences, is almost certain to result in failure. This may be due to a lack of clarity when formulating one’s own red lines – a fairly common occurrence – rather than a lack of clarity in how those red lines are communicated. According to this argument, because clarity is less likely to fail it is more likely to succeed, and therefore should be identified as a lesson.

Tertrais also recommends “any deterrence message that the highest political authorities issue should undergo careful preparation and drafting.”²⁸⁴ In contrast to off-the-cuff statements, prepared statements, especially those delivered by high-level officials, are usually assumed to contain language carefully selected following an internal review. Moreover, the tone of the message should “always project a sense of determination.”²⁸⁵ Schelling similarly recommended:

As a rule, one must threaten that he will act, not that he may act, if the threat fails. To say that one may act is to say that one may not, and to say this is to confess that one has kept the power of decision, that one is not committed. To say only that one may carry out the threat, not that one certainly will, is to invite the opponent to guess whether one will prefer to punish himself and his opponent or to pass up the occasion.²⁸⁶

Another lesson Tertrais insists upon is never to give the impression the military option is off the table.²⁸⁷ This, of course, is easier said than done because fear of a domestic political backlash often places limitations on the willingness of leaders to commit to going to war if their effort to deter fails. Despite the option of using ambiguous language as opposed to making an unambiguous commitment to use force, leaders are still cognizant that not unambiguously ruling out military force can generate domestic opposition. For many leaders, the issue at stake is not sufficiently salient for them to risk going to war, especially if the war is likely to be costly, casualty intensive, and not guaranteed to be successful.

For all these lessons, opposite conclusions can be drawn. Whilst it can be argued that clarity is preferred to vagueness, there might also be circumstances where vagueness is preferred so that it doesn’t unnecessarily provoke action rather than deter it. For example, if the circumstances that would lead to consequences, or the consequences themselves, are stated in specific terms, the adversary may try to find ways to achieve a similar policy impact by shifting the circumstances, exploiting loopholes, or mitigating the threatened punishment. It might also be deemed preferable to be vague about the consequences so that the threatener retains sufficient flexibility to respond as they deem appropriate once deterrence fails.²⁸⁸ Moreover, leaders may simply have little confidence their deterrence warnings will succeed,

²⁸⁴ Tertrais, “Drawing Red Lines Right,” p. 18.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁸⁶ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, p. 187.

²⁸⁷ Tertrais, “Drawing Red Lines Right,” p. 20.

²⁸⁸ Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, p. 220.

no matter how strong they are, and therefore see little advantage in defending a lost cause. In this regard, warning messages are less about producing a deterrent effect and more about performative politics - a demonstration that at least some effort was made to deter.

The specific context of communicating warnings on behalf of an alliance as opposed to a single state should also be accounted for. NATO derives both advantages and disadvantages from speaking on behalf of thirty-two member states, although these are context-dependent. NATO threats are more threatening and credible when warning messages are intended to deter direct aggression against Alliance territory, albeit somewhat less threatening and credible when attempting to deter indirect aggression against its members. This is because gaining the consensus of thirty-two member states to threaten military action is only possible in a limited range of worst-case scenarios. Deterring direct aggression against a non-member state by threatening a military response has traditionally garnered little support, as was prominently the case in 2021-2022 with Ukraine. At best, only political consensus for threatening non-military consequences was possible.

Although the prospects of NATO threatening military action to deter direct aggression against a non-member state are very slim, they are not impossible. There are at least four reasons for this. First, NATO has already used force 'out-of-area' on several occasions and therefore it is conceivable that political consensus can be reached to do so again. NATO has also deployed forces 'out of area' in a support capacity for which consensus was also necessary. Second, achieving political consensus to use military force does not necessarily require every Alliance member to contribute military forces to a 'NATO operation'. Instead, participation in a NATO operation may only consist of a handful of NATO members who take the lead whereas the majority either take no action or play a limited supporting role. Therefore, it may be possible to persuade the reluctant states to provide their political support in exchange for an understanding they will not be required to militarily participate. Third, when NATO has previously used force in the Balkans and Libya, it did so in the context of a humanitarian crisis. When there is the possibility of a similar humanitarian crisis resulting from war against a non-member, then the use of force should be contemplated rather than excluded from consideration. And if it is contemplated, and ideally planned for, it should be threatened. In the Ukraine case, had Russia employed WMD, especially against civilian targets – clearly a plausible scenario – would not the Alliance have faced strong pressure to take some form of military action? In other words, there are almost certainly circumstances that would merit NATO military action, and even if these circumstances aren't singled out in a warning message, the important point is that the possibility of military action is explicitly referred to. Fourth, the Ukraine analogy will almost certainly be raised in future Alliance deliberations about deterrence warning messages. Although not guaranteed, it is possible the messages conveyed prior to the Russian invasion will not be looked upon as model to emulate, and that a stronger alternative will be preferred. Indeed, it would be nothing short of foolhardy to repeat a failed approach.

Assuming stronger messages can be crafted, are there more effective means of delivering them? Almost certainly yes. One notable feature of the NATO warning messages preceding the Russian invasion was that the highest level of collective statements followed ministerial meetings. At no point was an emergency summit convened with all NATO heads of state and government issuing a joint warning. Senior NATO military commanders did not publicly repeat the threats nor were any military actions taken, such as placing forces on alert or deploying significant air, land or naval contingents closer to Ukraine, that would have given these threats greater credence. The Alliance could also have functioned as a forum for coordinating a messaging campaign, thereby improving the overall efficiency of member state

The messages conveyed prior to the Russian invasion will not be looked upon as model to emulate.

messages. Measures such as these are basic and straightforward, more likely to strengthen the effectiveness of deterrence warnings rather than weaken them, and are comparatively cheaper and less risky to the Alliance than the alternative of a guaranteed deterrence failure in their absence.

In addition to improving the quality of warning messages to deter future conflicts, new attention should be placed on deterring unwanted actions within war, the most important of which is nuclear use. It could be argued there is no need for improvement since no nuclear use has occurred and that the messages conveyed during the Ukraine war, particularly in the autumn 2022, constitute a 'success story' to be repeated should the need arise again. However, this would be to assume that NATO warnings, and specifically those of the United States, were decisive in preventing Russian nuclear use. Such an assumption is premature in the absence of any definitive evidence supporting it. Plausible alternatives exist to cast doubt on this interpretation, the most important of which are that pressure from Russia's allies was more influential, or that Russian leaders simply did not believe the situation was sufficiently dire as to merit nuclear use. Moreover, the context of any future nuclear crisis is certain to be different from previous ones. It is therefore prudent for NATO to address this issue as part of its future nuclear planning similar to the way it did in the 1970s. At that time, Nuclear Planning Group staff were assigned to study how to communicate warnings to the Soviets in a war. High-level NATO exercises also dealt with this problem as part of the 'nuclear play'. The advantage of studying and exercising the issue in this way is that it forces NATO staff to engage in a wide range of contingencies involving potential nuclear use and to think through the advantages and disadvantages of what messages to send, when to send them, and how to send them. Similar efforts should also be undertaken in relation to contingencies involving other types of non-nuclear WMD use, atrocities perpetrated against civilians, and so forth.

6. Conclusion

Words, and the way they are communicated, constitute deterrent power either independent of, or complementary to, harder forms of action.

There are many ways and means to deter. In the international security field most attention is focused on military means and other types of sanctions. This paper has examined what is arguably the most obvious, simplest, and cheapest way to deter, yet somewhat paradoxically, also the most understudied, namely deterring with words. Possessing the ability to impose military and other non-military costs can usefully complement a deterrence warning, and in most instances will be preferred, but it is not absolutely essential. Without the context that words provide, including identification of the circumstances that would lead to consequences, as well as the sorts of costs to be imposed, the mere fact one possesses the power to hurt is highly unlikely to offer much of a deterrent. Yet to be effective these words need to be communicated in such a way that the message is received as it was intended. But even in the absence of deploying military forces in a threatening way – to take a common example – a strong message may be sufficient on its own to deter an unwanted action. Although this is difficult to prove, just as it is with other ways and means of deterrence, policymakers nevertheless often believe it to be true. Indeed, why bother issuing warnings at all, much less devote considerable time and energy to crafting them, unless they hold out some hope of a positive result? Likewise, not to issue warnings, or to issue lackluster warnings, is widely understood to increase the chances of a deterrence failure. After all, if a green light remains green, or a red light appears yellow or green, the chances of stopping are minimal. Regardless of which way warning messages are viewed – as having the potential to stop wars and other unwanted actions if ‘done right’ or contribute to their outbreak if ‘done wrong’ – the underpinning assumption is that words, and the way they are communicated, constitute deterrent power either independent of, or complementary to, harder forms of action.

This paper has examined numerous cases of deterrence warning messages from 1914 to the present, focusing on the practical dilemmas policymakers face when deciding whether to issue these messages, and if so, how best to craft and deliver them to achieve the desired deterrent effect. Arguably the greatest challenge officials are confronted with in this regard is an unwillingness or inability to seriously contemplate the costs of a deterrence failure. Put another way, they find it difficult to fully appreciate the costs to themselves if unwanted actions occur, this negatively affects their ability to consider their own responses in such a scenario, which in turn undermines how they warn. In this sense, policy planners are often unable to ‘think the unthinkable’, or alternatively, the short-term policy imperative not to jeopardize relations, cause panic or be perceived as unnecessarily belligerent, leads them to refrain from communicating stronger warnings. These problems are almost always present in a national context, and even more so in an international context. Achieving agreement among multiple states on the wording of warnings necessitates, as a matter of course, watering down language. On the other hand, the fact multiple states agree to issue a warning hopefully offers some compensation, but there is no guarantee of this, particularly if the language used is so watered down that it implies a lack of serious commitment.

Apart from the internal challenges of crafting warnings is the nature of the broader circumstances and unwanted actions the warnings are intended to deter. It is one thing to deter an adversary, it is another to deter an ally; it is one thing to deter in peacetime, it is another to deter amidst an international crisis or war; it is one thing to deter a smaller adversary, it is another to deter a very powerful one; it is one thing to deter an adversary who has a history of backing

down, it is another when the adversary seems not to care about consequences; it is one thing to deter when the stakes are extremely high, it is another to deter when the stakes are much lower; it is one thing to deter when there is a risk of nuclear war, it is another when nuclear weapons are not a factor; and so on. Given these variations, and the need to tailor warnings accordingly, it is a challenge to identify any specific language, threats or means of conveying them, that are guaranteed to produce a deterrent effect. Examining cases across time is more likely to reveal what didn't work, and what not to do, rather than what did work, and therefore what best practices NATO should emulate. To the extent one can identify a common thread, it is in the nature of the dilemmas policymakers face when confronted with these situations, the choices they need to make, and the range of options they have available to select from. Whilst not as ideal as providing a foolproof successful warning template to cut and paste when a deterrence situation arises, foreknowledge of the dilemmas and choices that are likely to confront policymakers in this type of situation, as well as awareness of common pitfalls to avoid, hopefully still offers useful guidance for the politicians and officials who need to deal with these matters.

Annex 1:

Mutual Defence and Security Obligations

The Covenant of the League of Nations (1919)

Article 16. Should any Member of the League resort to war in disregard of its covenants under Articles 12, 13 or 15, it shall ipso facto be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to the severance of all trade or financial relations, the prohibition of all intercourse between their nationals and the nationals of the covenant-breaking State, and the prevention of all financial, commercial or personal intercourse between the nationals of the covenant-breaking State and the nationals of any other State, whether a Member of the League or not.

Agreement of Mutual Assistance Between the United Kingdom and Poland (1939)

Article 1. Should one of the Contracting Parties become engaged in hostilities with a European Power in consequence of aggression by the latter against that Contracting Party, the other Contracting Party will at once give the Contracting Party engaged in hostilities all the support and assistance in its power.

Three-Power Pact Between Germany, Italy, and Japan (1940)

Article 3. Germany, Italy and Japan agree to co-operate in their efforts on aforesaid lines. They further undertake to assist one another with all political, economic and military means when one of the three contracting powers is attacked by a power at present not involved in the European war or in the Chinese-Japanese conflict.

United Nations Charter (1945)

Article 42. Should the Security Council consider that measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations.

Dunkirk Treaty (1947)

Article II. Should either of the High Contracting Parties become again involved in hostilities with Germany, either in consequence of an armed attack, within the meaning of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, by Germany against that Party, or as a result of agreed action taken against Germany under Article I of this Treaty, or as a result of enforcement action taken against Germany by the United Nations Security Council, the other High Contracting Party will at once give the High Contracting Party so involved in hostilities all the military and other support and assistance in his power.

Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (1947)

Article 3. 1. The High Contracting Parties agree that an armed attack by any State against an American State shall be considered as an attack against all the American States and, consequently, each one of the said Contracting Parties undertakes to assist in meeting the attack in the exercise of the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by [Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations](#).

Brussels Treaty (1948)

Article IV. If any of the High Contracting Parties should be the object of an armed attack in Europe, the other High Contracting Parties will, in accordance with the provisions of [Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations](#), afford the party so attacked all the military and other aid and assistance in their power.

North Atlantic Treaty (1949)

Article 5: The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all, and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually, and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the People's Republic of China (1950)

Article 1. The two Contracting Parties undertake to carry out jointly all necessary measures within their power to prevent a repetition of aggression and breach of the peace by Japan or any other State which might directly or indirectly join with Japan in acts of aggression. Should either of the Contracting Parties be attacked by Japan or by States allied with Japan and thus find itself in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately extend military and other assistance with all the means at its disposal.

Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan (1951)

Article 1: Japan grants, and the United States of America accepts, the right, upon the coming into force of the Treaty of Peace and of this Treaty, to dispose United States land, air and sea forces in and about Japan. Such forces may be utilized to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East and to the security of Japan against armed attack from without, including assistance given at the express request of the Japanese Government to put down largescale internal riots and disturbances in Japan, caused through instigation or intervention by an outside power or powers.

Security Treaty Between the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (ANZUS) (1951)

Article IV. Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.

Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines (1951)

Article IV: Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes.

Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea (1953)

Article III: Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other, would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.

Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact) (1954)

Article IV. 1. Each Party recognizes that aggression by means of armed attack in the treaty area against any of the Parties or against any State or territory which the Parties by unanimous agreement may hereafter designate, would endanger its own peace and safety, and agrees that it will in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes. Measures taken under this paragraph shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations.

Warsaw Treaty (1955)

Article 4: In the event of armed attack in Europe on one or more of the Parties to the Treaty by any state or group of states, each of the Parties to the Treaty, in the exercise of its right to individual or collective self-defence in accordance with [Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations Organization](#), shall immediately, either individually or in agreement with other Parties to the Treaty, come to the assistance of the state or states attacked with all such means as it deems necessary, including armed force. The Parties to the Treaty shall immediately consult concerning the necessary measures to be taken by them jointly in order to restore and maintain international peace and security.

Japan-US Security Treaty (1960)

Article V. Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.

Collective Security Treaty (1992)

Article IV. In the case of an act of aggression against any of the member states, all other member states will provide to it all necessary assistance, including military assistance, and will as well support it with all available means in the implementation of the collective defence rights in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

Treaty of European Union (2007)

Article 42.7. If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

Annex 2:

A Selection of Deterrence Warning Messages

1. “As the House is aware, certain consultations are now proceeding with other Governments. In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty’s Government in the meantime before those consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect. I may add that the French Government have authorised me to make it plain that they stand in the same position in this matter as do His Majesty’s Government.”

Statement by PM Neville Chamberlain, House of Commons, March 31, 1939

2. “The Soviet Government have expressed to us the view that the Germans in the desperation of their assault may make use of poison gas against the armies and peoples of Russia. We are, ourselves, firmly resolved not to use this odious weapon unless it is first used by the Germans. Knowing our Hun, however, we have not neglected to make preparations on a formidable scale. I wish now to make it plain that we shall treat the unprovoked use of poison gas against our Russian ally exactly as if it were used against ourselves and if we are satisfied that this new outrage has been committed by Hitler, we will use our great and growing air superiority in the West to carry gas warfare on the largest possible scale far and wide against military objectives in Germany. It is thus for Hitler to choose whether he wishes to add this additional horror to aerial warfare.”

Winston Churchill broadcast on May 10, 1942

3. “Authoritative reports are reaching this Government of the use by Japanese armed forces in various localities of China of poisonous or noxious gases. I desire to make it unmistakably clear that, if Japan persists in this inhuman form of warfare against China or against any other of the United Nations, such action will be regarded by this Government as though taken against the United States, and retaliation in kind and in full measure will be meted out. We shall be prepared to enforce complete retribution. Upon Japan will rest the responsibility.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt Statement on Japanese Use of Poison Gas, June 5, 1942

4. "His Majesty's Government take early occasion to renew warning which the Prime Minister gave last year viz. that any use of poison gas against their Russian Ally by Nazi or other satellites will immediately be followed by fullest possible use of this process of war upon German munition centres, seaports and other military objectives throughout the whole extent of Germany."
Announcement issued from No. 10 Downing Street, April 21, 1943

5. "As President of the United States and as Commander in Chief of the American armed forces, I want to make clear beyond all doubt to any of our enemies contemplating a resort to such desperate and barbarous methods that acts of this nature committed against any one of the United Nations will be regarded as having been committed against the United States itself and will be treated accordingly. We promise to any perpetrators of such crimes full and swift retaliation in kind and I feel obliged now to warn the Axis armies and the Axis peoples, in Europe and in Asia, that the terrible consequences of any use of these inhumane methods on their part will be brought down swiftly and surely upon their own heads. Any use of gas by any Axis power, therefore, will immediately be followed by the fullest possible retaliation upon munition centers, seaports, and other military objectives throughout the whole extent of the territory of such Axis country."
President Roosevelt Statement Warning the Axis Against Using Poison Gas, June 8, 1943

6. "In the name of the U.S. and British Governments, I wish to make it plain that the use of poison gas against the Italians will call forth immediate retaliation upon Germany with gas, using the Allied air superiority to the full."
Draft Declaration on Gas Warfare signed by Roosevelt and Churchill, September 7, 1943

7. "The Governments of the United Kingdom, United States of America, and the U.S.S.R., on behalf of all the United Nations at war with Germany, hereby issue a solemn warning to all commandants and guards in charge of Allied prisoners of war, internees or deported citizens of the United Nations in Germany and German occupied territory and to members of the Gestapo and all other persons of whatsoever service or rank in whose charge Allied prisoners of war, internees or deported citizens have been placed, whether in battle zones, on lines of communication or in rear areas. They declare that they will hold all such persons, no less than the German High Command and competent German military, naval and air authorities, individually responsible for the safety and welfare of all Allied prisoners of war, internees or deported citizens in their charge.
"Any person guilty of maltreating or allowing any Allied prisoners of war, internees or deported citizens to be maltreated, whether in battle zone, on lines of communication, in a camp, hospital, prison or elsewhere, will be ruthlessly pursued and brought to punishment.
"They give notice that they will regard this responsibility as binding in all circumstances and one which cannot be transferred to any other authorities or individuals whatsoever."
Press Release Signed by Truman, Churchill and Stalin, Issued by the White House, April 23, 1945

8. "We affirm, in interests of world peace, that if there is a renewal of the armed attack, challenging again the principles of the United Nations, we should again be united and prompted to resist. The consequences of such a breach of the armistice would be so grave that, in all probability, it would not be possible to confine hostilities within the frontiers of Korea."
Sixteen Nations Declaration on Korea, August 8, 1953
9. "Communist China has been and now is training, equipping, and supplying the Communist forces in Indochina. There is the risk that, as in Korea, Red China might send its own army into Indochina. The Chinese Communist regime should realize that such a second aggression could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina. I say this soberly in the interest of peace and in the hope of preventing another aggressor miscalculation."
Address by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, September 2, 1953
10. "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union. ... That is why this latest Soviet threat-or any other threat which is made either independently or in response to our actions this week-must and will be met with determination. Any hostile move anywhere in the world against the safety and freedom of peoples to whom we are committed - including in particular the brave people of West Berlin - will be met by whatever action is needed."
President John F. Kennedy, Radio and television address to the American people on the Soviet arms build-up in Cuba, October 22, 1962
11. "Furthermore, a military intervention in Cyprus by Turkey could lead to a direct involvement by the Soviet Union. I hope you will understand that your NATO Allies have not had a chance to consider whether they have an obligation to protect Turkey against the Soviet Union if Turkey takes a step which results in Soviet intervention without the full consent and understanding of its NATO Allies."
Letter from President Lyndon Johnson to Turkish Prime Minister Inonu, June 5, 1964
12. "Should Israel commit aggression and military operations begin, then we will render aid to those countries that are subjected to aggression."
Letter from Soviet Premier Kosygin to President Lyndon Johnson, May 27, 1967
13. "In these circumstances, we must view your suggestion of unilateral action as a matter of the gravest concern involving incalculable consequences. ... You must know, however, that we could in no event accept unilateral action. This would be in violation of our understandings, of the agreed Principles we signed in Moscow in 1972 and of Article II of the Agreement on Prevention of Nuclear War. As I stated above, such action would produce incalculable consequences which would be in the interest of neither of our countries and which would end all we have striven so hard to achieve."
Message from President Nixon to Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev, October 25, 1973
14. "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."
President Jimmy Carter State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980

15. “Détente has brought appreciable benefits in the field of East-West co-operation and exchange. But it has been seriously damaged by Soviet actions. It could not survive if the Soviet Union were again to violate the basic rights of any state to territorial integrity and independence. Poland should be free to decide its own future. The Allies will respect the principle of non-intervention and strongly urge others to do likewise. Any intervention would fundamentally alter the entire international situation. The Allies would be compelled to react in the manner which the gravity of this development would require.”

Final Communiqué, North Atlantic Council in Ministerial Session, December 11-12, 1980

16. “Let me state, too, that the United States will not tolerate the use of chemical or biological weapons or the destruction of Kuwait's oil fields and installations. Further, you will be held directly responsible for terrorist actions against any member of the coalition. The American people would demand the strongest possible response. You and your country will pay a terrible price if you order unconscionable acts of this sort.”

George H. W. Bush Letter to Saddam Hussein, January 5, 1991

17. “What I'm saying is we're monitoring that situation very carefully. We have put together a range of contingency plans. We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly.”

Remarks by President Obama to the White House Press Corps, August 20, 2012

18. “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen. He has been very threatening beyond a normal state. And as I said, they will be met with fire, fury and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before.”

Press Conference Statement from President Donald Trump, August 8, 2017

19. “Iran is talking very boldly about targeting certain USA assets as revenge for our ridding the world of their terrorist leader who had just killed an American, & badly wounded many others, not to mention all of the people he had killed over his lifetime, including recently hundreds of Iranian protesters. He was already attacking our Embassy, and preparing for additional hits in other locations. Iran has been nothing but problems for many years. Let this serve as a WARNING that if Iran strikes any Americans, or American assets, we have targeted 52 Iranian sites (representing the 52 American hostages taken by Iran many years ago), some at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture, and those targets, and Iran itself, WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD. The USA wants no more threats!”

Tweets from Donald Trump, January 4, 2020

20. “As for the military sphere, today, modern Russia, even after the collapse of the USSR and the loss of a significant part of its capacity, is one of the most powerful nuclear powers in the world and possesses certain advantages in some of the newest types of weaponry. In this regard, no one should have any doubts that a direct attack on our country will lead to defeat and horrible consequences for any potential aggressor. ... Whoever tries to hinder us or threaten our country or our people should know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history”

President Vladimir Putin, February 24, 2022

21. "Secretary Austin reiterated the firm US commitment to providing extended deterrence to the ROK utilizing the full range of US defence capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, and missile defence capabilities and advanced non-nuclear capabilities. He noted that any nuclear attack against the United States or its Allies and partners, including the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, is unacceptable and will result in the end of the Kim regime."
54th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué, November 3, 2022
22. "If Hezbollah decides to enter the war, it will long for the Second Lebanon War ... It will be making the mistake of its life. We will strike it with strength that it cannot even imagine and the significance to it and to the country of Lebanon will be devastating."
Statement by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, October 22, 2023

Annex 3:

Deterrence Warnings Prior to February 24, 2022

1. November 10, 2021. Secretary Anthony Blinken and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. Blinken: 'We're concerned by reports of unusual Russian military activity near Ukraine. We're monitoring the region very closely, as we always do, we'll continue to consult closely as well with allies and partners on this issue. And as we've made clear, any escalatory or aggressive actions would be of great concern to the United States'.
2. November 15, 2021. Joint communiqué issued by M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, and Mr Heiko Maas, German Minister for Foreign Affairs. 'Any new attempt to undermine Ukraine's territorial integrity would have serious consequences'.
3. November 28, 2021. Joint Press Conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda and Prime Minister of Lithuania Ingrida Simonyte. Stoltenberg: 'we also send the message to Moscow about that, if they decide to use force, then of course there will be consequences. And we have demonstrated our will and our capability to impose costs and consequences on Russia before. We did that after the illegal annexation of Crimea back in 2014, where NATO Allies, the European Union, since then, have actually imposed heavy economic sanctions, financial sanctions on Russia. And we have also since then implemented ... the biggest reinforcements of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War, with battle groups, for instance, in the Baltic region ... We have tripled the size of the NATO Response Force, and we have increased our presence in the eastern part of the Alliance on land, in the air and at sea with air policing, with increased presence of NATO troops, and also with more naval presence. So we have demonstrated before our resolve to impose costs on Russia'.
4. November 29, 2021. Joint press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Latvia, Egils Levits. Stoltenberg: 'Any future Russian aggression against Ukraine would come at a high price. And have serious political and economic consequences for Russia'.
5. November 30, 2021. UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, News. Foreign Secretary warns a Russian incursion would be a strategic mistake. 'She will underline that an incursion into Ukraine would be a strategic mistake, and the UK will use all diplomatic and economic levers at our disposal to avoid that outcome'.

6. December 1, 2021. Closing press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Foreign Ministers in Riga, Latvia. 'Ministers made clear any future Russian aggression would come at a high price, and have serious political and economic consequences for Russia. ... So we have a wide range of options to make sure that Russia will be confronted with serious consequences, if they once again use force against an independent, sovereign nation Ukraine. Everything from economic sanctions, financial sanctions, political restrictions. But also, as we saw after 2014 when they illegally annexed Crimea, and continued to destabilize eastern Ukraine, support the separatists in Donbass, that actually triggered the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War'.
7. December 1, 2021. Keynote interview with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at Reuters Next event. 'Therefore, we call on Russia to be transparent, to reduce tensions and to de-escalate. If they do the opposite and actually decide to, once again, use force against Ukraine then we have made it clear and ministers made that clear during the NATO foreign ministerial meeting in Latvia today, that Russia will then have to pay a high price. There will be serious consequences for Russia and that's a clear message from NATO. ... So first of all, Allies and NATO, we all have made it very clear that there will be a high price to pay and sanctions is one of the options. So I think it's quite obvious that Russia already knows that they will pay a high price. And they have seen also that Allies implemented severe sanctions and also that NATO responded by strengthening defensive measures of NATO Allied countries in the Black Sea and the Baltic region. Exactly when we will announce what, I will not go into the details about that. And it is for individual Allies and the European Union to make decisions on sanctions. But NATO is a valuable and important platform where Allies consult and coordinate, because we represent together 50 percent of the world's GDP. So, of course, when NATO Allies act together on these issues, it really makes a difference'.
8. December 7, 2021. Readout of President Biden's Video Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia. 'President Biden voiced the deep concerns of the United States and our European Allies about Russia's escalation of forces surrounding Ukraine and made clear that the U.S. and our Allies would respond with strong economic and other measures in the event of military escalation'.
9. December 7, 2021. Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. Sullivan: 'I will look you in the eye and tell you, as President Biden looked President Putin in the eye and told him today, that things we did not do in 2014 we are prepared to do now. Now, in terms of the specifics, we would prefer to communicate that directly to the Russians, to not negotiate in public, to not telegraph our punches. But we are laying out for the Russians in some detail the types of measures that we have in mind. We are also coordinating very closely with our European allies on that at a level of deep specificity. We have experts from the Treasury Department, the State Department, and the National Security Council in daily contact with the key capitals and with Brussels to work through that package of measures. But I think it is not profitable for us to lay out the specifics of it standing here at this podium today'.
10. December 10, 2021. Joint news conference with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Von der Leyen: 'Aggression needs to come with a price tag, which is why we will communicate these points ahead of time to Russia'.

11. December 12, 2021. G7 Foreign Ministers' statement on Russia and Ukraine. 'Any use of force to change borders is strictly prohibited under international law. Russia should be in no doubt that further military aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and severe cost in response.'
12. December 13, 2021. Prime Minister's Office, Press Release. PM Call with President Putin of Russia: 'The Prime Minister emphasised the UK's commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and warned that any destabilising action would be a strategic mistake that would have significant consequences'.
13. December 16, 2021. Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the situation in and around Ukraine. 'Any further aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and would carry a high price'.
14. December 16, 2021. Joint press point by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Stoltenberg: 'Any further aggression against Ukraine will have severe consequences. And would carry a high price'.
15. January 4, 2022: Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with Nordic Counterparts. 'Mr. Sullivan and his counterparts discussed their readiness to impose severe consequences on Russia if it engages in further aggression against Ukraine'.
16. January 5, 2022. Russia-Ukraine – Communiqué from Jean-Yves Le Drian. 'I reminded my colleagues, as the Heads of State and Government of the European Union did at the European Council meeting in December 2021, that any further military aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and come at a high cost in response, including restrictive measures in coordination with partners'.
17. January 7, 2022. NATO Foreign Ministers address Russia's military build-up in and around Ukraine. 'At today's meeting, ministers stressed that any further aggression against Ukraine would have significant consequences and carry a heavy price for Russia'.
18. January 12, 2022. Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. 'And therefore we also made it very clear that any use of force against Ukraine will be a severe and serious strategic mistake by Russia. And it will have severe consequences and Russia will have to pay a high price. ... So we also convey a message to Russia that if they use military force, there will be severe consequences. Economic sanctions, political sanctions. We provide support, practical support to Ukraine to strengthen their ability to defend themselves. Allies do that in different ways'.
19. January 18, 2022. Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz. Scholz: 'It's important that we say now, it will mean high political costs for Russia should there be such an intervention and the principle of sovereignty of states and the integrity of borders should it be violated. We are committed, we have all committed to these principles. As I said, we're consulting about this, we are talking about this. We're looking into ways in which we can immediate response should such an action happen and that it will have high economic, political costs ... Part and parcel of things is that it is crystal clear that Russia will have to pay a high price should there be a military intervention against Ukraine or in Ukraine.'

20. January 18, 2022. Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in the discussion: "New World (Dis-)Order" organized by the Körber Stiftung and Der Spiegel. 'And we should also do what we can to deter or dissuade Russia from once again using force against a neighbour. And therefore, we are also sending a message to Russia that there will be a high price to pay. There will be economic, financial sanctions. We provide, NATO Allies provide support to Ukraine so they can defend themselves – and also that is increasing the threshold for any use of force against Ukraine'.
21. January 19, 2022. Statement from Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine: 'President Biden has been clear with the Russian President: If any Russian military forces move across the Ukrainian border, that's a renewed invasion and it will be met with a swift, severe, and united response from the United States and our Allies. President Biden also knows from long experience that the Russians have an extensive playbook of aggression short of military action, including cyber attacks and paramilitary tactics. And he affirmed today that those acts of aggression will be met with a decisive, reciprocal, and united response'.
22. January 20, 2022. Prime Minister's Office Press Release. PM Call with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz: 'The leaders discussed the concerning developments on the Ukrainian border, and agreed further military aggression would come at a high cost for Russia ... any invasion of Ukraine would be a severe strategic mistake'.
23. January 25, 2022. Remarks by President Biden in Press Gaggle. 'And I have made it clear to – early on to President Putin that if he were to move into Ukraine, that there'd be severe consequences, including significant economic sanctions, as well as I'd feel obliged to beef up our presence – NATO's presence in – on the eastern front: Poland, Romania, et cetera ... There will be enormous consequences if he were to go in and invade, as he could, the entire country – or a lot less than that, as well – for Russia, not only in terms of economic consequences and political consequences, but there'll be enormous consequences worldwide ... There is not going to be any American forces moving into Ukraine'.
24. January 25, 2022. Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on Russia Ukraine Economic Deterrence Measures. Senior Administration Official: 'You've no doubt heard us talk about how the United States, alongside allies and partners, continues to prepare a range of severe economic measures to impose on Russia if it further invades Ukraine. And, to repeat, we are prepared to implement sanctions with massive consequences that were not considered in 2014. That means the gradualism of the past is out, and this time we'll start at the top of the escalation ladder and stay there. We've made efforts to signal this intention very clearly. And I would say the deepening selloff in Russian markets, its borrowing costs, the value of its currency, market-implied default risk reflect the severity of the economic consequences we can and will impose on the Russian economy in the event of a further invasion ... All options are very much on the table, and we're united with Allies and partners to decisively impose severe consequences on Russia if it further invades Ukraine. And as we've said, while our actions and the EU's actions may not be identical, we are unified in our intention to impose massive consequences that would deliver a severe and immediate blow to Russia and over time make its economy even more brittle and undercut Putin's aspirations to exert influence on the world stage'.

25. January 27, 2022. Defence Secretary visits Netherlands, Germany and NATO Headquarters. Ben Wallace: 'I have no doubt that NATO is united in its determination to uphold European Security and that any further Russian invasion of Ukraine would be a strategic mistake met by swift and severe consequences'.
26. January 28, 2022. Readout of President Biden's Video Call with European Leaders on Russia and Ukraine. 'The leaders also discussed their joint efforts to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine, including preparations to impose massive consequences and severe economic costs on Russia for such actions as well as to reinforce security on NATO's eastern flank'.
27. January 28, 2022. Transcript: Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III: 'As we've made clear, in addition to the significant economic and diplomatic costs that Russia will incur, a move on Ukraine will accomplish the very thing Russia does not want - a NATO alliance strengthened and resolved on it Western Flank.'
28. January 31, 2022. Statement from President Biden on United Nations Security Council Meeting. 'If instead Russia chooses to walk away from diplomacy and attack Ukraine, Russia will bear the responsibility, and it will face swift and severe consequences'.
29. February 2, 2022. Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.'s Call with President Emmanuel Macron of France. 'The two leaders affirmed their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and reviewed our ongoing coordination of both diplomacy and preparations to impose swift and severe economic costs on Russia should it further invade Ukraine'.
30. February 7, 2022. Press conference by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda. Stoltenberg: 'On the sanctions, this is of course - it's not for NATO to decide sanctions, but I welcome the fact that NATO allies, the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and also of course the European Union have made it very clear that if Russia uses force against Ukraine again there will be a high price to pay, also in the form of economic sanctions'.
31. February 7, 2022. Remarks by President Biden and Chancellor Scholz of the Federal Republic of Germany at Press Conference. Scholz: 'It is important that all allies — the U.S. and Germany, the transatlantic partnership between the U.S. and Europe, NATO — say the same thing, speak with one voice, and do things together. And we made it very clear: If there was a military aggression against Ukraine, this will entail severe consequences that we agreed upon together, severe sanctions that we have worked on together. So, there will be a high price for Russia. This is a very clear message; everybody has understood it. And I think this message has been made clear again and again so that even Russia has understood the message now'. Biden: 'if Russia invades — that means tanks or troops crossing the — the border of Ukraine again — then there will be — we — there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it'.
32. February 11, 2022. UK Defence Secretary meets Russian counterpart in Moscow. Ben Wallace: 'I made clear that any invasion would have severe consequences and destabilise the security of Europe'.

33. February 11, 2022. Statement on the talks between Björn Seibert, Head of Cabinet of President von der Leyen, and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, European Commission Statement: 'They reiterated that any further Russian aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and severe costs for the Russian Federation. And they coordinated in detail on preparations for a robust and comprehensive package of sanctions, which would be deployed swiftly in case of further military aggression by Russia'.
34. February 12, 2022. Readout of President Biden's Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia. 'President Biden was clear that, if Russia undertakes a further invasion of Ukraine, the United States together with our Allies and partners will respond decisively and impose swift and severe costs on Russia'.
35. February 12, 2022. Secretary Blinken's Call with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. 'The Secretary made clear that a diplomatic path to resolving the crisis remained open, but it would require Moscow to deescalate and engage in good faith discussions. He reiterated that should Moscow pursue the path of aggression and further invade Ukraine, it would result in a resolute, massive, and united Transatlantic response'.
36. February 12, 2022. Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on diplomatic presence in Kyiv. 'We recall that any further military aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe cost in response'.
37. February 14, 2022. Readout of President Biden's Call with Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom. 'They discussed efforts to reinforce the defensive posture on NATO's eastern flank and underlined the continued close coordination among Allies and partners, including on readiness to impose severe consequences on Russia should it choose further military escalation'.
38. February 16, 2022. Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the first day of the Meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence. 'From the start, NATO Allies have made clear that further Russian aggression against Ukraine would have a high cost. ... Then, what I say is that since there is no certainty of what will happen in the next days and weeks, I'm saying at least two things. One is that if they use force, it will come with a high price. Sanctions will be imposed. We have provided, NATO Allies have provided support to Ukraine so they are better trained, better equipped, better commanded now than in 2014'.
39. February 16, 2022. Statement by NATO Defence Ministers on the situation in and around Ukraine. 'As stated previously, any further Russian aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and carry a high price'.
40. February 19, 2022. Remarks by Vice President Harris and President Zelenskyy Before Bilateral Meeting: 'If Russia further invades your country ... we will impose swift and severe economic sanctions'.
41. February 22, 2022. Transcript: Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks at a Meeting in Honor of Dmytro Kuleba, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine: 'President Biden signed an executive order to respond to President Putin's actions yesterday, and together with our allies and partners, the United States will not hesitate to impose other severe economic costs as events dictate'.

42. February 24, 2022. Press briefing by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Council. 'This invasion does not come as a surprise. We have warned against this for months and sadly what happened this morning during the night was something that allied security and intelligence services have predicted for a long time. We have tried to prevent it by calling Russia to engage in diplomatic efforts, by telling Russia that there will be severe costs or economic sanctions if they invade Ukraine further. But what happened over the last hours demonstrates that Russia, despite our diplomatic efforts and despite our clear messages of economic sanctions, decided to once again invade Ukraine'.

Annex 4:

Warning Russia against WMD Use in Ukraine

1. “On chemical weapons: First of all, any use of chemical weapons would totally change the nature of the conflict. And it will be a blatant violation of international law and will have far reaching consequences. And I think that’s the most important message to convey, that any use of chemical weapons is absolutely unacceptable, and will have far reaching consequences. ... At the same time, we are also open about our concerns to decrease the likelihood for the use of chemical weapons because that will fundamentally change the nature of the conflict. It will be a blatant violation of international law, and it will have severe consequences in a way that it is important to convey to Russia so they don’t use any chemical weapons in Ukraine, both because any use of chemical weapons will have devastating consequences for Ukraine, but it could also have severe consequences for neighbouring countries because any contamination or spread of chemical agents or biological agents will, of course, also potentially affect the neighbours.”

*Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg previewing
the extraordinary Summit of NATO Heads of State and Government,
March 23, 2022*

2. “We warn against any threat of the use of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons or related materials.”

G7 Leaders’ Statement, March 24, 2022

3. “We warn against any threat or use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. We recall Russia’s obligations under international treaties of which it is a party, and which protect us all. Any use by Russia of such a weapon would be unacceptable and result in severe consequences.”

*G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement on Russia’s War of Aggression Against Ukraine,
April 7, 2022*

4. “We condemn as irresponsible threats of use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons or related materials by Russia and reiterate that any use of such weapons would be met with severe consequences.”

G7 Foreign Ministers Statement on Russia’s War against Ukraine, May 14, 2022

5. "We reiterate our condemnation of Russia's unjustified use of nuclear rhetoric and signaling. Russia must abide by its international commitments, including those which ban the use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. We urge Russia to behave responsibly and exercise restraint, and reiterate that any use of such weapons would be unacceptable and met with severe consequences. In this regard we express serious concern after the announcement by Russia that it could transfer missiles with nuclear capabilities to Belarus."
G7 Leaders' Statement on Support for Ukraine, June 27, 2022
6. "If Russia crosses this line, there will be catastrophic consequences for Russia. The United States will respond decisively. Now in private channels, we have spelled out in greater detail exactly what that would mean."
US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, Meet the Press, September 25, 2022
7. "So, I mean, we've been very clear on this: that Putin's nuclear threat against Europe are irresponsible, and it's reckless. We — you've heard the President say this. You've heard the National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan; he was most recently on a few Sunday shows. And the consequences of nuclear use would be disastrous for Russia and the world, and Russia would be a pariah on the world stage. So this is not new rhetoric. We have heard this before from Russia. We have heard this before from Mr. Putin. They have made these threats before, over the course of the — this conflict this past six months or more. We, of course, take it seriously. Again, we take this very, very seriously. Though I would add that Russia itself has said many times that a nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought. This is something that they have said, including earlier this year in the P5 joint statement. As the President made clear, any use of nuclear weapons on any scale should be dis- — would be — should be and would be — would be disastrous for the world and would entail severe consequences."
Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, September 26, 2022
8. "To the best of our knowledge, Putin is threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil, not to attack NATO, which means that NATO should respond in a conventional way, but the response should be devastating. And I suppose this is the clear message that the NATO alliance is sending to Russia right now."
Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, Meet the Press, September 27, 2022
9. "Any use of nuclear weapons is absolutely unacceptable, it will totally change the nature of the conflict, and Russia must know that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought"
Opening remarks by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg at a meeting of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament, September 27, 2022
10. "When it comes to the contingency planning that we've engaged in for the potential use of a nuclear weapon by Russia in Ukraine, we have spoken very clearly of the implications for Russia were that to happen. We've used a number of adjectives. We have said there would be catastrophic, severe, strong, profound implications for Russia. All of those are accurate. We are — we stand by all of those descriptors. The point that we have made both publicly and privately to the Russians is that the consequences would be real, and they would be extraordinary."
Press Briefing, State Department Spokesman Ned Price, September 28, 2022

11. “We deplore deliberate Russian escalatory steps, including the partial mobilisation of reservists and irresponsible nuclear rhetoric, which is putting global peace and security at risk. We reaffirm that any use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons by Russia would be met with severe consequences.”
G7 Statement on Ukraine, October 11, 2022
12. “It will have severe consequences if Russia uses nuclear weapon, any kind of nuclear weapon against Ukraine. And this is something Russia knows, something NATO and NATO Allies have communicated in different ways to Russia. And we will not go into exactly how we will respond. But of course, this will fundamentally change the nature of the conflict. It will mean that a very important line has been crossed. Even any use of a smaller nuclear weapon will be a very serious thing, fundamentally changing the nature of the war in Ukraine. Of course, that will have consequences and Russia knows there will be consequences.”
Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers, October 13, 2022
13. “Addressing Russia’s recent nuclear threats, the Secretary General made clear that President Putin’s nuclear rhetoric is dangerous and irresponsible and that any use of nuclear weapons by Russia would have ‘severe consequences’.”
Official statement: “NATO steps up support for Ukraine, strengthens deterrence and defence,” October 13, 2022
14. “any nuclear attack against Ukraine will create an answer, not a nuclear answer but such a powerful answer from the military side that the Russian Army will be annihilated, and Putin should not be bluffing.”
Opening remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the European Diplomatic Academy, October 13, 2022
15. “Sarah Kelly: You and NATO members, you have emphasised and I’m quoting here, “Russia must understand that nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought”. Do you have any assurances that that message is being heard by Putin?

NATO Secretary General: Yes, partly because it has been communicated so many times, from NATO Allies, from also the United States and other NATO Allies that possess nuclear weapons, and from the whole Alliance. And actually, this is also something that Russia has subscribed to. So, this is a well-known message. But of course, we have to make it, we have to repeat that message because the nuclear rhetoric coming from Moscow, from President Putin is dangerous, is reckless. And if we have to take this threat seriously, even though the risk, the likelihood of an attack is low, the impact is so big, so the risk is something we have to take seriously.

Sarah Kelly: But do all 30 NATO Allies agree on what the response would be?

NATO Secretary General: All NATO Allies agree on the seriousness of any use of nuclear weapons, and this has been clearly conveyed from me and from also many other NATO Allies.”

Sarah Kelly: Here’s the response from Moscow: Putin’s ally, Dmitry Medvedev, says that he thinks the NATO military alliance would not risk a nuclear war and directly enter the Ukraine war, even if Moscow struck Ukraine with nuclear weapons – is he right?

NATO Secretary General: He is not right, because what we have stated clearly is that there will be severe consequences, but we have not lined out or gone into details what kind of consequences there will be, and of course we have many ways to respond. And that's exactly what we have communicated.

Sarah Kelly: While you warn, though, Moscow of severe consequences, French President Emmanuel Macron says that French... "A French nuclear response to Russia, using its own atomic arsenal against Ukraine or the region, is off the table". That statement wasn't very helpful for your deterrence, was it?

NATO Secretary General: But we have different ways of reacting; it doesn't have to be any use of nuclear weapons. What we have stated, again and again, is that the circumstances in which NATO would consider the use of a nuclear weapon remains very remote. But that doesn't take away the possibility of NATO to respond, NATO Allies to respond, if there is a use of nuclear weapon by Russia against Ukraine. And again, if there is any attack against a NATO Ally, we have the whole Alliance and Article 5 and our collective defence clause, and the purpose of that is to prevent that from happening."

Interview with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg by Deutsche Welle journalist Sarah Kelly at the Koerber Stiftung's annual Berlin Foreign Policy Forum, October 18, 2022

16. "We've been very clear with President Putin directly and privately about the severe consequences that would follow from any – any use of a nuclear weapon. We're watching this very, very carefully. We have not seen reason at this point to change our own nuclear posture."

Television Interview with US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, October 19, 2022

17. "We're concerned about two things. We're of course concerned about the rhetoric we've heard from Putin and from other Russian officials going back some weeks now over the possible use of a nuclear weapon. We're watching that very carefully. We haven't seen reason to change our own nuclear posture, but it's something that we're tracking very carefully, and we've also communicated directly and very clearly to the Russians, to President Putin, about the consequences that would flow from any use of a nuclear device."

Newspaper Interview with US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, October 26, 2022

18. "He (Putin) should be clear that for the UK and our allies, any use, at all, of nuclear weapons would change the nature of the conflict. There would be severe consequences for Russia."

UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverley, October 31, 2022

19. "And we send the very clear... and Allies have sent a very clear message to Russia that it will have severe consequences for Russia, and also of course that a nuclear war must never be fought."

Interview with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in the sixth edition of the Financial Times's Global Boardroom event, December 7, 2022

20. "We reiterate that Russia's irresponsible nuclear rhetoric is unacceptable and that any use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons would be met with severe consequences."

G7 Leaders' Statement, December 12, 2022

21. "We underscore that Russia's irresponsible nuclear rhetoric is unacceptable and that any use of nuclear weapons would meet with unequivocal international condemnation and severe consequences."
*Joint Statement Issued on the occasion of the meeting between
H.E. Mr Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General and
H.E. Mr Kishida Fumio, Prime Minister of Japan,
January 31, 2023*
22. "We reiterate that Russia's irresponsible nuclear rhetoric is unacceptable, and any use of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons by Russia would be met with severe consequences. We recall the consensus achieved in Bali of all G20 members, including Russia, that the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible."
G7 Leaders' Statement, February 24, 2023
23. "As we have made clear, the use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons in this conflict would be met with severe consequences."
State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller, May 25, 2023
24. "we concur that the use, or threat of use, of nuclear weapons is serious and inadmissible."
Quad Leaders' Joint Statement, May 20, 2023
25. "we reiterate our position that threats by Russia of nuclear weapon use, let alone any use of nuclear weapons by Russia, in the context of its aggression against Ukraine are inadmissible."
G7 Leaders' Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament, May 19, 2023
26. "Allies will continue to work closely together to address the threats and challenges posed by Russia and reiterate that any use of Chemical, Biological, Radiological or Nuclear weapons by Russia would be met with severe consequences."
NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, July 11, 2023
27. "Threats by Russia of nuclear weapon use, let alone any use of nuclear weapons by Russia, in the context of its war of aggression against Ukraine are inadmissible."
G7 Leaders' Statement, December 6, 2023



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