# Deterrence and Reassurance: Lessons from the Cold War

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The US-China mini-crisis of April 2001 following the collision between a Chinese interceptor and an American surveillance aircraft raises serious questions about the future of Sino-American relations. In the aftermath, both Washington and Beijing claimed victories, and officials and talking heads in each country spoke ominously about how to deal with the threat posed by the other. Spokesmen for President George W. Bush's administration and some senators emphasised the continuing need for deterrence, and seem to be framing their response to China in terms of the "lessons" learned from the decades-long conflict with the Soviet Union. Many of those "lessons" represent beliefs that have been confirmed tautologically with no serious reference to evidence. This is particularly true of the widespread belief—by no means limited to the current administration—that deterrence and compellence played a positive role during the Cold War.

The evidence now available indicates that the consequences of deterrence were mixed. Fear of nuclear war—quite independently of force structures, deployments or rhetoric—for the most part restrained policymakers in both Moscow and Washington. The strategy of deterrence—attempts by both protagonists to use their force structures, deployments and public statements to communicate capability and resolve—not infrequently provoked the kind of behaviour it was intended to prevent. A review of some of the reasons for these failures will help us think more effectively about their relevance to post–Cold War conflicts.

I begin with a short description of deterrence and compellence and go on to summarise what we learned about them during the Cold War with particular reference to problems of assessment and communication. I conclude with a series of practical suggestions for more effective crisis management. Throughout, I illustrate my arguments with examples drawn from the Cuban missile crisis, the most acute confrontation of the Cold War. It provides the best illustration of the many conceptual and perceptual problems that can confound deterrence and compellence. These are most pronounced in conflicts where adversaries are divided by misunderstanding and mistrust even more than by clashing interests. Sino-American relations already share these characteristics, and the lessons of the missile crisis, and of the Cold War more generally, thus seem particularly relevant to what is potentially the most serious post–Cold War security challenge.

## Deterrence and Compellence

Deterrence seeks to *prevent* a specified behaviour by convincing an actor who may contemplate it that the cost will exceed any

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possible gain. Compellence, by contrast, employs threats to *elicit* behaviour that would not otherwise be forthcoming. Both strategies presuppose that target actors make decisions in response to some kind of rational cost-benefit calculus, that this process can successfully be manipulated from the outside, and that the best way to do this is to increase the cost side of the ledger. Theorists have generally assumed that compellence is more difficult to achieve because in contrast to deterrence, which requires an invisible concession, it requires target actors to behave in ways that are highly visible and more likely to involve major costs at home and abroad. Thus, North Korea's leaders, to the extent that they were deterred by the United States, could simply deny they ever had any intention of invading South Korea. Saddam Hussein, if he had decided to withdraw Iraqi forces from Kuwait to avoid war with the United States and its allies, would not have been able to hide his retreat from the entire Arab world. The expected political costs of such a humiliation may have been a principal reason why compellence failed in this instance.

Although deterrence and compellence are conceptually distinct, the two strategies are often practised in tandem and in ways that effectively blur the distinction between them. Deterrence can be used to reinforce compellence, and vice versa. In 1973, after Israeli forces crossed the Suez Canal and threatened to cut off and surround the Third Egyptian Army, the Soviet Union sought to protect its Egyptian client by negotiating a cease-fire. When Israel ignored the cease-fire and continued its offensive, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev threatened to send Soviet forces to Egypt—a threat that provoked a short-lived crisis with the United States. The Soviet Union practised immediate extended compellence to prod the United States to restrain Israel. It did so, however, for an avowedly defensive and deterrent goal.

Students of deterrence also distinguish between general and immediate deterrence.[1] General deterrence relies on the existing power balance to prevent an adversary from seriously considering a military challenge because of the adverse expected consequences. It is often a country's first line of defence against attack. Leaders resort to the strategy of immediate deterrence only after general deterrence has failed, or when they believe that a more explicit expression of their intent to defend their interests is necessary to buttress general deterrence. If immediate deterrence fails, leaders will find themselves in a crisis, as President John F. Kennedy did when American intelligence discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba, or at war, as Israel's leaders did in 1973.[2] General and immediate deterrence represent a progression from a diffuse if real concern about an adversary's intentions to the expectation that a specific interest or commitment is about to be challenged.

Both forms of deterrence assume that adversaries are most likely to resort to force or threatening military deployments when they judge the military balance favourable and question a defender's resolve. General deterrence tries to discourage challenges by

1. Patrick Morgan in *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977) is credited with this distinction.

2. On deterrence and compellence in Cuba, see Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., rev. (Washington DC: Brookings, 1989).

developing the capability to defend national commitments or inflict unacceptable punishment on an adversary. It is a long-term strategy as five-year lead-times and normally longer are common between a decision to develop a weapon and its deployment. It is also long-term in its goal: to convince an adversary that aggression does not pay and that it must seek some kind of accommodation instead.

Immediate deterrence is a short-term strategy. It seeks to discourage an imminent attack, or challenge to a specific commitment. The military component of immediate deterrence must rely on forces in being. To buttress their defensive capability and display resolve, leaders may deploy forces when they anticipate an attack or challenge, as Kennedy did in the aftermath of the Vienna summit meeting with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in June 1961. In response to Khrushchev's ultimatum on Berlin, he sent additional ground and air forces to Germany and strengthened the US garrison in Berlin. These reinforcements were intended to communicate the administration's will to resist any encroachment against West Berlin or Western access routes to the city.

### The Military Balance

The military balance is central to the theory and practice of deterrence. During the Cold War, US national security policy assumed that Soviet aggression was opportunity driven: it would wax and wane as a function of Soviet perceptions of American capability and will. In retrospect it is apparent that the opposite was true: Soviet aggressiveness was most pronounced when the Soviets were weak and the Americans strong—the situation that prevailed between 1948 and 1952, and again between 1959 and 1962. The first period witnessed the first Berlin crisis and the Korean War, and the second, Khrushchev's challenges to Berlin and the Cuban missile crisis. Such a finding seems quite consistent with the thesis that "need", not "opportunity", often lies behind aggressive foreign policies. When leaders face a combination of strategic and political problems that they believe can only be overcome through a successful challenge of an adversary's commitments, they may initiate a challenge even when the military balance is unfavourable and there are no grounds for doubting adversarial resolve.[3]

The Cuban missile crisis offers a nice illustration. Former Soviet officials contend that Khrushchev sent missiles to Cuba for largely defensive reasons. The Bay of Pigs invasion, the subsequent US military build-up in the Caribbean and repeated assassination attempts against Cuban leader Fidel Castro convinced Cuban and Soviet intelligence that a second invasion, this time by American forces, was imminent; the missiles were intended to deter that invasion.

Khrushchev was also responding to a series of public and private statements by President Kennedy and other US officials that the United States had overwhelming nuclear superiority and in certain circumstances would consider a first strike. By putting medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles into Cuba, where they were capable of reaching the United States, the Soviet Union could partially offset its strategic inferiority. Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders were infuriated by the ongoing installation of

3. Chapter 4 of Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), develops this argument in detail.

US Jupiter missiles in Turkey, just across the Black Sea from the Ukraine. The missile deployment in Cuba was intended to subject the United States to a strong incentive to seek a détente with the Soviet Union. Khrushchev desperately wanted some kind of short-range nuclear threat that would enable him to shift resources away from the military to agriculture and industry in order to save his faltering economic reforms. He convinced himself, against the better judgement of several of his top advisers, that he could carry out a secret missile deployment and thus devise a way around American military superiority.

The role of the military balance in the resolution of the Cuban crisis is also at variance with the expectations of compellence theory. It offers no support for the "strong" formulation of compellence that expects crisis outcomes to mirror the military balance, and only marginal support for the "weaker" formulation that considers the military balance one of several factors that influence the strength of resolve on each side and, by extension, crisis outcomes. The military balance was never in dispute. The US navy, supported by carrier and land-based aircraft, dominated the Caribbean and could easily have swept the seas of Soviet and Cuban naval vessels, including submarines. Neither protagonist doubted the one-sided nature of the local conventional or strategic nuclear balance; Soviet military analysts credited the United States with a seventeen-to-one advantage in deliverable nuclear weapons. If military advantage translates into bargaining advantage, Kennedy should have imposed his will on Khrushchev. However, the outcome was not a one-sided American victory but a compromise that required Kennedy to make a pledge not to invade Cuba and to remove the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. The commitment to remove the Jupiters was offered as a last-minute secret concession. Secretary of State Dean Rusk revealed that Kennedy was actively considering a further concession: public acceptance of Khrushchev's demand for a Cuba-Turkey "missile swap"—i.e., a withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba and of US Jupiter missiles from Turkey. The president's closest advisers think it very likely that he would have taken this extra step if it had been necessary to end the crisis.

To the extent that American nuclear and conventional superiority in the Caribbean contributed to Khrushchev's restraint and ultimate concessions, it was for reasons different from those predicted by deterrence. Khrushchev was convinced that American hardliners would view the crisis as an irresistible opportunity to attack Cuba and overthrow its communist government.[4] He knew that he would be under enormous political pressure to respond with military action of his own; his generals opposed concessions and would demand retaliation. If the Soviet Union attacked the US missiles in Turkey, the United States might strike at the Soviet Union. Khrushchev withdrew his missiles to forestall the possibility of runaway escalation.

What mattered in Washington and Moscow was not the military balance, about which there was no real disagreement, but the political *meaning* of that balance. The hawks put tremendous emphasis on the military balance because they believed in the political utility of large-scale violence. Kennedy and his defence secretary Robert McNamara took little comfort in the balance because they regarded military action as dangerous and

4. Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 488–505.

impractical. The hawks focused on *relative* cost and gain and assumed their adversaries did the same. Because the Soviet Union was outgunned, Soviet leaders would roll over and play dead. If not, the United States would attack and kill them for real. For Kennedy and Khrushchev, however, the relevant consideration was *absolute* cost, and this would be horrendous in even a purely conventional war. Kennedy took no consolation in the near certainty that there would be many more dead Russians than Americans.

The relationship between the military balance and crisis policy is not without irony. In the United States, which had a wide margin of military advantage, the doves were probably right and the hawks wrong. A US air strike had a good chance of provoking a Soviet military response and a subsequent US escalation. In the militarily inferior Soviet Union, the hawks were right and the doves were wrong. Rusk's revelation and the testimony of other administration officials indicate that Kennedy would probably have made an additional concession had Khrushchev stood fast.

### Roles

All formulations of deterrence are based on the dichotomous division of protagonists into challenger and defender. These role definitions are crucial to the identification of deterrence encounters. Yet these context-free, technical definitions of role bear little relationship to the way actual protagonists conceive of themselves. Challenger and defender are defined in reference to the status quo, but the status quo is a highly subjective concept and generally contested by protagonists. Case studies indicate that *both* protagonists in deterrence and compellence encounters are likely to see themselves as the defender and their adversary as the challenger.

For much of the Cold War, Americans and Soviets each considered themselves to be the defender and their adversary the challenger. Their role conceptions had enormous implications for their understanding of their adversary's motives and behaviour. Each superpower leader and his advisers believed their adversary to be inherently aggressive, its military forces to have offensive missions and its leaders to be committed to exploiting any perceived weakness of their opponent. Each side saw itself as the leading exponent of a morally superior social system, defending it against subversion, intimidation and the possibility of direct attack by the other.

In the West, the events that led to the Cuban missile crisis have always been treated as a direct deterrence encounter, with the United States (the defender) trying to prevent the Soviet Union (the challenger) from deploying missiles in Cuba. A mirror image prevailed in the Soviet Union, where the "Caribbean crisis" was considered an extended deterrence encounter, with the Soviet Union (the defender) trying to prevent the United States (the challenger) from attacking its client, Cuba. The competing role conceptions of the superpowers were reinforced by their conflicting understandings of the status quo. The Kennedy administration never doubted that it was upholding the status quo: a Western hemisphere free of foreign military bases. For Soviet leaders the status quo was Fidel Castro's government. Their military build-up in Cuba was defensive because it sought to "prevent the inevitable armed intervention on the Island of Freedom, which was being prepared by aggressive circles" in the United States. The American Jupiter missiles in Turkey also upset the status quo and Khrushchev conceived of the Cuban missiles as a tit-for-tat measure. He would "get even" with the Americans and

"repay them in kind ... so they can feel what it is like to live in the nuclear gun sights".[5]

### Interests

International relations specialists increasingly acknowledge the subjective nature of national and domestic political interests. Interests are social constructions rooted in particular values, visions of community and conceptions of politics. However, deterrence and compellence assume that protagonists can identify one another's interests. Shared understandings of interests are an essential prerequisite of shared estimates of the balance of resolve. Once again, case studies indicate that leaders find it difficult to comprehend adversarial interests and can be insensitive to adversarial efforts to enlighten them.[6]

In Cuba, different understandings of roles led to different estimates of the balance of interests. Khrushchev and his advisers never doubted that the Soviet Union had more at stake because it was defending itself from American intimidation and Cuba from American attack. Sergo Mikoyan, son of Khrushchev's deputy prime minister Anastas Mikoyan, insisted many years later that it was "undeniable that the Soviet Union and the entire socialist camp would have lost much more from the overthrow of Castro than the United States could possibly have gained".[7] American leaders had a mirror image of the balance of interests. National foreign policy interests and Kennedy's political interests would be seriously compromised by the surreptitious introduction of Soviet missiles into Cuba. The Central Intelligence Agency and administration officials could find no pressing Soviet interest that required a missile deployment. "We knew," Kennedy's national security adviser McGeorge Bundy remembered, "that we were not about to invade Cuba and we saw no reason for the Russians to take a clearly risky step because of a fear that we ourselves understood to be baseless."[8]

The status quo is the starting point for both deterrence and compellence. From it, the roles of defender and challenger are derived, as are, in part, the balances of interests and resolve. But the status quo is not an objective attribute of context. It is a political-historical construct whose definition depends entirely on the perspective of observers. Protagonists rarely have the same understanding of the status quo, or of their respective roles and the interests at stake. Like the Soviet Union and the United States on the eve of the missile crisis, they often find it extraordinarily difficult to fathom the other's perspective or to communicate theirs successfully. In the absence of shared understandings, deterrence is likely to be misunderstood, and this increases the likelihood that it will fail.

### Estimates of Resolve

Earlier theorists of deterrence portrayed threats as the most effective means of sig-

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5. Aleksandr Alekseyev, "The Caribbean Crisis: As It Really Was", *Ekho Planety*, no. 33 (November 1988), pp. 27–9.

6. See Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), especially chapters 2–5, 7; and James L. Richardson, *Crisis Diplomacy: The Great Powers since the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 258–9, 264–7, 274–6.

7. Sergo Mikoyan, interview by the author, Moscow, 17 May 1989.

8. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 416.

nalling resolve. But case studies indicate that threats, too, are evaluated in context. A threat to go to war by a state perceived to be at a military disadvantage might be dismissed as a bluff. So will a threat seen to be aimed at a domestic audience.[9] And a deterrent threat that is taken seriously may be interpreted as a prelude to aggressive behaviour that requires a counter-deterrent response. More importantly, threats and military preparations are only one of the factors that shape estimates of resolve. When other considerations (e.g., ideology, the nature of the political system, the personality and past behaviour of leaders) shape these assessments, targeted leaders may be relatively impervious to attempts to manipulate their assessments of resolve by means of threats.

The origins of the missile crisis provide a compelling example of how deterrent threats can backfire and provoke the very behaviour they are intended to forestall. After the June 1961 Vienna summit and before the discovery of Soviet missiles on Cuba in October 1962, Kennedy worried that Khrushchev doubted his resolve. To buttress deterrence and convince Khrushchev that he was prepared to use force to defend American interests, the president reinforced the American military presence in Berlin, put the Soviets on notice through public and private channels that the United States had a strategic advantage (even a first strike capability), persevered with the Turkish missile deployment despite Eisenhower's advice to the contrary, and carried out a major military build-up in the Caribbean. However, Khrushchev never doubted Kennedy's resolve. One of the great ironies of the Cold War is that Khrushchev's decision to deploy missiles in Cuba secretly was the result of his unwavering belief that Kennedy would use the US navy to stop or even sink cargo ships carrying missile components or their warheads. He repeatedly rejected pleas from Castro for an open missile deployment. Yet Kennedy and his advisers had considered the possibility of open deployment and had decided there was nothing they could do about it because it would be seen by Nato allies and Latin American opinion as in every way analogous to the American deployment of missiles in Europe and Turkey.

In the crisis that ensued, Kennedy and Khrushchev used military deployments and threats to influence each other's estimate of their resolve. Each leader nevertheless estimated his adversary's resolve more or less independently of these attempts at manipulation.

On the morning of Saturday, 27 October 1962, Kennedy expressed willingness to issue a non-invasion pledge in return for the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. He made another important concession to the Soviets that night when he authorised his brother to tell Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that the United States was prepared to remove its Jupiter missiles in Turkey. He also considered a further concession, a public reciprocal missile withdrawal, but this proved unnecessary.

Kennedy's consideration of a further concession on the night of 27 October was based on a different calculus: the apparent need to stave off war. That morning, the ExComm—an unofficial group of advisers consisting of cabinet officials, the heads of the CIA and Joint Chiefs of Staff and other White House

9. Leonid Brezhnev's Politburo dismissed the 1973 US nuclear alert for this reason, assuming that it was directed against President Nixon's domestic opponents. See Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 266–8.

officials—received one piece of threatening news after another, culminating in the report that an American U-2 spy plane had been shot down over Cuba, probably by a Soviet surface-to-air missile. The Soviet air defence network in Cuba was apparently operational and Moscow seemed to have no compunction about shooting down unarmed American aircraft. The ExComm speculated that the Soviet Union and Cuba were preparing for battle. US attorney-general Robert Kennedy had "the feeling that the noose was tightening on all of us, on Americans, on mankind, and that the bridges to escape were crumbling".[10]

Khrushchev in fact was desperate to resolve the crisis at least a day before the Robert Kennedy–Dobrynin meeting on the night of 27 October because he was convinced that the United States was about to attack Cuba and perhaps the Soviet Union as well. Khrushchev did not question Kennedy's commitment to peace, but doubted the president's ability to restrain the US military. His concern was as misplaced as Kennedy's suspicion on 27 October that Khrushchev had been captured by Kremlin hardliners.

The faulty estimates of both leaders can be traced in part to their stereotyped understanding of each other's political system. Khrushchev and his colleagues used Marxist-Leninist concepts to analyse the workings of the US government. They saw the president and other public officials as agents of monopoly capitalism, and greatly underestimated their autonomy from Wall Street.

American policymakers recognised that Khrushchev did not exercise anything close to the dictatorial power of Stalin, but still exaggerated his ability to control Soviet foreign policy at every level. Kennedy and his advisers were insensitive to the possibility that any Soviet political or military initiative could be unauthorised. They assumed, incorrectly, that all the troubling events of 27 October were part of a coherent strategy, implemented on direct orders from Moscow, and signalled the emergence of a harder line. That day's events had explanations that nobody in the ExComm suspected. The report of Soviet diplomats in Washington burning their papers was false, the morning message from Khrushchev was not intended to convey a harder line—it was motivated by Walter Lippmann's call in the *Washington Post* for a public missile swap, read by the Soviet embassy as a trial balloon sent aloft by the White House—and Khrushchev knew nothing about the downing of Major Anderson's U-2. That attack was in direct violation of Khrushchev's orders. Khrushchev was at least as anxious as Kennedy to end the confrontation. He sent conciliatory signals, including continued Soviet restraint in the face of the blockade, and hoped that his messages of 26 and 27 October would provide a mutually acceptable basis for resolving the crisis.

At critical junctures, Kennedy and Khrushchev misjudged each other's resolve. Khrushchev's assessment of the probability of a US attack against Cuba was inversely proportional to the real threat. The risk of an air strike or invasion was greatest in the week before Kennedy announced the quarantine. For much of that week, the air strike was the preferred option of the president and most of the ExComm. While the debate raged between advocates of an air strike and a blockade, Khrushchev lived in a world of illusion; he was sublimely confident that US intelligence would not discover the missiles before he

10. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 97.

revealed their presence to the world, in the middle of November. After Kennedy's quarantine speech, Khrushchev became increasingly fearful that the United States would attack Cuba. To forestall this he sent a conciliatory message to Kennedy on Friday, 26 October, and on Sunday afternoon broadcast his acceptance of Kennedy's Saturday proposal. Khrushchev did not realise that Kennedy had become increasingly opposed to any military action because of its escalatory potential. Another irony of the crisis is that Khrushchev rushed to make an agreement at the very moment Kennedy contemplated a further concession.

### Estimates of Risk

When leaders want to avoid war, threats to go to war or to court it through loss of control involve stressful trade-offs. Leaders must weigh the bargaining advantages escalation is expected to confer against the risk of war it entails. This is very difficult to do in international conflicts where estimates of risk are notoriously unreliable.

The difficulty of making trade-offs is illustrated by the wide variance in risk estimates that existed in Washington and Moscow during the missile crisis. In the first week, the debate in Washington between advocates of an air strike and a blockade respectively was primarily an argument about the risk of war associated with the air strike. The hawks insisted that Khrushchev would not dare respond with military action of his own because the military balance was so unfavourable to the Soviet Union. The president and other ExComm members were unconvinced. There was a similar controversy in the Soviet Union. The military argued that Kennedy would back down if Khrushchev stood firm. In Havana, Marshal Sergei Biryuzov and General Igor Statsenko gave permission to shoot down the U-2 on the assumption that it would not provoke an invasion of Cuba. Khrushchev and his defence minister, Rodion Malinovsky, were horrified by the incident because they evaluated the risks of escalation differently.

Hawks and doves in each superpower based their conflicting assessments of risk on the same information. They were divided by their conceptions. American hawks counted on the deterrent value of military superiority. Kennedy and Khrushchev worried that military action by either superpower against the other would generate enormous political pressures to retaliate, regardless of the military balance. The new evidence about Cuba indicates that American hawks probably underestimated the risks of invading Cuba. There were forty-two thousand Soviet troops in Cuba, not the ten thousand estimated by the CIA, and they were equipped with tactical nuclear weapons. Soviet forces were not authorised to use their nuclear weapons without Moscow's permission, but had the capability to launch them and might have done so in response to an American invasion.[11] Kennedy and Khrushchev are long dead and no one knows how they would have responded to hypothetical challenges.

The controversy about the risks of escalation can never be resolved. All that can be said with confidence is that neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev, nor their advisers, conducted a thorough assessment of the risks of the policy options they advocated or adopted. Risk

11. See chapter 12 of Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, for documentation about Soviet military forces and nuclear weapons in Cuba.

assessment in the missile crisis was haphazard and idiosyncratic. The debate over the relative merits of the air strike and the blockade involved some discussion of risk, but no examination or assessment of the reasons why air strike advocates were convinced the Soviets would not retaliate, or why many blockade supporters thought the Soviets would have no choice but to retaliate.

In the second week, the ExComm's agenda was dominated by the blockade and its management. On Saturday, 27 October, the climactic day of the crisis, the ExComm sought to make sense of the day's events and prepare an appropriate response to Khrushchev's two messages. Although pressure for an air strike mounted throughout the second week, culminating in the Joint Chiefs' demand on Saturday for an immediate air strike, there was no attempt to come to terms with the competing predictions about the likely Soviet response to an air strike. President Kennedy relied on his intuition.

The risk assessments of the president and his advisers were far from comprehensive. The hawks considered only the military balance. They ignored all of the domestic and foreign policy considerations that loomed so large in Khrushchev's thinking. Kennedy and McNamara were more sensitive to the political costs to Khrushchev of diplomatic or military humiliation, and were correspondingly more cautious. They had no inkling of the broader foreign policy and domestic costs that Khrushchev associated with the failure of his initiative because they did not understand his several reasons for deploying the missiles. Kennedy and McNamara were also insufficiently alert to the danger of loss of control. Along with the Joint Chiefs, they exaggerated their ability to plan or execute military operations with precision. They remained unaware of most of the problems that threatened their management of the blockade and nuclear alert. They also failed to consider the difficulties Khrushchev had in controlling Soviet military forces and incorrectly interpreted instances of insubordination (e.g., the U-2 shoot down) as centrally authorised initiatives.

When threats to go to war are difficult to make credible because of the expected costs of war, leaders are forced to rely on Schelling's risk that leaves something to chance.[12] But a risk that leaves everything to chance—or is characterised by a wide band of uncertainty—makes compellence a highly unpredictable and dangerous strategy.

## Reassurance

Strategies of reassurance begin with a different set of assumptions. Unlike deterrence, they root the source of overt, aggressive behaviour in the acute vulnerability of adversaries. Reassurance encourages self-defined defenders to search for effective ways of communicating their benign and defensive intentions to would-be challengers. They do so to reduce the fear, misunderstanding and insecurity that are so often responsible for conflict escalation. The combination of carrots and sticks is often more successful than either alone.

Cuba once again provides a striking example. For years, the outcome of the crisis was attributed to compellence, but information that became available in the 1990s indicates that reassurance played an equally important role. Kennedy and Khrushchev clarified their respective interests and reas-

12. See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 92–125.

tures they attempt to represent. In contemplating the use of these strategies in the post–Cold War world, policymakers need to address these failings and compensate for them as best as possible. The first step in this direction is the reformulation of four critical concepts:

1. *Leverage.* Most formulations of deterrence and compellence more or less equate capability with military capability. Military might is seen as valuable because the ability to inflict suffering is expected to confer bargaining advantage. But punishment represents only one side of the bargaining equation; the ability to *absorb* suffering also confers bargaining advantage, and can sometimes offset a protagonist's superior economic and military capability. The Vietnamese demonstrated this truth in their war against the United States; they lost every battle but won the war.

Bargaining can usefully be compared to the children's game of rock, scissors and paper. The two protagonists make a fist behind their backs and decide whether to be a rock, scissors or a piece of paper. At the count of three, they thrust out and open their fist and reveal one (rock), two (scissors) or three (paper) fingers. The rock triumphs over the scissors because it can smash them, but is trumped by the paper that wraps the rock. The scissors in turn defeat the paper because of their ability to cut it. The game highlights the relational nature of power. The American rock (nuclear and local conventional superiority) triumphed in Cuba because Khrushchev was desperate to avoid a humiliating military defeat. But American compellence failed against North Vietnam because Hanoi, although at a serious military disadvantage, did not fear war. North Vietnamese paper (willingness to suffer) wrapped the American rock. Theories of deterrence and compellence need to consider capabilities—and counter-capabilities—beyond usable military force. Policymakers must remember that capabilities only translate into bargaining leverage when they confer meaningful gain on an actor or enable it to inflict meaningful loss on another.

2. *Understandings of context must be negotiated.* Relational bargaining power is best conceptualised in terms of asymmetries, or important inequalities in the situations of the bargainers. Common asymmetries include resources (including military capabilities), the need to settle, available alternatives, and time pressure. The balance of asymmetries is rarely self-evident. Bargainers often disagree about which asymmetries are relevant and whom they favour. This leads to different conclusions about the nature of a fair agreement and can make agreement more difficult to reach. Almost by definition, adversaries have different understandings of the origins of their conflict, each other's motives and what they both have at stake. Clashing schemas prompt clashing assessments of interests, roles and the status quo.

Strategies of coercive bargaining cannot take role definitions for granted. Would-be practitioners of deterrence or compellence must try to ascertain their adversaries' understanding of key asymmetries. The construction of a shared or negotiated understanding of the balance of asymmetries may be necessary to create a zone of agreement.

3. *Preference formation is a complex process.* Another fundamental weakness of coercive strategies is their failure to consider how preferences actually form and change. The missile crisis and other Cold War crises indicate that two critical factors in this con-

sured each other about their respective goals. By doing so, they shifted the cost-calculus of their adversary, significantly reducing the cost of the mutual concessions that resolved the crisis.

On the first day of the crisis, Kennedy was all for an air strike, and ExComm members are convinced he would have ordered one if he had had to make a decision that day. It took time for the president's anger to subside and for him to think through the likely political and military consequences of an air strike conducted without prior warning. As the week wore on, Kennedy felt cross-pressured. He increasingly wanted to avoid a military showdown in Cuba, but was unwilling to make any concession that would confirm Khrushchev's apparent belief that he could easily be blackmailed. Kennedy worried that concessions would encourage a new and far more serious challenge to US interests in Berlin. It was better to fight a war in the Caribbean, where the United States had a distinct military advantage. By the end of the second week, Kennedy's view of the problem had undergone further evolution: he no longer saw any contradiction between his desire to end the crisis through concessions and his goal of causing Khrushchev to be more moderate.

The secret messages Kennedy had received from Khrushchev and several freewheeling discussions between Dobrynin and Robert Kennedy provided insight into Khrushchev's motives for the missile deployment. Kennedy now considered it likely that Khrushchev had miscalculated the real consequences of the deployment and was anxious to find a face-saving way out of the crisis. Kennedy further reasoned that concessions were more likely to restrain Khrushchev in the future. Kennedy's revised estimate of the payoffs associated with concessions made him more willing to make those concessions.

From Khrushchev's perspective, the most significant form of reassurance that Kennedy practised was self-restraint. Khrushchev was surprised that Kennedy did not exploit the missile crisis to overthrow Castro, and that he had the power to restrain the US military from doing so. Kennedy's forbearance reduced Khrushchev's fear that the president would use his country's nuclear superiority to try to extract political concessions in the future. "Kennedy was a clever and flexible man," Khrushchev observed. "America's enormous power could have gone to his head, particularly if you take into account how close Cuba is to the United States and the advantage the United States had in the number of nuclear weapons by comparison to the Soviet Union."[13]

Clarification of interests and reassurance not only created a zone of agreement, but partially restructured the identities of the superpower leaders. Before the crisis, Kennedy and Khrushchev saw themselves as pure adversaries. Their back-channel communications and secret co-operation during the crisis created a shared identity based on a mutual commitment to peace. Paradoxically, the crisis developed trust between the leaders that provided the foundation for their subsequent steps toward détente.

### Better Conflict Management

Deterrence and compellence, as currently formulated, ignore some essential features of bargaining, and do not capture well those fea-

13. Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, trans. and ed. Jerrold L. Schechter with Vyacheslav V. Luchkov (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), p. 179.

nection are the assessments actors make of others' motives and the perceived consequences of the bargaining encounters in which they are engaged for other interests and relationships. Cuba suggests that new information is only likely to facilitate learning when bargainers are open to its implications and use appropriate schemas to interpret the information. Real-world bargainers are often motivated to maintain an understanding of their adversary or their environment that is conducive to the attainment of their goals—as Khrushchev did in the months prior to Kennedy's announcement of the blockade. During the crisis, many hawks and doves in both superpowers assimilated new information to their schemas, unlike their national leaders who altered key components of their schemas and reframed the political problem.

4. *Communication is context dependent.* Signals are never transparent. When different schemas are used to frame and interpret signals they are likely to be misunderstood. In the missile crisis, this phenomenon led to noise being misinterpreted as signals (e.g., Kennedy's Sunday visit to church), signals being mistaken for noise (Khrushchev's complaints at the Vienna summit about the Jupiter deployment) and signals being recognised as such but misinterpreted (Khrushchev's Saturday message). Misunderstandings of this kind not only impede learning but also tend to reinforce erroneous understandings of motives and context, as they did in Washington and Moscow at the height of the missile crisis.

Cognitive barriers can also confound attempts to clarify interests and reassure. For strategies of punishment or reward to succeed, practitioners need to know something about their targets' preferences. Adversaries must estimate others' preferences on the basis of incomplete information. If their estimates are wrong, their rewards or threats may be inappropriate or insufficient. Even when they estimate correctly, attempts to promise rewards or threaten punishments may still be misunderstood by their targets. If bargainers and their targets use different contexts to frame and interpret signals, misunderstandings are likely to arise, as they did in Cuba, when Khrushchev's Saturday message, intended as a reward, was interpreted as a threat.

5. *Motivated barriers to communication.* Motivated errors can create even more severe problems for communication. To the extent that policymakers believe in the necessity of challenging the commitments of their adversaries, they become predisposed to see their objectives as attainable. When this happens, motivated bias can be pronounced and take the form of distorted threat assessments and insensitivity to warnings that the policies to which our leaders are committed are likely to end in disaster. Despite evidence to the contrary, policymakers can convince themselves that they can challenge an important adversarial commitment without provoking war. Because they know the extent to which they are powerless to back down, they expect their adversaries to accommodate them by doing so. Policymakers may also seek comfort in the illusion that their country will emerge victorious at little cost to itself if the crisis gets out of hand and leads to war. Deterrence and compellence can be defeated by wishful thinking.

## Context Is All

Deterrence and compellence are unpredictable tools because the preference structure of targeted leaders is often idiosyncratic and opaque. While it is difficult to penetrate

the cultural and political barriers that impede empathy, it is nevertheless essential for policymakers to attempt to understand the goals and schemas of their adversaries before using strategies of either coercion or reward. It is foolhardy to believe that military superiority will make threats credible, or that credible threats will shift another state's cost-calculus in the desired direction. This observation brings me back to the starting point of my argument: that context is everything. American policymakers need to worry less about communicating resolve and more about understanding the needs, goals and subjective understandings of the leaders they want to deter, compel or reward. Leaders' needs, preferences and schemas determine how they interpret and respond to either threats or promises. Hans Morgenthau, the father of modern-day realism, correctly insisted that power is a psychological relationship, and that knowing which levers to pull is just as important as possession of the levers themselves. ❑