The Nuclear Taboo Paradox: Destabilizing Consequences of the Norm

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The Nuclear Taboo Paradox: Destabilizing Consequences of the Norm

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from The College of William and Mary

by

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Following the 1972 Easter Offensive, President Nixon is recorded discussing the nuclear option with Kissinger, stating that he would rather use the nuclear bomb against a strategic target than conventionally bomb Vietnam’s dike system. A nuclear attack on a different site, Nixon mused, would likely kill less Vietnamese than the proposed conventional bombing yet create a powerful “psychological” impact on the Soviets and the North Vietnamese.¹ A few days later, Nixon observed to Kissinger that “the only place where you and I disagree…is with regard to the [nuclear] bombing. You’re so goddamned concerned about the civilians and I don’t give a damn. I don’t care.” Kissinger responded, “I’m concerned about the civilians because I don’t want the world to be mobilized against you as a butcher.”²

This exchange is a curious one, at least for advocates of traditional realist theories of nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction (MAD). Whereas most Cold War confrontations involved a nuclear-armed Soviet Union directly or indirectly involved in the conflict to such a degree that a nuclear deterrent could be argued to be present, such was not the case in Vietnam. While the Soviets passed along aid and materiel to the North Vietnamese, they were reluctant to become actively involved in the conflict.³ North Vietnam itself possessed no nuclear capabilities, meaning the conflict was strategically ideal for employing nuclear weapons without fear of retaliation in kind against the United States or its allies. The United States certainly did not lack in numbers of available warheads or a shortage of targets, and the military

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doctrine of the 1950s and 1960s emphasized the use of tactical nuclear weapons in disputes short of all-out nuclear exchange. Why then did we not see U.S. nuclear weapons in this case?

The leading response to this question and others concerning nuclear non-use in recent years has been the development of nuclear taboo theory. Proponents of this position argue that the sixty-year history of nuclear non-use since World War II is largely the result of an evolving set of international norms categorizing nuclear weapons as “unsafe,” “inhumane,” and somehow different from other, more conventional weapons as “weapons of mass destruction.4 In the exchange presented above, for example, taboo advocates point to the moralistic connotations of Kissinger’s use of the word “butcher” within the nuclear context and note the clear effect of international opinion on constraining U.S. military action. More broadly, taboo devotees cite the nuclear taboo as the primary casual mechanism for the lack of major war during the Cold War and consider the taboo to be generally stabilizing of the international system.

This conclusion, however, is equally problematic to the challenges deterrence faces in the Vietnam case. While a robust case can be made that the nuclear taboo constrained U.S. action in Vietnam, the taboo by no means reduced the severity of the conflict. To the contrary, over 3.6 million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam between 1955 and 1975. Beginning in 1969, American bomber raids destroyed significant swaths of countryside and urban areas of Vietnam, employing herbicides, dropping napalm, and mining major ports and harbors.5 McGeorge Bundy would later observe that some targets could have been hit with nuclear

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weapons “quite possibly with human losses lower than those of the war that was actually fought.” Clearly then, the nuclear taboo does not always only stabilize and prevent conflict.

This paper is motivated primarily by this question: what are the full theoretical implications of the nuclear taboo? Despite nearly two decades of work in the nuclear taboo research program, this question has shockingly gone almost completely ignored. Instead, most taboo scholars seem content to presume that the nuclear taboo only has a stabilizing impact on the international system. As I have just demonstrated, this is undoubtedly not a comprehensive picture of the taboo’s casual effects. With such a gap in the literature, a full theoretical examination of the casual effects of the nuclear taboo is necessary in order to assess the progress of the rest of the research program and open up additional avenues of research.

In this thesis, I argue that while the nuclear taboo does in fact act to prevent major war, it also has the ancillary effect of increasing the incidence and severity of low- and mid-level conflict. In brief, this stability paradox is a result of international perceptions of nuclear states’ willingness to use nuclear weapons in the face of the taboo. As the nuclear taboo increases in influence in the international system, states become more reticent to use their nuclear weapons for fear of incurring the reputation costs associated with violation of the taboo. Knowledge of this reluctance based on the nuclear taboo is not reserved to the nuclear state—because the nuclear taboo is an international norm, rival states can also logically determine that a nuclear state will be less willing to use nuclear weapons in conflict. As a consequence, these rival states will be much more likely to disregard any nuclear deterrent a nuclear state has placed over an area regarded as a peripheral foreign policy interest—that is, over areas not regarded as existential security concerns of the state. This disregard will then manifest itself as increased and

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more severe conflict short of major war than we would otherwise expect under a taboo regime that simply prevents war or a deterrent system that does the same.

If correct, this analysis of the nuclear taboo should be of significant interest to both researchers and policymakers. Within the policy establishment, it has generally been the stated goal for the last twenty years or more to increase the normative and legal prohibitions on the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons, ostensibly for the purpose of maintaining and furthering international peace and stability. Should this analysis turn out to be correct, however, it may be eventually possible to determine what level of nuclear taboo is “enough,” such that the stabilizing impact of the paradox is maximized and the destabilizing component minimized—it may not in fact always be the case that a stronger nuclear taboo is better. Within the nuclear taboo research program, such a comprehensive analysis of the casual mechanisms of the taboo gives us the opportunity to reassess the state of the literature and review previous findings through our new, more powerful theoretical lens. Furthermore, by adding a significant casual effect to the taboo, entirely new questions regarding nuclear non-use policies and regimes open up to propel the research program forward in previously unexplored directions.

To explore my assertion that the nuclear taboo may have ancillary destabilizing side effects, I take a primarily theoretical approach. This is necessary in order to establish a foundational model on which to develop testable hypotheses both within this thesis and for future research. After developing an in-depth theoretical model for what I term the ‘nuclear taboo paradox,’ I develop two hypotheses suited for qualitative research methods in order to test the new theory. I opt for a qualitative research design for two reasons. First, as a plausibility probe for this new theory, a process-tracing approach is ideally suited to explore the nuance of the cases and confirm that it is in fact the paradoxical influence of the taboo at work rather than
some other casual mechanism. Second, as a norm the nuclear taboo is difficult to quantify even along a relative spectrum of robustness; even were such a measure to be developed, it would be infeasible here to develop a comprehensive dataset of the robustness of the nuclear taboo in all relevant states longitudinally over sixty years.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Following this introduction is Chapter Two, where I develop my theory of the nuclear taboo paradox. This chapter is divided into three principal sections. In the first component, I take an in-depth view of the current state of the literature on the nuclear taboo theory, including specific examination of the scholarly consensus of what the nuclear taboo is and is not, as well as how the nuclear taboo emerged and developed in the international system. From this review, I confirm that there is a significant gap in the literature concerning how the nuclear taboo might impact how other states will interact with nuclear states so constrained. In the second section of Chapter Two, I seek to develop a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the mechanisms underpinning what I term the ‘nuclear taboo paradox,’ borrowing from the realist nuclear stability-instability paradox framework to do so. Third, I lay out a longitudinal research design focused on qualitative discourse analysis to test two hypotheses generated from my theoretical component. For the purposes of control and to cover the full scope of the international development of the taboo, I opt to longitudinally test the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as examples of Soviet challenges to the U.S. policy of containment.

In Chapter Three, I examine the elite-level brinkmanship behavior exhibited during the Korean War as my first case study. As the first serious ‘hot’ crisis of the Cold War, this conflict represents the ideal case to test the impact of a nascent nuclear taboo—and the casual mechanisms of the nuclear taboo paradox by extension—on the U.S.-Soviet dyad. Setting the
model for the remainder of this thesis, Chapter Three is divided into two major sections. In the first section, the history of the case is examined with a view toward identifying specific instances of brinkmanship and conflict escalation. In the second major section, I take each identified occurrence of such behavior and analyze the available evidence in light of the predictions of nuclear taboo theory and the nuclear taboo paradox, as well as two alternative lens theories—deterrence and the nuclear stability-instability paradox. This chapter finds significant evidence that the normative taboo-based theories provide superior explanations to behavior exhibited during the Korean War than do the alternative lens theories. Between these two theories, there is more evidence in support of the nuclear taboo paradox and, in one of the two sub-cases, the nuclear taboo paradox explains the historical narrative much more comprehensively and accurately.

In Chapter Four, I progress to the Cuban Missile Crisis for my second case study. Having identified that the nuclear taboo was much more robust by the early 1960s relative to its influence during the Korean War, I predict that the nuclear taboo paradox will have a much stronger influence over elite crisis decision-making behavior. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first two sections mirror those in Chapter Three: the first section represents a historical narrative aimed at identifying discrete brinkmanship and escalation ‘events,’ while the second section seeks to further explore these events by analyzing what each of our four models predict for the case and then examining each sub-case of behavior in this light. A third section is appended to this chapter wherein the second hypothesis, which contains a longitudinal variable, is examined. In order to appropriately test the relative severity between the two conflicts, I take a counterfactual analysis approach to determine where each conflict fell historically relative to what its potential outcomes in extremis might have been. This chapter once again finds strong
evidence for the nuclear taboo paradox at work—indeed, the level of escalation and brinkmanship behavior seems to nearly exceed the major war caveat of our hypotheses. Turning to my second hypothesis, the results of Chapter Four indicate that, as predicted by the nuclear taboo paradox, the Cuban Missile Crisis was indeed more severe than the Korean War by most qualitative metrics.

Chapter Five brings us closer to the end of the Cold War and the contemporary era as I examine the effect of the nuclear taboo paradox on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Having established that the nuclear taboo is beginning to approach contemporary levels of robustness during the 1980s, I predict significant examples of brinkmanship and escalatory behavior as well as overall more severe low- to mid-level conflict relative to our other two cases. Like the chapters prior, Chapter Five is divided into three sections: historical narrative, examination of the evidence relative to the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox and our three alternative theories, and a comparative counterfactual analysis of the invasion’s severity relative to the other two cases. Unlike the previous two chapters, Chapter Five suggests that the nuclear taboo paradox was not the most critical causal mechanism in this case. While the evidence analyzed in the case does substantiate the idea that the nuclear taboo had been internalized by many elite decision-makers by this time, I conclude that factors unique to the Afghanistan case attenuated the causal power of the nuclear taboo paradox. Among these factors were the U.S. reluctance to militarily engage in the developing world post-Vietnam, Soviet manpower needs elsewhere, and the Soviet change in leadership in 1985. There is also evidence suggesting that the nuclear taboo may not have been as engrained within the collective Soviet consciousness as it was in the Western world.
Taken together with the other two case studies, however, I conclude in Chapter Six that this evidence provides strong empirical support in favor of the nuclear taboo paradox. After again summarizing my basic argument and reviewing the results of each case study, I synthesize the individual empirical results into a holistic appraisal of my theory’s predictions. Having concluded that the nuclear taboo paradox provides robust predictions and explanations for a number of case studies from the Cold War, I then discuss future steps for the literature, both from the perspective of moving this new theory forward and reevaluating earlier works on the nuclear taboo. I also take a brief opportunity to discuss some of the policy implications of this research, as alluded to above. Finally, I conclude this thesis with some thoughts about the nuclear taboo and nuclear taboo paradox more generally.
CHAPTER TWO

THEORY

Both the policy and academic communities widely mark August 6, 1945 as a paradigm shift in international relations. On that date, the United States conducted the world’s first military deployment of a nuclear weapon. At approximately 8:15 am local time, the 393rd Bombardment Squadron’s Enola Gay released the thirteen kiloton “Little Boy” during an aerial bombardment of the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Three days later, a second nuclear weapon nicknamed “Fat Man” was detonated over the city of Nagasaki, releasing over twenty-one kilotons of atomic energy after a forty-three second free fall. Together, these two bombs destroyed over seven square miles and killed over 130,000 people instantaneously, making them the largest man-made explosions ever produced at the time. An additional 170,000 Japanese would later die from the lingering effects of radiation poisoning, bringing the two bombs’ death toll to over 200,000.  

The Truman administration’s goal behind the use of the weapons had been to bring the Pacific theater of World War II to a close without an invasion of the Japanese mainland. Six days after the Nagasaki bombing, following more than three and a half years of fighting, Japan unconditionally surrendered to the United States and its allies. In the immediate term, it seemed the tactic had been a success, so much so that the U.S. military establishment at once began calls to integrate the new weapons fully into all major military planning. U.S. public sentiment for the

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8 This conclusion has since been disputed, with historians pointing to the Soviet entrance into the war, the fall of Okinawa, the Allied sea blockade, and the American concession to permit the Emperor to maintain a role in Japanese cultural life as all reasons which contributed to the 1945 surrender. Robert A. Pape, “Why Japan Surrendered,” International Security 18: 2 (Autumn 1993).
bomb also ran high, with over 85% of Americans in favor of the nuclear bombings of Japan according to a Gallup poll conducted just days after the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.  

The Soviet Union, finding itself now at odds with its wartime U.S. ally, quickly embarked upon its own program to acquire nuclear weapons and again level the technological playing field. With its own nuclear detonation in 1949, the Soviet Union prompted fears of a future war so destructive that it might destroy civilization itself. As tensions between the two powers heightened, apocalyptic predictions of cratered cities, total collapse of social infrastructure, and land so irradiated that agriculture would be impossible for hundreds of years became the order of the day. Everyone seemed to believe that nuclear war was inevitable and that the consequences would be dire. Even Albert Einstein allegedly quipped: “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”

At the time, this prediction seemed reasonable to most observers. Most successful military technologies have been widely adopted by states, employed in warfare strategy and tactics, and used on the battlefield. History is full of examples of what happens to states that fail to adopt new military technologies promptly—the Prussian defeat of France during the Franco-Prussian War and the Japanese victory against China in the First Sino-Japanese War are just two of many. In the first case, Prussian forces, supported by an extensive railroad network and breech-loading artillery, repelled the French incursion into the South German states; the French, who were largely committed to a more traditional school of military thought than the Prussians

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were, had explicitly decided against capitalizing on these technological advances in the years running up to the conflict. In the second case, Japan handily defeated the Chinese in 1876 after just six months, largely due to superiority in naval technology. After such defeats, states are generally quick to acquire the technologies they found themselves lacking in the last war and to employ them extensively in the next one. To most experts then, the eventual proliferation and deployment of nuclear weapons into standard warfare seemed inevitable.

Yet, to date, the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki over sixty years ago remain the only use of nuclear weapons against enemy targets, a remarkable fact in a world that has produced over 60,000 nuclear warheads.\(^\text{12}\) Constructivists have attributed the non-use of nuclear weapons to the emergence of a “nuclear taboo.”\(^\text{13}\) In short, the nuclear taboo suggests that over time states and political activists have deemed the use of nuclear weapons to be immoral and unjustifiable. As the taboo has strengthened, the reputational costs of using nuclear weapons have grown substantially to the point that states are heavily disincentivized from the bomb in war.\(^\text{14}\) Today, any country that uses a nuclear weapon in a first-strike capacity will assuredly be condemned by the international community and would almost certainly face international sanction. Even in a second-strike scenario, especially a tactical or limited one, states would have to carefully weigh the potential costs and benefits of nuclear retaliation. This would particularly be the case if a non-nuclear response was practicable.

While a substantial literature surrounding the nuclear taboo has emerged in the past decade, much of it has focused on the positive effect the nuclear taboo has had on international


\(^{13}\) Nina Tannenwald first addressed the nuclear non-use phenomenon from an ideational-normative framework. This is in opposition to most Cold War-era explanations, such as mutually assured destruction (MAD), which are grounded in realist assumptions that reject the importance of ideas and norms in the international system.

security. Specifically, researchers have focused on how the nuclear taboo contributes to nuclear non-use, prevents the outbreak of major war, and responding to their critics, in particular realists. As essential as this line of inquiry is to the nuclear taboo research program, however, scholars have overlooked the possible destabilizing security consequences of the taboo.

In this chapter, I argue that a strong nuclear taboo has both stabilizing and destabilizing consequences. As has been demonstrated in the literature, the nuclear taboo has a stabilizing effect on international politics by promoting the continued non-use of nuclear weapons. However, I argue that it also has the potential to produce greater conventional conflict among states, along the lines of the nuclear stability-instability paradox. That is, the taboo additionally reduces the credibility of nuclear threats involved in deterrence and compellence to such a degree that rival states can feel secure enough to engage in brinkmanship behavior and low-level conflict with nuclear-armed states.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I review the existing literature on the nuclear taboo, examining arguments both for and against its influence in the interstate system. I argue that this research program, while important in that it established the existence of the nuclear taboo, has overlooked the taboo’s possible destabilizing consequences. Second, I develop a theory of a nuclear taboo paradox which states that a sufficiently strong nuclear taboo could produce its own stability-instability paradox, destabilizing the international system by increasing the frequency and intensity of conflict. Third, I present my research design. To test the nuclear taboo paradox, I conduct a longitudinal case study of the United States and the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1990, demonstrating that as the nuclear taboo strengthened, the frequency and intensity of conventional conflict and brinkmanship behavior involving the nuclear-armed states increased.
Literature Review

The central thesis of Michael Mandelbaum’s book, *The Nuclear Revolution*, is that the detonation of the first nuclear weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in a revolutionary era of international politics where “familiar moral categories, ideas of right and wrong in warfare, do not fit.” This revolution forced policymakers and academics alike to reevaluate their ideas of the rationale and modes of war. The ever growing body of literature on nuclear weapons and their consequences suggests that we are still attempting to fully comprehend this revolution.

For much of the last sixty years, the response to this revolution has been largely driven by theories of deterrence. In the post-Cold War era, however, many scholars have found such explanations inadequate. With the emergence of constructivism and its emphasis on the role of ideas in the international system, some scholars have begun to attribute the non-use of nuclear weapons to a shift in international norms—or the emergence of, as they term it, a “nuclear taboo.” This research program to date has broadly focused on confirming the existence of such a norm and investigating the stabilizing effect of the taboo on state behavior. Very little scholarly work, however, has been conducted on potentially destabilizing consequences of the taboo. This section seeks to trace the development of the nuclear taboo literature, with an aim to situate the subsequent theoretical discussion within the proper context.

*Origins of Taboo Theory*

From the beginning of the nuclear era through the conclusion of the Cold War, the study of international relations was carried out predominantly through a rationalist lens. This theoretical paradigm gave rise to theories of deterrence and mutually assured destruction (MAD),

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which would become the primary explanatory models for the nuclear non-use phenomenon. The logic of nuclear deterrence, at its core, is no different than that of conventional deterrence. Deterrence theory contends that states attempt to prevent attacks on their territory and foreign policy interests by both implicitly and explicitly threatening military, economic, diplomatic, and other forms of reprisal on any external actors so foolhardy to do so.\textsuperscript{16} Kenneth Waltz perhaps best explicates the logic of deterrence, writing that it is “dissuading [an enemy] from an action by frightening that [enemy] with the consequences of the action.”\textsuperscript{17} MAD is a specific form of deterrence, under which both states on a dyad are deterred from attacking one another with nuclear weapons for fear of mutual annihilation. This fear rests on the principle of second-strike capability, or a state’s ability to launch a devastating retaliatory nuclear strike even after a full-scale nuclear assault. Most realists consider MAD an especially stable form of deterrence, as states view the cost of retaliatory nuclear strikes on their civilian populations as too costly for all but the most fundamental security objectives pertaining to national survival.

With the abrupt end of the Cold War and new archival evidence pertaining to national security decision-making during that period, however, some academics began to doubt the universality of the MAD model. One important critique came out of the constructivist school of thought. While not denying the validity and utility of the “balance of terror” logic of MAD, constructivists, in particular Nina Tannenwald, noted that the historical record has not always been consistent with predictions of the MAD model. To the contrary, historical evidence suggests numerous cases where the use of nuclear weapons was seriously considered when MAD


\textsuperscript{17} Kenneth Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” \textit{American Political Science Review} 84 (Sep. 1990): 732.
would dictate stability or where non-nuclear states seemed to ignore the strategic imperatives of nuclear deterrence.¹⁸

Specifically, Tannenwald and others cite three central theoretical and empirical problems with the MAD model. First, there are a number of cases where the logic of MAD does not apply—such as those involving conflict dyads where only one state possessed nuclear weapons—and yet no nuclear weapons were used. This is a significant challenge to the theory, which posits that the only constraints states feel with regard to nuclear non-use are those that credibly threaten their survival. If the entirety of the nuclear non-use phenomenon could be explained solely by the twin logics of nuclear deterrence and MAD, we would expect to have seen at least some cases where nuclear weapons were employed in conflicts characterized by nuclear asymmetry.¹⁹ This empirical problem also extends to the early years of the nuclear age, when the United States retained a monopoly on nuclear weapons amidst a growing rivalry with the non-nuclear Soviet Union and yet failed to leverage this advantage to prevent the emergence of bipolarity in the international system.²⁰

The second major critique constructivists bring to bear against MAD is theoretical. Tracing out the logic of MAD explicitly, Tannenwald and others note that a defining assumption of the argument is that the threat of retaliation with nuclear weapons, however slight, is a sufficiently costly potential to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war. While it is objectively true that nuclear weapons are more powerful per pound of raw material or per weapon than “conventional” weapons, the destruction they cause in the aggregate can be equaled by

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traditional incendiary bombing. Viewed from such a materialist perspective, nuclear weapons only differ from “conventional” weapons in their efficiency—other than the radiation side effect, there is little qualitatively different about their destructive capacity. To that end, we must then question how high potential costs must be to be deemed “unacceptable” by foreign leaders and whether or not that cost-benefit analysis holds constant over time. Indeed, as a state’s economic output and ability to rebuild following conflict increases with demographic and technological changes, one would anticipate that the level of “acceptable cost” engendered by going to war would increase as well. This suggests that the destructive power of nuclear weapons alone is insufficient to support MAD in all cases, even assuming a universe of perfectly rational actors.

The question of rationality leads us to the third major critique of MAD. While the assumption of rationality is frequently assumed within the realist paradigm of international relations for the sake of theoretical parsimony, numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that this assumption may not be valid in the real world. Participants in controlled laboratory experiments frequently show that exogenous factors such as high-pressure stress, wishful thinking, and motivated bias all can cause shifts away from optimal game-theoretic decision-making. Even in situations where such factors are eliminated or controlled for, political psychologists have found that actors often fail to “calculate” the predicted “optimal” decision, instead relying on cognitive shortcuts, innate biases, and cultural perspectives to process decision-relevant information. When it is noted that additional factors such as domestic politics or institutional incentives or constraints can complicate state leadership decision-making,

21 In fact, the American incendiary bombing of Tokyo during WWII actually resulted in more casualties and economic damage than did either individual atomic bomb at Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Richard Rhodes, The Making of the Atomic Bomb [New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1986], 599.
constructivists find that the concept of actor rationality can only be defined on the individual level; even then, such rationality is subject to influence by external factors unique to the specific situation under consideration.\(^{24}\) This suggests that traditional models of deterrence—and by extension, MAD—may not be as applicable to the real world as previously thought.

*The Nuclear Taboo*

To explain the non-use of the bomb, Tannenwald and others posit the gradual development of a taboo against any use of nuclear weapons. Under this model, state behavior is not solely explained by the cold, logical calculations of MAD, but also by an ever-growing normative prohibition that considers nuclear weapons unethical and immoral. This nuclear taboo is defined as a “widespread popular revulsion against nuclear weapons and widely held inhibitions on their use.”\(^{25}\) Taboo theorists argue that this normative prohibition, which categorizes nuclear weapons as something particularly special and improper for use in war, is actually the driving force behind the history of nuclear non-use post-WWII.

Because it is a normative concept, the nuclear taboo is not a fixed variable, but rather varies in its intensity and its relative significance to policymakers across time. Specifically, scholars have argued that, as it has become increasingly internalized by domestic populations, international institutions, and elite decision-makers, the nuclear taboo has strengthened in its causal power during the Cold War and to the present day. The result of this has been that nuclear states are constrained in their ability to utilize their weapons in actual combat, to the extent that we have not seen nuclear strikes since the 1945 Japanese bombings.

As a taboo, this norm represents a *de facto*, rather than a *de jure*, prohibition on the first-strike use of nuclear weapons. Sociological research suggests that taboos generally are instituted


to protect individuals and societies from behavior widely regarded as dangerous by making it normatively prohibitive to enact such a behavior. These beliefs can be substantiated through observed actual danger from an activity, the product of elite or interest group manipulation of public imagination, grassroots activism or hysteria, or some combination of these factors. Once a belief of danger has been established, the norm becomes attached to certain costs resulting from violations, which usually strengthen in their severity the longer the taboo remains in place.

Clearly these criteria hold for nuclear weapons, which have been widely designated as the most powerful and destructive weapons states have developed to date by both scientists and political activists. However, unlike most taboos, possession of the taboo object—in this case, nuclear weapons—is not also prohibited. Instead, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has been enacted to make it broadly unacceptable for new states to join the “nuclear club,” but states already in possession of nuclear weapons are permitted to maintain their arsenals, even though they are normatively prevented from using them. This has created a curious situation, where the nuclear taboo is widely acknowledged and yet simultaneously we see a normative “totemization” attached to the possession of these weapons, whereby the weapons have become an implicit symbol of “great power” status. This legal quirk suggests that the taboo has not been completely formalized. However, this is not to say that that the norm has not been successful. As Gizewski discusses, the primary success of the nuclear taboo has been in preventing further nuclear detonations during conflict as a direct result of the normative view that all nuclear

27 Some critics take issue with the definition of a ‘taboo,’ contending that the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945 is a tradition, not a norm. T.V. Paul argues that: “a taboo is…generally associated with such qualities as absoluteness, unthinkingness, and taken-for-grantedness,” and believes this does not accurately reflect state attitudes towards atomic weapons. Broadly, this argument is quite weak, grounding itself more in semantics rather than any particular substantive difference. Paul, “Taboo or Tradition?,” 867.
weapons are unique and equivalent, regardless of size, power, level of fallout, or any other metric.  

*Historical Development of the Nuclear Taboo*

The ideational underpinnings of the taboo actually pre-date nuclear weapons themselves. The concept of weapons so destructive that they require either moral or legal prohibition against their use or possession dates back to World War I, when the widespread use of chemical weapons on the battlefield provoked massive public outcry. The use of these new weapons was subsequently banned under international law with the Geneva Protocol on the grounds that they were inhumane and did not discriminate between civilian and military personnel. The concept of “weapons of mass destruction,” which categorizes some weapons as more heinous and immoral than others, was first used by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1937 in reference to the aerial bombings of Guernica, Spain. The term acquired its more contemporary usage as a synonym for non-conventional weapons—in other words, weapons with destructive capabilities not based off of kinetic energy or chemical combustion—almost immediately following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in late November 1945 and early 1946. Variations on the phrase then featured in U.S. executive branch memos, United Nations resolutions, and the scholarly lectures. Clearly then, the seeds of the idea that nuclear weapons constitute a new category of especially abhorrent weapons was present from the very beginning of the atomic age.


Tannenwald and others view the evolution of the nuclear taboo as the product of a competition between two divergent conceptions of nuclear weapons. In the first view, nuclear weapons were seen as powerful weapons integral to future U.S. national security. This was primarily the position of military leaders and many policymakers in the wake of the Japanese bombings. In the second view, which ultimately became the foundation for the contemporary nuclear taboo, nuclear weapons were regarded as terrible, inhumane, and even evil weapons that should never be used again. This perspective was first espoused by scientists who worked on the atomic bomb with the Manhattan Project and was quickly echoed by religious leaders and some policymakers, such as the U.S. Federal Council of Churches, Paul Nitze, and Ralph Bard.  

This second view was initially created by two independent groups, each of which had their own reasons for seeking a prohibition on the future use of nuclear weapons in combat. Broadly, these two sides can be divided into political and moral camps. On the political side, the Soviet Union and its satellite states worked vigorously to encourage a nuclear taboo in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was not because the Soviet Union had any normative or moral qualms about the atomic bomb, but rather because it sought to delegitimize a possible nuclear confrontation with the United States while Moscow lacked the capabilities to deter a nuclear attack. Indeed, the Soviet Union’s efforts to delegitimize nuclear weapons declined once second-strike capabilities were obtained. This represents a view of norms used strategically to further the national interest.

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35 Tannenwald, “Stigmatizing the Bomb,” 19.
As the Soviet Union sought to undermine the United States’ nuclear monopoly, activists and several Western and foreign leaders, such as David Lilienthal, Carlos Romulo, and Jawaharlal Nehru, concurrently spearheaded the beginning of an antinuclear global movement. Composed initially of Manhattan Project scientists such as Leo Szilard and J. Robert Oppenheimer, this group argued that the atomic bomb threatened the future of the environment and civilization itself. The antinuclear movement literally arose from the radioactive ashes of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, where physicists, medical professionals, and policymakers gradually began to comprehend the magnitude and longevity of the effects of nuclear fallout. As this movement gained traction in the United States and other Western states, policymakers suddenly found themselves on the defensive on questions of nuclear strategy and possession. As early as mid-1946, Truman administration officials had to justify the legitimacy and morality of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Growing public doubt and opposition to nuclear weapons then began to curtail the government’s ability to employ nuclear weapons in combat situations, although the U.S. military continued to draw up extensive plans for the use of nuclear weapons throughout the Cold War.

The strength of the nuclear taboo has since grown at a relatively steady rate. Early in the 1950s, increasing evidence of the lingering effects of radiation and new concerns about nuclear proliferation led to more vigorous public opposition to nuclear weapons. At the elite level, this view gained acceptance—albeit more gradually. Many U.S. policymakers still chafed against the

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37 Ibid., 48.
38 Tannenwald, “Stigmatizing the Bomb,” 19.
40 The most notable of early journalist critiques of the atomic bombings of Japan comes from New Yorker writer John Hershey, whose 31,000 word piece “Hiroshima” brought the first detailed accounts of post-bomb survivors to the American public. Soon after, the Truman administration began a concerted campaign to minimize negative public reaction to the direct devastation and emerging side-effects of the atomic bomb. John Hershey, “Hiroshima,” The New Yorker, August 31, 1946.
taboo, and consistently sought creative ways to subvert the moral constraints of the norm.\footnote{Higuchi, “‘Clean’ Bombs: Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Strategy in the 1950s,” Journal of Strategic Studies 29:1 (2006).}

Although the nuclear taboo has yet to achieve full legal status like the prohibitions on chemical weapons, a high degree of institutionalization within organizations like the United Nations has provided momentum for furthering restrictions on the testing and use of nuclear weapons. This further accelerated the development and evolution of the nuclear taboo. Today, several states still explicitly reserve the right to use their nuclear weapons—even as a first strike. But it is difficult to imagine a scenario where any state would find the costs of lost prestige and reputation, to say nothing of the possible military reprisals from outraged third parties, acceptable relative to the benefit gained from even a limited use of nuclear weapons.

What’s Missing

A great deal of work has been conducted on establishing that the nuclear taboo is present and at least partly responsible for why nuclear weapons have not been used since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. But additional scholarship is needed on the security implications of a strong nuclear taboo. To date, only passing remarks have been made about the effect of the nuclear taboo on the credibility of nuclear deterrence and any destabilizing effects it might have on the international system. Gizewski does write that “strict observance of the taboo does not preclude the onset of deadly international conflict. Not only does the emerging international environment offer a range of possibilities for violence below the nuclear threshold, but, in certain circumstances, the taboo itself could encourage its outbreak.”\footnote{Gizewski, “Winning Weapon,” 418.} However, little else has been made of this hypothesis. This is surprising, as nuclear strategies of deterrence and compellence are fundamentally grounded in the threat of a credible nuclear response to aggression. As the
nuclear taboo has strengthened over time, the reputational costs of violating the taboo have likewise increased, likely undermining the credibility of deterrence and MAD. It is the purpose of this study to fill this gap in the literature by articulating how the nuclear taboo might inadvertently destabilize the international system through such an increase in reputational costs, a phenomenon which I term the “nuclear taboo paradox.”

**Nuclear Taboo and Conflict**

Can a strong nuclear taboo make conventional conflict more likely? In this section, I first discuss the literature on the nuclear stability-instability paradox. I then outline my theory of a taboo paradox. Finally, I generate several hypotheses that follow from this theory, which are tested in the case studies found in subsequent chapters.

*The Nuclear Stability-Instability Paradox*

Using the basic deterrence logic of MAD, authors such as Glenn Snyder and Michael Krepon argue that the probability of direct conflict and major war is unlikely between nuclear-armed states—the costs of such an exchange would be far in excess of any anticipated benefits for all but the most existential of conflicts. For the same reason, however, the nuclear stability-instability paradox predicts that nuclear states have increased confidence that low-level or indirect conflicts will not spiral out of control into wider wars. This is because all states are aware of this aversion to nuclear conflict and know that states will be unwilling to risk nuclear holocaust over peripheral or non-existential disputes. As a consequence, such states actually tend to be more aggressive in their foreign policy. While states in non-nuclear dyads might fear that an opposing state might escalate smaller conflicts into war as a brinkmanship tactic, states under

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MAD can be relatively confident that opposing leaders will be reluctant to permit low-level or indirect conflict to escalate past a certain point for fear of an all-out war involving nuclear weapons.  

Snyder is credited with the first extended analysis of the nuclear stability-instability paradox, although the concept dates back to 1954 in the writings B. H. Liddell Hart. In “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” Snyder articulates how the proliferation of nuclear weapons is simultaneously a stabilizing and destabilizing force in interstate relations, remarking on nuclear weapons’ tendency to simultaneously stimulate and inhibit war. This work was further developed by Robert Jervis in “The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon,” where he discusses the danger of a world where policymakers believe they can leverage MAD to manage crises in their favor. Historically, this was manifested in the Eisenhower administration’s policy of massive retaliation and the decision of subsequent administrations to qualify such a policy to improve its credibility. Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz famous debated both the stabilizing and destabilizing attributes of permitting widespread proliferation of nuclear weapons. Most notably, Sagan observes that where nuclear weapons can provide a sufficient deterrent under a number of conditions—including adequate civilian control over the military, survivable second-strike capability, and plentiful accident-prevention measures—they can also encourage preventive wars during state development of

45 Krepon, “The Stability-Instability Paradox.”  
nuclear weapons capabilities, increase conflict over peripheral interests, and intensify the use and frequency of brinkmanship tactics.  

*The Taboo Paradox*

As previously discussed, a significant portion of the taboo literature has been devoted to analyzing the history and influence of the nuclear taboo, while largely neglecting other possible effects it might have on the stability of the international system. The stabilizing effects are relatively apparent—a stronger nuclear taboo makes it increasingly unlikely that states will escalate conflict to the nuclear level due to the political and reputation costs associated with violating the prohibition. Certainly the norm has had a stabilizing effect, as it contributes to the reigning sixty-year *status quo* of nuclear non-use. However, there likely are other ancillary effects of the nuclear taboo that need to be more thoroughly investigated, some of which may be destabilizing.

When the nuclear taboo is examined closely, it is probable that one of the major side effects of a stronger norm is a reduction in the credibility of nuclear deterrence. This follows logically, as all states are cognizant of the taboo not only as it applies to their own actions, but also as it applies to the actions of other states. As the nuclear taboo makes it prohibitive to even contemplate employing nuclear weapons against other states, this credibility is severely weakened. This then suggests that states seeking to challenge the *status quo* are more likely to disregard nuclear threats, knowing that no state would actually follow through on such a threat for reasons short of national survival. Challenger states then feel more confident in initiating low-level conflicts—provided the conventional balance of power is in their favor. This implies

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50 Ibid.
an inverse relationship between the strength and stability of nuclear deterrence and the nuclear taboo. To wit, as the nuclear taboo increases in strength, the deterrent power of MAD decreases.

The destabilizing effects of the nuclear taboo extend not only to the incidence of conflict, but also to the severity of interstate conflict. With a strong nuclear taboo, states feel more confident that nuclear weapons will not be launched as a retaliatory measure against aggressive foreign policy adventures. As a consequence, both nuclear and non-nuclear states will be more inclined to initiate crises and conflicts as a means to elicit concessions from opposing nuclear states. However, because awareness of the taboo is universal, the opposing state will see through this strategy and attempt to bolster its own deterrent threats. This leads to an escalation of conflict, as State A attempts to call State B’s nuclear bluff and as State B attempts to demonstrate its readiness to retaliate, in a pattern of behavior frequently described as brinkmanship tactics. Indeed, these spirals of conflict may escalate into major wars if the nuclear taboo is sufficiently strong. While we have yet to see such a war occur, likely due to the post-Cold War American global hegemony, major hostilities between two nuclear states could escalate to a nuclear exchange. Formally, the above logic leads us to two hypotheses:

H1: As the strength of the nuclear taboo increases, nuclear-armed states will exhibit a greater proclivity toward dispute escalation through the use of brinkmanship tactics and escalatory behavior.

H2: As the strength of the nuclear taboo increases, nuclear-armed states will engage in increasingly severe low- to mid-level conflicts.

In Hypothesis 1, we should see nuclear-armed states engage more frequently and more intensely in conflict escalation and brinkmanship tactics as the strength of the nuclear taboo increases.

51 Brinkmanship tactics refer to the “polic[ies] or practice…of pushing a dangerous situation to the brink of disaster (to the limits of safety) in order to achieve the most advantageous outcome by forcing the opposition to make concessions.” Brinkmanship is a decision by State A to escalate tensions to a point considered unacceptably risky by State B. This forces State B to capitulate, provided that State A can credibly threaten escalation and potentially conflict. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Political and Economic Brinkmanship,” Review of International Political Economy 14:3 (2007): 468.
This is because, if correct, the nuclear taboo paradox anticipates increased bluffing and decreased deterrent efficacy under a stronger nuclear taboo. Likewise, in Hypothesis 2 we should expect to see increasingly severe conflict—with the constraint that it will remain short of major war—due to an increased perception of higher normative and reputational costs to actually enacting a nuclear deterrent. If these hypotheses are incorrect, we would expect no change or fewer incidents of brinkmanship tactics and no change or a decrease in the severity of conflict involving nuclear states. Hypothesis 1 then more precisely pertains to strategic behavior within crises, whereas Hypothesis 2 specifically covers conflict itself.

In this section, I reviewed the literature on the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945. I concluded that an important explanation for the nuclear non-use phenomenon is found in the nuclear taboo, which argues that an evolving normative prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons in combat is chiefly responsible for their non-use by policymakers and military officials. This approach is not fully developed, however, as to date it has failed to explore possible destabilizing consequences of the nuclear taboo. I proposed a logic under which the nuclear taboo can have destabilizing consequences, namely that it adds such normative and reputational costs to the use of nuclear weapons that the credibility of a nuclear deterrent in most circumstances is substantially undermined. From this logic I generated two hypotheses: first, that we should see nuclear-armed states engage more frequently and more intensely in conflict escalation and brinkmanship tactics and second, that we should see nuclear-armed states engage in increasingly severe conflict—short of major war—as the strength of the nuclear taboo increases. The next step is to develop a research design that will allow us to test these hypotheses empirically.
Research Design

In the previous section, I outlined two different hypotheses detailing what we should expect to see if the nuclear taboo paradox operates in the international system. To test these hypotheses, I conduct a longitudinal case study to observe whether the taboo heightened conflict in specific disputes and whether, as the taboo gained in strength throughout the twentieth century, the intensity of conflict short of war and brinkmanship behavior also increased.

In this section, I outline my research methodology, beginning with a discussion of my overall research design. In the second part of this section, I discuss how I test my variables—the presence and relative strength of the nuclear taboo, brinkmanship tactics, and conflict severity. In the final component of this section, I detail my criteria for case study selection and identify the cases I have chosen for closer analysis in subsequent chapters.

Case Study Research Design

In order to best test my theory of the nuclear taboo paradox, I employ a predominantly qualitative approach. Specifically, I utilize a longitudinal case study model, under which I control for such variables as polarity, existing rivalries, borders, and a number of other variables known to influence interstate disputes and conflict. I select a qualitative approach over a more quantitative one for a number of reasons. Foremost among these is the nature of the nuclear taboo itself—as a moral-normative phenomenon, it is very difficult to conceptualize a useful and valid quantitative measure of the strength of the taboo at any given point in time or in any specific incident. Indeed, particularly for the early days of the nuclear taboo, theory would predict that the influence of the taboo would vary widely depending on which actors were involved in the incident. As a consequence, the influence of the nuclear taboo is best captured through detailed tracing of events. Second, as a new theoretical contribution to the nuclear taboo
program, a qualitative approach permits the overall logic of the nuclear taboo paradox to be examined within the context of actual historical events. This preliminary test, if successful, can then serve as the foundation of future, perhaps more quantitative testing.

The research I undertake in the following chapters broadly seeks to answer three questions. The first is whether the nuclear taboo, rather than nuclear deterrence or other structural factors, is operative in the decision-making process of each individual case. If this question is answered in the affirmative, as Tannenwald’s basic logic argues it should, I then determine whether there is evidence suggestive that the nuclear taboo paradox is operative in the cases as well. As articulated in Hypotheses 1 and 2, the primary evidence of the nuclear taboo paradox in these cases will be greater use of brinkmanship tactics and more severe low- and mid-level conflict. Finally, taking advantage of the longitudinal structure of my cases, I conduct a comparative analysis across cases to demonstrate that the destabilizing consequences of the nuclear taboo paradox increase as the nuclear taboo also has strengthened over time.

Variable Operationalization—Measuring the Taboo

Before we proceed to the actual case study selection, we must first briefly discuss the operationalization of my variables. For the purpose of testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, there are three critical variables requiring measurement—the presence and relative strength of the nuclear taboo, the incidence and extent of the use of brinkmanship tactics, and the relative severity of low- and mid-level conflict present in each case. The following paragraphs discuss how I measure each of these variables in this study.

As discussed above, a critical component of the literature on the nuclear taboo is adequately demonstrating that it is the nuclear taboo, rather than nuclear deterrence or other structural factors, at work in my cases. As such, in each case I first examine whether the nuclear
taboo paradox is either causally active or inactive before I move on to my comparisons of these crises over time. I accomplish this primarily through analysis of elite-level discourse and rhetoric, examining relevant decision-making efforts for language indicative of the nuclear taboo. More precisely, we would expect elites affected by the nuclear taboo paradox to include commentary regarding feelings of constraint by public and international opinion, the morality of nuclear weaponry, and distinctions between conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction. Explicit commentary by elites about a taboo or morality would be a strong indicator that the nuclear taboo is influencing decision-making, but is not required. Evidence of the nuclear taboo within civil society and state populations more broadly will also be considered when evaluating the strength of the taboo in a given case.

In the case that the nuclear taboo is not at work, we would not expect to see much, if any, such discourse or civic activism, as the alternative case for the non-use phenomenon is the realist structural one of nuclear deterrence and MAD. If this is in fact the case, we would rather expect elite decision-makers to discuss dyadic disputes in terms of the balance of power, first- and second-strike capabilities, and the material costs and benefits of escalation and intensified conflict. Commentary about morality would not be expected under this scenario.

A caveat should be made here that, at least in democratic states where cultural values may not precisely match up with raw balance of power calculations, we may still see some public rhetoric from elite decision-makers seemingly indicative of the nuclear taboo. This would be expected because democratic states, particularly modern Western ones, have a tradition of moral rhetoric in their foreign policy.52 However, we would only expect such rhetoric in the public sphere, while the actual decision-making process should still largely match the realist

52 Dominic Tierney, “‘Pearl Harbor in Reverse:’ Moral Analogies in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” Journal of Cold War Studies 9:3 (Summer 2007).
predictions. This distinction between public rhetoric and private, elite-level decision-making makes it all the more critical that any qualitative analysis of this question focus on all available written and recorded information concerning the actual decision-making process instead of just the actual outcomes of the disputes.

*Variable Operationalization*—*Measuring Escalation & Brinkmanship*

Hypothesis 1 is chiefly concerned with brinkmanship behavior and conflict escalation. As outlined earlier in this section, I hypothesize that as the nuclear taboo strengthens, we will see an increase in instances of state brinkmanship behavior and crisis escalation. In order to compare the relative effect of the nuclear taboo paradox across time, I use the dispute covered in the first case as my baseline measurement of relative incidence of brinkmanship tactics for the nuclear era. In each subsequent case, I perform the same measure on each dispute and then compare the frequency and intensity of the escalatory processes and brinkmanship tactics employed. If Hypothesis 1 is correct, we should expect to see an increase in the incidence of escalation and brinkmanship tactics, both across cases and within individual disputes themselves. To falsify my hypothesis, we would expect to see no change or even fewer instances of brinkmanship tactics and conflict escalation.

At this point, a distinction between conflict escalation and brinkmanship tactics needs to be made. On its own, conflict escalation refers to an increase in the intensity of a specific conflict. Lacking other constraints or qualifiers, states may choose to escalate a crisis or dispute for two reasons. In the first case, states choose to escalate a dispute because the issue of dispute is regarded as politically salient enough to warrant an escalated response from a cost-benefit
In other words, State A may choose to escalate a dispute with State B because is strategically beneficial to do so for State A. In the second case, states may choose to escalate a dispute to higher levels of conflict as a means to demonstrate political resolve, even if that resolve is a political bluff employed to assist State A in extracting additional concessions out of State B. Under this scenario, states choose to escalate conflict because it may be tactically beneficial to do so, even if actual conflict escalation may not be in State A’s long-term strategic interests. The classic example of such brinkmanship is Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor—elites in Japan hoped that by escalating the intensifying conflict in the Pacific with a significant pre-emptive strike, the United States would lose the resolve to fight back. Such tactics of escalation are properly termed brinkmanship, particularly when employed as a threat to escalate a conflict past a “tipping point.”

For the purposes of this study, I test escalation and brinkmanship behavior with a process-tracing approach. Because escalation and brinkmanship tactics are highly contextual, I analyze the overall impact, or lack thereof, of the nuclear taboo paradox on escalation processes. From a qualitative approach, if Hypothesis 1 is correct, we would expect to see an increase in elite decision-maker discussion focused on demonstrating resolve, taking a hard-line stance, bluffing, and the relative costs and benefits of escalation versus the value of the outcome of the dispute. If Hypothesis 1 is false, we would expect to see no change or even a decrease in the relative incidence of such discussions.

Variable Operationalization—Measuring Conflict Severity

Hypothesis 2 centers on specifying changes in conflict itself because of nuclear weapons. As I have previously discussed, the destabilizing loss in nuclear credibility due to a strengthening nuclear taboo theoretically should make both nuclear and non-nuclear states alike bolder when disputing with nuclear states. From this, I derived Hypothesis 2, designed to look at outcomes where Hypothesis 1 examined processes. For this hypothesis, I examine the intensity of the conflict itself, rather than the escalatory processes or brinkmanship tactics that lead up to it. Because of the paradoxical nature of the taboo and the rationalist dictates of nuclear deterrence and MAD, we should still expect most conflict to stop short of major war. However, all else being equal, we should see more intense low- and medium-intensity conflict as the nuclear taboo exerts increasing influence in the international system.

Because conflict severity, like brinkmanship, is difficult to quantify out of context, I again employ a qualitative approach to analyze the nuclear taboo’s effect, if any, on the overall severity of conflict in order to test Hypothesis 2. As with Hypothesis 1, it is critical to analyze trends longitudinally to trace out the specific impact of the nuclear taboo paradox, so again I use my first case both as evidence for the presence of the taboo and as a baseline to measure subsequent cases against. Because not all conflicts are directly comparable in terms of severity on objective metrics, I will conduct a counterfactual analysis of each conflict to determine where each case falls on a relative scale of conflict severity based on all possible conflict outcomes. The results of this analysis in each case will then be applied longitudinally against one another to test my second hypothesis. If Hypothesis 2 is correct, we would expect to see disputes become increasingly severe as the nuclear taboo strengthens throughout the twentieth century. If we see
either no change or a decrease in the relative severity of conflict across cases, then Hypothesis 2 will be falsified.

Case Selection: Challenges to Containment

With the nuclear taboo and measures for my hypotheses operationalized, the final step in the research design is case selection. There are several crucial criteria that any case selected must meet to properly test the nuclear taboo paradox over time. First, in order to capture the full destabilizing effect of the nuclear taboo vis-à-vis the principles of nuclear deterrence and MAD, the ideal case will have at least one state in possession of nuclear weapons for a significant portion of the nuclear era. This criterion provides us not only with more time on which to draw more disputes and conflicts out of, but also allows us to distinguish distinct phases in the development of the taboo as it grows stronger over time. A longitudinal study of one dyad, rather than several dyads on narrower time scales, is also a superior design, as it allows for controls for possible intervening variables such as regime type, pre-existing rivalries, and geography.

The obvious case for these criteria is a longitudinal study of the United States-Soviet Union dyad from 1945 until 1989. This is in fact the only possible dyad available to longitudinally study the nuclear taboo over the entire course of its existence, from the first detonation of a nuclear weapon in combat at Hiroshima in 1945 until a relatively contemporary date. From 1949 onwards, it also provides us with a nuclear-nuclear dyad, permitting us to examine the impact of the nuclear taboo on both sides of the dispute, consequently doubling the amount of data available in each case. In order to longitudinally analyze this dyad, I split the Cold War into three periods, according to fairly conventional historical divisions of the post-WWII interstate system. Within each of these periods, I analyze one significant conflict or dispute for evidence of the nuclear taboo paradox and my hypotheses. As a control variable, I
select cases on the criteria that they feature Soviet attempts to challenge the U.S. policy of containment.

The first period of the Cold War is typically demarcated from 1945-1953, or, in event terms, from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings through the detonation of the first hydrogen bombs. This period is dominated by a U.S. nuclear monopoly from 1945-1949, when the United States was the only state in possession of the technology required to construct and deploy nuclear weapons against an enemy target. Following the Soviet detonation of a test nuclear weapon in August 1949, the period continued to be typified by a state of unstable nuclear tensions. As a representative conflict of the period, I examine the Korean War from 1950-1953, which featured the Soviet Union seeking to challenge U.S. commitment to containing Communism on the Korean peninsula through proxy warfare.

The second period of the Cold War features between 1953 and 1962, or, again in event terms, from the detonation of the first hydrogen bombs through the Cuban Missile Crisis. This period was characterized by a situation often designated as “unstable MAD,” where both superpowers sought to out-spend and out-produce the other in an attempt to attain a position of nuclear superiority while in the interim refraining from engaging in direct conflict for fear of nuclear annihilation. It is during this period that we see most states aligning to one side of the Cold War or the other. As a representative case of the period, I examine the Cuban Missile Crisis, which featured a Soviet challenge to the Monroe Doctrine and containment in the Caribbean and Latin America.

The final period of the Cold War took place from 1962-1989, or the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis through the collapse of the Soviet Union. This period is marked by a rough strategic parity of nuclear forces between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result,
much of this period is characterized by *détente*, or a relaxation in the relations between the two superpowers. Toward the end of the 1970s, however, Western policy toward the Eastern bloc began to shift away from *détente* to a more confrontational posture. With this more aggressive posture came a renewed nuclear arms race, as well as the first true attempts at the development of a comprehensive Strategic Defense Initiative in the United States as a means to unsettle the balance of MAD. While the latter part of this period saw a decline in Soviet adventurism abroad as it turned inward to deal with growing domestic problems that would ultimately lead to its 1991 collapse, the first half of this period saw a significant increase in challenges to U.S. containment in Central Asia and Africa. For my final case study, I will analyze the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I argued that the nuclear taboo provides substantial explanatory power in understanding the nuclear non-use phenomenon, but that research into the impact of the taboo to date has been relatively one-sided. In my literature review, I identified a substantial gap in the research program pertaining to possible destabilizing consequences of the nuclear taboo. In the theory component of this chapter, I outlined a theory of the nuclear taboo similar to the nuclear stability-instability paradox, where the nuclear taboo can simultaneously have stabilizing and destabilizing effects on the interstate system. This logic, which I term the nuclear taboo paradox, suggests that as the nuclear taboo increases in normative strength, states will be more inclined to disregard nuclear threats and deterrents in their strategic calculations. To test this logic, I developed a qualitative research methodology designed on two hypotheses pertaining to brinkmanship tactics and severity of conflict through a longitudinal case study of the U.S.-Soviet dyad from 1945 to 1989. The following three chapters contain the results of these case studies.
CHAPTER THREE
KOREAN WAR, 1950-1953

Following nearly two years of fighting over scraps of territory along the 38th parallel, United Nations forces and the communists finally brought major theater operations of the Korean War to a close on July 27, 1953. While much territory exchanged hands multiple times in the opening months of the war, in the end the armistice line was declared almost exactly in accordance with the original boundaries between North and South Korea. The Korean conflict represented many firsts for the Cold War. It was the first time the Cold War turned hot with proxy warfare between the United States and communists in Russia and China. The Korean War was also the first instance of deliberately limited war in an era previously typified by total war. It was additionally the first major conflict in which a combatant had nuclear weapons from the start and, as a consequence, was also the first conflict in which elites opted not to use such weapons in a military capacity. As such, Korea is the ideal first case to establish a baseline for the impact of the nuclear taboo paradox.

Before delving into the actual case study, however, it is important to outline precisely what the nuclear taboo paradox would predict in such a scenario. Traditional nuclear taboo theory contends that even at this early date a weak taboo was in effect and exerted some influence over nuclear decision makers. With a weak nuclear taboo in place, we should then expect a few instances of brinkmanship, albeit ones concerned and tempered by the possible consequences of actual escalation. We predict this because although a weak taboo exists during this period, the overarching strategic paradigm remains a balance-of-power one. As a

55 Although an armistice and cease-fire were signed by both sides on this date, no formal peace instrument has ever been signed. Technically then, the two Koreas remain at war, as evidenced by sporadic fighting along the Demilitarized Zone. Edward A. Olsen, “The United States’ Role in the Korean Peace Regime Building Process,” in Peace Regime Building on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asian Security Cooperation, ed. Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seung-Ho Joo [Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010], 110.
consequence, policymakers ought to still accept the nuclear threat as a plausible outcome. In the instances that we do see brinkmanship behavior, however, this balance-of-power mentality should be moderated by a sense of weakened credibility, specifically predicated on notions of reputation costs, morality, or domestic public disapproval.

In this chapter, I argue that the Korean War case follows the logic of the nuclear taboo paradox and is best explained with this theory. Destabilizing elements of the nuclear taboo paradox in the form of increased brinkmanship and escalatory behavior do not occur with much frequency—to the contrary, elites deliberately and actively sought ways to prevent the conflict from spiraling into a wider war as they continued to situate most of their strategic thinking in traditional balance-of-power terms. However, when such behavior did occur, elites exhibited thinking consistent with concerns about the nuclear taboo.

This chapter is divided into two major sections. First, I present a brief historical overview of the Korean War to situate the case chronologically and provide context for specific instances of brinkmanship. Second, I look for evidence of brinkmanship behavior and escalatory tactics, on the part of both the United States and the communists. Having established instances of such tactics, I then examine how these empirics compare to the predictions of two competing explanations—the nuclear stability-instability paradox and nuclear deterrence—as well as traditional nuclear taboo theory and finally my own theory of the nuclear taboo paradox. I conclude this chapter with a summary of the overall empirical support for my theory from this case.

**Historical Overview**

Following the withdrawal of Soviet and U.S. troops from the peninsula in 1949, border skirmishes and guerilla raids quickly became the norm for both North and South Korea as both
polities harassed ideological opposition leaders in their respective territories.\textsuperscript{56} It was not until April of 1950, however, when Kim Il-Sung travelled first to Moscow and later to Beijing to secure Stalin’s and Mao’s support for an invasion of reunification, that plans for a wider war began to be put into motion. Stalin had indicated abstract support for such an effort as early as January 1950, but declined to provide Kim Il-Sung with troops for fear of sparking a larger war with the United States and its NATO allies.\textsuperscript{57} Instead, Stalin sent Kim to Mao, who despite being in the midst of demobilizing much of the People’s Liberation Army offered Kim both materiel and manpower. A month later, on June 25, 1950, North Korean armies crossed the 38\textsuperscript{th} parallel under the guise of a counterattack to South Korean military provocations.\textsuperscript{58}

The immediate U.S. reaction was one of surprise—very little intelligence had suggested an imminent attack, and unlike for Japan, no defense plans existed for South Korea.\textsuperscript{59} The Truman administration’s decision to intervene in the conflict with ground troops came only after lengthy internal debate weighing the necessity of a non-hostile Korea to Japan’s defense versus the risk of the war escalating with the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{60} On June 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1950, the United States led the United Nations Security Council in a unanimous resolution of condemnation of the North Korean invasion.\textsuperscript{61} Within a week, the United States began mobilizing forces stationed in Japan onto the Korean peninsula.

\textsuperscript{59} Stone, \textit{Hidden History}, 59.
\textsuperscript{61} This vote was made possible because the Soviet Union had been boycotting its Security Council seat since January 13, 1950 in protest of the United Nations’ refusal to unseat the Nationalist Chinese delegation after that government had fallen to Communist forces. Had the Soviet Union returned to its seat, Resolution 82 surely would have been vetoed. Francis H. Heller, \textit{The Korean War: A Twenty-Five Year Perspective} [Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977], 190.
In the opening weeks of the conflict, however, U.S. and allied reinforcements could not arrive quickly enough to support the ill-equipped and under-trained South Korean army as the superior North Korean forces pushed southward with their Soviet-built tanks and aircraft. By September, the South Korean army had been driven behind the Pusan perimeter. American forces were eventually able to hold off further North Korean advances at this line and began to seriously deplete enemy tank and personnel numbers, halting and reversing the North Korean advance. With the victory at the Battle of Inchon in September, U.N. forces finally broke through the line and began re-capturing territory steadily northward toward the 38th parallel.

As U.N. and South Korean forces marched northward, the question of crossing the 38th parallel and attempting a counter-invasion for reunification weighed on the minds of both sides. Truman, still seeking to avoid an escalation of the war to include the Soviet Union, directed General MacArthur through a National Security Council memorandum to operate north of the 38th parallel if “at the time of such operation there was no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcements of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily…” Later, as it was more and more presumed that the Soviet Union would continue to refrain from contributing ground forces, these orders were updated in late September by Secretary of Defense George Marshall, who authorized General MacArthur to proceed north of the parallel. Foreseeing such a move, on September 30th Chinese military commander Zhou Enlai threatened major Chinese intervention if the United States crossed the

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64 Hickey, *Korean War*, 69; Stone, *Hidden History*, 82.
65 Ibid., 98.
A plan was enacted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that only South Korean forces would proceed north of the parallel to forestall any accusations of imperialistic occupation by the communists or their sympathizers. General MacArthur would disregard the constraints of this plan several days later in early October when he elected to proceed northward with U.N. forces.69

The same day as U.N. forces cross the 38th parallel, Soviet leaders requested that the Chinese deploy five to six divisions to Korea to support the North Korean regime.70 Internal debate raged within the Chinese Politburo for several days, suggesting that the original threat to intervene was not fully credible at the time it was made, but ultimately Mao’s pro-intervention position won out and three divisions were dispatched to North Korea.71 These new reinforcements quickly crossed the Yalu River separating China and North Korea and participated in their first engagements in late October 1950. General MacArthur chose to press on rather than consolidate his forces at the neck of the peninsula, a disastrous decision that led to the Second Phase Offensive, where the Chinese ambushed the US X Corps and 8th Army.72 The resulting U.S. retreat from northwest Korea would be the longest in U.S. history, leaving U.N. allied forces south of Seoul by January 4th, 1951.73

Following the relief of General MacArthur and the assumption of supreme command of U.S. and allied forces in Korea by General Ridgeway in April 1951, U.N. forces were able to repel Communist forces—now operating with Soviet air force support—to a line just north of the 38th parallel.74 Some territory exchanged sides for several more months between the 38th parallel

68 Stueck, Korean War, 94.
69 Acheson, Korean War, 62.
70 Barbara Barnouin and Changgeng Yu, Zhou Enlai: A Political Life [Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2006], 144.
71 Lee, Seminar Studies, 52.
72 Ibid., 53.
73 Ibid., 53.
74 Hickey, Korean War, 178.
and Seoul, but eventually the conflict stabilized around the 38th parallel itself.\textsuperscript{75} In July 1951, armistice negotiations were called for by both sides while trench and air warfare continued. Peace negotiations were an on-again, off-again affair for the next two years, as both sides attempted to demonstrate their resolve to continue fighting while privately acknowledging that neither side was likely to achieve additional military success in the short-run.\textsuperscript{76} Finding a resolution to the Korean conflict became a major campaign issue in the 1952 U.S. election and was partially responsible for Dwight D. Eisenhower’s win.\textsuperscript{77} With the help of third-party negotiations with India and possibly with the suggestion that the new Eisenhower administration was prepared to expand the war with nuclear weapons should an ceasefire not be reached, the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed on July 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1953.\textsuperscript{78} No formal peace treaty was ever concluded and is technically considered active to the present day, but the preponderance of military operations—and all of those involving the United States—concluded with the signing of the Armistice Agreement.

**Examining the Evidence: Chinese Intervention**

With the case now detailed from a historical perspective, we can now examine it for evidence of the nuclear taboo paradox and my hypotheses. To do this, we must answer two questions—first, do we see instances of brinkmanship in the conflict, and second, if we do, are they best explained from my theoretical perspective or an alternative one, such as standard nuclear stability-instability theory or deterrence theory? This section of the chapter will address each question in turn. Since severity of conflict is intrinsically a comparative measure,

\textsuperscript{75} Stone, *Hidden History*, 298.
\textsuperscript{76} Stueck, *Korean War*, 214.
\textsuperscript{77} Acheson, *Korean War*, 149.
Hypothesis 2—which predicts more severe low- and mid-level conflict as the strength of the nuclear taboo increases—cannot be measured on this single case alone, but rather between cases.

As I suggested in the opening section of this chapter, there is very little evidence of brinkmanship behavior by either the United States or the Soviet Union-led communist forces during the Korean War. To the contrary, both sides went to great lengths to ensure that the conflict did not unintentionally escalate to a wider war between superpowers so soon after WWII. Some contemporary scholars have even gone so far as to criticize the Truman administration for not being willing to escalate the conflict when the facts on the ground would have seemed to indicate that it would have been militarily and politically expedient to do so and end the war on more favorable terms.\(^79\)

This cautious behavior is in accordance with the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox, which suggest that brinkmanship behavior increases over time as the nuclear taboo becomes more robust—at this point the nuclear taboo was still just emerging. As a result, we could expect the nuclear taboo to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, but that it wouldn’t be strong enough to lead to a significant amount of brinkmanship behavior. Before arriving fully at this conclusion, however, we must trace the casual logic of the theory through the case, as well as through competing explanations.

The first case of brinkmanship behavior we see during the Korean War comes from the Chinese on September 30\(^{th}\), 1950. As General MacArthur and his allied forces moved northward toward the 38\(^{th}\) parallel, Chinese military commander Zhou Enlai threatened major Chinese intervention if the United States crossed the border.\(^80\) This threatened action would greatly

\(^{79}\) Jackson, “Beyond Brinkmanship.”

\(^{80}\) Stueck, *Korean War*, 94.
Andrew Bessler

escalate the war, which at the time had seen only materiel support to the North Koreans from China and the Soviet Union.

While the Chinese ultimately did follow through on this threat and entered the conflict at the Yalu River, the existing historical record is unclear as to whether this specific case was in fact a credible escalatory threat or an example of brinkmanship employed in an attempt to stop the U.S. advance at the time it was conveyed to U.S. officials.\(^\text{81}\) It is clear that the Truman administration considered it a bluff, as no senior official publically rebuked General MacArthur for his unauthorized Home-By-Christmas Offensive or attempted to halt what appeared to be a successful forward advance north of the parallel.\(^\text{82}\)

The actual Chinese position is fuzzier, however. What is clear is that the Soviet Union originally requested that the Chinese be ready to mobilize several divisions of ground forces should the United States move northward, which serves as the original basis for Zhou Enlai’s admonition to the United States.\(^\text{83}\) It has also been documented that several significant players in the Chinese Politburo felt that the United States was a paper tiger and would halt its progress under the threat of a wider war.\(^\text{84}\) Others were more skeptical, however, and when the allied forces ignored the threat and crossed the parallel into North Korea, several days were spent in heated debate over what course of action China should actually take.\(^\text{85}\) The decision was ultimately made to militarily support the North Koreans at Mao’s insistence, but in smaller

\(^{81}\) Stueck, *Korean War*, 90-94.


\(^{83}\) Lee, *Seminar Studies*, 51.

\(^{84}\) This opinion was held throughout the war, in large part because of Chinese awareness of the emerging nuclear taboo and its particular application for protecting “Asiatic peoples.” In 1953, General Peng Dehuai would write: “Having successfully held on during the [Korean] war with inferior equipment, [China] completely unmasked the lying theory of the omnipotent new weapons used by the U.S. imperialists to bluff, threaten, and scare others.” Chih-Yu Shih, *China’s Just World: The Morality of Chinese Foreign Policy* [Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1993].

\(^{85}\) Lee, *Seminar Studies*, 52.
numbers than the Soviet Union originally directed, suggesting that China perhaps had not been fully prepared to mobilize into the war at the time of Zhou Enlai’s threat.  

The Realist Perspective: Deterrence & Nuclear Stability-Instability Paradox

Before we examine how the empirical evidence of this case matches with the logic of the nuclear taboo paradox, let us turn to the predictions of the competing realist arguments: rational deterrence and the nuclear stability-instability paradox. While the two theories diverge in their predictions for dyads in which both states possess nuclear weapons, for cases where only one state has deployable nuclear weapons capabilities their expectations are the same. For both theories in such a world, we should expect to see the nuclear power freely engage in escalation and threats to escalate conflict up to and including the use of nuclear weapons. This is because in lacking an opposing state with nuclear weapons capabilities, there is no commensurate level of retaliatory damage that could be threatened—whether implicitly or explicitly—to deter the former state from utilizing such weapons when it finds it strategically advantageous to do so. Likewise, because the rival state lacks nuclear weapons capabilities, we should see the opposing non-nuclear state refrain from escalating conflict and in general avoiding military adventures infringing on the foreign policy interests of the nuclear state.

Specifically for the Korea case, then, we should expect to see the United States engaging in increasingly aggressive military adventures in Korea and a Communist bloc effectively deterred by the United States’ nuclear status if either rational deterrence or the nuclear stability-

86 This assessment is corroborated by the fact that following the success of the Chinese civil war in 1948, the PRC dramatically reduced the size of its military. Niu Jun, “The Birth of the People’s Republic of China and the Road to the Korean War,” in The Cambridge History of the Cold War, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 1:231.
87 This is the case because the instability component of the stability-instability paradox is driven by the logical implications of a nuclear-nuclear dyad. With only one state in the dyad in possession of nuclear weapons, the system reverts to one of classical deterrence. Michael Sheehan, Balance of Power: History and Theory [New York: Routledge, 1996], 177.
instability paradox is the driving causal factor in the conflict. This would be the case because the United States retained a *de facto* monopoly on nuclear weapons through 1953, when the conflict ended.  

With no other state in possession of deployable nuclear weapons at the time, the United States should have felt free to pursue conventional military adventures as it desired, safe in the knowledge that the communist states would not escalate the dispute to major war. Should policymakers have found it strategically advantageous to do so, we should also see actual use of nuclear weapons in conflict in such a world.

Under this realist perspective, the United States generally acted in accordance with our predictions, although not always to the fullest extent anticipated. With the war effort in Korea finally turned in the United States’ favor and backed with an implicit nuclear trump card, policymakers had every assurance that the Communist bloc states would not militarily intervene if the allied forces progressed north of the 38th parallel in a bid to reunite the peninsula under the South Korean government. Indeed, on the U.S. side of this incident, the only point that is surprising under the realist theories is that the United States did not take more advantage of its *de facto* nuclear monopoly. Specifically, under the full causal logic of these models, we should see much more aggressive behavior on the part of the United States, rather than the extensive internal debate on the question of crossing the 38th parallel. Furthermore, it is surprising that the United States did not fully leverage its nuclear advantage by making the nuclear threat more explicit to the Communist bloc states.

The Chinese threat to escalate the conflict with direct military intervention and the events leading up to it, however, are fundamentally at odds with these predictions. Although Korea was

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89 This debate was abruptly ended by MacArthur’s unilateral decision to cross the border. Leckie, *Conflict*, 164.
seen as an important step toward spreading communism throughout East Asia, it was not an existential foreign policy issue for China or the Soviet Union. Faced with an opponent that could potentially retaliate with nuclear weapons, the communists should have been much more reluctant to intervene in such a manner so as to place them in direct military confrontation with the United States under our realist models. Instead, we see China as the more aggressive party in this episode and in the Korean case more broadly. The only scenario under which this outcome could operate under rational deterrence or the stability-instability paradox would be if the communists had perfect information that there was no possible circumstance under which the United States would retaliate with nuclear weapons, but such knowledge runs contrary to the basic assumptions of those same models. For this sub-case then, we must conclude that the realist models fail to provide adequate explanation for the Chinese intervention.

*The Nuclear Taboo Perspective: The Traditional Logic*

Turning now to norms-based logics, we will next consider the predictions of traditional nuclear taboo theory before proceeding on to an analysis of the case through the lens of the nuclear taboo paradox. Generally speaking, taboo theory posits that nuclear states will refrain from using nuclear weapons because the international community, domestic publics, and individual leaders find them immoral, inhumane, or otherwise in some way distinct from conventional weapons.\(^9^0\) This applies whether a particular dyad has one, two, or no states that possess nuclear weapons—the impact of the taboo is a function of its strength in a given state and the international community, rather than a product of any material differences between states. In a world with a weak nuclear taboo, then, we should expect to see states broadly continuing to act as if still operating under pure balance-of-forces logic. However, as a conflict

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\(^9^0\) Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007].
escalates toward the use of nuclear weapons, we should expect to see elite decision makers
discuss the reputation costs, morality, and public response inherent to such a decision and
ultimately decide against deploying their nuclear weapons regardless of their strategic or tactical
utility.

For the Korea case, the nuclear taboo applies most pertinently to U.S. decision-makers.
With a weak nuclear taboo in place, extended discussion about the deployment of nuclear
weapons would be expected from U.S. policymakers. However, the end result ought to be a
negative decision, specifically one justified through the normative and moral characteristics of
the taboo detailed above. Nuclear taboo theory does not make specific predictions about Chinese
behavior in this case, as the state did not yet possess nuclear weapons.

Looking at the Chinese intervention through this lens then, the nuclear taboo on its own
does not provide us with much explanatory value. The use of nuclear weapons was not discussed
extensively at this point in the conflict, so it cannot tell us much about the U.S. reaction to the
Chinese intervention threat. Lacking any predictions about non-nuclear states’ behavior in
response to awareness of the nuclear taboo’s effect on nuclear states, traditional nuclear taboo
theory also fails to explain the Chinese decision to threaten and later execute a direct military
intervention against the United States and U.N. allied forces as they crossed the 38th parallel. As
we will see in the following section, it is specifically this lack of predictive power that is
remedied by the theoretical modifications of the nuclear taboo paradox.

The Nuclear Taboo Paradox Perspective

Moving to consideration of my own theory, recall that the nuclear taboo paradox predicts
that as the nuclear taboo increases in strength, brinkmanship and more intense low-level conflict
will also increase. For a weak nuclear taboo then, we would expect to see much the same
outcome as the traditional nuclear taboo perspective in that see states should broadly continue to act as if still operating under pure balance-of-power logic up until the point of consideration for the use of nuclear weapons is reached. At that point, we should expect to see elite decision-makers discuss the reputation costs, morality, and public response inherent to such a decision and ultimately decide against deploying their nuclear weapons. Furthermore, we should expect rival states to begin exhibiting less concern for any implicit or explicit nuclear threat, specifically with elite language suggesting doubt at the credibility of such a threat because of those same normative factors discussed by nuclear decision-makers. This doubt in the nuclear deterrent should then manifest itself in a greater proclivity to engage in brinkmanship behavior.

Empirically, if the nuclear taboo paradox is correct, it then follows that we would expect to see only low levels of brinkmanship during the Korean War, all else being equal, because the nuclear taboo was still emergent between the years 1950-1953. The weakness of the taboo is evidenced by the insistence of many senior military and political leaders that the United States could still use nuclear weapons like any other weapon. However, in the final aggregate we should expect to see U.S. decision-makers choosing not to utilize nuclear weapons on normative grounds. On the communist side of the conflict, we should expect to see a greater willingness to engage in brinkmanship behavior than would be expected under a realist world; again however, this decision should likely only come after extensive internal debate among elite decision-makers as they attempt to grapple with the strategic consequences of an emergent nuclear taboo.

As with the traditional nuclear taboo lens, U.S. behavior during this instance of brinkmanship falls outside of the scope of the theory, as the use of nuclear weapons was not extensively discussed at this point in the conflict. Chinese behavior, however, was very much in line with our predictions. While it remains unclear whether the Chinese meant their September

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91 Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, 152.
30th threat to the United States as a credible deterrent or political bluff, it is clear that it was a case of brinkmanship. Specifically, this brinkmanship was informed by the willingness of some in the Chinese Politburo to escalate the conflict with the United States if necessary, a stance that was informed at least in part by perceptions of the likelihood of U.S. retaliation. Documentary evidence of Politburo meetings from September 1950 supports the notion that some Chinese leaders doubted the likelihood of a U.S. nuclear response or expansion of the war into China itself, labeling the United States instead a “paper tiger” that maintained its global power position with “the lying theory of the new omnipotent weapon…to bluff, threaten, and scare others.” Coupled with the U.S. administration’s proclaimed goal to keep the conflict confined to the peninsula, this would have been positive evidence to support Chinese opinions questioning U.S. willingness to use the atomic bomb—in other words, the nuclear taboo. The fierce internal debate following the U.S. disregard of the threat indicates that there was by no means complete agreement on this question with the Politburo, an outcome also in line with the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox.

**Examining the Evidence: Expanding the War to End the War**

The second incident of brinkmanship during the Korean conflict is situated toward the end of the conflict as the United States sought to find a way to extract itself from the war. Following President Eisenhower’s election in 1952 and his subsequent tour of Korea as he readied himself to take over the presidency, he convened a series of meetings with his national security advisors to determine a course of action that would resolve the conflict. One of the key

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92 We recall here that the critical distinction between escalation and brinkmanship is that in the former case a state finds it militarily advantageous to increase the severity of a conflict, while in the latter case a state increases the severity of a conflict as a means to convey political resolve to its opponent.

93 Chih-Yu, *China’s Just World.*

94 Acheson, *Korean War,* 149.
concerns, as it had been for the Truman administration, was that the war would spread to China or the Soviet Union should the stalled peace negotiations break down. Furthermore, the Eisenhower administration was concerned about the rising cost of the war and the domestic budget, which had been major issues during the presidential campaign.

Looking to extract the United States from the conflict as quickly and cheaply as possible, Eisenhower and his national security advisors spent a great deal of time contemplating the threat and possible use of nuclear weapons against China and North Korea should the peace talks fail. It is well documented in the historical and international relations literatures that these discussions consumed a good deal of time at these meetings, but available records are unclear as to whether they were merely academic in nature or were acted upon, either as contingency plans or as actual threats to the Communists to encourage continued talks.\(^95\) Some scholars believe that such threats may have been conveyed at least to several U.S. allies, while others argue that such discussions were never implemented, but, if they had been, likely would have been in the form of brinkmanship rather than an actual intention to escalate the conflict to nuclear war.\(^96\) This conclusion comes on the heels of revisionist scholarship in recent years that suggests that the Eisenhower administration was not nearly as eager to use nuclear weapons as has been previously thought.\(^97\)

**The Realist Perspective: Deterrence & Nuclear Stability-Instability Paradox**

Following the same model as before, we will first examine the realist alternatives to my theory before proceeding on to a discussion of traditional taboo theory and the nuclear taboo paradox. As was true for the first sub-case, the realist explanations of rational deterrence and the

\(^{95}\) Michio Kaku and Daniel Axelrod, *To Win a Nuclear War: The Pentagon's Secret War Plans* [Boston: South End Press, 1986].

\(^{96}\) Stone, *Hidden History*, 324.

\(^{97}\) Jackson, “Beyond Brinkmanship.”
nuclear stability-instability paradox both predict the same thing in a world where the United States has a *de facto* monopoly on nuclear weapons. If a realist alternative theory is correct, we should expect to see the sole nuclear power freely engage in escalation and threats to escalate conflict up to and including the use of nuclear weapons. Likewise, we should expect to see the non-nuclear state, which has no capabilities with which to threaten commensurate damage to deter a nuclear strike, should avoid escalating conflict on non-existential issues whenever possible to protect its material interests.

For this second sub-case, empirically we should be focused on the behavior of the United States. If the realist alternative theories are correct, we should expect to see the United States use its nuclear weapons capabilities to freely escalate or threaten to escalate the Korean conflict as a means to achieve strategic objectives. Specifically, deterrence theory and the nuclear stability-instability paradox would predict that the United States would use the threat of expanded war and nuclear weapons to prevent the communists from resuming and expanding the war as peace negotiations stalled. If such a threat is made as predicted, we would then also expect the Communist bloc to rationally consider the escalatory threat and accordingly acquiesce to U.S. demands.

If the Eisenhower administration was actually prepared to threaten nuclear escalation to keep the Communist front from breaking off peace negotiations and expanding the war, this would be in line with our alternative model predictions. The presence of nuclear weapons in the U.S. military arsenal should have provided U.S. elites with a sense of a superior negotiating position with such a threat, as they would have known that the communists would not be willing to risk national devastation for a third-country foreign policy dispute. However, the logics of these models would suggest that the most effective form of deterrence in this scenario would
require the Eisenhower administration to make the nuclear threat explicit so that it could not be misinterpreted.\textsuperscript{98} As I have already discussed, the historical record is not clear that the discussions concerning nuclear escalation with China ever resulted in any explicit threats. While it remains possible that it was in some capacity, which would lend some support to the rational deterrence logic, it certainly was not made in an unambiguous manner that would make the cost-benefit calculations very obvious for the Chinese. In fact, operating under the casual logic of these models, it is surprising that we do not see more such instances throughout the conflict. As a result, we can conclude that realist predictions provide a minimally acceptable explanation for this sub-case, although not a robust one, and certainly fail to explain the otherwise lacking incidence of nuclear threats by the United States.

\textit{The Nuclear Taboo Perspective: The Traditional Logic}

Returning to more normative approaches, let us now examine this sub-case from the lens of the traditional nuclear taboo model. Even by the end of the Korean War, traditional nuclear taboo theory only posits a weak nuclear taboo. As such, we should expect to see nuclear states advocating the use of nuclear weapons in very traditional balance-of-forces terms, but ultimately choosing not to for reasons of morality or public opinion. Non-nuclear states should not be particularly impacted by the nuclear taboo, since traditional taboo theory does not say anything predictive about the behavior of such states.

In this particular case, under the logic of the traditional nuclear taboo we should expect to see a nuclear United States frequently discussing the possible use of nuclear weapons for strategic and tactical aims in the war. As decisions are made, however, we would expect

policymakers to ultimately opt not to utilize the weapons, primarily citing public disapproval or moral concerns for their decision.

The U.S. escalatory threat sub-case follows these predictions as outlined. President Eisenhower met with his new security advisors prior to and immediately after being inaugurated president to develop a solution that would extract the United States from the conflict cheaply and effectively. By all accounts all options, including nuclear weapons, were re-visited and re-examined at length. For a time it seemed like the administration had decided to threaten the use of nuclear weapons should the Chinese continue to stalemate on the ceasefire issue. However, no threat was ever publically communicated by Eisenhower or members of his administration and the record remains incomplete as to whether it was ever communicated even in private to U.S. allies. While this sub-case lacks the “smoking gun” dialogue indicting the nuclear taboo as a reason to not proceed with the threat, evidence elsewhere is highly indicative of the fact that Eisenhower and his security advisors were extremely cognizant of the emerging nuclear taboo and struggled to reconcile their traditional balance-of-forces worldview with the new normative constraint on the United States’ most powerful weapon. As a consequence, we must conclude that this particular sub-case provides empirical support for the traditional nuclear taboo model.

The Nuclear Taboo Paradox Perspective

Turning to our final theoretical lens, we will now examine this sub-case in comparison to the behavior predicted under the nuclear taboo paradox. Recall that the nuclear taboo paradox begins with the theoretical predictions of the standard traditional taboo, then extends this logic to the other states involved in the conflict. In a system where the nuclear taboo still remains weak, we should expect to see elite-level dialogue initially expressing a strategic or tactical desire to

100 Ibid.
use nuclear weapons. However, we should ultimately see decisions being made to not use nuclear weapons on moral or humanitarian grounds. On the rival, non-nuclear side of the conflict, we should see states still concerned about the nuclear deterrent, but also less than fully convinced of the credibility of a nuclear response to a conventional military action.

This second case of brinkmanship provides less support for the nuclear taboo paradox than the first, but still can be explained under the logic. As has been previously discussed, it is still unclear whether the Eisenhower administration ever made the threat of nuclear escalation fully explicit to the communists. If it was, this behavior would certainly be an example of a threat to escalate a conflict to achieve a political goal—in this case, to keep the communists at the negotiating table. However, brinkmanship behavior in and of itself does not specifically provide evidence for the destabilizing evidence of the nuclear taboo paradox; the critical component of the theory is the rationale behind the brinkmanship, i.e. the presumption that rival states will not resort to nuclear retaliation because of the nuclear taboo. While the Soviet Union had acquired the atomic bomb by this point, it lacked both the quantities and deployment capabilities to use them in Korea. As such, concerns about a Soviet nuclear response to the proposed U.S. threat to escalate were not a significant factor in these discussions. Therefore, while this is certainly a possible case of brinkmanship during the Korean War, it is not clear that the nuclear taboo paradox was the primary casual factor at play in elite-level decision-making. At best, we can declare this sub-case ambiguous with regard to the available evidence, with a nod toward the nuclear taboo paradox because of the failure of the rationalist models to provide a suitable alternative explanation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that a nascent nuclear taboo had a small, yet measurable impact on the conduct of the Korean War. This is in accordance with my theory, which predicted a low level of brinkmanship conduct driven by taboo-based considerations. As the emerging nuclear taboo had yet to be fully engrained in the public and elite consciousnesses, fewer of the destabilizing consequences I predict for cases when the nuclear taboo is stronger resulted. Even at such a weak level, however, it is clear that the emergent taboo had an operative effect of elite-level decision-making.

Tracing the logic of the nuclear taboo paradox through the instances of identified brinkmanship specifically, I found that they provided strong, though not conclusive, support for my theory. For the purpose of comparison, I examined two alternative theories, the nuclear stability-instability paradox and rational deterrence, and found that they cannot account for the brinkmanship tactics used—or not used—by the combatants. In the following two chapters, I examine cases where the nuclear taboo became increasingly stronger, expecting to find a significant rise in the frequency and severity of brinkmanship behavior and low-level conflict that is much more clearly indicative of this normative paradox at work.
As the Cold War deepened into the early 1960s, so too did the enmity between the United States and the Soviet Union. Relations between the Eisenhower administration and the competing Soviet leaders who emerged out of the power vacuum left by Stalin’s death in 1953 for the most part were relatively stable throughout the remainder of the 1950s. However, with the nearly concurrent rise of both John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, the rivalry between the two states threatened to turn hot once more. At the same time, popular distaste for nuclear weapons in both states, but especially the United States, had increased to such a degree that it was no longer possible for elite decision-makers to ignore. Instead, political and military leaders sought to work within and around the growing normative constraints on their actions. To further investigate the effects of the nuclear taboo paradox, I have selected the Cuban Missile Crisis from this period for two reasons. First, with evidence that the nuclear taboo operated with greater and greater effect as the Cold War progressed, the crises of the 1960s are an excellent place to examine the increasingly strong impact of the taboo. Second, as a direct challenge to the U.S. policy of containment in the Western Hemisphere, the Cuban Missile Crisis meets our independent criteria for case selection, providing us with a superb case for analysis.

It is important to identify the specific predictions the nuclear taboo paradox makes for the time period in question before proceeding to the case. Nuclear taboo scholars generally agree that in the post-Korean environment, the effect of the nuclear taboo began to strengthen to such a degree that it began to consistently influence elite-level tactical and strategic thinking.\(^\text{102}\)

\(^{102}\) This should not be conflated with internalization of the taboo. While elites were internalizing the norm throughout the 1960s and 1970s, for much of the early part of this period the taboo’s influence was largely a result of public and/or electoral sentiment against the use of nuclear weapons. Lawrence S. Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the Nuclear Disarmament Movement*, [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009], 79.
our model then, we should expect to see a greater frequency and severity of brinkmanship crises and tactics, as well as higher levels of conflict—in terms of threatened or actual uses of force. We predict this because as the nuclear taboo becomes more entrenched in both domestic and international opinion, rival states should feel more confident in pursuing foreign policy adventures. This confidence stems from the knowledge that peripheral foreign policy interests are not worth the reputation costs to a state that violates the taboo in anything less than an existential conflict.

In this chapter, I argue that the behavior exhibited during the Cuban Missile Crisis is best explained with the logic of the nuclear taboo paradox. As the nuclear taboo increased in strength, its destabilizing elements manifested in the form of severe brinkmanship that mirrored and amplified similar crises from the same period. The overall level of conflict threatened was also more severe than previously seen since the conclusion of WWII as the two superpowers teetered on the brink of nuclear war. At the same time, however, elite-level discourse from both sides of the conflict indicates that neither side fully believed in the other’s nuclear threats and acted on these assumptions—driven in part by awareness of the influence of the nuclear taboo on the other—accordingly as they continued to let the conflict escalate.

This chapter is divided into three principal sections. First, I provide a brief narrative of the international events leading up to October 1962, so as to provide context for the sub-cases of brinkmanship that follow within the actual Cuban Missile Crisis. In the second section, I look for evidence of brinkmanship behavior by both the Soviets and the United States. As before, I examine the instances of brinkmanship through the lenses of deterrence theory, the stability-instability paradox, traditional nuclear taboo theory, and finally the nuclear taboo paradox. Next, I move to a comparative analysis of my first two cases in order to test my second hypothesis on
the relative severity of conflict. Finally, I conclude this chapter with an overall summary of my findings.

**Historical Overview**

The Cuban Missile Crisis was one of several high-level disputes between the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Corresponding predominantly with Eisenhower’s second term and the emergence of Nikita Khrushchev as the successor to Joseph Stalin, this was a period of the Cold War typified by proxy warfare and dispute escalation. Among the most notable cases from this period are Operation Ajax in Iran, the Suez Crisis, and the Berlin Crisis of 1961. The Cuban Missile Crisis however stands out during this period for two reasons. First, it represents a direct challenge to the U.S. policy of containment within the Western Hemisphere and a deliberate Soviet test of the Monroe Doctrine. Second, this crisis is widely acknowledged by historians and international relations scholars as the moment the world came closest to nuclear war.

The origins of the Cuban Missile Crisis date back to January 1959, when Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba and ended the corrupt dictatorship of General Fulgencio Batista. Batista, although hardly democratic, had been friendly to the major U.S. economic and military interests in Cuba. Many within the State Department and the majority of the American public believed that Castro already subscribed to communism at this time and that his revolutionary policies would spell national security disaster for U.S. interests in the hemisphere. In April 1961, the

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105 Ironically, although his revolution was explicitly anti-authoritarian and decidedly to the left of the Batista regime, Castro held no firm ideological dogma early in his political career. Rather, it was predominantly the fault of aggressive American policy, particularly in the wake of the Bay of Pigs incident, the pushed Castro toward the Soviet Union and communism. Ibid., 11.
CIA led a group of Cuban exiles in the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion in an ill-conceived attempt to oust Castro without the use of American forces. The invasion failed, dealing a significant blow to the new Kennedy administration and hardening both Cuban and Soviet resolve to maintain a power presence on the island.\textsuperscript{106}

The crisis itself began on in April 1962, when U.S. Jupiter missiles became fully operational in Turkey. Viewing this as a direct, offensive threat to the Soviet Union, Khrushchev decided late that month to deploy Soviet missiles to Cuba as a retaliatory measure.\textsuperscript{107} Beginning in mid-July, U.S. intelligence detected signs of large-scale arms transfers from the Soviet Union to Cuba. On October 14, Major Richard Heyser obtained the first photographic evidence of Soviet Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles in Cuba while flying a U-2 reconnaissance mission.\textsuperscript{108} Two days later, following analysis of the photographs, President Kennedy was briefed by McGeorge Bundy on the implications of this intelligence and subsequently called together the first informal meeting of what would later become known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm.\textsuperscript{109} President Kennedy continued to meet with the ExComm between October 16 and 21, during which time a range of responses were considered.\textsuperscript{110} On October 22, President Kennedy announced in a nationally-televised address that the United States would institute a naval quarantine against any and all “offensive military equipment” in transit from the Soviet Union to Cuba. Simultaneously, nearly all U.S. military

\textsuperscript{106} Don Munton and David A. Welch, \textit{The Cuban Missile Crisis} [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 18.  
\textsuperscript{107} James A. Nathan, \textit{Anatomy of the Cuban Missile Crisis} [Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001], xxiii.  
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 3.  
\textsuperscript{110} This range of response options extended across a spectrum from no response all the way through several plans for full-scale invasion of Cuba by U.S. military forces. Elie Abel, \textit{The Missile Crisis} [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1966], 52.
forces worldwide were ordered to raise their alert status to DEFCON 3, while U.S. nuclear forces were raised to DEFCON 2.\textsuperscript{111}

The severity of the U.S. response caught the Soviets by surprise, causing Khrushchev to respond via the Soviet news agency TASS with the claim that the Cuban shipments were purely “defensive weapons” and denouncing the U.S. deployments. Soviet military officials ordered the transport carriers to continue toward the quarantine line. In the meantime, increased U.S. aerial reconnaissance of Cuba produced photographic evidence of both Soviet ground forces and a number of missile launch sites nearing “full operational capability.”\textsuperscript{112} U.S. officials concluded from this evidence that the Soviets were determined to prevail in the confrontation, leading the ExComm to return to developing plans for a full military strike on Cuba. Khrushchev again responded in kind with a formal threat on October 27 by withdrawing preliminary proposals to deescalate the crisis and demanding that U.S. Jupiter-class missiles in Turkey be removed.\textsuperscript{113} The Kennedy administration ignored this proposal, choosing instead merely to promise to respect the sovereignty of Cuba in perpetuity in return for Cuban nuclear disarmament. Khrushchev struggled to find an alternative response but ultimately agreed to such a solution based primarily on the specter of an imminent U.S. attack on the island on October 28.\textsuperscript{114} Soviet orders were given for the missile transport ships to withdraw from the quarantine line and return home, while the Cuban missile sites began to be dismantled. Over the succeeding weeks, the two superpowers then slowly backed away from the brink of nuclear war.

\textsuperscript{111} The ExComm considered this action, although technically a valid \textit{casus belli} under international law, as the least likely to provoke a Soviet military response. Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, \textit{The Cuban Missile Crisis: A National Security Archive Documents Reader} [New York: The New Press, 1992], 79.


\textsuperscript{113} Chang and Kornbluh, \textit{Cuban Missile Crisis Reader}, 82.

\textsuperscript{114} This decision also came with the secret agreement that the United States would remove its own nuclear missiles from Southern Italy and Turkey, an arrangement reached through Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. Ibid.
Examining the Evidence: Escalation During the Cuban Missile Crisis

While the Korean War was a years-long conflict wherein we could identify very concrete occurrences of brinkmanship tactics, the Cuban Missile Crisis instead represents a continuous escalatory crisis over a very short span of time—just thirteen days. As a consequence, we will examine the crisis as one extended instance of brinkmanship and then evaluate the empirical evidence in light of my hypotheses and the alternative theories. In this first section, I will evaluate Hypothesis 1 concerning the frequency of brinkmanship and escalatory tactics. The following section will then feature the first analysis of Hypothesis 2, which predicts more severe low- and mid-level conflict as the strength of the nuclear taboo increases.

Whereas the Korean War was typified by restraint, the Cuban Missile Crisis represents the apex of Cold War tensions and escalatory threats. Both the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a series of ever-increasing escalatory threats, each seeking to push the other to the brink in order to achieve political victory without sparking an actual nuclear conflict. This is suggestive of the nuclear taboo paradox, which predicts that elite decision-makers will engage in more frequent and severe brinkmanship behavior in such a period of a moderately robust nuclear taboo. While the nuclear taboo was not completely embedded in the international order relative to contemporary standards, it was certainly strong enough to significantly influence decision-making during superpower disputes. To confirm this, however, we must first causally trace the events of the case—to evaluate the accuracy of my theory as well as alternative theories.

The case begins with the Soviet arms build-up in Cuba during the summer of 1962. Khrushchev and the Soviet Politburo, alarmed by the U.S. deployment of Jupiter-class nuclear missiles in neighboring Turkey and growing gap in strategic nuclear capabilities, sought to politically remedy the situation with a direct challenge to the United States’ declaration of an
exclusive sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere. From the beginning of the crisis, it was apparent to both sides that the positioning of several dozen nuclear missiles in Cuba would do little to actually alter the strategic balance of nuclear forces as both sides had achieved and were rapidly refining Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) technology. However, President Kennedy’s previous statements declaring Cuba as a flashpoint for potential superpower conflict made it an ideal location for Khrushchev to provoke the United States into a crisis that the Soviet Politburo expected its rival would ultimately back down from.\(^{115}\)

In response to Khrushchev’s provocation, the Kennedy administration greatly escalated the crisis by deploying a naval blockade against Soviet transport carriers bound for Cuba. While not the most forceful military response available, the naval blockade was considered an appropriate escalatory response by the ExComm that would still give the Soviets the prerogative to back away from the brink of nuclear war.\(^{116}\) As previously noted, such a blockade in international waters was technically a valid *casus belli* for the Soviet Union to declare war on the United States under international law. However, the ExComm felt confident that the Soviet Union would not counter-escalate the conflict so rapidly and even hoped that such a blockade would bring a quick end to the crisis.\(^{117}\) As the alternative was nuclear war—an unacceptable scenario to both U.S. and Soviet leaders during this time period, the “quarantine” was quite evidently designed as a U.S. brinkmanship tactic.\(^{118}\) The demonstrated willingness of the U.S.


\(^{116}\) The naval blockade, or quarantine, was the third most extreme of the six response options discussed by the ExComm. The primary responses discussed, in order of increasing severity, were: No response, diplomatic negotiations, warning Cuba to remove the weapons or face “consequences,” naval blockade, bombardment of the missile sites, and invasion of Cuba by U.S. military forces. Graham T. Allison and Phillip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* [New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1971], 114.

\(^{117}\) Hilsman, *Struggle Over Policy*, 192.

\(^{118}\) This is evidenced by the U.S. strategy used to implement the quarantine: Kennedy gave the Soviet Union twenty-four hours to respond to the imposition of the quarantine before it went into effect. This was followed by an intentional boarding of a ship known not to be carrying arms and then releasing it before U.S. naval ships were
military establishment to take the crisis “to the brink” is further evidenced by the decision to change U.S. military readiness levels to DEFCON 2 over an open channel to ensure that the Soviets were aware of the increased threat status.119

As a response, Khrushchev continued to escalate the crisis by ordering his transport carriers to continue toward the quarantine line in order to demonstrate that he was prepared to call the United States’ military bluff. Simultaneously, he ordered that the Cuban missile sites under construction continue and hasten their work and added to his demands for U.S. action.120 This show of defiance led the United States to escalate the crisis one final time, wherein the Kennedy administration opted to formally ignore Khrushchev’s latest demands and openly began mobilizing military personnel and equipment around the country in a show of determination to invade the Caribbean island if a diplomatic solution was not reached.121 Having brought the crisis to the brink of actual military conflict, U.S. and Soviet leaders then engaged in a confrontational “stare-down” until finally Khrushchev “blinked” for lack of compelling remaining military options short of all-out nuclear war.122

The Deterrence Model

Using classical deterrence theory as our first alternative model, we find that it predicts that this period represents the beginning of a stable and non-confrontational dyadic relationship between the two superpowers. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, both the United States and the Soviet Union had acquired a survivable second-strike nuclear capability. When two states both

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120 Beggs, Cuban Missile Crisis, 44.
121 Norman Polmar and John D. Gresham, DEFCON 2: Standing on the Brink of Nuclear War During the Cuban Missile Crisis [Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2006], 228.
122 Michael Dobbs, One Minute to Midnight [New York: Random House, 2008], 89.
maintain such capabilities, the system becomes known as mutually assured destruction, or MAD. Such capabilities are predicted to drastically reduce the incidence of conflict and prevent what crises do occur from escalating because of the overwhelming scale of devastation possible to both sides from a nuclear exchange. Put simply, there are no foreign policy objectives that warrant risk-taking if the potential costs, however remote, contain a nuclear strike.\footnote{Stephen L. Quackenbush, “Deterrence Theory: Where Do We Stand?,” \textit{Review of International Studies} 37 (2011): 741.}

In the Cuban case then, we should expect both the United States and the Soviet Union to avoid escalating crises to a degree where nuclear exchange could become a realistic possibility if MAD is the driving causal factor in the conflict. With both states in possession of nuclear weapons and maintaining survivable components of their nuclear arsenals in strategic air forces and submarines, mutual nuclear second-strike capability was nearly assured. As a consequence, neither state could reasonably expect to start and win a nuclear war with a nuclear first strike, as there was no guaranteed strategy to fully knock out the opposing side’s nuclear arsenal.\footnote{However, it should be noted that by this point the notion of the so-called “missile gap” had been corrected and the United States was aware that it held a commanding lead in ICBMs and Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) over the Soviet Union. As such, some military elements may have thought it possible to “win” a nuclear confrontation and as such would have been more willing to escalate. Ronald Steel, “Lessons of the Missile Crisis,” in \textit{The Cuban Missile Crisis}, ed. Robert A, Divine [New York: Markus Weiner Publishing, 1988], 219.} Because even just a few surviving nuclear missiles targeted on the right cities could produce unacceptable damage, neither side of the superpower rivalry ought to have been willing to “heat up” the Cold War to the level of nuclear confrontation. This mutual nuclear deterrence was then extended to most political and military interactions between the United States and the Soviet Union, which in turn should have prevented both sides from seeking to escalate international disputes and crises for fear of provoking that same nuclear outcome.

Under this perspective, we find that the principal actors in the Cuban Missile Crisis failed to act in accordance with the predications of rational deterrence. Although Cuba was seen as an
important foreign policy issue for both the United States and the Soviet Union, it was not a core
national interest to either. As such, it is perplexing from a deterrence perspective why both
superpowers would escalate the crisis to the brink of nuclear war. Faced with a rival with
survivable nuclear capabilities, both sides should have opted out of further crisis escalation far
earlier in the conflict.

This prediction is particularly pertinent for the Soviet Union, as both the communists and
the United States were aware that the strategic balance of nuclear forces still heavily favored the
United States. Coupled with an awareness that the United States would still react strongly to a
nuclear weapons presence so close to its borders even if Cuba was not a core national interest,
the severe escalation of the Cuban Missile Crisis by the Soviet Union makes little sense as a risk
unless there was an additional causal factor at work bolstering confidence in the idea that nuclear
weapons would not be used in such a crisis. As such, rational deterrence theory provides an
inadequate explanatory framework for the brinkmanship behavior exhibited during the Cuban
Missile Crisis.

The Nuclear Stability-Instability Paradox

The nuclear stability-instability paradox takes the logic of MAD one step further than
rational deterrence theory, positing that when states are confident in MAD’s capacity to prevent
nuclear war they are much more likely to engage in lower-level conflict and foreign policy
adventurism in rival states’ peripheral interests. Conflicts, however, should never escalate to a
point where nuclear war becomes a possibility, as that would be a failure of the basic logic of
deterrence that undergirds both models.

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125 Glenn H. Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury (Ed.) The Balance of
Power [Scranton: Chandler, 1965], 185-201.
If it is the nuclear stability-instability paradox at work in our case, then we should expect to see the Soviet Union willing to interfere in the United States’ sphere of influence because elite decision-makers are confident in the stabilizing power of MAD. As confrontation arises, we should see an increase in low- and medium-level conflict; this phenomenon is again induced by the decision-maker confidence that the opposing side will be unwilling to escalate a conflict but so far in order to ensure that the dyad does not creep too close to the nuclear brink. If the conflict is not immediately resolved through a single round of force escalation, then we should ultimately see a cap on brinkmanship behavior and escalatory tactics well before approaching the nuclear threshold.

Relative to the deterrence explanation then, the nuclear stability-instability paradox provides a much better explanation for the Cuban Missile Crisis. Spurred on by what he viewed as an unfair double standard as the United States placed operational Jupiter-class nuclear missiles in neighboring Turkey, Khrushchev sought to intervene in the United States’ own sphere of influence with a direct challenge not only to the policy of containment, but also to the Monroe Doctrine.\(^\text{126}\) Khrushchev writes in his memoirs:

“When Dulles announced his policy of ‘rollback,’ that is, gradually tearing away one country after another from the socialist camp or countries that had friendly relations with us, his aim was to bring them under military influence. But since capitalist ideology is not especially attractive nowadays to most of the peoples of the world, Dulles was counting most of all on force…And I thought to myself: ‘What if we were to come to an agreement with the government of Cuba and install [nuclear] missiles…so that it would be a secret from the United States?’ I came to the conclusion that if we did everything secretly and the Americans found out about it only after the missiles were in place and ready to be launched, they would have to stop and think before making the risky decision to wipe out our missiles by military force.”\(^\text{127}\)

Khrushchev continues later in his memoirs, citing that “[the United States] has surrounded [the Soviet Union] with military bases and kept our country under the constant threat of nuclear attack. But now the Americans themselves would experience what such a situation feels like.”

It was well-known internationally, including amongst the Soviets, that the United States viewed Latin America and the Caribbean as an integral component of its foreign policy. Clearly then, Khrushchev sought to ensure the success of the Cuban revolution in the United States’ sphere of influence and reverse the growing political trend of U.S. dominance in international affairs with the placement of nuclear missiles in Cuba, which he viewed as a deterrent to military invasion.

Meanwhile, the United States spent much of the summer prior to the Crisis warning both Castro and the Soviets against an offensive arms build-up so close to American soil. As the crisis began to boil over in October 1962, both sides engaged in several succeeding rounds of escalation just as anticipated by the nuclear stability-instability paradox. Khrushchev began the brinkmanship spiral by first ordering the arms build-up and nuclear missile deployment to Cuba. This was then followed by the naval blockade ordered by President Kennedy, in what was to most observers a technical breach of international law. Khrushchev took the crisis even further to the brink of nuclear war by ordering his ships to continue toward the quarantine line and adding to his original demands for peaceful settlement. Kennedy then exhibited brinkmanship behavior a final time by ordering the American military on alert and directly threatening Khrushchev and Castro with an invasion of the island—a threat that carried with it the implication of nuclear war. In each of these instances, both leaders left the opposing side ample time to back away

128 Ibid., 326.
129 Nathan, Anatomy, 46.
130 Chang and Kornbluh, Cuban Missile Crisis Reader, 7.
from the heightened threat before it was to be implemented. This is a definitive feature of brinkmanship behavior, confirming our hypothesis’ predictions for the case.

However, the spiral of brinkmanship tactics and escalation that occurred in the second week of the crisis significantly exceeds the scope of conflict generally predicted by the nuclear stability-instability paradox. As I have previously noted, the destabilizing element of the nuclear stability-instability paradox stems from the confidence that decision-makers in both states have in the power of MAD to prevent major war from breaking out. As a consequence, at some point we should have seen a limit on the escalatory tactics and brinkmanship used in the conflict. This is not what happened in our case however—it took the threat of nuclear escalation by President Kennedy to ultimately convince Khrushchev to back away from the brink.132 As such, we must conclude that the nuclear stability-instability paradox provides an incomplete explanation for the brinkmanship behavior observed during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Nuclear Taboo: The Traditional Logic

The traditional nuclear taboo tells us that states refrain from using nuclear weapons because elite decision-makers feel that they are immoral or inhumane.133 In a world with a moderately robust nuclear taboo, we should expect to see leaders increasingly reticent to employ nuclear weapons or even discuss employing them as a viable tactical or strategic option. In an ideal case world, we would expect to see such decision-makers commenting on the immorality of nuclear weapons, the public’s distaste for them, and the reputation costs inherent to violating such an international norm. Since the nuclear taboo is only moderately robust, however, we should still see some leaders advocating their use in combat and in brinkmanship scenarios.

132 Polmar and Gresham, *DEFCON 2*, 252.
133 Or at least that their publics find them distasteful enough to provide an electoral disincentive against using them. Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb*, 49.
For the Cuban Missile Crisis, we should then expect the nuclear taboo to moderately impact the decision-making of both the Americans and the Soviets. If the traditional nuclear taboo correctly explains the outcome of this case, U.S. and Soviet decision-makers ought to initially consider the use of nuclear weapons and then ultimately dispense with the idea for the reasons listed above. However, we would expect some elements of the decision-making leadership—most particularly from within the military establishment—to still advocate the use of nuclear weapons in the conflict despite the nuclear taboo. This would be especially true on the U.S. side of the conflict, as there was a significant component of the U.S. military establishment at the time that held the opinion that a nuclear war was still winnable. Furthermore, we should see elite decision-makers shying away from the outbreak of major war—which might involve the deployment of nuclear weapons—for fear of the same reputational and moral costs outlined earlier.

Before we can examine our predictions, we must first establish that the nuclear taboo was in fact moderately robust during the time period. During the 1950s, the antinuclear movement both in the United States and abroad had grown large enough to achieve political relevance. Internationally, antinuclear movements spread across Europe, the non-aligned states, and even within the Soviet Union, where Khrushchev permitted American ‘San Francisco to Moscow’ anti-nuclear protesters to march unimpeded across more than 600 miles of Soviet territory in 1961.134 A November 1959 Gallup poll also found that 77 percent of Americans supported extending the U.S.-Soviet nuclear testing moratorium.135 The taboo infiltrated the discourse of the 1960 presidential race as well, with Hubert Humphrey, Adlai Stevenson, John F. Kennedy,

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134 This protest was even permitted to culminate in an anti-nuclear protest in Moscow’s Red Square. Wittner, Confronting the Bomb, 96.
and even the Republican candidate Richard Nixon pledging their support for a nuclear test ban. Kennedy additionally promised that the United States would not be the first state to resume atmospheric testing and that he would “earnestly seek an overall disarmament agreement.”

Robert McNamara reports that as early as the late 1950s he urged both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to never initiate the use of nuclear weapons, and that both of them agreed with this precept. It is clear then that the nuclear taboo was slowly becoming internalized within the U.S. and global political consciousness by the beginning of the 1960s.

With the relative strength of the taboo established, we can now continue on to see that the Cuban Missile Crisis largely fulfills our predictions outlined above. Khrushchev originally had Soviet nuclear missiles transported to Cuba in order to rectify what he saw as a political imbalance more so than a strategic one—while adding the missiles to Cuba would not much change the strategic balance of nuclear forces, it was a strong counter-action to the U.S. deployment of Jupiter missiles in Turkey earlier that year. Certainly Khrushchev had no original intent to instigate a nuclear confrontation with the United States. As the conflict developed, both sides deliberately sought to contain the crisis short of all-out war while still seeking to turn the situation into a political win. This is especially critical for the United States, which at the time had a substantially larger nuclear arsenal than the Soviet Union. This led some U.S. military officials to the conclusion that the United States could launch a nuclear first-strike that would have knocked out most missile sites capable of striking the U.S. homeland. However, the ExComm demonstrated significant interest in preventing even limited nuclear attacks on the

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136 Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb*, 94.
139 Polmar and Gresham, *DEFCON 2*, 249.
United States and more extensive ones of U.S. allies in Europe, even though such a first-strike would have dealt significantly more damage to the Soviet Union.

There is further evidence that the U.S. leadership was very concerned not only about the material costs of escalation, but also the country’s moral standing in the world. During one meeting of the ExComm, Under-Secretary of State George Ball summed up the committee’s thinking on a pre-emptive nuclear airstrike on the Cuban launch sites:

“[W]e cannot launch a surprise attack against Cuba without destroying our moral position and alienating our friends and allies. If we were to do so we would wake up the following morning to find that we had brought down in ruins the structure of alliances and arrangements and that our whole post-war effort of trying to organize the combined strength of the Free World was in shards and tatters.”

Other members of the ExComm also made comments indicative of the nuclear taboo in the months leading up to the crisis. McNamara wrote to the Joint Chiefs of Staff as early as February 1961 that the first operating assumption regarding U.S. nuclear weapons was that “we will not strike first with such weapons.” Dean Rusk later recalled that during one of the ExComm meetings he argued that a nuclear attack was unfeasible because “world opinion would turn against [the United States] because we didn’t first try diplomatic avenues” and that Kennedy himself was worried about “an adverse public reaction” to a nuclear strike. Here it is clear that the nuclear taboo was at work within the ExComm, as decision-makers grappled with notions of morality and international reputation in addition to basic rationalist material considerations. In particular, these quotations make it evident that elite U.S. decision-makers were cognizant of an international normative prohibition on nuclear weapons, one which they must consider even if they did not completely subscribe to it themselves.

140 Chang and Kornbluh, *Cuban Missile Crisis Reader*, 79.
141 Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, 252.
142 Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb*, 108.
Lastly, we turn to the question of whether the nuclear taboo paradox best explains the Cuban Missile Crisis. In a system where the nuclear taboo is moderately robust, we should expect to observe elite decision-makers in nuclear states feel normative or moral restraints from using nuclear weapons. Because the taboo is an international norm, rival states should also be cognizant of the taboo. If both states are nuclear, the awareness of nuclear taboo should encourage the use of brinkmanship tactics. But because the nuclear taboo is not fully inculcated into all states, leaders should still take material considerations into account and even suggest and plan for nuclear strikes. Specifically, we would predict extensive elite-level discussions about the material accounting of a potential nuclear exchange intermixed with taboo and normative-moral language. Indeed, in a period where neither the nuclear taboo nor classical deterrence fully dominate, we would expect to see brinkmanship behavior and escalatory tactics spiral much further toward major war than we would expect under a more robust nuclear taboo. These anticipated outcomes differ from our predictions for the traditional nuclear taboo in that they specifically expect more severe conflict and increased frequency in the use of brinkmanship as a result of the nuclear taboo; traditional taboo theory only predicts that the taboo will influence elites to not use nuclear weapons in conflict or escalate conflict to major war.

In the Cuban Missile Crisis, we should expect to see the nuclear taboo paradox impact the decision-making of American and Soviet military and political elites. Some discussion of the material capabilities of nuclear weapons would likely be evident, but this discussion would eventually be overridden by moral and normative considerations related to the nuclear taboo. During the decision-making process, however, we should expect to see significant brinkmanship behavior on both sides of the conflict as a result of the mutual recognition of the nuclear taboo’s
constraining effect on the use of nuclear weapons. Because the nuclear taboo was not fully integrated into the international system, we should also expect to see much more severe brinkmanship behavior than we would otherwise as normative forces clash with materialist concerns; this would be especially true for the United States during this period, which possessed what was believed to be a superior nuclear posture perhaps capable of a successful nuclear first-strike.

The empirics of this case match these predictions. As we have previously discussed, Khrushchev did not seek major war when he originally devised the Soviet plan to install nuclear weapons in Cuba. Likewise, both sides went to great lengths to prevent the outbreak of actual major war. This comes in spite of evidence that suggests that this would have been an ideal period for the United States to initiate a nuclear first-strike on the Soviet Union if decision-makers were convinced that nuclear confrontation was inevitable due to the relative balance of nuclear forces. We have also already established that this restraint was in large part due to the moral force of the nuclear taboo. What the traditional nuclear taboo does not explain, however, is the extreme level of brinkmanship behavior exhibited during the Crisis—this is the defining question we seek to answer with the nuclear taboo paradox.

In accordance with the predictions of nuclear taboo paradox, we do in fact see a severe spiral of brinkmanship behavior in the Cuban case. Throughout the conflict, both the Soviets and the Americans made it clear that they were deliberately leaving room for the other side to back down short of nuclear war. Consequently, the ExComm opted to respond to the initial Soviet shipment of nuclear weapons to Cuba with a naval “quarantine” on the island, a move that escalated the dispute but also allowed the Soviet Union to reverse its course of action without

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143 Polmar and Gresham, DEFCON 2, 249.
major violence. The Soviet Union responded by altering its original demands to include the removal of the Jupiter-class missiles from Turkey and to order the work on the Cuba missile sites to continue as the nuclear transport ships continued toward the blockade—again an escalatory behavior intended to bring the conflict to yet another military “brink” while still leaving the United States with breathing space to defuse the conflict short of major war. Finally, President Kennedy opted to bring the conflict to the furthest “brink” possible short of all-out war by ensuring the U.S. military preparations for a nuclear conflict were patently clear to Soviet intelligence. While this brinkmanship spiral came far closer to major war than nuclear taboo paradox would ordinarily predict, the taboo’s moderate strength in the international system meant that traditional deterrence logic calculations also weighed heavily on the minds of policymakers during the crisis, further destabilizing the dispute. In accordance with our predictions for this case, more significant brinkmanship behavior came from the United States, which held superiority in material nuclear capabilities during the period and felt this diametric tension.

Examining the Evidence: Conflict Severity Between the Cases

I will now turn to examine the second hypothesis concerning conflict severity. This hypothesis analyzes the outcomes of the nuclear taboo paradox across cases, rather than the processes within each case. Specifically, if the nuclear taboo paradox is at work, we should expect to see evidence of increasingly severe low- and mid-level conflict as the strength of the nuclear taboo increases. To test Hypothesis 2, I will compare the severity of the first two cases based on the qualitative research design outlined in Chapter Two.

144 This comes as opposed to the other major options the ExComm had at its disposal, including a pre-emptive strike on the nuclear launch sites on the island and an all-out invasion of Cuba. Abel, The Missile Crisis, 52.
145 Blight and Welch, On the Brink, 95.
Comparing Conflict Severity: Korea and Cuba

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Korean War was the first instance in which the Cold War became “hot” with proxy warfare. In terms of military losses, the conflict was one of the more deadly ones of the second half of the twentieth century. While definitive numbers are impossible to tally due to poor record sourcing, most military scholars place the death toll for the conflict around two million military personnel.\(^{146}\) However, as discussed in Chapter 3, both the United States and the Soviet Union deliberately and actively sought to keep the conflict contained to the Korean peninsula so as to avoid an escalation toward global war.\(^{147}\) Indeed, while the Soviet-allied Chinese ultimately intervened in the conflict, the Soviet Union itself refused to intervene apart from providing North Korean forces with military equipment and funding.\(^{148}\) To reconcile these two seemingly competing descriptions of the conflict, we need to look not directly at the conflict itself, but rather at what might have resulted had the nuclear taboo not been at play—then we can appropriately place the historical outcome on a relative scale of potential outcomes rank-ordered by increasing severity.

When examining the Korean War in this light, we find that the actual historical outcome was only one of many divergent potential outcomes that could have resulted in both greatly increased and decreased severity. For example, on one extreme the United States could have chosen not to intervene or to follow the Soviet Union’s lead and only provide indirect military aid and financing to the South Korean forces. Prior to the invasion, in fact, the United States held no official foreign policy position on the peninsula apart from a desire for reintegration. Likewise, the Korean Peninsula was not regarded as a vital component of the newly-minted

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containment effort even within the Pacific theater, where the continued security of occupied Japan reigned supreme. Had key early decisions been made differently, escalation of the conflict beyond a superpower-financed civil war might have been relatively insignificant. On the other extreme, however, was the possibility of escalation to full-scale global war, which very likely would have gone nuclear. This also was a very real possibility, particularly following the Chinese intervention and later with the beginning of the Eisenhower administration in a bid to end the war. Between these two extremes come a number of alternative outcomes, including an early halt to hostilities at a number of points earlier in the war and immediate U.S. support of the South Koreans following the initial invasion.

Framed in this context, we must conclude that the actual historical outcome of the Korean War is situated very nearly in the middle of these possibilities. There were certainly a number of opportunities for both sides to limit or end the hostilities that were not taken, but there were certainly just as many opportunities to expand the conflict that were avoided in a deliberate effort to keep the war contained to the peninsula. It is this active and deliberate reticence to escalate the conflict, particularly on the U.S. side with its de facto nuclear monopoly, combined with the context of the prevailing tactical military doctrine, which must lead us to the conclusion that in spite of the high casualties the Korean War was a relatively limited conflict.

Turning to the Cuban Missile crisis, we find that, in terms of casualties, the conflict was extremely limited, with only one recorded death. This statistic is misleading, however. While the Korean War was typified by restraint and a reluctance to escalate, the Cuban Missile Crisis was characterized by both sides seeking to escalate and bluff their rival into backing away from

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149 Stueck, Korean War, 11.
151 Stueck, Korean War, 7.
152 U.S. MAJ Rudolf Anderson, shot down in his U-2 over Cuba on October 27, was the only casualty of the conflict.
the brink of global nuclear war. Indeed, most Cold War scholars regard the Cuban Missle Crisis as the closest the world has ever come to nuclear warfare.\footnote{David Holloway, “Escalation of the Cold War.”}

There were a number of critical decision points during the crisis that would have had significant ramifications for the overall resolution of the conflict has they been made differently. Of particular note is President Kennedy and the ExComm’s initial response. Recall that the ExComm discussed a number of responses ranging from doing nothing to the invasion of Cuba.\footnote{Elie Abel, \textit{The Missile Crisis}, 52.} A change in this critical first response would have significantly affected the outcome of the crisis. No response would have brought a quick end to the conflict but heightened superpower tensions and a full-out invasion likely would have triggered nuclear war. Later in the conflict, however, elite decision-makers exhibited a willingness to risk severe conflict, such as when Khrushchev ordered the nuclear transport ships past the quarantine line and when President Kennedy threatened invasion of the island.\footnote{Medland, \textit{Needless or Necessary}, 36.} It should be noted, however, that throughout the conflict both sides gave the adversary ample time to back down in a bid to avoid full-on major war. In a counterfactual world where outcomes were more severe than the actual historical outcome, elite decision-makers would have allowed the opposing side less time to capitulate and would have escalated the conflict even further. Contrariwise, in a counterfactual world where outcomes were less severe than the actual history, we would have seen much more gradual escalation and an elite tendency to back away from the brink earlier in the confrontation.

As can be seen from these counterfactuals, the tack taken by U.S. and Soviet leaders during the Cuban Missle Crisis was neither the most nor the least severe of all possible outcomes—the crisis could have just as easily been defused in its earliest stages as it could have ended in global nuclear war. Indeed, there were many more opportunities to de-escalate the
conflict that were foregone than there were to intensify it. Perhaps more important than these counterfactuals is the actual context of the conflict, wherein the dispute itself revolved around the presence of nuclear weapons. The Cuban Missile Crisis hinged almost completely on an either-or question of peaceful defusing hostilities or nuclear warfare—had direct military action been undertaken by either side, the result almost certainly would have been nuclear war, rather than a less severe form of conventional conflict. In this regard, we can conclude that the Cuban Missile Crisis was a severe crisis in spite of a lack of combat deaths or direct military confrontation because of the high potentiality for such an extreme form of conflict.

From a comparative perspective then, the Cuban Missile Crisis was a significantly more severe conflict than the Korean War. This is in line with the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox as outlined in Hypothesis 2. Where elites during the Korean War deliberately sought to contain the conflict and prevent escalation, elites during the Cuban Missile were much more willing to engage in brinkmanship and escalatory behavior, bringing the world far closer to the edge of nuclear war than it had ever been before or has since.

Indeed, one might argue that the Cuban Missile Crisis violates the major war caveat of the nuclear taboo paradox by approaching nuclear war so closely. However, as previously noted, this phenomenon is best explained by the unique crossroads in nuclear thinking that was occurring on both sides of the Cold War during the early 1960s. With neither deterrence nor the nuclear taboo predominating, the world of the Cuban Missile Crisis was particularly unstable and prone to conflict escalation. This explanation is further evidenced not only from the mix of rationalist and normative-moral discourse in elite-level discussion during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but also from the proliferation of significant superpower disputes during this period.156

156 Some examples of these conflicts include Operation Ajax, the Suez Crisis, and the Berlin Crisis. David Holloway, “Escalation of the Cold War,” 391-393.
Consequently, such extreme brinkmanship behavior does not on its own undermine the logic of the nuclear taboo paradox.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I argued that the nuclear taboo paradox provides the best explanation for the behavior of leaders during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As the nuclear taboo increased in strength throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, elites increasingly factored it into their strategic decision-making, even if they themselves personally did not yet completely subscribe to the norm. Consequently, we see increased brinkmanship behavior that is both iterated and more severe than in the Korean case. Indeed, the Cuban Missile Crisis pushed the superpowers to the very brink of nuclear war. This outcome can be attributed to the unique period in which it took place as the dominant mode of elite thinking was in the process of shifting from traditional balance-of-forces toward the taboo.

The examination of the crisis through the four theoretical lenses yielded the best results for the nuclear taboo and the nuclear taboo paradox. Of these two, the nuclear taboo paradox provided additional explanatory value to the case that traditional taboo theory was unable to supply. I also tested my theory on Hypothesis 2, finding that the Cuban Missile Crisis was in fact a more severe conflict than the Korean War by any reasonable measure. This was in accordance with our original predictions as well. In the following chapter, I will examine a final case with a strongly robust taboo, expecting to find even more instances of brinkmanship behavior and severe low- to mid-level conflict.
CHAPTER FIVE
SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN, 1979-1989

In the last decades of the Cold War, U.S.-Soviet relations began to deteriorate after a brief period of détente. Where the late 1960s and most of the 1970s were typified by arms and trade agreements and indirect competition in the developing world, the late 1970s and 1980s marked a resurgence in ideological and proxy military conflict between the two superpowers.

However, as the Cold War heated up, the taboo against the use of nuclear weapons also grew stronger. The anti-nuclear movement was in the midst of a resurgence following renewed efforts by the U.S. military establishment to develop tactical, high radiation, and neutron-yield nuclear weapons. Further, several nuclear disarmament and arms limitations treaties were signed by the superpowers during this period.\(^\text{157}\)

This stage of the Cold war serves as the ideal opportunity to the implications of the nuclear taboo paradox for periods in which the norm against the use of nuclear weapons is strong. Specifically, this chapter will analyze the brinkmanship and conflict behavior exhibited by Moscow and Washington during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989.

The literature on the traditional nuclear taboo claims that by this point in the Cold War the taboo was firmly entrenched in international organizations and elite strategic thinking. Thus, it would predict that nuclear states would be less willing to become involved in conflict due to concerns about escalation that might lead to a violation of the taboo. The nuclear taboo paradox, however, predicts that, because the taboo is strong, we should see a greater frequency and severity of brinkmanship tactics and escalatory behavior than in earlier periods of the Cold War, such as during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This outcome is expected because the stronger the

nuclear taboo becomes, the more confident leaders will be that no state will use nuclear weapons. When nuclear war is highly improbable, leaders worry less that lower level conflicts will escalate to the point of a nuclear exchange, freeing them to take advantage of opportunities for foreign policy adventurism.

In this chapter, I argue that elite decision-making during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan can be explained by the nuclear taboo paradox, but that unique factors of the case attenuate some of the paradox’s effect, particularly on the United States. The empirical evidence specifically suggests that the strength of the nuclear taboo was not universal—namely it was less influential in the Soviet Union than in the Western bloc—and that the United States was constrained from escalating the conflict by a number of domestic variables.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I provide a brief account of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the next section, I examine each identified instance of brinkmanship behavior through the theoretical lens of my theory, the nuclear taboo, and two alternative realist theories. I then focus on my second hypothesis by comparing the severity of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Finally, I end the chapter with some concluding remarks on some of the unique factors involved in this case and set us up for my concluding analysis in Chapter Six.

**Historical Overview**

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is rooted in one of many developing world political upheavals that were characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s. King Mohammed Zahir Shah ruled Afghanistan from 1933 until the early 1970s. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the Marxist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) began to gain political power under the leadership of Zahir’s cousin, Mohammed Daoud Khan, who served as the state’s prime minister from 1954 to
1963. On July 17, 1973, Daoud Khan seized power from King Zahir Shah in a military coup, accusing the king’s administration of corruption and mismanagement of the economy. Daoud Khan’s rule was short-lived, however, due to factionalism within the PDPA; while popular with the general population of Afghanistan, his repression of political activities spurred a portion of the party to splinter and join forces with the Afghan Army. On April 27, 1978, Daoud Khan was captured and executed, while Nur Muhammad Taraki, then secretary-general of the PDPA, installed himself as both the president and prime minister of the newly reorganized Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Almost immediately, Taraki began implementing Soviet-style reforms on issues ranging from land ownership and industrialization to marriage customs and private debts.

Many of the reforms implemented under Taraki were not well-received by many conservatives in rural areas, particularly religious leaders and land owners. By the summer of 1978, pockets of revolt had sprung up in Nuristan and Badakhshan. The revolt against the communist government cut across class and ethnic lines, in some cases uniting tribes that had fought one another for centuries. Religious leaders declared a jihad, and soon the area of the state under the Taraki regime’s control began to shrink as mujaheddin—holy warriors—dominated the countryside.

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161 Collins, Soviet Invasion, 55.
163 Ibid., 74.
Concerned about the rising tide of revolts and the perceived possibility for an intervention by Iran, Pakistan, or agents of the United States or China, the Afghan government signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation on December 5, 1978 with the Soviet Union. Although the treaty contained few specifics, Article 4 included an implicit security commitment from the Soviets. Almost immediately, the Afghan government requested Soviet assistance in combating the rebels. Indeed, the government made 21 requests for aid in 1979 alone. Although initially reticent to provide military support, the Soviet Politburo determined that the deteriorating situation in Kabul had become so severe by late 1979 that it warranted intervention. Unbeknownst to Taraki, however, was that Soviet officials concluded that any intervention required a full takeover of the government and forced regime change in order to stabilize the state.

On December 25, 1979, Soviet mechanized forces crossed the Soviet-Afghan border near Herat. Two days later, Soviet airborne and special forces captured critical points in Kabul and killed most of the major government officials, including Taraki and Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin. Babrak Karmal, a political leader considered more cooperative by the Soviet leadership, was installed as the new president of Afghanistan on December 28.

The international response to the Soviet invasion was decidedly negative, with the United States introducing a General Assembly resolution condemning the intervention. The resolution, along with a number of political and diplomatic sanctions, passed with a vote of 104-18. In Afghanistan, the invasion and the installation of Karmal was seen as further evidence of a

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167 Ibid., 13.
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communist desire to meddle in Afghan affairs. This is turn led to mass defections from the army and a corresponding increase in the strength of the *mujaheddin*. Sensing an opportunity to damage the Soviet Union politically, the United States began covertly shipping small arms and anti-aircraft missiles to elements of the *mujaheddin* as part of Operation Cyclone.

After several months of combat operations within Afghanistan, it became increasingly clear to Soviet military planners that a limited intervention would be insufficient to prop up the Karmal regime. The Afghan Army, which the Soviets had hoped could shoulder the brunt of actual combat operations, proved ineffective due to low morale and widespread desertions. Meanwhile, Soviet troops found themselves beset by a tactical doctrine ill-suited to Afghan terrain and fraternization of Tajik, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz Soviet military elements with their Afghan counterparts. Believing that the United States would not become more involved in the conflict, the Soviets opted to launch a full-scale counterinsurgency occupation. For the first several years of the conflict, they conducted sweep-and-destroy missions and indiscriminate aerial assaults on towns and villages.

Beginning in 1986, Soviet leaders began to fear that a true victory, wherein the *mujaheddin* were pacified and a Soviet-friendly government was able to exercise influence outside of the capital, was impossible to achieve. After six years of continuous combat operations, the Afghan government controlled only Kabul and a few other major city centers.

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173 Ibid.
while Soviet casualties were on the rise due to increased *mujaheddin* combat capabilities resulting from significant U.S., Chinese, and Saudi foreign aid.\(^ {175}\)

Seeking favorable political circumstances under which they could withdraw, the Soviets slowly eased Karmal out of power and replaced him with General Mohammed Najibullah. Najibullah sought to appease the *mujaheddin* insurgents with reconciliation efforts and new Soviet-designed policies—to little effect.\(^ {176}\) In 1987, a limited cease-fire was declared, while in Geneva multilateral talks were held on the subject of Soviet withdrawal. A peace accord was finally signed between Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and the Soviet Union on April 14, 1988, after which most combat operations ceased.\(^ {177}\) However, limited fighting took place as elements of the *mujaheddin* harassed withdrawing Soviet forces and jockeyed for post-occupation political position. On February 15, 1989 the final Soviet column departed Afghanistan.\(^ {178}\)

**Examining the Evidence: Escalation During the Soviet Invasion**

When compared to both of our previous cases, it is apparent that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is more similar to the Korean War than the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet invasion was a sustained combat situation, rather than an escalatory dispute as in Cuba. As with the Korean War, there were discrete instances of brinkmanship tactics and escalatory tactics used during the dispute. I examine these incidents to determine whether they are consistent with the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox or our three alternative theories.


\(^ {177}\) Russian General Staff, *Soviet-Afghan War*, 304.

During the period in which the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan took place, proponents of the nuclear taboo generally agree that the norm against the use of nuclear weapons had become quite strong. While the taboo was perhaps not as strong as it is in the post-Cold War environment, it had the greatest influence over Cold War international politics during the 1980s. In accordance with the nuclear taboo paradox, we should then expect to see a significant amount of brinkmanship and escalatory behavior among the nuclear dyads.

Interestingly, there is only one case of escalatory behavior during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Following the first year of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, the Soviet Politburo faced a dilemma. Contrary to initial Soviet expectations, it had failed to subdue revolt in Afghanistan, despite its superior capabilities. In fact, anti-interventionist and anti-Communist sentiment in Afghanistan united diverse ethnic, ideological, and socioeconomic factions in armed opposition to the Soviets and the leftist puppet regime in Kabul. Rather than a limited intervention in which the Afghan Army conducted the preponderance of the military operations, Soviet military planners soon found their own troops had to carry much of the combat burden. At this point that the Soviets were faced with a choice: return home in defeat or greatly expand the conflict by conducting a full-scale and long-term counterinsurgency occupation of Afghanistan. The Soviets ultimately chose to escalate the conflict, electing to follow a path that would leave them mired in Afghanistan for the next eight years.

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179 However, it should be noted that this last decade of Cold War animosities also represents a unique cross-section of circumstances in the two superpowers’ foreign policies. The United States was simultaneously distancing itself from active military interventions in the wake of Vietnam and pursuing an overall more aggressive foreign policy against the Soviet Union, while the Soviet Union sought to renew and reform its economic and political structure to keep pace with U.S. advancements. Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, 284; Pavel Podlesnyi, “Some Lessons of the Soviet-American Détente and Bilateral Co-operation of the 1970s,” in *The New Détente: Rethinking East-West Relations*, ed. Mary Kaldor, Gerard Holden, and Richard Falk, [London: Verso, 1989], 61.

180 Giradet, *Soviet War*, 27.

A number of factors contributed to Soviet decision-making. Moscow perceived a radical Islamic Afghanistan as a threat to the stability of the southern Soviet-bloc states that contained some 30 million Muslims. Access to resources, and particularly a desire to put the Soviet Union 200 miles closer to the Straits of Hormuz and a warm water port, also played a role. Most important, perhaps, was the notion that a state that had “successfully” made the transition to communism should not be permitted to backslide or become vulnerable to the West. However, the necessary condition for Soviet military intervention was opportunity. The Soviets observed a growing U.S. reticence to become directly involved in third world affairs and took advantage of this new reluctance to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy.

*The Deterrence Model*

Deterrence theory predicts a stable relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States during the late Cold War period. By the end of the 1970s, both superpowers had had a reliable second-strike capability for over a decade. In particular, the Soviet Union had closed the qualitative and quantitative gaps in its nuclear arsenal vis-à-vis the United States. Because neither state had the possibility of winning a nuclear confrontation without sustaining massive retaliatory damage from the other in the process, both the Soviet Union and the United States ought to have avoided foreign policy confrontations. This would have been disrupted by the Reagan administration’s drive to reignite the arms race and the controversial move toward

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183 Ibid., 159.
developing a Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1983, but as these efforts did not result in tangible changes to the U.S. defense posture, the long-run effect ought to have been negligible.\textsuperscript{187}

Thus, the deterrence model leads us to expect that both superpowers would avoid any conflict or dispute escalation that had even the remote possibility of spiraling into a nuclear war. In the case of Afghanistan, if the United States believed that this country was vital to its containment strategy, then deterrent threats should have been issued prior to the Soviet invasion and Moscow should have abided by such threats. However, if the United States did not see much initial value in Afghanistan, then we ought to see the Soviet Union free to intervene in the state’s internal affairs and the United States reluctant to respond militarily. In other words, under a fully robust system of MAD deterrent threats should be issued from the state which holds the foreign policy region in highest value and the opposing state should abide by such threats by refraining from action.

I find that the Afghanistan case fulfills the predictions of this second scenario reasonably well, although there is no evidence of a direct deterrent threat made by either superpower at any time during the decade-long conflict. Prior to the invasion in 1979, the United States did not perceive Afghanistan as a critical foreign policy interest. At this time, Washington sent substantial aid to neighboring Pakistan, which was viewed by most U.S. elites as the far more strategically important state in the region. As Ambassador to Afghanistan Robert G. Neumann put it: “the Soviet Union had a legitimate interest in stability along its southern border, while the U.S. interest was of a lesser degree, that is, to help Afghans protect their independence.”\textsuperscript{188}

Ambassador Neumann later wrote in 1971 in a State Department policy review that:

\textsuperscript{188} Hammond, \textit{Red Flag}, 26.
“For the United States, Afghanistan has at the present limited direct interest; it is not an important trading partner; it is not an access route for U.S. trade with others; it is not presently...a source of oil or scarce strategic metals;...there are no treaty ties or defense commitments; and Afghanistan does not provide us with significant defense, intelligence, or scientific facilities...”

As a consequence of this position, the United States did little to deter the Soviet Union prior to the invasion. President Jimmy Carter made no public statements on the subject until after the initial invasion, despite possessing intelligence pointing to an imminent Soviet attack on Afghanistan as early as April 1979. Indeed, only a private warning was issued to the Soviets on August 5, 1979 stating that “outside interference [in Afghanistan]...would be regarded very seriously.” With no existing deterrent, the Soviets then felt free to invade to the south.

In accordance with the expectations of deterrence theory, once the Soviet Union mobilized, the range of possible actions available to U.S. policymakers was immediately constrained. While President Carter did impose a number of economic and diplomatic sanctions on the Soviet Union in response to the invasion, no direct military action was taken. A number of U.S. elites are recorded as stating that they did not wish to directly intervene militarily in the Afghanistan conflict because of serious concerns of provoking the Soviet Union to escalate the conflict. President Carter indicated that during a National Security Council meeting, the majority of his advisors concluded that “[d]irect military action on our part was not advisable.” Secretary of State Cyrus Vance echoed this notion in a private letter to Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, warning that a direct military confrontation would create “a high risk that each [superpower] might miscalculate the actions of the other” and that “it was vital that both [the

189 Ibid.
191 Bradsher, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, 151.
192 The most notable sanctions imposed by the United States in response to the Soviet invasion included suspension of the then on-going START treaty talks, an embargo on U.S. grain exports, and a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Bradsher, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, 194.
Soviet Union and the United States] give sober consideration to the implications of the current situation for each side’s interest in the maintenance of world peace.”

As a result, the United States opted only to provide financing and materiel to the mujaheddin.

The most substantial problem for deterrence theory in this case is that there is no record of any attempt by the Soviet Union to deter a potential U.S. military intervention. Rather, the potential for escalation if the United States intervened appears to have been implicitly accepted by U.S. decision-makers. While this does not undermine the ability of deterrence theory to explain this case, since MAD had existed between the two superpowers for over a decade at this point, it does make the case less robust. Additionally, while deterrence theory explains initial Soviet behavior and the subsequent lack of U.S. military intervention, it cannot fully account for why the Soviets chose to escalate the Afghanistan conflict in 1980.

*The Nuclear Stability-Instability Paradox*

The nuclear stability-instability paradox suggests that, because of MAD, nuclear states are confident that foreign policy adventurism against another state in areas of peripheral strategic interest will not be met with escalated nuclear retaliation. Therefore, they are free to provoke crises and engage in low-level uses of force as the conventional balance-of-forces suits them.

In the Afghanistan case, the nuclear stability-instability paradox predicts that Soviet decision-makers initially should have opted to intervene if it was in the country’s national interest, particularly in a target with no nuclear “umbrella.” Should the United States have found the dispute to have been of sufficient strategic interest, it would also predict that Washington would have been willing to intervene militarily. In other words, Soviet and American leaders

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ought to have been confident that the logic of MAD would have prevented either country from escalating the conflict into a nuclear confrontation.

In this case the nuclear stability-instability paradox is less consistent with the empirical findings than basic deterrence theory. Soviet behavior in 1979 is consistent with the predictions outlined above. But the United States failed to intervene in the conflict after the Soviets initially invaded—even though the invasion challenged its policy of containment.

Although the Carter administration did not regard Afghanistan as particularly important prior to the Soviet invasion, its view changed dramatically in December 1979. Preoccupied with the hostage crisis in Iran and attempting to solidify an alliance with Pakistan, President Carter and other U.S. elites began to view the Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan axis as an “arc of crisis” which, if overtaken by Soviet control or influence, would greatly threaten major U.S. strategic interests in the Persian Gulf. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski characterized the conflict as “not a local, but a strategic challenge,” and President Carter himself declared in his 1980 State of the Union address that “[a]n 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…[and] will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” Therefore, U.S. policymakers saw Afghanistan as strategically important after the Soviet invasion, if not before.

Even so, the Carter administration limited itself to economic and diplomatic sanctions. This outcome is contrary to the nuclear stability-instability paradox, which predicts that the knowledge that the Soviet Union would not escalate the conflict to the point of nuclear war should have encouraged the United States to intervene with direct military force. As such, we

195 Hammond, Red Flag, 122.
196 Bradsher, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, 193.
must conclude that the nuclear stability-instability paradox does not explain the Afghanistan case.

*The Nuclear Taboo*

The logic of the nuclear taboo predicts that states will refrain from using nuclear weapons because of a powerful prohibitive norm in the international community against their use. In a system with a robust nuclear taboo, we would expect to see leaders reluctant to even discuss the use of nuclear weapons in combat, opting instead to use conventional military force even where it might be less effective tactically than employing nuclear weapons. When commenting on nuclear weapons, both publically and privately, leaders should use moral or normative rhetoric, categorizing the atom bomb as a “weapon of mass destruction,” “inhumane,” “non-discriminatory,” and “unethical.” Over time, the taboo should be increasingly internalized by both leaders and institutions on the national and international levels.¹⁹⁷

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it then follows that we should see low levels of conflict, if we see any at all. States will seek to avoid severe conflict that might make the use of nuclear weapons more likely, which elites and publics alike view as abhorrent. We should also expect to see elites rarely discuss the nuclear option, as it should be generally accepted by most, if not all, policymakers that such weapons may only be used as a deterrent. If nuclear weapons are brought up for consideration, we should see the notion quickly dismissed for normative-moral reasons.

The Afghanistan case is generally consistent with the nuclear taboo. Once the conflict was initiated by the Soviet Union, the United States opted not to intervene directly with military force so as not to escalate the dispute. While President Carter remarked in his memoirs that his

National Security Council briefly discussed the possible use of nuclear weapons if the Soviets continued their advance toward the Indian Ocean, there is no evidence that the use of nuclear weapons was considered in response to the invasion of Afghanistan.\footnote{Douglas P. Lackey, \textit{Moral Principles and Nuclear Weapons}, [Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld Publishers, 1984], 240.} While the logic of deterrence can explain why the Carter and Reagan administrations chose not to use nuclear weapons in response to the invasion of Afghanistan, it is also possible that the strong taboo was a factor as well.

The U.S. and global antinuclear movements revived significantly in the early 1980s, with the Committee for Safe Nuclear Policy (SANE) membership growing by over 800 percent. Between 1980 and 1984, more than 17 acts of mass nuclear-related civil disobedience were recorded.\footnote{Lawrence S. Wittner, \textit{Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the Nuclear Disarmament Movement}, [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009], 153.} Even Ronald Reagan, who initially sought to reintroduce limited nuclear warfare into the U.S. national defense lexicon, conceded publically as early as 1982 that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought…[t]o those who protest against nuclear war, I can only say: ‘I’m with you.’”\footnote{Ibid., 168.} This points to the strength of the nuclear taboo during this period—such evidence suggests that any U.S. president would have found it difficult to use nuclear weapons in the face of such strong domestic and international opposition.

\textit{The Nuclear Taboo Paradox}

The nuclear taboo, however, is only capable of explaining nuclear non-use and little more. Nothing within the theory provides us with explanations of state behavior within a case, rendering it of limited predictive utility to both academics and policymakers.
To explain state behavior, we turn once again to the nuclear taboo paradox. In a system with a robust nuclear taboo, the nuclear taboo paradox predicts increased brinkmanship, escalation, and more severe low- to mid-level conflicts. Because of the power of the nuclear taboo, nuclear states are reluctant to use their nuclear weapons, a fact that other states are aware of as well. As a consequence, rival states are more likely to disregard the nuclear deterrent, anticipating instead that a nuclear state will be unwilling to escalate a conflict past a certain point in order to avoid major war. Because the taboo has come to dominate strategic thinking concerning nuclear weapons, we would expect to see more brinkmanship behavior and escalatory tactics than we would in cases where deterrent considerations dominate.

In the Afghanistan case, the nuclear taboo paradox predicts that the Soviet Union would be willing to intervene militarily in Afghanistan even in the face of an American nuclear deterrent. The Soviets should also feel free to escalate their conflict against the mujaheddin, as they would expect the United States to have only a limited range of viable responses. For the United States, the nuclear taboo paradox also predicts a military response to the Soviet intervention as a form of escalation. In such a scenario, we would expect to see Soviet policymakers respond with further rounds of escalation and brinkmanship, but an eventual cap on such behavior as the conflict progresses toward major war due to a fear of violating the taboo.

In contrast to the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Afghanistan case does not fully fit the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox—only the Soviet Union’s behavior is consistent with our model. The Soviet Union did intervene militarily in Afghanistan, largely because of a lack of an existing nuclear deterrent. We also see evidence of limited Soviet escalation in Afghanistan beginning in 1981, when the Soviet military initiated a scorched-earth
campaign against the mujaheddin insurgents. Contrary to our expectations, however, the United States refused to become militarily involved in the conflict, opting instead to sanction the Soviet Union economically and diplomatically while simultaneously providing money and materiel to the mujaheddin. This behavior is much more in line with the predictions of deterrence. As a result, we must conclude that our theory does not fully explain the U.S. behavior exhibited during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The failure of the United States to act in accordance with our predictions may be attributable to factors specific to this case that limited both the Soviet Union and the United States from escalating the conflict in Afghanistan further than they would have liked. For example, the United States was reluctant to use militarily force abroad post-Vietnam, the Soviet Union had manpower needs in Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union experienced a change in leadership in 1985. On the U.S. side of the conflict, there is evidence that the Carter administration initially desired to take a harder—even military—line against the Soviets; Carter himself characterized the initial Soviet invasion as a “grave threat to peace,” “an extremely serious threat to peace,” and finally as “the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War” on January 8, 1980 before scaling back his retaliatory rhetoric thereafter. This position was shared by other elites in Washington, many of whom would later characterize Afghanistan as the confirmation that the Soviet Union was not abiding by the principles of détente. However, difficulties quickly arose concerning questions of public acceptance of a stronger U.S. counter-intervention. Other concerns included the political and practical consequences of an increased defense budget, the logistics of developing a deployment force to the region, and the uncertain

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201 Russian General Staff, Soviet-Afghan War, 91.
203 Bradsher, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, 189.
support of necessary allies in the region for such a move.\textsuperscript{204} There is also evidence that the nuclear taboo may not have been as engrained within the collective Soviet consciousness as it was in the Western world; this would consequently undermine the destabilizing influence of the nuclear taboo paradox by revitalizing the casual power of nuclear deterrence.\textsuperscript{205} Together, these factors dampened much of the incentive to escalate the severity and brinkmanship behavior within the conflict that we would have otherwise anticipated.

\textbf{Examining the Evidence: Conflict Severity Between the Cases}

Hypothesis 2 seeks to explain behavior caused by the nuclear taboo paradox \textit{between} cases, rather than within them. Specifically, Hypothesis 2 predicts that as the nuclear taboo gains in strength, low- to mid-level conflicts should become more severe. To test this hypothesis, I will now examine how the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan compares to our previous two cases in terms of conflict severity.

\textit{Comparing Conflict Severity: Korea, Cuba, and Afghanistan}

While the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is much more similar to Korea than the Cuban case, for purposes of comparing conflict severity it represents a third kind of conflict distinct from both of our previous cases. In the Korean War, the conflict was essentially a conventional dyadic war. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, no actual combat operations were initiated, but the conflict certainly represents the height of superpower disputes during the Cold War—indeed, it is the point at which most historians believe the world came closest to the brink of nuclear war. In the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, we see a conventional force—the Soviet army—aligned against a primarily insurgent force that dealt in irregular combat operations and guerilla tactics.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 193.} \footnote{\textsuperscript{205} David E. Hoffman, \textit{The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and its Dangerous Legacy}, [New York: Anchor Books, 2009], 89.}
As before then, it is difficult to compare these three conflicts solely in terms of cost or casualties. Rather, I again employ a counterfactual analysis of the Afghanistan conflict to determine where the historical case falls on a relative scale of possible outcomes ranked in terms of severity. Once rank-ordered, I then compare this severity measurement against those of our other two cases in order to test Hypothesis 2.

If the Korean War was characterized by extreme restraint and the Cuban Missile Crisis by a severe spiral of escalation, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan falls somewhere in between. Relative to the other two cases, there were also fewer opportunities for elite-level decision-makers to alter the severity of the conflict. The first critical opportunity was that of the initial invasion—Moscow had to decide whether and how to intervene in Afghanistan. Recall that although the Soviet Union had a significant interest in the regime and stability of Afghanistan, Politburo officials rebuffed every Afghan request for military assistance prior to 1979. The change in policy to intervene militarily largely came as a recognition that the Amin regime was actively contributing to the destabilization of Afghanistan through its insistence on pushing through unpopular radical reforms. With that said, Soviet displeasure with the Amin regime did not on its own necessitate military intervention—the Soviets could have encouraged dissident actors within the PDPA to carry out a regime change independently and accompanied this with increased economic support. Alternatively, the Soviets could have invaded with a much larger force; the Red Army force of just 115,000 troops represented a small fraction of the full Soviet force capacity of over four million troops. A larger intervention could have resulted in a variety of outcomes—on the one hand, overwhelming Soviet numerical superiority might have

kept the *mujaheddin* from organizing in the first place, while on the other hand it could have led to a more severe “scorched-earth” campaign against Afghan communities than actually occurred.

The Soviet decision to escalate the conflict in 1982 could also have been both more or less severe had elite-level decision-making been different. After a year and a half in Afghanistan, the Soviets had determined that the *mujaheddin* were not going to be defeated quickly as originally anticipated. As a result, Moscow changed operational tactics to a “scorched-earth” campaign. In alternative narratives the Soviets could have either substantially escalated the size of their presence or initiated their withdrawal much earlier than they actually did. This point also represents the most likely moment for a potential intervention by the United States, had Washington chosen to directly intervene with military force. In such an alternative scenario, direct fighting between U.S. and Soviet military forces would have certainly made the conflict more severe, raising the specter of a wider war.

From these counterfactuals, we can see that there was substantial room for both Soviet and U.S. decision-makers to escalate the conflict in Afghanistan. While the conflict that occurred historically was not the least severe of all possibilities, it was less severe than it could have been. Indeed, I conclude that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was less severe than the Cuban Missile Crisis. While very similar to Afghanistan in that the historical outcome represents a relative “median” on our spectrum of counterfactual outcomes, the Korean War also seems to have been a more severe conflict in terms of casualties. This result is at odds with Hypothesis 2, which states that low- and mid-level conflicts will become more severe as the nuclear taboo becomes more robust. However, this conclusion is unsurprising in light of the lack of support for Hypothesis 1 in this case. Again, the factors discussed above concerning the unique

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characteristics of this case likely explain this discrepancy between the empirical evidence and the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that the nuclear taboo paradox can explain Soviet behavior in the Afghanistan case, but that its causal power over the behavior of the United States was attenuated significantly due to unique factors of the case. As the nuclear taboo became more robust worldwide during the 1970s and 1980s, leaders came to accept and internalize the nuclear taboo. Although the strength of the nuclear taboo means that few significant discussions of the use of nuclear weapons took place, what limited records and recollections we have from key decision-makers speak to the powerful influence of the nuclear taboo during this period, particularly in the West.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I will bring together the evidence from the three cases and argue that they reveal strong empirical support for the nuclear taboo paradox, suggesting that this argument should be tested against additional cases in the future and incorporated into current policymaking.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

With the end of the Cold War and the steady stream of formerly classified documents, conversations, and meetings that has come with it, it has become increasingly apparent that traditional theories of nuclear deterrence and MAD do not fully explain how elite decision-makers actually came to the policy decisions that they did. In recent years, this emergence of new information has spurred the development and acceptance of alternative theories seeking to explain Cold War elite behavior and the history of nuclear non-use since 1945. Chief among these is the nuclear taboo, which seeks to explain the history of nuclear non-use since World War II as a function of an evolving international norm which categorizes nuclear weapons as somehow more immoral and inhumane than conventional weapons. Indeed, even the distinction between “conventional weapons” and “weapons of mass destruction” is viewed by taboo advocates as evidence that there is a normative force at work preventing the use of nuclear weapons in conflict. In recent years, scholarship on international norms and the history of nuclear decision-making has generated a robust literature pointing to the nuclear taboo as an important part of the Cold War narrative.

What the nuclear taboo literature has not done to date, however, is explore the full theoretical implications of the nuclear taboo. Instead, the overwhelming preponderance of the literature has assumed that the nuclear taboo only exhibits stabilizing casual mechanisms, chief of which is preventing the use of nuclear weapons in conflict and, consequently, major war. In light of what we already know from the realist literature on deterrence and the nuclear stability-instability paradox, as well as the actual history of the Cold War, this is undoubtedly not a comprehensive picture of the nuclear taboo’s casual effects. What was needed was a full
theoretical examination of the taboo’s casual mechanisms with a specific focus on possible ancillary effects as they might pertain to conflict or elite behavior.

In this paper, I sought to rectify this significant gap in the literature, arguing that while the nuclear taboo does in fact act to prevent major war, it also has the additional effect of increasing the incidence and severity of low- and mid-level conflict. This paradoxical effect is a result of international perceptions of a state’s willingness to resort to nuclear weapons in conflict. As the nuclear taboo gains influence over elite decision-makers and the international community, nuclear states become more reluctant to use their nuclear weapons because of the increased reputation costs associated with such an act. Because the nuclear taboo is an international norm, all states are aware of this effect, leading rival states to arrive logically at the same conclusion—that is, that nuclear State A will be unwilling to use its nuclear weapons if challenged in areas of peripheral foreign policy interest. As a consequence, rival State B will be more likely to disregard any nuclear deterrent State A may have placed over the foreign policy objective, concentrating instead only on conventional military and political factors when deciding whether to engage in conflict. This disregard then manifests itself as increasingly severe and frequent low- and mid-level conflict than we would otherwise expect.

Chapter Summaries & Synthesis

Following a more extensive theoretical analysis of this phenomenon, which I termed the nuclear taboo paradox in Chapter Two, I turned to an empirical examination of the taboo paradox’s influence on three different cases selected from the Cold War. In Chapter Three, I analyzed the Korean War as the first example of a Soviet challenge to the U.S. policy of containment. Following a tracing of the historical narrative of the case, I determined that two discrete instances of brinkmanship behavior occurred during the Korean War. Using a
comparative analytical framework, I determined that in both instances, deterrence theory, the nuclear stability-instability paradox, and traditional nuclear taboo theory all failed to explain some or all of the behavior observed in the case. The nuclear taboo paradox, conversely, provided a robust explanation for both sub-cases. The overall number of instances of brinkmanship behavior was small yet measurable, in accordance with the predictions of the taboo paradox. More importantly, elite-level discourse on both sides of the conflict is indicative of taboo-based thinking even at this early stage in the nuclear taboo’s evolution.

In Chapter Four, I sought to examine a case from the middle of the Cold War to provide us with empirical evidence from a period when the nuclear taboo had gained more normative and institutional traction. Once I established that the nuclear taboo was in fact increasing in international influence, both through grassroots activism and growing elite internalization, I tested the elite decision-making from the Cuban Missile Crisis against the predictions of my theory. Because the Cuban Missile Crisis was a much more condensed dispute than the Korean War, I opted to analyze the case as one extended spiral of brinkmanship rather than discrete instances. Tracing the historical narrative, I found that U.S. and Soviet elites took the crisis through no less than four distinct rounds of brinkmanship and escalation. As before, I analyzed the empirical evidence of the case against the predictions of two alternative realist theories as well as traditional nuclear taboo theory in addition to my own. As before, the realist explanations failed, while the taboo-based theories fared much better. I also tested my second hypothesis for the first time in this chapter, finding that the nuclear taboo paradox does appear to increase the severity of low- and mid-level conflicts over time as the nuclear taboo has increased in robustness.
Finally, in Chapter Five I analyzed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This case was selected because it occurred toward the end of the Cold War, when we expect the nuclear taboo to have reached a level of robustness comparable to contemporary levels. Again having confirmed this assertion concerning the relative strength and influence of the taboo first, I continue with the model set by my previous two chapters. Unlike the results of the Korean and Cuban cases, the results of this third case were more ambiguous. The Soviet Union acted in accordance with the predictions of the nuclear taboo paradox, escalating the conflict as they entered Afghanistan and initiated a “scorched-earth” campaign against the mujaheddin in 1982, but the United States was surprisingly reticent to involve itself militarily or otherwise escalate the conflict. Likewise, our testing of Hypothesis Two finds that, contrary to predictions, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was less severe than either the Korean War or the Cuban Missile Crisis. Examining the case more closely, I determined that a number of factors unique to the case constrained further U.S. action. While it is difficult to prove a negative case, I did find evidence suggesting that taboo-based thinking played a critical role in elite-level decision-making during Soviet-Afghan conflict.

Taking all three of these cases holistically, I find strong empirical support for the influence of the nuclear taboo paradox during the Cold War. As the Cold War progressed and the nuclear taboo increased in international acceptance and institutionalization, the observed conflicts became more severe and we see more and increasingly severe instances of escalation and brinkmanship tactics. In all cases, including the Soviet-Afghan War, we see strong evidence of taboo-based thinking and discourse among elite decision-makers. Longitudinally, we see more evidence of the nuclear taboo and its paradoxical effect on conflict severity as it grows in
robustness, again in accordance with our predictions. This presents us with a number of policy and research implications, some of which are discussed below.

Suggestions for Future Research

As with the development of any new theory or extension of an existing theory, more work remains to be done to conclusively establish the presence of the nuclear taboo paradox empirically. Progressing forward, additional work ought to be conducted to more comprehensively test the casual power of the taboo paradox beyond the three brief case studies presented here. Such qualitative work should also be expanded upon with quantitative work, perhaps with the development of an objective measurement of the strength of the nuclear taboo by country-year compared against existing conflict severity data, such as the Militarized Interstate Dispute index. Another interesting line of questioning, as suggested by our Cuban Case, is the interaction of the nuclear taboo paradox with other competing modes of strategic thinking. For example, do the casual effects of the nuclear taboo paradox and deterrence-based strategic thinking always amplify one another, or are there cases where they might dampen—or even stabilize—the other’s impact on conflict incidence and severity?

Looking more broadly at the nuclear taboo research program, it is clear that much of the existing literature requires reevaluation in the light of the nuclear taboo paradox. As previously discussed, the great preponderance of the taboo literature presumes that further development of the nuclear taboo can only be stabilizing for the international system. Having demonstrated that this is not always the case, it is clear that much of this original research must be revisited to ensure that the derived conclusions, particularly those of a policy nature, remain valid when the casual implications of the nuclear taboo paradox are considered. Additionally, much of the nuclear taboo literature, including this work, has been conducted with the presumption that the
nuclear taboo only ever increases in robustness and international influence. An important further line of research in pursuit of reevaluating the overall taboo literature would be to more carefully examine the causes and implications of a weakened nuclear taboo.

Policy Implications

As the international community continues to grapple with nuclear issues as diverse as nonproliferation, disarmament, and safeguarding nuclear materials from falling into the hands of rogue non-state actors, the nuclear taboo as a norm and emerging global institution is perhaps more relevant to global peace and security today than at any time in the past. Many scholars and policymakers have sought to encourage the development of the nuclear taboo internationally as a more politically expedient means to permanently remove the threat of nuclear war than disarmament. The addition of the nuclear taboo paradox into such thinking, however, points to the ultimate futility of such policy. While an overwhelming norm against the use of nuclear weapons, or even the institutionalization of a global ban against their use, would indeed prevent nuclear war by definition, the nuclear taboo paradox suggests that conventional conflict would only become more frequent and severe as the result of such a move. Indeed, most readings of the nuclear taboo literature do not discount some of the casual power of nuclear deterrence and MAD in preventing major war—what would happen if this buffer against major war was removed? In such an extreme case, the extended logic of the nuclear taboo paradox points to a world strikingly reminiscent of 1940. Worse yet, such a world contains seventy years of improvements and advancements in conventional military technology, much of it designed throughout the Cold War explicitly as a replacement for the strategic and tactical capabilities promised by nuclear weapons.
Such frightening implications point to the undesirability of an outright global ban on the use or possession of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the greatest policy implication of this research seems to be that there is a certain “right” amount or robustness of the nuclear taboo, wherein the taboo’s stabilizing effects are maximized and the destabilizing elements of the taboo paradox are minimized. Determining in fact what such a “right” amount of nuclear taboo promises to be a daunting task for both policymakers and academics alike. As suggested by the Soviet-Afghan case, the robustness of the nuclear taboo is not necessarily universal—it can be stronger in some states and weaker in others, and its influence over policymakers will certainly fluctuate over time. Even if a comprehensive, real-time measure of the strength of the nuclear taboo was developed for every major state, there still remains the question of how best to “fine-tune” the strength of the nuclear taboo so as to reach the optimal maximum-minimum point of conflict stability. Finally, there remains the question of how to weaken the nuclear taboo, if necessary, without destroying the overall normative regime, either in a single state or within the international community more broadly.

Final Thoughts

All of these questions point to the unique characteristics of the nuclear taboo in international affairs. One is hard-pressed to find another international norm as powerful and pervasive, yet untamed in its growth and evolution, as the nuclear taboo. For all the research put into the subject and policy work crafted to further it internationally, it may turn out that the nuclear taboo and nuclear taboo paradox are largely uncontrollable by policymakers. The emergence of the taboo, buoyed through the disparate work of grassroots activists, civil society, and individual elite actors, certainly defied the policy preferences and efforts of the original nuclear actors.
To date, the nuclear taboo has predominantly served the causes of international peace and stability by preventing major war that almost certainly would have involved nuclear weapons. As we enter a new century of rising states and potential conflict flashpoints, however, individual states and the international community at large may soon be faced with an uncomfortable choice: permit the nuclear taboo to continue to evolve and gain influence, encouraging severe conventional conflict unafraid of nuclear retaliation, or break the nearly seven-decade-long tradition of nuclear non-use to reaffirm the utility of nuclear deterrence. Neither option is a particularly palatable one, leading us to hope that an as yet unidentified third path might soon present itself before such a decision must be made.
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