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Managing Escalation

Lessons and Challenges from Three Historical Crises Between Nuclear-Armed Powers



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About This Report

The return of great-power competition and the war in Ukraine have highlighted the stark risks of conflict with nuclear-armed great powers, such as Russia and China. Such a conflict would entail escalation risks that the United States has not seriously considered since the Cold War. A key question for the U.S. Department of Defense is how to prevail in such a war while limiting the scope of escalation in order to inform force development and prepare future leaders for high-stakes deliberations on the risks and trade-offs involved in fighting another major-power war, should this war come to pass.

This is the second in a series of two reports. The main report, which is not available to the general public, summarizes the overall project and presents its analysis, conclusions, and recommendations. In this supplemental report, we present three historical case studies of nuclear-armed countries' attempts to manage escalation during intense crises and conflict. This report is intended for defense strategists and force planners interested in preparing for future conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary. Data collection and analysis began in October 2021 and continued through September 2022. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. government.

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Summary

Issue

A war between the United States and a capable, nuclear-armed adversary would introduce the risk of destructive strikes on a scale the United States has not seriously contemplated since the end of the Cold War. The main debate in the policy world is between advocates of theories of victory that are reliant on denial and advocates of theories of victory that depend on cost imposition. Cost-imposition strategies, such as those requiring a distant blockade or a punitive air campaign, require the United States to successfully navigate what we refer to as the *Goldilocks Challenge*: how to identify with high confidence a “sweet spot” of pressure points that are valuable enough to influence enemy decisionmaking but not so valuable that they cause unacceptable retaliation.¹

The argument for a cost-imposition strategy rests on two assumptions that are fundamental but underanalyzed: (1) that such sweet spots exist and (2) that policymakers can identify and continuously track the boundaries of these sweet spots with sufficient confidence that leaders are willing to authorize attacks against these targets as part of a wider campaign. To help the U.S. Air Force evaluate the feasibility of a cost-imposition strategy and assess the associated risks of uncontrolled escalation, we examine in this report the ability of past decisionmakers to identify adversary thresholds and to apply this information to control escalation during militarized crises between nuclear-armed states.

Approach

In this report, we analyze three historical cases of militarized crises and conflicts between nuclear-armed major powers:

- the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis between the United States and the Soviet Union
- the 1969 border conflict between China and the Soviet Union
- the 1995–1996 crisis between the United States and China over Taiwan.

These cases are illustrative of the types of scenarios U.S. policymakers could plausibly confront in the future but do not amount to a comprehensive sample of potential escalation and de-escalation pathways.

The premise of this report is that historical analysis of prior crises between nuclear-armed powers can offer significant insights into prospective barriers to managing escalation risks during

¹ The phrase *Goldilocks Challenge* originates in Jacob L. Heim, Zachary Burdette, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *U.S. Military Theories of Victory for a War with the People's Republic of China*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1743-1, February 2024.

wartime. Because a major war between nuclear-armed states has never happened, no historical analogy can account for all the attributes of such a conflict, including the pace of decisionmaking, scale of destruction, and perceived stakes. Together, however, they can help to bound forecasts by revealing reoccurring pressures, dilemmas, distortions, and obstacles that may be heightened in a future conflict. We give special attention to how decisionmakers perceived the risks of escalation, how they used the available information to infer adversary intentions, and how they assessed their options. We do not make specific predictions about how certain states will act during future crises and conflicts or evaluate the relative merits of potential theories of victory. Rather, we identify recurring patterns of behavior and shed light on plausible blunders, hurdles, and accidents that U.S. planners can prepare to mitigate.

Key Findings and Implications for U.S. Planners

Our historical analysis identified the following considerations for managing escalation risks during wartime:

- **The United States will have a limited ability to control how adversaries interpret its coercive actions.** Adversaries may wrongly surmise U.S. intentions from uncoordinated, unauthorized, or unrelated policies or actions—and vice versa. Varied strategic cultures and historical experiences can also cause misinterpretations of intentions and signals.
- **Decisionmakers may not immediately recognize that a crisis or conflict has begun.** Delays can impede the transmission of coercive signals, skew assessments of adversary resolve and valuation of targets, and limit parties' ability to avert or control escalation during crises or the opening stages of conflict.
- **Decisionmakers' assessment of the value of a target or the significance of a threat may change over time as a conflict evolves and potential costs become clearer.** Leaders' valuation of targets, evaluation of the relative costs and benefits of reprisals, and perception of adversary intent may change over the course of a conflict. This suggests that the boundaries of any sweet spot within the Goldilocks Challenge framework will be fluid, increasing the prospect of inadvertent escalation.
- **The reorganization or creation of decisionmaking bodies may alter access to or interpretation of information, complicating efforts to sway power centers.** Changes in the composition or procedures of such forums may change the balance of influence among leaders and contribute to unpredictable outcomes. This may complicate attempts to tailor coercive strategies for individual leaders and confound behavioral predictions.
- **A perceived loss of control over the intensity, pace, or scope of a confrontation might not compel a rival to capitulate.** Leaders may respond in unpredictable ways to unanticipated escalation or a loss of battlefield or theater awareness. To clear the fog of war, some leaders may choose to escalate.
- **Nuclear threats may increase adversary fears without compelling substantial changes in behavior.** In each of our cases, an inferior nuclear power antagonized a more powerful rival. Varied attitudes toward the utility of nuclear weapons for warfighting may make some leaders more tolerant of nuclear threats.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

A war between the United States and a nuclear-armed adversary would raise the prospect of catastrophic destruction on a scale the United States has not seriously confronted since the end of the Cold War.² Although the immediate likelihood of such a conflict remains low, the intensification of competition between the United States and China and the deterioration of relations between the United States and Russia have prompted calls for more-systemic analysis of how the United States could prevail in such a conflict. A critical consideration within the resulting debate is how, should an armed confrontation come to pass, the United States can limit the scope and intensity of the fighting and manage the risks of inadvertent or accidental escalation while still achieving its military and political objectives.

Multiple theories of victory for an armed conflict against a nuclear-armed adversary have been proposed.³ While some have called for the United States to prepare to comprehensively defeat an adversary and leave it physically unable to continue a war, others have questioned the viability of this approach against a great power that possesses a survivable nuclear deterrent, as both Russia and China do.⁴ Grinding down an adversary's military forces and industry to the point that the adversary lacks the capacity to resist would be extremely difficult and risk catastrophic escalation by threatening its vital interests, and perhaps even survival.⁵ Accordingly, attention has shifted toward coercive approaches that persuade an enemy to stop fighting even while it retains the capacity to do so by either decreasing the benefits or increasing the costs of continued resistance. Within this debate, theories of victory premised on *military cost imposition*, in which military measures (such as a distant blockade or a punitive air campaign) are employed

² For a discussion of the potential consequences of a U.S.-China war, for instance, see Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunness, and Tristan Finazzo, *The Return of Great Power War: Scenarios of Systemic Conflict Between the United States and China*, RAND Corporation, RR-A830-1, 2022; and David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable*, RAND Corporation, RR-1140-A, 2016.

³ A *theory of victory* is a causal story about how to defeat an adversary during a war. For the purposes of the U.S. Department of Defense, it is the logical framework that explains how military operations will translate into the war's political objectives. For related definitions, see Eliot A. Cohen, "The Strategy That Can Defeat Putin," *The Atlantic*, March 7, 2022; Mark Morris, "AirSea Battle vs. Offshore Control: Which Has a Better Theory of Victory?" *War on the Rocks*, November 26, 2013; Frank G. Hoffman, "The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy: A Theory of Success," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 97, 2nd Quarter 2020; and Brad Roberts, *On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue*, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, June 2020.

⁴ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Cornell University Press, 1989b.

⁵ Joshua Rovner, "Two Kinds of Catastrophe: Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2017.

to attempt to persuade the attacker that the costs of continuing the war outweigh the benefits, now predominate.⁶

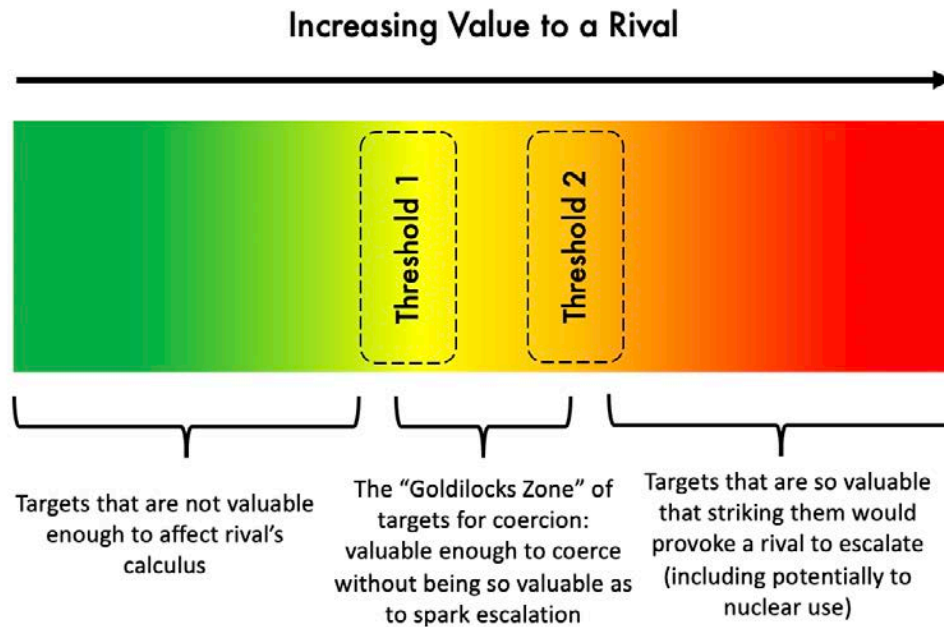
Despite its prominence, a military cost-imposition theory of victory carries its own challenges and risks that remain underappreciated in public debates about U.S. military strategy. Such a theory assumes the existence of a “Goldilocks” range of pressure points that are valuable enough to influence enemy decisionmaking but not so valuable that they cause unacceptable escalation (Figure 1.1). The “sweet spot” of targets within these parameters may be extremely narrow or may not even exist—and it may shift or morph during a conflict. There is also a temporal challenge: It takes time to impose large cumulative costs on the enemy, which makes this approach ill-suited for quickly unfolding scenarios, such as a rapid fait accompli. Great powers have historically absorbed tremendous costs when the stakes are high, and retaliation may be a more likely response than capitulation.⁷ Moreover, successful execution would require conveying credible assurances to the adversary that compliance will bring relief from the coercive pain.⁸ If cost-imposing measures, such as striking valued targets, convince the adversary that it faces a bad-faith actor intent on harming it even if it complies, or if an adversary worries that concessions will only invite future predation, even extremely painful cost-imposing measures will not produce coercive success.

⁶ This discussion draws on Jacob L. Heim, Zachary Burdette, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *U.S. Military Theories of Victory for a War with the People’s Republic of China*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1743-1, February 2024.

⁷ See, for example, Allan Dafoe, Sophia Hatz, and Baobao Zhang, “Coercion and Provocation,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 65, No. 2–3, February–March 2021; and Kathleen E. Powers and Dan Altman, “The Psychology of Coercion Failure: How Reactance Explains Resistance to Threats,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 67, No. 1, January 2023.

⁸ Reid B. C. Pauly, “*Stop or I’ll Shoot, Comply and I Won’t*”: *Coercive Assurance in International Politics*, dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, June 2019.

Figure 1.1. Identifying the Sweet Spot Within the Goldilocks Challenge Framework



SOURCE: This figure draws on Heim, Burdette, and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2024.

The Goldilocks Challenge is intrinsically difficult to solve. Beyond the need to define an adversary's escalation thresholds and then identify viable targets within the sweet spot, U.S. planners and decisionmakers must account for the additional risks of uncontrolled escalation that can arise as a result of a misstep or miscalculation. All coercive strategies entail a degree of risk, but the likelihood and consequences of error are heightened in cost-imposition strategies because they depend on carefully calibrated threats of punishment and applications of pressure to succeed. For U.S. planners and decisionmakers who are contemplating how to *avoid* a scenario in which tensions with a rival spiral out of control and how to *prepare* for the possibility of an attending conflict, two questions are apparent: Can states identify targets within these parameters, and can they do so with sufficient confidence that leaders are willing to authorize attacks against these targets as part of a wider campaign? Answering both questions requires consideration of how to overcome practical and cognitive limitations in terms of information access, analysis of adversary intentions, and enforcement of threats.

Purpose of This Report

This is the second in a series of two reports. The main report, which is not available to the general public, summarizes the overall project and presents our analysis, conclusions, and recommendations. In this supplemental report, we analyze three historical cases of militarized crises and conflicts between nuclear-armed major powers, then apply insights from those examples to the problem of designing coercive strategies today. We give special attention to how

decisionmakers on both sides perceived the risks of escalation, how they used the available information to infer adversary intentions, and how they assessed their options. If decisionmakers have struggled to understand their adversaries' intentions and escalation thresholds in past crises and conflicts, their ability to successfully manage escalation in the future is uncertain.

The importance of understanding escalation management that could arise during a cost-imposition campaign is of particular significance to the U.S. Air Force. Together with members of the other services, airmen serve an essential role in developing potential courses of action, conducting operational planning, and providing recommendations to manage or mitigate escalation risks. Airpower has been a key tool used in military cost-imposition campaigns, and the Air Force operates two legs of the nuclear triad, so Air Force leaders undoubtedly will be called on to provide advice on the development and refinement of theories of conflict for a war against another nuclear-armed power. They could be called on through assignments in a combatant command (such as U.S. Strategic Command), through support to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, or as independent subject-matter experts. This report is intended to assist in preparations for these roles by identifying the practical challenges that decisionmakers historically have confronted and to shed light on potential pitfalls they should be prepared to mitigate.

Aims and Methods

We define *escalation* as an increase in the intensity or scope of a militarized crisis or conflict “that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants.”⁹ *Vertical escalation* involves either (1) the threatened use or employment of forces, weapons, and capabilities not previously used in the confrontation or (2) an expansion of the type and number of targets at risk. Alternately, escalation can occur *horizontally* when the geographic scope of a conflict expands.¹⁰

There are three canonical mechanisms that explain how escalation occurs.¹¹ First, *deliberate* escalation happens when actors intentionally breach key thresholds to gain an advantage, avoid defeat, or signal resolve. Second, *inadvertent* escalation happens when states unwittingly cross an adversary's escalation thresholds. Finally, *accidental* escalation can result from mistaken or unauthorized actions. States may choose to escalate unilaterally in response to a perceived provocation, to exploit a closing window of opportunity, or to avert another undesired outcome they forecast would occur otherwise. At times, though, escalation unfolds as a chain reaction in which both sides engage in tit-for-tat escalation in response to each other's actions in ways that

⁹ Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, RAND Corporation, MG-614-AF, 2008, p. xi.

¹⁰ Morgan et al., 2008, pp. 18–20.

¹¹ Morgan et al., 2008, pp. 20–28.

may seem individually justified but cumulatively risk triggering a spiral of escalation that neither side is ultimately able to control.

In contrast to studies that focus on the mechanisms and strategic utility of escalation, this report focuses on decisionmakers' ability to evaluate and manage the risks when engaged in a militarized crisis or conflict under the nuclear shadow. We explore the following three questions:

1. How have states attempted to manage escalation in the nuclear shadow during a conflict or crisis?
2. What factors informed perceptions and evaluations of escalation risks during a crisis?
3. What role did nuclear weapons play in each leader's decisionmaking calculus? How plausible was the risk of nuclear use?

In particular, we seek to understand how decisionmakers perceive the risks of escalation, whether and with what confidence they understand a rival's intentions and thresholds for escalation, and how these assessments inform their resulting behavior under pressure.

Toward this end, we developed a set of three illustrative case studies of historical crises and conflicts between nuclear-armed powers. The purpose of these case studies is not to offer point predictions of how specific scenarios could escalate or how specific states would act when confronting real or perceived threats. Similarly, this report does not evaluate the relative merits of specific theories of victory. Rather, we aim to offer insight into the range of plausible wartime behaviors—as well as the factors that can assist or impede attempts to manage escalation—by examining how states have attempted to develop, adjust, and execute coercive strategies to achieve their objectives within acceptable parameters in imperfect conditions.¹² Applying what one scholar has termed a “historical sensibility” and another a “historical mind” as a mode of inquiry can help decisionmakers who face complex problems by identifying patterns; providing a frame to consider potential opportunities, pitfalls, and unknowns; and offering a reminder of the importance of humility, prudence, and discipline when confronted with uncertainty.¹³

To identify viable case studies, we compiled a composite list of crises and conflicts between nuclear-armed powers drawn from major studies in the field.¹⁴ Our decision to expand the scope to include militarized crises reflected the fortunate reality that direct conflicts between nuclear powers are rare. From this list, we selected three cases in which states attempted to coerce a rival while staying below the nuclear threshold and that presented variations in the parties involved,

¹² As one historian has suggested, “only [through examination of past decisionmaking] can we prepare ourselves through such vicarious experiences for the ways these challenges actually arise, the kinds of faces they really present” (Philip Zelickow, “The Nature of History’s Lessons,” in Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, Brookings Institution Press, 2016, p. 282).

¹³ Francis J. Gavin, “Thinking Historically: A Guide for Policy,” in Andreas Wenger, Ursula Jasper, and Myriam Dunn Cavelty, eds., *The Politics and Science of Prevision: Governing and Probing the Future*, Routledge, 2020; Eliot A. Cohen, “The Historical Mind and Military Strategy,” *Orbis*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Autumn 2005.

¹⁴ Matthew Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,” *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1, Winter 2013; Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

the intensity of the fighting, the stakes of the conflict, and the coercive tools employed.¹⁵ Moreover, we determined sufficient literature was available to examine how each side perceived the other's intentions and risks of escalation. For a description of the specific rationale by case, see Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Overview of Case Selection

Case Description	Characteristics	Reason for Inclusion
1962 Cuban Missile Crisis	- Major nuclear crisis resulting in de-escalation - Occurred during period of transition in nuclear balance	- Canonical case for U.S. thinking on nuclear escalation - Source availability enables exploration of role of structural and personal factors
1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict	- Limited conventional conflict between two nuclear powers - Weaker state initiated despite nuclear imbalance - Both states engaged in nuclear signaling - Plausible risk of escalation	- First example of China engaging in conflict with a nuclear-armed power after it obtained a nuclear capability - One of two examples of direct conflict between nuclear-armed states - Case in which PRC leadership feared direct threat to Beijing
1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis	- Use of military force to coerce change in Taiwanese policy and deter U.S. intervention - Weaker state initiated despite nuclear imbalance	- Influenced PLA force development and doctrine - Within living memory for many actors who are still active - Potential source of lessons (or negative learning) by each side

NOTE: PLA = People's Liberation Army; PRC = People's Republic of China.

The selected cases also provide an opportunity to consider leader behavior in the context of various escalation mechanisms. For example, the U.S. imposition of a quarantine in the Cuban Missile Crisis is an instance of *deliberate* escalation because it was intentionally designed to raise the scope and intensity of the crisis to give the United States coercive leverage. Alternatively, the Chinese ambush of Soviet border forces in 1969 *inadvertently* produced a crisis because China did not realize the Soviets would interpret the action as more provocative than past skirmishes along the border. Finally, concerns about managing *accidental* escalation resulting from mistaken or unauthorized actions, such as the latent risk that a Chinese missile might accidentally strike a U.S. or Taiwanese vessel during a military exercise, shaped U.S. and Chinese behavior during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Before we proceed, several caveats are in order. The most obvious—but perhaps most significant—is the reality that a major war between two nuclear-armed, global powers has never occurred. Although historical crises and conflicts may illuminate aspects, no single episode can

¹⁵ Other cases considered included the 1954 and 1958 Taiwan Strait crises, 1956 Suez Crisis, and 1973 Yom Kippur War, which were excluded because of the Soviet Union's indirect role. The absence of sufficient information on internal planning and calculations also precluded analysis of several crises between India and Pakistan and India and China.

approximate all the characteristics of such an event. The selected crises and limited conflicts illuminate common dilemmas, anxieties, and patterns of thinking that may arise during a confrontation among nuclear-armed powers. However, the casualties and physical destruction experienced in the cases surveyed in this report amount to only a very small fraction of the likely destruction resulting from a direct, unlimited conflict between the United States and China or Russia.

Similarly, historical cases offer insights into how policymakers have *imagined* the possibility of a conflict against another nuclear-armed power but not how they have *reacted* to the real event. As explored in the individual case studies, concerns about the danger of a major war (and the attending specter of a nuclear exchange) weighed on U.S., Soviet, and PRC decisionmakers and informed both their assessment of plausible courses of action and their selection of specific responses. But because each of these confrontations stayed below the threshold of a wider war, these fears did not materialize, and decisionmakers were not forced to confront the real consequences.

Notably, the crises and conflicts examined also occurred 26 to 60 years before our research began. We chose not to examine more-recent crises involving nuclear-armed powers (such as the 2020–2022 China-India border incidents or various crises between the United States and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) because adequate information on leaders’ perceptions and calculations is not publicly available. Without insight into high-level debates during a crisis, we are unable to assess whether decisionmakers reliably, and with high confidence, identified their adversary’s escalation thresholds and resolved the Goldilocks Challenge. The resulting historical distance between the cases examined and the current strategic landscape, however, contributes to several dissimilarities, including the international and regional context, the domestic political conditions in the relevant countries, and the military capabilities available and employed. These dissimilarities attenuate other nontemporal differences, such as the relative balance of power among belligerents and the significance of the interests motivating the confrontation.

These differences are reason to exercise caution when attempting to draw strict analogies between these historical events and future conflict scenarios. Historical comparisons are useful for spurring creative thinking about human and state behavior, but these comparisons can become counterproductive if specific analogies are treated as exact blueprints for the future or if decisionmakers contort historical lessons to confirm preexisting beliefs.¹⁶ When similarities are

¹⁶ On the potential for historical analogies to inform and misinform, see Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, Free Press, 1986. For a study of the negative consequences of overreliance on a specific analogy, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, Princeton University Press, 1992. On the “malleability” of historical analogies to conform to preexisting views, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, “Policymaking and the Uses of the Vietnam War,” in Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, Brookings Institution Press, 2016.

emphasized without considering the differences between scenarios, or when past conditions are interpreted as guarantees of future outcomes, the risk of mislearning from the past grows.

But history also offers analysts a vast laboratory to explore how humans and institutions have behaved under pressure. Rather than forecasting exactly how the future *will* be, historical analogies can help to bound the range of how the future *could* be. The historical cases surveyed in this report are not facsimiles of a future major conflict between nuclear-armed powers, and they differ in notable ways from current conditions between the United States, Russia, and China. Yet their unfamiliarity is also useful as a guard against cognitive biases that can cause analysts to overemphasize continuity and to project their preferences onto other actors with varied interests, perspectives, and behavior. Considering both similar and dissimilar historical precedents can help to test common assumptions and to encourage new thinking about how a future scenario could unfold.¹⁷

Structure of This Report

Chapters 2 through 4 present three case studies, arranged chronologically: the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, involving the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR); the 1969 Border Conflict between the Soviet Union and the PRC; and the 1995–1996 crisis over the Taiwan Strait, which involved the PRC, Taiwan, and the United States.

Each of the chapters includes a brief discussion of the strategic environment and context of the crisis or conflict, followed by a narrative summary of its initiation, course, and resolution. At the end of each chapter, we include an assessment of the factors that informed how each state perceived events, interpreted its rival's intentions and risk tolerance, and executed a campaign to impose its will while keeping the confrontation within its desired parameters.

In Chapter 5, we discuss the limitations of historical analogizing, distill common patterns from across the case studies, and outline considerations for anticipating and managing the risks of escalation in the future.

¹⁷ Alexandra Evans, “Thinking in (Napoleonic) Times: Historical Warnings for an Era of Great-Power Competition,” *War on the Rocks*, December 18, 2020.

Chapter 2. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

Widely recognized as one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis altered U.S. and Soviet attitudes toward the risk of nuclear conflict and prompted the development of new crisis management and deconfliction mechanisms. Triggered by the United States' discovery of a Soviet attempt to secretly deploy nuclear-armed missiles to Cuba, the crisis unfolded over 13 tense days of diplomatic and military maneuvering that brought both sides to the brink of nuclear war. Despite misassumptions and misinformation about the other side's intentions, capabilities, and escalation thresholds, the United States ultimately coerced the Soviet Union to dismantle its missiles and defused the crisis. Sixty years after its peaceful resolution, it remains a formative case study for U.S. thinking about crisis management and the dangers of escalation in a militarized crisis.

This outcome was not, however, predetermined. Drawing on the extensive scholarship on the Cuban Missile Crisis, as well as public speeches and firsthand accounts by major participants, we evaluate how U.S. and Soviet leaders attempted to manage the confrontation and to improve their understanding of the other side's escalation thresholds. The declassification of U.S. and Soviet records related to the episode has created a rich body of scholarly analysis from which to trace each side's decisionmaking, evaluate the accuracy of key assumptions, and identify moments when the situation nearly spiraled out of control.

Strategic Context

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union reached its zenith during the early 1960s. Since the late 1940s, the powers had been engaged in an unremitting ideological, economic, and military struggle for dominance that spanned the globe and colored nearly every aspect of their foreign policy. U.S. policymakers feared that the global spread of communism would endanger the stability of the international system and threaten long-term U.S. stability. Accordingly, they sought to deny Soviet influence in the power centers of Western Europe, West Germany, and Japan; thwart communist movements in the decolonizing areas of Asia, Africa, and the Americas; maintain sufficient military strength to deter and, if needed, defeat threats against the United States, its allies, or their vital interests; and, ultimately, encourage a fundamental change in the governance of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ For their part, Soviet leaders harbored equivalent fears of the United States as, in their view, a hostile and imperialist state that was attempting to encircle the Soviet Union, subvert the communist system, and retard the forces

¹⁸ On the evolution of U.S. containment strategy, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, Hill and Wang, 2007.

of global revolution. Communist ideology posited that the United States, like other imperialist powers, would exploit any perceived vulnerability and that conflict between the systems was inevitable.¹⁹

Changes in the military balance during the 1950s heightened the U.S. sense of vulnerability. The United States' global network of alliances and bases, superior power projection capabilities, and diverse and sizable nuclear arsenal had ensured a wide advantage over potential adversaries since the end of World War II, although the Soviet Union maintained a conventional military advantage in Europe.²⁰ Over the late 1950s, however, improvements in the size and sophistication of the Soviet nuclear arsenal and its stockpiles of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) raised new questions about the U.S. ability to deter a Soviet attack against Western Europe or to avert an attack on the U.S. homeland.²¹

At the same time, Soviet leaders expressed new confidence in their ability to deter a U.S. attack and compel the United States to modify its behavior. In 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev outlined the principles for a "peaceful coexistence" between capitalism and socialism premised on the assumption that the Soviet Union had acquired sufficient nuclear capabilities to deter a U.S. attack and compel negotiation of some form of accommodation with the United States.²² As the Soviet leader explained to the Presidium in a speech that year, the United States and the Soviet Union now possessed "such means of destruction as to make war unthinkable, if not impossible."²³ Just as importantly, Khrushchev assessed that his U.S. counterparts had also reached the conclusion that a nuclear war would leave no winners.²⁴ As a result, he believed that the "Soviet thermonuclear power could force the imperialists to be reasonable."²⁵

A series of crises between the nuclear powers provided Khrushchev with the opportunity to test the theory. During the 1956 Suez Crisis, for instance, the Soviets threatened Britain, France, and Israel with a nuclear strike after they attempted to seize the Suez Canal from Egypt. Although other factors contributed to the standoff's peaceful resolution, Khrushchev mistakenly believed that the Soviet threat had compelled the three aggressors to back down.²⁶ Two years

¹⁹ Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, University of North Carolina Press, 2007, pp. 101–107.

²⁰ Jerome H. Kahan and Anne K. Long, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Study of Its Strategic Context," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 87, No. 4, December 1972.

²¹ Zubok, 2007, p. 132; George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 691–692.

²² Craig Campbell and Sergey Radchenko, "MAD, Not Marx: Khrushchev and the Nuclear Revolution," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1–2, 2018, pp. 213–215, 220–222.

²³ Campbell and Radchenko, 2018, pp. 213–215.

²⁴ Zubok, 2007.

²⁵ Zubok, 2007.

²⁶ Zubok, 2007, p. 30.

later, the Soviet leader provoked a new crisis over Berlin when he demanded the United States withdraw its forces from the western zone of the city, which remained under West German control but was located in East German territory. The Soviet leader hoped to scare the Western powers into negotiations to revise the postwar balance in Europe, reverse the integration of West Germany into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and otherwise unravel elements of the U.S. containment strategy.²⁷ The resulting crisis spurred the construction of a wall dividing Berlin and culminated in 1961 with a tense standoff between U.S. and Soviet forces at a checkpoint between the city's two zones.²⁸ Through back-channel negotiations, the two sides avoided war, and Khrushchev's confidence in the utility of nuclear pressure to achieve Soviet strategic objectives remained. "The game is still worth playing," he told the Presidium in early 1962.²⁹

Meanwhile, new opportunities and pressures had emerged in Cuba, where Fidel Castro had three years earlier established the first communist government in Latin America.³⁰ Convinced that Castro was a Soviet client who posed a threat to both the continental United States and pro-U.S. governments across Latin America, the United States attempted to overthrow the regime in April 1961. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)–planned operation ended in disaster, humiliating the newly inaugurated U.S. President, John F. Kennedy, and reinforcing Soviet and Cuban beliefs that the United States would not tolerate the existence of a communist government on the island.³¹ The issue of Cuba became the rallying cry for a broad coalition within the Soviet Union that pressed Khrushchev to assure the Castro regime's survival and prevent another U.S. invasion.³² The issue also became linked with the emerging contest between the Soviet Union and China, which accused Moscow of failing to adequately protect Castro and of appeasing imperialist forces.³³

In May 1962, Khrushchev decided to direct the secret deployment of Soviet medium-range nuclear-capable ballistic missiles to Cuba.³⁴ Historians continue to debate the Soviet leader's

²⁷ Zubok, 2007.

²⁸ Zubok, 2007, pp. 132–138. On the Kennedy administration's policy toward Berlin in the context of the broader German problem, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963*, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 283–351.

²⁹ Zubok, 2007, p. 142.

³⁰ For a concise summary of U.S. attitudes and military planning toward Cuba, see Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy: Vol. VIII, 1961–1964*, Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011, pp. 108–114.

³¹ Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

³² Zubok, 2007, pp. 143–144.

³³ Zubok, 2007, p. 144; Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary*, Norton, 2006.

³⁴ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble": The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Norton, 1997.

precise motivations and the reasons for the timing of this decision. Domestic and international political pressures likely heightened his sense of responsibility for Cuban security and increased Khrushchev's susceptibility to Cuban requests for security assistance.³⁵ But scholars have also noted that the Soviet leader may have hoped to redress the strategic imbalance between the Soviet Union and the United States by improving the Soviet Union's ability to strike the United States. Earlier that year, the United States had begun to deploy new Minuteman and Titan ICBMs, which exceeded Soviet systems in number and quality and introduced new uncertainty about the Soviet capacity to survive a first strike, and had completed the positioning of U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey, on the Soviet Union's periphery.³⁶ As Khrushchev told the Presidium, which voted unanimously in support of the plan, the deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba would "equalize the balance of power" and teach the United States "what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you."³⁷

Regardless of his exact rationale for stationing nuclear weapons in Cuba, the available evidence suggests that neither Khrushchev nor other Soviet officials seriously considered the possibility that the missiles would be discovered before they became operational. The Kremlin declined a Cuban request to announce the missile deployment publicly and stipulated that "in no document should it be written that the weapons delivery was destined for Cuba."³⁸ The leadership selected a plan to transport the missiles using a minimal number of Soviet Navy vessels out of a desire to avoid attracting undue attention but otherwise appears to have been confident that a significant number of Soviet forces and equipment—as well as the missiles and their nuclear warheads—could be transported, unloaded, and stationed without detection.³⁹ Some Soviet military leaders assured Khrushchev that they could easily conceal the missiles on the island. Yet others may have deliberately misled the political leadership, gambling that the prospect of establishing a toehold so close to the United States justified the risk of detection.⁴⁰ Once the missiles became operational, Soviet military and political leaders surmised, the implicit threat of their use would encourage the United States to restrict its protests to the diplomatic

³⁵ Zubok, 2007, pp. 143–144.

³⁶ Zubok, 2007, p. 144; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Brookings Institution, 1987.

³⁷ In his memoirs, Khrushchev later claimed that he had manufactured the crisis in order to coerce the United States to remove the Jupiter missiles and to deter a U.S. invasion of Cuba, which Cuban and Soviet intelligence forecast was likely to occur soon. As several scholars have noted, this explanation likely reflects a post facto justification for the gamble rather than an accurate characterization of the Soviet leader's thinking at the time (Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., Longman, 1999; Garthoff, 1987; Zubok, 2007; Campbell and Radchenko, 2018, pp. 225–226).

³⁸ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997; Dobbs, 2008.

³⁹ Serhii Plokhyy, *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Norton, 2021.

⁴⁰ Zubok, 2007, p. 145.

level.⁴¹ “I am going to grab Kennedy by his balls,” Khrushchev assured a Cuban delegation during a July 1962 visit to Moscow to finalize arrangements for the deployment.⁴²

The Cuban Missile Crisis

On July 26, the first vessel transporting Soviet forces arrived in Cuba. The soldiers who disembarked were the vanguard of a plan, known as Operation Anadyr, to ultimately deploy five missile regiments to Cuba. Three were to be equipped with R-12 medium-range ballistic missiles, capable of reaching as far as Atlanta from the designated sites in Cuba.⁴³ The remaining two would be equipped with R-14 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), which could hold Washington, D.C., and targets across the Midwest at risk. In addition, the Soviets planned to deploy more than 50,000 Soviet military personnel to man four motorized regiments, two tank battalions, one MiG-21 regiment, and a dozen SA-2 surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries.⁴⁴ For additional protection of the missile sites, the Soviets envisioned deploying 11 IL-28 light bombers, equipped to carry conventional and nuclear loads, and two short-range missile regiments equipped with 80 nuclear-tipped weapons.⁴⁵

By late August, evidence of an apparent Soviet buildup in Cuba had reached the White House. Uncertain of the Soviet Union’s intentions, and concerned by the influx of Soviet forces and equipment, Kennedy requested on August 23 a study of options to destroy any military installations in Cuba capable of launching nuclear attacks against the United States.⁴⁶ After a U-2 flight over the island photographed several SA-2 SAM sites and Soviet guided-missile patrol boats, the White House released a public statement cautioning that the “gravest issues would arise” if the Soviet Union deployed “offensive ground-to-ground missiles” to the island, and it repeated similar warnings through diplomatic channels.⁴⁷ After a second reconnaissance flight revealed the Soviet MiG-21s and additional SA-2 sites, the President publicly disclosed that the United States had collected evidence of a Soviet military buildup in Cuba and announced that he had requested congressional approval to call up reserve forces “should this or any other crisis make it necessary.”⁴⁸ Addressing rumors of U.S. preparations for military action against Cuba,

⁴¹ Karl K. Werder, *Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962*, Air War College, April 14, 1995; Zubok, 2007.

⁴² Zubok, 2007.

⁴³ Poole, 2011, p. 161.

⁴⁴ Fursenko and Naftali, 2006, pp. 440–441.

⁴⁵ Poole, 2011, p. 161.

⁴⁶ Poole, 2011, p. 162.

⁴⁷ This transcription of the White House’s September 4, 1962, statement appears in James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Armageddon Letters: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy, “The President’s News Conference,” American Presidency Project, September 13, 1962a.

Kennedy stated that the United States was not preparing to invade Cuba but cautioned it would take action if

the Communist buildup in Cuba were to endanger or interfere with [U.S.] security in any way, including our base at Guantanamo, our passage to the Panama Canal, our missile and space activities at Cape Canaveral, or the lives of American citizens in this country, or if Cuba should ever attempt to export its aggressive purposes by force or the threat of force against any nation in this hemisphere, or become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union.⁴⁹

Although U.S. leaders recognized that the Soviet Union had increased its military assistance to Cuba and was stationing significant equipment on the island, they remained unaware of the Kremlin's decision to deploy nuclear weapons to the island. U.S. policymakers, who did not know that the Soviets had temporarily stationed medium-range missiles and their attendant nuclear warheads in East Germany in 1959, surmised that the Soviet Union would never deploy its nuclear weapons abroad.⁵⁰ They therefore overlooked signs of Soviet preparations, including public press reports, based on accounts by Cuban migrants, of the arrival of Soviet missiles on the island.⁵¹ Confusing matters further, the Soviets launched a deliberate campaign to discredit these rumors and reassure Washington that they had not deployed offensive weapons to Cuba. A Special National Intelligence Estimate, finalized on September 19, concluded that the Soviet buildup was "primarily defensive" and noted that placing medium-range ballistic missiles or IRBMs in Cuba would be "incompatible" with known Soviet policy and behavior.⁵² Another U-2 overflight eight days later found no evidence that the Soviets had stationed offensive weapons in Cuba.⁵³

The U.S. warnings did not prompt Soviet leadership to reconsider its assumption that the United States would not detect the missiles until they were operational. Contrary to U.S. intentions, the Kremlin interpreted the low U-2 flights as a U.S. attempt to signal U.S. readiness to bomb the island at any moment and therefore saw these flights as an additional motive to strengthen the island's defenses.⁵⁴ Accordingly, the Kremlin attempted to deceive the U.S. leadership by providing high-level assurances that it did not intend to deploy "offensive" systems to Cuba. Several days after President Kennedy's first warning, the Soviet ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, publicly stated that "the armaments and military equipment sent

⁴⁹ Kennedy, 1962a.

⁵⁰ Zubok, 2007, p. 144.

⁵¹ Garthoff, 1987, p. 14.

⁵² Poole, 2011, p. 163.

⁵³ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

⁵⁴ Dobbs, 2008.

to Cuba are designed exclusively for defensive purposes.”⁵⁵ On September 11, the USSR released a statement that supplies to Cuba should not be blocked because “our nuclear weapons are so powerful in their explosive force and the Soviet Union has such powerful rockets to carry these nuclear warheads, that there is no need to search for sites for them beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union.”⁵⁶

In the meantime, the Soviet buildup continued apace. By October 4, the Soviets had delivered 36 R-12 missiles and their associated nuclear warheads, as well as six nuclear bombs for the IL-28s, 12 nuclear charges for short-range rockets, and 80 conventional cruise missile warheads, to Mariel Harbor, just southwest of Florida’s Key West. Another set of 24 R-14 nuclear warheads, as well as additional equipment, was at sea.⁵⁷

U.S. Discovery of the Soviet Missile Sites, October 14–22

On October 14, an American U-2 plane made a scheduled flight over Soviet positions in Cuba (Figure 2.1). Despite the fact that the missile site construction was incomplete, the Soviets did not attempt to camouflage the area because they believed that the island’s palm trees would provide natural concealment.⁵⁸ Soviet observers noted the U-2 flight but failed to report that the missiles may have been discovered; four days later, the commander of the Soviet forces in Cuba assured Khrushchev that the United States did not suspect that the deployment was underway.⁵⁹ Unaware of the possible detection, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko reiterated to Kennedy on October 18 that Soviet support to Cuba consisted solely of defensive capabilities.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 22, 1962c.

⁵⁶ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

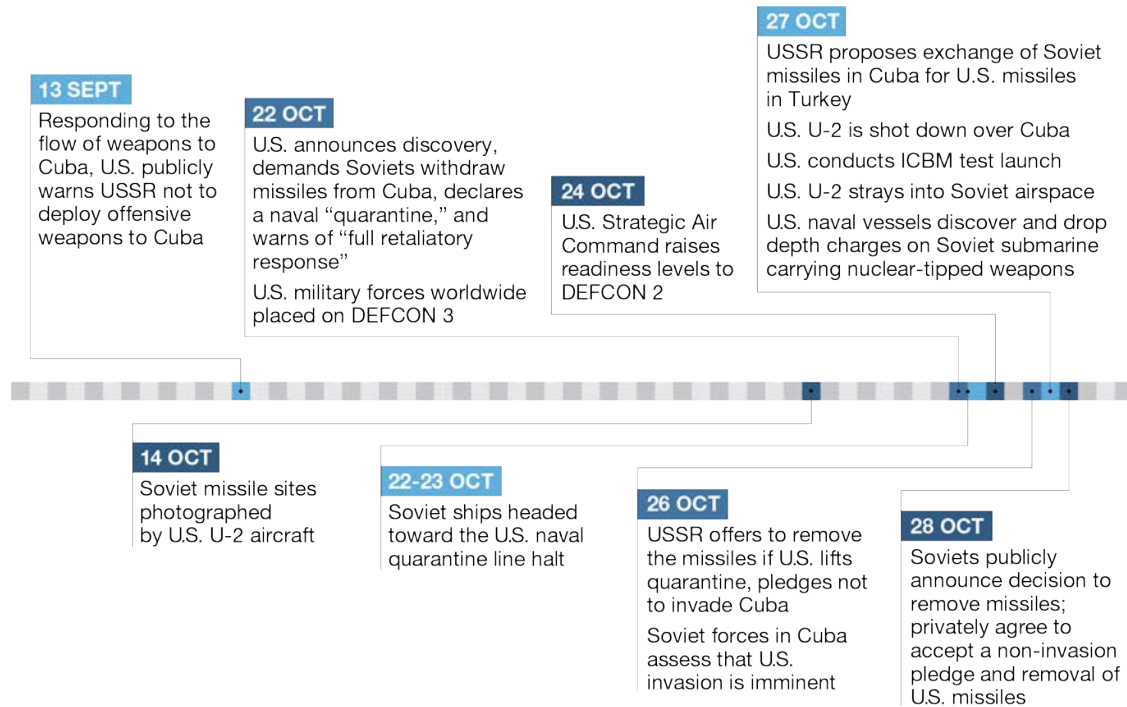
⁵⁷ Poole, 2011, p. 163.

⁵⁸ Other failed attempts to camouflage the military buildup include military units arriving in civilian clothing, lining up in lines of four on the docks, then marching with Red Army convoys sporting Soviet insignias, including the Red Army Star (Allison and Zelikow, 1999).

⁵⁹ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

⁶⁰ During the meeting, Kennedy offered to pledge that the United States would not invade Cuba. Gromyko reportedly rejected the offer and did not pass it along to Khrushchev (Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Norton, 1971; Allison and Zelikow, 1999).

Figure 2.1. Timeline of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis



NOTE: DEFCON = Defense Condition.

In fact, the U-2 plane had photographed three Soviet launch sites. Once the intelligence community processed the images, U.S. analysts located medium-range ballistic missiles and missile launch equipment in several places on the island (Figure 2.2). Later in the afternoon on October 15, the director of the National Photographic Interpretation Center confirmed the finding. U.S. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor were informed of the discovery that evening. The next morning, Bundy briefed the President on the grim discovery while others presented the photographs to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and the service chiefs.⁶¹

U.S. leaders interpreted the presence of Soviet ballistic missiles as a clear violation of the President's prior ultimatum and a demonstration of Moscow's resolve to "deter any active U.S. intervention to weaken or overthrow the Castro regime, which they apparently regard as likely and imminent," as an October 16 CIA memorandum stated.⁶² The Soviet Union's immediate objectives were unclear, but the fact that the Kremlin had sought to conceal the nature of the buildup heightened U.S. suspicions and conditioned policymakers to assume malicious intent.⁶³

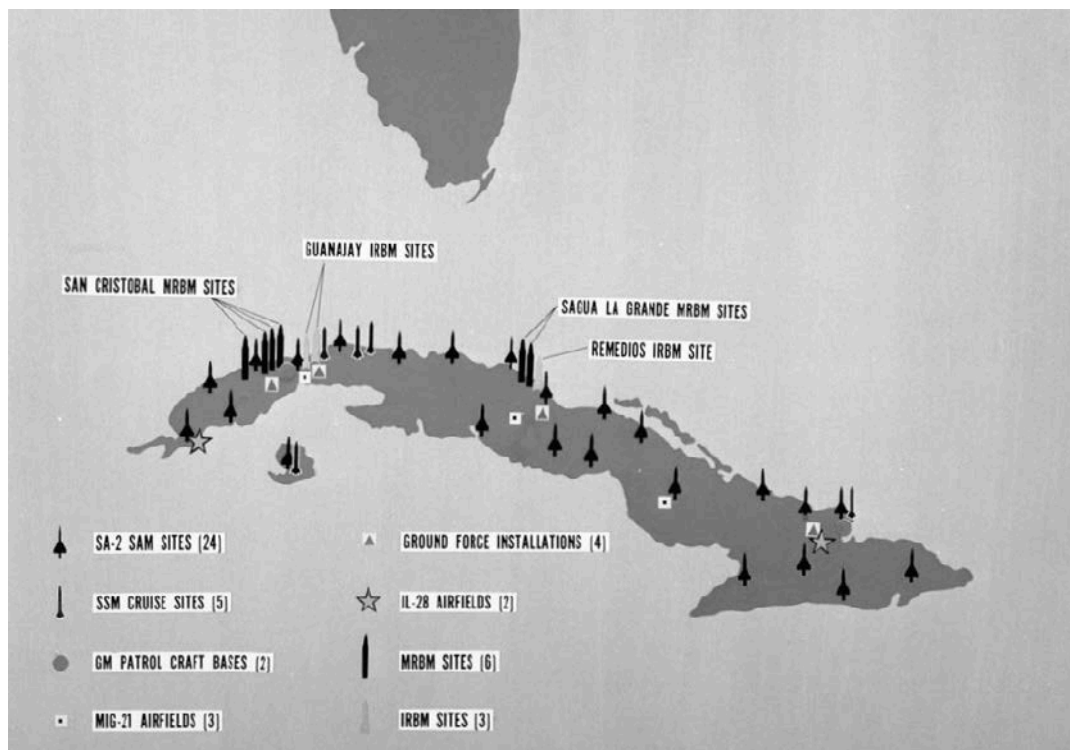
⁶¹ Dobbs, 2008.

⁶² Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

⁶³ Garthoff, 1987.

Senior officials, including Kennedy and Bundy, had publicly stated as recently as October 14 that the United States did not believe the Soviet Union had violated the U.S. ultimatum, partially because of Soviet statements.⁶⁴ Now, they interpreted the deployment as an explicit challenge that the United States must address or else risk undermining the credibility of other U.S. threats and commitments. “Last month I said we weren’t going to [allow it]. Last month I should have said that we don’t care,” Kennedy later recalled. “But when we said we’re not going to, then they go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then I think our risks increase.”⁶⁵

Figure 2.2. U.S. Assessment of the Soviet Military Buildup in Cuba



SOURCE: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, “Department of Defense Cuban Missile Crisis Briefing Materials,” February 6, 1963.

NOTE: MRBM = medium-range ballistic missile; SSM = surface-to-surface missile.

Informed that the missile sites would become operational in ten days, Kennedy directed Bundy to convene a special group to develop a course of action and provide advice. Accordingly, Bundy established what would come to be known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (or ExComm), which the President chaired and which included Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Taylor, and Bundy,

⁶⁴ Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Dobbs, 2008.

⁶⁵ Allison and Zelikow, 1999, p. 335.

among others.⁶⁶ Over the course of the crisis, the group went to extraordinary lengths to conceal the frequency and purpose of its sessions from public attention and to ensure the Soviet Union did not prematurely learn of the U.S. discovery.⁶⁷

From October 16 to 21, the ExComm considered a variety of potential responses representing differing escalation risks. The group agreed that the United States could not tolerate the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba and needed to secure their removal. It quickly rejected the option of contacting the Soviets to inform them of the U.S. discovery because of concern that it might cede the initiative to the Soviets if a major crisis erupted.⁶⁸ Similarly, the ExComm also determined that issuing another public ultimatum demanding the removal of the missiles would be insufficient. Instead, the group reached a tacit agreement that some type of military response would be necessary to compel the Soviets to remove the missiles. Two general options predominated their conversations: (1) the imposition of a naval blockade of Cuba and (2) air strikes targeting the three identified missile bases, SAM sites, and associated airfields, along with other infrastructure.⁶⁹

The President's advisers divided into two general factions. Leading one camp, the Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated for forceful military action and proposed expanded air strikes and preparations for a follow-on amphibious invasion if necessary. They rejected the idea of a blockade, maintaining that it would not compel the Soviets to either halt work on the missile sites or remove missiles on the island. Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay extended the argument a step further, claiming that a blockade combined with political action would prompt the Soviets to retaliate and raise the risk of the parties just "gradually drift[ing] into a war under conditions that are at great disadvantage to us, with missiles staring us in the face, that can knock out our airfields in the southeastern portion [of the United States]."⁷⁰ Maintaining that military action would ultimately be necessary, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged the President to exercise his first-mover advantage and act before the missiles became operational.⁷¹ "I just don't see any other solution except direct military intervention right now," LeMay told the ExComm.⁷²

⁶⁶ Daryl G. Press, "Power, Reputation, and Assessments of Credibility During the Cuban Missile Crisis," paper presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 30–September 2, 2001.

⁶⁷ Dobbs, 2008.

⁶⁸ Garthoff, 1987.

⁶⁹ On the options proposed and the ExComm's deliberations, see Poole, 2011, pp. 165–174.

⁷⁰ Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises: Vol. 2, September–October 21, 1962*, Norton, 2001, pp. 583–584.

⁷¹ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, "Minutes of the 505th Meeting of the National Security Council," October 20, 1962a.

⁷² Naftali and Zelikow, 2001, pp. 583–584.

Kennedy initially was receptive to these arguments and directed his military advisers to prepare additional analysis to evaluate this approach's likelihood of success.⁷³ But by October 19, a second camp of the President's civilian advisers urged the President to consider a more incremental course of action that could coerce the Soviets to concede to U.S. demands while reducing the danger of undesired or accidental escalation that could lead to a major war. Convinced that the Soviets would respond to an attack on Cuba by retaliating against U.S. forces in West Berlin or the Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy, McNamara, Robert Kennedy, and other senior officials favored more-limited military action, such as a blockade of offensive weapons, paired with diplomatic overtures.⁷⁴ Because U.S. military action would be focused on the incoming Soviet ships, rather than the USSR's ongoing activities on Cuba, this option would convey U.S. opposition while retaining the possibility of more-forceful action if the Soviets did not withdraw.⁷⁵ As Secretary of State Rusk summarized, the aim was to ensure that "the great powers could step back from the brink and have time to consider and work out a solution rather than be drawn inexorably from one action to another and escalate into general nuclear war."⁷⁶ "It's a problem of properly conditioning Khrushchev for our future moves," McNamara summarized.⁷⁷

Advocates for a more graduated response to the crisis also emphasized the potential political risks associated with either preemptive air strikes or an invasion of Cuba. Robert Kennedy and McNamara predicted that the international community would view air strikes as an act of aggression, an outcome that would undermine support for the United States and strengthen the Soviet position.⁷⁸ Drawing comparisons to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Robert Kennedy said that a surprise attack was "not within [U.S.] traditions."⁷⁹

Concerned about the chance of escalation, the President ultimately decided on October 20 to impose a quarantine and to authorize preparations for surgical air strikes and a potential invasion of Cuba if the Soviets did not cooperate.⁸⁰ Senior officials were uncertain whether the less assertive military action would compel the Soviet Union to change its behavior, and they still feared that the Soviets could retaliate with force, but they calculated that it would buy both sides

⁷³ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

⁷⁴ Fursenko and Naftali, 2006; Press, 2001; Poole, 2011, p. 169.

⁷⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Cuban Missile Crisis," in Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁷⁶ Lillian Goldman Law Library, "Cuban Missile Crisis Record of Meeting," October 19, 1962.

⁷⁷ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

⁷⁸ Robert Kennedy argued an air strike "could not be undertaken by the U.S. if we were to maintain our moral position at home and around the globe" (Paul A. Anderson, "Decision Making by Objection and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2, June 1983).

⁷⁹ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

⁸⁰ Anderson, 1983.

time to process the significance of the standoff and shift the decision to either escalate or de-escalate onto the Soviets.⁸¹ As a memorandum outlining the President's choices summarized, the naval action was seen as "the step least likely to precipitate general war while still causing the Soviets . . . to back down."⁸²

Over the next two days, preparations to conduct air strikes against Soviet SAM sites and MiG airfields in Cuba continued.⁸³ Concerned that U.S. personnel or local forces might fire the Jupiter missiles in Turkey or Italy without authorization if their sites came under attack, the President directed that U.S. commanders in Europe be instructed to destroy or render the systems inoperable if an attempt to launch without presidential approval arose.⁸⁴ Strategic Air Command elevated the alert status of its nuclear bomber force and began dispersing bombers across 33 civilian and military airfields. Air Defense Command also dispersed its aircraft, including those that were, for the first time in the command's history, armed with nuclear weapons.⁸⁵

In a presidential address broadcast nationally by television and radio that evening (October 22), Kennedy announced the discovery of "unmistakable evidence" that the Soviet Union was installing nuclear-capable missiles in Cuba "under a cloak of secrecy and deception."⁸⁶ Claiming that the "greatest danger of all would be to do nothing," the President declared that the United States would implement "a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba[,] continu[e] and increas[e] close surveillance of Cuba and its military build-up," call up reinforcements at Guantanamo, and convene a regional diplomatic meeting to discuss the threat.⁸⁷ Kennedy called on Khrushchev to halt the buildup and warned that provocative actions by the Soviets in any part of the world, including West Berlin, would be met by "whatever action is needed."⁸⁸ During the President's speech, 22 interceptor aircraft went airborne in preparation for a Cuban military reprisal. With the exception of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, the United States placed its military forces worldwide on DEFCON 3.⁸⁹

The United States Draws the Quarantine Line, October 22–24

Hours before Kennedy's address, Khrushchev learned that the U.S. President was preparing to make a public declaration regarding the Soviet threat. Unsure whether Kennedy's comments

⁸¹ Anderson, 1983; Press, 2001.

⁸² Ted Sorenson, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, Harper, 2008, p. 295.

⁸³ Poole, 2011, pp. 171–174.

⁸⁴ Poole, 2011, p. 174.

⁸⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis*, January 4, 1963.

⁸⁶ Kennedy, 1962c.

⁸⁷ Kennedy, 1962c.

⁸⁸ Kennedy, 1971. Three hours prior to the televised announcement, Kennedy informed lawmakers of the upcoming announcement of nuclear missiles in Cuba (Schlesinger, 2004).

⁸⁹ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

would pertain to Cuba or to Berlin, Khrushchev convened an emergency session of the Presidium to discuss the possibility of a wider war.⁹⁰ No one in the hall doubted that a U.S. invasion of Cuba was possible, but Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky, in an apparent attempt to prevent panic, noted that the United States would be unable to execute an amphibious or airborne assault within 24 hours.⁹¹ The Presidium therefore decided to take steps to reduce the prospect of an accidental nuclear exchange. Aware that Malinovsky previously had orally authorized Soviet field commanders in Cuba to use tactical nuclear weapons if the United States attacked, Moscow transmitted an urgent order shortly before midnight directing the commander of Soviet forces in Cuba to “put all his forces on alert” but not to prepare for the use of any nuclear weapons.⁹²

Shortly after 1 a.m. in Moscow, and an hour before Kennedy’s scheduled address, the Kremlin received advance copies of the U.S. President’s prepared remarks, as well as a private letter reiterating U.S. opposition to the presence of offensive weapons in Cuba and delineating the actions the United States viewed as provocative.⁹³ Soviet leaders were relieved to discover that a U.S. invasion was not imminent, but the U.S. announcement of a quarantine raised other challenges. The initial decision to deploy nuclear weapons to Cuba had been premised on the assumption that the missiles would not be revealed until they were operational, and there was now no plan in place for how to respond if the United States detected Soviet preparations prematurely. None of the IRBMs or their warheads had reached Cuba, and barely half of the planned medium-range missiles were on the island. Moreover, two ships transporting the longer-range systems, the *Kasimov* and *Krasnodar*, were sailing toward the quarantine line, and four *Foxtrot*-class diesel submarines, each carrying nuclear-tipped torpedoes, were nearing the island.⁹⁴ The Soviet Union had to decide what to do about the missiles that were still en route, whether to challenge the U.S. quarantine, and whether to expand the confrontation.

The Soviet leadership agreed that the four submarines and one ship, the *Aleksandrovsk*, which carried 24 1-megaton nuclear warheads and was 200 miles northeast of Cuba at the time, should proceed to the nearest Cuban ports.⁹⁵ Although the ship was already within the quarantine line, the submarines would have to cross through U.S. antisubmarine defenses to reach Cuba. Mistakenly believing the United States lacked the ability to detect the submarines’ movements,

⁹⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 240.

⁹¹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 241.

⁹² Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 242.

⁹³ John F. Kennedy, “Letter from President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev, October 22, 1962,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 22, 1962b. An hour before the scheduled address, Secretary of State Dean Rusk provided an advance copy of the speech to the Soviet ambassador to the United States. Concurrently, the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union transmitted a copy to the Foreign Ministry in Moscow.

⁹⁴ Svetlana V. Savranskaya, “New Sources on the Role of Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, April 2005.

⁹⁵ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 247.

Soviet officials were confident that the *Foxtrots* could reach Cuba without provoking a confrontation.⁹⁶ The Soviets ordered the other 30 inbound vessels, which were carrying another 50 nuclear warheads, to either halt or return to the Soviet Union to avoid encountering U.S. Navy vessels. After initially deciding to allow a ship carrying IRBMs to continue sailing, Khrushchev ordered on October 23 that it halt outside the quarantine line.⁹⁷

Still, the danger of a wider war, which Soviet leaders believed would quickly escalate to a global nuclear exchange, hung over the discussion in Moscow. Khrushchev continued to defend his decision to deploy the missiles to Cuba and dismissed the prospect of withdrawing unilaterally.⁹⁸ The Presidium agreed to raise the alert status of the Soviet armed forces and directed Marshal Andrei Grechko, then–commander of the Warsaw Pact, to “raise the military readiness of the military, navy, and air forces of the United Military Force.”⁹⁹ When members of the Presidium voiced fears that the crisis would lead to nuclear war, Khrushchev assured them that no steps would be taken that might provoke “the use of nuclear weapons against Cuba” but that the Soviet Union would not be intimidated.¹⁰⁰ “[T]hey can attack us, and we shall respond,” he told the group.¹⁰¹

Early in the morning of October 23, Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy to warn that the United States had started down a course “which may lead to catastrophic consequences for world peace.”¹⁰² In the first of what would become a series of letters exchanged between the two leaders, the Soviet leader struck a tone that was “threatening as well as defiant.”¹⁰³ He reiterated that the armaments were “intended solely for defensive purposes” and warned that the Soviet Union might challenge the quarantine line, which he characterized as a violation of international norms and evidence that Washington was embarking down “the path of aggressive actions both against Cuba and against the Soviet Union.”¹⁰⁴ In a second letter on October 24, Khrushchev warned Kennedy, “Our instructions to Soviet mariners are to observe strictly the universally accepted norms of navigation in international waters and not to retreat one step from them.”¹⁰⁵

Unaware of the Soviet decision to turn the ships around, the United States continued to prepare for the possibility of a confrontation if the Soviets challenged the quarantine or launched

⁹⁶ Zubok, 2007.

⁹⁷ Allison and Zelikow, 1999, p. 348.

⁹⁸ Fursenko and Naftali, 2006.

⁹⁹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 248.

¹⁰⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, 2006.

¹⁰¹ Zubok, 2007.

¹⁰² Nikita Khrushchev, “Letter from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 24, 1962,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 24, 1962b.

¹⁰³ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 248.

¹⁰⁴ Khrushchev, 1962b.

¹⁰⁵ Khrushchev, 1962b.

preemptive strikes against the United States. On October 23, the President approved and signed a proclamation outlining the terms of the quarantine, which was to go into effect at 10 a.m. the following day. It clarified that the United States would stop and search any vessels that reached a line 500 miles from Cuba's shores and would prohibit the passage of cargo containing "surface-to-surface missiles; bomber aircraft; bombs, air-to-surface rockets and guided missiles; warheads for any of the above weapons; [and] mechanical or electronic equipment to support or operate the above items."¹⁰⁶ Notably, the United States would allow food and fuel through the quarantine line out of concern that Khrushchev would retaliate by blockading Berlin.¹⁰⁷

Over the course of the day, the United States took additional measures to reduce uncertainty over Soviet intentions and to prepare for a potential war. More than 200,000 U.S. troops began to mass in Florida, and evacuations of civilians and children from the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base began.¹⁰⁸ The United States made no effort to disguise these activities, and the Presidium learned about the concentration of U.S. forces in Florida by the morning of October 22.¹⁰⁹ The President authorized low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba to improve U.S. understanding of military developments on the island and to inform ongoing planning for air strikes or an invasion. Anticipating the risk that the Soviets or Cubans might shoot down a U-2 plane over the island, Kennedy approved an ExComm contingency plan to destroy the Soviet SAM network on Cuba if any U.S. aircraft were downed.¹¹⁰ Acknowledging the prospect that the Soviets might seek to expand the confrontation horizontally, he instructed the Department of Defense to prepare a battalion-size contingency force in case the Soviets attempted to cut off access to West Berlin in retaliation.¹¹¹ In anticipation of potential vertical escalation, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed Strategic Air Command to begin generating forces in preparation to raise readiness levels to DEFCON 2 at 10 a.m. the following day.¹¹²

Meanwhile, the White House continued to receive conflicting information about the Soviet Union's response. Despite Khrushchev's letter acknowledging the presence of "the armaments which are in Cuba," senior representatives of the Soviet government—including the Soviet representative to the United Nations (UN)—continued to publicly refute allegations of the presence of Soviet missiles and to imply that the Soviet Union would not abide by the

¹⁰⁶ Office of President John F. Kennedy, *Proclamation 3504: Interdiction of the Delivery of Offensive Weapons to Cuba*, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 23, 1962.

¹⁰⁷ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

¹⁰⁹ Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Fursenko and Naftali, 2006, p. 468.

¹¹⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 250; Poole, 2011, p. 176.

¹¹¹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 251.

¹¹² Poole, 2011, p. 176. Some of the aspects of raising the alert status included raising the number of active nuclear weapons; flying more than 60 aircraft on daily flights across the Atlantic into a holding pattern over the Mediterranean; and loading aircraft in the United States, the Pacific, and Europe with nuclear weapons (Dobbs, 2008).

blockade.¹¹³ That evening, the ExComm learned of the unexpected discovery of Soviet submarines moving into the Caribbean and was presented with evidence of an “extraordinary number” of coded messages sent to Soviet ships. Uncertain of Soviet intentions, Kennedy ordered the Navy to give “the highest priority to tracking the submarines and put into effect the greatest possible safety measures.”¹¹⁴ In a second, short letter to Khrushchev, Kennedy called on both sides to “show prudence and do nothing to allow events to make the situation more difficult to control than it already is.”¹¹⁵

On the morning of October 24, the ExComm met for what one participant later described as “the most trying, the most difficult, and the most filled with tension” meeting of the crisis.¹¹⁶ After a presentation of evidence that the Soviet ships were still approaching the quarantine line, the group learned that a Soviet submarine appeared to have positioned itself near the blockade line to interfere with U.S. operations.¹¹⁷ The previous day, Defense Secretary McNamara had transmitted instructions to the Navy to use established procedures, such as the dropping of hand grenade-size practice depth charges, to induce submarines to surface and identify themselves.¹¹⁸ The United States also sent messages clarifying “Submarine Surfacing and Identification Procedures” to Moscow and other third-party governments.¹¹⁹ “Our commanders have been instructed to avoid hostilities if at all possible, but this is what we must be prepared for, and this is what we must expect,” McNamara informed the President.¹²⁰ But a new message interrupted the meeting with information that the Soviet ships bound for Cuba had stopped or reversed course, prompting Kennedy to direct U.S. forces to suspend all intercepts for one hour to allow additional information to be collected. “We’re eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked,” Secretary Rusk reportedly whispered to another attendee.¹²¹

That same day, Khrushchev received word that another transport ship, the *Aleksandrovsk*, and its cargo of 24 1-megaton warheads for R-14 missiles, as well as 44 14-kiloton warheads for the Soviet FKR cruise missiles, had docked in Cuba the previous morning. Their arrival reduced the Soviet leaders’ fears that the U.S. Navy would interdict Soviet warheads at sea and bolstered

¹¹³ Nikita Khrushchev, “Chairman Khrushchev’s Letter to President Kennedy,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 23, 1962a.

¹¹⁴ Kennedy, 1971.

¹¹⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Letter from President Kennedy to Nikita Khrushchev,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 23, 1962d.

¹¹⁶ Kennedy, 1971.

¹¹⁷ Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Kennedy, 1971, pp. 67–72.

¹¹⁸ William Burr and Thomas S. Blanton, *The Submarines of October: U.S. and Soviet Naval Encounters During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, National Security Archive, October 31, 2002.

¹¹⁹ Burr and Blanton, 2002.

¹²⁰ Kennedy, 1971, p. 70.

¹²¹ Poole, 2011, p. 177.

the Soviet presence on the island. In a meeting with the Presidium later that day, the Soviet leadership decided to therefore maintain pressure on the United States until the missiles became operational. In an uncompromising letter to President Kennedy, Khrushchev denounced the blockade as an “act of aggression” that was “pushing mankind toward the abyss of a world missile-nuclear war” and warned that incoming Soviet ships would defend themselves if necessary.¹²²

The Soviets Offer a Trade, October 25–27

By the time the Presidium reconvened on October 25, however, Khrushchev had adopted a more moderate tone. His assertive letter the previous day had not provoked its intended response; indeed, Kennedy’s reply, which arrived that morning, simply reiterated the U.S. position that the Soviet Union was responsible for initiating the crisis. During the session, Khrushchev stated that the Soviet Union would ultimately have to remove its missiles from Cuba if it hoped to avoid war, and he warned that the Soviets would need to find an alternative means to defend the Castro regime.¹²³ For the first time, he raised the prospect of offering the United States a compromise solution, in which the Soviet Union would trade its missiles in Cuba for assurances that the United States would not invade or pledges to withdraw the U.S. missiles from Turkey.¹²⁴ “These are correct and reasonable tactics” to avoid a war that would devastate the Soviet Union, he argued, suggesting “this initiative” could “strengthen Cuba” in the end. Though this position marked a sudden change in the Soviet stance, the Presidium voted in approval.¹²⁵

After deciding that it would seek to trade its missiles in Cuba for U.S. concessions elsewhere, the Presidium convened without a decision as to whether or when to extend an offer to Washington.¹²⁶ But over the next several days, Soviet officials received additional worrisome indicators that suggested they needed to take more-rapid action to defuse the crisis. During a meeting of the UN Security Council on October 25, U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN Adlai Stevenson released photographs of the Soviet missile sites in Cuba in an attempt to build international support for the U.S. position and increase the political pressure on the Soviet Union to withdraw its forces from the island.¹²⁷ Descriptions of the U.S. evidence, as well as Stevenson’s heated exchange with the Soviet representative, were widely publicized in the West

¹²² Nikita Khrushchev, “Letter from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 24, 1962,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 24, 1962b.

¹²³ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 259.

¹²⁴ Zubok, 2007; Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 260.

¹²⁵ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 260.

¹²⁶ Khrushchev reportedly suggested that the leadership attend the Bolshoi Theater that evening to calm tensions in Moscow (Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 260).

¹²⁷ Dobbs, 2008, pp. 130–131.

and had a “devastating effect” of publicizing the extent of Soviet deception and persuading skeptical international observers of the U.S. claims.¹²⁸

A series of coincident reports heightened Soviet concerns that U.S. patience was running out. On October 25, the GRU (Soviet military intelligence service) office in the Soviet Union’s embassy in Washington intercepted an order from the Joint Chiefs of Staff directing Strategic Air Command to place its forces on a nuclear alert.¹²⁹ That same day, a Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) informant in Washington reported that he had overheard two *New York Herald Tribune* journalists discussing plans to fly to Florida soon to “cover the operation to capture Cuba” that “could begin at any moment.”¹³⁰ The evidence was flimsy but nevertheless was quickly reported back to Moscow, where it was compiled with reports of changes in the U.S. alert condition and reports of U.S. orders for hospitals to prepare to receive casualties and was transmitted to Khrushchev on October 26.¹³¹ The Soviet leader appears to have taken the warning seriously and told members of the Presidium that day that the Kremlin had “been warned that war could start today.”¹³² Fearing time was running out, Khrushchev dictated a letter to Kennedy on October 26 proposing the Soviet Union withdraw its nuclear missiles in exchange for a declaration that the United States would not invade Cuba or support an invasion by other forces.¹³³

Coincidentally, a KGB agent in Washington, acting without authorization from the Kremlin, had attempted to propose a similar arrangement through a back channel that same day. Convinced that the superpowers were teetering on the edge of war, the Soviet intelligence officer approached a U.S. journalist with ties to the State Department in hopes he might transmit a proposal to dismantle and remove the missile installations in exchange for a U.S. guarantee to

¹²⁸ Dobbs, 2008; Kennedy, 1971.

¹²⁹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 258.

¹³⁰ KGB agents arranged to accidentally run into Rogers the next morning and inquired whether Kennedy was a man of his word. Rogers replied, “He will do what he says he will do.” The KGB took this as confirmation that the United States was planning to invade (Paul Kan, “The Bartender Who Accidentally Saved the World,” *War on the Rocks*, October 13, 2014). Anatoly Gorsky verified the report and sent it to Moscow amid a dearth of information on the U.S. plans sent by KGB agents to the USSR in recent days. Scholars believe it is likely that Gorsky was desperate for fresh news and thus hurried the report (Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “Soviet Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1998, pp. 78–80).

¹³¹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 262.

¹³² Plokhly, 2021.

¹³³ Nikita Khrushchev, “Department of State Telegram Transmitting Letter from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 26, 1962,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 26, 1962c.

not invade Cuba.¹³⁴ The journalist then sent the proposal to the State Department as an official Soviet correspondence.¹³⁵

Before the United States could respond, however, a series of incidents in the Caribbean caused Khrushchev to reconsider his position once again. On October 25, two U.S. ships failed to intercept a Soviet tanker, the *Bucharest*, but decided to allow the ship to pass after determining it was unlikely to contain nuclear weapons.¹³⁶ The next day, the U.S. Navy stopped and searched a Lebanese freighter under Soviet charter but ultimately allowed it through the quarantine line.¹³⁷ The uneven enforcement of the blockade convinced Khrushchev to reconsider the U.S. leadership's resolve and, some historians have suggested, may have persuaded him to hold off for greater U.S. concessions.¹³⁸

Yet the situation threatened to deteriorate again on October 27 when the Soviet Ministry of Defense received a coded flash message from the commander of Soviet forces in Cuba warning that a U.S. air strike was imminent and reporting that Castro had ordered the Cuban air defense units to fire on any incoming U.S. airplanes.¹³⁹ Under pressure from Defense Minister Malinovsky, Khrushchev signed an order to the Soviet commander in Cuba, who controlled all weapons on the island, authorizing the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a U.S. attack on the island.¹⁴⁰ A few hours later, Khrushchev received an alarming letter from Castro repeating the claim that the United States was readying to attack in 24 to 72 hours; Castro proposed that the Soviet Union launch a nuclear first strike against the United States. The crisis, the Cuban leader wrote, presented the Soviet Union with an opportunity "to eliminate this danger forever, in an act of the most legitimate self-defense. However harsh and terrible the solution, there would be no other."¹⁴¹ After receiving the letter, Khrushchev became concerned that Castro might provoke nuclear attack because of his "obsession with death and self-sacrifice."¹⁴²

But despite the evidence his subordinates were presenting to him, the Soviet premier doubted that the United States was preparing to strike. "I think they won't venture to do this," he told the Presidium, noting that five days had passed since the announcement of a quarantine without

¹³⁴ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, pp. 263–265.

¹³⁵ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, pp. 265, 270–272; John Scali, "Memorandum from ABC Correspondent John Scali to the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman)," memorandum to Roger Hilsman, Jr., John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 26, 1962.

¹³⁶ Kennedy, 1971; Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

¹³⁷ Kennedy, 1971.

¹³⁸ Scholars note that U.S. officials had been concerned that the sporadic enforcement would send a mixed or weak signal to Moscow (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Fursenko and Naftali, 2006).

¹³⁹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, pp. 272–273.

¹⁴⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, pp. 271–273.

¹⁴¹ Fidel Castro, letter to Nikita Khrushchev, October 26, 1962.

¹⁴² Castro, 1962; Dobbs, 2008.

further military action.¹⁴³ Claiming that Moscow's demonstration of resolve had convinced Washington to reconsider the feasibility of an invasion, he suggested that the Soviet Union now faced an opportunity to push for the "liquidation of the bases in Turkey."¹⁴⁴

Despite the dire warnings from Cuba, Khrushchev chose to increase Soviet demands that same day. In a letter to Kennedy dictated before the Presidium, the Soviet leader explicitly stated that the Kremlin would "agree to remove those weapons from Cuba which you regard as offensive" if the United States would "evacuate its analogous weapons from Turkey."¹⁴⁵ Following the mutual drawdown, the parties "would pledge to the UN Security Council to respect the integrity of the frontiers and sovereignty" of Turkey and Cuba.¹⁴⁶ Mindful of the possibility that the letter could take time to arrive, the Presidium decided to take the additional precaution of broadcasting the message on Radio Moscow. While the letter proposing terms to defuse the crisis was read over the radio, Soviet leaders issued a new order to the commander of Soviet forces in Cuba stating that he was "forbidden to apply nuclear warheads . . . without authorization from Moscow."¹⁴⁷

Close Calls and Cooperation, October 27–28

By publicly declaring its willingness to negotiate, the Soviet Union had taken a significant step toward reducing tensions over Cuba.¹⁴⁸ Still, the sudden change in Soviet demands, and the new use of a public channel, confused U.S. policymakers, who also expressed concern that a public agreement to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey would undermine NATO cohesion.¹⁴⁹ Unsure how to proceed, the President and his advisers agreed to stall for time in order to test Khrushchev's intentions and see whether he might be willing to settle for his original, lesser terms.¹⁵⁰ The White House issued a formal statement rejecting Khrushchev's terms, although it acknowledged that the elements were "generally acceptable."¹⁵¹

But even as the two sides began to move toward a negotiated solution, the crisis entered its most dangerous phase the same day. On October 27, a few hours after Khrushchev transcribed

¹⁴³ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, paperback ed., Norton, 2004, p. 569.

¹⁴⁴ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, pp. 274–275. In another book, the authors suggest Khrushchev may have been influenced by American columnist Walter Lippmann, who suggested the trade in a news commentary that Khrushchev read (Fursenko and Naftali, 2006).

¹⁴⁵ Khrushchev, 1962b.

¹⁴⁶ Zubok, 2007, p. 147.

¹⁴⁷ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 276.

¹⁴⁸ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 277.

¹⁴⁹ Dobbs, 2008.

¹⁵⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 279.

¹⁵¹ Dean Rusk, "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union," in Charles S. Sampson, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963: Vol. VI, Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996.

his letter to Kennedy, Soviet forces in Cuba detected a U.S. U-2 aircraft near Guantanamo. Mistakenly believing the plane was conducting reconnaissance for a U.S. air attack the following day, the local commander ordered a SA-2 unit to shoot, killing the U.S. pilot.¹⁵² An hour later, the White House learned that U.S. reconnaissance planes had come under fire from Cuban anti-aircraft batteries. The attacks crossed a clearly articulated U.S. threshold, and the President's advisers noted that U.S. aircraft were already standing on 30-minute alert to destroy the Soviet SAM network in Cuba. But Kennedy, unsure how to reconcile the provocation with Khrushchev's multiple, conflicting messages and unwilling to risk an all-out war based on limited information, chose instead to wait.¹⁵³ "It isn't the first step that concerns me, but both sides escalating to the fourth or fifth step and we don't go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so," he told the ExComm.¹⁵⁴

Although U.S. policymakers focused on the U-2 downing, three separate and coincidental events also increased the possibility of an inadvertent escalation during this period. Seemingly unaware of the possibility that the Soviets might misinterpret their actions, authorities at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California proceeded with a prescheduled test launch of an Atlas ICBM on October 26 without first contacting the Pentagon or informing U.S. political authorities. Because Strategic Air Command had raised the alert status, other missiles at the same site had already been paired with nuclear warheads and were on full alert. As one scholar has pointed out, "Had the Soviets monitored the launch, they might have thought a preemptive strike was beginning and reacted accordingly with a strike of their own."¹⁵⁵ Another near miss occurred the following day, when a U.S. U-2 pilot flying an air sampling mission accidentally strayed into Soviet territory, prompting the Soviets to scramble MiGs to intercept and down the aircraft. Alaska Air Defense Command dispatched two F-102 interceptors, which were armed with nuclear warheads because of the elevated alert levels, to intercept the Soviet MiGs and guide the lost pilot back to U.S. territory. In the aftermath, Defense Secretary McNamara, who was not informed of the missing aircraft for more than 90 minutes after it entered Soviet airspace, suspended further U-2 air sampling missions.¹⁵⁶

But perhaps the most dangerous moment of the crisis occurred near the blockade line, where U.S. destroyers were tracking four Soviet *Foxtrot* submarines. Unaware that the submarines each carried nuclear-tipped missiles or that their captains were authorized to launch if attacked, the U.S. vessels released practice depth charges to compel the submarines to surface. The Soviet command, believing it was under attack, loaded its nuclear torpedo and received the requisite

¹⁵² Dobbs, 2008.

¹⁵³ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 281.

¹⁵⁴ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

¹⁵⁵ Richard M. Pious, "The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Limits of Crisis Management," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 116, No. 1, Spring 2001, p. 85.

¹⁵⁶ Dobbs, 2008, pp. 328–330.

approval of three officers onboard to launch. At the last moment, the Chief of Staff of the Submarine Brigade, who coincidentally happened to be on board the vessel, overruled the decision. He refused to fire and persuaded the captain to surface instead.¹⁵⁷ The United States reportedly did not learn of this near miss for another four decades.¹⁵⁸

By the end of the day, both U.S. and Soviet officials felt the situation was beginning to slip from their control. “For many in the Ex Comm the flak attack and the loss of a U-2 seemed to imply that Khrushchev was not in complete [command] of the situation in Moscow,” two historians wrote, noting that these incidents raised the prospect that factions within the Soviet leadership were grappling for control.¹⁵⁹ In an attempt to gain greater clarity, Kennedy tasked his brother to meet privately with Ambassador Dobrynin to propose a political solution.¹⁶⁰ During the meeting at his home that evening, Robert Kennedy shared that his brother was ready to end the quarantine, provide a guarantee that the United States would not invade Cuba, and remove its missiles from Turkey, provided that the exchange remained secret to shield the President’s domestic position and allow the United States to manage relations within NATO. Robert Kennedy pledged that the missiles would be removed “within four to five months” and urged the Soviets to make a quick decision, warning that “events are moving too quickly” to delay.¹⁶¹ Dobrynin dispatched a cable summarizing the discussion and outlining the terms of the U.S. proposal.¹⁶²

In Moscow, Khrushchev had already decided to accept Kennedy’s terms, which the President had also transmitted through a letter to the Soviet leader. The U-2 incident heightened Khrushchev’s fears that events on the ground could force the U.S. President’s hand and illustrated the dangers of waiting for a perfect solution.¹⁶³ At the same time, the Soviet leader may have received misinformation suggesting that the White House’s patience was running out. Misunderstanding a television station’s plans to rerun the President’s October 22 press conference, the KGB incorrectly reported that Kennedy would hold a new public address early in the morning on October 28. Soviet analysts inferred that Kennedy intended to use the conference to declare war against the Soviet Union if the Soviets did not accept U.S. terms in advance.¹⁶⁴ By the time Dobrynin’s report arrived, Khrushchev was already making the case for accepting the U.S. offer to the Presidium. Drawing an analogy to Lenin’s decision to accept German terms in

¹⁵⁷ Yasmeen Serhan, “When the World Lucked Out of a Nuclear War,” *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2017; “The Cuban Missile Crisis: 40 Years Later,” interview with Thomas S. Blanton, *Washington Post*, October 16, 2002.

¹⁵⁸ Serhan, 2017.

¹⁵⁹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 281.

¹⁶⁰ Press, 2001.

¹⁶¹ Dobbs, 2008; Zubok, 2007.

¹⁶² Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, pp. 282–283.

¹⁶³ Fursenko and Naftali, 1997, p. 284.

¹⁶⁴ Dobbs, 2008.

1918 in order to improve the Soviet Union's strategic position, he warned that the country now confronted the prospect of a nuclear war. He assured the Presidium that it could trust Kennedy's pledge to secretly remove the Jupiter missiles and that the Cubans would be safe from attack for the remainder of his term, which Khrushchev predicted would last another six years. "In order to save the world, we must retreat," he noted.¹⁶⁵ The Presidium quickly agreed with Khrushchev.

To avert any further delay or miscommunication, Khrushchev chose to publicly accept Kennedy's terms on Radio Moscow.¹⁶⁶ In an announcement aired on October 28, the Soviet government stated that it had "given a new order to dismantle the weapons you described as offensive, and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union."¹⁶⁷ Abiding by the U.S. request for secrecy, this announcement made no mention of the exchange for the Jupiter missiles.¹⁶⁸

Assessing U.S. and Soviet Attempts to Manage Escalation Risks

The standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union over the presence of offensive weapons in Cuba marked one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War. Through the early days of the crisis, both countries resisted pressure to back down despite their recognition of the risks that a confrontation over Cuba could spiral into a nuclear conflict. Fearing that the other side might launch a preemptive attack, and uncertain of the other's intention to test or enforce the quarantine, both sides started preparing for a major conflict. In the end, the United States successfully navigated the crisis and compelled the Soviet Union to withdraw its missiles from Cuba without provoking undesired escalation (Table 2.1).

¹⁶⁵ Leffler, 2007.

¹⁶⁶ Khrushchev did not consult with Cuban political leaders prior to accepting Kennedy's terms and did not disclose the Jupiter arrangement with Castro. Khrushchev feared Castro would view the conditions as a personal slight and disclose the arrangement publicly (Leffler, 2007).

¹⁶⁷ Dobbs, 2008.

¹⁶⁸ Khrushchev, 1962a.

Table 2.1. Characteristics of the Cuban Missile Crisis

CHARACTERISTICS	SOVIET UNION (USSR)	UNITED STATES (US)
How did the crisis or conflict end?	Negotiated agreement	
Were major pre-conflict assessments of escalation risks accurate?	No. USSR did not anticipate deployment would be detected or would prompt militarized crisis.	No. U.S. overstated risk of Soviet reprisals in Europe.
How did each state attempt to compel the other?	Military pressure: • Mobilization of reserve forces • Limited naval brinkmanship Political pressure and inducements: • Private and public threats • Diplomatic overtures • Back-channel engagements	Military pressure: • Imposition of a naval blockade • Increase in alert status • Mobilization of reserve forces Political pressure and inducements: • Private and public threats • Diplomatic overtures • Back-channel engagements
Did each state succeed in limiting the conflict below its desired threshold?	No. USSR desired to avoid a militarized crisis.	Mixed. Avoided open conflict and nuclear exchange but moved closer to brink than desired.
Did either state achieve its primary objective?	Mixed. Did not obtain local objective but did gain limited status recognition.	Yes. Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba.

A mutual desire to avoid a catastrophic nuclear exchange contributed to the peaceful resolution of the crisis but did not make this outcome inevitable. At various points during the crisis, U.S. and Soviet leaders seriously contemplated military options they recognized were likely to trigger reprisals that would expand the conflict geographically or vertically. Despite their desire to avoid escalation, both sides believed they had limited options and feared that the crisis could escalate into a direct military conflict despite their preference to avoid that outcome. Confronted with what he perceived as credible U.S. preparations to attack Cuba, for instance, Khrushchev admitted to the Presidium, “they can attack us, and we shall respond. This may end in a big war.”¹⁶⁹ In the end, both leaders chose to step down from the brink, but only after choosing not to enforce established red lines and choosing to disregard contrary evidence of the other’s intentions. Several close calls resulting from miscommunications, misinterpretations, and inadequate command brought the countries closer to the brink of war than either desired—and could have caused inadvertent or accidental escalation.

Yet the President’s approach was likely the least perilous of the options presented. Having not foreseen the possibility that the Soviet Union would disregard U.S. warnings and provoke a confrontation over Cuba, the Kennedy administration faced a situation in which any response—including a decision to accept the Soviet deployment—entailed accepting significant risk. Indeed, the President chose to enact a blockade *despite* his advisers’ warnings that the Soviets

¹⁶⁹ Zubok, 2007.

might retaliate militarily only because it appeared to be the best of an array of bad options.¹⁷⁰ U.S. policymakers feared that allowing the Soviets to continue their buildup would only delay a confrontation to a future date, when the United States might be forced to fight in less opportune conditions. Alternately, policymakers agreed that the Joint Chiefs of Staff's recommended approach of a military strike against Cuba would guarantee Soviet military retaliation, but they disagreed over the exact form of the expected reprisals. In opposing the Soviet deployment and enacting a naval blockade, the Kennedy administration set in motion a series of events that *could* have sparked a conflict. But the risks of escalation would have been even higher if the President had selected one of the alternative approaches advocated by his military advisers to either deny Soviet gains or impose greater military costs.

Access to Accurate Information

U.S. and Soviet policymakers' reliance on incomplete, inaccurate, and unreliable evidence complicated their attempts to manage the crisis over Cuba and contributed to a series of close calls that made inadvertent escalation more likely. The first, and most obvious, informational shortfall was the United States' delayed detection of Soviet missile sites. Technical limitations, including sporadic imagery and signals intelligence collection, infrequent and low-resolution satellite photoreconnaissance coverage, and limited human intelligence collection in Cuba, restricted U.S. access to available information on Soviet preparations to transport the missiles, as well as the rationale behind the detected buildup of Soviet personnel and equipment.¹⁷¹ On the basis of inaccurate information about the composition of Soviet forces on the island and the mistaken belief that the Soviet Union had never stationed its nuclear weapons outside its borders, the United States issued an ultimatum that elevated the stakes of the crisis. The delayed U.S. realization also prevented the United States from intervening until shortly before the missiles became operational but after the Soviets had already established a significant military presence on the island, altering the potential costs of military intervention.

Even after the crisis began and additional resources became available, errors of fact and omission still marred U.S. descriptions of the Soviet presence in Cuba. U.S. decisionmakers were unaware that the Soviet Union had already delivered nuclear warheads for most of the 80 cruise missiles in Cuba and did not know that the Soviets had authorized local commanders to employ tactical nuclear weapons before the crisis began.¹⁷² U.S. analysts similarly miscounted the number of Soviet soldiers on the island, estimating that 6,000 to 8,000 had disembarked when

¹⁷⁰ Press, 2001, pp. 131–132.

¹⁷¹ Joseph W. Caddell, Jr., "Corona over Cuba: The Missile Crisis and the Early Limitations of Satellite Imagery Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2016; Raymond L. Garthoff, "US Intelligence in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1998.

¹⁷² Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

approximately 40,000 military personnel were already in Cuba when the crisis began.¹⁷³ It is unclear whether more-accurate information on the scale of the Soviet footprint and the presence of forward-deployed nuclear weapons would have altered the President's chosen strategy or led to a more-rapid or more-forceful military response. But had Kennedy chosen to initiate a preemptive air strike—an option U.S. policymakers contemplated throughout the duration of the crisis, and the response his military advisers strongly encouraged—U.S. leaders would have discovered that they had based their contingency plans on significant underestimates of Soviet defensive capabilities and the risks of nuclear retaliation.

Soviet policymakers similarly relied on flawed information about U.S. capabilities, policymaking procedures, and behavior. For instance, Soviet military officials wrongly assured Khrushchev that the United States could not detect the missile sites in Cuba or track the location of the diesel-powered *Foxtrots* as they crossed through the U.S. quarantine line. These underestimates of U.S. capabilities contributed to a false degree of confidence in the Kremlin's ability to deceive the United States and an underestimate of the likelihood of prompting U.S. retaliation. Soviet intelligence and political leaders also failed to accurately assess the credibility of sources claiming knowledge of secret U.S. deliberations, which weakened their ability to distinguish rumors, misinformation, and reality. Soviet operatives overstated their interlocutors' access to senior U.S. officials and, in several cases, misperceived interactions with U.S. citizens as official, albeit back-channel, probes from the U.S. government.¹⁷⁴

Beyond the problem of flawed information, U.S. and Soviet leaders faced the challenge of acting without access to pertinent details about the other side's intentions, reactions to conveyed threats and inducements, and behavior during the standoff. The pace of events presented a dilemma for calibrating coercive measures and assessing the status of the crisis, as exemplified by the time it took for the Kennedy administration to learn that the Soviet ships had halted or turned around. But decisionmakers' uncertainty also reflected the reality that many of their most important questions were unanswerable. Forecasting how any leader—let alone one as mercurial as Khrushchev—would behave over the course of a hypothetical crisis or war is a task that strains available methods and therefore requires acceptance of low-confidence estimates. As a result, neither side possessed complete confidence in its understanding of the other's intentions and current or future risk thresholds.

Assessment of Adversary Intentions

Soviet misunderstandings of U.S. ambitions and escalation thresholds contributed to the outbreak of the crisis. Soviet leaders, working from an inaccurate reading of recent U.S. policies toward Cuba and flawed intelligence on other U.S. activities, overstated the plausibility of a U.S.

¹⁷³ Dobbs, 2008.

¹⁷⁴ Fursenko and Naftali, 1998; Arnold L. Horelick, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior*, RAND Corporation, RM-3779-PR, 1963.

invasion of the island following the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco and underestimated the willingness of the United States to initiate a public confrontation if it detected the missiles.¹⁷⁵ Kennedy's public announcement of the U.S. discovery discredited this assumption but did not automatically result in an updated Soviet theory of U.S. resolve to enforce the stated threats or to risk a wider conflict. Soviet leaders remained uncertain of U.S. intentions throughout the course of the confrontation and repeatedly revised their assessments of U.S. willingness to enforce the quarantine, U.S. receptivity to a missile exchange, and the status of U.S. military preparations.

Informational shortfalls constrained the U.S. ability to accurately assess the Soviet Union's intentions in Cuba and to anticipate Soviet responses to U.S. countermeasures with a high level of confidence. "In the absence of clear evidence of deployment," historian Raymond Garthoff has noted, U.S. intelligence estimates "had to rest on an assessment of Soviet intentions, and the past record tended to support the conclusion that the Soviet leaders would not deploy strategic nuclear missiles in Cuba."¹⁷⁶ U.S. analysts reasonably determined that a deployment of intermediate- or medium-range missiles was feasible but implausible because it would introduce military risks that were "incompatible" with the Soviet Union's identified interests.¹⁷⁷ Once Soviet actions disproved this assumption, however, U.S. analysts struggled to devise an alternative explanation for Soviet actions and, in turn, to assess the costs the Soviet Union was willing to pay to ensure its desired objective. Although the President ultimately approved a successful strategy, U.S. officials never reached a consensus about the likelihood and nature of potential Soviet responses.

Individual leaders' personalities also influenced how they processed information, resulting in unpredictable decisions that are hard to explain by looking only at the evidence available to those leaders. Notoriously unpredictable, Khrushchev appeared to rely heavily on personal intuition, often surprising his advisers and other senior Soviet officials. Similarly, President Kennedy often drew on personal theories of Soviet behavior and his interpretation of the situation, despite the availability of a large body of intelligence analysis on Soviet preferences and behavior and a well-developed field of Soviet studies. This approach reflected both innate personality characteristics and personal experience. The Bay of Pigs fiasco left the President skeptical of his military advisers and the U.S. intelligence community and contributed to his decision to create a new advisory body, the ExComm, rather than rely on established forums or informational channels.¹⁷⁸ This institutional adjustment complicated Soviet attempts to assess U.S. intentions

¹⁷⁵ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

¹⁷⁶ Garthoff, 1998, p. 21.

¹⁷⁷ Director of Central Intelligence, *Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62: The Military Buildup in Cuba*, September 19, 1962, in Louis J. Smith, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963: Vol. X, Cuba, January 1961-September 1962*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas M. Coffey, *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay*, Crown Publishers, 1986, pp. 356-357; Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, concise ed., Norton, 2002, pp. xliii-xliv.

because “Soviet intelligence proved incapable of providing precise reports of the activities of the ExCom[m].”¹⁷⁹ Although it is unclear whether Soviet intelligence officers and analysts would have performed much better if the United States had relied on preexisting mechanisms, the rearrangement made an already difficult task for the Soviets even harder.

Personal interactions were also critical to building rapport and identifying a common interest in avoiding conflict throughout the crisis but alone did not resolve communication challenges that impeded both sides’ efforts to refine their assessments of their adversary’s intentions and interests. Human errors and technical barriers impeded timely and effective communication, hampering U.S. and Soviet efforts to assess the other’s intent and raising the chances of miscalculation. In the absence of a dedicated hotline, Kennedy and Khrushchev communicated through letters that had to be transcribed, encrypted, transmitted to their respective embassies, decoded, translated, and then carried to the recipient by hand.¹⁸⁰ This arduous process produced uncertainty about whether the other side had received and accurately interpreted a threat or overture and made it more difficult for either to seize windows of opportunity or sustain momentum after positive exchanges. Khrushchev acknowledged the weaknesses of this method in one letter to Kennedy, writing, “a continuation of an exchange of opinions at such a distance, even in the form of secret letters, will hardly add anything to that which one side has already said to the other.”¹⁸¹

Execution of Coercive Action

Prior U.S. planning for military operations against Cuba ensured that senior military officials were prepared to present the President with a range of options, once directed.¹⁸² Nonetheless, gaps in senior civilian and military officials’ knowledge of Soviet capabilities, inadequate coordination among U.S. military commanders outside Washington, and human errors prevented senior political and military leaders from fully controlling the signals the United States conveyed to the Soviet Union. In some cases, such as the decision to warn Soviet submarines, incomplete information led the United States to take actions it did not realize the Soviets would perceive as threatening their nuclear-armed forces. In other cases, a lack of centralized knowledge of preplanned activities could have resulted in the impression of a coordinated campaign. Uncertain of the U.S. intentions, and in possession of intelligence suggesting the U.S. President was nearing a decision to invade, the Kremlin could reasonably have misidentified the ICBM test launch or misinterpreted other disconnected U.S. military actions that day as preludes to an attack.

¹⁷⁹ Fursenko and Naftali, 1998, p. 64.

¹⁸⁰ Dobbs, 2008; Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

¹⁸¹ Khrushchev, 1962c.

¹⁸² On U.S. planning prior to October 15, see Poole, 2011, pp. 162–165.

The United States also acted unpredictably in ways that contributed to de-escalation. The killing of a U.S. pilot flying over Cuba on October 27 crossed an identified U.S. escalation threshold that the United States had already articulated to the Soviet Union and that motivated contingency planning in Washington. But despite prior discussions that suggested the President would authorize air strikes if the Soviets or Cubans shot down a U-2 plane, Kennedy chose not to retaliate because of concerns that such a response would provoke further Soviet reprisals. The episode is illustrative of how states' escalation thresholds may shift over the course of a crisis as leaders' understanding of the potential costs and benefits of certain courses of action evolve.

Meanwhile, inadequacies in Soviet command and control hindered the Kremlin's ability to enforce its response to real or perceived U.S. provocations. In some cases, communication breakdowns prevented critical information from reaching operators. Washington provided Moscow with advance warning of U.S. methods for notifying detected submarines, for instance, but did not know that the Kremlin failed to pass this information to Soviet commanders operating in the theater.¹⁸³ In other cases, such as the shooting of the U-2 on October 27, the delegation of authority to local commanders resulted in a misalignment between Soviet leaders' strategic intentions and operators' practical behavior.

¹⁸³ Serhan, 2017.

Chapter 3. The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict

In October 1969, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Mao Zedong directed the central leadership to disperse from Beijing in anticipation of an imminent Soviet nuclear attack.¹⁸⁴ Seven months earlier, Mao had approved a limited operation to ambush Soviet border guards patrolling Zhenbao (also known as Damansky or Damanskii) Island, a small feature on a disputed stretch of the Ussuri River where Soviet and Chinese border guards frequently skirmished.¹⁸⁵ Mao intended to use the attack, which involved only lightly armed Chinese infantry, to compel the Soviet Union to adopt a more restrained posture and to avert future incidents. Instead, it provoked a series of fierce battles along the border. Although neither country desired a wider conflict, the fighting raised the specter of direct attacks on Chinese strategic and leadership targets deep within the country and prompted both countries to alter their nuclear postures.¹⁸⁶

What factors contributed to the inadvertent escalation of Sino-Soviet tensions in 1969? In this chapter, we examine Chinese and Soviet decisionmaking during the border conflict, which began in March 1969 and waned following the resumption of border talks after October 20 that year. The episode represents one of only two instances of overt conflict between nuclear-armed states. Although understudied in comparison with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the conflict offers insight into how decisionmakers seek to manage escalation risks when operating under the nuclear shadow and how they might react to credible and unanticipated nuclear threats in such scenarios.

To describe Chinese and Soviet efforts to manage the conflict and its risks, we drew on a rich body of international scholarship based on Chinese, Soviet and Russian, U.S., and Eastern European government records. The United States has declassified intelligence reports and analysis that it produced during the crisis, which scholars have mined to verify and complement details the belligerents have released. Although access to PRC records remains limited, international historians have re-created major decision points using memoirs, interviews, and other accounts of participants in PRC deliberations, as well as documents that China has selectively declassified. Comparatively less detail is available on Soviet decisionmaking. Despite the opening of Russian and Eastern European archives after the Soviet Union's collapse, there

¹⁸⁴ On the October war scare, see Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 344; and John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, Stanford University, 2006, pp. 62–65.

¹⁸⁵ Lorenz M. Lüthi, “Restoring Chaos to History: Sino-Soviet-American Relations, 1969,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 210, June 2012, p. 382; Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 49; Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American *Rapprochement*,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 2000, p. 28.

¹⁸⁶ Lewis and Litai, 2006, pp. 62–65.

remains a scarcity of documents on Soviet foreign policy during the tenure of Leonid Brezhnev, who effectively led the Soviet Union as General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1964 until his death in 1982. This challenge makes it difficult to create a comprehensive account of debates within the regime or to resolve a few outstanding debates about Soviet intentions, as we highlight at times below. Despite these constraints, our review of the available historical literature enables a reconstruction of major changes in PRC and Soviet behavior, threat perceptions, and attempts to manage escalation.

Strategic Context

In 1969, the border between the Soviet Union and China spanned some 7,500 kilometers, extending from the Altai and Tianshan mountains in the west through the steppes and deserts of central Asia to the Ussuri, Amur, and Argun rivers in the east. The varied and sometimes difficult terrain complicated efforts to demarcate Sino-Soviet territorial boundaries, many of which dated back to treaties and territorial concessions that foreign powers imposed on a weakened China during the late Qing dynasty. Although the Soviet Union had, shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, indicated interest in negotiating a comprehensive border treaty, talks never materialized, and large portions of the border remained undelineated when the CCP took control of China in 1949. The PRC periodically raised boundary questions but tolerated the status quo arrangement for most of the 1950s.¹⁸⁷ As two historians of the period have noted, the new communist leadership was preoccupied with internal matters and “often seemed curiously vague in its approach to managing China’s borders,” preferring to defer a resolution to outstanding issues for the time being.¹⁸⁸

But as the Sino-Soviet alliance began to rupture in the late 1950s, both countries refocused their attention on the border.¹⁸⁹ Where Beijing had once been willing to defer to Moscow’s ideological leadership, doctrinal disagreements over how to build a socialist state at home and engage with the nonsocialist world strained relations between the two communist parties and incited new competition.¹⁹⁰ Incidents such as skirmishes between Soviet and Chinese border guards became more frequent after 1959, which prompted the two sides to open secret border

¹⁸⁷ Elizabeth Wishnick, *Mending Fences: The Evolution of Moscow’s China Policy from Brezhnev to Yeltsin*, University of Washington Press, 2001, pp. 24–27; Thomas W. Robinson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes*, RAND Corporation, RM-6171-PR, 1970, pp. 5–6.

¹⁸⁸ Zhihua Shen and Julia Lovell, “Undesired Outcomes: China’s Approach to Border Disputes During the Early Cold War,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2015, p. 95. See also Alsu Tagirova, “From Crisis Management to Realignment of Forces: The Diplomatic ‘Geometry’ of the 1969–1978 Sino-Soviet Border Talks,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Winter 2022, p. 118.

¹⁸⁹ On the origins of the Sino-Soviet split, see Lüthi, 2008; Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–1967*, Stanford University Press, 2009; and Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*, University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

¹⁹⁰ Zubok, 2007, p. 462.

talks to manage the situation in 1964.¹⁹¹ The PRC demanded the Soviets acknowledge that the existing arrangement was the product of “unequal treaties” that European imperialists had forced on the Chinese. The Soviets, recognizing that to concede this point would undermine their status in the decolonizing world and open the door to further Chinese demands, refused and sought to limit talks only to the territories where recent incidents had occurred.¹⁹² After public reports that Mao had raised the issue of reclaiming additional territory when speaking with a foreign delegation, the Soviets suspended talks.¹⁹³ In early September 1964, *Pravda* published a report accusing the PRC of demanding 1.5 million square kilometers of Soviet territory, amounting to an “aggressive threat against the USSR.”¹⁹⁴

Meanwhile, the military balance along the border had begun to shift. Until the 1960s, the Soviets had concentrated their military resources in the country’s western regions, where most of the Soviet population and industry resided and where the threat from the United States and its European allies seemed most acute. By contrast, China concentrated its forces near the disputed eastern sectors, where it had a large population and industrial base, and maintained only “scattered” positions across the western and central boundary lines.¹⁹⁵ As relations with China deteriorated over the 1960s, however, the Soviet Union diverted thousands of conscripts from Germany and the western military districts to the east.¹⁹⁶ Between 1965 and 1969, the Soviets increased their presence in the border districts from 14 understrength divisions to an estimated 34 full-strength divisions, which the Soviets reinforced with newly constructed barracks, transportation infrastructure, training grounds, and family accommodations.¹⁹⁷ In 1967, the Politburo voted to station troops in Mongolia, upgrading Soviet defensive capabilities in the east and clearing the path to station six divisions along China’s northern frontier with the country. Most were mechanized and equipped with nuclear-capable tactical rockets, although some brigades also possessed tactical missiles and IRBMs.¹⁹⁸ By contrast, China relied on light infantry forces and comparatively few artillery or motorized vehicles.¹⁹⁹ Although the PRC had tested its first nuclear device in 1964, its nuclear weapon capabilities were minimal: The decision

¹⁹¹ Although a scarcity of Chinese documentation prevents a comprehensive assessment, some scholars have suggested that Beijing instigated incidents in 1963 and 1964 to create a record of border problems and pressure Moscow to offer concessions (Lüthi, 2008, pp. 273, 275). See also Tagirova, 2022, pp. 119–122.

¹⁹² M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes*, Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 120–122; Wishnick, 2001, p. 28.

¹⁹³ Scholars dispute Mao’s intentions (Lüthi, 2008, p. 276; Shen and Lovell, 2015, p. 108; Kuisong, 2000, p. 23).

¹⁹⁴ Lüthi, 2008, p. 276.

¹⁹⁵ Robinson, 1970, p. vi.

¹⁹⁶ Viktor M. Gobarev, “Soviet Policy Toward China: Developing Nuclear Weapons 1949–1969,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, December 1999, p. 42.

¹⁹⁷ Fravel, 2008, p. 204; Lüthi, 2008, p. 340.

¹⁹⁸ Wishnick, 2001, p. 30.

¹⁹⁹ Fravel, 2008, p. 205.

to pursue strategic weapons had preceded the development of a clear concept of employment, and programs to research and develop intermediate- and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles began only in 1965.²⁰⁰

Nonetheless, Soviet strategists continued to express concern over the PLA's numerical advantage in conventional forces. By 1967, Soviet military intelligence estimated that approximately 1 million PLA forces were positioned along the border, with millions more Chinese citizens available for emergency mobilization.²⁰¹ "[T]he image of the Chinese multitudes sweeping across the vulnerable Siberian steppes was fairly widespread, even among reform-minded scholars and officials in Moscow as well as in the border regions," one scholar wrote, noting this image was linked to preexisting Soviet perceptions of Chinese irrationality and fecklessness.²⁰² Statements by Chairman Mao in the late 1950s on the use of nuclear weapons to advance socialism, combined with Chinese harassment of Soviet diplomats in Beijing and demonstrated willingness to instigate confrontations against a superior opponent, deepened Soviet fears and sowed worries about potential Chinese aggression.²⁰³ In a memorandum circulated in 1966, the Central Committee warned that

the Chinese have frequently attempted to provoke armed conflicts along the border. [They] have attacked Soviet border guard patrols, and their farmers have been encouraged [by the Chinese authorities] to undertake violent temporary occupation islands [sic] The local Chinese population [in the frontier areas] is being inflamed in the same manner . . . [we] believe that these facts impel us to take a more serious, namely a strategic view on the future of our Far East.²⁰⁴

Soviet posture changes alarmed the PRC leadership, which began to debate the prospect of a Soviet attack as early as October 1963.²⁰⁵ Claiming that China must "prepare on all sides" for war, Mao called for the relocation of Chinese industries to the interior as part of creating a "third line" of defense.²⁰⁶ In 1966, Soviet forces began to blockade Chinese access to disputed islands on the Amur and Ussuri rivers, and violent skirmishes along the land border became frequent.²⁰⁷ Against this backdrop, the Soviet Union's August 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia set off

²⁰⁰ Evan A. Feigenbaum, "Soldiers, Weapons and Chinese Development Strategy: The Mao Era Military in China's Economic and Institutional Debate," *China Quarterly*, No. 158, June 1999, pp. 288–296; M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros, "China's Search for Assured Retaliation: The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Fall 2010, pp. 53–57; Wishnick, 2001, p. 30.

²⁰¹ Gobarev, 1999, p. 42.

²⁰² Wishnick, 2001, p. 30. See also Gobarev, 1999, pp. 33–34.

²⁰³ Wishnick, 2001, p. 30; Gobarev, 1999, pp. 33–34; Campbell and Radchenko, 2018, pp. 217–218.

²⁰⁴ Gobarev, 1999, p. 35.

²⁰⁵ Sergey Radchenko, "Untrusting and Untrusted: Mao's China at a Crossroads, 1969," in Martin Klimke, Reinhild Kreis, and Christian F. Ostermann, eds., *Trust, but Verify: The Politics of Uncertainty and the Transformation of the Cold War Order, 1969–1991*, Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 364; Fravel, 2008, pp. 206–207.

²⁰⁶ Radchenko, 2016, p. 364. See also Kuisong, 2000, p. 24.

²⁰⁷ Fravel, 2008, pp. 206–207.

alarms across Beijing: If the Kremlin was willing to use military force to resolve an ideological confrontation, would it attempt the same in China?²⁰⁸

That winter, the situation along the border deteriorated. As the ice on the Amur and Ussuri rivers hardened, the number of armed confrontations between border guards increased, and the locus shifted south to Zhenbao Island. On December 27, 1968, and January 23, 1969, a Soviet armored patrol fired into the air and beat more than two dozen Chinese border forces with sticks and rifles. Such incidents became more frequent in February, but the Chinese did not fire back.²⁰⁹

Border Conflict

Zhenbao Island Battles, March 1969

Chinese preparations for an ambush began as early as January 1968, shortly after an armed skirmish on Qiliqin Island resulted in the first Chinese casualties.²¹⁰ The Central Military Commission (CMC) instructed the headquarters of the PLA's Shenyang Military Region, Beijing Military Region, and Heilongjiang Military Region to "make full preparations, and work out various operation plans" to teach the Soviets a "bitter lesson."²¹¹ Zhenbao Island was selected as the location of the operation, and the Shenyang Region Command selected and accelerated the training of three reinforced companies. On February 19, the General Staff and Foreign Ministry approved an operation plan and passed a set of operational directives to the CMC, which assumed direct command.²¹² The PLA deployed 600 border troops with instructions that "no battle should be fought unless victory is certain."²¹³ A subsequent order specified that operations "be limited to our side of the channel course [along the eastern side of the Ussuri River], that our forces not become tangled up with the enemy, be not carried away by the fighting, and after victory . . . should retreat to an advantageous place."²¹⁴ As Zhou Enlai, Premier of the PRC, explained to one commander, the purpose was to conduct a limited, punitive operation to

²⁰⁸ Wishnick, 2001, pp. 31–32; Fravel, 2008, p. 207; Hyun-Binn Cho, "Nuclear Coercion, Crisis Bargaining, and the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969," *Security Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2021, p. 556.

²⁰⁹ Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," in Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt, eds., *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, M. E. Sharp, 2003, p. 207.

²¹⁰ Lüthi, 2012, p. 382.

²¹¹ Kuisong, 2000, p. 28.

²¹² Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 49; Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, CNA, November 2010, p. 21.

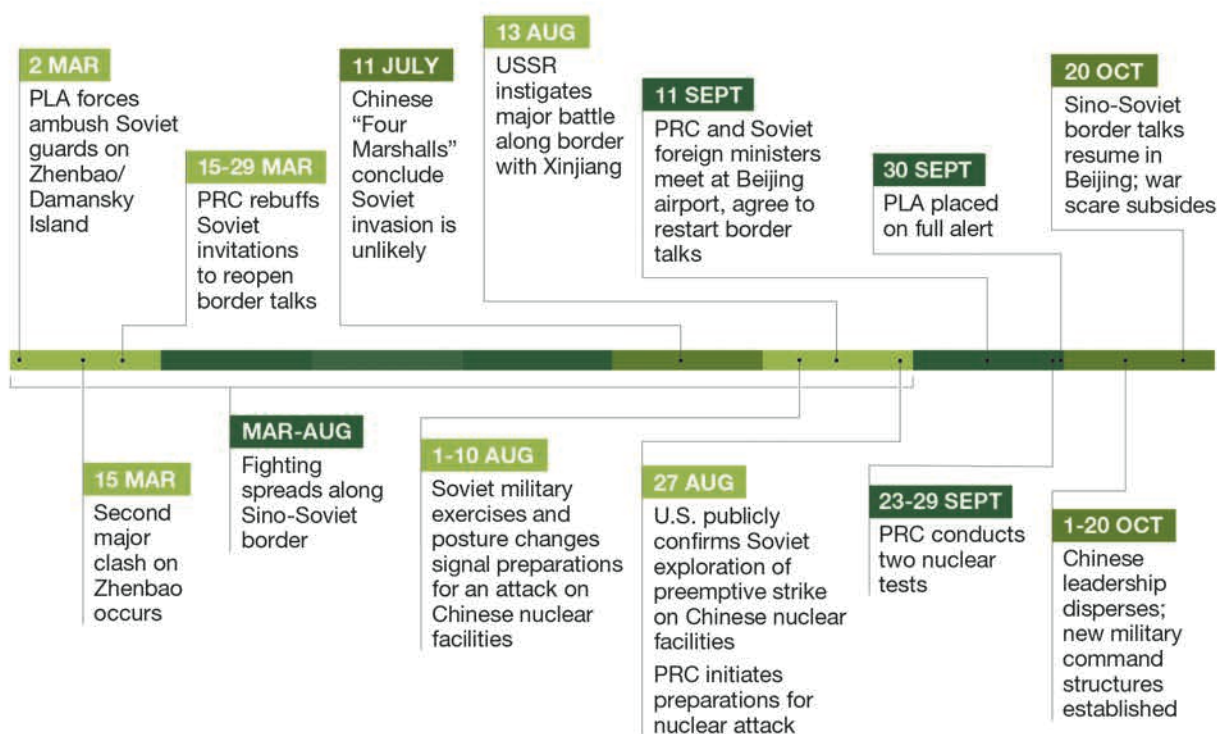
²¹³ Kuisong, 2000, p. 28; Cho, 2021, p. 557. See also Robinson, 2003, p. 207.

²¹⁴ Robinson, 2003, p. 207. Chinese border guards attempted to initiate a confrontation in early 1969 but did not provoke a Soviet response (Lyle J. Goldstein, "Return to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why It Matters," *China Quarterly*, No. 168, December 2001, p. 988; the author cited his interview with a historian at the Modern History Research Center, Peking University). For a similar assessment, see Kuisong, 2000, p. 28.

dissuade future incidents along the border. “We are rational,” he explained, pointing out that a war along the border could become “part of a world war, [and] we don’t want to expand the conflict.”²¹⁵

On March 2, two Soviet armored cars patrolling the disputed Zhenbao Island stumbled into a Chinese ambush. After the Soviets returned the Chinese rifle fire, PLA forces concealed near the Chinese side of the river joined the battle, destroying one of the armored cars, the command car, and a Soviet truck with artillery fire. During the resulting two-hour melee, the Chinese killed approximately 31 Soviet personnel and forced the remainder off the island before Soviet reinforcements could arrive.²¹⁶ Figure 3.1 provides a timeline of the conflict from March through October 1969, and Figure 3.2 shows a map of the Sino-Soviet border in 1969.

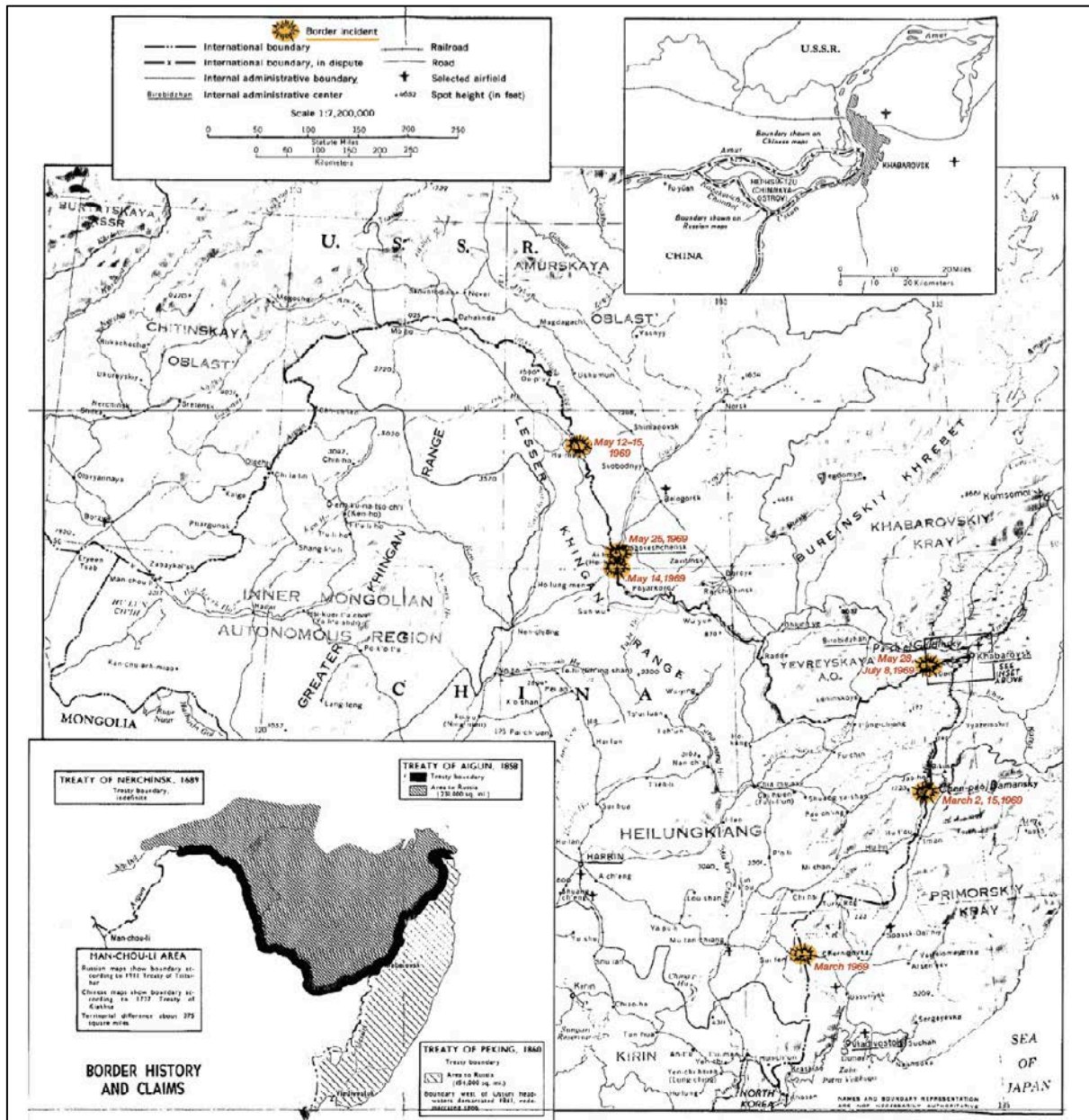
Figure 3.1. Timeline of the 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict



²¹⁵ Lüthi, 2008, p. 340.

²¹⁶ Kuisong, 2000, p. 26; Lyle J. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenal Deter? The Sino-Soviet Crisis of 1969,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 1, Spring 2003, p. 58; Robinson, 2003, pp. 207–211; Cho, 2021, p. 556.

Figure 3.2. Eastern Sector of the Sino-Soviet Border, 1969



SOURCE: Adapted from CIA, "The Current State of Sino-Soviet Relations," April 24, 1970.

The assault stunned the Soviet leadership.²¹⁷ Alarmed by worsening relations with China, Soviet officials had anticipated the potential for conflict and attempted to strengthen defenses accordingly. But the terrain, the proximity to Chinese lines of communication, and China's large population contributed to a sense of vulnerability among Soviet political and military thinkers, who were otherwise divided over whether they could avoid a military confrontation—even a

²¹⁷ Gobarev, 1999, p. 43.

nuclear war—with their neighbor.²¹⁸ A majority of Politburo members, including members of the China Department of the Communist Party Central Committee, believed that the ideological differences between the countries were “insurmountable” and feared that China was pursuing a strategic alliance with the United States against the Soviet Union. Elements of the Soviet Ministry of Defense and Army General Staff interpreted China’s growing nuclear capabilities as additional evidence that confirmed China’s hostile intentions.²¹⁹ In contrast, more-dovish figures in the KGB’s First Main Directorate and in the GRU advised a more temperate approach toward Chinese border disputes. Believing that Soviet priorities lay in Europe, whereas China’s main interests were in Southeastern Asia and the Pacific, these figures maintained that the Sino-Soviet relationship was salvageable because these disputes were not over vital interests and that any U.S.-China rapprochement would be fleeting.²²⁰

The unanticipated attack on Soviet forces threw this interpretation into question and raised new questions about Chinese intentions. In a midnight call to the Chief of Staff of the Soviet Border Guard Forces, Soviet leader Brezhnev expressed confusion over the attack and asked whether the general believed war was imminent.²²¹ According to the general’s later recollection, he assured Brezhnev that both the General Staff and the Main Staff of the Border Guard Forces had determined that a Chinese invasion was unlikely because the PLA had not amassed enough forces in the area.²²² Meanwhile, Soviet television featured graphic accounts of alleged Chinese atrocities, while commentators described the specter of the Chinese “hordes” across the border.²²³

Over the next two weeks, both sides reinforced their positions near the island. The Soviets elevated the alert status of the Far East Command, increased patrols on the island, and stationed artillery near the area but did not position a permanent force on the island because it might be vulnerable to Chinese artillery and mortar fire.²²⁴ The CMC placed PLA units along the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders on high alert, dispatched additional patrols, bolstered positions near Zhenbao, and directed the Shenyang Military Region to prepare to retaliate if Soviet forces attacked.²²⁵ Mass political demonstrations in both countries accompanied these military actions. In China, more than 250 million people participated in four days of government-

²¹⁸ Wishnick, 2001, p. 31.

²¹⁹ Gobarev, 1999, p. 38.

²²⁰ Gobarev, 1999, p. 38.

²²¹ Gobarev, 1999, p. 44.

²²² Gobarev, 1999, p. 44.

²²³ Allen S. Whiting, “Soviet Policy Toward China, 1969–1988,” in George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock, eds., *Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy*, Routledge, 1991, p. 515.

²²⁴ Robinson, 2003, pp. 201–202, 211.

²²⁵ Robinson, 2003, p. 211.

organized demonstrations, an outpouring that played to Soviet fears of the Chinese masses.²²⁶ On March 7 and 8, Soviet protestors responded by smashing windows and marching past the Chinese embassy in Moscow with banners calling for an overthrow of the “Mao clique.”²²⁷

On March 15, a second, bloodier round of fighting occurred on Zhenbao. Soviet and Chinese accounts differ on the details, but the Soviet Union likely initiated the confrontation in retaliation for the March 2 assault.²²⁸ In contrast to border incidents in prior years, which involved a few dozen border guards armed with small arms, batons, and sticks, Soviet and Chinese units on and near the island now resorted to artillery and mortar fires. The Soviet forces deployed tanks, armored cars, helicopters, and aircraft to attack the Chinese position and attempt to interdict unmotorized reinforcements as they crossed the frozen river.²²⁹ Despite the Soviet forces’ technological superiority, however, the Soviet operation failed against the more numerous and better prepared Chinese forces.²³⁰ A command and control failure on the Soviet side had also delayed the authorization process for reinforcements by several hours and prevented them from arriving until after the fighting had ended.²³¹ According to Soviet sources, Soviet forces killed up to 1,000 Chinese personnel, but the PLA’s infantry and artillery forces ultimately repulsed three Soviet offensives.²³²

The Chinese intention had been to deter Soviet provocations, and Mao issued an order to halt: “We should stop here. Do not fight any more!”²³³ Chinese leaders, who had closely monitored the battle on Zhenbao as it unfolded, were surprised by the intensity of the fighting and scale of the losses but believed that further escalation was unlikely.²³⁴ The Soviet Union, they maintained, was focused on Europe, not Asia, and therefore lacked the resolve and the capacity to start a major war on its southeastern border, where China’s advantage was greatest.²³⁵ Chinese military leaders pointed out that the Soviet forces appeared dispirited and lacked the

²²⁶ Wishnick, 2001, p. 34.

²²⁷ Radchenko, 2016, p. 30.

²²⁸ Robinson, 2003, p. 201; Thomas W. Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 66, No. 4, December 1972, p. 1189.

²²⁹ Robinson, 2003, pp. 211–212.

²³⁰ Robinson, 1972, p. 1189.

²³¹ The staff officer on duty was unable to reach either Brezhnev or the Defense Minister, both of whom were traveling abroad (Kuisong, 2000, p. 32).

²³² Radchenko, 2016, p. 18. An earlier study, also based on Soviet sources, estimated 800 Soviet casualties (Robinson, 2003, p. 212).

²³³ Kuisong, 2000, p. 30.

²³⁴ Wishnick, 2001, p. 34. According to participants in the operations, Zhou commanded the operation and was involved in tactical decisions (Kuisong, 2000, p. 29).

²³⁵ During a CCP cadre meeting, for instance, Zhou dismissed the notion of a Soviet invasion on the grounds that the Soviets’ Far Eastern bases were still underdeveloped and Soviet forces could not, in his assessment, fight well at close range or at night (Kuisong, 2000, p. 31).

motivation to fight, even if the Kremlin wanted to launch a wider campaign.²³⁶ Chinese leaders therefore surmised that their rival either was seeking to distract the Soviet populace from “internal difficulties” or was “feigning an attack in the East to attack in the West.”²³⁷ During a meeting of the Cultural Revolution Group on March 22, Mao claimed to be “optimistic about [the consequences of] this incident on the [Sino-Soviet] border” and recommended that the political report of the upcoming Ninth Congress should not treat the issue too seriously. Either unaware of the Soviet deliberations or misinterpreting their significance, Mao claimed that “many people” in the Soviet Union were unaware of the dispute and that the Politburo had not discussed the battle.²³⁸

Still, Mao did not dismiss the possibility of a wider war entirely. In what historians have characterized as a sarcastic proposal, the chairman suggested during a March 15 meeting of the Politburo that the PLA withdraw to the countryside and cede Harbin, Shenyang, and Changhun before turning around to “eat them up little by little.”²³⁹ In that same speech, he called for China to prepare battalions in every county, noting, “If we don’t make the best of the opportunity to prepare, what will happen when we really fight a war?”²⁴⁰ The following night, Mao and Lin Biao (First Vice Chairman of the CCP, Minister of National Defense, and Mao’s heir apparent at the time) convened senior officials for a discussion of countermeasures to control the border clashes. During the meeting, Mao ordered preparations to defend nuclear industrial installations against Soviet bombers, but added, “That’s all. Don’t fight.”²⁴¹

Soviet Attempts to Compel Border Talks, March–June 1969

In the aftermath of the Zhenbao battle, the Soviet leadership struggled to interpret Chinese intentions and assess the risks of further escalation. The Politburo had gathered for an emergency session on the evening of March 15, but attendees disagreed over how best to respond. Emphasizing the risks, some urged restraint, warning that further action could provoke a larger Chinese response. Yet more-hawkish elements urged swift retaliation.²⁴² Alleging that Chinese operations on Zhenbao amounted to a declaration of war, Soviet Minister of Defense Andrei Grechko called for swift retaliation, including action to “eliminat[e] the China threat forever,” a threat that some East German sources suggest may have included a preemptive nuclear strike on

²³⁶ Radchenko, 2016, p. 22.

²³⁷ Radchenko, 2016, pp. 22, 25.

²³⁸ Kuisong, 2000, p. 30.

²³⁹ Radchenko, 2016, p. 24.

²⁴⁰ Radchenko, 2016, p. 25.

²⁴¹ Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 50.

²⁴² Kuisong, 2000, p. 32.

Chinese nuclear facilities.²⁴³ In preparation for an expansion of the conflict, the Soviets placed strategic nuclear forces in the Far East on high alert, deployed additional forces to the eastern section of their border, and debated whether to evacuate Russian citizens in China.²⁴⁴

Still, Brezhnev and other senior officials hoped to avoid further escalation. Since 1966, when Chinese nuclear and missile testing became more frequent, the Soviet military had become increasingly concerned that the PLA could hold Soviet targets at risk.²⁴⁵ And even if a wider war was averted, a protracted conflict risked deepening fissures within the Warsaw Pact and undermining Soviet attempts to maintain leadership of the global communist movement. Already, heated debates over the appropriate Soviet response to the border crisis had derailed substantive discussion of other items on the Soviet agenda during the March 15–17 meeting of the Warsaw Pact’s Political Consultative Committee in Budapest, during which the Romanian delegation resisted a Soviet-drafted declaration of solidarity against Chinese aggression. That same week, Romanian, Italian, Austrian, and Swiss delegations to a summit of global communist parties in Moscow blocked a statement condemning the CCP.²⁴⁶

Moscow therefore settled on a strategy that combined diplomatic overtures with a mix of public and private warnings. Whereas the leadership previously sought to downplay the Chinese threat, Soviet newspapers and television channels now transmitted extensive reports of border scuffles and promises of future “resolute” actions, should Chinese provocations continue, while Soviet radio stations transmitted Chinese-language broadcasts into Chinese territory describing Soviet nuclear capabilities.²⁴⁷ These broadcasts were accompanied by subtler Soviet official statements that hinted at the prospect of nuclear retaliation.²⁴⁸

At the same time, Soviet officials attempted unsuccessfully to reopen dialogue with China and to explore options to restart the border talks suspended in 1964.²⁴⁹ After the March 15 clash, Brezhnev tried to use a Kremlin-Zhongnanhai hotline but was unable to reach Mao.²⁵⁰ A second attempt by Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin on March 21, using a separate line to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), also failed after a Chinese operator denounced the Soviet official as a “revisionist element” and refused to transfer his call.²⁵¹ At midnight, a Soviet chargé

²⁴³ Kuisong, 2000, p. 32.

²⁴⁴ Cho, 2021, p. 557; Kuisong, 2000, pp. 32–33.

²⁴⁵ Gobarev, 1999, p. 47.

²⁴⁶ Lüthi, 2012, p. 384.

²⁴⁷ Radchenko, 2016, p. 30.

²⁴⁸ Lüthi, 2008, p. 341; Lüthi, 2012, pp. 386–387.

²⁴⁹ Lüthi, 2008, p. 341; Lüthi, 2012, pp. 386–387.

²⁵⁰ Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 50.

²⁵¹ Lüthi, 2012, p. 385; Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 50.

d'affaires in Beijing hand-delivered the same message to the MFA.²⁵² “The two countries are at war, one cannot chop the messenger,” Zhou reportedly exclaimed after learning an operator had blocked the call.²⁵³ But he still declined the Soviet proposal for direct telephone negotiations on the grounds that, as other senior leaders agreed, direct conversations were “inappropriate” in light of the situation.²⁵⁴ And when the Soviet embassy tried again to reach Mao’s office amid reports that Soviet forces were maneuvering around Zhenbao Island in preparation for an invasion, Zhou declined the request and suggested the Soviets were “posturing.”²⁵⁵

But if the Chinese made little effort to defuse tensions, neither did they pursue escalation. Confident the Soviets were not preparing for an invasion, senior political and military officials focused instead on preparations for the Ninth CCP Congress, which opened on April 1.²⁵⁶ The conflict provided Mao with a pretext to impose strict restrictions on the delegates, who arrived in the capital on chartered military planes and were ordered to maintain complete secrecy, and strengthened PLA representatives’ stature in the negotiations.²⁵⁷ While party officials debated how to impose order on the Cultural Revolution, additional skirmishes erupted along the western border between Kazakhstan and Xinjiang, where China had missile and nuclear weapons testing sites, as Soviet and Chinese border guards increased patrols and responded more forcefully to perceived border violations.²⁵⁸ Although the conflict overhung the Congress, which concluded on April 24, the PRC did not make major changes to its posture or policy toward the Soviet Union.

By early May, discussions of the possibility of a wider war had become more frequent in China, and senior officials, including Lin Biao, pushed to double Chinese military expenditures. Mao and Zhou, however, remained relatively sanguine. Despite Soviet threats and continued flare-ups along the border, the Chinese leadership continued to assume that an invasion was unlikely because Moscow’s strategic priorities lay in Europe, where its military resources were still concentrated and where the stakes of its contest with the United States were greatest.²⁵⁹ As one senior Chinese official later recalled, the chairman “made very exact calculations that the USSR did not have adequate [military] preparations [or] numbers . . . to carry out a serious war

²⁵² Cho, 2021, p. 558; Kuisong, 2000, p. 32.

²⁵³ Lüthi, 2012, p. 385.

²⁵⁴ Kuisong, 2000, p. 32; Radchenko, 2009, p. 26.

²⁵⁵ Radchenko, 2009, p. 26. The Chinese leadership similarly dismissed an April 11 note from the Soviet Foreign Ministry proposing that negotiations resume within days, replying only that the PRC would respond to the request in time and that the Soviet leadership should “calm down and not rush” (Tagirova, 2022, p. 125).

²⁵⁶ Lüthi, 2012, p. 385.

²⁵⁷ Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962–1976*, Bloomsbury Press, 2016, pp. 207–208.

²⁵⁸ William Burr, “Sino-American Relations, 1969: The Sino-Soviet Border War and Steps Towards *Rapprochement*,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, April 2001, p. 81; Friedman, 2015, p. 177.

²⁵⁹ Kuisong, 2000, p. 35.

with China . . . so he was willing to take the risk.”²⁶⁰ With the Congress behind them, the Chinese leadership agreed to propose resuming negotiations with the Soviet Union on May 24 and directed general preparations for a defense in depth, but it “made no specific military preparations for fighting a major war beyond these [limited] planning activities.”²⁶¹

Soviet Nuclear Saber Rattling, June–August 1969

Little is known about Soviet deliberations in the weeks following the Zhenbao battles, but the available evidence indicates that China’s behavior bewildered senior Soviet officials, who viewed it as irrational and dangerously unpredictable. In diplomatic notes dispatched on March 29 and July 13, Moscow reiterated its willingness to hold border talks, but discussions stalled after Beijing insisted the Soviets acknowledge that prior border arrangements were the product of “unequal treaties.”²⁶² Lacking a viable diplomatic option, the Soviets therefore chose to increase military and political pressure on the Chinese leadership. During a summit of the world’s communist movement in mid-June, for instance, Brezhnev denounced the Chinese model and called for the establishment of a “collective security system” akin to the Warsaw Pact in Asia.²⁶³ Three weeks later, following a July 8 clash on an island in the Amur River, the Soviet Foreign Ministry issued a note threatening that continued Chinese provocations would prompt unspecified “additional measures,” a gesture U.S. diplomats interpreted as an indication of possible further military action.²⁶⁴

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, Soviet leaders feared that a conflict could escalate into a major war. Accordingly, the Soviet military deployed additional troops to border regions and issued secret orders to local authorities to stockpile medical supplies and ready militias that “could be armed and involved in the implementation of military tasks.”²⁶⁵ The Soviets likely intended these measures to deter further Chinese military action. As Brezhnev summarized in June, “the stronger the defense of our borders, the less danger there is of a really dangerous military confrontation at our eastern frontiers.”²⁶⁶

The Soviet Union also took steps to signal the possibility of nuclear escalation, in the form of either a nuclear strike on Chinese territory or a conventional attack on Chinese nuclear facilities. It redeployed Soviet bomber units from Eastern Europe to new positions in Mongolia and the Far East, where they conducted exercises designed to simulate attacks against targets in northwest

²⁶⁰ Goldstein, 2001, pp. 992–994.

²⁶¹ Lüthi, 2012, p. 385; M. Taylor Frael, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949*, Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 136; Kuisong, 2000, p. 36.

²⁶² Kuisong, 2000, p. 32; Cho, 2021, p. 559.

²⁶³ Lüthi, 2012, p. 388; Radchenko, 2016, p. 31.

²⁶⁴ Wishnick, 2001, p. 35.

²⁶⁵ Radchenko, 2016, p. 30.

²⁶⁶ Radchenko, 2016, p. 31.

China, the location of the country's nuclear facilities.²⁶⁷ That same month, two Soviet citizens visiting Boston reportedly attempted to assess potential U.S. reactions to a Soviet attack on a Chinese nuclear facility.²⁶⁸

It is unclear whether the Chinese leadership ignored or simply did not detect the Soviet Union's nuclear signals; in either event, such signals did not compel Beijing to adopt a more accommodating posture. On July 11, a group of four senior officials with military backgrounds submitted the results of a study Mao commissioned to reexamine the international situation and assess the likelihood of a U.S. or Soviet invasion. Confirming the PRC chairman's assessment, the marshals concluded that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was likely to start a war against China—either alone or together—because their strategic priorities were in Europe, not Asia. The Americans, the marshals surmised, had learned from their “bitter” experiences in Korea and Vietnam and were not willing to wage or capable of waging another war in Asia in the near future. Focused on the threat from the United States, the Soviets were similarly oriented westward and were poorly prepared to fight along the eastern flank. Misunderstanding the sources of the Soviet buildup along the border, the marshals concluded that the Soviets were seeking “to use military mobilization to consolidate their political control and to suppress resistance to them at home and in Eastern Europe.”²⁶⁹

After the Chinese rebuffed another private Soviet inquiry about opening bilateral talks on July 26, the Soviets redoubled their efforts to coerce Beijing militarily. From August 1 to 10, the Soviets declared a stand-down of all flights in the eastern border region, a signal U.S. intelligence interpreted as a possible preparation for an attack on China, and announced the decision to appoint a former deputy commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces to command the Far Eastern Military District.²⁷⁰ During this period, U.S. intelligence also detected an “unusually large” military exercise that appeared to be simulating attacks on targets resembling Chinese nuclear facilities.²⁷¹ Against this backdrop, 300 Soviet forces instigated a confrontation on the western border, near Lake Zhalanashkol and the Terekty River, on August 13 that resulted in at least 20 Chinese deaths and a “resounding Chinese defeat.”²⁷²

Evidence of Soviet preparations for a conventional or nuclear strike against Chinese nuclear facilities accumulated over the remainder of the month. On August 18, a Soviet embassy official lunching with U.S. State Department official William Stearman asked “point blank” how the

²⁶⁷ Cho, 2021, p. 558; Wishnick, 2001, p. 35.

²⁶⁸ Lüthi, 2012, pp. 386–387.

²⁶⁹ Wilson Center, “Report by Four Chinese Marshals, Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen, to the Central Committee, ‘A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation’ (Excerpt),” trans. Chen Jian with assistance from Li Di, July 11, 1969, *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao* [CCP History Materials], No. 42, June 1992b, pp. 70–75.

²⁷⁰ Cho, 2021, p. 558; Burr, 2001, p. 86.

²⁷¹ Burr, 2001, p. 86.

²⁷² Cho, 2021, p. 558; Kuisong, 2000, p. 33.

United States, which had considered similar attacks against China's nuclear program a few years earlier, would respond to a Soviet attack on a Chinese nuclear facility.²⁷³ Surprised, Stearman replied that he was "in no position to predict exactly what the U.S. would do" but believed that the United States would view such an attack "with considerable concern" and would "most certainly want to keep out of any such conflict."²⁷⁴ The probe raised the alarm in Washington, where the intelligence analysts monitoring Soviet military exercises had already concluded that there was "some chance" that the Soviets were preparing to take military action against China and could launch a preemptive strike in the near future.²⁷⁵ Nine days later, the CIA director told reporters that Soviet officials had inquired about possible reactions to an attack on Chinese nuclear facilities.²⁷⁶ Underscoring the point, an editorial in *Pravda* the next day called for global attention to the risks of a general conflict between the Soviet Union and China, cautioning that "no continent would be left out if a war flares up under the present conditions."²⁷⁷

Was the Soviet nuclear threat genuine? Having concluded that Mao was irrational and would return to the negotiating table only under the threat of an imminent attack, the Soviet leadership may have intended only to conduct a complex psychological operation.²⁷⁸ If so, they went to great pains—and accepted substantial risk of inadvertent escalation—to ensure the threat was credible. According to one scholar with considerable access to Soviet records, Moscow informed its Eastern European allies that the country's Strategic Air Force units in the Far East had been placed on combat ready alert and would soon conduct a preemptive nuclear strike on the Chinese missile and nuclear testing range in Lop Nor, along with other Chinese nuclear facilities. The Soviets then may have leaked this information to foreign intelligence organs to ensure the information reached the Chinese.²⁷⁹

On the other hand, the Soviet Ministry of Defense and General Staff had advocated since 1966 for the use of both conventional and nuclear weapons in the event of a major war with China.²⁸⁰ Although they remained confident that a limited conflict could be won through conventional means, military leaders feared that "human waves" of fanatical Chinese forces would overwhelm Soviet positions in the Far East and threaten vital centers.²⁸¹ In the event of a

²⁷³ Kuisong, 2000, p. 34. On earlier U.S. discussions of preemptive attacks against the Chinese nuclear program, see William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle': The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Winter 2000–2001.

²⁷⁴ Gerson, 2010, p. 35.

²⁷⁵ Burr, 2001, p. 86.

²⁷⁶ Cho, 2021, p. 559.

²⁷⁷ Kuisong, 2000, p. 34.

²⁷⁸ Burr, 2001, p. 87.

²⁷⁹ Gobarev, 1999, p. 46.

²⁸⁰ Gobarev, 1999, p. 47.

²⁸¹ Gobarev, 1999, p. 40; Tagirova, 2022, p. 124.

threat against such cities as Blagoveshchensk, Vladivostok, and Khabarovsk, “nuclear weapons would have to be used against Chinese nuclear weapons bases, such as the nuclear testing range in Lop Nor and some strategic airfields.”²⁸² Later accounts by a Soviet diplomat and a KGB officer suggest that the Kremlin seriously considered an attack but “wanted to ascertain Washington’s response first.”²⁸³

Regardless of whether the Soviet nuclear threat was genuine, the August events prompted a dramatic reversal in Chinese attitudes. The August 13 offensive in Xinjiang had already raised alarm bells in Beijing, where senior officials expressed concern that the situation could spiral out of control.²⁸⁴ Chinese assessments of the military situation presumed that China could lure an attacking Soviet force deep into Chinese territory, where the Chinese population advantage was greatest, but this strategy was ill-suited for Xinjiang, where population density was low.²⁸⁵ The public revelation that the Soviet Union had probed potential U.S. responses to a strike on Chinese nuclear facilities, paired with Chinese intelligence reports that Eastern European governments had fielded similar inquiries, spurred new action.²⁸⁶ On August 27, the CCP Central Committee and CMC issued a joint order establishing a “Leading Group for People’s Air Defense,” which would organize the evacuation of people and industrial production from major cities under Zhou’s leadership. The next day, the Chinese Central Committee signed an “Order for General Mobilization” that called on border provinces and regions to “be fully prepared to fight a war against aggression.”²⁸⁷ Subsequent directives over the following days directed major population centers either to begin digging air raid shelters and stockpiling materials or to “scatter” inhabitants throughout the provinces.²⁸⁸ On September 2, Beijing began to mobilize its 8 million inhabitants.²⁸⁹

Beijing did not immediately extend a new offer to negotiate despite its severe threat perceptions of Soviet willingness to escalate. As his emphasis on defensive preparations revealed, Mao had long maintained that China could survive a nuclear war because of its large and dispersed population, and he believed that the surviving Chinese population would continue to fight until it had overwhelmed the adversary.²⁹⁰ Like other senior Chinese political and military leaders of his generation, Mao viewed nuclear weapons as a powerful tool to resist intimidation and coercion by other nuclear powers but doubted they could serve any significant

²⁸² Gobarev, 1999, p. 40.

²⁸³ Burr, 2001, p. 87.

²⁸⁴ Kuisong, 2000, p. 35.

²⁸⁵ Kuisong, 2000, p. 36.

²⁸⁶ Kuisong, 2000, p. 36.

²⁸⁷ Cho, 2021, p. 559.

²⁸⁸ Kuisong, 2000, p. 37; Lüthi, 2012, p. 391.

²⁸⁹ Lüthi, 2012, p. 391.

²⁹⁰ Kuisong, 2000, p. 36.

battlefield function.²⁹¹ “With only atomic bombs and without people’s struggles, then atomic bombs are meaningless,” he had written.²⁹² Now, Chinese officials pointed out that the PLA had its own nuclear arsenal and could exact revenge, even if its strategic forces still lacked a first strike capability. After reading press reports on Soviet nuclear threats, Zhou reportedly summoned a senior military official for a discussion of how to accelerate construction of missile locations. If China could secure an “operational capability,” Zhou stated, “we won’t fear others’ threats or coercion. Plans to conduct a surgical strike will be wishful thinking.”²⁹³

The death of Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh on September 2, however, interrupted Chinese military deliberations and presented a new opportunity to pursue a negotiated settlement.²⁹⁴ During the funeral on September 6, a member of the Soviet delegation approached the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry to convey a message to the Chinese delegation that Kosygin was willing to travel to Beijing to meet with the Chinese leadership. Suspicious of Soviet intentions, Mao did not approve his foreign minister’s request to meet for four more days, by which point Kosygin had already departed.²⁹⁵ The foreign ministry scrambled to transmit the message to the Soviet delegation, which was eventually reached in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Kosygin rerouted his flight to Beijing.²⁹⁶

On September 11, Zhou and Kosygin met for three and a half hours in the Beijing airport.²⁹⁷ Both sides attempted to assure the other of their desire to avoid war and agreed that they shared a common interest in preventing a situation the United States might profit from. Although Kosygin attempted to broach the prospect of a broader political settlement by proposing the countries reappoint ambassadors, resume foreign policy consultations, and explore economic cooperation, Zhou focused on the border situation. He promised that China would “not take the initiative” and would not use its nuclear weapons first, but he denounced the continued Soviet military buildup and warned against an attack on PRC nuclear facilities.²⁹⁸ Speaking to Soviet fears, Zhou warned, “if you do so, we will declare that this is war and that this is aggression. We will rise in resistance. We will fight to the end.”²⁹⁹

²⁹¹ For Mao’s views on nuclear weapons, see Fravel and Medeiros, 2010, pp. 57–63.

²⁹² Fravel and Medeiros, 2010, p. 62.

²⁹³ Fravel, 2008, p. 265.

²⁹⁴ Lüthi, 2012, p. 391.

²⁹⁵ Kuisong, 2000, p. 37.

²⁹⁶ Kuisong, 2000, p. 37.

²⁹⁷ Kuisong, 2000, p. 37.

²⁹⁸ Radchenko, 2016, p. 33.

²⁹⁹ Kuisong, 2000, p. 37.

The meeting concluded with an agreement to exchange formal diplomatic notes and restart formal border negotiations.³⁰⁰ On September 13, Zhou reported the results of the talks to Mao and advised that China participate in direct negotiations.³⁰¹ The prospect of averting further escalation likely contributed to the recommendation, but Beijing now also possessed a strong incentive to stabilize the situation. On September 7, a Romanian delegation to Beijing delivered a message from U.S. President Richard Nixon indicating that Washington was serious about normalizing U.S.-China relations and would not support Soviet aggression against China.³⁰² Although the Chinese leadership remained apprehensive, Nixon's message validated its assessments that border talks could be conducive to normalization because they would place pressure on the United States to finalize an arrangement with Beijing before Sino-Soviet relations could be repaired.³⁰³ Kosygin's visit had made Washington "nervous," assessed the same group of four senior officials Mao had consulted in July, and continued talks would encourage Nixon to "exert himself to catch up."³⁰⁴

From Beijing's perspective, improved relations with Washington presented an alternative option to achieving Mao's initial aims of securing Chinese borders and deterring Soviet provocations. "We must wage a tit-for-tat struggle against both the United States and the Soviet Union, including negotiation as a means of fighting against them," a group of four senior officials recommended in a September 17 report, adding, "we should be firm on principles and flexible on tactics."³⁰⁵ Although the officials had dismissed the possibility of a Soviet attack and advocated for a policy of "equidistance" from either superpower, they now suggested that the Soviets "intend[ed] to wage a war of aggression" if the "attitude of the U.S. imperialists" was favorable to their cause. Surmising that Soviet diplomatic overtures were genuine, they therefore recommended Beijing enter into talks without preconditions and respond positively to U.S. overtures.³⁰⁶ "In this light," a 2021 study concludes, "Beijing's decision to resume border talks was tactical: improve relations with Washington and, in turn, protect China's borders by resisting the Soviets through negotiations."³⁰⁷

³⁰⁰ Cho, 2021, p. 560.

³⁰¹ Lüthi, 2012, p. 392.

³⁰² Cho, 2021, p. 561.

³⁰³ Cho, 2021, pp. 552, 563–564.

³⁰⁴ Radchenko, 2016, p. 34.

³⁰⁵ Wilson Center, "Report by Four Chinese Marshals, Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, and Xu Xiangqian, to the Central Committee, 'Our Views About the Current Situation' (Excerpt)," trans. Chen Jian with assistance from Li Di, September 17, 1969, *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao* [CCP History Materials], No. 42, June 1992a.

³⁰⁶ Wilson Center, 1992a.

³⁰⁷ Cho, 2021, p. 564.

The Final War Scare, September 16–October 10

On September 18, Zhou wrote Kosygin to formally propose terms for border negotiations and reiterate his demand that Soviet threats against Chinese nuclear weapon facilities cease.³⁰⁸ The two parties appeared to be moving toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict, yet substantial mistrust remained.³⁰⁹ Predisposed to view the Chinese as untrustworthy negotiators, Soviet officials interpreted Zhou's careful but vague statements during the airport meeting as further evidence that the Chinese were unwilling to engage in genuine negotiations and would try to trick the Soviet Union. Kosygin had balked from Zhou's attempts to broach the possibility of a mutual drawdown along the border, suspecting that his Chinese counterpart was attempting to draw the Soviets into a trap. If the Soviet forces withdrew, he reasoned, the PRC might encourage Chinese settlers to claim the land in an attempt to force Soviet concessions by default.³¹⁰ For their part, the Chinese remained attuned to the possibility of a sudden Soviet attack and continued to direct emergency preparations for a general war in which Chinese territory could come under conventional and even nuclear attack.³¹¹ Comparing Soviet diplomatic overtures to Japan's negotiations with the United States in the months preceding Pearl Harbor, Chinese leaders feared that Moscow might use the talks as a "smoke screen" to distract Beijing and obscure its military preparations.³¹²

Already inclined to suspect Soviet intentions, the Chinese leadership searched for additional evidence of deception. In a report prepared for Mao, for instance, senior officials noted that no other Soviet leaders had met Kosygin at the airport when he returned from Moscow, an oversight they interpreted as an indication that his Politburo colleagues had not approved the diplomatic foray.³¹³ On September 16, five days after the airport meeting, the *London Evening News* published an article by a journalist suspected of KGB connections that warned of the possibility of a Soviet nuclear attack on Chinese nuclear facilities in Xinjiang.³¹⁴ The author's insinuation that the Brezhnev doctrine, which proclaimed the Soviet "right" to intervene to suppress any threat in any socialist state, could be applied to China touched a raw nerve in Beijing, where Mao, Zhou, and others had for months warned that the Czechoslovakian leadership's fatal error had been to trust Moscow.³¹⁵ In the aftermath, both Zhou and Mao became worried that Washington had not publicly and explicitly denounced Soviet nuclear threats. Drawing a flawed

³⁰⁸ Lüthi, 2008, pp. 343–344.

³⁰⁹ Cho, 2021, p. 560.

³¹⁰ Radchenko, 2016, p. 33; Wishnick, 2001, p. 36.

³¹¹ Lüthi, 2008, pp. 343–344.

³¹² Radchenko, 2016, p. 36.

³¹³ Radchenko, 2016, pp. 34–35.

³¹⁴ Cho, 2021, p. 561.

³¹⁵ Wishnick, 2001, p. 39; Radchenko, 2016, pp. 34–35.

historical analogy to the world wars, senior leaders began to suspect that the United States was not only supporting the Soviet Union but hoping for a Sino-Soviet war so it could “reap the spoils after joining in later.”³¹⁶

Chinese officials were therefore already primed to misinterpret Soviet intentions when, on September 26, Moscow submitted a request that negotiations begin on October 10. Noting that the diplomatic message did not contain any references to Soviet threats against Chinese nuclear facilities, Mao and Zhou concluded that an attack—one certain to escalate into a wider war—would likely occur on October 1, China’s National Day.³¹⁷ Zhou dispatched an immediate request to postpone the talks for another ten days, likely to allow time for additional war preparations, while Mao warned others not to visit the capital for holiday commemorations.³¹⁸ On September 30, Lin Biao ordered the PLA on full alert, dispersed most military aircraft from airports near Beijing, and directed the CMC’s Administrative Group to implement measures to protect airports.³¹⁹ Zhou Enlai reversed another of Lin’s directives, which would have risked flooding Beijing by preemptively releasing three water reservoirs outside the capital.³²⁰

Confronted with a credible threat of a nuclear attack, Mao chose to escalate by demonstrating the PRC’s nuclear capabilities. The chairman ordered a thermonuclear test to demonstrate the country’s determination to “win still greater victories” and to strike “another great blow at the nuclear monopoly of U.S. imperialism and [Soviet] social imperialism.”³²¹ On September 23, China conducted its first underground explosion, which was followed by the detonation of a 3-megaton thermonuclear weapon on September 29.³²² Whether the Kremlin was aware of the intensity of Chinese fears or the nature of Chinese preparations is not clear from the available documentary records, although the Soviets certainly would have known of the Chinese nuclear test.

While source limitations preclude a conclusive determination, scholars have not found evidence that the Soviets were readying to launch an attack.³²³ But convinced at that point that the Soviet Union intended to strike, Chinese leaders proved reluctant to let down their guard. When October 1 passed without incident, they concluded that the attack had been moved to October 20, the scheduled start of negotiations, and redoubled defensive preparations. On October 5, Lin Biao conducted an urgent inspection of defensive fortifications in Zhangjiakou, a

³¹⁶ Lüthi, 2008, p. 343.

³¹⁷ Lüthi, 2012, p. 393.

³¹⁸ Cho, 2021, p. 560.

³¹⁹ Lüthi, 2008, pp. 343–344; Lüthi, 2012, p. 393.

³²⁰ Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 61.

³²¹ Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 60.

³²² Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 60.

³²³ One source suggests that the Soviets dismissed the notion of using nuclear weapons in August 1969 out of concern that “it was an unfeasible option against a populous country like China” (Lüthi, 2008, p. 342).

city located between Beijing and Inner Mongolia.³²⁴ Amid rumors that the Soviets were retrofitting their delegation's plane with nuclear-tipped air-to-surface-missiles, Mao directed the central leadership to leave the capital. To evade potential capture or death and to command local guerrilla forces in the event of a Soviet invasion, Mao fled to Wuhan, Lin Biao flew to Suzhou near Shanghai, and other senior CMC officials dispersed to command centers and posts across the country.³²⁵ On October 16, the General Staff established an advance command post to oversee operations in the opening phases of a conflict and ordered the mobilization of the strategic reserve.³²⁶ Two days later, Lin Biao ordered China's strategic nuclear forces to begin preparations for a surprise attack.³²⁷

The Crisis Wanes, October 1969 Onward

The start of Sino-Soviet border talks on October 20 did not immediately assuage Chinese anxieties. Still suspicious of Soviet intentions, Zhou directed the General Staff Intelligence Department to brief him daily on the military situation, while the CMC issued instructions to prepare for the possibility of a winter war, when Soviet tanks would be able to cross the frozen rivers into Chinese territory.³²⁸

Over the subsequent months, three factors convinced the PRC to reassess the likelihood of an attack. First, the United States and the Soviet Union announced on October 25, five days into the Sino-Soviet border negotiations, that the countries would begin preliminary strategic arms control talks on November 17. Believing that the Soviet Union was committed to securing a disarmament agreement with the United States, Chinese officials concluded that the Soviet Union was unlikely to take any military action against China that might derail the process.³²⁹ Second, Chinese leaders received additional U.S. signals, including a leaked report of the U.S. decision to withdraw two destroyers from the Taiwan Strait, in October and November that persuaded them that U.S. efforts to normalize were sincere.³³⁰ The realization reduced Chinese fears that the United States would support or encourage a Soviet attack and raised the possibility that Beijing could achieve its strategic objectives through rapprochement with Washington rather than further conflict with Moscow. In November, Zhou issued a secret directive to resume U.S.-China ambassadorial talks "so as to keep the Soviets off balance and deflect the Russian threat

³²⁴ Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 62.

³²⁵ Lüthi, 2008, p. 344. See also Cho, 2021, p. 560.

³²⁶ Lewis and Litai, 2006, p. 62.

³²⁷ Cho, 2021, p. 569; Lewis and Litai, 2006, pp. 64–65.

³²⁸ Radchenko, 2016, p. 36.

³²⁹ Cho, 2021, pp. 572–573.

³³⁰ Cho, 2021, p. 570; Tagirova, 2022, pp. 131–135.

against China.”³³¹ Finally, the fact that the Soviet Union did not launch an attack on the border over the winter of 1969–1970 convinced the Chinese leadership that the situation had stabilized. In a gesture of goodwill, Mao received the head of the Soviet border negotiation delegation in Tiananmen on May 1, 1970. At the event, the chairman declared that the neighbors “should negotiate well, should have good neighborly relations, should be patient, and only fight with words.”³³²

Assessing Chinese and Soviet Attempts to Manage Escalation Risks

Like the Cuban Missile Crisis seven years earlier, the Sino-Soviet border conflict was the unintended consequence of a weaker state’s attempt to deter a more powerful rival from initiating a conflict in the future. Concerned about the Soviet buildup in the region and believing the Soviet Union had already begun to test the disputed border line, the Chinese leadership calculated that a limited and isolated attack would teach the Soviet leadership a “bitter lesson” and, in turn, deter further incursions and stabilize the border. Instead, the Chinese ambush on March 2 resulted in an increase in the frequency, intensity, and costs of the fighting and prompted the Soviet Union to escalate to specific threats of conventional and nuclear action against China. As a result of this initial miscalculation of Soviet escalation thresholds, Beijing brought the two countries closer to, rather than further from, the brink of a major war.

The inadvertent escalation of Sino-Soviet tensions in 1969 offers an instructive illustration of how misjudgments and misinterpretations can cloud decisionmakers’ assessment of adversary intentions, escalation thresholds, and capabilities (Table 3.1).

³³¹ Cho, 2021, p. 570.

³³² Lüthi, 2008, p. 344.

Table 3.1. Characteristics of the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict

CHARACTERISTICS	SOVIET UNION (USSR)	PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (PRC)
How did the crisis or conflict end?	Resumption of bilateral negotiations	
Were major pre-conflict assessments of escalation risks accurate?	No. USSR underestimated the likelihood that border skirmishes could provoke Chinese retaliation.	No. PRC did not anticipate ambush would provoke Soviet retaliation, protracted fighting, or Soviet nuclear and conventional threats.
How did each state attempt to compel the other?	Military pressure: • Increase in number, intensity, and location of attacks on Chinese border forces • Re-posturing of conventional and nuclear forces • Exercises demonstrating capability to strike high-value Chinese targets • Verbal threats of nuclear escalation Political pressure and inducements: • Anti-Chinese propaganda • High-level diplomatic overtures • Participation in direct talks • State media coverage	Military pressure: • Increase in number and intensity of attacks on Soviet border forces • Tests of new nuclear capabilities • Statements of resolve • Defensive preparations to enhance regime survivability Political pressure and inducements: • Anti-Soviet propaganda • Mass demonstrations • State media coverage • Limited participation in direct talks
Did each state succeed in limiting the conflict below its desired threshold?	Mixed. USSR failed to deter conflict but avoided major war and nuclear use.	Mixed. PRC provoked a protracted conflict and perceived nuclear threat but avoided a major war.
Did either state achieve its primary objective?	Yes. USSR obtained PRC reentry into border talks.	No. PRC prompted, rather than deterred, additional Soviet military action.

Access to Accurate Information

Because of the duration, geographic proximity, and scale of the Soviet and Chinese buildup along the border, leaders in both countries were generally aware of their rival's force posture and relative technological advantages or disadvantages prior to the start of the conflict.

Even before the conflict began, however, the rivals' strained relationship limited their access to accurate information on each other's policies, intentions, and perspectives. Although materials documenting the breadth and accuracy of Soviet intelligence collection before and during the conflict are not available, historians have noted that neither China analysts in Soviet policy institutes nor senior leaders (such as Brezhnev) believed they possessed adequate reporting to explain China's turn away from the Soviet Union or its internal political dynamics before the conflict began.³³³ The inaccessibility of established hotlines in April 1969, China's diplomatic isolation, and Beijing's initial resistance to direct dialogue further constrained Soviet leaders'

³³³ See, for instance, Radchenko, 2016, pp. 29–30.

ability to collect evidence of Chinese intentions or concerns during the conflict and heightened Soviet leaders' sense of uncertainty.

In contrast, the available record does not provide evidence that Chinese leaders feared they lacked sufficient evidence on general Soviet attitudes. Descriptions of Chinese debates show that decisionmakers drew information from a variety of sources, including diplomatic engagements with third parties, public press reports, and military reporting, to formulate theories of Soviet behavior and the risks of further escalation. But as the October war scare illustrates, they struggled to discern rumor from fact and were susceptible to potential Soviet misinformation and disinformation campaigns. This difficulty was likely in part a result of the breakdown in communications between the countries prior to the conflict, as well as the CCP's relative isolation at the time. Despite its tentative interactions with Washington, Beijing remained alienated from the international community and was guided by what one scholar has characterized as "uncompromising" views on the correct relationship between the communist and noncommunist worlds.³³⁴ This alienation reduced the CCP's access to (and confidence in) external information sources that could have helped to verify rumors of an impending Soviet attack or provided additional context to decipher Soviet behavior.

Chinese and Soviet leaders used different types of information to develop their assessments of each other's capabilities and intentions. Before 1969, Soviet decisionmakers emphasized their technological advantage but acknowledged the PLA's conventional numerical superiority as a secondary concern. Once the conflict began, Soviet assessments placed greater emphasis on population size as a source of Chinese strength. In contrast, the Chinese leadership acknowledged the Soviet Union's overall technological advantages but focused on specific shortfalls, as Zhou's comments in the aftermath of the second Zhenbao battle illustrate. Compared with their Soviet counterparts, Chinese officials were also more preoccupied with the militaries' relative will to fight. Records of senior Chinese deliberations suggest, however, that decisionmakers relied on anecdotal evidence of Soviet forces' irresolution and cowardice rather than a systemic analysis of Soviet readiness or morale.³³⁵ More-general ideological assumptions about the relative strength of the Chinese and Soviet communist systems, which hardened after the 1960 split, predisposed Chinese leaders to assume they had an advantage.³³⁶

Assessment of Adversary Intent

These shortfalls in information likely contributed to Chinese and Soviet leaders' consistent misjudgment of their rivals' interests and intentions but were not the sole cause of these errors.

The broader political context distorted each side's vision of the other and inhibited the development of trust necessary to de-escalate tensions. As in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Soviet

³³⁴ Lüthi, 2008, pp. 347, 349.

³³⁵ Kuisong, 2000, p. 27.

³³⁶ Radchenko, 2016.

and PRC officials' reliance on recent interactions, as well as the broader state of Sino-Soviet relations, to interpret the available information and plug analytical gaps warped their perceptions of the other side's motives and capabilities. The Sino-Soviet rivalry predisposed leaders on both sides to assume the other side's worst intentions and constrained their ability to accurately assess how the other side might perceive and respond to their behavior. For instance, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia elevated Chinese fears that the Soviet Union might someday attempt an invasion and predisposed Chinese officials to view Soviet military activities in the Far East as preparations for just such an invasion. In reality, Soviet leaders also felt a sense of vulnerability as they faced what they perceived as an increasingly aggressive and unpredictable China, which they viewed as forcing their hand in building up military capabilities in the Far East in response. By heightening anxiety about the cohesiveness of the Warsaw Pact, growing Sino-Soviet discord ironically contributed to the decision to intervene in Czechoslovakia that would aggravate Chinese insecurity further.³³⁷

Conversely, Chinese leaders overlooked the possibility that the Soviet Union, which was not preparing to attack its neighbor, might perceive an unexpected ambush as an indicator of Chinese intentions to escalate further, particularly when combined with hostile propaganda and public statements that suggested mobilization for a wider war.³³⁸ Similarly, they (1) did not realize that the Soviet Union's overtures to negotiate in spring and summer 1969 were genuine and urgent, (2) underestimated Soviet fears that the situation could escalate into a wider war that summer, and (3) failed to anticipate how their refusal to engage in negotiations might prompt the Kremlin to escalate to more-forceful measures.

At the same time, Chinese leaders misunderstood the significance of the eastern border to the Soviet Union and underestimated the Kremlin's resolve to risk war. Chinese officials reasonably assumed that the Soviet Union was focused on Europe, where its contest with the United States was focused and where the majority of its military capabilities and allies were located. But they drew the wrong conclusion that Moscow was therefore unwilling to defend its interests in the east despite substantial evidence that the Soviet Union had already diverted significant resources to the region and assumed a more assertive patrolling posture. This wishful thinking reflected Chinese leaders' ideological assumption that the international balance between the communist countries had tilted in China's favor and that a limited demonstration of Chinese strength would "not only dissuade the Soviet Union from invading, but also add to revolutionary tides around the world, including China," as one historian argues.³³⁹

³³⁷ Mark Kramer, "The Kremlin, the Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine," in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion and Utopia*, Central European University Press, 2011, p. 288; Radchenko, 2016, p. 36.

³³⁸ Robinson, 2003, p. 204.

³³⁹ Radchenko, 2016, p. 24.

Leadership factors contributed to these misinterpretations and hindered decisionmakers' access to alternative perspectives. Even before the border fighting began, Mao's encouragement of hyperbolic, anti-Soviet rhetoric for political and domestic purposes made it difficult for his subordinates to voice alternate theories of how to approach China's neighbor without calling the leader—and, by extension, the Chinese communist cause—into question.³⁴⁰ Additionally, the Chinese state's vertical structure, centralized decisionmaking, and subordination of the armed forces to the CCP all contributed to a stovepiping of information that impeded effective analysis of issues that crossed bureaucratic boundaries.³⁴¹ As a result, PRC leadership received limited information that was further distorted by a narrow understanding of international politics.

The resulting Chinese miscalculations contributed to preexisting Soviet assumptions of Chinese irrationality that were premised on both shortfalls in accurate information and racialized views of the Chinese as unreasonable, unpredictable, and, in turn, untrustworthy.³⁴² Soviet leaders assumed before 1969 that a serious military challenge was unlikely because the Soviets had a strong local defense backstopped by overall technological and nuclear advantages in the balance of power. They were therefore surprised by the Zhenbao ambush and struggled to devise an alternative explanation for Chinese behavior other than innate aggressiveness and irrationality. Although the Chinese aimed to compel a return to the pre-1968 status quo ante, the Soviet leadership interpreted their rebuff of Soviet diplomatic advances, belligerent public statements, and continued assertive border patrolling as further evidence of the Soviet leadership's view that the Chinese were irrationally committed to revising the border line despite the clear risks of provoking a wider war. This interpretation reinforced an implicit Soviet belief that the Chinese responded best to force, not subtle threats or inducements. Rather than match Chinese gestures in kind, the Soviets therefore determined that a massive escalation—a series of increasingly threatening nuclear signals—was the only way to force the Chinese to confront the risks of conflict and alter their behavior.

Execution of Coercive Actions

Despite their reliance on incomplete and flawed information and assessments, the Soviet Union and China competently executed their coercive campaigns without major mishaps in implementation. The Chinese leadership exercised effective command and control of its border forces, and there is no public record of major incidents of unintentionally targeting Soviet forces or assets. Although some sources suggest that overassertive Soviet border guards may have started unauthorized but low-intensity skirmishes along the border, the available record of Soviet military activities suggests that the Soviet Union exercised strict discipline as well (particularly

³⁴⁰ Lüthi, 2008.

³⁴¹ Fravel and Medeiros, 2010, pp. 57–58.

³⁴² Radchenko, 2016, p. 24.

compared with its more lax standards during the Cuban Missile Crisis).³⁴³ The notable exception was the Chinese hotline operator who acted without authorization to block Soviet leaders' attempts to communicate with their counterparts in Beijing.

The parties' belligerent rhetoric belied the fact that both sides limited the scale and cost of the confrontation. The major battles in March and August represented significant departures from pre-1969 standards in terms of the scale, duration, and costs of the fighting, but they involved a relatively small proportion of the overall forces and capabilities arrayed on either side of the border. Similarly, both sides limited their operations to the disputed territory and avoided the temptation to extend operations deeper into either country's territory. Despite threats to escalate the conflict horizontally and vertically, a shared desire to avoid a major war constrained Soviet and Chinese military options in practice. A perceived shortage of other conventional options may, however, have contributed to the Soviet decision to employ more-explicit nuclear signals in summer 1969.³⁴⁴

The Soviet nuclear threats illustrate a broader difference in how Chinese and Soviet leaders responded to uncertainty. Confronted with a sudden and unexpected conflict against an unpredictable adversary, Moscow chose to escalate its threats and intensify its real military pressure on Beijing. It took several more months for the Chinese to realize that they had lost control of the pace, scale, and territorial scope of the conflict, at which point they increased their defensive preparations but did not choose to escalate their attacks, revise their demands, or capitulate. Similarly, uncertainty regarding Soviet intentions did not cause China to initiate diplomatic outreach or stop fighting.

Moreover, the available record of Chinese deliberations and behavior in 1969 does not provide strong evidence that Soviet nuclear superiority compelled Beijing to de-escalate. The PRC initiated the confrontation despite knowing it occupied a weaker position in the nuclear balance, and it resolved to continue fighting even after it was confronted with evidence of an imminent nuclear threat against strategic and leadership targets deep within Chinese territory. Some scholars have suggested that the Soviet Union compelled China to the negotiating table and that the Chinese leadership "succumbed unwillingly to Moscow's demand for talks."³⁴⁵ Yet these claims do not adequately account for Chinese leaders' belief that the government could survive a nuclear strike and that China's defensive preparations would enable a mass Chinese army to ultimately prevail over what they believed was an irresolute Soviet force. Faced with what they perceived as a credible and imminent threat, Chinese leaders chose to accelerate defensive preparations but did not attempt to stave off the attack by accelerating negotiations,

³⁴³ See, for instance, Radchenko, 2016, p. 30.

³⁴⁴ Although questions remain about the purpose of these preparations, the available evidence suggests the Soviets successfully applied pressure on China without provoking retaliation from other parties, such as the United States.

³⁴⁵ Gerson, 2010; Kroenig, 2013. For a critique of Kroenig's statistical model, see David C. Logan, "The Nuclear Balance Is What States Make of It," *International Security*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Spring 2022, pp. 173–174.

offering new positive inducements, or otherwise adopting a more accommodating posture. Moreover, the Chinese did not seek to speed up the conclusion of border talks once they began and ultimately secured an agreement balanced in China's favor. As one study has pointed out, "the events of the 1969 crisis offer little support for the view that nuclear weapons are useful tools of coercion" because the Soviets "gained very little."³⁴⁶

What explains Beijing's counterintuitive response? In 1969, China's senior political and military leaders (including Mao) viewed nuclear weapons primarily as a coercive tool with limited warfighting utility and had long emphasized the need to resist or counter attempts at nuclear intimidation, the importance of survivability rather than nuclear parity, and "the superiority of people over weapons on the battlefield," as two scholars of Chinese nuclear doctrine have written.³⁴⁷ But China lacked a developed concept for nuclear employment or retaliation because resource and organizational constraints had impeded the development of nuclear expertise in the country.³⁴⁸ The personnel responsible for developing the country's nuclear strategy were not part of the PLA's operational warfighting units, and they played little role in planning.³⁴⁹ When a crisis erupted, Beijing therefore defaulted to the position of its political leadership and executed a strategy that did not substantially differentiate between nuclear and conventional warfighting.

³⁴⁶ Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2017, p. 217.

³⁴⁷ Fravel and Medeiros, 2010, pp. 51, 57–64.

³⁴⁸ Fravel and Medeiros, 2010, pp. 51, 57–64.

³⁴⁹ Fravel and Medeiros, 2010, p. 67.

Chapter 4. The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

In this chapter, we examine U.S. and Chinese interactions during the 1995–1996 crisis over Taiwan, commonly known as the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Triggered by President Bill Clinton’s decision to grant Lee Teng-hui, president of the Republic of China (ROC), a visa to visit the United States, the crisis featured extensive Chinese military exercises and live-fire exercises, as well as diplomatic and informational signals, that ultimately prompted the United States to conduct a significant show of military force to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait. Although the crisis did not escalate to armed hostilities, the incident marked one of the lowest points in the bilateral relationship up to that point.

We decided to examine the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis to account for potential changes in state behavior after the end of the Cold War and because of the significance of the case as a formative experience for current political and military leaders in the United States and China. The recency of this episode, as well as the sensitivity of both countries’ policy toward Taiwan, limited the availability of detailed information on either U.S. or Chinese deliberations during the crisis. The U.S. 25-year declassification policy in the United States enabled the recent release of a greater volume of documentation on the Clinton administration’s foreign policymaking generally, but records related to Taiwan remain limited. Within China, information on PRC debates and decisionmaking regarding Taiwan is restricted, and many government archives remain inaccessible to researchers.

Strategic Context

In 1949, the Chinese Nationalist government declared Taipei the temporary capital of the ROC, prompting a dispute over the status of the island in relation to mainland China that remains unresolved more than seven decades later. Although the ROC expressed ambitions to reclaim the mainland and overthrow what it viewed as the mainland’s illegitimate government, the communist leaders of the newly established PRC maintained that Taiwan was a rebellious province that they would eventually reabsorb. Believing that a communist takeover was likely and recognizing that the United States lacked the theater assets needed to defend the island, the Truman administration announced in January 1950 that it considered Taiwan to be part of China and would not intervene in its defense. The outbreak of the Korean War six months later, however, spurred a rapid policy shift. To deter a Chinese invasion and ensure the ROC’s survival, the United States deployed the 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Strait and increased security

assistance to Taiwan, although it maintained that Taiwan's legal status was unresolved.³⁵⁰ In 1951, the United States reactivated the Military Assistance Advisory Group to the Republic of China, which had suspended operations in 1949, to facilitate increased military assistance.³⁵¹

Four years later, the first major cross-strait crisis erupted when the PRC bombarded the Nationalist-controlled islands of Quemoy (also known as Kinmen or Jinmen) and Matsu (also called Nankan or Mazu), triggering a standoff that lasted months. Determined to preserve the Nationalist government in Taipei but worried about becoming entangled in a conflict, the United States decided against direct military involvement.³⁵² In December 1954, the United States signed a Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROC, in which it pledged to support Taiwan in the event of a broader conflict but did not commit to defending Taiwan's offshore islands. The following year, Congress passed the Formosa Resolution, which granted the President authority to defend Taiwan and other offshore islands.³⁵³ After the collapse of U.S.-PRC talks, however, the PLA resumed its bombardment of Quemoy and Matsu and blocked ROC access to garrisons on the islands in 1958. The United States soon intervened to resupply the ROC garrisons, bringing an abrupt end to the crisis.³⁵⁴

Worried that the United States could get drawn into a cross-strait war, U.S. policymakers attempted to persuade Taipei and Beijing to accept the principle of a peaceful political settlement. But by the mid-1970s, the gradual normalization of relations between the United States and China also incentivized Washington to clarify its position on Taiwan. During a landmark visit to China in 1972, President Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou signed what would later become known as the Shanghai Communiqué, in which the United States acknowledged "there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China," reaffirmed "its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves," and agreed to the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces and installations from the island.³⁵⁵ In a second joint communiqué signed seven years later to mark the establishment of formal relations, the United States affirmed the so-called One China principle but noted that "the people of the United States will maintain

³⁵⁰ Richard Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait*, Brookings Institution Press, 2005a, p. 18.

³⁵¹ From 1948 until its suspension in 1949, the organization was known as the Joint United States Military Advisory Group to the Republic of China (Nathaniel R. Weber, *United States Military Advisory Groups During the Cold War, 1945–1965*, dissertation, Texas A&M University, May 2016, pp. 131–132).

³⁵² According to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the crisis nearly "carr[ied] the United States to 'the edge of war'" (Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–1956: The White House Years*, Doubleday, 1965, p. 550).

³⁵³ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Joint Resolution by the Congress," January 29, 1955, in Harriet D. Schwar, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, China*, Vol. II, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986.

³⁵⁴ For a history of the first and second Taiwan crises, see Pang Yang Huei, *Strait Rituals: China, Taiwan, and the United States in the Taiwan Strait Crises, 1954–1958*, Hong Kong University Press, 2019.

³⁵⁵ "Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Shanghai Communiqué)," Shanghai, February 27, 1972.

cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.”³⁵⁶ In 1979, the United States abrogated its Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROC and drew down its military presence on the island, although it retained a legal basis to provide defense articles and services “as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability” under the Taiwan Relations Act passed a year earlier.³⁵⁷

From Beijing’s perspective, the prospects for unification continued to improve during the 1980s. Soon after the death of CCP Chairman Mao and the accession of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the PRC ceased its symbolic bombardment of Quemoy and Matsu and approached the Taiwanese leadership about opening a cross-strait dialogue.³⁵⁸ Although Taipei rejected Beijing’s proposed “one country, two systems” formula, under which Taiwan would retain a degree of economic, social, and political autonomy in exchange for unification with the PRC, a new Taiwan government lifted restrictions on travel to the mainland and opened talks on trade and investment.³⁵⁹ As a result, cross-strait economic activity and travel increased throughout the 1980s.³⁶⁰

Yet the PRC’s hopes that increased interaction would build support for a “one country, two systems” framework did not materialize. Rather, political developments in Taiwan, including the lifting of martial law in 1987 and subsequent democratization, generated new pressure within the island to reconsider the prospect of formal independence.³⁶¹ A rising generation of politicians, many born on Taiwan, rejected the One China principle and accused mainlanders of manipulating the narrative to justify dominance of Taiwan.³⁶² New political organizations, such as the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), advocated for the notion of Taiwan as a distinct country, whereas others suggested that future unification would need to be conditional on the

³⁵⁶ “Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America, 1979,” January 1, 1979.

³⁵⁷ Public Law 96-8, Taiwan Relations Act, April 10, 1979. According to a Heritage Foundation dataset, the number of U.S. personnel stationed in Taiwan rose from 11 in 1950 to a peak of approximately 19,000 in 1958. The gradual drawdown in U.S. forces began after 1973 and concluded in 1979 (Tim Kane, “U.S. Troop Deployment Dataset,” Heritage Foundation, updated March 1, 2006a). For analysis, see Tim Kane, *Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950–2005*, Heritage Foundation, May 24, 2006b, p. 8.

³⁵⁸ Andrew Scobell, “Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 155, No. 2, Summer 2000, p. 230.

³⁵⁹ John W. Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan’s Democratization*, University of Washington Press, 2011, pp. 14–15.

³⁶⁰ Garver, 2011, pp. 14–15.

³⁶¹ Thomas P. Gold, “Identity and Symbolic Power in Taiwan,” in Wilson Center, *The Evolution of a Taiwanese National Identity*, Asia Program Special Report No. 114, August 2003.

³⁶² Garver, 2011, pp. 15–23; Arthur S. Ding, “The Lessons of the 1995–1996 Military Taiwan Strait Crisis: Developing a New Strategy Toward the United States and Taiwan,” in Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell, and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People’s Liberation Army at 75*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, July 2003.

opening of the Chinese economic and *political* system.³⁶³ In 1994, Taiwan President Lee embarked on a campaign of “pragmatic diplomacy” to raise Taiwan’s international profile and broaden its economic relations.³⁶⁴

Often accompanied by other high-level officials, President Lee traveled throughout Southeast Asia, Central America, Africa, and Europe for informal meetings with foreign government officials and campaigned for Taiwan’s reentry into the UN General Assembly.³⁶⁵ That July, Taipei released a white paper advocating for a new “one China, two equal political entities” approach to the cross-strait relationship.³⁶⁶ Lee’s behavior persuaded Chinese leaders that U.S. and international support had emboldened Taipei to push closer to complete independence.³⁶⁷

Meanwhile, relations between the United States and China had deteriorated. The PLA’s 1989 massacre of student protestors in Tiananmen Square had “shattered the consensus in the United States that maintaining a positive relationship with China was in U.S. interests” and “removed a reason for limiting U.S. ties with Taiwan” at the same time that the Soviet Union’s collapse negated the initial rationale for improving relations with China.³⁶⁸ In late 1992, the George H. W. Bush administration announced its decision to sell 150 F-16 jet fighters to Taiwan, a gesture China interpreted as a violation of the 1982 communiqué and an alarming sign of increasing U.S. support for the island.³⁶⁹ The next year, the Clinton administration launched a review of U.S.-Taiwan relations that resulted in a decision to allow higher-level diplomatic engagement. Concurrently, the United States supported UN resolutions condemning Chinese human rights abuses and opposed China’s admission to the World Trade Organization, among other measures.³⁷⁰ Feeding Chinese fears that the United States was turning away from China and toward Taiwan, the U.S. Secretary of Transportation held an official meeting with President Lee in Taipei in 1994. Chinese observers expressed concern that U.S. actions would legitimate the “splittists” within Taiwan and embolden the leadership to move toward formal independence.³⁷¹

The PRC leadership was sensitive to U.S. global advantages. Although China possessed significant economic, political, and military advantages over other states in the region—including Taiwan—Chinese officials recognized that the United States had a wide margin of

³⁶³ Garver, 2011, pp. 15–23; Ding, 2003.

³⁶⁴ Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.-China Relations 1989–2000*, Brookings Institution Press, 2003, pp. 201–202.

³⁶⁵ Garver, 2011, pp. 31–32.

³⁶⁶ Suettinger, 2003, p. 203.

³⁶⁷ Jia Qingguo, “Reflections on the Recent Tension in the Taiwan Strait,” *China Journal*, Vol. 36, July 1996.

³⁶⁸ Bush, 2005a, p. 25.

³⁶⁹ Scobell, 2000, p. 231.

³⁷⁰ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 162–164; Fravel, 2008, p. 258.

³⁷¹ Fravel, 2008, p. 258; Garver, 2011, p. 13.

advantage in the overall global balance of power.³⁷² The disparity was particularly evident in the nuclear domain: In contrast to the large and varied U.S. nuclear force, which could hold targets across the globe at risk on short notice, China possessed only 20 ICBMs capable of reaching the West Coast of the United States.³⁷³ This imbalance exacerbated China's sense of vulnerability and contributed to concerns that the United States, which CCP leaders perceived as harboring global hegemonic ambitions, would seek to first "contain" and then subjugate China.³⁷⁴

Third Taiwan Strait Crisis

President Lee Teng-hui's Cornell Visit, May–June 1995

On May 22, 1995, a White House spokesperson confirmed that the State Department had issued a travel visa to Lee Teng-hui to attend a June 8–11 reunion event at his alma mater, Cornell University (see Figure 4.1 for a timeline of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis).³⁷⁵ Only two months earlier, the Clinton administration stated publicly that it would maintain the traditional U.S. policy against permitting visits by high-level Taiwan government officials.³⁷⁶ U.S. policymakers recognized that China might perceive the trip as U.S. support for Lee's campaign to obtain international recognition of the ROC through overseas interactions that might confer the appearance of official standing or support for Taiwan's petitions for admission to international bodies, such as the UN.³⁷⁷ Noting Chinese protests, National Security Council (NSC) and State Department officials argued internally that allowing Lee to travel to the United States could cause a variety of "grim consequences," including further deterioration of bilateral relations, a suspension of ongoing human rights and nonproliferation dialogues, and PLA military demonstrations.³⁷⁸ After a nearly unanimous vote in Congress recommending Lee's

³⁷² Garver, 2011, pp. 35–36; Bi Jianhai, "The Role of the Military in the PRC Taiwan Policymaking: A Case Study of the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–1996," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 11, No. 32, 2002.

³⁷³ Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 2002, pp. 57–58. Complicating matters further, the PLA stored its missiles and nuclear warheads in separate locations. To prepare for launch would require several hours, during which, Chinese strategists feared, an adversary would likely detect the activity and launch a preemptive attack to decapitate PRC leadership.

³⁷⁴ Ding, 2003; Garver, 2011, pp. 5–6.

³⁷⁵ Scobell, 2000, p. 231.

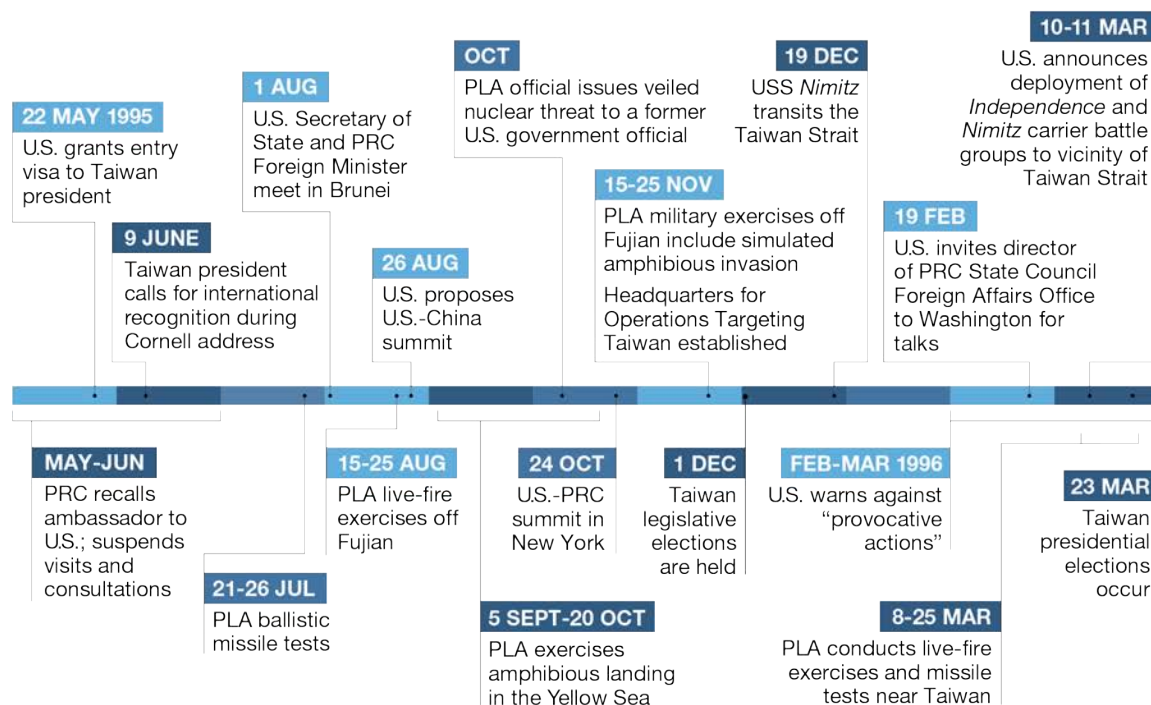
³⁷⁶ Garver, 2011, pp. 68–69.

³⁷⁷ David M. Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations, 1989–2000*, University of California Press, 2001, p. 46; Jia, 1996.

³⁷⁸ Suettinger, 2003, p. 217; Robert S. Ross, "The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Fall 2000, p. 91.

admission to the United States as a private individual, though, congressional pressure ultimately forced President Clinton's hand.³⁷⁹

Figure 4.1. Timeline of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis



As predicted, the decision outraged Chinese leaders, who feared that the trip would embolden the pro-independence movement in Taiwan and make it more difficult to isolate the ROC from the international community.³⁸⁰ Although Chinese officials recognized that Congress had intervened, they viewed the President's final decision as a betrayal of previous assurances that Lee would not be allowed to visit and as further evidence that the United States was

³⁷⁹ Garver, 2011, p. 68. In May 1994, the administration declined Lee's request for a refueling stopover in the United States, spurring the formation of a powerful coalition of advocacy groups, lobbyists, and sympathetic legislators focused on modifying U.S. visa policy. In October 1994, Congress inserted language into an immigration bill mandating that the United States approve visa requests from high-ranking Taiwan officials. The President signed the bill but clarified in a statement that any future decision would "weigh particularly carefully the foreign policy interests of the United States" and consider "the successful balance struck between our unofficial relations with Taiwan and our relations with the People's Republic of China" (Suettinger, 2003, pp. 204–205, 209–217; Lampton, 2001, pp. 47–48).

³⁸⁰ Ding, 2003, pp. 382–383. On congressional attitudes toward Taiwan during this period, see Zhiqun Zhu, "Battle Without Gunfire: Taiwan and the PRC's Lobbying Competition in the United States," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2000; and Garver, 2011, p. 68.

reconsidering the basis of its relationship with the PRC.³⁸¹ China's response was swift and fierce. Following the public announcement, the MFA called in the U.S. ambassador to register a "strong protest" and urged the United States to reverse its decision or "pay the price."³⁸² In the following weeks, China took steps to incrementally downgrade relations, including suspending expert consultations on nuclear energy and arms control, postponing planned visits by senior U.S. and Chinese officials, and recalling a PLA commander traveling in the United States.³⁸³

Lee's actions during his visit to the United States only inflamed tensions further. During a June 9 speech at Cornell, the Taiwan president avoided any mention of unification but called for international recognition of Taiwan and repeatedly referred to the "Republic of China" on Taiwan.³⁸⁴ Such statements would have been incendiary in any context, but they convinced the Chinese leadership that the United States not only had drifted from its One China policy but was also conspiring with Taiwan to build international support for independence.³⁸⁵ In retaliation, China's Taiwan Affairs Office canceled a planned second round of high-level, cross-strait talks and accused Lee of "attacking and cursing the mainland, agitating to split up the country and advertising 'two Chinas.'"³⁸⁶ To increase pressure on Washington to reaffirm its commitment to its One China policy and deter future cooperation with Taipei, Beijing also recalled its ambassador to the United States and delayed approval of his incoming U.S. counterpart.³⁸⁷ A barrage of Chinese propaganda targeting Lee individually and the general notion of Taiwanese independence accompanied these diplomatic protests.³⁸⁸

In contrast to confrontations with the United States in the years prior, such as the 1992 F-16 arms sale, political and military leaders (including President Jiang Zemin, Premier Li Peng, Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, and Vice Chairman of the Chinese Military Commission Admiral Liu Huaqing) agreed that a tougher response was needed.³⁸⁹ Soon after Lee's address, Jiang

³⁸¹ Richard Bush, "Chinese Decisionmaking Under Stress: The Taiwan Strait, 1995–2004," in Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *Chinese National Security Decisionmaking Under Stress*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2005b, p. 144; Garver, 2011, pp. 69–70; Lampton, 2001, p. 48.

³⁸² Suettinger, 2003, pp. 217–218.

³⁸³ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 217–218; Garver, 2011, p. 73. For an example of public attempts by the United States to convey that its policy on Taiwan's status remained unchanged, see White House, "Press Briefing by Mike McCurry," American Presidency Project, May 22, 1995a; and White House, "Press Briefing by Mike McCurry," American Presidency Project, May 23, 1995b.

³⁸⁴ Lee Teng-Hui, "Pres. Lee Teng-Hui, Cornell University Commencement Address, June 9, 1995," USC US-China Institute, June 9, 1995.

³⁸⁵ Ding, 2003, p. 382.

³⁸⁶ Suettinger, 2003, p. 220.

³⁸⁷ Garver, 2011, p. 73.

³⁸⁸ Fravel, 2008, p. 256.

³⁸⁹ Fravel, 2008, pp. 260–261. In April 1995, one month after Lee's request was made public but before the visa was granted, the PLA official reportedly commented that military force could be used to convey an "explicit and

directed the PLA to develop plans for a show of force against Taiwan. Within weeks, the military leadership proposed a series of military exercises and missile tests timed to coincide with Taiwan's electoral calendar. The PRC's first goal was to influence Taiwan's upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections (scheduled to occur in December 1995 and May 1995, respectively) by sowing fears of potential Chinese military action and generating a political and economic crisis, which it hoped would mobilize public pressure against pro-independence parties and then compel Lee to moderate his behavior.³⁹⁰ Secondly, Beijing aimed to deter Washington from taking actions that the CCP considered further modifications to the One China policy and that Beijing feared might improve Taipei's international standing.³⁹¹

Jiang's decision to approve the military exercises marked a shift in Beijing's Taiwan policy away from positive inducements, such as the Eight-Point Plan for cross-strait cooperation, toward a greater use of military threats.³⁹² Scholars have noted that internal political factors—including Jiang's attempts to stave off challengers, his dependence on activist elements of the PLA, and the military's desire to justify budget increases—likely contributed to the hardening of Chinese attitudes.³⁹³ But the decision to implement a military coercion campaign against Taiwan also reflected Chinese leaders' realization that diplomacy had failed to prevent the crisis. In April 1995, Lee rejected the Eight-Point Plan and announced that Taiwan would participate in talks only if the mainland renounced the use of force and accepted the principle of divided rule—conditions Beijing believed it could never accept.³⁹⁴ The United States appeared unwilling to support the Chinese position on the resumption of talks or on other cross-strait issues. After all, attempts by China to communicate its concerns diplomatically had failed to persuade the United States not to grant Lee a visa. In this context, those who advocated for nonmilitary alternatives were quickly sidelined.³⁹⁵ As Foreign Minister Qian later recalled, "I was assured a visa would not be issued. Imagine what I thought and what was thought of me when the visa was granted."³⁹⁶

firm message . . . [that] China will never tolerate foreign interference in its internal affairs and will never barter away its principles" (Suettinger, 2003, p. 207).

³⁹⁰ You Ji, "Taiwan in the Political Calculations of the Chinese Leadership," *China Journal*, No. 36, July 1996; Garver, 2011, pp. 118–126.

³⁹¹ Ding, 2003, pp. 382–383.

³⁹² You Ji, "Making Sense of War Games in the Taiwan Strait," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 6, No. 15, 1997, p. 288. Others have identified similar patterns in Chinese policy on other issues during the subsequent crisis period, noting that China also became more assertive in pushing its territorial claims in the Spratly Islands and violated an implicit moratorium on nuclear testing (Suettinger, 2003, p. 220).

³⁹³ Scobell, 2000, pp. 229, 236; Lampton, 2001, p. 51; Garver, 2011, pp. 36–37, 49–54.

³⁹⁴ Scobell, 2000, p. 231; Bi, 2002, pp. 567–572; Suettinger, 2003, pp. 207–208.

³⁹⁵ Lampton, 2001, p. 51; Fravel, 2008, pp. 256–258.

³⁹⁶ You, 1997, p. 292; Scobell, 2000, p. 231.

³⁹⁷ Scobell, 2000, pp. 235–236.

PLA Summer Exercises, July–August 1995

On July 18, the PRC announced that it would conduct air and naval exercises off the Fujian coast, followed by missile tests targeting an area approximately 90 miles off the coast of Taiwan.³⁹⁷ From July 21 to 28, the PLA fired six DF-15 ballistic missiles, followed by a second round of live-fire exercises and missile tests involving both anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles and spanning an even larger area north of Taiwan from August 15 to August 25.³⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Hong Kong press reports described the movement of PLA ground forces and sophisticated aircraft into Fujian Province, situated across the strait from Taiwan.³⁹⁹ Although the exercises were located just outside Taiwan's sovereign waters, the creation of an exclusion zone nonetheless interfered with flight paths and shipping lines to and around the island, forcing the diversion of hundreds of commercial flights to Taipei.⁴⁰⁰

To minimize the latent risks of inadvertent or accidental escalation, the PRC communicated the nature, location, duration, and scope of the military exercises in advance to Taipei and Washington, albeit with less notice than it usually provided.⁴⁰¹ Nonetheless, public statements by Chinese officials clearly indicated they intended the exercises to demonstrate the PRC's opposition to Taiwan's independence and the perceived shift in U.S. policy. Framing Chinese maneuvers as defensive, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman called on the United States to "take actions to stop further damage . . . it's up to the U.S. to correct its mistakes What we are going to do is to make the U.S. reali[z]e the importance of Sino-U.S. relations to prompt them to take the right track."⁴⁰² In a September 1995 interview, Vice Chairman of the CMC General Liu Huaqing was even more explicit. "[Lee Teng-hui] went to the United States flaunting his connections with foreigners, openly forsook national interests, brazenly advocated a split, and resisted reunification. This inevitably has increased tension across the Taiwan Strait," he stated.⁴⁰³ In a thinly veiled threat, he warned that China would

resolutely oppose any moves by foreign forces to interfere in China's internal affairs and to undermine China's reunification, and resolutely oppose the conspiracy of the Taiwan authorities [The PLA] is determined, and has the ability to smash all schemes . . . [Lee Teng-hui's] irresponsible policy will only bring disaster.⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁷ Scobell, 2000, p. 232.

³⁹⁸ Scobell, 2000, p. 233.

³⁹⁹ Suettinger, 2003, p. 226.

⁴⁰⁰ Garver, 2011, p. 74; Bruce A. Elleman, *The Making of the Modern Chinese Navy: Special Historical Characteristics*, Anthem Press, 2019, p. 64.

⁴⁰¹ Scobell, 2000, p. 236.

⁴⁰² Fravel, 2008, pp. 261–262.

⁴⁰³ As translated in Scobell, 2000, p. 241.

⁴⁰⁴ As translated in Scobell, 2000, p. 241.

Taipei responded with threats of its own. In a defiant speech before the National Assembly, Lee called for an accelerated military program to build an “effective deterrent and rapid-reaction” defense force to increase the cost of Chinese adventurism and deter an armed invasion of the island.⁴⁰⁵ Meanwhile, Taiwan’s armed forces conducted naval live-fire exercises in late July and announced that major exercises would be held in September and October.⁴⁰⁶

Washington’s response was comparatively muted. Taken aback by the ferocity of Chinese protests, the Clinton administration initially sought to clarify through private channels that the visa decision “would not change the fundamentals of the U.S.-China relationship,” as one senior official later recalled, but did not attempt to mediate the growing cross-strait tension.⁴⁰⁷ Lee’s subsequent aggressive stance surprised U.S. policymakers, who had received assurances from Taiwan’s Washington representative that Lee’s comments would be “strictly private and low-key.”⁴⁰⁸ (Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord was reportedly so furious about the representative’s duplicity that he refused to meet him again.⁴⁰⁹)

Hoping to stabilize a potentially volatile situation, restore a sense of normalcy to U.S.-China interactions, and preserve the prospect of continued engagement, the Clinton administration consciously downplayed Chinese provocations and elected against tit-for-tat recriminations. It released a muted statement after the July missile exercises, noting they were “not helpful” for stability, and elected against punitive measures when China arrested and expelled two Hong Kong-based U.S. Air Force attachés accused of “spying” on China’s military exercises in early August and when China conducted an underground nuclear test on August 17.⁴¹⁰

At the same time, China’s suspension of virtually all interactions and demand for “concrete measures” to repair the relationship forced the Clinton administration on the defensive.⁴¹¹ Chinese officials pressed Washington for firm commitments that the United States would abide by the One China policy, deny future Taiwan government requests to travel in the United States, and otherwise distance itself from Lee’s efforts to obtain international recognition of the ROC. As Chinese Foreign Minister Qian commented to journalists, “words must count and deeds must yield results.”⁴¹² During a side meeting with Qian during a regional forum in Brunei on August 1, Secretary of State Warren Christopher passed a letter from Clinton to Jiang stating that the United States did “not support” efforts to create “two Chinas or one China, one Taiwan”; to

⁴⁰⁵ Suettinger, 2003, p. 226.

⁴⁰⁶ Suettinger, 2003, p. 226.

⁴⁰⁷ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 211–216. See also Bush, 2005b, p. 144.

⁴⁰⁸ Barton Gellman, “U.S. and China Nearly Came to Blows in ’96,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1998.

⁴⁰⁹ Gellman, 1998.

⁴¹⁰ Suettinger, 2003, p. 236.

⁴¹¹ Suettinger, 2003, p. 227.

⁴¹² Ross, 2000, p. 96.

further “Taiwan independence”; or to secure Taiwan’s admission to the UN.⁴¹³ The gesture was not enough to satisfy Chinese officials, who had only to look to the visa scandal as evidence they could not trust U.S. policymakers to stand by their words. Although he acknowledged the session had been productive, Premier Li Peng noted that “it is not enough to make oral statements What is important is to translate the statements into actions.”⁴¹⁴

To bind the United States to the One China policy and to dispel any notions among Taiwan officials otherwise, the PRC demanded a U.S.-China communiqué in which the United States would commit to supporting unification and articulate new terms for future visits by Taiwan’s leaders to the United States.⁴¹⁵ On August 26, against the backdrop of the PLA’s second round of military exercises, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Peter Tarnoff arrived in Beijing to discuss preparations for an upcoming U.S.-China summit. But while Chinese officials wanted to focus the event on the Taiwan issue, senior officials in the Clinton administration had instructed Tarnoff to push for a broader event focused on the issues that most concerned the United States, including human rights, nuclear nonproliferation, and trade.⁴¹⁶ In statements following the visit, an MFA spokesman acknowledged that the talks were “useful” but reiterated that a restoration of precrisis relations would depend on “whether the U.S. side can take actions to honor its commitment” to “opposing ‘two Chinas or one-China-one-Taiwan,’ Taiwan independence, and Taiwan joining the UN.”⁴¹⁷

Over four more rounds of consultations in September, the two parties agreed to convene an unofficial summit between Presidents Jiang and Clinton in New York on the condition that it would include the discussion of issues unrelated to Taiwan. On the surface, the event appeared productive. Clinton reiterated that the United States would oppose Taiwan’s application for membership in the UN and assured Jiang that visits by Taiwan’s leaders to the United States would remain “unofficial, private, and rare.”⁴¹⁸ But in a seeming return to the precrisis dialogue, the two leaders focused their discussions on other issues, such as trade, human rights, arms proliferation, and environmental protections.⁴¹⁹ Soon after, the Chinese ambassador returned to Washington, a new U.S. ambassador took up his post in Beijing, and political and military officials began scheduling new high-level engagements. In Washington, senior officials expressed hopes that “[e]ngagement” was back on track.⁴²⁰

⁴¹³ Suettinger, 2003, p. 232.

⁴¹⁴ Ross, 2000, p. 97.

⁴¹⁵ Ross, 2000, p. 98.

⁴¹⁶ Ross, 2000, p. 98.

⁴¹⁷ Suettinger, 2003, p. 238.

⁴¹⁸ John F. Harris, “Clinton, Jiang Confer,” *Washington Post*, October 25, 1995.

⁴¹⁹ Ross, 2000, p. 99.

⁴²⁰ Suettinger, 2003, p. 242.

But even as senior officials took steps to repair the bilateral relationship, Chinese military leaders continued to threaten further military escalation. During a series of conversations in fall 1995, for instance, Chinese military intelligence officials told former Assistant Secretary of Defense Charles Freeman that China was planning to conduct more missile tests that would impose closure zones near Taiwan's ports of Kaohsiung and Chilung.⁴²¹ As Freeman later recounted to U.S. government officials, the Chinese military officials appeared to dismiss the prospect of U.S. military retaliation or intervention on the basis that the United States was unwilling to risk casualties.⁴²² In what Freeman interpreted as a veiled nuclear threat, one PLA leader commented that he was confident the United States would not assist Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack because "you care more about Los Angeles than you do about Taiwan."⁴²³

Whether China's leaders sanctioned this specific threat remains unclear. According to an NSC official, U.S. officials assessed that the source was credible but considered his remarks either "empty bluster . . . or a calculated bluff" best left unanswered.⁴²⁴ Regardless, the statement was indicative of the more general shift in Chinese thinking by late October 1995. The summit in New York had not mollified Jiang or other PRC officials, who noted that Lee continued to publicly argue for Taiwan's right to greater diplomatic recognition and engagement with the international community. Meanwhile, Washington had taken few concrete steps to restrain Taipei, as Beijing had expected. Following his return to Beijing, President Jiang, Premier Li Peng, and National People's Congress Chairman Qiao Shi "all separately issued very stern statements on Taiwan" that indicated they had "reached an unanimity of views on taking an uncompromising stand toward forces favoring Taiwan independence and on dealing relentless blows at any forces trying to break Taiwan from the mainland."⁴²⁵ After months of pressure, civilian and military leaders had decided that a more forceful approach toward both Taiwan and the United States was needed.⁴²⁶

China Attempts to Influence ROC Presidential Elections, January–March 1996

Tensions continued to rise over the winter of 1995–1996 as Beijing committed to a military coercion campaign. From November 15 to 25, the PLA conducted another, more ambitious

⁴²¹ Patrick E. Tyler, "As China Threatens Taiwan, It Makes Sure U.S. Listens," *New York Times*, January 24, 1996.

⁴²² Suettinger, 2003, p. 246.

⁴²³ Suettinger, 2003, p. 247. According to Suettinger, the White House "presumed" the PLA official was Xiong Guangkai, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff and director of China's military intelligence. Although other sources imply that the threat was issued in January 1996, following reports of the USS *Nimitz*'s passage through the Taiwan Strait, Suettinger reports that the comment was made during an October 1995 meeting and repeated during a January 1996 White House discussion. For a differing timeline, see Scobell, 2000, p. 241.

⁴²⁴ Suettinger, 2003, p. 248.

⁴²⁵ Scobell, 2000, p. 232.

⁴²⁶ Scobell, 2000, p. 232; Suettinger, 2003, p. 243.

round of military exercises off the coast of Fujian.⁴²⁷ Two Air Force divisions, 300 Navy vessels, and 17,000 forces simulated an amphibious invasion of Dongshan Island.⁴²⁸ Unlike the prior demonstrations, Beijing explicitly stated that the exercises were aimed at Taiwan and intended to resist the “splittist” activities of pro-independence forces. The PLA announced that it had established a Headquarters for Operations Targeting Taiwan and that the Nanjing Military Region was responsible for the exercise, distinctions that suggested the PLA had gone on a war footing.⁴²⁹ In broadcasts covering the event, state media channels upheld the exercises as evidence that the PLA would “safeguard the nation’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” and “firmly oppose and contain” pro-independence forces.⁴³⁰ Despite the bellicose rhetoric, the PLA situated the activities at a sufficient distance to decrease the risk of an accidental exchange with Taiwan forces.⁴³¹

On December 1, the day before Taiwan polls opened, Beijing announced that it would hold another, longer round of military exercises before the March 1996 presidential election and warned that previous PLA drills had discovered blind spots in Taiwan’s radar coverage. The news prompted panic in Taiwan, where people scrambled to purchase foreign currencies in anticipation of a war.⁴³² When the results of the election were tabulated, Lee’s Kuomintang party retained a bare majority in the legislature but had received only 46 percent of the popular vote, a steep decline from the 53 percent it received a year prior.⁴³³ The pro-independence DPP increased its representation to 32.9 percent of the legislature but fell short of pre-1995 expectations.⁴³⁴ Other factors, including infighting within the Kuomintang and concerns about Taiwan’s economic and political transition, contributed to this outcome. For Chinese leaders, however, it appeared that their military coercion campaign was succeeding.

Eighteen days later, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz* sailed through the Taiwan Strait on December 19 while transiting to the Indian Ocean.⁴³⁵ The first U.S. military movement in the area since the crisis began, and the first passage of a U.S. carrier through the Taiwan Strait since the United States and China normalized relations in 1979, the maneuver might have conveyed the resolve and capacity of the United States to enforce its interests in the

⁴²⁷ Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Derek Grossman, Kristen Gunness, Michael S. Chase, Marigold Black, and Natalia D. Simmons-Thomas, *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling in the New Era: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1074-1, 2021, p. 101.

⁴²⁸ Garver, 2011, p. 93.

⁴²⁹ Ross, 2000, p. 103.

⁴³⁰ Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., 2021, p. 101.

⁴³¹ Scobell, 2000, p. 237.

⁴³² Garver, 2011, p. 94.

⁴³³ Garver, 2011, pp. 94–95.

⁴³⁴ Garver, 2011, pp. 94–95.

⁴³⁵ Elleman, 2019, p. 64.

region in different circumstances.⁴³⁶ But by the time the United States announced the transit six weeks later, it was still unclear whether the White House had authorized, or had even been aware of, the *Nimitz*'s route, and it was therefore difficult to infer what message, if any, the transit was meant to convey to China, Taiwan, or other parties in the region.⁴³⁷ Although some analysts have suggested that the Pentagon may have authorized the movement in an attempt to reduce the potential for Chinese misunderstandings of U.S. resolve and to deter further challenges, other sources maintain that the *Nimitz*'s transit through the strait was the result of weather delays earlier in its route rather than as part of a deliberate signaling effort.⁴³⁸

Chinese leaders were unimpressed. For more than five months, the United States had by all appearances tolerated the PLA's military maneuvers, leading some Chinese officials to suggest that any threats to the contrary were empty bluffs. "It is bullshit that the U.S. will intervene," one senior Chinese diplomat reportedly told David Lampton, president of the National Committee on United States–China Relations, in August 1995, noting, "You did nothing in 1954 and 1958, Quemoy and Matsu, and you are doing nothing in Bosnia."⁴³⁹ Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Joseph Nye attempted to persuade Beijing otherwise when he announced at a mid-November 1995 press conference in Beijing that any use of force would be a "serious mistake" that could threaten U.S. national security interests.⁴⁴⁰ The statement constituted the strongest U.S. warning since the onset of the crisis; in private meetings with senior Chinese officials, however, Nye declined to clarify when pressed regarding how the United States would respond if hostilities occurred in the strait. "Predisposed as they were to a view that the United States was a declining superpower unwilling to engage in combat that might entail heavy casualties, PLA leaders may have mistaken Nye's effort to maintain a balanced U.S. approach to the Taiwan issue as a sign of weakness or indecision," one analyst suggests.⁴⁴¹

But U.S. attitudes toward the risks of escalation shifted over the winter, as China's rhetoric grew increasingly belligerent and reports of PLA planning for military action against Taiwan began to appear in the Hong Kong and foreign press.⁴⁴² After the PLA's November exercises, the Director of Central Intelligence established a dedicated, interagency task force to monitor Chinese military activities in the Taiwan Strait around the clock.⁴⁴³ Concurrently, the

⁴³⁶ Ross, 2000, p. 104.

⁴³⁷ Garver, 2011, pp. 96–97.

⁴³⁸ Ross, 2000, p. 104; Garver, 2011, pp. 87–88.

⁴³⁹ Lampton, 2001, p. 53.

⁴⁴⁰ Garver, 2011, pp. 86–87.

⁴⁴¹ Suettinger, 2003, p. 244.

⁴⁴² Garver, 2011, p. 97.

⁴⁴³ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 249, 251. For a discussion of the task force's composition and conclusions, see Kristen Gunness and Phillip C. Saunders, *Averting Escalation and Avoiding War: Lessons from the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis*, National Defense University Press, December 2022, p. 22.

Department of Defense directed contingency planning for the possibility of PLA military action, which some indicators suggested could occur just before Taiwan's March 23 presidential elections.⁴⁴⁴ Faced with growing congressional pressure to get tough with Beijing and increasingly alarmed by Chinese behavior, the NSC directed an in-house review of its China policy in January 1996.⁴⁴⁵

On February 19, the administration chose to redouble its diplomatic efforts by directing three senior officials—Secretary of State Christopher, Secretary of Defense William Perry, and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake—to intensify efforts to engage their Chinese counterparts. The decision to dispatch the national security adviser was unusual, but U.S. officials determined that the Chinese would trust that he was speaking directly on the President's behalf.⁴⁴⁶ Because the Chinese system lacked an equivalent role, the White House decided to invite Vice Minister Liu Huaqiu, who directed the State Council's Foreign Affairs Office and reported directly to Qian Qichen, Jiang Zemin, and Li Peng, for a private meeting with Lake during his scheduled March visit to Washington.⁴⁴⁷ According to a participant in his preparations, Lake's principal goal "was to give the Chinese a straight readout of American strategy and policy goals; commitment to security in the Asia-Pacific region, including Taiwan; and expectations of China."⁴⁴⁸ Believing that Beijing had misinterpreted U.S. policy and intent and concerned such misinterpretations could contribute to a miscalculation, U.S. policymakers "hoped that a clear and extended private conversation would at least ensure that [Beijing's] decisions related to Taiwan and other subjects were not made out of ignorance of American positions or likely responses."⁴⁴⁹

When the invitation to meet with Lake was extended in late February, Liu accepted immediately. Like his U.S. counterpart, his objective was to clarify his government's intentions: specifically, that the PLA's exercises and tests were not indicators of an imminent attack on Taiwan or other offshore islands.⁴⁵⁰ Chinese leaders still believed that the United States was unlikely to intervene militarily in the crisis between the PRC and Taiwan, but the rhetoric on both sides had intensified over February and raised concerns about inadvertent escalation.⁴⁵¹

On March 5, Beijing announced that it would conduct another series of missile tests and live-fire exercises, the location, breadth, and sophistication of which represented a significant escalation beyond the activities exercised in 1995. Scheduled for March 8–15 and March 12–20,

⁴⁴⁴ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 249, 251.

⁴⁴⁵ Suettinger, 2003, p. 249.

⁴⁴⁶ Suettinger, 2003, p. 251.

⁴⁴⁷ Suettinger, 2003, p. 251.

⁴⁴⁸ Suettinger, 2003, p. 251.

⁴⁴⁹ Suettinger, 2003, p. 251.

⁴⁵⁰ Scobell, 2000, p. 236.

⁴⁵¹ Scobell, 2000, p. 237.

the military maneuvers were concentrated in waters less than 50 miles from Taiwan's busiest ports and timed to coincide with Taiwan's elections.⁴⁵² Chinese leaders had concluded that the proximity to Taiwan was necessary to influence the island's elections and compel a shift in U.S. policy, although the precise end-state they believed they could reasonably achieve is unclear.⁴⁵³ When asked whether an attack by the PLA had grown more likely, an MFA spokesman warned outside powers not to intervene, cautioning that "[t]he Chinese government will not sit by watching with folded arms."⁴⁵⁴

United States Responds Militarily, March 1996

In contrast to the previous exercises, the U.S. response now took a more forceful tone. In late February, the Joint Chiefs of Staff briefed the President on the results of their review of China-related contingencies. Disturbed by the prospect that a confrontation could escalate to a nuclear war, officials struck a somber tone. "We've got to do all we can to avoid this," Clinton insisted.⁴⁵⁵ U.S. officials assessed that the PLA was not preparing an attack, because it lacked the amphibious landing capabilities required to invade the island, and they surmised the exercises would not "presage any broader military effort."⁴⁵⁶ Still, the exercise carried risks. A State Department spokesman described the missile tests as an "irresponsible" effort to intimidate Taiwan's voters and cautioned there would be "consequences" if any Chinese missiles went off target, while Defense Secretary Perry warned of a "bad mistake."⁴⁵⁷ Through private channels, U.S. diplomats repeatedly advised China not to proceed with its missile tests.⁴⁵⁸

On March 8 (March 7 in Washington), the PLA fired three M-9 short-range ballistic missiles from western Fujian into portions of the southern and northern closure areas just 32 and 22 miles from Taiwan's shore and near Taiwanese naval bases and major commercial ports.⁴⁵⁹ Flash reports of the tests reached the White House just as Liu was arriving.⁴⁶⁰ Although officials quickly determined that the tests posed no direct threat to Taiwan, Lake and Christopher agreed to adjust the visit protocol in light of the Chinese decision to disregard U.S. protests.⁴⁶¹ When Liu arrived at a scheduled dinner that evening, a "grim-faced" Perry delivered a blunt threat that

⁴⁵² Lampton, 2001, pp. 52–53; Garver, 2011, p. 105.

⁴⁵³ Ross, 2000, p. 108.

⁴⁵⁴ Garver, 2011, p. 101.

⁴⁵⁵ Suettinger, 2003, p. 251.

⁴⁵⁶ Ross, 2000, p. 108.

⁴⁵⁷ Suettinger, 2003, p. 252.

⁴⁵⁸ Ross, 2000, p. 108.

⁴⁵⁹ Garver, 2011, pp. 100–110; M. Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Winter 2007/2008, p. 56.

⁴⁶⁰ Suettinger, 2003, p. 253.

⁴⁶¹ Suettinger, 2003, p. 253.

the United States would respond militarily if Chinese weapons struck Taiwan.⁴⁶² Dismissing Liu's claims that the tests were part of "routine exercises," the defense secretary reiterated that Chinese moves had introduced the risk of conflict. "I understand very well, and the PLA understands very well, the symbolism of 'bracketing' a target. And as a technologist, I understand the very real possibility that a missile guidance system can malfunction," he told Liu, warning, "the United States has more than enough military capability to protect its vital national security interests in the region, and is prepared to demonstrate that."⁴⁶³ That same day, the White House issued a statement denouncing the Chinese tests as "reckless and provocative."⁴⁶⁴ See Figure 4.2 for an illustration of PLA exercises and missile splashdown zones during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis.

The following day, Liu and Lake met for more-informal discussions at a country estate outside Washington. Concerned that the Chinese had misconstrued U.S. intentions, Lake attempted to explain U.S. policy and its strategic goals by sketching out U.S. policy toward Asia, the envisioned role of U.S.-China relations, and what he viewed as four challenges for the relationship: Taiwan, intellectual property rights, nonproliferation, and human rights. Regarding Taiwan, Lake warned Liu against underestimating U.S. commitments and urged China to cease its missile tests and exercises, tone down its rhetoric vilifying Lee, and reopen the cross-strait dialogue. Liu's response repeated the PRC's established position that (1) its actions were responsive to actions initiated by the United States and Taiwan, (2) military exercises were routine and no threat to the United States, and (3) it was up to Washington to take concrete steps to improve the relationship. Yet Liu acknowledged that the situation was "explosive" and needed careful handling. The remainder of the day's discussions went similarly, with both sides seeking to clarify their positions in occasionally heated exchanges. But both appeared satisfied in the end. According to one source, the Chinese delegation appeared "elated" at the evening banquet, where they claimed that the event "would be seen as a turning point in the relationship."⁴⁶⁵

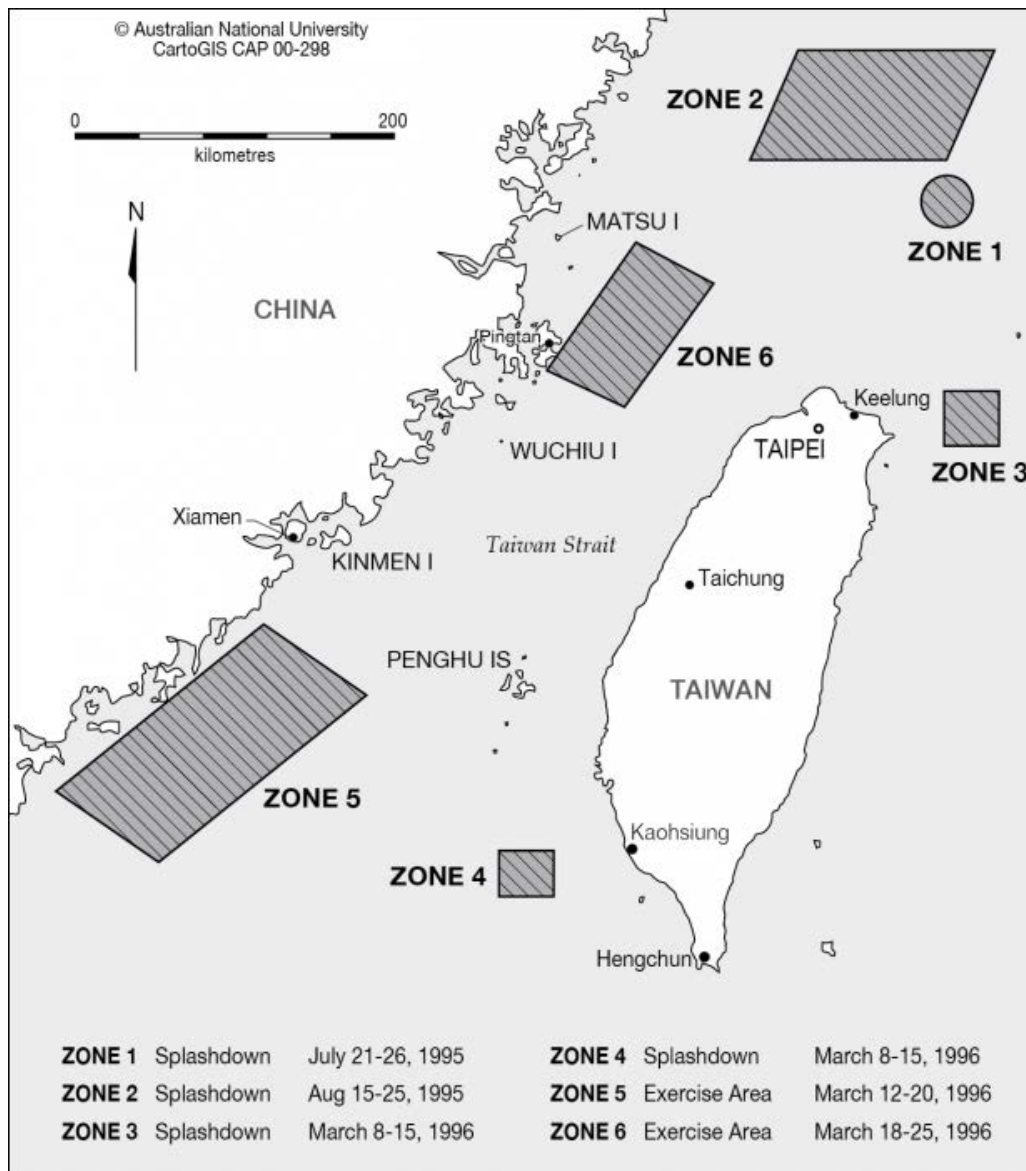
⁴⁶² Gellman, 1998.

⁴⁶³ Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America*, paperback ed., Brookings Institution Press, 2000, p. 96.

⁴⁶⁴ Lampton, 2001, p. 53.

⁴⁶⁵ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 253–255.

Figure 4.2. PLA Exercises and Missile Splashdown Zones, 1995–1996



SOURCE: Reproduced from Australian National University, College of Asia and the Pacific, CartoGIS Services, "Taiwan Strait: PRC Military Exercise Areas and Missile Splashdown Zones 1995-1996," updated January 24, 2022 (CC BY-SA 4.0).

While Lake and Liu worked to dispel misconceptions and build confidence about the other country's intentions, preparations for a more forceful response to the PRC's exercises were also underway. That day, Perry met with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Shalikashvili to consider potential military options to register the U.S. protests and demonstrate that the United States "could not be ignored or intimidated."⁴⁶⁶ By the defense secretary's own

⁴⁶⁶ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 253–255.

recollection, he and Shalikashvili agreed that the PLA would dismiss another diplomatic message as further evidence of U.S. irresolution.⁴⁶⁷ They rejected the option of dispatching one carrier battle group to the exercise area as too subtle a response because one was in the area typically, and two were seen as “unnecessarily provocative.”⁴⁶⁸ They therefore settled on the middle ground of sending two carrier battle groups to patrol in the vicinity of Taiwan, with instructions not to enter the strait or the exercise area. The proposal was presented to the NSC later that day, which quickly agreed that decisive action was needed to deter the Chinese from doing “something stupid,” and the President approved the deployment that afternoon.⁴⁶⁹

On March 10, the Pentagon announced that the President had ordered the dispatch of the USS *Independence* to waters within 100 miles of Taiwan.⁴⁷⁰ The largest deployment of U.S. naval forces in the Pacific since the Vietnam War, the move was intended to demonstrate that “the United States has a national interest in the security and the stability in the western Pacific region” and “a powerful military force there to help us carry out our national interests,” as Secretary Perry explained.⁴⁷¹ A State Department spokesperson reiterated the message, adding that the administration also aimed “to convey the strong interests that we have in a peaceful outcome.”⁴⁷² The following day, the Pentagon announced the USS *Nimitz* would join the *Independence* off Taiwan.⁴⁷³

By now, reports of a potential conflict between the United States and China had made international headlines. In comments to Chinese interlocutors and public statements, U.S. officials stressed the “precautionary” nature of the deployments and reiterated that U.S. Navy vessels were operating at a safe distance from the exercise zone.⁴⁷⁴ The day after the announcement, Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Sandy Berger and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Tarnoff met secretly with Ding Mou-shih, Secretary General of Taiwan’s National Security Council, to clarify U.S. intentions and expectations and to caution Taiwan against exploiting the U.S. deployments.⁴⁷⁵ But the administration also did not shy away from further warnings. Speaking on *Meet the Press* on the morning of March 10, Secretary of State Christopher reiterated that there would be “grave consequences” if China tried to resolve the Taiwan matter by force: “We’ve made it as clear as

⁴⁶⁷ Carter and Perry, 2000, p. 97.

⁴⁶⁸ Carter and Perry, 2000, p. 97.

⁴⁶⁹ Suettinger, 2003, p. 255; Gunness and Saunders, 2022, p. 22.

⁴⁷⁰ Lampton, 2001, p. 53.

⁴⁷¹ Ross, 2002, p. 56.

⁴⁷² Ross, 2002, p. 56.

⁴⁷³ Garver, 2011, p. 103.

⁴⁷⁴ Suettinger, 2003, pp. 256–257.

⁴⁷⁵ Suettinger, 2003, p. 257.

we possibly can to them, because we don't want any miscalculation We have real interests in Taiwan, and I don't want the Chinese to misunderstand that."⁴⁷⁶

The deployment of the carrier battle groups may have caused the Chinese leadership to reconsider the likelihood of a U.S. intervention. Previously, most Chinese officials believed that the possibility of U.S. military action was low, a conviction that had only been reinforced by the administration's low-profile responses to earlier tests and exercises.⁴⁷⁷ Even those Chinese officials who believed a U.S. intervention was possible maintained that it was unlikely to be swift or decisive.⁴⁷⁸ But if one carrier group might have conveyed the U.S. symbolic commitment to a peaceful resolution, the deployment of two demonstrated the U.S. capacity, at the time, to prevent the PLA Navy from deploying from its bases.⁴⁷⁹ In analysis published after the crisis, Chinese military and civilian analysts acknowledged that the deployment of two carriers was a "strong military signal" of U.S. resolve and readiness to intervene.⁴⁸⁰

Nonetheless, scholars have argued that Chinese leaders reasonably inferred from U.S. behavior and statements that the United States still wanted to avoid war and would not escalate further.⁴⁸¹ In comments to a visiting Japanese delegation years later, Jiang reportedly claimed that the United States "lacked courage" to cross the centerline of the Taiwan Strait, while Chinese officials "subsequently spread the word that the carrier battle groups were deterred from entering the Strait by the activities of the Chinese submarines" in the exercise area.⁴⁸² The available evidence is insufficient to determine whether this statement reflected a sincere belief or face-saving rationalization but suggests that U.S. and Chinese officials may have drawn different lessons from the episode.

China does not appear to have been deterred from taking further action to coerce Taiwan or compelled to halt other coercive efforts against the ROC that predated the crisis, although the latter outcome was not a stated U.S. objective.⁴⁸³ PLA exercises simulating a full-scale invasion of Taiwan continued, and the Chinese military demonstrated new naval capabilities and operational concepts, as well as improved coordination among sea, air, and submarine forces.⁴⁸⁴ On March 14, three days after learning a second carrier would soon reach the area, Beijing declared that a third wave of exercises would begin on March 18 and run through March 25.

⁴⁷⁶ Garver, 2011, p. 103.

⁴⁷⁷ Ding, 2003, p. 387.

⁴⁷⁸ Garver, 2011, pp. 113–115.

⁴⁷⁹ Garver, 2011, p. 103.

⁴⁸⁰ Ross, 2002, pp. 68–69.

⁴⁸¹ Garver, 2011, pp. 110–115.

⁴⁸² Suettinger, 2003, p. 261.

⁴⁸³ Because China likely lacked the capacity and intent to start a full-scale invasion, U.S. action did not deter escalation to an outright conflict.

⁴⁸⁴ Garver, 2011, p. 105.

China reportedly selected the exercise area, which encompassed 6,000 square kilometers near Hainan Island, because of the topographical similarity to Taiwan. The PLA prepared to fire more than 20 DF-15 missiles but ultimately reduced the total number, likely because of inclement weather.⁴⁸⁵

Resolution, March 23–25

Under the shadow of Chinese exercises, Taiwanese voters participated in the country's first direct popular election for president on March 23, 1996. Lee won 54 percent of the vote, defeating the DPP candidate, Peng Ming-min, by a 33-point margin that exceeded prior polling estimates.⁴⁸⁶ Soon after the election, Lee announced that his "full agenda" would prevent overseas visits for the near future and that he had no further plans to visit the United States.⁴⁸⁷

The election resolved the immediate rationale behind the Chinese pressure campaign, and the PLA did not schedule further exercises. At Washington's suggestion, Taipei cancelled corresponding live-fire exercises on Matsu, an offshore island close to the mainland, and the U.S. carrier battle groups returned to their normal duty stations.⁴⁸⁸ After nearly a year of dramatic military demonstrations and heated rhetoric, the crisis concluded quietly.

Assessing U.S. and Chinese Attempts to Manage Escalation Risks

As discussed in Chapter 1, several factors differentiate this episode from conventional scenarios for how a future conflict between the United States and a nuclear-armed great power might unfold. The pace and duration of the crisis—which unfolded over a period of approximately ten months—contrasts with the expected speed and intensity of at least the early phases of such a conflict. Compared with the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Sino-Soviet conflict, the perceived likelihood that either side would intentionally initiate conflict or expand the confrontation during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis was relatively low, even as concerns about accidental escalation were greater. Even at the height of the crisis, U.S. policymakers' fear was that the crisis had increased the danger of a misstep—such as an accident at sea, an errant missile, or an unauthorized encounter between PRC and U.S. or Taiwanese vessels—that could inflame the situation and narrow the range of options, even sparking a conflict. This danger provided additional incentive for both sides to behave conservatively and to cooperate to slow, rather than accelerate, the pace of decisionmaking. Because neither side neared the brink (or was

⁴⁸⁵ Richard D. Fisher, Jr., "China's Missiles over the Taiwan Strait: A Political and Military Assessment," in James R. Lilley and Chuck Downs, eds., *Crisis in the Taiwan Strait*, National Defense University Press, September 1997, p. 174; Garver, 2011, p. 106; Suettinger, 2003, p. 260.

⁴⁸⁶ Suettinger, 2003, p. 260.

⁴⁸⁷ Ross, 2000, p. 115.

⁴⁸⁸ Ross, 2000, p. 115; Suettinger, 2003, p. 260.

perceived to be nearing the brink) of an intentional, direct conflict, a variety of escalatory options were also not seriously considered.

These significant differences make the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis an imperfect analogy to a future conflict between the United States and a nuclear-armed adversary. Nevertheless, the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis illustrates recurring patterns in information collection, assessment, and decisionmaking that also appeared in the other historical cases and are likely to be present in a conflict setting. The practical impediments, logical biases, and signal distortions that complicated U.S. and PRC interactions during the crisis may become more pronounced or harder to avoid under the pressure of time and amid the fog of war. The case also provides an opportunity to consider dynamics that contributed to de-escalation in a crisis that may not be present during a major war. If U.S. and Chinese policymakers struggled to understand the other side’s intentions and perceptions in the ten months it took for the Taiwan Strait Crisis to unfold, such understanding would likely become even more difficult during the early stages of a conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary when one side may be trying to execute a rapid fait accompli on a much faster timeline. Decisionmakers would not have the same luxury of relatively slow-tempo operations that enable them to carefully consider and deliberate their next moves and to explore diplomatic options in a tense but still relatively cooperative peacetime environment.

Table 4.1 summarizes the characteristics of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Table 4.1. Characteristics of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

CHARACTERISTICS	UNITED STATES (US)	PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (PRC)
How did the crisis or conflict end?	Tensions waned after the Taiwan government election	
Were major pre-conflict assessments of escalation risks accurate?	Mixed. U.S. predicted prospect of Chinese retaliation but underestimated severity and duration.	Mixed. PRC underestimated U.S. will to intervene militarily but accurately assessed conflict could be avoided.
How did each state attempt to compel the other?	Military pressure: • Deployment of two carriers Political pressure and inducements: • High-level diplomatic overtures • Statements of resolve • Public and private statements affirming no policy change	Military pressure: • Large-scale, live-fire military exercises • Tests of missile capabilities • Statements of resolve • Defensive preparations to enhance regime survivability • Nuclear threats (disputed) Political pressure and inducements: • Suspension of cross-strait dialogue • Downgrading of U.S.-PRC diplomatic relations • Media coverage and statements
Did each state succeed in limiting the conflict below its desired threshold?	Yes. U.S. avoided direct military confrontation with PRC.	Mixed. PRC failed to deter limited U.S. intervention but avoided direct military confrontation.
Did either state achieve its primary objective?	Yes. U.S. demonstrated commitment to cross-strait stability.	Mixed. China did not prevent election of pro-independence figure or secure a binding U.S. commitment to the One China policy.

NOTE: We marked Chinese nuclear threats as “disputed” because there is not conclusive evidence to determine whether the message was intentional and authorized by senior CCP leaders.

Access to Accurate Information

Despite frequent and high-level interactions between the two governments, officials in the United States and China held flawed views of their counterparts’ interests and attending willingness to engage militarily to shape the situation in the Taiwan Strait. Moreover, attempts by both sides to clarify their positions through trusted intermediaries, such as Assistant Secretary of Defense Freeman, or formal channels, such as the multiple direct conversations convened between U.S. and Chinese officials in 1995, failed to encourage the other side to update its theories of the crisis.⁴⁸⁹ During the most dangerous period of the crisis in March 1996, however, direct dialogue did facilitate effective information-sharing and built confidence that each side understood the other’s intentions.

Sensitive to the possibility of miscommunication and the difficulty of distinguishing reality from rumor in a crisis, leaders on both sides also took steps to clarify their positions and to

⁴⁸⁹ Gunness and Saunders, 2022, p. 35.

reduce the possibility of sudden surprises that could force the other side to make rapid decisions. For instance, the PRC provided the United States with advance warning of its exercises that included descriptions of the zones of activity. Likewise, the United States attempted to engage the PRC through multiple channels and coupled its demonstrations of force with public and private statements articulating its terms. During a conflict, however, decisionmakers likely would lack the incentive, time, or means to provide similar information or engage in equivalent cooperation to manage escalation risks.

Assessment of Adversary Intentions

The Chinese coercion strategy was based on two assumptions about U.S. intentions: that the United States was seeking to “contain” China in order to pursue its global hegemonic ambitions and that the United States was not committed to defend Taiwan or maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait. These seemingly contradictory positions—which paralleled the PRC’s assessment of the Soviet threat in 1969—both increased Chinese leaders’ desire to respond to the perceived provocation and increased the level of escalation the leadership was willing to undertake to demonstrate its commitment to unification and deter further changes in U.S. or Taiwan government policy.

Maintaining that U.S. policy toward Taiwan had not changed, U.S. government officials did not immediately recognize the severity of the Chinese response to the Lee visit or the significance of the following military exercises. Chinese opposition to the visa request was well known, and several senior U.S. officials anticipated the possibility of symbolic reprisals against Taiwan, including limited military demonstrations. Still, they did not recognize the depth of Chinese fears or Beijing’s willingness to conduct some ambitious and sustained exercises in the Taiwan Strait. Believing that they had already clearly and explicitly communicated the possibility of congressional intervention in Lee’s visa decision, U.S. officials also did not anticipate the intensity of Chinese feelings of betrayal or that this event would feed Chinese notions of more-general U.S. hostility toward the country.

Some sources suggest that bureaucratic disagreements within the U.S. government may have also contributed to Chinese confusion about U.S. intentions toward Taiwan and delayed senior U.S. officials’ understanding of the severity of the crisis and the associated dangers of escalation.⁴⁹⁰ The lack of a unified stance on Chinese policy prior to 1995 may have caused Washington to overlook the prospect that Beijing would interpret its varied actions as a coordinated campaign to contain Chinese power or to embolden Taiwanese “splittists.” Moreover, the fractured nature of U.S. policy formulation meant that the President’s attention was not focused on Taiwan until winter 1995–1996, by which point Chinese perceptions of the Clinton administration’s policy were well formed and the opportunity to prevent the largest and most threatening demonstration of force had passed.

⁴⁹⁰ See, for instance, Gunness and Saunders, 2022, pp. 21–22, 34.

More generally, domestic factors influenced how all actors assessed their opponents' intentions and informed the signals that both sides transmitted. For China, Taiwan, and the United States, domestic politics played a significant role in setting the pace of activity, circumscribing the range of viable options, and incentivizing more-assertive responses. The U.S. legislative calendar and Taiwan's electoral cycle, for instance, both generated pressure to act and increased the number of actors involved, complicating efforts to assign responsibility and predict the outcome of governmental decisions.

Execution of Coercive Actions

As prior RAND research has shown, China used “all the signaling tools at its disposal at the time” to intimidate Taiwan, coerce the Taiwanese electorate, and influence U.S. policy toward the Taiwan Strait.⁴⁹¹ Because China wished to avoid an armed conflict, which it believed could trigger direct U.S. intervention, it attempted to appear sufficiently threatening to convey its willingness to use force to defend its interests if necessary while minimizing the risk that others would interpret its exercises as preparations for actual conflict.

For the first several months of the crisis, China effectively calibrated its actions to fall below a threshold of hostility that might spur U.S. intervention. What Chinese strategists neglected to account for, however, was the possibility that a perceived risk of *inadvertent* escalation could prompt the United States to harden its position. The available evidence suggests that senior U.S. officials did not fear that China was preparing to launch a direct, intentional attack on Taiwan when they decided to redeploy the two carrier battle groups.⁴⁹² Rather, as Secretary Perry's warnings to Liu illustrate, U.S. officials were concerned that China was taking reckless action that elevated the possibility of an accidental strike on Taiwan's territory or forces that could spark further escalation.⁴⁹³ Even though Chinese missiles had not struck Taiwan, the credible risk that one *could* with little warning drove the United States to intervene. In order to increase the pressure on the Taiwanese electorate, China had inadvertently crossed a U.S. escalation threshold by taking military measures that increased the risk of accidents.

Ultimately, however, both sides' desire to avoid war incentivized them to take actions to minimize the risk that an intentional, inadvertent, or accidental provocation could cause the other side to escalate the standoff. For instance, the PRC warned the United States, Taiwan, and other regional actors of each exercise and missile test before they began and did not deploy “surprise” capabilities or otherwise operate unpredictably. With the notable exception of the March 1996 exercise, China located its exercises at what PLA strategists assessed was a sufficient distance to minimize the likelihood of an accidental exchange with ROC forces. Even during the more

⁴⁹¹ Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., 2021, p. 104.

⁴⁹² For more-detailed discussion on the decision to redeploy the carrier battle groups, see Carter and Perry, 2000, p. 97; and Suettinger, 2003, p. 255.

⁴⁹³ For Perry's warning, see Carter and Perry, 2000, p. 96.

provocative March exercise, the PLA did not encircle Taiwan and sought to leave some air and naval approaches open. And when the *Nimitz* and *Independence* carrier groups arrived, the PLA deliberately did not approach the U.S. ships.⁴⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the United States refrained from deploying U.S. vessels through the Taiwan Strait in March 1996—a move U.S. officials agreed would be viewed as threatening to China—and explicitly, repeatedly, and through public and private channels communicated the limited reason for the vessels' presence.

The role of nuclear weapons in the initiation, course, and outcome of the crisis is ambiguous but not determinative. U.S. nuclear superiority apparently did not deter China from initiating the military exercises and attempting to coerce Taiwan, and there is some evidence that China may have engaged in periodic attempts at nuclear coercion despite its weaker position in the strategic balance. Firsthand and press accounts of U.S. government discussions suggest that some Chinese officials may have issued nuclear threats, but available sources are insufficient to determine whether these probes were sincere and authorized by China's senior leadership.⁴⁹⁵ Moreover, their transmission through informal channels diluted the threats' authority and allowed the United States to ignore them. The involvement of the PLA's Second Artillery units, which operate nuclear and conventional capabilities, in several of the exercises may also have been intended to demonstrate the PRC's ability to use nuclear weapons, but whether this was a rationale behind their inclusion—and whether Taiwan or the United States was the intended recipient for this signal—is unclear.⁴⁹⁶ China also conducted a series of nuclear tests during the crisis, although analysts have argued that they were “not intended primarily as signals to the United States over Taiwan” but were “part of an effort at strategic force modernization that reached the testing stage several years before the Taiwan issue erupted and that continued after the conclusion of the crisis.”⁴⁹⁷

There is limited evidence that nuclear weapons played an indirect role in shaping U.S. assessments of the risk of inadvertent escalation and, in turn, contributed to the U.S. decision to take a more forceful stance. U.S. officials do not appear to have viewed Chinese nuclear threats as significant or credible, and public accounts of U.S. government deliberations imply that U.S. officials did not surmise a connection between events in Taiwan, ongoing arms control negotiations, or Chinese nuclear tests.⁴⁹⁸ Clinton's February 1996 briefing, which involved discussions of scenarios culminating in a nuclear exchange, elevated the crisis in the President's eyes and focused his attention. This may have primed the President to favorably view military options as tools to stabilize the situation and avoid inadvertent escalation. Notably, the United

⁴⁹⁴ Garver, 2011, p. 109.

⁴⁹⁵ Gellman, 1998; Suettinger, 2003, p. 247; Scobell, 2000, p. 241.

⁴⁹⁶ Garver, 2011, p. 128.

⁴⁹⁷ Garver, 2011, p. 130.

⁴⁹⁸ China conducted underground nuclear tests on May 15 and August 17, 1995. These tests are not mentioned in either Suettinger, 2003, or Ross, 2000.

States limited its military deployments to conventional forces and did not issue public comments referencing its nuclear advantages.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

The historical crises and limited conflicts surveyed in this report illustrate consistent obstacles, patterns of thinking, and common behaviors that make it difficult to manage escalation when pursuing a cost-imposition theory of victory. Regardless of variations in the degree of preparation, the stakes of a contest, the structure of decisionmaking procedures, the availability of accurate information, and a host of other factors, decisionmakers routinely face significant uncertainty about their adversary's intentions and escalation thresholds, as well as the consequences of actions taken by either party. This uncertainty stems, in part, from the inherent difficulty of sending signals clearly and interpreting another's signals correctly.⁴⁹⁹ The knowledge that the other side has incentives to misrepresent its red lines and that those thresholds may change over time compounds these challenges. Taken together, these findings raise serious doubts about the ability of decisionmakers to accurately and confidently gauge which targets fall within the range of pressure points that are valuable enough to force a rival to make painful concessions but not so valuable that the rival will escalate a conflict above a desired threshold.

This uncertainty can impede decisionmaking in any scenario that requires decisionmakers to determine an adversary's intent, capabilities, and resolve. More than one year (as of this writing) into the Russia-Ukraine war that began in February 2022, a consensus among experts and policymakers on the seriousness of the risk of escalation to a direct Russia-NATO conflict—or the actions that could precipitate such an outcome—remains elusive.⁵⁰⁰ Similar uncertainty was apparent in the commentary over the consequences of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan. Although some analysts were quick to declare the start of a Fourth

⁴⁹⁹ This difficulty is well documented in the historical and theoretical literature on international relations. For examples of different models and methodological approaches, see Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, reissue ed., Columbia University Press, 1989a, p. 141; Philip E. Tetlock, "Social Psychology and World Politics," in Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Garner Linzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. I, 4th ed., McGraw-Hill, 1998; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999; and Marcus Holmes, "The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 4, October 2013.

⁵⁰⁰ The United States and other members of NATO have gradually increased how much military aid they provide Ukraine because of uncertainty about Russia's escalation thresholds and awareness that Russia's red lines might shift over the course of the war (Austin Carson, "The Paradoxes of Escalation in Ukraine: Slowly but Surely, Russia and the West Are Drawing Their Redlines," *Foreign Affairs*, July 29, 2022). For a discussion of plausible pathways of escalation, see Bryan Frederick, Samuel Charap, Scott Boston, Stephen J. Flanagan, Michael J. Mazarr, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, and Karl P. Mueller, *Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1971-1, 2022. For competing claims on escalation risks that illustrate the range of interpretations, see Dan Altman, "The West Worries Too Much About Escalation in Ukraine: NATO Can Do More Without Provoking Moscow," *Foreign Affairs*, July 12, 2022; and John J. Mearsheimer, "Playing with Fire in Ukraine: The Underappreciated Risks of Catastrophic Escalation," *Foreign Affairs*, August 17, 2022.

Taiwan Strait Crisis, others argued that events had not reached this threshold and that a slide into such a confrontation would not occur.⁵⁰¹ These debates among external subject-matter experts are not necessarily reflective of deliberations within the U.S. government at the time, but the disagreements illustrate the difficulty of recognizing the onset of crises and assessing their severity or significance in real time. As in the historical episodes surveyed in this report, analysts who are reliant on incomplete information can perceive a situation differently and reach differing conclusions about the associated risks.

Similar patterns of thinking that can impede decisionmaking in a crisis or conflict are likely to be present—and perhaps even more pronounced—during an ongoing conflict. This suggests the need for caution in pursuing a cost-imposition theory of victory against a nuclear-armed great power because the consequences of missteps may be dire. In this chapter, we revisit the strengths and limitations of using historical analogies to understand patterns of crisis behavior, review the key findings from the three case studies, and discuss how these insights can help the United States navigate the risks of escalation in future crises and conflicts with nuclear-armed rivals.

Limits of Historical Analogies

As discussed in Chapter 1, the goal of examining historical attempts by nuclear-armed great powers to manage escalation risks is to illustrate recurring behavioral patterns rather than to make specific predictions about how certain states will act during future crises and conflicts. Generating specific predictions from these historical cases is difficult because the context of most of the envisioned scenarios for future conflict among nuclear-armed great powers will likely differ in significant ways. Structurally, the local and global distributions of military, economic, and political power apparent in each case study differ from today in notable ways. For instance, in 1969, the Soviet Union possessed a clear quantitative and qualitative advantage over China, which had only recently tested its first nuclear device. Today, U.S. strategists face two nuclear rivals that have modernized, diversified, and expanded their strategic forces.⁵⁰² Technological changes—including advances in sensing, automation, and precision—have also contributed to changes in the distribution of power; enabled the advent of new classes of cyber, space, electronic, and information weapons; opened new operational domains; made new military capabilities available for employment; and, potentially, altered escalation pathways in the process.⁵⁰³ Institutionally, U.S., Chinese, and Russian decisionmaking structures and intelligence collection and analysis capabilities have also evolved, in part in response to experiences documented in the prior chapters.

⁵⁰¹ Christopher P. Twomey, “The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis Is Just Starting,” *War on the Rocks*, August 22, 2022.

⁵⁰² U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 2022, pp. 94–110.

⁵⁰³ Michael C. Horowitz, “Do Emerging Military Technologies Matter for International Politics?” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 23, May 2020.

The stakes of a conflict between the United States and another nuclear-armed state also likely would exceed those that motivated the three historical confrontations examined here. In all three cases, decisionmakers on both sides assessed that the potential benefit of achieving their national aims was less than the potential cost of fighting a major war. This assessment produced an incentive to cooperate to de-escalate tensions and find a settlement that would not exist in a scenario in which a leader has chosen to go to war to address a perceived existential threat to their nation's security.

Moreover, the actual experience of war may generate different pressures for escalation. A future conflict between major powers also may unfold at a different pace or on a different timeline than the crises surveyed in this report. Although the Sino-Soviet border dispute and Third Taiwan Strait Crisis featured brief periods of rapid decisionmaking, both crises evolved over a period of months and encompassed long periods of opportunity for leaders on both sides to collect information and consider their options. Even if U.S. strategists receive substantial advance warning to prepare for an attack, events are likely to proceed very quickly once a war begins, and conditions will necessitate an accelerated decision timeline.

The generated pressure could alter decisionmaking dynamics or compound the informational gaps, logical biases, and other distortions noted in these case studies. The effects of the sunk cost, endowment, and loss aversion biases are more pronounced in leaders who are already committed to a major war than in those who are posturing in a crisis or limited conflict.⁵⁰⁴ The logical biases and distortions observed in these crisis conditions could become more pronounced or harder to avoid under the conditions of a major conflict, during which access to information will be constrained by the speed and volume of events; the degradation and loss of collection, dissemination, and analysis systems; and purposeful attempts at concealment, deception, and misinformation.

These differences are reminders of the imperfection of historical analogies and the need for caution when attempting to predict future events based on past experience. Nonetheless, the cases surveyed here are still informative because decisionmakers exhibited patterns of thinking that are likely to be present—and perhaps even more pronounced—in the crucible of an ongoing conflict. They demonstrate how a diverse set of actors under a wide variety of circumstances all faced similar problems in making accurate assessments during crises and conflicts. Indeed, differences between past and future scenarios may make it harder rather than easier to identify a rival's escalation thresholds and resolve the Goldilocks Challenge.

⁵⁰⁴ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, new ed., Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 393–404; Thomas W. Milburn and Daniel J. Christie, “Effort Justification as a Motive for Continuing War: The Vietnam Case,” in Betty Glad, ed., *Psychological Dimensions of War*, Sage Publications, 1990; Robert Jervis, “Political Implications of Loss Aversion,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2, June 1992, p. 191; Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination and the Korean War*, Stanford University Press, 2009; William A. Boettcher III and Michael D. Cobb, “‘Don’t Let Them Die in Vain’: Casualty Frames and Public Tolerance for Escalating Commitment in Iraq,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 5, October 2009.

Because of enduring source limitations, the assessments in the preceding chapters rely on necessarily incomplete accounts of U.S., Soviet, and Chinese decisionmaking. Although it is possible that states had more-accurate assessments of their adversary's intentions and thresholds than the public record suggests, political leaders and bureaucracies tend to err toward publicizing information that makes them look more, rather than less, competent. It is equally possible that leaders considered even more-escalatory measures than the historical record suggests and that, if not for chance or unknown factors, the crises could have escalated further. Given that the crises and limited conflicts covered in this report did not escalate into all-out wars, these likely are cases in which leaders did a better job at sending signals and assessing their rivals than in instances that resulted in war. If anything, our analysis therefore likely *understates* the challenges that leaders face in assessing adversary vulnerabilities and resolve, distinguishing between intentional and inadvertent signals or actions, and controlling escalation.

The main exception is that U.S. decisionmakers today have access to better intelligence collection and analysis than the decisionmakers in the case studies examined, an improvement that may enhance the United States' understanding of its rivals in a crisis or conflict. Still, this continuous process of development has not entirely eliminated the problem of incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading information or resolved all challenges associated with producing accurate and timely analysis.⁵⁰⁵ Even if the United States has access to better intelligence in future conflicts, policymakers inevitably will make decisions with incomplete (and sometimes inaccurate) information, and even accurate and complete information does not guarantee good analysis or policy choices. Iterative improvements to intelligence collection and analysis processes do not address many of the fundamental drivers that make it difficult to understand an adversary, such as deep-seated psychological biases (e.g., the tendency to attribute others' behavior to their dispositional character rather than the situation in which they find themselves, while doing the reverse for oneself) and the unpredictability of individual leaders, who might not know how they will act until confronted with a given situation.⁵⁰⁶ Although the United States may be better equipped to monitor certain adversary capabilities than past U.S. planners were, it may not necessarily be better placed to anticipate adversary behavior or decisions in a conflict.

The fact that some historical records related to the case studies in this report are still unavailable to the general public underscores the lengths to which states go to maintain the privacy of specific calculations that reveal how they value targets, assess the relative costs and benefits of the use of force, understand adversary intentions, and structure decisionmaking.

⁵⁰⁵ For examples of recent intelligence shortfalls, see Katie Bo Lillis and Natasha Bertrand, "US Intelligence Community Launches Review Following Ukraine and Afghanistan Intel Failings," *CNN*, May 13, 2022. The fact that these shortfalls occurred concurrently with extraordinary intelligence successes underscores the intrinsic difficulty (Warren P. Strobel, "Release of Ukraine Intelligence Represents New Front in U.S. Information War with Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, April 4, 2022).

⁵⁰⁶ See, for example, Jervis, 2017; and Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict*, Yale University Press, 2021.

Restrictions on historical records represent only a pale imitation of the measures in place to safeguard information on current and future assessments and planning. The challenge of developing a complete picture of leaders' intentions and perceptions decades after a crisis has ended emphasizes the difficulties that leaders face when making assessments in real time with incomplete and often misleading information, rushed analysis and decisionmaking, and the inherent limitations of human cognition in stressful and risky situations.

When considering the applicability of a historical analogy or when presented with evidence that another foreign leader has employed historical reasoning, U.S. policymakers should be attuned to the possibility that differing personal and national experiences can cause analysts and policymakers to interpret the same historical event in strikingly different ways. The preceding case studies offer several examples of policymakers misinterpreting the past. In 1969, for instance, a Chinese misreading of U.S. motivations to intervene in World War II contributed to a false assumption that the United States supported the prospect of a Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear facilities. In other cases, a leader may purposefully stretch a historical comparison for rhetorical or political effect, as in Khrushchev's attempt to recast Lenin's decision to accept German peace terms in 1918 when justifying his decision to accept the U.S. offer to resolve the Cuban standoff.

Likewise, the salience of specific historical analogies may vary among leaders or nations. For instance, our review of open-source, Chinese-language analysis indicated that the Cuban Missile Crisis—a watershed moment for U.S. foreign policy and a foundational case study for several generations of U.S. strategists—has received comparatively little attention in Chinese writings on nuclear or defense strategy.⁵⁰⁷ The crisis has some resonance in at least some Chinese defense circles, as a senior Chinese nuclear expert reportedly compared the situation between China and the United States today to that of the Soviet Union and the United States in the Cold War at a conference in China. Tong Zhao, a Chinese nuclear policy expert, writes, “This expert judged that it might take a major crisis—something of similar severity to the Cuban Missile Crisis—to sober up political leaders enough to make them reflect on the dangers of the current course.”⁵⁰⁸ Yet the reviewed literature also suggests that Chinese military and security analysts may have

⁵⁰⁷ To conduct this literature review, we used both Mandarin and English databases to find documents written by analysts that could reasonably be inferred as representing CCP, PLA, or other elite Chinese reviews. We searched for the terms “古巴导弹危机,” “古巴危机,” “加勒比海导弹危机,” “加勒比海危机,” and “Cuban Missile Crisis” in the following databases: Google Scholar, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and the Wilson Center Digital Archives. Of the results, very few (5.52 percent) were written by authors who were identified as PLA-affiliated, and even fewer (0.33 percent) had the aforementioned search terms in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. A majority (94.6 percent) were written during or after the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis.

⁵⁰⁸ Tong Zhao, “What’s Driving China’s Nuclear Buildup?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 5, 2021b; Tong Zhao [@zhaot2005], “A senior Chinese nuclear expert recently made a public observation: regarding nuclear race, the US & China today are somewhat like the US & USSR in the early 1960s; and nothing will likely change this dangerous trend, except a major crisis similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis. 2/3,” Twitter post, July 27, 2021a.

inferred different lessons from those inferred by their U.S. counterparts. As in the English-language literature, the Chinese analysis underscores the importance of official and unofficial communication channels in de-escalating confrontations.⁵⁰⁹ In contrast to U.S. scholarship, which often characterizes the Cuban Missile Crisis as a cautionary tale and praises U.S. and Soviet flexibility, many of the Chinese writings we examined interpret the history as justification for pursuing an unyielding policy during crisis and express confidence that China would be smart enough to avoid the Soviet Union's mistakes. As one Chinese analyst summarizes, the lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis for Beijing is to "stic[k] to [its position] to the end."⁵¹⁰

Findings

With these caveats in mind, our analysis supports several findings about how states attempt to contain crises and conflicts below desired escalation thresholds during confrontations against nuclear-armed rivals.

First, there is no evidence from these three cases that states confidently identified the coercive "sweet spot" as required to successfully navigate the Goldilocks Challenge before or during crises or conflicts. In part, this finding reflects the reality that decisionmakers generally concluded that a significant expansion in the scope and scale of violence would create more risks than benefits. Although leaders were willing to *threaten* greater costs and even took steps to improve their ability to extract greater costs if a decision were made (such as in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis), policymakers either did not consider or rejected the concept of imposing intolerable costs on the adversary as a viable theory of victory.

At the same time, leaders proved unable to resolve the preliminary problems required to resolve the Goldilocks Challenge. **In all three cases, decisionmakers struggled to assess their adversary's plans and intentions, and their assessments of adversary escalation thresholds were often incomplete, inaccurate, or inadequate.** Leaders might make confident but wrong assessments or otherwise express acute uncertainty, which could stem from incomplete information, concerns about the reliability of the information they possess, or questions about

⁵⁰⁹ See, for example, Qin Zhilai [秦治来], "The Influence of Mass Media on International Relations [论大众传媒对国际关系的影响]," *New Thinking* [新远见], 2011, p. 31 (the author is affiliated with the CCP Central Party School); Feng Yujun and Chen Yu, "The New Military Revolution and International Security," *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol. 29, No. 2, March/April 2019 (the authors are affiliated with Fudan University and the Ministry of State Security's China Institute for Contemporary International Relations); and Xie Jiannan [谢剑南], "Ultimate Pressure in the Ultimate Game—the Action Logic, Lessons and Enlightenment in the Cuban Missile Crisis [极限施压与极限博弈: 苏美在古巴导弹危机中的行动逻辑、历史遗产及启示]," *Journal of Strategy and Decision-Making* [战略决策研究], Vol. 6, 2018, p. 88 (the author is affiliated with the CCP's Central Party School).

⁵¹⁰ Xia Liping, "Crisis Management in China and in the United States," in Michael D. Swaine, Tuosheng Zhang, and Danielle Cohen, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, p. 163. For a contrary view, see Tong Zhao and Li Bin, "The Underappreciated Risks of Entanglement: A Chinese Perspective," in James M. Acton, ed., *Entanglement: Russian and Chinese Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Risks*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, p. 12.

how accurately they can forecast an adversary's potential responses to hypothetical scenarios. Such outcomes can stem from the inherent uncertainty associated with understanding and forecasting human behavior or from concerns about the inaccessibility or reliability of specific pieces of information.

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict offer vivid examples of how even states that are engaged in a protracted and intense competition—and that possess the motivation and opportunity to collect substantial information on their rival's preferences—miscalculated how provocatively their rival would perceive their actions and how it would respond. In the one case of successful coercion—the Cuban Missile Crisis—the Soviet Union abandoned an objective that was of less importance to Soviet security than, for example, the political status of Taiwan is for China. Moreover, the United States incurred serious risk of catastrophic escalation in coercing the Soviet Union to withdraw its missiles from Cuba. As historians have noted, there were multiple moments during which either side could have reasonably inferred that its rival had, or was preparing to cross, stated red lines, yet the true risks were known, in some cases, only decades later. Notably, both the Soviet Union and the PRC failed to find a coercive sweet spot in the only conflict among the three cases. Decades later, it remains unclear whether a stable set of such targets actually existed, demonstrating the intrinsic difficulty of identifying targets within the sweet spot.

Multiple factors impeded decisionmakers' ability to interpret their adversary's intent, assess its resolve, and predict its behavior. To varying degrees across the cases, leaders struggled to distinguish facts from rumors. As evidenced in the Soviet intelligence's decision to transmit flawed reporting on an imminent U.S. attack on Cuba, crisis conditions generated pressure to collect and share information that otherwise might not have survived close scrutiny. In addition to the large volume of information that requires processing and the intrinsic difficulty of distinguishing credible information, differing strategic cultures and historical experiences further contributed to misunderstandings and impeded leaders' ability to predict how their opponent would perceive (and respond to) their actions. Even when ample information was available, preexisting beliefs about an adversary and ideological commitments often colored decisionmakers' interpretation of the available evidence. The ideological rivalry between the Soviet Union and China in the 1960s, for instance, predisposed PRC political leaders to distrust Soviet diplomatic overtures and to believe rumors of an impending Soviet attack. Leadership dynamics and personality factors also played a role in shaping how information was disseminated, interpreted, and translated into courses of action, often producing outcomes that were difficult for an outsider to anticipate. Using an objective analysis of U.S. military proposals, Soviet leaders reasonably could have inferred that the United States would attack Cuba. It would have been more difficult to predict the actual outcome: that President Kennedy, confident in his own judgment and skeptical of his military advisers, would choose to override the military's preferred options.

Second, decisionmakers' ability to assess their adversary's plans and intentions did not always improve over the course of the crisis or conflict. Across our reviewed cases, leaders' confidence in how they assessed the risks associated with their selected courses of action fluctuated during the reviewed cases. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. and Soviet leaders gained additional information about what actions the other side would perceive as provocative, revised their understanding of potential escalation thresholds, and updated their assessment of the other side's resolve and desire to start a nuclear war. This process contributed to the eventual de-escalation of the crisis, but it was imperfect. Both sides continued to express deep uncertainty over the other's interests, intentions, and strategy throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis. Even at the end of the crisis, shortly after concluding that the U.S. leadership shared his desire to avert war, Khrushchev rushed to announce his decision to withdraw missiles via Moscow's public radio system because he mistakenly believed that the United States was close to declaring war. In the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, neither Chinese nor Soviet leaders developed a strong understanding of the other side's intentions or the likelihood of further escalation, even as the conflict dragged on; to the contrary, events hardened Soviet views of the Chinese as fundamentally irrational and unpredictable, while the Chinese oscillated from overconfidence that they could avert a wider war to paranoia about Soviet plans to initiate a nuclear war. This uncertainty drove both sides to take escalatory actions that increased the intensity, geographic scope, and targets at risk and that exceeded both sides' anticipated thresholds before the conflict began.

Third, decisionmakers often disagreed internally about how the enemy would respond to specific courses of action. Such disagreements may arise when information about an adversary's objectives, capabilities, or preferences is unavailable or inconclusive. Reasonable decisionmakers may also reach different conclusions even with access to reliable information, depending on such factors as their priorities, their tolerance for costs and risk, and how they weight probabilities. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, President Kennedy's advisers presented different options to compel the Soviet Union to remove its missiles while containing the confrontation below the nuclear level. Disagreements about the appropriate course of action did not arise because advisers had access to different information but because they had different interpretations of Soviet intentions in initiating the crisis, different assessments of Soviet willingness to fight a nuclear war, and different calculations about the costs the United States and its allies should be willing to pay to achieve their objectives. Conversely, disagreements among those responsible for formulating national security policy can contribute to uncertainty by impeding information-sharing or diverting attention from potential risks. For instance, bureaucratic disagreements delayed the Clinton administration's ability to form a consensus theory of Chinese intentions during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and to assess the attendant risks of inadvertent escalation.

When such disagreements arose, the outcome rested on who was in charge. Individual personality and leadership styles informed how decisionmakers handled disagreements, defined

their tolerance for risk, valued certain targets, and determined which strategies or approaches they found more compelling. Their advisers could make recommendations based on existing analysis, but leaders ultimately relied on a mix of logic and instincts to make decisions. Faced with ambiguous evidence that the Soviets had chosen to comply with the U.S. quarantine, for instance, another President might have chosen to enforce U.S. threats rather than allow time to collect more information.

Fourth, leaders' responses to conflict and crisis situations often did not follow predetermined plans; rather, decisionmakers developed (and selected among) response options dynamically as the situation evolved. Across the case studies, leaders were more likely to revise their views on the costs or risks that *they themselves* were willing to tolerate than to update assessments of their rival's intentions, resolve, and limits. This approach makes it difficult to identify sweet spots within the Goldilocks Challenge framework in advance because **key leaders may not have considered—or agreed on—the value of specific targets until a specific and credible threat emerges.** Kennedy's decision not to retaliate for the downing of a U-2 plane over Cuba is illustrative of how decisionmakers may reverse their position when a theorized threat becomes real. Similarly, the retaliatory courses of action they may consider would likely depend on the broader circumstances of the specific crisis or conflict in which they found themselves.

Fifth, timing may alter decisionmakers' interpretations of coercive actions or signals. For instance, decisionmakers may not immediately recognize that a crisis or conflict has begun. As a result, they may not accurately perceive the other side's attempts to apply pressure and could be less incentivized to consider how their actions are perceived, limiting their ability to avert or shape the scope of escalation. In 1969, the Chinese leadership did not immediately realize that the Soviet Union perceived the ambush on Zhenbao as more threatening than prior skirmishes and therefore was slow to realize that it had provoked a new conflict. Similarly, the Chinese belatedly realized that the situation had, in their view, reached the brink of a major war only after months of Soviet threats to escalate vertically. This case also illustrates how leaders' understanding of the operational or strategic consequences of military action may lag behind the pace of events.

Sixth, the perceived loss of control did not compel decisionmakers to capitulate. Instead, decisionmakers responded to evidence that a crisis or conflict had progressed more quickly or in unanticipated directions by deferring decisions on new action until they could collect additional information (as the Kennedy administration did repeatedly in 1962), issuing new threats (as the Soviets and Chinese did in 1969 and the United States did in March 1996), or escalating the confrontation (as both parties did in 1969). This pattern was apparent even in instances of implicit and explicit nuclear threats. At the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Khrushchev's fear that the situation was spiraling out of his control contributed to his final decision to accept the U.S. quid pro quo and abide by the U.S. terms of secrecy. However, the Soviet leader's *initial* decision to pursue an exchange of the Soviet missiles in Cuba for U.S. missiles in Turkey

occurred days earlier, shortly after he concluded that the United States was unlikely to attack. His renewed fear of inadvertent or intentional escalation provided an incentive to finalize the agreement but was not the original impetus.

Finally, there was variation among and within the cases in how leaders viewed the likelihood and costs of nuclear escalation. Nuclear inferiority has repeatedly failed to stop weaker states from provoking crises against more-capable adversaries, as the Soviet Union discovered in 1969 and the United States realized in 1962 and 1995–1996.⁵¹¹ Divergent theories of the utility of nuclear weapons, and the prospect of surviving a nuclear exchange, also complicated U.S. and Soviet attempts to manage their crisis in 1962 and impeded effective Soviet nuclear compellence in 1969. The intensity of Chinese fears in October 1969, which endured despite Soviet signals of a desire to de-escalate tensions and, ultimately, participation in negotiations, also suggests that **walking back nuclear threats may be particularly difficult once they have been communicated.** Moreover, Chinese demonstrations of resolve during the October 1969 war scare illustrate the possibility that **nuclear threats can, in some circumstances, increase adversary fears and attendant escalation risks without compelling substantial changes in behavior.**

Implications

Taken together, the three examined case studies underscore the difficulty of distinguishing between intentional and inadvertent signals or actions in a crisis or conflict. Although a comprehensive assessment of alternative theories of victory against a nuclear-armed adversary is beyond the scope of this report, our findings highlight the underappreciated risks intrinsic to a military cost-imposition strategy. The surveyed case studies raise serious doubts about the ability of wartime decisionmakers to gauge what an adversary values accurately and confidently and then to apply sufficient pressure to targets that meet the necessary criteria.

Yet the surveyed case studies also illustrate the significant escalation risks associated with any attempt to coerce a rival, regardless of the chosen U.S. theory of victory. Shortfalls in information collection, processing, and coordination can impede effective execution of any strategy—and can make missteps and miscalculations nearly inevitable. In the event of a conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary, U.S. decisionmakers will have to select between imperfect options. Careful planning and operations can minimize, but never eliminate, escalation risks.

Our findings therefore suggest the following considerations for future attempts to estimate and manage the risk of inadvertent or uncontrolled escalation:

- **The United States will have a limited ability to control how adversaries interpret its coercive actions.** Adversaries may wrongly surmise U.S. intentions from uncoordinated,

⁵¹¹ For research examining this dynamic, see Kyungwon Suh, “Nuclear Balance and the Initiation of Nuclear Crises: Does Superiority Matter?” *Journal of Peace Research*, May 5, 2022.

unauthorized, or unrelated U.S. and third-party policies or actions. Varied strategic cultures and historical experiences may also cause adversaries to misinterpret U.S. intentions. These same factors may cause the United States to misinterpret adversary signals.

- **Decisionmakers may not immediately recognize—or agree—that a crisis or conflict has begun.** Such delays or disconnects may impede the effective transmission of coercive signals, skew assessments of adversary resolve and the valuation of certain targets, and limit both parties' ability to avert or control escalation during crises or the opening stages of conflicts.
- **Decisionmakers' assessment of the value of a target or the significance of a threat may change over time as a conflict evolves and potential costs become clearer.** Adversaries may change their valuation of targets over the course of a conflict, their beliefs about the importance of escalating in response to certain kinds of attacks, and their assessments of an adversary's intentions. These possibilities suggest that the boundaries of any Goldilocks range of pressure points will be fluid, increasing the prospect of inadvertent escalation.
- **The reorganization or creation of decisionmaking bodies may alter access to or interpretation of information, complicating efforts to sway power centers.** Adjustments to the composition or procedures of deliberative bodies may change the balance of influence among leaders and contribute to unpredictable outcomes.⁵¹² Such changes may complicate attempts to tailor coercive strategies for individual leaders and impede attempts to accurately anticipate a leader's decisions.
- A perceived loss of control might not compel a decisionmaker to capitulate. **Planners should not assume that degradations in an adversary's confidence in its ability to manage the pace, rhythm, or intensity of fighting will motivate it to exercise greater restraint.** Similarly, political and military leaders may respond in unpredictable ways to a loss of battlefield or theater awareness. To clear the fog of war, some leaders may choose to escalate.
- **Implicit and direct nuclear threats may increase adversary fears without compelling substantial changes in behavior.** In each of our cases, an inferior nuclear power antagonized a more powerful rival. Varied attitudes toward the utility of nuclear weapons for warfighting may make some leaders more tolerant of nuclear threats.

⁵¹² For a discussion of group dynamics and foreign policy decisionmaking, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, "No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, Supp. 1, April 2017.

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMC	Central Military Commission
DEFCON	Defense Condition
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
ExComm	Executive Committee of the National Security Council
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
IRBM	intermediate-range ballistic missile
KGB	Committee for State Security
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSC	National Security Council
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
SAM	surface-to-air missile
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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A war between the United States and a capable, nuclear-armed adversary would introduce the risk of destruction on a scale the United States has not seriously contemplated since the end of the Cold War. The main debate in the policy world is between advocates of theories of victory that are reliant on denial and advocates of theories of victory that depend on cost imposition. Cost-imposition strategies, such as those requiring a distant blockade or a punitive air campaign, require the United States to successfully navigate what the authors refer to as the *Goldilocks Challenge*: specifically, identifying with high confidence a “sweet spot” of pressure points that are valuable enough to influence enemy decisionmaking but not so valuable that they cause unacceptable retaliation.

To help the U.S. Air Force evaluate the feasibility of a cost-imposition strategy and assess the associated risks of uncontrolled escalation, the authors examine the ability of past decisionmakers to identify adversary thresholds and to apply this information to control escalation during militarized crises between nuclear-armed states.

The authors analyze three historical cases of militarized crises and conflicts between nuclear-armed major powers: (1) the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis between the United States and the Soviet Union, (2) the 1969 border conflict between China and the Soviet Union, and (3) the 1995–1996 crisis between the United States and China over Taiwan.

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