

*Column*

## Reputation as a Means of Deterrence and Compellence

Deterrence is the act of dissuading an adversary from taking undesirable action by clearly signaling your intent and capability to respond decisively if such action is taken. Compellence, on the contrary, is coercing the adversary to behave in a way that is desirable to you.<sup>1</sup> Since the mechanism by which deterrence and compellence work—achieving an objective by threatening force rather than using it—inevitably depends on the adversary’s perception of you, how the adversary assesses your intent and capability is of critical importance to the credibility of your threat. An adversary’s perception can be influenced not only by your current declaratory policy and military posture, but also by your record of past actions. This paper will examine the concept of “reputation” based on past events, a topic that has implications for discussions of deterrence and compellence in other chapters. First, I will briefly define the concept and explain its importance, then review previous research and consider future challenges.

### Definition and Significance of Reputation

Reputation in international politics is the collective perception of an actor’s character, formed on the basis of that actor’s past actions.<sup>2</sup> The term is not used in the general sense of likeability, but rather to refer to the

actor's reputation in terms of specific variables such as "resolve" and "capability" that are critical in interstate bargaining. Reputation is a product of perception, not objective fact, and it is intersubjective in the sense that an actor's reputation is held by others, not "owned" by that actor *per se*. Reputations are not necessarily accurate, either, as a reputation rooted in the distant past may persist beyond the scope of rational generalization. That said, since pervasive uncertainty and limited information make it difficult to assess another state's resolve and capability, using the state's past behavior as an indicator of its character type is still consistent with the rationalist premise of deterrence theory.

It is here that we begin to see the importance of reputation in interstate bargaining involving deterrence and compellence. In other words, in an international crisis, countries at odds with each other do not start from a blank slate when they send signals to each other about their resolve and capability. Instead, bargaining takes place on the basis of existing perceptions built up in the years leading up to the crisis. This is by no means to say that a state's past reputation is always the deciding factor. What is important is that the signals sent by the state in the present are received by the other party through the lens of a reputation formed in the past. For example, given the well-known effects of confirmation bias and consistency bias, it would not be hard to imagine that the effectiveness of a signal sent by a state would vary depending on whether the signal was in line with or against that state's reputation.<sup>3</sup> Particularly in the context of punitive extended nuclear deterrence, answers to the ultimate questions of political resolve, such as "Is the United States willing to sacrifice Los Angeles for Berlin?" are impossible to know before the fact. Thus, the image or reputation of a state based on its past patterns of behavior has a major impact on a challenger's estimation of how much risk a state offering extended deterrence is willing to accept. In this sense, reputation is a variable that provides important context for analyzing the workings of deterrence and compellence.

### Changes in Reputation Research

Research on reputation can be roughly grouped into three periods: a first period (Cold War period–1990s) in the context of classical deterrence theory, a second period (1990s–2000s) characterized by a revision of the conventional view, and a third period (2010s–) in which the pace of empirical research has accelerated. The following is an overview of previous research along these lines.

As with many other theories and concepts in international politics,

research on reputation has often reflected the climate of real international politics at the time. In the context of the Cold War, particular emphasis was placed on a state's reputation for resolve. The basic logic is simple. If, in a past crisis, X had taken a hardline stance and was willing to use force in response to a provocation by Y, this precedent would create a reputation for X's strong resolve. Thereafter, X would be less likely to be challenged not only by Y, but also by Z, a third party. On the other hand, a conciliatory response by X would be perceived as a sign of weakness, and would incur the risk of further challenges in the future. Thomas Schelling focused on this logic and even stated that reputation for action is "one of the few things worth fighting over."<sup>4</sup>

When the United States and the Soviet Union, then rival military superpowers, accepted mutual assured destruction (MAD) as a given reality, it was the question of their political resolve to use force that came to the fore, not marginal differences in their capability. For example, the "domino theory" posited that, if the United States did not intervene in Vietnam, its anti-communist commitment would lose credibility and the countries in the region would all become communist at once. This line of thought was a major influence in the U.S. decision-making process leading up to the Vietnam War. This is often discussed as a classic case of using force to protect a reputation for resolve. The crises in Berlin and Cuba also showed aspects of a "game of chicken" in which the side displaying the stronger resolve—taking a greater risk on the brink of mutual catastrophe—extracted concessions from the other side. In situations like these, "small issues will often loom large . . . because they are taken as tests of resolve."<sup>5</sup> Precisely because the logic of reputation for resolve was highly intuitive, it tended to be accepted somewhat uncritically in Cold War period discussions.

As the Cold War ended, however, such views were called into question. Jonathan Mercer, for example, focuses on the influence of cognitive biases in the reputation formation process, offering the harsh criticism that it is impossible to acquire a reputation for resolve that is desirable for oneself, and therefore it is futile to fight for its sake.<sup>6</sup> Of particular importance to his argument was the impact of the fundamental attribution error in the context



President John F. Kennedy communicates U.S. resolve through a televised speech during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (Getty Images/Kyodo News Images)

of extended deterrence. That is, people tend to attribute their own desirable behavior to their good intrinsic character, while attributing their undesirable behavior to circumstances beyond their control. In contrast, we tend to assume that other people's desirable behavior is due to external factors (or our own efforts) and, conversely, that their undesirable behavior is due to their bad intrinsic character. For example, if X provides extended deterrence to Z, Z will attribute X's desirable behavior (i.e., the policies X adopts to protect Z) to external factors (such as Z's economic value to X), and as a result, X will not gain a reputation for having an intrinsically strong resolve. Conversely, if X behaves in a way that is undesirable for Z (i.e., does not protect Z), then Z will consider the cause to be X's internal weakness. This means that no matter what X does, X may end up stuck with a reputation for weak resolve, but not a reputation for strong resolve.

Departing from Mercer's psychological approach, Daryl Press argued from a realist perspective that the decisive factors in predicting the behavior of one state toward another lie in the balance of power at the time and the interests at stake in that particular situation, not in the state's past actions or its associated reputation.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Press asserted that the credibility of a threat is determined by the current situation, not the disposition of the actor. Shipping Tang synthesized these critical views and declared that since it is impossible to make future predictions based on past actions, political leaders' concerns about their reputation for resolve are merely an irrational "cult."<sup>8</sup>

This period saw a resurgence of theoretical debate, with Paul Huth clarifying the conceptual and theoretical issues surrounding reputation in response to these criticisms, and Dale Copeland questioning Mercer's logic.<sup>9</sup> For instance, following Mercer's logic above, different conclusions can be reached depending on how Z defines "self" and "other" in the reputation formation process. Mercer assumes that Z views X as "the other," but provides no firm basis for this assumption. For example, if X and Z are in a long-term alliance, and Z perceives X, its ally, as a member of the same team and Y, its hypothetical enemy, as "the other," X may be able to escape the negative effects of Z's cognitive bias and earn a reputation for resolve.

While highlighting these theoretical issues, the researchers also failed to reach an agreement in empirical terms. Both advocates and critics of the reputation logic used seemingly valid historical examples to support their arguments, and neither view could refute the other outright. One problem with this period of discussion is that it was difficult to comprehensively affirm or deny such a complex and multifaceted variable as reputation in the first place. To answer the fundamental question of whether reputation exists or not, or whether it has a meaningful impact in international politics,

it is necessary to break down the concept further and ask "under what conditions" reputation has an impact.<sup>10</sup>

There has been a surge of empirical research based on this question, especially since the 2010s. In terms of the research methodology, qualitative case studies such as the Mercer and Press studies mentioned above have traditionally been the norm. Considering the nature of the concept of reputation, it seems only natural that researchers would rely on primary and secondary sources to closely examine the perceptions of policymakers at the time. Keren Yarhi-Milo, for example, took such a diplomatic-historical approach, analyzing in detail how the Carter, Reagan, and Clinton administrations each made policy decisions with their reputation for resolve in mind.<sup>11</sup> Frank Harvey and John Mitton criticized Mercer's and Press's assertions above before arguing that the reputation for resolve that the United States earned through conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East in the 1990s and 2000s did have an impact on deterrence and compellence against Syria in the 2010s.<sup>12</sup> And Danielle Lupton analyzed President Eisenhower's and President Kennedy's relationships with Premier Khrushchev during the Cold War, concluding that national leaders could gain (or lose) a reputation for resolve on a personal level through their words and actions.<sup>13</sup>

However, reputation research methodologies are steadily diversifying beyond case studies, and the criteria for causal inference are becoming more rigorous. For example, Ketian Zhang, who concluded that China's concern about its reputation for resolve has had a significant impact on its attempts to coerce neighboring countries, based her argument on a series of interviews with policymakers as well as documentary analysis.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Alex Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo were the first to confirm the impact of reputation for resolve through quantitative analysis.<sup>15</sup> Relying on the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MID) dataset commonly used for quantitative analysis in international politics, they show that the simple hypothesis that states that took a hardline stance in past crises are less likely to be challenged in subsequent years is statistically significant. Contrary to Press's view above that reputations are meaningless because interests and resolve change under different circumstances, Weisiger's and Yarhi-Milo's findings provide evidence that past actions can be generalized beyond their immediate contexts and have a lasting influence in the form of reputations. Todd Sechser also used a unique data set—the Militarized Compellent Threats (MCT) dataset, which contains only compellent threat episodes—to argue that states tend to take a hard line to protect their reputation for resolve when they see a high likelihood of receiving further challenges in the future.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, research methods that use psychological experiments to uncover the micro-foundations of the reputation formation process are becoming increasingly popular, reflecting a trend in political science as a whole.<sup>17</sup> The potential of experimental methods in the area of reputation research was recognized at a relatively early stage. For example, Dustin Tingley and Barbara Walter had pairs of respondents participate in a repeated deterrence game and found that the players gradually built up reputations for resolve.<sup>18</sup> Joshua Kertzer, who conducted basic research on resolve, found in his experiments that concerns about reputation have the effect of encouraging more hardline decisions about the use of force.<sup>19</sup> Lupton, mentioned above, also adopted a research design that combined case studies and experiments. Her experiments confirmed a model in which political leaders' early statements in office create expectations of personal resolve that are then updated based on their actual behavior, and she applied this model to historical case studies. Finally, as an example of a study that goes beyond a simple survey experiment, Michael Goldfien et al. used conjoint analysis to suggest the possibility that certain domestic policies can shape reputations that carry over into foreign policy.<sup>20</sup>

## Challenges and Prospects for Reputation Research

The accumulated evidence from these studies suggests that the prevailing view now is that reputation can indeed have a significant impact on interstate dynamics involving deterrence and compellence. As has already been noted above, the simple dichotomous question of whether reputation exists or not has lost its appeal in recent reputation research. However, it is also true that recent reputation studies, by deliberately limiting their scope of analysis, have made it more difficult to consider the complex concept of reputation as a whole. Therefore, there is a need to continue to accumulate research with the theoretical scope conditions clearly specified. In the following section, we will examine the current state of the major debates about reputation.

First of all, the question remains as to whether reputation belongs to the state or to the individual. This correlates to some extent with the methodology used in each study: quantitative studies tend to focus on the state, which is the unit of analysis in most datasets, while case studies tend to focus on political leaders. However, these studies are not mutually contradictory, and it is of course possible to see the reputation of the state as coexisting with the reputation of individual leaders. For instance, while Lupton explicitly analyzed reputation at the individual level, she did not deny the existence of reputation at the national level.<sup>21</sup> It is plausible that the United States has

a fairly strong reputation for resolve at the state level, independent of the reputation at the individual level, which varies depending on who is in the White House at any given moment. If reputations can coexist at both the state and individual levels, then how the two interact needs to be discussed more explicitly.<sup>22</sup>

There is also much uncertainty about reputation's duration. It is generally assumed that a reputation will fade away as more time passes from the past events that caused the reputation to form, but it is not clear whether the process is a linear one or follows some kind of curve. In addition, the major powers and their leaders, who are important subjects of analysis, are constantly engaged in some form of foreign policy, even if their actions do not lead to a major international crisis. Given this, another important issue to consider is how reputations are updated as a continuous process. As noted above, it is not realistic to assume that perceptions are updated from a blank slate, so any form of interaction between past reputations and current events should be actively discussed in future research.

Finally, there is the question of what reputation is about. Already in the 1990s, it was pointed out that while a lot of attention had been paid to reputation for resolve, there was little research on reputation for capability.<sup>23</sup> Largely, this is still the case today. If political will and military capability are the two pillars of coercion, then reputation for capability should be considered no less important than that for resolve. Since military power, like resolve, is an extremely difficult variable to measure, it is easy to hypothesize that reputation for capability is formed through war, which is the ultimate test of actual military power. In particular, unlike the size of the military budget or the number of military assets, which can be quantitatively compared, the perception of intangible aspects of military power that cannot be directly observed in peacetime, such as the organizational efficiency of the military and the quality of its strategy and tactics, are likely to be affected greatly by actual wartime performance. For example, Western countries' perceptions of Russia's military capabilities may have changed significantly in the two years since the invasion of Ukraine (at the time of writing), as Russia got itself bogged down in a war of attrition. This is because despite Russia's material superiority over Ukraine (even with the West's support for Ukraine), doubts have been raised about Russia's qualitative skills and its ability to employ material assets effectively to achieve its strategic goals. Therefore, we need to develop an understanding of other kinds of reputation, without limiting the discussion to political resolve alone.<sup>24</sup>

As we have seen above, research on reputation in international politics has come a long way in the last 30 years or so. Looking back, the development of reputation research shows some correlation with the rise and fall of nuclear

deterrence theory. During the Cold War, reputation originally emerged as an important subject in the context of the credibility of deterrence under the “long shadow of nuclear weapons.” The challenges to the conventional wisdom about reputation in the 1990s also coincided with a shift in public interest from nuclear deterrence to nuclear (non-)proliferation. And given that nuclear weapons are once again gaining prominence today, the recent upsurge in reputation research can be seen as one aspect of the return to deterrence theory.

However, as the number of nuclear-armed states increases and their geographic and technological contexts become more diverse than during the Cold War period, we also need to accommodate a broader and more nuanced understanding of reputation. In other words, it is no longer sufficient to understand reputation narrowly as an issue of resolve in the context of nuclear deterrence between two superpowers, especially when not all the parties necessarily have similar ideas about deterrence the way the United States and the Soviet Union did. Our new challenge is to understand reputations in a more nuanced manner: what reputations (for resolve, capability, or other attributes) belonging to which actors (states, individuals, or other parties) come into play under which conditions and in which contexts (nuclear/conventional, direct/extended, and various other types of deterrence and compellence)? The concept of reputation in international politics raises questions that are essential for looking ahead to “new horizons of the nuclear age.”

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1. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).
2. Although there are minor variations in how the concept has been defined in the literature, there is a near consensus on its key characteristics. The definition presented here is based on these common characteristics. Reputation is often confused with the concepts of status and prestige, but these terms are more often used to refer to a state's place in the overall hierarchy of states, rather than in terms of any one specific variable. Due to space constraints, I will not go into a detailed conceptual discussion here, but instead refer the reader to the following references: Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Deborah W. Larson, T. V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, “Status and World Order,” in *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3-29; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, “Reputation and Status as Motives for War,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 371-393; Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal Determination in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).
3. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Robert Jervis, Richard N. Lebow, and Janice G. Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
4. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 124.
5. Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 39.
6. Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*.
7. Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
8. Shiping Tang, “Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict,” *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (January 2005): 34-62.
9. Paul K. Huth, “Reputations and Deterrence: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment,” *Security Studies* 7, no. 1 (September, 1997): 72-99; Dale C. Copeland, “Do Reputations Matter?,” *Security Studies* 7, no. 1 (September 1997): 33-71.
10. Robert Jervis, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler, “Redefining the Debate over Reputation and Credibility in International Security: Promises and Limits of New Scholarship,” *World Politics* 73, no. 1 (January 2021): 167-203.
11. Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation*.
12. Frank P. Harvey and John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility: US Reputation and International Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
13. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve*.
14. Ketian Zhang, “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 117-



- 159.
15. Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 473-495.
16. Todd S. Sechser, "Reputations and Signaling in Coercive Bargaining," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 2 (February 2018): 318-345.
17. Emilie Hafner-Burton, D. Alex Hughes, and David Victor, "The Cognitive Revolution and the Political Psychology of Elite Decision Making," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 2 (2013): 368-386; Susan D. Hyde, "Experiments in International Relations: Lab, Survey, and Field," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 403-424; Joshua D. Kertzer and Jonathan Renshon, "Experiments and Surveys on Political Elites," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 529-550.
18. Dustin H. Tingley and Barbara F. Walter, "The Effect of Repeated Play on Reputation Building: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (April 2011): 343-365.
19. Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
20. Michael A. Goldfien, Michael F. Joseph, and Roseanne W. McManus, "The Domestic Sources of International Reputation," *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 2 (2023), 609-628. Conjoint analysis differs from common survey experiments that seek to identify the causal effect of a single independent variable by looking at the difference between treatment and control groups. Instead, conjoint analysis allows us to manipulate many parameters simultaneously and estimate the average marginal component effect (AMCE) for each, by asking respondents to compare "profiles" of randomly assigned attributes. The method was originally developed in the field of marketing research, but in recent years it has been increasingly used in political science. Jens Hainmueller, Daniel J. Hopkins, and Teppei Yamamoto, "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments," *Political Analysis* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1-30; Kirk Bansak et al., "Beyond the Breaking Point? Survey Satisficing in Conjoint Experiments," *Political Science Research and Methods* 9, no. 1 (January 2021): 53-71.
21. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve*.
22. Cathy Xuanxuan Wu and Scott Wolford, "Leaders, States, and Reputations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 10 (November 2018): 2087-2117; Jervis et al., "Redefining the Debate." Going further, we could point out that, in addition to states and individuals, reputations also apply to domestic organizations such as political parties and non-state actors. One reason why states and individuals have received so much attention in previous studies is that sovereign states, with the ability to mobilize vast resources of all kinds, including military power, and political leaders, who are responsible for decision making, have traditionally been the most influential actors in international politics. Methodological factors, such as a simple lack of data on other types of actors, are also possible.
23. Huth, "Reputations and Deterrence"; Jervis et al., "Redefining the Debate." One of the few exceptions is Elli Lieberman, "The Rational Deterrence Theory Debate: Is the Dependent Variable Elusive?," *Security Studies* 3, no. 3 (March 1994): 384-427; "What Makes Deterrence Work?: Lessons from the Egyptian-Israeli Enduring Rivalry," *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (June 1995): 851-910.
24. See also Chapter 2, which discusses reputation as an irrational madman in the context of compellence. Examples of other kinds of reputation include studies about reputation for loyalty, i.e., whether or not a country is reliable as an ally. Douglas M. Gibler, "The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (June 2008): 426-454; Gregory D. Miller, *The Shadow of the Past: Reputation and Military Alliances before the First World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Iain D. Henry, "What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence," *International Security* 44, no. 4 (April 2020): 45-83.