

Chapter 5

Perspectives on Nuclear Threats: Two Purposes and Two Methods for Creating Credibility

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has been garnering attention due to Russia's repeated use of nuclear threats. Of course, these kinds of nuclear threats are nothing new. Since the advent of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II, there have been multiple attempts over the years to influence the behavior of others with the threat of using nuclear weapons. However, nuclear threats are not all uniform in nature and can be classified into several types. This paper introduces two perspectives on categorizing the purposes and forms of nuclear threats discussed in previous studies.

Deterrence and Compellence

The first is a distinction that focuses on what is being demanded alongside nuclear threats. When a certain party threatens the use of military force, the aim is to influence an adversary's behavior through the threat. In other words, the threatening party conveys to the adversary that it will use military force if the adversary does not comply with a demand, with the aim of making the adversary want to prevent the use of military force and forcing their hand in complying with the demand. While demands made on these occasions may vary in their content, they can be roughly classified into those that require an adversary not to do something, and those that require them to do something.

The strategy of demanding that an adversary refrain from doing something that it has not done yet, and threatening to use military force if it does, is called deterrence. A typical example would be a threat made to prevent an attack on the threatening party's own nation or an ally. This is specifically a case where, if there is another nation that seems likely to attack the threatening party's own nation or an ally, but an attack has not yet occurred, the latter will threaten to launch a counterattack and inflict grievous damage in the event the former were to attack, thereby making the adversary's attack end in failure. The purpose of this threat is to dissuade the adversary from taking an action

that it has not yet taken, but is likely to. Thus, deterrence is a strategy to maintain the status quo at the time a threat is made.¹

In contrast, the strategy of demanding that an adversary take a certain action and threatening to use military force if it does not do so is called compellence. For example, during the confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea that occurred between 2017 and 2018, the U.S. putting pressure on North Korea by demanding that it destroy its nuclear weapons and dismantle its nuclear weapons program, and appearing ready to use military force should the latter refuse, is an example of compellence. The purpose of this threat was to force North Korea to take the action of denuclearization while it was already in possession of nuclear weapons and had an ongoing nuclear weapons program. Thus, compellence is a strategy to alter the status quo at the time a threat is made.²

Depending on the situation, however, it may be difficult to distinguish between instances of deterrence and compellence. For example, in the Russo-Ukrainian War, Russia has demanded that the United States and other Western nations stop providing military assistance to Ukraine, repeatedly warning that not doing so could bring about a direct conflict with the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on one side and Russia on the other, along with potentially leading to nuclear war. Of these, threats attempting to dissuade the West from providing specific equipment that has not yet been delivered, or attempting to prevent the use of such equipment in certain ways, can be seen as simple deterrence. Specifically, this corresponds to the warning given by Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin in January 2023 that the provision of offensive weapons to Ukraine would bring about a global catastrophe, and that the only reason that nuclear-armed states have so far refrained from using nuclear weapons in localized warfare is simply that they have not directly faced threats to their own citizens or territorial integrity, along with the warning given by Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev in February of the same year that if the Crimean Peninsula or inner Russia were attacked with weapons provided by the U.S., Russia would respond with any and all weapons in its arsenal, including nuclear weapons.³

Meanwhile, Russia has also repeatedly made threats demanding that the West stop

¹ E.g., David E. Johnson, Karl P. Mueller, and William H. Taft V, *Conventional Coercion across the Spectrum of Operations: The Utility of U.S. Military Forces in the Emerging Security Environment* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002), 10-13.

² E.g., Ibid., 13-15.

³ Lidia Kelly, "Putin Ally Says West's Deliveries of New Weapons to Kyiv Will Lead to Global Catastrophe," Reuters News, January 22, 2023; Kevin Liffey, "Russia's Medvedev Says More U.S. Weapons Supplies Mean 'All of Ukraine Will Burn,'" Reuters News, February 4, 2023.

providing all types of military assistance to Ukraine while such assistance is already being provided.⁴ These threats can be seen as either deterrence or compellence, depending on how the situation is perceived. When viewing Western military assistance as intermittently repeated, separate actions, these threats can be understood as deterrents attempting to dissuade the next act of assistance being taken. On the other hand, if viewing Western military assistance as a continued campaign, these threats can be understood as threats of compellence demanding an alteration in behavior; namely, the cessation of ongoing actions.

Thus, for actual nuclear threats, there are those that involve a combination of aspects of both deterrence and compellence. This fact, however, does not negate the existence of purer examples of either deterrence or compellence, nor does it negate the merits of distinguishing between these two concepts. In actuality, the different purposes give each strategy different characteristics. As mentioned above, deterrence is a strategy used by a party wanting to maintain the status quo. The deterrent party may threaten an adversary, but what it wants is for the adversary not to disrupt the status quo, and if the adversary does not take any action, the situation will end with the deterrent party also taking no action. It is only when the adversary challenges the status quo that the deterrent party moves to put the threat into action; in that sense, therefore, deterrence is a passive strategy. In contrast, compellence is a strategy used by a party wanting to alter the status quo. The compeller wants the adversary to take a specific action, but one that the adversary does not want to take of its own volition. In order to compel the adversary to take an action that it would normally not want to take, compellence requires the compeller to take the initiative in moving the adversary, continuously building up pressure until the adversary complies with the demand. In this sense, therefore, compellence is a proactive strategy.⁵

Here, it is crucial to note that the status quo refers only to the situation at the time a threat is made. Consequently, there may be situations in which, when seen from a broader perspective, a party attempting to alter the status quo is actually using deterrence. This corresponds to cases in which, for example, following the alteration of the status quo by the successful creation of a *fait accompli*, a threat is then made to maintain the new status

⁴ E.g., Lidia Kelly and Ronald Popeski, "Russia's Lavrov: Do Not Underestimate Threat of Nuclear War," Reuters News, April 26, 2022; Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia Warns West over Risk of Conflict with NATO," Reuters News, May 12, 2022; David Ljunggren and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, "Russia's Medvedev Says Arms Supplies to Kyiv Threaten Global Nuclear Catastrophe," Reuters News, February 27, 2023; Guy Faulconbridge and Kevin Liffey, "Western Arms for Ukraine Make 'Nuclear Apocalypse' More Likely: Russia's Medvedev," Reuters News, May 24, 2023.

⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 71-72.

quo. Conversely, a status quo power may resort to compellence as a way of restoring the status quo ante after it has been altered by another party. It is also possible for the parties involved to have different perceptions on what constitutes the status quo; however, when compared to differences of opinion in respect of points of reference as to what constitutes a legitimate original state, the perceptions of involved parties in respect of the status quo at a given point in time tend to be in accordance with one another more often than not. Even if the parties' perceptions differ, a third-party analyst would be able to distinguish between deterrence and compellence and analyze the situation after having determined how to perceive the status quo.

The Madman Theory and Brinkmanship

The second distinction that can be made concerning nuclear threats is the difference in methods for creating the credibility of a nuclear threat. The issuance of a threat is the act of declaring that an action will be taken in future under certain conditions. Accordingly, there exists the possibility that the threat will not be carried out, contrary to what has been said. In other words, the threatening party may simply be bluffing in an attempt to make an adversary comply with its demand by showing an intention to follow through with a threat, even though it has no intention of doing so.⁶ Once the adversary becomes aware of the possibility of a bluff, it will no longer be afraid of the threat and will lose motivation to comply with the demand. For this reason, a major challenge for the threatening party is to ensure the credibility of the threat by convincing the adversary that it is serious about the threat.

The credibility issue gets more serious in the case of threats where their carrying out would also incur significant costs for the threatening party; in particular, nuclear threats. If the adversary being threatened with nuclear weapons is also a nuclear-armed state, the threatening party must assume that there will be a retaliatory nuclear attack in response to its own nuclear attack. The characteristics that make nuclear weapons unique include the difficulty of blocking an attack and the scale of damage that is inflicted if even a single strike reaches its target. Prior to the advent of nuclear weapons, it was necessary to defeat enemy forces on the battlefield in order to expose an adversary's home and heartlands to danger. However, after nuclear weapons appeared and developments

⁶ James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 578.

were made in their means of delivery, especially ballistic missiles, it became possible to inflict a major strike on an adversary's home and heartlands without going through the steps of defeating the opposing forces on the battlefield.⁷ Even today, with advancements in missile defense technology, the interception of ballistic missiles remains a difficult endeavor. Consequently, if an adversary's nuclear forces are not expected to be completely disarmed by an attack (first strike), the threatening party must be prepared to expose itself to a retaliatory nuclear attack made by the adversary (second strike).

The costs to a party using nuclear weapons do not end at retaliatory attacks. Even when an adversary is not a nuclear-armed state, it is expected that nations using nuclear weapons will suffer a great many political and economic costs. Unlike conventional military force, which has been in use throughout all of history up to the present, the only examples of nuclear weapons being used are Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. In some respects, this long, unbroken history of non-use of nuclear weapons has created a norm in which the use of nuclear weapons has become taboo. A party who breaks the taboo and uses nuclear weapons is highly likely to expose itself to intense criticism from other nations, fall into diplomatic isolation, and be subject to various economic, financial, and other sanctions. If the party using nuclear weapons is a small or medium-sized nation, this may also trigger intervention by a major power with the intention of overthrowing the nation's regime.⁸

The enormous costs associated with the use of nuclear weapons mean that parties making nuclear threats tend to be viewed with suspicion as to whether they are truly prepared to use nuclear weapons in spite of these costs. If the survival of a threatening party's nation is at stake, it would not be difficult to convince an adversary of the former's willingness to accept such enormous costs. In contrast, it is not a simple matter to give credibility to a nuclear threat in cases where a threatening party wants to deter an attack on more peripheral interests not affecting the survival of its own nation or prevent attacks on allied nations rather than itself, and in cases of compellence.

For this reason, previous studies have considered methods for giving credibility to nuclear threats. Among them, the madman theory and brinkmanship have garnered significant attention. The former, the madman theory, is a method that involves making an adversary believe that the threatening party is "mad" enough to actually follow

⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 22-23.

⁸ Matthew Fuhrmann, "After Armageddon: Pondering the Potential Political Consequences of Third Use," in *Should We Let the Bomb Spread?* ed. Henry D. Sokolski (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016).

through with a threat that has high costs if carried out. “Mad,” as used here, is defined as a significant deviation from common thinking and calculation. This deviation may be caused by an inability to make rational calculations due to being ruled by emotions or influenced by mental illness. Alternatively, the results of calculations may deviate significantly from those of others due to overestimating the benefits involved in the central issue of the confrontation or underestimating the costs that would be incurred oneself.⁹

A specific example of madman theory-type nuclear threats being used is the Vietnam War. As the war grew protracted, the U.S. sent an ultimatum to North Vietnam and the Soviet Union in 1969, stating that unless considerable progress was made in peace negotiations, the U.S. would need to start taking serious measures. President Richard Nixon wanted to give the Soviet Union the impression that he was so intent in his aims with respect to Vietnam that he would take extreme measures, including the use of nuclear weapons. This was so he could push the Soviet Union into pressuring North Vietnam into accepting a peace deal. With this intent, attempts were made to send signals through actions including having strategic bombers appear ready to launch sorties or fly over the vicinity of the Soviet Union, as a way of bolstering the above-mentioned ultimatum. However, concerned about domestic opposition in the U.S. against escalating the situation, President Nixon placed various restrictions on the actual measures, which led to half-done signaling. It also appeared that the Soviet side did not understand what issues were associated with this nuclear signaling by the U.S. In the end, the U.S. nuclear threat ended in failure with no progress in peace negotiations made by Vietnam.¹⁰

For a more recent example, madman theory-type nuclear threats were also used in the 2017–2018 Korean Peninsula crisis. In this case, which saw the U.S. and North Korea in a fierce confrontation over North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, both countries made nuclear threats. The U.S. took a strategy involving applying the maximum amount of pressure on North Korea in order to force the latter to comply with denuclearization. U.S. President Donald Trump has long been cultivating the impression that he is an unprecedented and unpredictable figure, and in

⁹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 36–43; Roseanne W. McManus, “Revisiting the Madman Theory: Evaluating the Impact of Different Forms of Perceived Madness in Coercive Bargaining,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 5 (2019).

¹⁰ For an overview of this case, refer to the following. Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, “The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969,” *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003); Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 142–146.

the confrontation with North Korea, too, he sought to give his adversary that perception in order to pressure the country into moving.¹¹ Officials from the Trump administration repeatedly stated that “all options are on the table,”¹² and President Trump himself also gave the following warning: “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.”¹³ At the UN General Assembly, President Trump also stated that “if [the United States] is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.”¹⁴ Furthermore, after Chairman of the State Affairs Commission Kim Jong Un remarked in his address that “the nuclear button is on my office desk,” President Trump tweeted that he also had a nuclear button that was “much bigger [and] more powerful” and actually worked.¹⁵ In this way, President Trump was attempting to make North Korea comply with his demands by giving the impression that he might actually use nuclear weapons; however, this exchange did not result in North Korea agreeing to denuclearization.

Another method for giving credibility to nuclear threats is brinkmanship. This method involves exploiting the risk of nuclear weapons being used by accident in a case where a threat to intentionally use nuclear weapons would be difficult to believe. In situations where tensions are high, such as a crisis, accidents sometimes do occur when national policymakers become unable to control or manage a situation completely. Things can happen in a crisis that would not likely occur under calmer conditions; as policymakers expose themselves to hastiness caused by a rapidly unfolding situation and the dilemma of conflicting interests, they can make poor decisions due to misinformation, assumptions, or misunderstandings, actions may not be taken in line with the directions given by policymakers because of breakdowns in communication, or situations developing on the ground quickly can leave policymakers with barely any time to get involved. Such unintended circumstances always include the possibility that nuclear weapons are used. By continuing to remain in the eye of a crisis, taking actions that could lead to a military incident or escalation thereof, or even delegating authority

¹¹ James D. Boys, “The Unpredictability Factor: Nixon, Trump and the Application of the Madman Theory in US Grand Strategy,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 3 (2021), 436-438, 443-445.

¹² E.g., Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 101-102.

¹³ White House, “Remarks by President Trump before a Briefing on the Opioid Crisis,” August 8, 2017.

¹⁴ United Nations General Assembly, “Seventy-Second Session: 3rd Plenary Meeting,” A/72/PV.3, September 19, 2017, 12.

¹⁵ Jackson, *On the Brink*, 168-169.

for using nuclear weapons to a subordinate commander, a nation using brinkmanship can exploit the heightened possibility that nuclear weapons might actually be used as a way of pressuring an adversary into backing down.¹⁶

Brinkmanship is often compared to a game of chicken. The game of chicken is a test of courage in which two vehicles facing one another travel straight forward at high speed, with the one who swerves first considered the chicken. Both players are motivated to keep driving straight ahead longer than the other because neither wants to lose; however, if they both keep traveling straight, what awaits them is a head-on collision. It becomes a contest of wills to see who is more willing to embrace the risk of such a collision.¹⁷ As mentioned above, brinkmanship using nuclear threats involves both parties competing to see who is more willing to come close to destruction against the background of risking plunging into destruction—nuclear war—if neither side relents. This is an attempt by the threatening party to force the adversary into giving up first and thus complying with its demands.

An example of a brinkmanship-type nuclear threat being used is the Cuban Missile Crisis. After learning that the Soviet Union had deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba, the U.S. applied military pressure to compel the Soviet Union to remove them. While in this case, the U.S. did not threaten to use nuclear weapons, it raised its defense readiness condition to one step short of all-out war (DEFCON 2) and put its nuclear forces on alert, showed it was ready to invade Cuba, and set up a naval blockade. This confronted the Soviet Union with the fact that by heightening the possibility of a military conflict, actual conflict would put the Soviet Union at risk of an all-out war with the U.S., potentially even plunging them into a nuclear war. Initially refusing to comply with Washington's demand, the Soviet Union eventually decided to comply out of fear of losing control of the situation following incidents that included a U.S. reconnaissance plane being shot down without Moscow's permission by Soviet anti-aircraft missile units in Cuba.¹⁸

Russia's nuclear threats during the Russo-Ukrainian War can also be interpreted as

¹⁶ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 90-125; Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 38-41.

¹⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 116-118.

¹⁸ For an overview of this case, refer to the following. William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), chap. 19; Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), chap. 19; Martin J. Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1945-1962* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020).

brinkmanship. In the course of the war, Russia has curbed Western military assistance to Ukraine by repeatedly threatening that such assistance could lead to a direct conflict between Russia and the West and, if that were to happen, bring about nuclear war.¹⁹ This is not Russia directly threatening a nuclear attack on the West; rather, it can be said that Russia is pressuring the West with the risk of an escalation of the situation resulting in nuclear war.

Conclusion

This paper introduced two perspectives on categorizing nuclear threats. One perspective focuses on what is being demanded, making a distinction between deterrence, which aims to maintain the status quo, and compellence, which aims to alter the status quo. The other perspective focuses on the methods for giving credibility to nuclear threats, making a distinction between the madman theory and brinkmanship.

Of course, these distinctions are theoretical; in reality, there are also cases that involve a combination of each. However, looking at threats through the perspective of these lenses allows complex realities to be categorized and simplified, thus making it possible to comprehend the inner makeup of each case and carry out comparative analyses across cases. Forging ahead with studies using such a theoretical perspective while adding a focus on the particularities of individual cases will allow us to better understand complex issues.

There are still many points to be explored in research on nuclear threats. In particular, while numerous studies on nuclear deterrence have appeared since the time of the Cold War, there are very few studies on nuclear compellence. More research is required, including analyses of actual cases.²⁰

¹⁹ E.g., Kelly and Popeski, “Russia’s Lavrov”; Faulconbridge, “Russia Warns West”; Ljunggren and Tétrault-Farber, “Russia’s Medvedev”; Faulconbridge and Liffey, “Western Arms for Ukraine.”

²⁰ As a study on nuclear compellence, including comparative analyses of several cases, refer to the following. Ohnishi Ken, “Compellence and Nuclear Weapons: A Study of Conditions for the Success of Proactive Nuclear Threats,” in *New Horizons of the Nuclear Age*, ed. Ichimasa Sukeyuki (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2024).