

The Madman and the Bomb: Nuclear Blackmail in the Trump Era

By Todd S. Sechser, Ph.D., and Matthew Fuhrmann, Ph.D.

President Donald Trump has now assumed control over the nation's arsenal of more than 4,000 nuclear weapons. What will he do with them? We do not yet know the Trump administration's approach to nuclear strategy, but Mr. Trump has offered some clues to his mindset. He has denounced nuclear arms control, declaring that he would welcome a renewed nuclear arms race with Russia (Shear and Sanger, 2016). He has indicated that he might be willing to allow Japan and other U.S. allies to acquire nuclear weapons (*New York Times*, 2016a). And he has suggested that he might be willing to use nuclear weapons against the Islamic State (MSNBC, 2016).

These statements are consistent with a broader theme in Mr. Trump's approach toward nuclear weapons and foreign policy: unpredictability. "We must as a nation be more unpredictable," he declared in a foreign policy speech during the 2016 presidential campaign. "We have to be unpredictable, and we have to be unpredictable starting now" (*New York Times*, 2016b). In his past business dealings, Mr. Trump argues, it was advantageous to be seen as unpredictable. It kept adversaries off-balance and nervous about what he might do next. By this reasoning, the United States could also benefit from engaging in unexpected behavior, particularly with respect to nuclear weapons.

Mr. Trump is not the first to advance these claims. Indeed, there is a rich intellectual tradition behind the idea that nuclear strategy requires a dash of unpredictability – or even irrationality.

NUCLEAR THREATS AND UNPREDICTABILITY

In the 1950s and 1960s, economist Thomas Schelling observed that the fundamental problem with nuclear threats is that they are not credible. When facing a nuclear-armed adversary, leaders know that using nuclear weapons could invite devastating retaliation. Threatening to launch a nuclear attack against another nuclear state would be dismissed immediately as a bluff. As John F. Kennedy's national security adviser once noted, "A decision that would bring even one hydrogen bomb on one city of one's own country would be recognized in advance as a catastrophic blunder; ten bombs on ten cities would be a disaster beyond history; and a hundred bombs on a hundred cities are unthinkable" (Bundy, 1969, p. 9–10). Even attacking a non-nuclear adversary with nuclear weapons could carry tremendous costs, branding the attacker as an international pariah and motivating other countries to align against it. Nuclear threats, in short, are not believable, as the costs of executing them are simply too high.

The credibility problem is especially severe, Schelling argued, for nuclear threats that

are intended to convince an adversary to change its behavior or relinquish something valuable. Schelling's term for this kind of coercive situation was "compellence" (Schelling, 1966, p. 69–90). When engaging in nuclear compellence, following through on a threat requires the coercer to be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict – and perhaps initiate the conflict altogether. But moving first is inherently more difficult than retaliating. For this reason, Schelling argued, nuclear compellence is harder than deterrence.

How, then, can leaders use nuclear weapons for compellence, if no rational leader would ever start a nuclear war? Schelling's answer was both startling and clever: threaten to do *inadvertently* what one would never do intentionally. Consider the following metaphor. Two mountain climbers stand near the edge of a cliff, tied together by a length of rope. If one climber wishes to coerce her partner, she cannot credibly threaten to jump off the cliff – her partner will not believe her. However, if she inches toward the edge of the cliff, she creates a risk that some unanticipated event – a gust of wind, a loose rock, momentary vertigo – will cause one to slip off the edge and carry both to their death. As the two move closer and closer to the edge, this shared risk increases. The encounter then ends in one of two ways. Either the dreaded accident actually occurs and the pair falls to their death or, more likely, one party loses her nerve and gives in (Schelling, 1966, p. 99).

Nuclear threats, in Schelling's view, have this same dangerous quality. In any nuclear crisis, there is a risk that some unanticipated event will carry the two sides into a nuclear conflict that neither side wanted. The 1962 Cuban missile crisis offers several examples of how this could happen. During the tense two-week crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union experienced numerous incidents that could have led to inadvertent war (Sagan, 1993; Dobbs, 2008). For example, a U.S. pilot became confused and accidentally flew his U-2 reconnaissance plane into Soviet airspace, narrowly avoiding a clash between Soviet interceptors and nuclear-armed U.S. escort jets. U.S. radar stations falsely detected Soviet ballistic missile launches on several occasions, due to technical malfunctions and happenstance events (such as the explosion of a Soviet satellite in orbit). And perhaps most dangerously, at the tensest moment of the confrontation, Soviet surface-to-air missile operators in Cuba shot down a U.S. spy plane, in violation of their instructions from Moscow. These events all occurred beyond the control of national leaders – and could have had catastrophic consequences.

But for Schelling, the unpredictability of crisis confrontations is precisely the point. In his view, a nuclear threat is a "threat that leaves something to chance" (Schelling, 1960, p. 187–203). In other words, there is always a chance that leaders will lose control during a crisis, resulting in a war that neither side intended. Moreover, leaders can take deliberate actions – such as alerting nuclear assets, pre-delegating nuclear launch authority to field officers, or deploying forces near those of the adversary – that increase this risk. An adversary might not believe that you would intentionally start a nuclear war, but the mounting danger of an accidental war might persuade him to back down and end the crisis. Indeed, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev seems to

have been quite worried about the possibility of losing control in 1962, imploring President John F. Kennedy “not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war...a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it” (U.S. Department of State, 1996).

Nuclear brinkmanship therefore turns not on the willingness of the coercer to start a nuclear war, but instead, on its ability to tolerate the risk that such a war might come about accidentally, in a way nobody could have predicted. As Schelling (1966, p. 109) explains, “It is our sheer inability to predict the consequences of our actions and to keep things under control, and the enemy’s similar inability, that can intimidate the enemy (and, of course, us too).” Unpredictability, in this story, is a virtue, not a vice.

THE BRINKMANSHIP MYTH

The logic of brinkmanship seems to offer a solution to the problem of credibility in nuclear confrontations. But it works much better in theory than in practice.

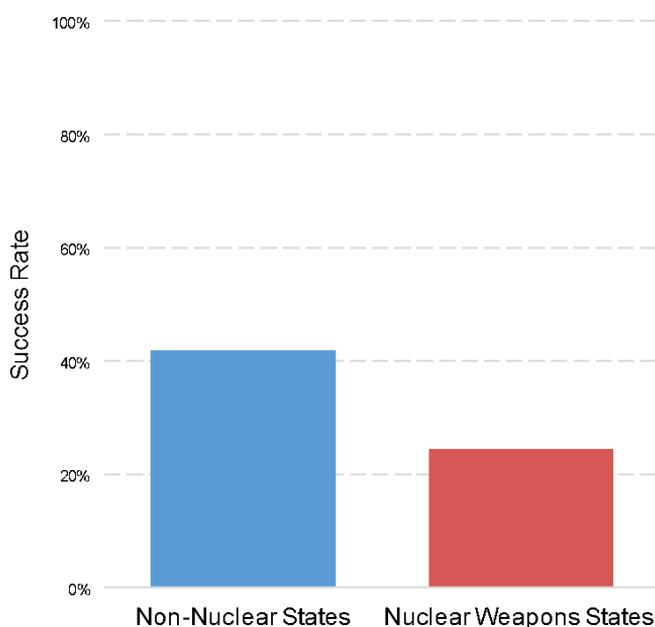
The logic of brinkmanship views nuclear confrontations as competitions of risk-taking, in which the danger of inadvertence rises until one side loses its nerve and backs down. The implicit assumption is that both sides are acutely aware of the risk of losing control during the crisis, and become intimidated when that risk becomes intolerable. But psychologists have long known that individuals are susceptible to the “illusion of control”: the false belief that one is in control of events that are actually caused by external factors (Langer, 1975; Jervis, 1976, p. 44–48). Individuals in positions of authority – such as national leaders – are particularly susceptible to this bias. Consequently, leaders typically do not comprehend the true level of danger that they face in a crisis. They tend to overestimate their ability to maintain control over events and prevent accidental escalation. As a result, the risk of inadvertence is unlikely to persuade leaders to capitulate, since they believe they can maintain control of the crisis. Khrushchev’s recognition of the dangers of inadvertence in 1962 was notable not because it was typical, but rather, because it is so rare.

In our book *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, we examine the behavior of leaders in nineteen different crises. In each of these crises, one side attempted to use nuclear threats – sometimes vague, sometimes explicit – to compel another state to make concessions. What we found surprised both of us: in almost none of these crises did leaders express the sort of concerns about losing control that Schelling’s logic of brinkmanship would expect. In most crises, leaders are not preoccupied with the possibility that they might accidentally stumble into a war they did not want. Even in the Cuban missile crisis, many of the key participants denied that nuclear weapons had anything to do with the outcome of the crisis. Robert McNamara, Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense during the crisis, argued that the Soviets “were finally forced out, but it was not through the threat of use of nuclear weapons.” Instead, he argued,

“It was our tremendous conventional power in the region which forced the Soviets to take those missiles out” (Charlton, 1987, p. 23). Thus, even in the episode that has long been considered the archetype for nuclear coercion, the evidence is actually quite mixed.

McNamara’s instinct is borne out by a broader look at the historical record. Using a database of more than 200 episodes of attempted military coercion during the 20th century (Sechser, 2011; 2017), we compared the success rate of nuclear-armed coercers to that of non-nuclear coercers. The logic of nuclear brinkmanship holds that nuclear-armed countries should have an advantage in these coercive situations, since they can create risks of inadvertence that non-nuclear countries cannot. Tumbling off the cliff into war is always costly, but against a nuclear-armed opponent, it could be devastating. Yet we found that nuclear weapons do not appear to provide an advantage in coercive episodes: as Figure 1 demonstrates, the success rate for nuclear-armed coercers is no higher – and in fact is slightly lower – than the success rate for non-nuclear countries (Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2013). The coercive value of nuclear weapons, it would seem, is not vindicated by the historical record.

Figure 1: Coercive Threat Success Rates, 1918–2001.



Source: Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 84.

An example helps illustrate how difficult it is to use unpredictability as a coercive bargaining tool in nuclear crises. In 1969, just a few months after taking office, President Richard Nixon sought to fulfill his campaign promise of ending the Vietnam War on terms favorable to the United States. After being stonewalled

repeatedly by North Vietnamese negotiators, U.S. leaders reasoned that only Soviet pressure could convince North Vietnam to make concessions at the bargaining table. Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, settled on a novel solution for obtaining Soviet cooperation: “We must worry the Soviets about the possibility that we might lose our patience and may get out of control,” Kissinger wrote (1969, p. 6). To do so, Nixon and Kissinger devised an operation code-named Giant Lance, which called for a series of steps designed to make the Soviets think that the United States was planning a nuclear attack (Sagan and Suri, 2003; Burr and Kimball, 2003; 2015). One of these actions involved sending 18 nuclear-armed B-52 bombers on a flight path straight toward the Soviet Union. The bombers would pull back just before crossing into Soviet airspace, and spend several days circling ominously near the Soviet border.

Nixon’s logic came straight from the Schelling playbook – and echoes President Trump’s recent remarks about the virtues of unpredictability. “I just want to keep them off balance. Keep them questioning what I will do,” Nixon declared (Sagan and Suri, 2003, p. 158). He told his Chief of Staff, H.R. Haldeman:

I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe that I’ve reached the point that I might do *anything* to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that, ‘for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry – and he has his hand on the nuclear button’ – and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace. (Haldeman, 1978, 83)

Indeed, just before the alert operation began, Nixon instructed Kissinger to meet with the Soviet ambassador, “shake his head and say, ‘I am sorry, Mr. Ambassador, but Nixon is out of control’” (U.S. Department of State, 2007, p. 87).

How did Nixon’s implementation of brinkmanship fare? In one respect, Nixon’s strategy succeeded: the Soviet ambassador to the United States cabled back to his superiors remarking on Nixon’s “growing emotionalism and lack of balance with respect to events related to Vietnam” (U.S. Department of State, 2007, p. 99). But the madman strategy failed to achieve its intended result of coercing the Soviets and intimidating North Vietnam. At best, the Soviets were confused by the alert operation and did not understand its purpose; at worst, they saw it as a bluff (Burr and Kimball, 2003, p. 147–48). But, contrary to the expectations of brinkmanship theory, they did not capitulate out of fear of being dragged inadvertently over the nuclear cliff.

CONCLUSION

President Trump has touted the virtues of unpredictability in foreign policy. He is not the first to do so: vaunted scholars of nuclear strategy, as well as U.S. presidents, have believed that cultivating an image of being irrational or out of control can be a coercive tool, particularly when nuclear weapons are involved. But the reality is that while Schelling’s “threat that leaves something to chance” is an elegant solution to a

thorny theoretical problem, it has a poor track record of real-world success. When leaders have attempted to use nuclear threats for coercion, they have almost always failed.

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