

Introduction to International Relations

Lecture 9: Brinkmanship

Professor Branislav L. Slantchev

Department of Political Science, University of California - San Diego

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Overview. Having discussed strategies of coercion in two generic situations (deterrence and compellence), we now turn to the problem of using inherently incredible threats to gain bargaining leverage. Some threats involve actions that are too painful for both the actor making them and the recipient. If the pain that the threatener would cause himself by the execution of the promised action is too great, then commitment strategies of the types that we discussed may be too dangerous for they can irrevocably commit him to a course of action from which there is no escape. We now study alternative *risk strategies*, or brinkmanship. These do not involve pre-commitment tactics but instead rely on a generation of risk. We study the Six Day War of 1967 as an example of a brinkmanship that went over the brink.

OUTLINE OF LECTURE 9: BRINKMANSHIP

1. The nuclear revolution
 - a) Massive Retaliation
 - b) moral opprobrium (nuclear v. non-nuclear)
 - c) credibility problem (nuclear v. nuclear)
 - d) Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)
 - e) what to do if threat is “too big”?
2. Crisis bargaining
 - a) Game of Chicken
 - b) risk and commitment
 - c) severing communications
 - d) preemption and disaster
3. How to make big threats credible?
 - a) strategic irrationality
 - Nixon’s Madman Theory
 - George W. Bush v. Kim Jong Il
 - provocability and vindictiveness
 - b) threat that leaves something to chance (brinkmanship)
 - modified chess game analogy
 - shared risk of disaster
 - autonomous generation of risk
 - blurring the brink
 - c) limited retaliation
 - splitting threat in small steps
 - bargaining through gradual escalation
 - McNamara’s “No Cities” Doctrine
4. An example: Six Day War of 1967

Because it may be rational to use force under certain circumstances, the threat to use force becomes a foreign-policy tool that could be used to achieve better bargaining outcomes in mixed-motive situations. We examined two archetypal situations. In the first, an actor attempts to establish a credible commitment to respond to attempts to change the status quo; that is, he tries to *deter* his opponent from doing something he does not like. In the second, an actor attempts to establish a credible commitment to continue inflicting damage on his opponent while the opponent persists in a course of action; he tries to *compel* his opponent to undo his alteration of the status quo.

We discussed several strategies that actors can use for deterrence and compulsion purposes, and noted that there are many ways one could alter the strategic calculations of the other actor. Although we analyzed examples that involved military situations, it is important to realize that the concepts are much more general and can be applied in wide varieties of circumstances. At any rate, the threat to use force could be regarded as an instrument of policy, much like the Clausewitzian conception of war.

Until, that is, you consider the arrival of nuclear weapons. How could an instrument of such enormous destructive power ever be utilized for political purposes? The nuke, but its very nature, seems to defy rational use. Even the threat to use it seems incredible against an opponent similarly equipped. The nuclear weapons seem to have caused a revolution in military thinking, in particular in relating military means to political ends by undoing the credibility of the threat to employ it.

The **nuclear revolution** laid bare the credibility problem in a way that previous weapons did not make possible. First, even in a crisis between a nuclear and non-nuclear state, it is not clear that the nuclear state can credibly threaten to resort to nuclear weapons. It is simply hard to imagine a threat that involves rattling the rockets over an issue of peripheral interest, and almost anything short of one's own survival could be deemed peripheral when it comes to nukes. Today (now that we know the effect of a nuclear strike), launching nukes against a non-nuclear state would cause immense moral opprobrium, and would not be tolerated by citizens in any country that has a representative government. The U.S. did maintain a posture of **massive retaliation**, according to which it could potentially resort to nukes in response to crises throughout the world (like the Korean War, for example). But if the explosion of such crises is any indication, this particular threat was not believed by various adversaries who went ahead anyway.

Second, in a crisis between two nuclear powers, the dangers multiply to a degree that it makes the resort to the weapon appear totally irrational. Threatening with nukes, as we discussed when we talked about crisis stability, could be inherently dangerous if it can cause the reciprocal escalation of fear of surprise attack. And when the two sides have second-strike capability, then using nukes seems to become completely irrational because regardless of who strikes first, both opponents would be surely destroyed.

It is worth noting that the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) is an American invention. The Soviets never really subscribed to MAD and consistently argued that deterrence was a worthless concept. They adhered to a doctrine of a winnable nuclear war, and correspondingly initiated large-scale civilian programs that would enable the country to survive (in some sense) after absorbing a nuclear strike. The programs that included vast evacuation schemes, creation of shelters, and stockpiling, scared many American analysts who recommended time and again that the U.S. should pursue similar programs. For many domestic reasons, it was not possible for the U.S. to create a program that required an unprecedented amount of control over the citizens, something that the USSR had in abundance. At any rate, keep in mind that the principal American antagonist during the Cold War professed disbelief in MAD, and his actions do indicate that perhaps the Soviets were not as deterrable as the Americans would have hoped.

So, back to the idea of using nuclear weapons: if it is not possible to rationally employ a nuke, then how, in the world, would one credibly threaten with it? And if one cannot rely on the nukes for anything other than self-defense against an invasion of the homeland, of what possible use are the enormous stockpiles? Why did the U.S. and the USSR, for example, engage in such a costly arms race?

We now study several ideas how one might rationally threaten with something that has incredibly bad consequences for both the threatener and the recipient of the threat. Although I used the nuclear weapons example to motivate the discussion, it will quickly become clear that the logic is widely applicable across a wide variety of situations that involve relying on inherently incredible threats to extract bargaining concessions. So, let's define our problem first in terms that will make it easier to grasp.

1 Crisis Bargaining: The Game of Chicken

When deterrence fails (that is, when a demand by a challenger is made), an international crisis begins. During this brief and intense period, actors maneuver for better bargaining positions, communicate threats and promises, and try to avoid costly fighting. While deterrence can be seen as bargaining in a peaceful situation and compellence as bargaining in a fighting situation, crisis bargaining occurs in an environment that is not quite war but is less than peace as well. A crisis is the last chance to avoid the transition from peace to war, it is the last chance to settle the contested issue by diplomatic means or limited military deployments. If a crisis is resolved, we're back to deterrence. If it is not, we enter the period of compellence.

Crises occur regularly and crisis bargaining is a vast and very important area of research in international relations. Understanding how some crises can be peacefully resolved raises the hope that we might be able to avoid sinking into war as often as we do. Very few wars come as bolts out of the blue, most are preceded by intense crisis periods. Understanding crisis bargaining is therefore

crucial to our understanding of war and peace.

Crises, however, are not limited to military conflicts. Just about any mixed-motive bargaining situation in which the actors work with a sense of urgency (e.g. against a deadline of some sort) would qualify as a crisis. Of course, military crises that involve potentially the deaths of many and the destruction of property are that much more intense and dangerous than ordinary ones.

We begin with a very simple formulation of crisis bargaining, one that has been extensively used to describe the tense dynamics of the situation. This is the so-called **Game of Chicken**. The original game goes something like this. Two guys in souped-up cars race against each other down a narrow road in front of a cheering crowd. Each can choose to keep going or swerve (we assume that whenever they swerve, they swerve to the right). If they both swerve, they avoid collision and neither gains anything. If one swerves but the other keeps going, the first loses face and is declared a wimp, and the other is declared the tough guy, wins in reputation and the admiration of the girls in the crowd. If neither swerves, they collide and die (we do not know whether this results in reputational gain or loss).

What would the actors do? If one of the guys believes that the other will keep going, then the only rational response is to swerve. Conversely, if the other guy knows that his opponent will swerve, to which the rational response is to keep going. The outcome of the confrontation is that no collision occurs: one of the guys swerves and the other wins.

That does not seem to help us a lot though because the real question is: Who is going to be the one to swerve? How does one guy know that the other would swerve, and how does the other know that the first one will keep going? If they both know this, then why does the wimp even bother entering the contest? He might as well concede defeat at the outset and save the gas. Only if the men are somewhat uncertain about each other's rashness do we have a real contest and a real crisis.

Let's think of the situation as a game in which the players are not quite sure about each other's resolve. Suppose, for example, that your opponent can vary in toughness from being quite wimpish (and therefore likely to swerve) to being quite foolhardy (and therefore likely to keep going). He, of course, knows his own "level of wimpishness" but you don't. Similarly, he is not aware just how foolhardy you are. Naturally, boasting about one's toughness is unlikely to convince anyone, so a test is required. We are now in a race that has the potential to end in disaster: Each guy could keep going in the hopes that the other would turn out to be less unstable and swerve first; if they reach a point of no-return, they could easily die.

When actors have asymmetric information, there always exists a real risk of disaster (this is analogous to the explanation for war as a bargaining breakdown due to asymmetric information). Each actor presses his advantage as far as possible without knowing exactly where the opponent's breaking point is. You can see how they can go over the brink while taking an escalating succession of

risks. Without these risks, there is no danger, and without danger, there is no reason to swerve. That is why the race is a test: it should demonstrate who the tough guy really is by subjecting them both to a danger that can be averted, up to a point, by either one, but that escalates as they both keep going. This, of course, is why the situation is called a crisis and not, for example, diplomatic picnic or something.

What would actors do in this game? Well, they could attempt to establish a commitment not to swerve. We have already seen some ways that this can be achieved, so let's try one here. You can commit to not changing your course if you relinquish control and leave the *final clear chance to prevent disaster* to the opponent. In the Game of Chicken you can yank your steering wheel and wave it to the other driver. You have now given up the ability to swerve and so could not do it even if you wanted to. Again, making yourself weak can give you a bargaining advantage.

It is important that the other driver actually sees you waving the wheel otherwise your commitment is useless. In other words, your commitment must be communicated and understood. If the other driver makes himself unavailable for receiving communication, you may not be able to improve your bargaining position by constraining your choice. It does not matter how committed you are, if I do not know about it, it will serve you little. In fact, you may suddenly develop a craving for loopholes.¹

Knowing that your successful communication of your commitment would force him into concessions, your opponent would naturally attempt to make himself unavailable to receive it. He can deliberately **sever communications**. For example, the other driver can purposefully put a blindfold on so he cannot see you should you choose to yank your wheel out. As long as you can see that he cannot see you, he has effectively preempted you by committing credibly to not seeing your commitment, and therefore leaving you with the last clear chance to swerve.

This desire to preempt the other's commitment can be strong, and we have seen that the "preemption syndrome" can make the situation rather tricky. Imagine what would happen if you yank the steering wheel and wave it triumphantly out the window just to see the other driver grinning and waving his to you. Now you have both committed with perfect credibility and, since neither can now swerve, have ensured that the disaster outcome will occur. Again, whenever you commit by constraining your choice, you must make sure that the other actor has an option to exit. That is, you must make sure he has not

¹The humor in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* derives precisely from an ultimate commitment whose author failed to communicate it to the other. The Russians build a Doomsday Device, a machine that automatically blows up the entire world if it ever detects a nuclear explosion on Soviet soil. It is fully automated and cannot be turned off. In other words, the Soviets have the ultimate deterrent: there is no way the U.S. would attack them because the Russians could not avoid global war even if they wanted to. It's perfect, except that for bureaucratic reasons the Soviets neglect to tell the Americans about it, and when a deranged general launches a nuclear strike on the Soviets, well, you get the idea.

committed irrevocably already.

All of these commitment devices are inherently extremely dangerous because if both actors succeed in establishing a credible commitment not to swerve, disaster is certain. Since the outcome is so awful, it is perhaps excusable to disbelieve that actors would seek to commit themselves in such an irrevocable fashion. More likely, they would attempt to leave an escape clause that would help them get out of the situation should it become unbearably “hot”. (And, just as naturally, each actor would expect the other to have left an escape clause for himself, and would confidently press forward until they both collide!)

Sometimes, a threat is simply too big to be credible. We shall discuss three strategies that may help with using threats with disastrous outcomes. First (and quickly) we analyze a strategy of **strategic irrationality**. Next, we look at two strategies share an underlying logic between themselves. One is the **threat that leaves something to chance** and the other is the strategy of **limited retaliation**. These strategies depend on the willingness of the players to run a risk of undesired and unintended consequences.

2 Irrationality to the Rescue?

Let’s begin with one possible “solution” to the credibility problem. If I can convince you that I am irrational or stupid and therefore cannot understand your commitment, I render myself immune to your threats and win because you (being the rational and smart one) would have no choice but back down. Children often understand this much better than adults. A kid pretending to be dumb or not hear is simply implementing a pretty good tactic of making himself unavailable to receive information about your very credible commitment that is not in its interest. A kid knows that if he acknowledges hearing his mom calling him to come home, he has no choice but go home or else. Playing with abandon and ignoring her ever sterner shrieks is a much better strategy, which he only has to defend with the innocently-sounding “I did not hear you!”

This idea of fostering **strategic irrationality** is not limited to children. President Nixon, for example, once remarked to his National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that it would be good for the Russians and the North Vietnamese to think that he was “out of control” and so could use the nukes if an agreement on peace is not achieved soon. This was an attempt to escape the rational logic that precluded the use of nuclears in such a peripheral theater. Don’t believe me? Here’s President Nixon in 1968 on his “Madman Theory”:

I call it the Madman Theory... I want the North Vietnamese to believe I’ve reached the point where 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.

His theory did not work (not that Nixon was entirely sane). People have not given up on the idea. U.S. nuclear command said in 1998 that an “irrational and vindictive” demeanor against adversaries such as Iraq may help deter conflict: ²

Because of the value that comes from the ambiguity of what the U.S. may do to an adversary if the acts we seek to deter are carried out, it hurts to portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed... The fact that some elements [of the U.S. government] may appear to be potentially ‘out of control’ can be beneficial to creating and reinforcing fears and doubts within the minds of an adversary’s decision makers... That the U.S. may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be a part of the national persona we project to all adversaries.

More recently, the U.S. and North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, DPRK) have been branding each other “crazy” one way or the other in a curious reversal of the logic (which maybe makes them truly irrational?). After Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech, the official North Korean news agency reported that “Bush’s remarks at the U.S. Congress clearly proves how crazy he has become in pursuing the hostile policy to stifle the DPRK.”

On the other hand, many believe that DPRK’s leader Kim Jong-il is insane. Here’s former Navy Secretary James Webb arguing that instead of going after Saddam, the U.S. should have dealt with DPRK: “I think North Korea is far more dangerous than Iraq because of several reasons. One is, their leader truly is nuts. Saddam Hussein is shrewd. Kim Jong Il is crazy... he’s totally unpredictable... [and he] has nukes.”

Ironically, it appears that for some reason the U.S. is helping Kim present a strongly deterrent posture by promulgating the belief that he might be unstable (and therefore may overreact to any hint of threats). But then the North Koreans are not doing any better: if Bush is truly crazy, then he just might use force anyway.

In the end, the confusion surrounding these stances makes it clear that perhaps neither side is crazy after all, just jockeying for bargaining advantage. This is the main problem with strategic irrationality: since your opponent knows you may have an advantage to feign it, it will be truly hard to be convincing. On top of that, even in a dictatorship it is hard to imagine a madman at the helm, especially someone like Kim, whose family has managed to run (into the ground) North Korea since 1954. So let’s look at somewhat more plausible strategies for using very large threats.

²Quoted by John Diamon in his “Military Urges U.S. on Nuclear Arms,” Associated Press, 3/2/98. The original quotes come from an internal study called *Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence*.

3 Risk Strategies: Brinkmanship

Brinkmanship means taking an issue to the limit, to the edge of the cliff, hopefully without going over the brink. It does not have to be war, any outcome that is mutually hurtful is “suitable” for brinkmanship. Rocking a boat in the open sea when neither the rocker nor the other person can swim, is brinkmanship. Refusing to agree on a settlement until the 11th hour before a deadline, is brinkmanship.

Note that it’s only brinkmanship is both the actor doing it and his opponent are subjected to grave risks. It does not work if only one of them is. If I rock the boat and cannot swim but you can, then I am not walking on the brink, I am just an idiot. If I refuse to negotiate a contract and upon its expiration I am out of a job and you are free to hire scabs, then I am not engaging in brinkmanship, I am going you a favor by conveniently removing myself from your consideration. Similarly, if I am the only one who can swim, then my action is simple extortion. We generally reserve the term “brinkmanship” for situations where the disaster is painful to everyone involved, and so each actor has incentives to try to avoid it.

Here’s Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, called the “master of brinkmanship and diplomacy,” writing in *Life Magazine* in 1956:

You have to take chances for peace, just as you must take chances in war. Some say that we were brought to the verge of war. Of course we were brought to the verge of war. The ability to get the verge without getting into the war is the necessary art... If you try to run away from it, if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost. We’ve had to look it square in the face... We walked to the brink and we looked it in the face. We took strong action.

Schelling offers the following analogy to help explain the idea of brinkmanship. Imagine a chess game. You are playing the Whites and I am playing the Reds. The game, as usual, can end in win, loss, or a draw. However, we now modify the game by adding a fourth outcome called *disaster*, which is strictly worse *for both players* than simply losing the game. For example, if disaster occurs, we both pay hefty fines to a third party.

The new rules specify very clearly what causes disaster. Specifically, if either player has moved his knight across the middle of the board and the other player moves his queen across the middle, then disaster strikes immediately. It does not matter whether the knight or queen are moved first.

How would two rational actors play this game? One thing we can tell for certain is that it will never end in disaster because this outcome is always under control of the players and they both have incentives to avoid it. The disaster outcome can only occur if some player deliberately makes a move that ends the game according to the new rule. Since disaster is the worst possible outcome, no rational player would ever make this move.

This is not to say that the knights and the queens will stay on their side of the board. Indeed, because of this certainty of disaster on the last move, players can use strategic moves that exploit the situation for its inherent credibility. If I, for example, am the first to move his queen across the board and keep it there, you are effectively deterred from moving your knights across. As long as the queen is on that side, I have credibly committed to threatening you with disaster should you move the knights across.

In fact, I am threatening you with something that you would cause should you take the proscribed move. The consequences follow automatically and I am unable to do anything about that. To wit, I am threatening you with a war that you start! As before, disaster is unpalatable to both, and even if it were more costly to me than to you, the threat would still be effective as long as your costs are sufficiently high compared to the other possible outcomes, and so you would still be deterred. I have successfully relinquished the initiative to you, and it is you who gets to be embarrassed by the multitude of choices at your disposal.

The virtue of this modified game is that the rules are completely clear and it is always known with certainty who has committed and who has the last move that avoids disaster or causes it. In real life, of course, things are not as clear. We don't always know (or can even calculate) who would be the last to move. Certain situations create their own escalatory logic that might blow up in both our faces with neither one of us really intending it.

3.1 The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance

We now modify the modified chess game. We keep disaster outcome and amend the rule to say that should the necessary conditions occur a referee rolls a die and if six comes up disaster occurs. If the die shows any other number, the game continues. If the conditions still exist after a player makes the next move, the die is rolled again, and so on. That is, every time the conditions are met, there is a one-sixth chance of disaster. (In our language, we transform the necessary and sufficient conditions into ones that are only necessary but not sufficient.)

This is now a very different game indeed. In particular we can easily imagine circumstances where knights and queens would move to the "wrong" side of the board, creating a *shared risk of disaster*. If, for example, you move your queen across, I can try to compel you to move it back by deliberately placing both of us in a risky and dangerous situation. I can move my knight across and at every turn while the situation persists we both risk a one-sixth probability that we end up badly. If you lose your nerve before I do, that is, if your willingness to run risks is not as high as mine, I win because you would retreat.

Notice how different this is from before. In the original modification, whoever moved his relevant piece across the board first won. There were no imaginable circumstances where we would both have the queens and the knights on the "wrong" sides of the board. The reason for that, of course, is that the threat is extremely effective: in fact, its fulfilment is completely automated by the rules.

In the modified version of the modified chess game, however, this certainty is gone. What's more interesting, players are able to threaten each other with a disaster that would hurt both. This was not a possibility in the original modification because once someone commits, the other cannot pressure him to retreat by threatening to move his chess piece across too. The certainty of disaster ensures that no such threat can be credible. In this version, on the other hand, such threats can be made and probably will be made.

You can apply the technique of constraining your own choices to this environment as well. For example, suppose you have moved your queen across and I want to compel you to move it back. However, you are much more resolved than I am and we both know it. If I can bring myself to run the risk of disaster at least twice, however, I can win nevertheless: I move my knight across, thereby placing us both in jeopardy. However, since I know that in the war of nerves you will probably win, I then move another piece such that it blocks the knight's way back. Now I cannot retreat even if I wanted to and it is up to you to do something to relieve the risk. If I can commit myself to continue to run the risks and make clear to you that you are the only one who can diffuse the situation, you would have no choice but back down and retreat.

The strategy of taking your opponent to the brink of shared disaster and compelling him to turn back first is brinkmanship. Schelling calls it "manipulating the shared risk of war" and it really involves the deliberate creation of risk that can only be relieved when the opponent takes an action that suits your purposes. Brinkmanship is a war of nerves, it is about risk-acceptance and fear more than it is about cool rational calculations.

Why don't we just threaten with something certain? Why "simply" create a *risk* that something *may* happen? Threatening with too big a stick can be a problem because it may lack credibility. For example, consider the original modification of chess. Suppose you move your queen across and I verbally tell you that unless you retreat I will move my knight and we both end up with the disastrous outcome.

We have already seen that it does not matter whether this outcome hurts you more than it hurts me. As long as it hurts me sufficiently (and it does because according to the rules it is even worse than a loss), my threat will not be credible. You obviously cannot avert the disaster *if* I make the final move. I know it. You know that I know it. And I know that you know that I know it. We also both know that it is up to me to make the fatal last move. You can just sit smugly and smile at me while I rail against the rules being stacked in your favor, the world being cold and heartless, and nobody caring about my predicament. None of that would help, of course. You win and we both know it.

A similar problem occurs with threatening massive retaliation in response to conventional military infractions. The stick is too big and too dangerous to be believable. Even when the United States had first-strike capability many wondered if this nation could use the nukes for a third time with impunity and with total disregard of the extent of the threat they are supposed to diffuse. Say

the Soviets invade some dinky little third world country with a population of 1 million. Can the United States threaten to blow up Moscow (population of 10 million) in retaliation? Probably not and the Russians knew it. The gun is too powerful and so the threat to use it is not credible.

When it is not possible to threaten credibly because the action would hurt you too much, you can threaten with the *risk* or *probability* that the action would be carried out *despite your best intentions to avoid it*. Uncertainty, so the speak, scales down the threat because it renders the outcome a “mere” possibility.

The risk of carrying out the action in spite of your own attempts to prevent is inherent in many complex situations. First, you may simply make an error in assessing your opponent’s freedom of choice and intentions. Maybe the opponent cannot or would not back down. In any case, the risk of misperception is clearly present. Second, and more interestingly, the threat may be carried out even when it should not have been. Maybe your opponent backs down but before you have the chance to stop it, events are set in motion that lead to disaster anyway. Brinkmanship is a slippery slope, maybe at some point it is no longer possible to avert disaster and nobody is quite sure where this point really is. That’s the third possibility: we both may become committed to the escalatory steps without even realizing it and may not be able to escape them even if *we both wanted to*.³

The threat that leaves something to chance (very aptly named) depends on creating this shared risk of disaster. Once created, the players engage in a competition in risk-taking in the sense that the outcome depends on resolve and nerve.

3.2 Limited Retaliation

The other very similar strategy that depends on the generation of risk is the strategy of limited retaliation. Instead of creating a situation where ultimate disaster may strike, one takes a series of small steps (hence the word “limited” in the name of the strategy) that do two things. First, they increase the probability that the ultimate disastrous event may occur because they generate an additional risk of that happening and further steps presumably escalate that risk. Second, they involve giving the opponent explicit incentives to back down that are unrelated to the risk of disaster.

By destroying methodically but in limited quantities things of value to the opponent, you give him the chance to stop the destruction while he still has something of value left. The problem with the big stick (again) is that if the threat is carried out, the opponent has nothing left to care for. In the strategy of massive retaliation, we destroy the Soviet cities, for example. But if the op-

³If you have not seen the film *Fail-Safe*, I absolutely recommend it. In it, the Americans and the Soviets become committed to escalatory actions that result in disaster with neither side wanting it and both trying to help each other avoid it. What begins as a routine day and a small technical mishap turns into a global disaster. See the original film with Henry Fonda and Walter Mathau, not the recent George Clooney remake.

ponent stands to lose everything, he will fight back as hard as he can, which is not what we want. We only want them to back down.

Suppose that instead of initiating a nuclear war, whether deliberately or by accident, we target Soviet cities but only destroy one. We then tell them that unless they retreat we will destroy another. If they don't retreat, we destroy a second city. And so on and so forth, gradually turning the pressure up, but always letting them back down. The reason such a strategy might work is because despite of the pain, the Soviets are left something they care for: their other cities. It is the threat to destroy these cities, not the pain of having already lost some, that might compel them to back down.

This strategy gradually imposes costs on the opponent but, more importantly, it threatens to impose more costs in the future. A player would be unable to threaten with more costs if it destroys everything his opponent values in one fell swoop. A threat that leaves quite a bit to the adversary is a lot more credible than a massive murderous one. In fact, part of the credibility problem with the massive threat is generated by the consequences of nuclear war. If we threaten with a massive nuclear strike, then the Soviets, with nothing to lose, have incentives to strike back and impose as great costs on us as possible. With a limited strategy, on the other hand, they may be induced not even to retaliate because they are afraid that if they do, they would lose even more.

If you think that this is cold and heartless, you are right. However, Robert McNamara, the U.S. Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations made a speech in 1962 in which he proposed this very strategy, the so-called "No-Cities Doctrine". The Russians were very quick to denounce it by claiming that no limited option existed in a nuclear war. Once the missiles start flying all bets are off. The Soviets quite correctly perceived how such a strategy would deny them bargaining power. They had a lot of imprecise missiles with which they can threaten massive strikes but not careful limited retaliation in return. So they did not like it.

The essence of this approach is very similar to the one used by the threat that leaves something to chance in that it breaks the large inherently incredible threat into a series of smaller, credible ones. The strategy of limited retaliation also increases the credibility of the threat of future destruction. By exercising the limited option, a player can demonstrate that its resolve is greater than that of its adversary, just like with the threat that leaves something to chance, where it did so by revealing its willingness to run risks of disaster.

3.3 The Generation of Risk

Obviously, these are very dangerous tactics; *they would not work unless they were dangerous because it is the generation of risk that makes them potentially worthwhile.* How is that risk generated?

Rational opponents would never cross the brink of disaster willingly. However, even rational opponents may do so unwittingly, unintentionally, and by accident or sheer bad luck. The essential idea here is to blur the brink. If you

cannot clearly see where it is, you can walk perilously close to it. If you could see it, then you might be tempted to stay away, just to make sure nothing actually tips you over.

So how do we blur the brink? By generating the fear that things may get out of hand. Many have heard of the “fog of war” a situation during tense moments of conflict where communication is uncertain, decision makers are not fully in control of events, accidents happen, and everyone’s nerves are so tight that they might snap. Many of the mechanisms that generate risk actually preclude firm control of its escalation or its degree, thereby further enhancing the fear factor. This is sometimes called an **autonomous risk** because it is generated by events beyond one’s control.

The crucial point is that you have to arrange things in such a way that neither you nor your opponent knows precisely just where the brink is. If you know, you would definitely never escalate beyond it. If he knows, he can push up to it and you run the risk of giving up because you think it is dangerous while he knows that it is safe. The threat is therefore one of unintended consequences, an inadvertent escalation, not a cool rational one.

4 Do Statesmen Dance on the Brink?

They do, and they often go over it. The Cuban Missile Crisis is the archetypal case of brinkmanship that everyone uses to illustrate the concept. However, this crisis is very untypical, it was unique in intensity even for the Cold War. It involved extraordinarily high stakes, and the two leaders managed to pull away from the brink, with one of them (Kennedy) not even realizing how close they had truly come. The Russian leader (Nikita Khrushchev, who was said to have loved nuclear blackmail) never again rattled his rockets. It was not only because the Soviets lost in the crisis, but because both sides were duly sobered by the experience. Crudely put, the potential gains were not worth the risks.

Many crises are not peacefully resolved. Consider the Six Day War of 1967 in which Israel initiated a *blitzkrieg* against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, and managed to capture territories that tripled its size. This war was a case of Egyptian president Nasser’s brinkmanship that went over the brink.

After the Suez/Sinai War of 1956, the United Nations maintained a force, UNEF, in the Sinai peninsula (Egyptian territory) whose purpose was to separate Israel and the Egyptian army, and prevent any possible provocations that might cause a larger conflict. The UNEF was there at Egypt’s “invitation” and was bound to leave should the Egyptians asked it to. Israel had repeatedly warned that it would regard re-militarization of Sinai as a threat, and the closure of the Straits of Tiran (a crucial commercial link through which Israel had secretly been importing Iranian oil among other things) as a *casus belli*.

After many skirmishes in the early 1960s and several larger-scale attacks and reprisals by both sides, Nasser embarked on a policy of brinkmanship. Goaded by the Syrian and Jordanian leaders, he took the initiative to demonstrate Arab

resolve by sending Egyptian troops into the Sinai (after the Soviets lied to him that Israel was massing troops on the Syrian border). He was in no position to attack Israel while fighting in Yemen (where Egypt was backing rebels against royalists supported by Saudi Arabia), and consequently he tried to ensure that Israel would not take his action as a preparation for war. To this end, he sent the troops openly hoping that this would serve the dual purpose of deterring aggression against Syria without provoking a preemptive strike against Egypt. However, events took a life of their own as the countries began sliding down the precipice to disaster.

Emboldened by the outpour of public support for his move into the Sinai, Nasser decided to up the stakes and demanded the withdrawal of UNEF forces. The U.N. Secretary General U Thant capitulated without so much as asking the General Assembly to consider the matter as per the original agreement. The U.N. force was withdrawn eliminating the last shield Israel had against Egypt. Predictably, the anti-Israeli voices escalated their rhetoric: now that the U.N. was not protecting the “Zionist entity,” the time had come to wipe it out in war. Caught in the momentum of his success, Nasser blockaded the Straits of Tiran again on May 22, cutting off all Israeli shipping and stopping the covert supply of Iranian oil.

This marked a point of no return in the crisis. Israel had always maintained that closure of the straits was a *casus belli* against which Israel was free to respond with force in self-defense. Nasser was unprepared for war, and hence one is drawn to the conclusion that he must have hoped for some sort of diplomatic resolution of the crisis, perhaps an intervention by the superpowers that would allow him to escape with his reputation intact. The closure of the straits was not designed to provoke war, but was an act of risk-taking, in which Nasser may have underestimated the nervousness of the Israelis.

As soon as Nasser gave the appearance for preparing for a military solution of the Zionist problem, the Arab leaders rallied around Egypt. The Arab forces began mobilizing, reaching over a quarter of a million troops with 2,000 tanks and 700 aircraft. Israel had gone on alert three weeks previously and was reeling under the intense pressure. Yitzhak Rabin (Chief of Staff, Commander of the Israeli Defense Forces [IDF]) suffered a nervous breakdown that put him out of commission for a while. Desperately, the Israelis tried to get President Johnson to intervene somehow and compel Nasser to open the straits. The Americans preferred negotiations and warned Israel that if it decided to preempt it would be alone.

Negotiations went nowhere and there was no time for patience. The Soviets were supplying the Arabs with massive amounts of arms. On the 30th King Hussein suddenly flew to Cairo and Jordan signed a defense pact with Egypt. The choir clamoring for Israel’s destruction reached a crescendo with Iraq joining it. The Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies swelled with contributions from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and even distant Algeria. The Israelis panicked and pressed America once more to step in and diffuse the crisis or, failing that, let

Israel preempt. In response, the U.S. imposed an arms embargo on the region, further worsening Israel's ability to withstand a military attack.

Israel's situation became untenable. The country was being asked to stay put and allow itself to be attacked as a condition of international support. The U.S. estimated blithely that Israel would be able to absorb an initial strike and then defeat the Arabs anyway within days. The massive civilian casualties that such an attack would inflict did not figure in these calculations. Neither did Israel's concern with the safety of the nuclear reactor at Dimona which had been overflowed by Egyptian fighters on several occasions.⁴ Israel's decision to preempt had both military and political reasons. Militarily it made sense to take the initiative if war would come anyway and spare the civilians needless suffering. Politically, it would enhance its deterrent threat by demonstrating the might of the IDF and the readiness to use force to defend the country's interests.

On the other hand, Washington's pressure seemed to bear fruit when Nasser agreed to send his vice-president to discuss a diplomatic resolution. It may have been possible to avert war but Israel's preemptive strike came two days before his scheduled arrival. Having sowed the seeds of war, having placed Israel into an impossible quandary, and having incited Arab public opinion for blood and destruction of Israel, Nasser reaped the fruits of his dangerous policies.

On June 5, 1967 the Israeli Air Force attacked air bases throughout Egypt and destroyed almost the entire Egyptian air force on the ground. The mastery of the skies opened the way for the ground invasion. Israeli tanks rolled into the Sinai and captured the entire peninsula stopping at the eastern bank of the Suez canal. The IDF drove out the Jordanian forces from Jerusalem and expelled them from the West Bank completely. The cease-fire stopped the fighting with the Egyptians on the 9th, allowing the IDF to turn its attention to the Syrians. By the 11th, the Israelis had conquered the Golan Heights as well.

In a mere six days, Israel had dealt a shattering blow to her enemies. The stunning defeat was costly to the Arabs, who had suffered a combined total of 20,000 casualties, with Egypt losing about 80% of its air force and armor (against 3,000 Israelis of whom about 780 were killed). All three Arab belligerents lost territories in this war: Egypt lost the Sinai, including the Gaza Strip, Jordan lost the West Bank including Jerusalem, and Syria lost the Golan Heights. The Egyptians also lost revenues from the oil field in the Sinai and shipping through the canal which was closed until 1975. An additional 300,000 Palestinians became refugees as they fled the war zones in the West Bank and Gaza. The consequences of this failed brinkmanship are still with us today because this was the war in which Israel tripled in size and, most importantly, found itself ruling over millions of Palestinians.

⁴The Yom Kippur War of 1973 is a good example that while Israel could defeat the Arabs even after allowing itself to be attacked, such victory would be costly and cause deep and lasting societal anxiety. No leader could ever be excused for exposing his citizens to a deliberate attack by an enemy. This war also demonstrates vividly the consequences of losing the credibility of the deterrent posture.