

Jeremi Suri

Nuclear weapons and the escalation of global conflict since 1945

“Atomic war means national suicide. The ultimate delusion of the atomic era is the notion that national suicide is a feasible means of defense.” “How apparently sensible and sane men could drift into such beliefs,” journalist I.F. Stone commented, “will astound future historians, if there are any.” As the race to develop more destructive nuclear weapons with farther range escalated during the 1950s, Stone warned: “war clouds are gathering which could mean the end of our species. The Russians and the Americans resemble two huge herds moving toward possible conflict, too closely packed to struggle successfully against their fate. The helplessness of human kind is the dominant feature of the planetary landscape as the crisis approaches.”¹

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¹ I.F. Stone, “National suicide as a form of defense,” *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, 28 November 1955; I.F. Stone, “Words to be engraved on a new Rosetta stone,” *I.F. Stone's Weekly* 21 June 1961, both reprinted in I.F. Stone, *The Haunted Fifties* (New York: Merlin Press, 1963), 119-23, 378-80.

Stone's comments effectively capture the twisted logic of nuclear deterrence and crisis management during the Cold War. The leaders of the largest states consistently sought to avoid nuclear Armageddon by making the prospect of a new world war more horrific. By holding all of humankind hostage to the possibility that full-scale conflict between the strongest states would annihilate civilization, they hoped to insure restraint and compromise around the sites of greatest danger—particularly Berlin, the Taiwan Strait, Cuba, and the Middle East. This was a strategic logic that encouraged all-or-nothing thinking—stable preservation of the geopolitical status quo or complete destruction in a fire of biblical proportions; an imperfect “long peace” or a radiated landscape where the “living envy the dead.”²

Despite its perversity, nuclear deterrence and crisis management worked during the Cold War. On numerous occasions, American, Soviet, and later Chinese leaders stepped back from the brink of conflict and sought compromise. They recognized that continued aggression against strong enemy interests would produce irreversible consequences. They recognized that “victory” in the areas of most central Cold War disputes was not possible. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev captured the chastening influence of nuclear threats most clearly when he appealed to President John F. Kennedy to help untie the “knot” of war in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis.³ “[W]e are living at a time,” Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy, “when it is important to achieve progress together in international affairs. It is particularly important, I would say, that this be really tangible and actual progress creating a new situation—a situation of relaxation of tension, thus opening to us the prospect of solution to other pressing problems and questions.”⁴ The moment of greatest nuclear danger in the Cold War inspired the strongest push for settlement among the leaders who controlled the “absolute weapon.”⁵

2 See John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 215-45; Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 40-116.

3 Nikita Khrushchev to John F. Kennedy, undated (November 1962); Khrushchev to Kennedy, 14 November 1962; Khrushchev to Kennedy, 11 December 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, volume 6 (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1996), 208, 212, 230, www.state.gov.

4 *Ibid.*, Khrushchev to Kennedy, 27 July 1963, 301-02.

5 The phrase “absolute weapon” comes from Bernard Brodie, “War in the atomic age,” in Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), 21-69.

A Cold War settlement, however, never came to fruition. This was at least in part because of nuclear weapons. They encouraged the avoidance of war, but they also encouraged the continuation of conflict. McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's special assistant for national security affairs, captured this paradox when he explained that nuclear capabilities were "the most potent status symbol since African colonies went out of fashion."⁶ Powerful states with global ambitions—particularly the United States and the Soviet Union—did not wish to use these weapons, but they manipulated their placement and posturing for the purpose of displaying power. Nuclear warheads, missiles, and other delivery vehicles became the currency for calculating strength, the measure of a regime's ability to assure its own security, and the security of its allies. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact, the two dominant post-1945 alliances, centred their activities on the deployment of nuclear forces. The use of these weapons for threats and signals of resolve, not actual war, was fundamental to Cold War diplomacy.

A new international body of "expert" opinion coalesced around attempts to find the most effective nuclear postures for national gain, without crossing the threshold to Armageddon. This was the impetus behind the work of individuals like Bernard Brodie, Albert Wohlstetter, Thomas Schelling, Henry Kissinger, and others employed by the RAND Corporation, various American universities, and numerous government-sponsored bodies. Schelling, a future Noble prize-winner, summed up the conventional wisdom of the emerging strategic theorists when he explained that international conflict was, in fact, a matter of bargaining:

The power to hurt is nothing new in warfare, but for the United States modern technology has drastically enhanced the strategic importance of pure, unconstructive, unacquisitive pain and damage, whether used against us or in our own defense. This in turn enhances the importance of war and threats of war as techniques of influence, not of destruction; of coercion and deterrence, not of conquest and defense; of bargaining and intimidation.⁷

6 McGeorge Bundy to John F. Kennedy, 7 May 1962, folder: France, security 1962, box 116a, president's office file, John F. Kennedy presidential library, Boston, MA.

7 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 33-34.

The posturing of nuclear weapons was a mechanism for signalling commitment, resolve, and capability. The deployment (or nondeployment) of these weapons allowed for a manipulation of risk, and a manipulation of the enemy as a consequence. Nuclear weapons were trump cards to display, at the appropriate time, for boosting the confidence of allies and covering adversaries. In his 1957 bestseller, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, Kissinger echoed Schelling and other strategic experts when he called for manipulation of nuclear forces—perhaps even small warheads in a limited war—“to *affect* the opponent’s will, not to *crush* it, to make the conditions to be imposed seem more attractive than continued resistance, to strive for specific goals and not for complete annihilation.” Nuclear weapons made full-scale war unthinkable, but they also made the exploitation of threats unavoidable in preserving “fluidity” for American, Soviet, and other national aims in the Cold War. To forsake all nuclear threats short of war would, Kissinger and others argued, leave states without workable programs for effecting geopolitical change. As the most powerful military capabilities available to states, nuclear weapons were necessary tools of diplomacy in the Cold War.⁸

This observation about the utility of nuclear posturing explains the co-existence of war-avoidance and crisis instigation, caution and recklessness, during the post-1945 years. Nuclear weapons deterred World War III, but they encouraged more limited conflict in the pursuit of Cold War aims. Limited conflict, however, frequently risked unintended escalation into full-scale war as one country reacted with force to the moves of another. In this sense, the boundaries between “safe” nuclear posturing and more dangerous moves toward full-scale war were often less clear, less firm, and less secure than advocates of nuclear deterrence would have one believe. Nuclear escalation was an ever-present threat, despite the strong inhibitions against unleashing Armageddon. Jockeying for advantage in this context, the most powerful Cold War states were, as I.F. Stone explained, continually “moving toward possible conflict.”

8 Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 136, 140, emphasis in original; Henry A. Kissinger, “Military policy and defense of the ‘grey areas’,” *Foreign Affairs* 33 (April 1955): 416-28; Henry A. Kissinger, memorandum to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., 8 December 1954, folder: Kissinger, Henry A., 1954-57, box 39, Hamilton Fish Armstrong papers, Seeley Mudd manuscript library, Princeton, New Jersey [hereafter Armstrong papers]. See also Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), chapter 4.

This article will explore the dynamics of nuclear escalation and risk-taking, how war dangers grew, but also how the most powerful states avoided Armageddon. Nuclear deterrence did not make survival and the end of the Cold War inevitable. Nor did inherited political institutions and ideologies assure this outcome. Human beings managed “to struggle successfully against their fate,” despite Stone’s pessimism, because of restrained and sensible leadership at key moments. We were fortunate during the Cold War. We cannot count on the same good fortune in the future if nuclear weapons continue to remain prominent as tools of diplomacy.

The dangerous history of nuclear weapons since 1945 should counter any complacency about the continued presence and spread of nuclear arsenals in the 21st century. The overriding lesson of the Cold War is that nuclear deterrence is not stable. Nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament are necessary priorities for the long-term security of the United States and the global community as a whole.

DRAWING LINES

Nuclear weapons helped draw the main lines of conflict and stability in the Cold War. These lines were often one and the same. Within a decade of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States and the Soviet Union threatened to use their growing nuclear arsenals in response to enemy aggression in the most closely contested geopolitical zones. Policymakers in Washington, DC dubbed this doctrine “massive retaliation.” Leaders in Moscow did not use the same language, but they also made it clear that they would launch their warheads if they found their security jeopardized in areas of core interest. Nuclear balance, in this sense, was about mutual containment and also mutual assured destruction. The superpowers established clear demarcations of authority based on promises of annihilation for any acts of direct transgression.

Berlin was, of course, the most obvious example of this phenomenon. None of the four postwar occupying powers in Germany intended to divide the former national capital permanently. The location of the city deep within the Soviet-controlled zone of the country made the continued supply and protection of the western sectors in Berlin difficult to imagine in the context of Cold War hostilities. West Berlin was, as Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev later remarked, the “testicles” of the west, incredibly vulnerable to Moscow’s reach.⁹

⁹ Khrushchev quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 140.

When the Soviet Union repeatedly sought to take control of West Berlin and close off this island of American influence in the East bloc, the United States relied on nuclear threats to force Moscow's retreat. During Josef Stalin's attempted blockade of the western half of the city in 1948-49, Washington moved nuclear-capable aircraft to Great Britain and made it clear that any Soviet military incursion would open the door to American nuclear retaliation. The pattern was repeated between 1958 and 1962, when Khrushchev's promises to turn over authority in the city to an East German government that would not recognize American claims drew explicit threats of nuclear retaliation from presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Kennedy. By August 1961 the Kremlin accepted that asserting its authority over West Berlin was too dangerous. It opted to build a wall that symbolized the permanence of the status quo, rather than risk nuclear war through continued pressure on the west. With massive nuclear arsenals on alert for an initiation of direct hostilities in Central Europe, both Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed that "a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."¹⁰

The presence of the American nuclear arsenal allowed Washington, despite its inferior conventional armed forces in Europe, to draw a firm line of authority in West Berlin. Any Soviet-sponsored moves on this exposed US position would unleash a nuclear conflict that Moscow did not want to fight. American leaders could therefore show resolve in this city, build a magnet for disaffected citizens of the communist bloc, and assert, as Kennedy did, that it was a protected outpost of western freedom. It also became a part of the larger containment strategy in Europe pursued by the United States and its allies. Through the formation of NATO in 1949 they institutionalized an American commitment to use nuclear weapons against any direct Soviet military incursions into non-communist European territory. NATO relied upon nuclear threats to assure that the enemy remained east of the Iron Curtain. Leaders in Moscow knew that any move against a vulnerable area in western Europe would set off a "tripwire" that included American nuclear-armed aircraft, and by the late 1950s, nuclear armed missiles as well.

Of course the tripwire also worked in reverse. American leaders knew that if they supported direct military incursions into Soviet-held territory they would risk a massive, perhaps nuclear, response. When Kennedy accepted the construction of the Berlin Wall with evident relief in August 1961,

¹⁰ John F. Kennedy quoted in Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 278.

he was acknowledging this fact. A clear and permanent demarcation of the east-west territorial division made it less likely that either side would initiate local hostilities capable of generating a more dangerous confrontation.

The same sentiment pervaded the Kennedy White House after the end of the Cuban missile crisis in late October 1962. Khrushchev had agreed to withdraw Soviet missiles from the Caribbean island, fearful of sparking a nuclear war with the United States. At the same time, Kennedy had rejected calls for a military attack on Cuba during the crisis, fearful of possible Soviet responses. Kennedy went so far as to make a non-invasion pledge for the purpose of assuring Moscow's continued restraint. Nuclear threats forced leaders in both the United States and the Soviet Union to back down from public agendas to redraw the geopolitical map. Nuclear weapons enforced an unsatisfactory, but stable status quo, with clear lines of superpower authority.

To some, this nuclear-enforced stability protected peace. On closer inspection, however, this peace was illusory. Due to their nuclear capabilities, the United States, the Soviet Union, and their closest allies had taken on geopolitical commitments that extended far beyond their conventional military capabilities. Washington lacked the nonnuclear force to hold West Berlin, and Moscow similarly lacked the nonnuclear force to protect Cuba. Both superpowers used nuclear threats to punch above their weight—to make strategic claims that stretched their resources and prestige beyond more defensible positions.

Why did the United States risk nuclear war to protect half of a city deep within Soviet-held territory? Why did the Soviet Union initiate the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War to defend a tiny communist regime in the Caribbean? Washington and Moscow pursued these unprecedented policies because nuclear weapons made such dangerous extensions of national power possible. In so doing, nuclear weapons hardened Cold War positions, increased the points of conflict, and raised the overall risk of Armageddon. There would never have been a Berlin crisis or a Cuban missile crisis if it not for the American and Soviet expansion that came with nuclear arsenals. The peaceful resolution of these crises does not negate the fact that they were consequences, at least in part, of nuclear posturing. Nuclear balance escalated the risks of war in each case, but then encouraged men like Kennedy and Khrushchev to pursue moderation as they stared into the abyss of full-scale war.

Observers should be cautious about assuming that events had to turn out this way. They did not. During the Berlin and Cuban missile crises neither superpower seriously considered initiating nuclear war, but neither ruled it out either. Washington and Moscow had made firm public commitments in Berlin and Cuba that they resisted altering for fear of losing face. Their image of strength and resolve was at stake. To back down in one case risked encouraging more challenges in the future. In a nuclear world, where authority came from the ability to make credible threats about using horrific weapons, this was a very serious consideration. During moments of crisis, nuclear considerations encouraged escalation as much as moderation. The geopolitical lines that emerged in the 1960s were built on an expansion of risks, an escalation of tensions, and a recurring crisis atmosphere. Leaders had to assure stability in spite of these pressures.

SIGNALLING RESOLVE

In the years before the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, leaders in both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized that constructing ever larger nuclear arsenals would not increase their freedom of action and maneuver. Quite the contrary, nuclear “overkill”—the ability to devastate potential targets beyond military necessity—locked the two superpowers into cumbersome and complicated war plans with little flexibility. Robert McNamara, Kissinger, and others worried that these circumstances would produce a replay of what A.J.P. Taylor described as the conditions for “war by timetable” that had set in motion the tragedy of the First World War. Of course this time the destruction would be many magnitudes greater, and perhaps irreparable.¹¹

For asserting power and influence in areas far from Europe—what Kissinger called the “grey areas”—thermonuclear weapons were, in fact, unusable.¹² A nuclear strike on the Korean peninsula, in Indochina, or in the Middle East would not help to bolster superpower allies in any of these contested regions. If anything, reliance on nuclear strategy diverted attention and resources from the local conventional measures that were necessary for

11 David Alan Rosenberg, “The origins of overkill: Nuclear weapons and American strategy,” in Norman A. Graebner, ed., *The National Security: Its Theory and Practice, 1945-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 141-78; A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963).

12 Kissinger, “Military policy,” 416-28.

effective policy on the Cold War periphery. Nuclear weapons contributed to the perception, propagated by Mao Zedong and others, that the superpowers were really “paper tigers.” For all of their apparent muscle, they were actually quite weak when challenged by local revolutionary forces.

Why, then, did the United States and the Soviet Union continue to invest in larger, more destructive nuclear arsenals after the early 1960s? Why didn't they decide that their capability for rapid worldwide destruction was sufficient? Why did they continue to escalate the size and scope of their nuclear threats until the end of the Cold War, three decades later?

The answers to these questions do not revolve around concerns for basic territorial security. In neither superpower did leaders believe that they needed more nuclear weapons, and escalating nuclear threats, for national survival. Instead, they pursued ever larger arsenals to signal strength, resolve, and the will to fight in areas far from their core territory. By the mid-1960s, nuclear weapons were unusable in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, but their conspicuous maneuver around these areas was a form of muscle-flexing. They reminded adversaries of Moscow and Washington's capability for destruction. They also warned onlookers not to push the superpowers too far.

The Soviet Union and the United States needed to continue building nuclear weapons, despite their practical uselessness, because they were the currency for measuring strength across the globe. The more warheads and delivery vehicles one could count, the stronger one appeared. The superpowers possessed these weapons and “third world” countries did not. Middle-sized powers—especially China, Great Britain, and France—acquired these weapons in small numbers to show that they too were strong states, but non-competitors with Moscow and Washington. Displays of nuclear power were designed for status much more than battlefield advantage.

Nuclear maneuvers were signalling exercises that substituted for direct superpower warfare, but often at great cost, especially for citizens of other societies. By designing a new weapons system, deploying it in a new “forward” territory, and building it in large quantity, each of the superpowers asserted that it was “winning” the Cold War, that it was exceeding its adversary. Similarly, when one of the superpowers appeared to fall temporarily behind in this race to develop and deploy new nuclear weapons, experts claimed it had reached a point of “vulnerability,” despite its plentiful supply of warheads and delivery vehicles. Neither side could ever rest comfortably, assured that it “had enough” unusable nuclear weapons to maintain its image of invincibility.

The debates about strategy and power in the aftermath of the Vietnam War captured this precise dynamic. Despite strong Soviet and American efforts to restrain the arms race through the negotiation of the first strategic arms limitation treaties, as well as restrictions on anti-ballistic missile systems, major figures in both societies perceived these agreements as sources of vulnerability, especially for the United States. By the mid-1970s, both superpowers possessed more than 20,000 nuclear warheads—easily enough to destroy each other, and the rest of the world, many times over. Nonetheless, observers perceived American “weakness” and Soviet “strength” as Moscow’s arsenal exceeded Washington’s for the first time.

A group of influential American politicians and intellectuals revived the “committee on the present danger” in 1976 to lobby for stronger US shows of international strength through a nuclear arms buildup, among other measures. They argued that the Soviet numerical advantage in warheads and many delivery systems put the United States on the defensive, especially in the “third world.” Combined with the apparent advantage the Soviets maintained in conventional forces, Moscow’s gigantic nuclear arsenal opened what critics called a “window of vulnerability” in the global standing and security of the American nation. Advocates of a more threatening US nuclear posture espoused “peace through strength,” and they criticized advocates of arms control and détente—including Henry Kissinger—for sacrificing American interests in the name of crisis avoidance.

These questionable claims gained credence from Soviet behaviour in the late 1970s. A number of military and political figures in Moscow began to assert that they now held the upper hand in the Cold War, due in large part to their growing numerical nuclear superiority. The Soviet Union accordingly took on a more aggressive role in encouraging the expansion of friendly communist regimes in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and Central America. Nuclear strength encouraged leaders in Moscow and other countries, including the United States, to overrate Soviet capabilities. It signalled a geopolitical advantage, even when deeper economic and social trends pointed in the opposite direction.

This is the context for the Cold War crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s. From the emergence of an Islamist government in Iran in early 1979 through the Soviet destruction of a civilian Korean Airlines jet and NATO war games in the fall of 1983, the two superpowers remained in a perpetual crisis mode. Tensions had never been as high since the Cuban missile crisis. Nuclear rivalries escalated the dangers of the period as each side made ex-

PLICIT threats, committed to new weapons development, and sought to maneuver its capabilities for maximum effect. Newly-elected President Ronald Reagan showed American toughness by rhetorically attacking the Soviet Union and promising a US nuclear arms buildup to reestablish predominance in the Cold War. Soviet leaders—Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Constantine Chernenko, all in ill health—sought to maintain what they perceived as Soviet military advantages by pursuing additional overseas allies and increasing their own rate of weapons deployment. Nuclear rivalries did not restrain the superpowers; they contributed to rising hostilities as each side sought to signal resolve amidst uncertainty.

The crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s only came to a close when leaders in both superpowers—Ronald Reagan and the newly emergent Mikhail Gorbachev—found alternative mechanisms for signalling that they wanted to escape the spiral of arms races and escalating threats. One must emphasize that this occurred *despite* the pressures that nuclear rivalries created for continued conflict. Reagan and Gorbachev shared a strong—perhaps naïve—belief that their societies would be better off in a world without nuclear weapons. The evident war dangers, and the ways in which nuclear threats contributed to these dangers, reinforced this sensibility in Reagan. He commented in his memoirs:

During my first years in Washington, I think many of us in the administration took it for granted that the Russians, like ourselves, considered it unthinkable that the United States would launch a first strike against them. But the more experience I had with Soviet leaders and other heads of state who knew them, the more I began to realize that many Soviet officials feared us not only as adversaries but as potential aggressors who might hurl nuclear weapons at them in a first strike.... Well, if that was the case, I was even more anxious to get a top Soviet leader in a room alone and try to convince him we had no designs on the Soviet Union and the Russians had nothing to fear from us.¹³

Gorbachev famously confirmed that he also sought to eliminate nuclear tensions, and build a “common European home” in place of the Cold War,

¹³ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 588-89.

when he met with Reagan in Reykjavik, Iceland in October 1986. The two rivals sat without their aides beside a warm fireplace, and they negotiated for the possible elimination of their nuclear arsenals. To the horror of the nuclear experts in their societies, these men were serious about changing the basic structure of international relations and ending the arms race that they both identified as a source of conflict and potential Armageddon. They were revolutionaries, operating outside the framework of nuclear crisis assumptions in the Cold War.

These two leaders revised the role of nuclear weapons in international affairs. After 1986 these weapons changed from signals of conflict and resolve to signals of cooperation and peace. Just as their rapid construction and deployment defined the Cold War, their demobilization and partial dismantlement defined the end of the Cold War. Friendly relations replaced crisis attitudes as major arms control agreements and unilateral force reductions dominated Soviet-American relations from 1987 to 1991. Pointing to these military signals in a speech to the United Nations general assembly on 7 December 1988, Gorbachev exclaimed, “[l]ook at how our relations have changed.”¹⁴ Mutual trust among leaders transformed the signalling effects of nuclear weapons. Nuclear demobilization became a new hinge for peace.

COERCING ADVERSARIES

The Reagan-Gorbachev story offers a happy ending for nuclear crises in the Cold War. It is, however, somewhat misleading. It presumes cautious leadership determined to control tensions and even eliminate the sources of those tensions when they prove most dangerous. It also assumes that nuclear weapons were deployed for defensive purposes in an insecure world. Increased security—reached through mutual trust between Reagan and Gorbachev—reduced the need for these weapons, according to this reasoning.

A close examination of crisis behaviour—particularly during moments of forgotten or hidden crisis—reveals a much more dangerous phenomenon. Despite their avowed defensive purposes, and their role in signalling resolve, leaders also used nuclear threats in efforts to coerce adversaries. That is, they manufactured war dangers to blackmail other states. The very exist-

¹⁴ Gorbachev’s speech quoted in Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, revised edition (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1994), 365-66.

tence of large nuclear arsenals encouraged aggressive and threatening manipulations of these weapons. Leaders could not detonate their warheads for effective purpose on the battlefield, but they were determined to find other uses for them in procuring desired political ends. A young Kissinger anticipated this logic as early as 1954: “the U.S. nuclear arsenal is no better than the willingness to use it...if we do not wish to doom ourselves to impotence in the atomic stalemate or near-stalemate just around the corner, it may be well to develop alternative programs.”¹⁵

Kissinger, in particular, had an alternative program with President Richard Nixon. Nixon somewhat facetiously dubbed it the “madman” strategy. Kissinger described it as an effort to escape the geopolitical straightjacket of nuclear stalemate. The strategy recognized that in a world of roughly balanced nuclear forces, threats proved most effective if adversaries were not entirely certain about the rationality and reasonableness of American policymakers. If everyone knew that the president would never initiate a nuclear war, then there was no need to take his nuclear posturing seriously. He was a paper tiger. If, however, it appeared that he might do something rash and impulsive—or if he could not control those around him from taking actions of that kind—then one had to worry much more about American nuclear threats. Irrational and unpredictable leadership could frighten enemies in a way that careful leadership could not.

Kissinger had thought long and hard about this issue, and his early writings on limited nuclear war were an effort to make threats more credible and effective. He argued for flexible and diverse deployments of force that would “enable us to escape the vicious circle in which we find ourselves paralyzed by the implications of our own weapons technology.”¹⁶ “Given the power of modern weapons,” Kissinger wrote, “it should be the task of our strategic doctrine to create alternatives less cataclysmic than a thermonuclear holocaust.” He called for US policymakers to take the military initiative, short of Armageddon.¹⁷ Kissinger later expanded on this point with Israeli ambassador to the United States, Yitzhak Rabin: “I have learned that when you use force it is better to use 30 percent more than is

15 Kissinger, memorandum to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

16 Henry Kissinger, “Force and diplomacy in the nuclear age,” *Foreign Affairs* 34 (April 1956): 360.

17 Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, 18-19.

necessary than five percent less than necessary...whenever we use force we have to do it slightly hysterically.”¹⁸

Despite later denials, this was serious stuff. It contributed to calculated risk manipulation and escalation during nuclear crises. Every American president from Eisenhower through Reagan saw a value, at certain moments, in nurturing some uncertainty in the Soviet Union and China about US intentions. With regard to Berlin and the Taiwan Strait, American strategic commitments were formal and clear. But what about Korea? What about the Caribbean? What about the Middle East? In all of these areas, the White House refused to articulate exactly when it would and when it would not consider nuclear retaliation against enemy incursions. Intermittently, presidents made public threats in each of these regions. This was more than simple deterrence. It was an express policy of pressuring adversaries, as well as allies, to change policy.

The clearest example of intentional American nuclear risk-taking for coercive purposes centres on a largely unknown incident in October 1969. Scholars have only recently begun to uncover the details of US decision-making and analyze its implications during this period. American actions, orchestrated by Nixon and Kissinger, display an aggressive use of threats that contradicts assumptions about the purely deterrent purposes of nuclear weapons in the Cold War.

Despite the absence of any particularly threatening Soviet behaviour against the United States, on the morning of 6 October 1969 Kissinger asked Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to increase the nation's preparations for war so that “the other side” will “pick this up.” Nixon and Kissinger hoped to frighten the Soviet Union into more accommodating behaviour with regard to Vietnam. Later that evening, Nixon ordered Laird to “initiate a series of increased alert measures designed to convey to the Soviets an increasing readiness by U.S. strategic forces.”¹⁹ The nuclear alert measures included

18 Memorandum of conversation between Kissinger, Rabin, and Peter Rodman, 24 January 1973, folder: Rabin/Dinitz, sensitive memcons, 1973 [2 of 2], box 135, Kissinger office files, Nixon presidential materials project, National Archives, College Park, Maryland [hereafter Nixon papers].

19 Alexander Haig to Kissinger 14 October 1969, folder: Haig chron, 1-15 October 1969 [1 of 2], box 958, NSC files, Nixon papers. The account of Kissinger's 6 October 1969 telephone conversation with Laird comes from William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, “New evidence on the secret nuclear alert of October 1969: The Henry A. Kissinger telcons,” “Passport,” newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, April 2005.

communications silence in selected strategic air command and Polaris nuclear submarine commands, cessation of regular combat aircraft exercises in select areas, increased surveillance of Soviet ships en route to North Vietnam, increased ground alert actions for strategic air command bombers and tankers, and dispersal of strategic air command aircraft with nuclear weapons to forward positions.²⁰

Before its termination on 30 October, the nuclear alert included the loading of thermonuclear weapons on B-52 aircraft stationed at March air force base in southern California and Fairchild air force base in Washington state. Nuclear-armed B-52s flew 18-hour missions over the northern polar cap, toward the Soviet border, in a pattern they would use if they were indeed launching a nuclear strike. These were dangerous missions that could have initiated a direct clash between Washington and Moscow, especially if a nuclear-armed aircraft strayed into Soviet airspace or crashed near Soviet territory. Observers in the Kremlin also might have misconstrued this alert as the real thing. Fortunately, that did not happen, but the risks of misperception and miscalculation were very real.

This effort at nuclear coercion did not succeed. Kissinger expected that Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin would refer to the nuclear alert and seek to reduce tensions. This reaction never materialized. Nonetheless, Kissinger continued to advocate the repositioning of nuclear weapons and occasional nuclear threats to throw adversaries off balance. He remained convinced that nuclear weapons could serve coercive purposes, intimidating enemies and encouraging favourable negotiations.

Kissinger's approach to nuclear strategy was alarming, but not entirely unique. The very existence of huge arsenals during a period of geopolitical stalemate after the Cuban missile crisis meant that leaders felt pressure to make these weapons useful, short of war. When they needed to pressure their adversaries into changing behaviour, nuclear weapons were a tempting, if complicated, tool. Like the police officer who shows her gun even though she does not intend to shoot a fleeing criminal, policymakers brandished their most powerful arms to alter the calculations of their enemies. They did this in times of relative peace as well as heightened crisis. Nuclear weapons increased risk-taking in the Cold War for coercive purposes.

²⁰ Kissinger to Nixon, 9 October 1969, folder: schedule of significant military exercises, volume 1, box 352, NSC files, Nixon papers; Haig to Kissinger, 9 October 1969, folder: items to discuss with president, 8/13/69-12/30/69, box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers.

This is a history that remains to be written. The apparent success of deterrence and the apparent failure of coercion—especially from a post-Cold War perspective—have encouraged historians to neglect the aggressive risk-taking and military escalation associated with nuclear weapons. Although nuclear crises generally ended peacefully in the Cold War, they often arose because nuclear weapons encouraged war-like behaviour, even when leaders clearly did not want war. Nuclear weapons also raised the risks considerably during crises. They made efforts at diplomatic blackmail threatening to humanity as a whole.

CONCLUSION

I.F. Stone was much too pessimistic. Nuclear weapons proved capable of providing for a feasible and successful form of national defence. Their abundance in the Cold War did not produce Armageddon. At moments of highest tension around Berlin and Cuba, and in the Middle East, their presence encouraged sensible leaders in Washington, Moscow, and other capitals to back down and avoid another world war. One can well imagine a Cold War without nuclear weapons that would have produced World War III.

One can also imagine a world more peaceful and less crisis-ridden without nuclear weapons. The growing arsenals of these destructive forces encouraged extended strategic commitments in vulnerable areas, risk-taking in international rivalries, and a general escalation of threats during moments of tension. The crises in Berlin and Cuba reflected all of these trends in nuclear diplomacy. The hardening of resolve and the bias toward building weapons rather than talking peace also reflected dominant assumptions about measuring national strength in the size of nuclear arsenals. Most alarming, new research indicates that nuclear weapons tempted policymakers, particularly in the United States, to pursue coercive efforts at changing enemy behaviour. This meant manufacturing crises, blackmailing, and acting “mad.” From this perspective, nuclear weapons undermined peace in profound ways.

Stone had reasons to be pessimistic, as do historians looking back on the Cold War. Despite the claims of stability associated with nuclear deterrence, close examination of the historical record reveals more danger, risk, and belligerence than cautious power-balancing. Nuclear weapons deterred full-scale war, but they contributed to crisis escalation. They placed certain limits on the scope of the Cold War but they also made it more permanent. Most significant, they distorted international relations, bringing global su-

perpowers to the point of war in places of questionable strategic value—including West Berlin and Cuba. Nuclear weapons, as Stone complained, made the world too small for peaceful coexistence between the United States and the Soviet Union. The superpowers came to “resemble two huge herds moving toward possible conflict, too closely packed to struggle successfully against their fate.”

In the post-Cold War world the dangers of Armageddon are far lower. More states possess nuclear arsenals, but the stockpiles of even the largest powers are less plentiful than in the past. The rivalries most likely to set off an exchange of nuclear weapons are between countries with very limited nuclear inventories—India and Pakistan, Israel and a soon-to-be-nuclear Iran. Although global thermonuclear war is a distant possibility, the history of nuclear crises should make us shiver at the thought of so many more states engaging in the aggressive risk-taking exhibited by the few nuclear powers in the Cold War. The spread of nuclear weapons will bring more instability and conflict. This is the strongest reason why leaders, imbued with historical knowledge of the Cold War, should do all they can to make the world less nuclear, rather than moreso. The history of nuclear escalation should inspire nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament.