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For the average person, indeed, for most sane people, nuclear war is simply unthinkable. For those of us who have committed our professional lives to thinking about the unthinkable, nuclear war between two states that possess secure second-strike capability is irrational. There are simply no political objectives worth the assured destruction that likely would follow any first use of nuclear weapons. More formally, the subjective expected utility of any gains that would result from a first strike needs to be weighed against the subjective expected utility of the losses that would result from nuclear retaliation. Even if the probability of a second strike is low, the negative utility of such an outcome overwhelms any expected gains because the losses would be so massive. At least at the level of strategic interaction, the fact of mutual assured destruction should give us some confidence that volitional nuclear war among two or more nuclear armed states makes no sense and thus should not occur.¹

And yet, many of us continue to worry. Are all decisionmakers rational in the sense that they value the continued existence of their populations more than other goals?² Might nuclear war result through accident? That is, could some error in states' command and control systems lead to the false conclusion that nuclear war was already underway and thus precipitate civilian decisionmakers or field commanders to initiate what they erroneously believe to be a retaliatory strike?³

In his classic analysis of deterrence, *Arms and Influence*, Thomas Schelling argued that war can result via both volitional and inadvertent pathways.⁴ In the first chapter, he explicates a rational theory of deterrence, where

¹ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 231-234.

² The fear that leaders might care about other goals more than the survival of their own citizens was at the root of debates in the 1980s about the need for a "countervailing strategy" as well as fears of nuclear Armageddon resulting from a far-fetched though possible alliance between Saddam Hussein and Islamist terrorist. See, for example, Walter Slocombe, "The Countervailing Strategy," *International Security*, 5, 4 (1981): 18-27; and Remarks by the Vice President at the Air National Guard Senior Leadership Conference, Adams Mark Hotel, Denver, Colorado (December 2, 2002). Available online at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/12/20021202-4.html>.

³ See, for example, Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Sagan, "Nuclear Alerts and Crisis Management," *International Security* 9, 4 (1985): 99-139.

⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

one state can influence another through coercive threats. Deterring or compelling another state is held to be achievable through the issuance of threats to punish the target if the demanded behavior is not forthcoming. Wars from this standpoint result when target states either do not believe the threat of punishment to be credible, or when the threatened punishment is too small to counterbalance any expected gains from defiance. Whether the first shot is fired by the source or the target of the threat, hostilities are volitional; the result of choice.⁵

Viewed through the lens of deterrence, it appears as if the dynamics of war initiation can be subjugated to rational analysis. But Schelling complicates matters with a discussion of inadvertent war. Although he saw no conceivable route by which the United States and the Soviet Union could find themselves in a major nuclear war, in chapter three of *Arms and Influence* he nonetheless argues:

This does not mean that a major nuclear war cannot occur. It only means that if it occurs it will result from a process that is not entirely foreseen, from reactions that are not fully predictable, from decisions that are not wholly deliberate, from events that are not fully under control. War has always involved uncertainty, especially as to its outcome; but with the technology and geography and the politics of today, it is hard to see how a major war could get started except in the presence of uncertainty. Some kind of error or inadvertence, some miscalculations of enemy reactions or misread of enemy intent, some steps taken without knowledge of steps taken by the other side, some random event or false alarm, or some decisive action to hedge against the unforeseeable would have to be involved in the process on one side or both.⁶

True to form, Schelling contemplated the ways in which strategic actors might derive some benefit from the dangers that pervasive uncertainty implies for high stakes conflict. Because nuclear crises and the initial use of force always contain some danger of escalation and thus a shared danger of all-out war, Schelling anticipated that states might purposely manipulate that danger through strategies of brinkmanship.⁷ Although under conditions of mutual secure second strike capability a threat to respond to some limited provocation with a nuclear attack lacks credibility, he argued that states might gain some bargaining advantage by demonstrating their willingness to risk war through a “threat that leaves something to chance.”⁸ For Schelling:

[t]he key to these threats is that, though one may or may not carry them out if the threatened party fails to comply, the final decision is not altogether under the threatener’s control. The threat is not quite of the form “I may or may not, according as I choose,” but, has an element of, “I may or may not, and even I can’t be altogether sure.” Where does the uncertain element in the decision come from? It must come from somewhere outside of the threatener’s control. Whether we call it “chance,” accident, third-party influence, imperfection in the machinery of decision, or just processes that we do not entirely

⁵ With other early deterrence theorist, Schelling recognized that influence attempts involve more than just threats although the role of assurances and promised rewards is less developed. See, Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 74; Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, passim; and William W. Kaufmann, *The Requirements of Deterrence* (Princeton: Center for International Studies, 1954). Later efforts to incorporate promises and assurances more systematically into discussions of deterrence include Janice Gross Stein, “Deterrence and Reassurance,” in Philip Tetlock et al. (eds.) *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 9-72; James W. Davis, Jr., *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Jeffrey Knopf, “Varieties of Assurance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35,3 (2012): 375-399; and Reid B.C. Pauly, *The Assurance Dilemma: Contingency and Control in International Coercion*, book manuscript, 2023.

⁶ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 95-96.

⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 99.

⁸ Schelling, *The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance*, RAND Historical Document HD-A1631, https://www.rand.org/pubs/historical_documents/HDA1631-1.html.

understand, it is an ingredient in the situation that neither we nor the party we threaten can entirely control. An example is the threat of inadvertent war.⁹

Disagreements about the level of uncertainty entailed in international politics and the degree to which the dangers of nuclear escalation ultimately can be controlled by central decisionmakers help explain the intense Cold War debates about the need for limited or implementable nuclear options in pursuit of escalation dominance, as well as whether the theoretically derived notion of the stability-instability paradox was empirically valid. For if the dangers of escalation are multiple and unknowable, then the image of a slow-motion ascent of an escalation ladder is little more than a theoretical chimera.¹⁰ If leaders believe that war entails some chance of inadvertent escalation, then stability at the level of strategic nuclear forces will not make the world safe for conventional war as the stability-instability paradox implies.¹¹ Rather, nuclear armed adversaries will be wary of directly engaging one another in conventional war.¹² When adversaries share a strong fear of nuclear escalation, the threat that leaves something to chance should be a powerful signal of interest and resolve.¹³

Cold War discussions of nuclear deterrence tended to focus on direct confrontations between the two superpowers whether they are real—such as in the crises over Berlin, Cuba, or the Middle East—or they are hypothetical. Though criticized for superimposing rather stylized and often biased conceptual categories onto inherently ambiguous cases of interstate conflict,¹⁴ the Cold War context within which these discussions occurred meant that analysts were focused on the challenges that states faced in deterring the use of nuclear weapons against themselves or their allies. Little thought was extended to the task of averting nuclear escalation in conflicts involving states that were not clearly allied or closely aligned to one of the superpowers.¹⁵

⁹ Schelling, *The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance*, 2.

¹⁰ Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 82-85. Even one of the chief proponents of the countervailing strategy and the need for escalation dominance regarded the notion that nuclear escalation could be subjected to tight control as an “illusion.” See, Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1981*, January 29, 1980, 67. Available at: https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1981_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150845-130; Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1982*, January 19, 1981, 64. Available at: https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1982_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150904-113. See too, Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 385-386,

¹¹ Glenn Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury, ed., *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), 184-201.

¹² Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 425-426. For a recent example that appears to support Brodie’s assertion, see, Al Jazeera, “Pakistan Won’t Initiate Military Conflict With India,” September 3, 2019. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/3/pakistan-wont-initiate-military-conflict-with-india-imran-khan>.

¹³ Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 137-140. For brinkmanship to produce the desired effects, statesmen must believe in the possibility of inadvertent war. Although there is evidence that statesmen do fear uncontrolled escalation and inadvertent war, both the historical basis and causal logic of such beliefs have been criticized. See, Marc Trachtenberg “The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914,” *International Security* 15, 3 (1990/91): 120-150; also, Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship,” *International Security* 47, 3 (2022/23), 9-51.

¹⁴ See, for example, Richard Ned Lebow and Stein, *When Does Deterrence Succeed and How Do We Know?* (Ottawa: Canadian Institute for International Peace, 1990); Lebow and Stein, “Deterrence: The Elusive Dependent Variable,” *World Politics* 42,3 (1990): 336-70; and Alexander L. George & Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 71-82.

¹⁵ Though Nina Tannenwald’s important arguments about the emergence of a “nuclear taboo” may help explain the paucity of such cases, they are not directly relevant to the questions addressed here. But see, Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use,” *International Organization* 53, 3 (1999): 433-468.

Following a ten-year pattern of limited probes and incremental land grabs, including the occupation and subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, presents decision makers and scholars with such a case. Although in December 1994 the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom signed the Budapest Memorandum and thereby extended security guarantees to Ukraine in exchange for the latter's relinquishing its nuclear arsenal and accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the memorandum contained no commitments on the part of the signatories to provide military assistance to Ukraine in the event that it should come under political pressure or military attack. Nonetheless, together with leaders in many European allied states the Biden administration decided quite early that preserving Ukraine's independence was a strategic interest. Having failed to deter a Russian invasion in the first instance, the challenge facing the Western allies remains how to support Ukraine's defense in a way that minimizes the risks of Russian escalation. On the Russian side, President Vladimir Putin, former President Dmitry Medvedev (currently Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation), and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu have warned that Western support for the Ukraine raises the dangers of a direct nuclear confrontation.¹⁶

The question of escalation management beyond the stylized accounts inspired by Cold War crises is thus not only theoretical but existential, certainly for Ukraine but perhaps also for the United States and its allies. Is there a path to victory for Ukraine in the face of Russian nuclear threats? How can the West best respond to Russian efforts to manipulate the shared danger of nuclear war?

In "Escalation Management in Ukraine: 'Learning by Doing' In Response to the 'Threat that Leaves Something to Chance,'" Janice Gross Stein, who was herself a central player in Cold War-era debates about the empirical validity and strategic utility of deterrence, directs her focus to the challenge of escalation management after the failure of Washington's efforts to deter a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Highlighting the tension between the Biden administration's commitment to helping Ukraine repel the Russian aggressor and its determination to avoid a direct confrontation between the US and Russia with the attendant dangers of nuclear escalation, Stein argues that President Joe Biden's incremental approach to strategy reduced the uncertainty generated by Putin's efforts to engage in nuclear brinkmanship once it became clear that Russian forces would not quickly overrun Ukraine's defences and occupy the entire country. Through "a calibrated strategy of pragmatic, incremental 'learning by doing,' in significantly and repeatedly broadening the scope of the military assistance that Ukraine is receiving, without provoking an escalatory response from Russia outside of Ukraine," the Biden administration thus far has "[m]anaged uncertainty by signaling different kinds of restraint and then edging up to the line while monitoring and adjusting" (46).

The article provides both a timely assessment of the dynamics of escalation management to date, as well as an assessment of the implications of these developments for a more general understanding of the ways in which uncertainty confounds both political leaders' and scholars' efforts to subjugate wartime decisions to straightforward cost-benefit analysis. Among Stein's many contributions to our understanding of both the dynamics of the Ukraine War and its implications for more general discussions of brinkmanship and escalation management, I wish to highlight four.

¹⁶ See, for example, Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia's Putin Issues New Nuclear Warnings to West Over Ukraine, Reuters, February 22, 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-update-russias-elite-ukraine-war-major-speech-2023-02-21/>; Varg Folkman, "Nuclear weapons on the table if Ukraine counteroffensive succeeds: Russia's Medvedev," *Politico*, July 30, 2023. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-dmitry-medvedev-ukraine-counteroffensive-russia-invasion-war-nuclear-weapons/>; and "Russia's Shoigu warns West of 'direct military clash between nuclear powers'," *swissinfo.ch*, October 30, 2023. Available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/reuters/russia-s-shoigu-warns-west-of-direct-military-clash-between-nuclear-powers-/48935376>.

Evolution of Russian Doctrine

For those who have not followed the post-Cold War evolution of Moscow's strategic doctrine closely, Stein provides an excellent overview of Russian developments against the backdrop of changes both in Russian conventional capabilities and US strategic doctrine. In particular, her tracing of changes in the role envisioned by Russian military planners for nuclear weapons in an armed conflict with the West facilitates a more nuanced understanding of Russia's doctrine of "escalate to deescalate" (37). Contrary to the widespread belief that Russia has continued to lower the threshold for the introduction of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict, which is an interpretation of Russian strategic doctrine that has found its way into the *Nuclear Posture Review* of both 2018 and 2022,¹⁷ Stein argues that Russian emphasis on the threat of nuclear escalation has actually declined in the past decade with the reconstitution of Russian conventional capabilities. As Moscow's conventional capabilities have improved, military doctrine shifted to stressing the early use of conventional weapons in armed conflict. Moreover, at least since 2010, Russia "has moved *away* from rather than *toward* deterrence strategies that rely on nuclear weapons" (38). Whereas in 2002 Russian military doctrine contemplated the use of nuclear weapons in response to "situations that are critical to the national security of the Russian Federation," by 2014 the introduction of nuclear weapons into a conventional conflict is restricted to situations where "the very existence of the state is under threat" (38).¹⁸

If Stein's summary of the recent evolution of Russian nuclear doctrine is accurate, and if strategic doctrine provides some indication of the most likely terms according to which Russian political and military decision-makers conduct discussions about military options in the Ukraine War, then understanding what might constitute an existential threat to the Russian state is crucial to avoiding moves that might trigger nuclear escalation.¹⁹ Stein asks, "Does a proxy war with NATO that is increasing the supply of more advanced equipment to Ukraine constitute an existential threat, or is direct engagement of NATO forces necessary? Is the only enabling condition an imminent strike against Russia's command-and-control structures?" After surveying relevant publications, Stein concludes that "[t]he answers to these questions are opaque and debated among Russian strategists themselves" (39).

Analytic Framework

The Ukraine War is in many regards unique, yet any understanding of its causes, underlying dynamic, and potential outcome requires us to map observable features of the war onto more general concepts and models. Abstracting from the particularities of the specific conflict allows us to see things we might otherwise overlook. By framing the conflict in terms of deterrence theory and focusing on leaders' efforts both to manipulate and to cope with pervasive uncertainty, Stein reveals numerous aspects of the war that have not been widely discussed while at the same time raising questions about the limits of influential models of war initiation, escalation, and termination, questions to which I will return below.

Whereas most debates about the origins of the war have tended to revolve around whether or not the West somehow reneged on a promise made to the Soviet Union not to expand NATO in return for Soviet acceptance of German reunification, with the relevant breach supposedly occurring in 2008 when at the NATO Summit in Bucharest the allies issued a vague pledge to eventually invite Ukraine and Georgia into the

¹⁷ US Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, 8; and US Department of Defense, "2022 Nuclear Posture Review," in *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 5.

¹⁸ See too Kristen Ven Bruusgaard, "The Myth of Russia's Lower Nuclear Threshold," *War on the Rocks*, September 22, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/the-myth-of-russias-lowered-nuclear-threshold>.

¹⁹ In her study of leaders' efforts to assess the intentions and likely behavior of others, Keren Yarhi-Milo found that strategic doctrine was often overlooked as a source of credible information. When used, it often did not lead to uniform conclusions. See Karen Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing The Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

alliance,²⁰ Stein's analysis invites us to also consider more proximate factors. Although the Biden administration received widespread praise for releasing intelligence regarding Soviet intentions in the run-up to the invasion, thereby pre-empting Moscow's efforts to cast its aggression as a Russian response to a Ukrainian provocation, Stein stresses the fact that Washington also engaged in a failed attempt at immediate extended deterrence (46). The claim raises numerous questions that no doubt will occupy scholars for years to come.

The Biden administration's pre-war signals included a trip by CIA Director William Burns to Moscow in November 2021, where he personally delivered the threat of severe economic sanctions in the event of a Russian attack on Ukraine. These were paired with efforts of the secretary of state to gauge the degree to which Russian moves were based on Russian security concerns and to provide US assurances that such concerns could be discussed. How were these signals perceived by Moscow? Were Washington's threats and assurances regarded as credible?²¹

Russia too has been implementing a strategy of deterrence with the goal of preventing greater US involvement in the conflict. The first premise of Stein's article is that Putin early on adopted a strategy of brinkmanship. He has attempted to manipulate the shared risk of war through the issuance of threats that leave something to chance. Thus, immediately prior to the invasion, he ordered the alert of Russian strategic command centers combined with veiled threats of nuclear escalation. The alert turned out to have comprised little more than augmented staffing of command posts, and there was no observable repositioning of tactical nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, these "fuzzy" signals appear to have been sufficient to reinforce Biden's commitment to a set of guardrails that are intended to foreclose a direct confrontation between Russian and US forces and the attendant risk of escalation that would entail (36, 41, 44). Coping with the uncertainty entailed in Russian strategic doctrine, in particular what Putin might regard to be an existential threat to the state, as well as the uncertainty generated by Putin's efforts at brinkmanship, is one of the central challenges facing Washington and its European allies.

The second premise of the article is that the Biden administration has sought to reduce uncertainty by adopting a pragmatic strategy of "learning by doing." First proposed by Stein as a heuristic for understanding the early foreign policy decisions of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev²² as applied to the Ukraine crisis, "learning by doing" represents an incremental and experimental response to the threat that leaves something to chance (42). It consists of probing the extent of the adversary's commitments and testing one's own assumptions about the adversary by gauging its responses to limited actions, and subsequently adjusting strategy accordingly. Since the invasion, the United States and its allies have consistently tested Russian red lines. When the delivery of Javelins and Stingers did not provoke escalation, these systems were followed by the delivery of longer-range weapons with offensive capabilities, including HIMARS, main battle tanks, and subsequently a commitment to the delivery of F-16 fighter jets by Denmark and the Netherlands. As a result of "learning by doing," the US and its allies thus far successfully have provided Ukraine with an unparalleled supply of weapons and intelligence without provoking a major Russian escalation (46).

Although the strategy of "learning by doing" appears to have reduced the dangers of escalation, Stein warns of complacency. Each side is learning through repeated interactions in ways that can change the underlying

²⁰ See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, 5 (2014): 77-89.

²¹ Given renewed scholarly interest in the conditions that facilitate credible commitments and the processes whereby observers draw inferences about actors' resolve, the run-up to the Russian invasion of February 2022 should be of great interest to scholars of international security. For a review of recent contributions to this literature, see Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler, "Redefining the Debate over Reputation and Credibility in International Security: Promises and Limits of New Scholarship," *World Politics*, 73, 1 (2021): 167-203.

²² Stein, "Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner," *International Organization*, 48, 2 (1999): 155-183.

dynamics. For its part, Washington might “overlearn” from earlier successes and begin to take greater risks (33). If, in response, Russia’s leadership came to believe it was facing serious defeat or an existential threat to the Russian state, the “threat that leaves something to chance” might “bump up directly against Washington’s strategy of ‘learning by doing.’ These two strategies could collide in unexpected and dangerous ways as a pessimistic Russian leadership learns from the success of the U.S. strategy and recognizes that Moscow needs to act as well as speak” (44).

Theoretical Insights

Analyzing the interaction between Russia and the US through framework of “learning by doing” not only helps us to interpret recent and ongoing developments but also suggests some important limitations of many standard models of deterrence, war initiation, and termination.

Central to Stein’s analysis is the notion that strategic interactions of the sort we are experiencing in Ukraine are characterized by fundamental uncertainties. At first glance, this characterization of international conflict resembles influential rationalist models of conflict that stress the centrality of information asymmetries in explanations of war. Because actors have private information regarding their preferences over outcomes and the price they are willing to pay to achieve them, wars, which are both costly and dangerous, result when at least one party to a dispute misjudges the preferences of the other (who, in turn, may be engaged in deceit). Otherwise, war seems puzzling, as rational actors should be able to reach a more efficient negotiated settlement.²³ In the rationalist framework, fighting wars forces belligerents to reveal previously private information, allowing others to update their information and beliefs, both regarding the relative capabilities of the conflicting parties as well as the costs and benefits of continued fighting. Wars end when the minimum terms of settlement for the belligerents converge.²⁴

The rationalist literature on war termination conceives of shifts in preferences primarily as a response to new information about the preferences and capabilities of *others*. Thus, states are expected to expand or decrease their war aims when they learn that they are stronger or weaker relative to their adversary than previously believed.²⁵ Although Biden’s strategy of “learning-by-doing” is aimed at soliciting new information about Putin’s preferences and resolve, much of the story Stein tells is about how Biden came to know his *own* preferences. If stylized models of bargaining presume that actors know their preferences and then reveal information either strategically as part of a signaling strategy, or unavoidably in the course of fighting, Stein’s analysis suggests that preference formation often follows behavior. Rather than basing their choices on *a priori* preferences, leaders sometimes “come to ‘know’ their own attitudes, emotions, and preferences by making inferences from their own behavior or the circumstances in which their behavior occurs. Here, preferences do not dictate strategy. Rather, strategy shapes preferences” (32).

The incremental strategy adopted by the Biden administration and its European allies thus far has not provoked a major horizontal or vertical escalation on the part of Putin. The obvious counterfactual question is how Moscow would have responded had the United States adopted a more assertive strategy in the early spring of 2022. Implicit in Stein’s analysis is the hypothesis that a more robust immediate response likely would have led to escalation. But how can we make sense of the effects of slow motion (which have been

²³ See, James Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, 49, 3 (1995): 379-414; and Robert Powell, “War as a Commitment Problem,” *International Organization*, 60, 1 (2006): 169-203. For a critical take on using the assumption of complete information as a theoretical baseline, see Davis, “Better than a Bet: Good Reasons for Behavioral and Rational Choice Assumptions in IR Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 29, 2 (2023): 476-500.

²⁴ Hein E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²⁵ In Goemans’ account, leaders might also change their war aims in response to new information about the preferences of their domestic publics. See Goemans, *War and Punishment*, chapter 2.

beneficial for the US)? From a strictly rationalist perspective it should make little difference *ceteris paribus* whether information on Biden's willingness to supply Ukraine with weapons and intelligence reaches Moscow incrementally or all at once. The process of updating should lead to the same result.

As Schelling's discussion of "salami tactics" anticipated, psychology tells us that the cumulative effects of incremental probes likely will be different from the effect a single massive challenge to an adversary's commitment.²⁶ Rather than weighing the costs and benefits of an option in terms of ultimate final assets, psychology tells us that decisionmakers evaluate options according to whether these choices represent gains or losses relative to a reference point and that they are likely to take greater risks to avoid large losses than they will to make gains of a similar size.²⁷ In prospect theoretic terms, slow motion deteriorations in the status quo allow actors to "renormalize," with subsequent losses weighed against a new reference point rather than cumulatively vis-à-vis some status quo ante.²⁸

Policy Implications

When leaders do not know their own preferences, efforts to model escalatory dynamics based on insights borrowed from information economics only take us so far. Because he cannot reliably predict how he would feel if he were to conclude that Russia is losing the war, any preferences Putin might express about this eventuality are unreliable.²⁹ However, as long as Russia is not confronted with a dramatic collapse of its position on the battlefield, motivated reasoning likely will prevent Putin from reaching such a conclusion. But what if Putin did come to fear a humiliating defeat? Stein's assessment that such an eventuality poses the greatest danger of large-scale escalation corresponds to the insights derived from psychological studies of decisionmaking under risk and uncertainty, and she counsels against provoking such an eventuality through overlearning from Russian behavior to date. Because we cannot escape uncertainty completely, Stein wisely calls on NATO leaders to devote serious consideration to the multiple ways in which Russian leaders could experience defeat and what could be offered to reduce the sense of humiliation and loss if they do (49). Some combination of promises and assurances will be necessary, but my sense is that the West's willingness to offer them will depend to a large extent on developments within Russia. The latter is another source of uncertainty that confounds any attempts to subjugate the dynamics of war to a straightforward strategic analysis. If only because of domestic political constraints, it is hard to imagine a US president offering significant assurances or side payments as compensation for Russia's having suffered defeat in Ukraine.

As it stands, Biden has attempted to signal that the US does not seek regime change in Russia and in a major departure from longstanding policy, and that it would respond to a Russian use of a tactical nuclear weapon with a massive conventional, rather than nuclear, retaliatory attack. For now, coupling the threat of conventional retaliation with these assurances appears to have paid off (41, 45). But in reading Stein's account of Putin's efforts to engage in brinkmanship, one comes away thinking either that the Russian president's heart is not in it, or that he has not quite mastered the strategy. If, however, even half-hearted threats that leave something to chance are sufficient to induce caution in Washington, one wonders what might result from an adept attempt to manipulate the shared dangers of nuclear escalation.

²⁶ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 66-69. See too, Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 534-588.

²⁷ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, 47, 2 (1979): 263-291.

²⁸ See Jervis, "The Political Implications of Loss Aversion," *Political Psychology*, 13, 2 (1992): 199-200.

²⁹ McDermott and Pauly have suggested that Putin exhibits behavior consistent with a narcissistic personality and that narcissists tend to overestimate their own skill and ability to control events. See, McDermott and Pauly, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," in Jacques Hymans et al., "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," H-Diplo Policy Roundtable II-5, 4 August 2023, 13. Available at: <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/RJISSF-Policy-Roundtable-II-5.pdf>.

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