THE THREAT THAT LEAVES SOMETHING TO CHANCE

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It is typical of strategic threats that the punitive action -- if the threat fails and has to be carried out -- is painful or costly to both parties. The purpose is usually deterrence ex ante, not revenge ex post. Making a credible threat involves proving that one would have to carry out the threat, or creating incentives for oneself or incurring penalties that would make one evidently want to. The "trip-wire" idea reflects this problem; American troops stationed in Europe had the recognized purpose of convincing the Russians that war in Europe would involve the United States whether the Russians thought the United States wanted to be involved or not -- that escape from the commitment was physically impossible.

As a general rule, one must threaten that he will act, not that he may act, if the threat fails. To say that one may act is to say that one may not, and to say this is to confess that one has kept the power of decision -- that one is not committed. To say that one only may carry out the threat, not that one certainly will, is to invite the opponent to guess whether one will prefer to punish himself and his opponent or to pass up the occasion. Furthermore, if one says that he may -- not that he will -- and the opponent fails to heed the threat, and the threatener chooses not to carry it out, he only confirms his opponent's belief that when he has a clear choice to act or to abstain he will choose to abstain (consoling himself that he was not caught bluffing because he never said that he would act for sure).

There are, though, threats that we may act, not that we necessarily
will, that may be effective in spite of this loophole. They can work, however, only through a process that is a degree more complicated than firm commitment to certain fulfillment. Furthermore, they may arise inadvertently, and they may entail unintended behavior. They are therefore less likely to be recognized and understood. This paper is about them.

The 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 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.

**THE THREAT OF INADVERTENT WAR**

The thought that general war might be initiated inadvertently, through some kind of accident, false alarm, or mechanical failure; or through somebody's panic, madness, or mischief; through a misapprehension of enemy intentions or a correct apprehension of the enemy's misapprehension of ours; is not an attractive one. As a general rule one wants to keep such a likelihood to a minimum; and on the particular occasions when tension rises and strategic forces are put on extraordinary alert, when the incentive to react quickly is enhanced by the thought that the other side may
strike first, it seems particularly important to safeguard against impetuous
decision, errors of judgment, and suspicious or ambiguous modes of behavior.
It seems likely that, for both human and mechanical reasons, the probability
of inadvertent war rises with a crisis.

But is not this mechanism itself a kind of deterrent threat? Suppose
the Russians observe that whenever they undertake aggressive action tension
rises and this country gets into a sensitive condition of readiness for
quick action. Suppose they believe what they have so frequently claimed --
that an enhanced alert status for our retaliatory forces, and for theirs,
may increase the danger of an accident or a false alarm, theirs or ours, or
of some triggering incident, resulting in war. May they not perceive that
the risk of all-out war, then, depends on their own behavior, rising when
they aggress and intimidate, falling when they relax their pressure against
other countries?

Notice that what rises -- as far as this particular mechanism is con-
cerned -- is not the risk that the United States will decide on all-out
war, but the risk that war will occur whether intended or not. Even if the
Russians did not expect deliberate retaliation for the particular misbe-
havior they had in mind, they could still be uneasy about the possibility
that their action might precipitate general war or initiate some dynamic
process that could end only in massive war or massive Soviet withdrawal.
They might not be confident that we and they could altogether foretell the
consequences of our actions in an emergency, and keep the situation alto-
gether under control.

Here is a threat -- if a mechanism like this exists -- that we may act
massively, not that we certainly will. It could be quite credible. Its
credibility stems from the fact that the possibility of precipitating major war in response to Soviet aggression is not limited to the possibility of our coolly deciding to attack; it therefore extends beyond the areas and events for which a more deliberate threat is in force. It does not depend on our preferring to launch all-out war, or on our being committed to, in the event the Russians confront us with the fait accompli of a moderately aggressive move. The final decision is left to "chance." It is up to the Russians to estimate how successfully they and we can avoid precipitating war under the circumstances.

The threat -- if we call this contingent-behavior mechanism a "threat" -- has some interesting features. It may exist whether we realize it or not. Even those who have doubted whether our massive-retaliation threat was a potent deterrent to minor aggression during the last several years but are perplexed that the Russians have not engaged in more mischief than they have, can note that the threat we voiced was backed by an additional implicit threat that we might be triggered by Soviet actions in spite of ourselves. Furthermore, even if we prefer not to incur even a small probability of inadvertent war, and would not use this mechanism deliberately, the "threat" in question may be a by-product of other actions that we have a powerful incentive to take. We may get it whether we like it or not when we (and the Russians) take precautions commensurate with a crisis; knowing this, the Russians may have to take the risk into account. Finally, the threat is not discredited even if the Russians accomplish their purpose without triggering war. If the Russians estimate that the chance of inadvertent war during a particular month rises from very small to not-so-small if they create a crisis, and they go ahead anyway, and no major war
occurs, they still have no reason to suppose that their original estimate was wrong, and no reason to suppose that repetition would be less risky, anymore than a person who survives a single play of Russian roulette should decide it isn’t so dangerous after all.

LIMITED WAR AS A GENERATOR OF RISK

Limited war as a deterrent to aggression may also require interpretation as an action that enhances the probability of a greater war. If we ask how the western forces in Europe are expected to deter a Russian attack or to resist it if it comes, the answer usually runs in terms of a sequence of decisions. In case of attack on a moderate scale, we could make the decision to fight limited war; it would not be a decision to proceed with mutual annihilation. If we can resist the Russians on a small scale, they must either give up the idea or themselves take a step upward on the scale of violence. At some point there is a discontinuous jump from limited war to general war, and we hope to confront them with that choice. If this is not the typical sequence of decisions envisaged, it at least seems typical in one respect: it involves deliberate decisions — decisions to take an action or to abstain from it, to initiate a war or not to, to step up the level of violence or not to, to respond to a challenge or not to.

But an additional interpretation can be put on limited war. The danger of all-out war is almost certainly increased by the occurrence of a limited war; it is almost certainly increased by an enlargement of limited war. This being so, the threat to engage in limited war has two parts. One is the threat to inflict costs directly on the other side, in casualties, expenditures, loss of territory, loss of face, or anything else. The
second is the threat to expose the other party, together with one's self, to a heightened risk of general war.*

Here again is a threat that all-out war may occur, not that it certainly will occur, if the other party engages in certain actions. Again, whether it does or does not occur is not a matter altogether controlled by the threatener. Just how all-out war would occur -- just where the fault, initiative, or misunderstanding may occur -- is not sure. Whatever it is that makes limited war between great powers a risky thing, the risk is a genuine one that neither side could altogether dispel if it wanted to. The final decision, or the critical action that initiates an irreversible process, is not something that should necessarily be expected to be taken altogether deliberately; "chance" helps to decide whether general war occurs or not, with odds that are a matter of judgment based on the nature of the limited war and the context in which it occurs.

Why would one threaten limited war rather than all-out war to deter an attack? First, to threaten limited war -- according to this analysis -- is to threaten a risk of general war, not the certainty of it; it is consequently a lesser threat than the massively retaliatory threat and more appropriate to certain contingencies. Second, it has the advantage, in case the enemy misjudges our intentions or commitments, of an intermediate stage: we can engage in limited war, creating precisely the risk for both of us that we threatened to create, without thereby making general war the price we both pay for the enemy's mistaken judgment. We pay instead the

* The same point is stressed by Glenn H. Snyder, "Deterrence by Denial and Punishment," Research Monograph No. 1, Princeton University Center of International Studies, January 2, 1959, pp. 12, 29.
lesser price of a risk of general war, a risk that the enemy can reduce by withdrawal or settlement.

Third, in case the enemy is irrational or impetuous, or we have misjudged his motives or his commitments, or in case his aggressive action has gotten up too much momentum to stop, or his actions are being carried out by puppets or satellites that are beyond his immediate power to control, there is some prudence in threatening risk rather than certainty. If we threaten all-out war, thinking it not too late to stop him, and it is, we must either go ahead with it or have our threat position discredited. But if we can threaten him with a one-in-twenty chance of all-out war in the event he proceeds, and he does proceed, we can hold our breath and have nineteen-to-one odds of getting off without general war. Of course, if we scale down the risk to us we scale it down to him too; it may degrade the threat to put too much safety in it. But in cases where there is danger that we completely misjudge the enemy's commitment to an action, or completely misjudge his ability to control his own agents, allies, or commanders, the more moderate risk may deter anything that is still within his control, while an even greater risk would be no assurance against actions that have gotten beyond his control.

If we give this interpretation to limited war, we can give a corresponding interpretation to enlargements, or threats of enlargement, of the war. The threat to introduce new weapons into a limited war is not, according to this argument, to be judged solely according to the immediate military or political advantage, but also according to the deliberate risk of still larger war that it poses. Just as a moderate limited war may increase by a large factor the likelihood of major war within the next
thirty days, so a progression from conventional to novel weapons may raise that probability by another factor.

We are led in this way to a new interpretation of the "trip-wire." The analogy for our limited-war forces in Europe is not, according to this argument, a trip-wire that certainly detonates if it is in working order and fails altogether if it is not. What we have is a graduated series of trip wires, each attached to a chance mechanism, with the daily probability of detonation increasing as the enemy moves from wire to wire. The critical feature of the analogy, it should be emphasized, is that whether or not the trip wire detonates general war is -- at least to some extent -- outside our control, and the Russians know it.

The same interpretation might be true of Quemoy. One can argue that the Chinese or Russians were deterred by the prospect of major war, not just by the prospect of losing a limited war or winning one at excessive cost. Even if they were convinced that we would exercise every skill and caution to keep a war limited, and they were prepared to exercise skill and caution themselves, they may simply have felt that the process that leads to bigger and bigger wars is not one that they or we fully understand or can foresee, and that the risk, though numerically small, was appreciable.

RISKY BEHAVIOR IN LIMITED WAR

If one of the functions of limited war, then, is to pose the deliberate risk of all-out war, in order to intimidate the enemy and to make pursuit of his limited objectives intolerably risky to him, the usual precepts for behavior in limited war need revision. The supreme objective may not be to
assure that it stays limited, but rather to keep the risk of all-out war within moderate limits above zero. At least, this may be the strategy for the side that is in danger of "losing" a limited war. The less likely it is that the enemy's aggressive advances can be contained by limited and local resistance, the more reason there may be to fall back upon the deliberate creation of mutual risk. (Alternatively, the more the aggressor can design his advances so that even local resistance seems fraught with explosive potential, the less attractive local resistance will seem.)

Deliberately raising the risk of all-out war is thus a tactic that fits the context of limited war. Of course, one cannot raise the risk just by saying so. One cannot just announce to the enemy that yesterday one was only about 2 per cent ready to go to all-our war but today it is 7 per cent and they had better watch out. One has to take actions that — assuming he and his adversary continue to be just as concerned and careful to keep the war limited — leaves everyone just a little less sure that the war can be kept under control. The idea is simply that a limited war can get out of hand by degrees; that at any point one has some notion or sensation of how much "out of control" it is; that various actions — innovations, breaches of limits, manifestations of "irresponsibility," challenging and assertive acts, adoption of a menacing strategic posture, adoption of headstrong allies and collaborators, spoofing and harassing tactics, introduction of new weapons, enlargement of troop commitments or the area of conflict — tend to raise almost anyone's judgment of how much "out of control" the situation is; and that to share such an increase in risk with an enemy may provide him an overpowering incentive to lay off. Preferably one creates the shared risk by irreversible maneuvers or
commitments, so that only the enemy's withdrawal can tranquili\textsuperscript{se} the situation; otherwise it may turn out to be a contest of nerves.


deral and Harrassment

Limited local war is not the only context in which deliberately risky behavior may be used as a type of threat. Between the threats of massive retaliation and of limited war there is the possibility of less-than-massive retaliation, of graduated reprisal. There are few serious analyses in print of war of limited reprisal. The idea that one might "take out" a Russian city if Soviet troops invade a country, and keep "taking out" one every day until they quit, has been occasionally adverted to journalistically but not systematically explored. Similar in spirit is the idea of hostile action on a small scale — sinking ships, blockading ports, jamming communications, or whatever it may be.

There are a number of Russian actions of an aggressive or hostile sort that might provide neither locale for a limited war nor the dramatic act to trigger massive retaliation: efforts to harrass, blackmail, or blockade neutral countries or American allies, a peacetime campaign to jam our early-warning and other radar, tricks with nuclear weapons as part of a war of nerves, instigation of sabotage in NATO countries, flagrant support to insurrection, or even the use of unaccustomed violence in quelling disturbances within their own satellites. It may do little good to combat these actions by like measures of our own; it may also not be wise to insist that we are about to boil over into massive retaliation.

If something were to be done, the deliberate creation of a small but appreciable shared risk of general war might be considered. Or, if not, the purpose and significance of Soviet mischief might want to be interpreted as an effort to intimidate by the creation of a shared risk of general war.

How do we interpret a dramatic act like, say, limited nuclear reprisal on enemy territory? As in limited war, there again may be two parts to the "cost" imposed on an enemy. One is a direct cost: casualties, destruction, humiliation, or whatever it may be. The other is the created risk of all-out war. Nobody quite knows what happens if one country explodes a nuclear weapon in an enemy country. If the action is recognized as an isolated act, limited in intent, not part of a massive attack nor of a sneak attack against the other's retaliatory capability, the victim may not see wisdom in unleashing all-out war in response to the pain and insult. But even if he does not, he is likely to do something that in turn will have consequences that may ultimately reach a stage of all-out war. If the response is simply to strike back in like fashion, the process may taper off, or it may explode. So even if each side prefers to act cautiously, failure to understand completely how each other reacts might bring about a dynamic process that ultimately exploded into all-out war.

The odds may still be against it. Here again we are dealing with an action that may or may not bring about full war, the final outcome not being under the complete control of the participants, the probability of full war being a matter of judgment. To mention these possibilities is not to propose them, but only to indicate how they should be interpreted. The sanction they impose on the victim — one that the threatener shares with him — is the recognizable increase in the likelihood of total war.
RISKY BEHAVIOR AND "COMPELLENT" THREATS

There is typically a difference between a threat intended to make an adversary do something (or cease something he has already started) and a threat intended to keep him from starting something. The distinction is in the timing, in who it is who has to make the first move, in whose initiative is put to the test. To deter by threat an enemy's advance it may be enough to burn bridges behind myself as I face the enemy; to compel by threat an enemy's retreat I have to be committed to move forward, and this requires lighting the grass on fire behind me with the wind blowing toward the enemy. I can block your car in the road by placing my car in your way; my deterrent threat is passive, the decision to collide is up to you. If you, however, find me in your way and threaten to collide unless I move, you enjoy no such advantage; the decision to collide is still yours, and I enjoy deterrence. You've got to arrange to have to collide unless I move; and that is a degree more complicated to arrange.

The threat that compels rather than deters therefore often takes the form of administering the punishment until the other acts, rather than if he acts. This is because often the only way to become physically committed to the action is to initiate it. Initiating steady pain, even if the threatener shares the pain, may make sense as a threat, especially if the threatener can initiate it irreversibly so that only the other's compliance can relieve the pain they both share. But irreversibly initiating certain disaster, if one shares it, is no good. Irreversibly initiating a moderate risk of mutual disaster, however, if the other's compliance is feasible within a short enough period to keep the cumulative risk within tolerable bounds, may be a means of scaling down the threat to where one is willing
to set it going. Subjecting the enemy (and oneself) to the pressure of a 1 per cent risk of enormous disaster for each week that he fails to comply is somewhat similar to subjecting him (and oneself) to a steady weekly damage rate equivalent to 1 per cent of disaster. (The words "somewhat" and "equivalent" may be interpreted very flexibly here.)*

"Rocking the boat" is a good example. If I say, "Row, or I'll tip the boat over and drown us both," you'll say you don't believe me. But if I rock the boat so that it may tip over, you'll be more impressed; if I can't administer pain short of death for the two of us, a "little bit" of death, in the form of a small probability that the boat will tip over, is a near equivalent. But to make it work, I must really put the boat in jeopardy; saying that I may put us both overboard is unconvincing. I have to rock the boat enough so that it may turn over, with a small but appreciable probability, in spite of my interest in staying alive.

Ideally, for this purpose, I should have a little black box that contains a roulette wheel and a device that will detonate in a way that would unquestionably provoke total war. I then set this little box down, tell the Russians that I have set it going so that once a day the roulette wheel will spin with a given probability (numerically specified and known to the Russians) that, on any day, the little box will provoke total war. I tell them -- demonstrate to them -- that the little box will keep

* To initiate risky action, if one cannot initiate it irreversibly, does not necessarily "win" over an opponent; the latter may still hope, by acting firm, to induce the initiator to back down. One still has to win the "war of nerves" if the adversary chooses to play it out for a while. But at least this symmetrical situation replaces one in which the asymmetry favored the opponent, who won by default if neither side acted.
running until my demands have been complied with. I let them inspect the box so that they see that there is nothing we can do to stop it, to keep it from detonating total war if the roulette wheel actually produces the right combination before the situation has been rectified by their compliance. Note that I do not insist that I shall decide on total war, or initiate it deliberately, if the box hits the critical combination. I leave it all up to the box which automatically engulfs us both in war if the right (wrong) combination comes up on any day.*

Given the fact that, even if the enemy complies, there is some risk that the box detonates war before he has a chance to collect himself and do our bidding, there is an advantage in making it less than certain that the box will explode on any given day. In ordinary deterrence -- where nothing happens unless the enemy acts contrary to our demand -- to threaten too much may be superfluous but not self-defeating; in the present case -- where the threat starts fulfilling itself at a specified rate over time as soon as we commit ourselves to it -- too big a threat can defeat its purpose. In this situation the small-probability threat is not just a possible substitute for the large certain threat; it is a superior and necessary alternative.

Take an example. A European country, having acquired a modest nuclear retaliatory force, tells the Russians to get out of Hungary or it will obliterate the USSR. The Russians pay no heed, doubting that the country would carry out the threat, seeing that there is no way the

* (The tactic may be the less risky the more automatic the mechanism is; the more automatic, the less incentive the enemy has to test our intentions in a war of nerves, prolonging the period of risk.)
threatening country can make itself have to in a persuasive manner. Alternatively, the country threatens to send one missile per day over the USSR, with a nuclear weapon and a random device that explodes it somewhere over Russia if it hasn’t been shot down. The Russians say they do not believe the country would do it; the country responds by doing it. The Russians protest and threaten, a day passes, the country does it again. Maybe one get through and detonates, maybe several do, maybe none do; if some do, maybe they burst over cities, maybe over populated countryside, maybe over deserted areas. The country keeps it up.

What is it doing? I would say that a principal thing the country is doing — in addition to damaging or humiliating Russia — is to incur a painful risk that both it and Russia (and the rest of the world) will be engaged in all-out war in the near future, a war that neither that country nor Russia wants. The country is saying in effect, "If you do not get out of Hungary, we may cause an all-out war to occur." By when must they get out? The sooner they get out, the sooner the risk of war (from this cause) will be terminated or reduced. The country applying the pressure is not saying, "Get out or we shall deliberately start a war." The decision is not up to them, and does not depend on their summoning the manifest resolution for a final act. The Russians may go ahead and suppose that the country concerned will do everything it can to prevent total war; but they also have to recognize that with these things flying around, exploding now and then, and with the Russians themselves responding in whatever way they feel obliged to, it is not altogether clear that the country concerned and the Russians know how to keep total war from occurring.

This illustration is intended as an analogy for other actions in which
posing a risk of all-out war may not be so recognizable as an integral part of what is happening. To take a more immediate situation, suppose an armored column were sent to Berlin in the event that ground access were denied, or suppose, once a transport squeeze on Berlin became intolerable, troops were sent in to claim and hold a corridor; suppose actions were taken that, whether intended to or not, generated some likelihood of an East German uprising. How do we analyze the nature of the pressure on the Russians? I think the answer is in large part that they are confronted with a risk of a war that both sides badly want not to occur, but that both sides may not be able to prevent. A rationale for direct action, even on a scale that by itself might accomplish little, could be the deliberate creation of a risk that we share with the Russians, providing them the option to terminate the risk by acting or withdrawing to meet our objectives.

This is not the only interpretation of such action, of course. It may be that we could win militarily if the fight stays on a small scale, and that for the Russians to enlarge it would require a discontinuous jump that they would be deterred from by the fear of provoking a discontinuous response. In that case the initial limited war would contain a "deterrent" threat against enlargement of the war. Even so, an important reason why the threat of even small-scale war might be effective is that such a war promises a small but appreciable increase in the probability of an enormous war, the probability being small enough that the Russians believe the West could bring itself to create it, large enough to make it unprofitable for
them to let it occur.*

It is worth noting that this interpretation suggests that the threat of limited war may be potent even when there is little expectation that we would win it. In this interpretation, a limited local war is not just local military action; it contains an element of "retaliation" on the Soviet homeland — not a small bit of retaliation, but a small probability of a massive war.

**BRINKMANSHIP**

The argument of this paper leads to a definition of brinkmanship and a concept of the "brink of war." The brink is not, in this view, the sharp edge of a cliff where one can stand firmly, look down, and decide whether or not to plunge. The brink is a curved slope that one can stand on with some risk of slipping in; the slope gets steeper and the risk of slipping greater as one moves toward the chasm. But the slope and the risk of slipping are rather irregular; neither the person standing there nor onlookers can be quite sure just how great the risk is, or how much it increases when one takes a few more steps down the slope. One does not, in brinkmanship, frighten the adversary who is roped to him by getting so close to the edge that if he decides to jump he can do so before anyone can stop him. Brinkmanship involves getting onto that slope where one may fall in spite of his best efforts to save himself, dragging his adversary with him.

* In the author's opinion the dispatch of U.S. troops to Lebanon in 1958 was not only both risky and successful but successful precisely because of the risk — a risk that the Communists could lessen or aggra­vate according to their response.
Brinkmanship is thus the deliberate creation of a recognizable risk of war, a risk that one does not completely control. It is the tactic of deliberately letting the situation get somewhat out of hand, just because its being out of hand may be intolerable to the other party and force his accommodation. It means harassing and intimidating an adversary by exposing him to a shared risk, or deterring him by showing that if he makes a contrary move he may disturb us so that we slip over the brink whether we want to or not, carrying him with us.

The idea that we should "keep the enemy guessing" about our response, particularly about whether we shall respond, needs an interpretation along these lines. It is sometimes argued that we need not threaten the enemy with the certainty of retaliation or the certainty of resistance, but just scare him with the possibility that we may strike back. This idea may be misconceived if it means confronting the Russians with a possible response that remains for us to decide on one way or the other. The Russians may guess that after the event we should prefer not to strike back, particularly if they perform their aggression in moderate bites; and if we are unwilling to arrange so that we have to strike back, and are even unwilling to say that we certainly shall, we may seem to confirm their understanding of what our preference would be if we left ourselves any escape. So if we are afraid that an absolute commitment to the threat might fail in its purpose and commit us to an action we'd rather not be committed to, there may be little to salvage by trying to persuade the enemy that we just might decide to do it anyway.

But the situation is different if we get into a position where it is clear to the Russians that we are sufficiently involved that, while we
probably have a way out, we may not. To say that we may or may not retaliate for an invasion of some neutral country, depending on how it suits us at the time, and that we shall not let the enemy make this decision for us, not let him know just what to expect, may confront the enemy with what appears to be a bluff. But to get so involved in or near a neutral country with troops or other commitments that we are not altogether sure ourselves about whether we could evade a fight in case of invasion, may genuinely keep the enemy guessing.

In sum, it may make sense to try to keep the enemy guessing as long as we are not trying to keep him guessing about our own motivations. If the outcome is partly determined by events and processes that are manifestly somewhat beyond our comprehension and control, we create genuine risk for him.

**THE IMPERFECT PROCESS OF DECISION**

Underlying this threat that one "may" retaliate or precipitate war -- the decision being somewhat beyond his control -- is the notion that some of the most momentous decisions of government are taken by a process that is not entirely predictable, not fully "under control," not altogether deliberate. It implies that a nation can get even into a major war somewhat inadvertently, by a decision process that might be called "imperfect" in the sense that the response to particular contingencies cannot exactly be foretold by any advance calculations, that the response to a particular contingency may depend on certain random or haphazard processes, or that there will be faulty information, faulty communication, misunderstanding, misuse of authority, panic, or human or mechanical failure.
This idea does not reflect an unusually cynical view of the decision process. In the first place, decisions do have to be taken on the basis of incomplete evidence and ambiguous warning; and it is unreasonable to deny in principle the possibility of an irrevocable action taken on a false alarm. (Furthermore, one need not be obsessed with the likelihood of false alarm to recognize that there may be levels below which this particular danger cannot be pushed without incurring other dangers that outweigh it.)

Second, war can occur because both sides become committed to irreconcilable positions from which neither is willing to back down, particularly if backing down requires assuming, even momentarily, a condition of military vulnerability. And it takes no cynic to recognize that two governments may misjudge each others' commitments.

But in the third place, even an orderly government with responsible, comparatively cool-headed leaders is necessarily an imperfect decision system, especially in crises. (Not all governments that have, or may soon have, some power to provoke general war are to be described as "cool headed." This is so for a number of reasons, one of which is that in anything but a completely centralized dictatorship a number of persons participate in a decision, and they do not have identical value systems, judgments of enemy intentions, and estimates of military capabilities. A decision taken quickly in crisis may depend on who is present, on whether particular studies have been completed, on the initiative and forcefulness shown by particular leaders and counsellors who are reacting to a quite unprecedented stimulus. Some parts of the decision may be taken on delegated authority, and the person to whom the decision is delegated
cannot necessarily reproduce the decision that would have been reached by a president or premier or cabinet in consultation with congressional or parliamentary leaders. There may even be some necessary contradictions in the decision process, such as constitutional issues that cannot be settled in advance but that make it difficult to prepare fully for certain contingencies because the necessity to break law or precedent can be accepted only implicitly, not explicitly prepared for. Finally, the need to keep secrets puts limits on the amount of advance preparation for contingencies that can be carried out.

For this reason there is no such thing as a "firm" plan, intention, or policy of a government to cover every contingency — even all important foreseeable contingencies. How the considerations add up, what interests are brought to bear, and how the collective decision procedure works in future crises is simply not fully determinable in advance.

If on top of this we recognize that there are ordinary human limitations on the intellectual and emotional ability of governmental decision makers during the conduct of dangerous maneuvers on the brink of war, it ought to be clear that there is such a thing as getting into a situation from which it looks as though the nation may successfully extricate itself but in which there is some appreciable risk that, try as it does within the limits it allows itself, it may not succeed.

One does not expect a government to call attention to its own failings in this regard and to communicate to an enemy that this incomplete mastery of its own actions is an integral part of its strategy. There are also powerful public-relations reasons for not pointing out to an enemy that one is even slightly susceptible to disastrous errors in judgment and
false alarms, or that one is a little unsure how to escape from a risky situation. It is understandable, too, that a government engaged in limited war does not state that it has been attracted to this military action by the possible risk of all-out war that it entails. The point is that these things go without saying.

But the basic idea of a threat that leaves something to chance is important even if we do not consciously use it ourselves, even tacitly. In the first place it may be used against us. In the second place, we may misjudge some of the tactics we do use if we fail to recognize the presence of a risk-of-total-war ingredient that may be a significant part of our influence on the enemy even if we've never appreciated it. If — to take an example — this is an important part of the role of limited-war forces in Europe, our analysis of that role may be seriously mistaken if we do not recognize it. The usual idea that a trip wire either does work or does not work, that the Russians either expect it to work or expect it not to work, is mistaking two simple extremes for a more complicated range of probabilities.

A POSSIBLE RATIONALE FOR A STRIKE-FIRST CAPABILITY

The threat that leaves something to chance is a helpful concept in approaching the question of whether for the particular purpose of deterrence (i.e., aside from other purposes that a strategic force is intended to serve) there is value in weapons that are suited to striking first, rather than to striking back after an enemy has attacked us. It has been argued that for those types of enemy aggression or in those areas of the world where we are not committed to a retaliatory threat, where our
threat is implied rather than expressed, where the action to be deterred is ambiguous, or where we have deliberately chosen to keep a freedom of choice and not commit ourselves to a response, the enemy's judgment of our likely retaliation — and his susceptibility to deterrence — may depend on how he thinks we would estimate the outcome if we did retaliate. And, it is argued, he may read more of a threat in the situation if it appears to him that our weapon system gives us some possibility of blunting his return strike, i.e., if it is designed for something more than just striking back.*

The contrary argument is that general war is so awful a prospect that we would not initiate it except in the face of extreme provocation; and for low-level aggression, where we are not committed to massive retaliation, it is futile and expensive to bolster a vague and latent threat that, even when bolstered, is still not very forceful. The rejoinder to this is that even in those cases where the enemy knows that we probably will not retaliate massively, there is a chance that we might, and the mere possibility may be enough to deter him. The fact that there are areas and acts to which he doubts that our threat applies does not altogether degrade the latent threat; unless he is nearly certain, the fruits of his low-level aggression may not be worth the risk to him.

It is the meaning of the word "might" that is perplexing here. If he

* It is important to note that if he is trying to weigh our reluctance to strike against our reluctance to let him get away with something, it is not the comparison of our first-strike capability with our second-strike capability that matters — not the relative improvement that we get by striking first — but the absolute cost of striking first, i.e., the relative cost of striking first against not striking at all and taking the consequences of his aggressive success.
really thought that we would strike first when he embarked on his bit of mischief, he would have a choice among three alternatives: to abstain altogether, to go ahead with his misbehavior and get struck massively, or to anticipate the latter possibility and initiate all-out war himself. Of the three, the second is certainly inferior to the third and we can suppose that he would rule it out. If we give him the certain threat of massive retaliation, then, what we do is to force him into a more extreme choice. It is not to abstain from his provocative act or get hit; it is to abstain or hit us.

This may be a sensible threat to confront him with, if he would shrink from striking us. (In some contexts, "Over my dead body," is a potent threat.) If we have a reliable strike-back capability, it is not unreasonable to let him believe that he may as well hit us too if he is going to hit a small country, since we are going to be in it anyway. But it is important to note that if this is our threat, its credibility does not depend on our possession of a strike-first potency. If we are daring him to hit us first, or else to stay put, he will be deterred by our strike-back capability, not by the size of the first-strike capability that he hopes to destroy in his own attack. In other words, a readiness to respond massively for aggression can be a reasonable threat even if it forces him to choose between abstaining altogether or striking us first; but it is not by itself an extra reason for possessing first-strike weapons.

The first-strike weapons only add to deterrence if he thinks that we might strike unpredictably. A deterrent threat that depends on a first-strike capability has to assume, it seems, that the enemy cannot guess
what action of his would precipitate our attack. Specifically, we get no advantage from our strike-first capability when we make an absolute threat — a threat that if he proceeds we shall strike. If he knows that we shall, after he proceeds, he should either abstain or strike us, in which case it is retaliatory power that we want — the weapons that are peculiarly good at surviving whatever blow he can deliver in advance. We cannot confront him with a trip wire, a firm commitment of any sort, conditional on his own next step, and frighten him more with first-strike than with strike-back weapon systems. If we tell him that at some (unspecified) point we may find the situation intolerable and launch our attack, this must mean that at a certain point we may estimate his intentions and find them intolerable and decide to strike. But if he has any way of knowing how we estimate his intentions, and what we consider intolerable, he would try to predict our decision and strike first. (He may also anticipate incorrectly and try to strike us even when he need not.)

Maybe he cannot anticipate us. But the situation has a peculiar effect on our threat position. We cannot say, "Look out, you're pressing us almost too far," or, "Not another step or we'll hit you," and expect our first-strike capability to be what stops him. In fact, if we relied on a first-strike capability, the closer we felt to a decision to strike, the less threatening we should be to avoid giving away our intentions. And less threatening is just what we do not want to be when deterrence is our objective.

But the anomaly — of treating our strike-first capability (not just our retaliatory capability) as part of our deterrent posture — exists only if we insist that our decision to strike would be perfectly rational,
conscious, and logically consistent, based on the cumulative evidence of
the enemy's behavior — i.e., that it would be predictable. Whenever we
threaten him that we have a rational way of deciding when his behavior,
projected further into the future, has become intolerable, and that at
that point we will strike him, we are announcing in effect that our
behavior is predictable, being based on an internally consistent value
system, intelligent analysis of the evidence, and rules of logical
inference.

The situation is quite different if he expects that a small but
significant probability of our attack will attend each of his acts of
aggression, and that the realization of this threat depends partly on
factors that are genuinely unpredictable. In this case we are not in
effect making the enemy believe that our behavior is unpredictable only to
the extent that we can deceive him; our response is unpredictable to him
because it is unpredictable, in some significant degree, even to us. We
are not threatening that we may surprise him because we can calculate his
expectations better than he can calculate ours; we may surprise him for
the same reason that we may surprise ourselves. He cannot expect to fore-
tell our behavior in contingencies so complex that we cannot ourselves
exactly foretell our own response to them.

Confronting him with this kind of probability mechanism does not have
the feedback possibilities that are inherent in a threat that we shall
deliberately catch him by surprise. It does not invite him to estimate
when we think he will strike hence when we shall strike, hence when he
should strike, and then to worry that we may anticipate that so that he
has to strike a little sooner himself, and so on. This "He thinks I think
he thinks..." procedure gives both parties added incentive to strike because of the feedback of each one's expectations about the other. But when the probability of our striking in response to his low-level aggression is an ever present possibility, and the final determination is affected by factors beyond our own power to anticipate, his expectations and ours do not compound explosively. He has to estimate the probability of being hit, and to decide whether his planned aggression is worth the risk; but he does not need to strike to keep us from striking to keep him from striking.

In this case, we have a purely "deterrent" motive for possessing some first-strike capability; our possession of it is not an indication that we are planning to attack him by surprise. It simply means that, whether we presently intend to or not, and however careful we are to prevent accident, misapprehension, and false alarm, there is a chance that we shall be prompted by his action into striking first, and against that contingency it is prudent to make some investment in the appropriate equipment. Certainly if we do end up striking first, it is enormously to our advantage to be able to blunt his return strike, and not simply to inflict punishment. Our motive is aboveboard if it just recognizes that the dynamic process that leads to all-out war is somewhat beyond our experience and comprehension and capacity to predict, dependent on some factors that are beyond our capacity to control.

There is thus some anomaly in rationalizing a first-strike capability for deterrence against low-level aggression on ground that we are reasonable people who may coolly decide at some point that things have gone too far and sneak in a surprise blow. There is no such anomaly in relating
some first-strike capability to deterrence if it is candidly recognized that all-out war may come whether we wish it or not, in ways that are not entirely predictable, out of situations that cannot be entirely foreseen, through decision processes that are not fully understood and that are subject to human and mechanical error, to the ordinary uncertainties in collective decision, to the influence of ambiguous evidence, and to the actions of governments other than our own. If there are two night watchmen in a building, each a little afraid that he may shoot at the other by mistake, each aware that if he mistakenly shoots at the other and misses he may be hit by the other’s shooting back in self-defense, it is not necessarily hostile of them each to select ammunition that is likely to be mortal, candidly admitting that he does not want to shoot the other but that, if he does, he hopes he kills him.

This brings us back to the case of "deterrence by threat of inadvertent war," discussed at the beginning of the paper. We have now arrived at one rationalization for giving even a "purely retaliatory" force some first-strike capability. To the extent that one deters crises and low-level aggression by responding in a way that, compounded with enemy behavior and third-country behavior, raises the likelihood of inadvertent war, one is doing precisely what the present section has talked about. One is implying that one may retaliate massively against low-level aggression; more correctly, one is implying that one may strike massively when the enemy creates crises. "Retaliation" may be the wrong word here, but in operational terms it comes to the same thing. Whether one threatens to punish a miscreant and leaves a 95 per cent chance that one will not, or threatens a 5 per cent chance that one may strike him for reasons beyond one’s own
control, the effect on the opponent is much the same, as long as it is clear that the odds are given and within those odds the threatener does not control the event and the opponent cannot predict it, and that the only amelioration of the risk is through the opponent's withdrawal to a less menacing position.

The main difference between the "false-alarm" type of mechanism and the threat based on a risk deliberately incurred, is in the conscious motivation. In one case a risky posture is deliberately adopted. In the other one adopts, for his own protection, an alert posture that, in spite of his best efforts to control it, contains a residual risk that cannot be further reduced without unacceptably degrading his retaliatory power.