

# Mainland Strikes and U.S. Military Strategy Towards China

## Historical Cases, Interviews, and a Scenario-Based Survey of American National Security Elites

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Wait, all mistakes are my own responsibility, but if you want to get philosophical, it's possible that the cause of my mistakes could be a deeper factor. But probably not.

## Summary

The growth of Chinese military power has generated a far-ranging debate in the United States about how the American military should adapt itself for the future. A key axis in this debate concerns the willingness of a future U.S. president and his advisors to recommend mainland strikes—conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland during wartime. Some strategists believe that this course of action is likely, perhaps inevitable, should war occur. Another group of strategists argues that an American president would likely not authorize such a move against the homeland of another nuclear-armed power. Both camps make different recommendations for American military force planning based on their conflicting assumptions.

This dissertation wades into the middle of this debate. Careful theorizing and systematic research can help adjudicate the arguments found in this disagreement. Towards that end, this dissertation presents three complementary research approaches focused on investigating the willingness of an American president and his advisors to authorize mainland strikes. First, historical research complemented with material from presidential archives enabled this project to investigate the parallels between the bombing campaigns in the Korean War and the Vietnam War and a hypothetical U.S.-China war. Second, twenty interviews with American national security elites analyzed the decision-making frameworks they employed to assess the desirability of mainland strikes in potential conflicts. Finally, an online scenario-based survey experiment with eighty-five national security elites tested the effect of different scenario characteristics and respondent backgrounds on the likelihood of mainland strikes in a Taiwan-related scenario.

This research indicates that mainland strikes are neither guaranteed nor off the table. Importantly, Chinese nuclear weapons appear to reduce the likelihood of—but do not rule out—mainland strikes. Furthermore, the likelihood of mainland strikes is contingent upon several key scenario characteristics and the background and beliefs of those involved with any decision-making on mainland strikes. A Chinese attack on American forces will likely dramatically increase the likelihood of mainland strikes. Circumscribing the target set (so-called “limited” strikes) will also increase the probability of mainland strikes. Whether any given individual will support mainland strikes, this research suggests, will depend in part on their partisanship, age, views towards Taiwan, and their views towards Chinese nuclear weapons.

American military force planners ought to build into their planning the possibility of a U.S.-China war with and without mainland strikes. Planners will then need to explicitly make trade-offs between forces optimized for victory with and without mainland strikes.



## **Chapters**

1. The Mainland Strikes Debate: Its Origin and Content
2. Theories and Methods
3. The Korean War
4. The Vietnam War
5. Interviews with National Security Elites
6. A Survey of National Security Elites
7. Findings and Implications



## **Chapter 1. The Mainland Strikes Debate: Its Origin and Content**

Beginning in 2010, a recurring public debate emerged about the role of so-called “mainland strikes” in any U.S. military strategy toward China. Mainland strikes refer to wartime attacks on military targets located on the Chinese mainland with non-nuclear (i.e. conventional) weapons. This debate arose as American military strategists began to confront the implications of growing Chinese military power. Potential strategies were often defined, at least partially, by their relationship to and views towards mainland strikes. Some strategies, as will be discussed, assumed that an American President, and his or her advisers, would be willing to authorize or recommend mainland strikes in a future war with China. This course of action emphasized the procurement of a military force optimized to carry out these mainland strikes. Other strategies assumed an extreme unwillingness to recommend mainland strikes. These strategies called for building and training a military force capable of operational tasks other than mainland strikes.

This dissertation examines the idea that investigating the soundness of these two contradictory assumptions about mainland strikes can help American military planners to better understand the course of a future U.S.-China war. This is a war that will hopefully never occur due, in part, to sound American military planning that maintains deterrence. Armed with knowledge about the conditions that make mainland strikes more or less likely, American military planners and civilian decision-makers can make better decisions about military strategy towards China.

This introductory chapter proceeds in four sections. Section one reviews the post-Cold War growth of Chinese military power. Section two outlines an ongoing debate about the proper American military response to the growth of Chinese military power. Section three explains the role of mainland strikes in different American military strategies towards China. Section four discusses the importance of the mainland strikes debate for formulating American military strategy towards China and outlines the policy implications of understanding the likelihood that mainland strikes will be authorized under a variety of conditions.

### **Growing Chinese Military Power**

Nearly all writers, strategists, analysts, and researchers interested in the Chinese military and in U.S. military strategy towards China agree that Chinese military power has grown significantly over the past three decades and could pose formidable problems for the American military during any war in Asia between American and Chinese military forces.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Chinese military initiated a radical transformation. By focusing on building a force capable of challenging American intervention, Chinese leaders created an advanced military able to greatly complicate the task of U.S. forces coming to the defense of a Pacific ally or partner. Eric Heginbotham and his co-authors in a 2015 RAND report entitled *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard* document the shifting military balance by evaluating the outcome of U.S.-China combat in 10 different mission areas. By assessing the relative balance in each mission area from 1996 to 2017, Heginbotham and his authors conclude that “trends in the military balance are running against the United States.”<sup>1</sup> RAND analyst David Shlapak and his co-authors’ widely-cited 2009 report, *A Question of Balance*, came to a similar analytical result. Employing theater-level combat modeling, in conjunction with historical analysis, they find a “growing imbalance of military power” between China and the United States.<sup>2</sup> These broad analytical reports complement the pessimistic findings of other, more policy-oriented reports and narrower, usually more technical, assessments of particular military

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<sup>1</sup> Each mission-level analysis employs a relatively straightforward mission-level model. The ten mission areas are Chinese capability to attack air bases, the U.S.-China air-to-air campaign, U.S. penetration of Chinese airspace, U.S. capability to attack Chinese air bases, Chinese anti-surface warfare, U.S. anti-surface warfare, U.S. counter-space capabilities, Chinese counter-space capabilities, cyberwarfare, and nuclear capabilities. Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015, p. xxxii. There is an article that amounts to a critique of this report: Lyle Goldstein believes the military situation is worse than Heginbotham and co-authors portray. Goldstein’s article therefore strengthens my claim that most analysts agree that Chinese military power has grown tremendously in recent decades. Lyle Goldstein, “The US-China Naval Balance in the Asia-Pacific: An Overview,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 232, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> David Shlapak, David Orletsky, Toy Reid, Murray Scott Tanner, and Barry Wilson, *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2009. p. xix. This was an update of an earlier, rosier 2000 RAND report. The authors note that the 2009 report contains conclusions that are “substantially less optimistic for the Taiwan (and U.S.) side.” For the earlier report, see David Shlapak, David Orletsky, and Barry Wilson, “Dire Strait? Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Confrontation and Options for U.S. Policy,” Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2000.

domains.<sup>3</sup> Broader treatments of Chinese military power have also documented the growth of Chinese military capabilities.<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate the effect of growing Chinese military power, this section briefly describes the Chinese operational threat to U.S. air bases and surface Navy forces in the region.<sup>5</sup> Because many strategists believe that U.S. military dominance in East Asia rests on the U.S. ability to deploy its conventional forces to East Asia, these sections reveal why American military strategists have viewed current trends as ominous for the U.S.-China military balance and so have begun to debate different potential American military strategies towards China.

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<sup>3</sup> An important early article that describes the growth of Chinese military power and its implications for United States foreign and military policy is by Thomas Christensen. Thomas Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2001. Other high-level reports that document the growth of Chinese military power include Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge*, Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003; Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael Chase, Derek Eaton, and Kevin Pollpeter, *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2007; Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2014. Narrower reports include Christopher Bowie, *The Anti-Access Threat and Theater Air Bases*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2002; Alan J. Vick, *Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters: Historical Lessons and Future Challenges*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015. Though not directly about the growth of Chinese military power, a late 1990's RAND report did help illuminate the growing threat that Chinese ballistic missiles armed with sub-munitions posed to American air bases. John Stillion and David T. Orletsky, *Air Base Vulnerability to Conventional Cruise-Missile and Ballistic-Missile Attacks: Technology, Scenarios, and U.S. Air Force Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1999. For analysis of the Chinese navy, see Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, August 1, 2018. This report series began in 2005. The China Maritime Studies Institute at the Naval War College has created an impressive collection of scholarly work on the Chinese Navy, see their "Red Book" series, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-red-books/>, accessed June 7, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Richard D. Fisher Jr., *China's Military Modernization: Building for Regional and Global Reach*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger Security International, 2008; Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013; Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. For a work on the development of Chinese defense industry, see Tai Ming Cheung, *Fortifying China: The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. The Department of Defense also publishes an authoritative annual report on Chinese military power. See *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, Department of Defense, May 2019. These reports date back nearly twenty years. Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg is also notable for his sustained research on the growth of Chinese military power, see Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, American, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011, Chapter 9, pp. 215-244. Friedberg's interest in Asia as the potential "cockpit of great power conflict" predates this book. See Aaron L. Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> The focus on the Chinese threat to American air bases and to American naval surfaces can be traced to Evan Montgomery's focus on these competitions in his 2014 *International Security* article. Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection."

American air bases in Asia are presently vulnerable to attack by China's growing arsenal of accurate, long-range cruise and ballistic missiles.<sup>6</sup> Eric Heginbotham and his coauthors in the 2015 "U.S.-China Military Scorecard" RAND report devote the first of their ten "scorecards" to assessing China's ability to attack American air bases.<sup>7</sup> In a scenario set in 2017, the authors find that Chinese attacks on Kadena Air Base on Okinawa could lead to a closure of "two weeks or more" in military operations and that attacks on Andersen Air Force Base on Guam would constitute a "significant threat."<sup>8</sup> RAND analyst Jeff Hagen, who has devoted considerable professional attention to air base vulnerability, has testified before the congressionally-sponsored U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission that "clearly the U.S. could face extended periods of time when few, if any, of our bases near China are operating."<sup>9</sup>

A notable operational analysis done in 2017 of the missile threat to U.S. bases in Asia was recently conducted by two U.S. Navy officers and published by the Center for New American Security. Their findings, which they describe as "deeply concerning," include the conclusion that a large-scale Chinese missile attack on American bases in East Asia could overwhelm American air defenses and destroy over 200 American aircraft on the ground in the first hours of the conflict.<sup>10</sup> This threat to the operation of American air bases creates a major problem for the post-Cold War "American way of war."<sup>11</sup> In particular, American forces will likely no longer be able to treat bases as a "sanctuary" where they can efficiently amass materiel and forces and then strike the enemy at a place and time of America's choosing.<sup>12</sup> The operational implications of air base vulnerability have led many analysts to conclude that preparing for a war with China requires a large dose of new thinking.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>This entire section is in large part due to the work of Alan Vick in highlighting this problem for the United States Air Force for many years. He also encouraged me to treat the so-called "A2/AD" problem less generically. The air base vulnerability problem is arguably a central operational manifestation of the "A2/AD" problem. See Alan J. Vick, "Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters: Historical Lessons and Future Challenges," Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, RR-968-AF, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Heginbotham et al., "The U.S.-China Military Scorecard," pp. 45-70.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 69. See Goldstein, "The US-China Naval Balance in the Asia-Pacific," pp. 910-912 for an argument about why the RAND analysis is actually too optimistic.

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Hagen, "Potential Effects of Chinese Aerospace Capabilities on U.S. Air Force Operations." U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. May 10, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Shugart and Javier Gonzales, *First Strike: China's Missile Threat to U.S. Bases in Asia*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2017, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Vick, "Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters," pp. 11-17.

<sup>12</sup> The end of "sanctuary" for air bases is a concept borrowed from Vick. Ibid. pp. 19-37.

<sup>13</sup> The Air Force, including Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), is cognizant of the threat of Chinese missile attacks to U.S. air bases and has begun to take steps to respond and adapt. Oriana Skylar Mastro and

In comparison to the situation prevailing in the 1990's, the surface forces of the U.S. Navy, including American aircraft carriers, have also become more vulnerable to a Chinese attack. China's anti-ship ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and submarines all pose threats to American surface forces operating close to China. This trend results from the growing range of Chinese surveillance and precision-strike capabilities and the relatively short range of the modern American carrier air wing. For instance, China's DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile can travel approximately 1,000 nautical miles; the F-35C, the Navy's newest combat aircraft designed for takeoff and landing on aircraft carriers, has an unrefueled combat radius of 550 nautical miles.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the exact distance at which China's missiles pose a credible threat to American aircraft carriers is subject to debate.<sup>15</sup> There are limits to Chinese surveillance of the ocean through, for instance, over-the-horizon radars. The U.S. Navy also does have formidable defensive capabilities, but the analytical debate has converged on the premise that American aircraft carriers can no longer operate with impunity.<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, some scholars argue that Chinese military power, relative to the U.S., has not actually grown over the past few decades. Michael Beckley makes exactly this case.<sup>17</sup> Other analysis highlights persistent Chinese military weaknesses.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, most American

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Ian Easton, *Risk and Resiliency: China's Emerging Air Base Strike Threat*, Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, 2017, pp. 10-13.

<sup>14</sup> Jerry Hendrix, *Retreat from Range: The Rise and Fall of Carrier Aviation*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2015, pp. 48, 51. This piece should be viewed as part of an ongoing debate about the utility of the current and future America carrier and its airwing. For the other side of the debate, see Seth Cropsey, Bryan G. McGrath, and Timothy A. Walton, *Sharpening the Spear: The Carrier, the Joint Force, and High-End Conflict*, Washington, D.C.: The Hudson Institute, 2015. For more information on China's anti-ship ballistic missiles, see Andrew Erickson, "Raining Down: Assessing the Emergent ASBM Threat," *Jane's Navy International*, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> For a recent analysis that examined the limits of Chinese surveillance capabilities beyond its borders, see Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2016. See also the debate this article engendered. Two of the three debaters believed that Biddle and Oelrich's analysis underplayed the likely range of Chinese reconnaissance and strike capabilities. Andrew S. Erickson, Evan Braden Montgomery, Craig Neuman, and Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Correspondence: How Good Are China's Antiaccess/Area-Denial Capabilities?" *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> For news coverage of China testing anti-ship ballistic missiles in the South China Sea, see Amanda Macias and Courtney Kube, "Chinese Military Conducts Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles Tests in the Hotly Contested South China Sea," *CNBC*, July 1, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2017. Travis Sharp and I have disagreed with this argument. For our case and Beckley's response, see Travis Sharp and John Speed Meyers and Michael Beckley, "Correspondence: Will East Asia Balance Against Beijing?" *International Security*, Vol. 42, No 3, 2018/19.

<sup>18</sup> Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen Gunness, Scott W. Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2015.

observers of the U.S.-China military balance have perceived a worsening situation for the U.S. military and so have begun to devise and assess different means of reversing this shift.

## Potential American Military Strategies towards China

In response to the growth of the Chinese military and the perception of a military balance tilting in favor of China, American strategists have devised and compared a number of alternative military strategies. There are three fundamental strategies.<sup>19</sup>

The first strategy focuses on mainland strikes. Sometimes labeled AirSea Battle (though this label generates needless confusion), this approach requires U.S. military forces that can penetrate China's so-called anti-access/area-denial capabilities promptly during a conflict and conduct conventional strikes throughout the Chinese mainland.<sup>20</sup> The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment's (CSBA) 2010 *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* report typifies this approach and its prescription for how the American military should adapt to Chinese military modernization. The authors focus on the Chinese development of anti-access/area-denial capabilities, a suite of military weapon systems designed to prevent American forces from entering and maneuvering in the western Pacific, and the authors call for a major rethinking of both procurement priorities and war planning. In arguing that the United States should implement a blinding campaign against Chinese intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities at the outset of hostilities, the authors assume that a President and his or her advisors will authorize strikes on a wide range of targets on the Chinese mainland.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the authors note that a critical assumption underlying their

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<sup>19</sup> These ideas are based on a working paper that Derek Grossman and I co-wrote tentatively titled "Minding the Gaps: U.S. Military Strategy towards China and Key Analytical Gaps," under review, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Jan van Tol, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010. For a shorter report less focused on the military-operational aspects of AirSea Battle, see Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010. There was a debate about whether AirSea Battle was a strategy. Strictly speaking, it was not. It was an operational concept as van Tol and later Pentagon statements made clear. But the central ideas of what CSBA fellows labeled AirSea Battle could be relatively easily fashioned into a larger security strategy. For this point, see Elbridge Colby, "The War over War with China," *The National Interest*, August 15, 2013. For an analysis that labels this approach as all-aspects dominance, see Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, "Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2015. An alternative name could be "counter-A2AD"—a name unlikely to takeoff outside of military planning circles.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of anti-access/area-denial capabilities, see van Tol et al. "AirSea Battle," especially chapter 2, pp. 17-47. For a discussion of "blinding" strikes, see pages 56-60. It's worth noting that the use of the term anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) privileges American approaches that seek directly attack A2/AD forces to regain access to the region. This point is elaborated in Christopher M. Dougherty, *Why America Needs a New Way of War*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2019, p. 24.

proposed approach is that “neither U.S. nor Chinese territory will be accorded sanctuary status” and that “U.S. conventional counterforce strikes—both kinetic and non-kinetic (e.g., cyber)—inside China will be authorized from the conflict’s outset.”<sup>22</sup> The air base vulnerability problem and also China’s anti-satellite capabilities and anti-ship ballistic missiles are all at the base of this strategic thinking. Some strategists argue that strikes on military targets located on the Chinese mainland are essential: only by reducing Chinese combat aircraft sortie generation, destroying or suppressing Chinese ballistic and cruise missiles, and disrupting Chinese targeting can American forces avoid heavy losses and possibly defeat. Broadly speaking, this strategy entails developing, at a minimum, the ability to perform reconnaissance throughout the Chinese mainland and strike capabilities able to penetrate deeply into Chinese airspace. The Air Force’s new manned bomber is often associated with these missions, but in reality, many other weapon systems—reconnaissance satellites, fighter escorts, a range of munitions, among many other systems—would be needed to adequately perform this mission. Finally, it’s worth pointing out that thinkers beyond those formerly associated with CSBA are loosely affiliated with this strategy.<sup>23</sup>

A maritime denial strategy presents a second option. The central idea of a maritime denial strategy is to target all Chinese power projection forces—especially ships and planes—that are attacking American forces or the forces of an American partner or ally. T.X. Hammes of the National Defense University has notably staked out a public position consistent with this approach. In a strategy he labels “Offshore Control,” he calls for a U.S. force structure and war plan that is simultaneously capable of both a long-distance blockade of Chinese seaborne imports and of attacking targets in the seas and airspace near China.<sup>24</sup> He explicitly advocates foregoing strikes on the Chinese mainland in the belief that “the concept of decisive victory against a nation with a major nuclear arsenal is fraught with risks.”<sup>25</sup> Wayne Hughes and Jeffrey

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<sup>22</sup> van Tol et al, “AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept,” p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> The former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development and current Center for a New American Security fellow Elbridge Colby, at least in some of his earlier writings on the topic, can be placed in a loose intellectual alliance with the CSBA writers. Elbridge Colby, “Don’t Sweat AirSea Battle,” *The National Interest*, July 31, 2013; Colby, “The War over War with China.” Aaron Friedberg also develops an analytical framework with which to compare strategies towards China and devotes attention to a strategy similar to the one described above. His assessment does seem to favor this strategy because he perceives there to be deterrence and cost-imposing benefits of this strategy. Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond Air-Sea Battle: The Debate over US Military Strategy in Asia*, New York: Adelphi Series, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> T.X. Hammes, *Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict*, National Defense University, Strategic Forum, 2012; T.X. Hammes, “Sorry, AirSea Battle is No Strategy,” *The National Interest*, August 7, 2013; T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control vs. AirSea Battle: Who Wins?” *The National Interest*, August 21, 2013.; T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy,” *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2012.

<sup>25</sup> T.X. Hammes. “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict.” National Defense University, Strategic Forum, June 2012, p. 6.

Kline of the Naval Postgraduate School have developed a “war at sea” strategy that provides military options short of strikes on the Chinese mainland. Their proposal includes capitalizing on American strengths in undersea warfare and the development of small missile-armed surface combatants.<sup>26</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Jacob Heim propose an “active denial strategy” that emphasizes “combat against offensive maneuver forces instead of strikes against home territories.”<sup>27</sup> Their description of capabilities to support this strategic tenet includes American submarines, anti-ship missiles, and mines.<sup>28</sup>

Another strain of strategic thought that can be grouped under maritime denial strategies includes operational concepts that focus on the U.S. or its partner deploying ground-based anti-ship missile forces in East Asia.<sup>29</sup> These strategies, broadly speaking, call for forces that find and destroy offensive Chinese forces without strikes on the Chinese mainland. Though a consensus on what forces can best accomplish this mission does not exist, analyses associated with this approach tend to emphasize American undersea warfare capabilities and the platforms and munitions to support long-range stand-off naval strikes.

The final strategic camp supports a naval blockade. This strategy calls for deterring or compelling Chinese leaders by implementing a blockade of Chinese seaborne commercial traffic.<sup>30</sup> Whether implemented relatively near Chinese coasts (a close-in blockade) or at far-

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<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey E. Kline and Wayne P. Hughes Jr. “Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle: A War at Sea Strategy.” *U.S. Naval War College Review*. Vol. 65. No. 4. 2012. Some strategists call this the “feet wet” option. I owe thanks to Dr. Phillip Saunders of the National Defense University for this point.

<sup>27</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, “Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism Under Austerity,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2015, p. 186. See also Dougherty, *Why American Needs a New Way of War*, pp. 10, 19, 24, 26. Dougherty contrasts denial with the approach above that emphasizes attacking Chinese A2/AD assets, an approach that Dougherty labels an “operational dead end.”

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas G. Manhken, Travis Sharp, Billy Fabian, and Peter Kouretsos, *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019; Timothy M. Bonds, Joel B. Predd, Timothy R. Heath, Michael S. Chase, Michael Johnson, Michael J. Lostumbo, James Bonomo, Muharrem Mane, and Paul S. Steinberg, *What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression?*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2017; Jacob L. Heim, *Missiles for Asia? The Need for Operational Analysis of U.S. Theater Ballistic Missiles in the Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2016; Jim Thomas, “Why the U.S. Army Needs Missiles: A New Mission to Save the Service,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Sean Mirski, “Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct, and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2013. For a response to this article, see Evan Braden Montgomery, “Reconsidering a Naval Blockade: A Response to Mirski,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2013. See also Douglas C. Peifer, “China, the German Analogy and the New AirSea Operational Concept,” *Orbis*, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2011; Gabriel B. Collins and William S. Murray, “No Oil for the Lamps of China?” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 2008; Bruce Blair, Chen Yali, and Eric Hagt, “The Oil Weapon: Myth of China’s Vulnerability,” *China Security*, Summer 2006.

away maritime chokepoints (a distant blockade), this strategy takes advantage of Chinese reliance on ship-borne trade, especially its oil imports. While past analysis tends to assume that the U.S. Navy already possesses sufficient capabilities for a naval blockade against China (especially a distant blockade), there are likely niche capabilities, such as offensive mine-laying, that this strategy would require above and beyond those currently planned by American forces.<sup>31</sup> Proponents of this option argue that its de-emphasis of conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland makes it less “escalatory.”

These three approaches encompass a broad range of American military strategies towards China.<sup>32</sup> And, of course, any strategy implemented by the U.S. will likely combine elements of the poles described above. That said, given limited resources and the competing demands of other strategic challenges, American leaders, both in and out of uniform, will have to make tough choices about strategies towards China and will likely be reluctant to embrace all force structure and war planning recommendations made by the strategists described above. Therefore, American defense policymakers will need to assess and compare these strategies. Fortunately, this assessment process has begun in earnest.<sup>33</sup> This dissertation attempts to contribute further to this process of policy analysis by focusing on the willingness of an American president and his or her advisers to authorize or recommend mainland strikes—conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland—during a future possible U.S.-China war.

## The Mainland Strikes Debate

The U.S. military strategies described above can be differentiated by their attitude towards mainland strikes and especially over their differences over the conditions under which

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<sup>31</sup> Mirski, “Stranglehold,” p. 409.

<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that there is a broader debate about American grand strategy towards China. This dissertation focuses on military strategy as its appropriate level of analysis. For treatments of American grand strategy and China, see Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “After the Responsible Stakeholder, What? Debating America’s China Strategy,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2019; Michael E. O’Hanlon and James Steinberg, *A Glass Half Full?: Rebalance, Reassurance, and Resolve in the U.S.-China Strategic Relationship*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2017; Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015; Charles L. Glaser, “A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation,” *International Security* Vol. 39, No. 4, 2015; Lyle J. Goldstein, *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry*, Georgetown University Press, 2015; Ashley J. Tellis, *Balancing without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014; Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Friedberg, *Beyond Air-Sea Battle*.

a future administration will or will not authorize them. This disagreement is a mostly unexamined and certainly unresolved issue in the broader debate.<sup>34</sup>

One of the earliest references to the issue that mainland strikes pose for American military strategy towards China can be found in a 1999 RAND report. Zalmay Khalizad and his coauthors wrote:

It is difficult to imagine that the United States would wage a largely unconstrained strategic air campaign as in Operation Desert Storm against an opponent that could wreak devastation on the American homeland, both because the United States would be concerned about crossing a threshold that might trigger Chinese nuclear retaliation and because the United States might not want to break all communications links between the Chinese leadership and its nuclear forces.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to Khalizad's notes of trepidation, CSBA's 2010 report emphasized the likelihood of mainland strikes by way of noting their military necessity. Jan van Tol and his fellow writers warned, "According these targets ["high-leverage" targets inside China] sanctuary status would severely undermine US attempts to maintain a stable military balance in the Western Pacific."<sup>36</sup> David Ochmanek of RAND and Elbridge Colby of the Center for a New American Security embrace a similar line of argument, though both note that a U.S. administration would likely (and should) only strike targets in the geographic areas near the site of conflict.<sup>37</sup>

Another camp argues that mainland strikes are dangerous and are much less likely to be authorized than CSBA writings imply.<sup>38</sup> Chinese possession of nuclear weapons, according to

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<sup>34</sup> An exception to the "unexamined" part of the claim is a previous research project of mine. John Speed Meyers, "Will a President Approve Air-Sea Battle? Learning from the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis," *Infinity Journal*, Vol 4, No. 4, 2015; John Speed Meyers, "The Real Problem with Strikes on Mainland China," *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2015. This project was not, by a long shot, definitive. Its weaknesses are part of my motivation for a more thorough, comprehensive dissertation on the topic.

<sup>35</sup> Zalmay Khalizad, Abram N. Shulsky, Daniel Byman, Roger Cliff, David T. Orletsky, David A. Shlapak, and Ashley J. Tellis, *The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> Jan van Tol et al. *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. 2010.

<sup>37</sup> David Ochmanek, *Sustaining U.S. Leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region: Why a Strategy of Direct Defense Against Antiaccess and Area Denial Threats is Desirable and Feasible*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015. p. 12.; Elbridge Colby. "The War over War with China." *The National Interest*. August 15, 2013. For instance, Colby writes, "the cordoning off of all of China's territory from attack would provide Beijing with tremendous advantage...in strict military terms..."

<sup>38</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "The Air-Sea Battle 'Concept': A Critique," *International Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 5, 2014. Joshua Rovner, "Three Paths to Nuclear Escalation with China," *The National Interest*, July 19, 2012.

T.X. Hammes, the analyst most closely associated with this camp, will loom too large in elite decision-making, preventing authorization of conventional strikes due to fear of escalation to nuclear war.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Kline and Wayne Hughes classify mainland strikes as “potentially escalatory” and Eric Heginbotham and Jacob Heim suggest that mainland strikes “may well be inadvisable when confronting a nuclear-armed great power.”<sup>40</sup> Michael Beckley writes that a doctrine that emphasizes mainland strikes “risks turning conventional wars into nuclear wars.”<sup>41</sup> Joshua Rovner also highlights the dangers of mainland strikes, though he argues that there is a dilemma for American policy-makers between the twin perils of nuclear escalation and protracted conventional war.<sup>42</sup>

Both camps rely mostly on intuitive logic and brief references to history to support their case. Neither marshals a systematic, empirical approach to examine the conditions under which a future U.S. administration in a war with China would or would not authorize conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. Nor, to the best of my knowledge, has any other researcher attempted this task. That said, Caitlin Talmadge has published on a closely related topic: whether China would use nuclear weapons during a conventional conflict with the United States. She analyzes the technical and strategic reasons China might turn a conflict nuclear. But her research does not deal directly with what U.S. decision makers would do in a conflict.<sup>43</sup>

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Even famed journalist James Fallows has stepped into this debate. Likely influenced by an interview of T.X. Hammes for an article, he wrote that “bombing runs deep into China” are a “step so wildly reckless that the U.S. didn’t consider it even when fighting Chinese troops during the Korean War.” James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2015.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 23 for the main writings of T.X. Hammes on the topic.

<sup>40</sup> Kline and Hughes, “Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle,” p. 35; Heim and Heginbotham, “Deterring without Dominance,” p. 191.

<sup>41</sup> Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> Joshua Rovner, “Two Kinds of Catastrophe: Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2017. See also Dougherty, *Why America Needs a New Way of War*, pp. 20-21. He writes, “Launching massive, crippling attacks on Chinese or Russian C4ISR [command, control, computers, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance]—almost all of which is located in their respective homelands and closely tied to their regimes’ abilities to maintain internal control—would be enormously escalatory and potentially strategically untenable.”

<sup>43</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, “Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States.” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2017. Talmadge published a shorter *Foreign Affairs* essay on this topic. See Caitlin Talmadge, “Beijing’s Nuclear Option: Why a U.S.-Chinese War Could Spiral Out of Control,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2018. Former Pacific Command commander Dennis Blair and Caitlin Talmadge then engaged in a written correspondence on that article. See Dennis C. Blair and Caitlin Talmadge, “Would China Go Nuclear?” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019.

## The Policy Implications of This Debate

Military planners would benefit greatly from a more accurate and empirical understanding of the conditions under which mainland strikes will or will not be authorized in order to inform force planning and war planning. Generals and admirals at Pacific Command, officials in the Office of Secretary of Defense, and all concerned with American military strategy have an interest in understanding the likelihood and conditions under which mainland China will or will not be, to borrow CSBA's terminology, a "sanctuary." The policy implications of this dissertation's research on mainland strikes are three-fold.

First, to the extent that this research suggests that current American military strategy towards China rests on unsound assumptions about the likelihood of mainland strikes, American strategists can devise new, alternative concepts of operations to counter the operational challenges posed by a strengthened Chinese military.<sup>44</sup> This sort of new thinking can be seen in the work of RAND's David Gompert, the National Defense University's T.X. Hammes, and the recent writings of CSBA.<sup>45</sup> These thinkers are searching for alternative strategies and concepts of operations because they believe that a President could be reluctant to authorize conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland.

Second, those charged with planning future military forces might design and procure different weapon systems based on different beliefs about the likelihood that conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland might or might not be authorized. For instance, Wayne Hughes of the Naval Postgraduate School has advocated that the Navy purchase relatively small, cruise missile-equipped ships able to conduct a "war at sea" strategy that at least delays the decision to strike targets on the Chinese mainland.<sup>46</sup> Credible evidence on the likelihood of mainland strikes being authorized can help foster a salutary conversation on the benefits and disadvantages of different American force planning assumptions about potential conflict with China.

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<sup>44</sup> I am indebted to the prior RAND research of Glenn Kent and David Ochmanek that emphasizes a "strategy to tasks" framework that focuses analytical attention first on strategy and concepts of operations and only then on procurement. Glenn A. Kent and David Ochmanek, "A Framework for Modernization within the United States Air Force," RAND, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> David Gompert and Terrence Kelly, "Escalation Cause," *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2013; David Gompert, "Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific," RAND, 2013; David Gompert, Astrid Cevallos, Cristina L. Garafola, "War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable," Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2016; See footnote 23 for the main writings of T.X. Hammes on this topic; Thomas G. Manhken, Travis Sharp, Billy Fabian, and Peter Kouretsos, *Tightening the Chain*.

<sup>46</sup> Kline and Hughes, "Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle."

Third, this research can help the American national security community develop a more accurate picture of a future U.S.-China war, informing their assessment of the relative difficulty for U.S. forces. Military commanders and civilian planners might then have a more refined understanding of potential casualty levels and equipment losses under different scenarios.

Perhaps most importantly, this dissertation rests on the conviction that any changes in U.S. military strategy towards China—including concepts of operations, procurement, and war planning—ought to rely on systematic, rigorous research that subjects the arguments of both sides of the mainland strikes debate to equally intense scrutiny. I hope this dissertation contributes to that research.

## **Roadmap**

Chapter 2 presents different theoretical perspectives on the determinants of mainland strikes and explains the research approaches employed in later chapters. Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the Korean and Vietnam Wars, respectively, and focus on the origins of geographic constraints on the conventional bombing campaigns during those wars. Chapter 5 presents evidence from twenty interviews of American national security elites about their decision-making logic related to mainland strikes. Chapter 6 analyzes the results of the online, scenario-based survey experiment of American national security elites. Chapter 7 summarizes key findings and offers insights for U.S. military strategy towards China.

## Chapter 2. Theories and Methods

Past scholarship provides useful theories to understand the general conditions under which conventional strikes on the homeland of a nuclear power might or might not be authorized. This chapter examines three theoretical categories of factors that could affect the likelihood of conventional escalation. The chapter then discusses the methodologies selected to analyze the effect of these factors on mainland strikes.

The theory portion of this chapter outlines three different models of the relationship between nuclear symmetry (mutual nuclear possession) and conventional intra-war escalation (increases in the intensity or geographic scope of non-nuclear violence). Nuclear weapons were included as an important theoretical perspective given that initial writings related to mainland strikes made references to nuclear strategy, albeit often in a relatively cursory manner. This section is meant to formalize many of the nuclear strategy assertions made by earlier strategists that debated the relative merits of mainland strikes. A second section discusses various scenario characteristics and their relationship to the likelihood of mainland strikes. This perspective, often minimized in traditional international relations scholarship, emphasizes the importance of a specific foreign policy situation, defined as the immediate environment faced by a decision-maker. A third section categorizes attributes and beliefs of individual decision-makers potentially related to their willingness to authorize mainland strikes.

The methodological portion of the chapter introduces the approaches used to study the determinants of conventional escalation and mainland strikes. One section covers the use of historical case studies, another the interviews of American national security elites, and a final section discusses the use of a scenario-based survey of American national security elites.

### Theories of Conventional Escalation and Mainland Strikes

Conventional escalation refers to increases in the intensity or geographic scope of non-nuclear violence that cross significant thresholds according to the participants involved.<sup>47</sup> It should be emphasized that this definition of escalation relies on the

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<sup>47</sup> Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2008, p. xi. Scholarship on conventional escalation can be viewed as part of a larger limited war literature. For treatments of limited war, see Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957; Morton H. Halperin, "Nuclear Weapons and Limited War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1961; Morton H. Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age*, New York: Jon Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1963; Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977; Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, Boulder, Colo.:

subjective judgments of the participants. Conventional strikes on the homeland of a nuclear power, particularly the Chinese mainland, can be appropriately categorized as a form of conventional escalation given that many participants in this debate have viewed mainland strikes as “escalatory.”<sup>48</sup> Because the debate over mainland strikes has been in large part about wartime rules of engagement, this dissertation concerns itself with *intrawar* conventional escalation, i.e. escalation after a crisis or war has started.<sup>49</sup>

## Theories of Nuclear Symmetry and Conventional Escalation

Nuclear symmetry and conventional escalation are concepts at the heart of the mainland strikes debate. Skeptics of mainland strikes, notably T.X. Hammes, believe that Chinese nuclear weapons reduce the probability of mainland strikes to nearly zero. Hammes writes, “The United States must accept that China’s nuclear arsenal imposes restrictions on the way American forces might attack Chinese assets.”<sup>50</sup> An American President, this camp argues, would be loath to risk nuclear war by embracing so escalatory a tactic as strikes on the homeland of a nuclear adversary. CSBA’s writing on *AirSea Battle*, the most forceful exposition of an operational concept relying primarily on mainland strikes, embraces an alternative perspective, though their argument is mostly implicit. Chinese and American nuclear weapons cancel each other out, creating mutual nuclear deterrence and thus freeing the American military to pursue escalatory tactics, such as conventional strikes, on the Chinese homeland.<sup>51</sup>

Both camps are drawing on venerable traditions in the world of nuclear strategy. But there has been surprisingly little connection made to date between nuclear strategy and conventional escalation. The seminal work on conventional escalation, Richard Smoke’s *War: Controlling Escalation*, devotes only a single, somewhat dismissive paragraph to nuclear weapons. It is worth quoting him in full to understand the motivation for this chapter’s close attention to nuclear weapons and conventional escalation.

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Westview Press, 1979; Christopher M. Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; Elbridge Colby, *America Must Prepare for ‘Limited War’*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2015

<sup>48</sup> See the debate between Elbridge Colby and T.X. Hammes cited in Chapter 1 footnotes 22 and 23.

<sup>49</sup> For scholarship on wartime rules of engagement, see Jeffrey W. Legro, *Cooperation Under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint During World War II*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995; Jeffrey W. Legro, “Military Culture and Inadvertent Escalation,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1994.

<sup>50</sup> T.X. Hammes, *Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Forum, 2012, p. 4. For related writings by Hammes, see T.X. Hammes, “Strategy and AirSea Battle,” *War on the Rocks*, July 23, 2013; T.X. Hammes, “Sorry, AirSea Battle is No Strategy,” *The National Interest*, August 7, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> See the paragraph-long “critical assumption” the report authors make on page 50 that “mutual nuclear deterrence holds.” Jan van Tol, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

The other piece is the assertion that in all recent military conflicts policy-makers have had in the back of their minds the possibility that sometime, somehow, the war might “go nuclear,” and that this has made a difference in their decisions, even in low-level conventional conflicts. This is true, I think, yet I am uncertain how much difference it has made—and in what direction(s) the implications point. On the one hand, it can be argued that the nuclear possibility makes everyone more cautious; on the other, it can be argued that it makes the scope much greater for brinkmanship, for calculated efforts to make gains by appearing irrational (“playing chicken”), and for other ways of deliberately manipulating a shared risk as part of one’s strategy. Which is it? In my opinion, probably some of both.<sup>52</sup>

Smoke’s choice to focus on pre-nuclear era cases perhaps contributed to his judgment. This chapter develops and extends Smoke’s proto-theorizing.

Before introducing three models relating these concepts, one more definition is in order. Nuclear symmetry exists when both states in a crisis or war possess nuclear weapons and delivery systems capable of striking relevant targets.<sup>53</sup> While other definitions are possible, this formulation possesses the merit of simplicity; a later subsection will discuss alternative definitions and their substantive implications.

Three models—caution, null, and emboldenment—predict different effects of nuclear symmetry on conventional escalation. In comparison to a crisis or war in which neither side possesses nuclear weapons, the caution model predicts less conventional escalation, the null model predicts no difference, and the emboldenment model predicts more conventional escalation. The sections below explain these models and their associated logics, present historical and statistical evidence in favor of each model, and formulate empirical predictions from the models.

### The Caution Model

This model suggests that nuclear symmetry introduces extreme caution into decision making on conventional escalation. When conflict does occur between nuclear states, each side employs force with severe operational restraints to avoid the catastrophic prospect of nuclear war. The simplest formulation of this school of thought might be: nuclear symmetry creates extreme caution. Two mechanisms exist by which nuclear weapons generate caution. The high costs logic emphasizes the tremendous costs of nuclear war. The accidental war logic argues that leaders fear that conventional escalation could result in accidental or inadvertent nuclear use. As result, leaders

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<sup>52</sup> Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>53</sup> There is a large literature on nuclear asymmetry, that is, on crises and wars in which one side possesses nuclear weapons and the other does not. This chapter excludes that research given that this project’s focus is on the interaction between the United States and China, two nuclear-armed powers.

restrain their actions and limit conventional escalation to minimize the possibility of accidental nuclear war.

### *The High Costs Logic*

The scholarship of Kenneth Waltz and Robert Jervis articulates the high costs logic, although a large body of work by other scholars expands on this theme.

Kenneth Waltz, in a 1981 Adelphi monograph, made the argument that more nuclear weapons means more peace and a reduced chance of conventional escalation. On the importance of nuclear weapons as a force for peace, he writes, “They [nuclear weapons] make the cost of war seem frighteningly high.”<sup>54</sup> He further explains that “the presence of nuclear weapons makes states exceedingly cautious.”<sup>55</sup> The consequence of nuclear weapons for conventional conflict between nuclear rivals is that “war has been confined geographically and limited militarily.”<sup>56</sup>

Robert Jervis also predicts that the high cost of mutual nuclear destruction will create tremendous caution during encounters between nuclear powers. Nuclear weapons, Jervis argues, are distinct from even massive uses of conventional force because nuclear devastation would be “unimaginably enormous,” mutual, and potentially swift.<sup>57</sup> After noting the “unusual...caution with which each superpower has treated the other,” he then offers a concise explanation of the total destruction logic.<sup>58</sup> He writes, “Nuclear weapons can explain superpower caution: when the cost of seeking excessive gains is an increased probability of total destruction, moderation makes sense.”<sup>59</sup>

Other prominent international relations scholars have made a similar argument, pinning the pacifying effects of nuclear weapons on the high costs logic.<sup>60</sup> This

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, London: Adelphi Papers, No. 171, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981, p. 3. See also Kenneth Waltz, “More May Be Better” in Scott Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003, pp. 3-45.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 2, 24-25.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Jervis, “The Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons: A Comment,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1988, p. 83.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 80.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81. See also Robert Jervis, *The Illlogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984, pp. 24-25.

<sup>60</sup> Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 450.

mechanism reduces the probability that nuclear states will engage in conflict and reduces conventional escalation should war occur.

### *The Accidental War Logic*

A second logic by which nuclear weapons induce caution and reduce the incentives for conventional escalation is the fear of accidental nuclear war.<sup>61</sup> As a result, leaders and advisers might avoid tactics that have battlefield utility but which could increase the probability of accidental nuclear use.

The term “accidental” is intentionally broad and subsumes not only accidental but also inadvertent nuclear use.<sup>62</sup> Fear of accidental nuclear use includes fear that the enemy’s nuclear forces might be used even though the adversary’s leadership did not wish to use them. This pathway to nuclear war has been explored by scholars including Paul Bracken, Bruce Blair, Scott Sagan, and Eric Schlosser and includes proximate causes like mechanical failures and failures of command and control.<sup>63</sup> For this research, accidental use also includes what has been termed “inadvertent” nuclear use. Inadvertent nuclear use occurs when a combatant’s actions are unintentionally escalatory, crossing a threshold of one party that the other party failed to realize was a red line. A reluctance to use conventional escalation could therefore arise from an uncertainty over adversary red lines related to nuclear use.

A relatively new pathway to accidental nuclear war arises from nuclear-conventional entanglement, systems that have both “conventional” warfighting roles and roles related to nuclear warfare.<sup>64</sup> Recent scholarship has speculated in particular about the precise ways that Chinese nuclear systems are entangled and the implications of this entanglement for American military strategy and the possibility of a U.S.-China conventional war becoming a nuclear war.<sup>65</sup> Scholars have worried that if the United

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 188; Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 12-13, 20-21, 137-140, 168, 170; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 21-22, 238.

<sup>62</sup> These definitions come from the work of Forrest Morgan and other RAND researchers. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, pp. 23-28.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Bracken, *The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983; Bruce G. Blair, *Strategic Command and Control*, The Brookings Institution, 1985; Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993; Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control*, New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> James M. Acton, “Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2018, p. 58.

<sup>65</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, “Will China Go Nuclear: Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2017; Joshua Rovner,

States employs mainland strike—conventional strikes on targets located on the Chinese mainland—Chinese leaders could misperceive these strikes as part of a disarming, counterforce campaign. This risk of misperception, these writers theorize, could increase the probability that China actually uses nuclear weapons in a future U.S.-China war.

### *Historical and Statistical Evidence for the Caution Model*

According to the caution model, great power politics before the atomic bomb was a deadly affair that twice in the twentieth century resulted in world war. Only NATO and Soviet possession of nuclear weapons prevented inevitable Cold War crises from spiraling out of control.<sup>66</sup> When crisis did occur, notably during the Cuban Missile Crisis, both sides restrained their use of conventional force, limiting the amount of force employed and restricting the geography of conflict, in order to reduce the possibility of nuclear war.<sup>67</sup> The caution model also predicts reduced conventional escalation in India-Pakistan crises because “states approaching nuclear conflict invariably retreat from confrontation.”<sup>68</sup> Scholars cite other historical cases too.<sup>69</sup>

This school of thought can also point to statistical evidence in favor of its argument, though these articles tend to focus on the occurrence of war rather than the extent of conventional escalation. Victor Asal and Kyle Beardsley have published two quantitative articles whose key findings support the caution model.<sup>70</sup> Robert Rauchhaus,

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“Two Kinds of Catastrophe: Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2017; Thomas J. Christensen, “The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China’s Strategic Modernization and US-China Security Relations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2012

<sup>66</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Spring 1986, pp. 99, 120-123; Jervis, “The Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons: A Comment”; Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, p. 30. For a recent essay premised on the pacifying effect of American nuclear weapons, strategic and tactical, during the Cold War, see Elbridge Colby, “If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1999, pp. 115, 118, 229; Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*, New York: Vintage, 2009, pp. 21-23, 229, 271, 324.

<sup>68</sup> Rajesh M. Basrur, “Correspondence: Do Small Arsenals Deter?” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2007/8, p. 203; Martin van Creveld, *Nuclear Proliferation and the Future of Conflict*, Free Press, 1993, pp. 77-96.

<sup>69</sup> For case research based on China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and the Arab states, see Van Creveld, *Nuclear Proliferation and the Future of Conflict*, pp. 65-121.

<sup>70</sup> Their 2007 article used the International Crisis Behavior Dataset, specifically crises between 1945 and 2001, and an ordered logit model to demonstrate that the greater the number of nuclear states involved in a crisis the less violent the ultimate outcome of the crisis. Their later article finds that crises in which both sides possess nuclear weapons (compared to crises in which neither side possesses nuclear weapons) have a shorter duration, which is consistent with the logic of the caution model. Victor Asal and Kyle

employing Correlates of War data, has also found that nuclear weapons significantly and dramatically reduced the occurrence of major war.<sup>71</sup> Other scholars, using increasingly advanced statistical techniques, have come to similar conclusions.<sup>72</sup>

### *Empirical Predictions and Implications for Mainland Strikes*

The caution model expects that an adversary's possession of nuclear weapons will cause leaders to exercise restraint when using force, that is, to dampen conventional escalation. For the Korean War and the Vietnam war case studies, this theory predicts that these leaders did not strike some targets for fear of nuclear escalation. Similarly, for the interviews and survey portion of this dissertation, this theory suggests that elites will be fearful of potential Chinese nuclear use despite U.S. possession of nuclear weapons.<sup>73</sup> The fear will result from the high costs of nuclear war (the high costs logic), the possibility of accidental or inadvertent nuclear use (the accidental war logic), both, or perhaps through a currently unarticulated logic.

For a modern war between the United States and a nuclear-armed power, this theory predicts that an American president will exercise extreme caution in authorizing conventional strikes on the adversary's homeland. President and their advisers will

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Beardsley, "Proliferation and International Crisis Behavior," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2007; Kyle Beardsley and Victor Asal, "Winning with the Bomb," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Rauchhaus, "Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2009. It should be noted that this paper was later challenged. See Mark S. Bell and Nicholas L. Miller, "Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Vipin Narang analyzed data from 1816 to 1992 (and 2001 in a second statistical check) and argues that "asymmetric escalation" nuclear postures among regional nuclear powers reduce the probability of conflict at all levels of intensity. A later section of this chapter will return to this article. It's also true that this article finds that mutually assured destruction nuclear postures do not reduce the probability of conflict, a finding that conflicts with the predictions of the caution school. Narang explains this finding by emphasizing the importance of different nuclear postures, which he defines as the primary envisioned employment, capabilities, command and control, and transparency of the nuclear state. Narang's theory therefore emphasizes that only an asymmetric escalation posture, one that emphasizes nuclear first-use, tactical nuclear weapons, and decentralized command and control, leads to caution and therefore lower levels of violence. Akisato Suzuki examined the relationship between the total number of nuclear states and the number of militarized interstate disputes between 1950 and 2009 with a Random Forests machine learning model, finding that the greater the number of nuclear states present in the world the fewer the number of militarized interstate disputes. Vipin Narang, "What Does It Take to Deter? Regional Power Nuclear Postures and International Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2013; Akisato Suzuki, "Is More Better or Worse? New Empirics on Nuclear Proliferation and Interstate Conflict by Random Forests," *Research and Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2015.

<sup>73</sup> There is potentially a contradiction built into this theory. One might expect the caution model also to predict that Chinese leaders will also be cautious because of American possession of nuclear weapons. In this case, American leaders, knowing that Chinese leaders will be cautious, will no longer be worried about potential Chinese nuclear use. This logic is similar to the null model logic explored shortly. The caution model does not expect leaders to use this multi-level thinking.

foresee pathways that lead to nuclear war and restrict American rules of engagement and the level of force used in order to minimize nuclear danger. The high costs logic predicts that a president and his advisers will emphasize the existential danger of nuclear war when placing tight restraints on the American military. The accidental war logic predicts that a president and his advisers might view mainland strikes against a nuclear-armed nation as initiating a hard-to-control and dangerous chain of events. In order to avoid the associated risks, the President may insist on tight rules of engagement. This logic might be particularly pertinent if American leaders fear Chinese conventional-nuclear entanglement.

### The Null Model

According to the null model, mutual nuclear possession produces no discernible effect on conventional escalation compared to a world free of nuclear weapons. Nuclear powers treat other nuclear powers as if the nuclear revolution never occurred. War between nuclear powers remains possible and crises between nuclear adversaries are just as likely to spin out of control as crises between non-nuclear states. When leaders consider using force against a nuclear-armed adversary, they do not act particularly cautious and do not restrain their decisions on conventional escalation for fear of nuclear war. Instead, leaders act much the way leaders have always acted, sometimes cautiously, sometimes incautiously. Nuclear weapons are only a minor part of the decision-making equation. The null effect arises from two logics. The irrelevance logic holds that war in the modern world has already achieved a sufficiently deadly reputation that nuclear weapons are superfluous in explaining the unwillingness of leaders to risk war or to initiate greater conventional escalation between great powers. The stalemate logic proposes that nuclear arsenals cancel each other out, allowing both sides to act as if the relationship were free of nuclear weapons.

### *The Irrelevance Logic*

John Mueller's article "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons" captures the central propositions of scholars who argue that nuclear weapons are irrelevant in explaining patterns of conflict and escalation in international politics.<sup>74</sup> These scholars believe that the same forces that explain escalation in conflict between non-nuclear powers explain conflict between nuclear-armed adversaries. Mueller explains his logic with a metaphor:

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<sup>74</sup> Mueller, "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1988; John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, Basic Books, 1989, pp. 94, 110-16; John Mueller, "Nuclear Weapons Don't Matter: But Hysteria Does," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2018.

It is probably quite a bit more terrifying to think about a jump from the 50<sup>th</sup> floor than about a jump from the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, but anyone who finds life even minimally satisfying is extremely unlikely to do either.<sup>75</sup>

Mueller concedes that nuclear war is particularly horrific, but he postulates that major war, even absent nuclear weapons, has already become sufficiently costly such that it induces caution among leaders. Richard Ned Lebow similarly sees pre-nuclear and post-nuclear crisis and war behavior by statesmen as essentially the same. He writes:

If willingness to accept war as an outcome of crisis is measured along a continuum ranging from least to most, nuclear crises are certainly to be found clustered around the negative pole, but, as we have seen, some conventional crises are to be found there as well...Thus, the distinctions between conventional and nuclear crises may be more in degree than in kind.<sup>76</sup>

War and the results of higher levels of conventional escalation can be undesirable even in crises without nuclear weapons. Restraints on the use of force, according to the null model, are not the inevitable byproduct of nuclear weapons.

### *The Stalemate Logic*

Robert McNamara advances an alternative logic to explain the minimal role that nuclear weapons play in international politics. In a 1983 *Foreign Affairs* article, he wrote, "They [nuclear weapons] are totally useless—except to deter one's opponent from using them."<sup>77</sup> This logic suggests that two nuclear arsenals cancel each other out. The leaders of each state recognize that their opponent could retaliate with nuclear weapons in response to nuclear first-use and therefore nuclear weapons become useless, except, of course, to deter nuclear use by the adversary.

Vipin Narang's theorizing on nuclear postures also endorses this logic. He postulates a theory that suggests that an "assured retaliation" nuclear posture fails to deter even intense conventional attacks and escalatory conventional tactics.<sup>78</sup> His analysis of Pakistani and Indian foreign policy behavior and a separate statistical analysis bolster his theorizing.<sup>79</sup> Nuclear weapons produce stalemate and therefore

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<sup>75</sup> Mueller, "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons," pp. 66-67.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, pp. 15-17.

<sup>77</sup> Robert S. McNamara, "The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions," *Foreign Affairs*, 1983.

<sup>78</sup> Vipin Narang, "Posturing for Peace? Pakistan's Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2009/10, pp. 43-44.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* See also Narang, "What Does It Take to Deter? Regional Power Nuclear Postures and International Conflict."

allow statesmen to recommence international politics as usual, using force as if nuclear weapons did not exist at all.

### *Historical and Statistical Evidence*

Null model advocates point to historical evidence in favor of their theory. Richard Ned Lebow analyzed twenty-six historical crises—including six from the post-World War II atomic era—and found that crisis behavior differed little before and after the advent of nuclear weapons.<sup>80</sup> Writing in 1981, Lebow states, “The generic cause of crisis, the principles of strategic bargaining and the problems of crisis decision-making, appear to have changed very little during the last fifty or even seventy-five years.”<sup>81</sup> John Mueller argues that nuclear weapons are unnecessary to explain the absence of direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>82</sup> He writes,

nuclear weapons and the image of destruction they inspire were not necessary to induce the people who have been running world affairs since 1945 to be extremely wary of repeating the experience of World War II (or for that matter, of World War I).<sup>83</sup>

Research on the 1969 Sino-Soviet Border War provides some support too; a close reading of secondary Soviet and Chinese sources finds that China’s nascent nuclear arsenal did not explain the Soviet Union’s decision to forego a wider attack on China.<sup>84</sup>

A range of statistical studies lend further support to the null model. Paul Huth and Bruce Russett find that possession of nuclear weapons fails to predict successful deterrence of attack on a third party (“extended deterrence”) in a dataset of 54 post-1900 cases.<sup>85</sup> Erik Gartzke and Dong-Joon Jo use militarized interstate dispute data

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<sup>80</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, pp. 15-17. For the list of cases, see p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 14-15.

<sup>82</sup> John Mueller, *The Remnants of War*. See also John Mueller, “The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World,” p. 56. For others who agree with this logic, see Ward Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, pp. 87-103.

<sup>83</sup> Mueller, *The Remnants of War*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>84</sup> Lyle J. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter? The Sino-Soviet Crisis of 1969,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 1, 2003.

<sup>85</sup> This finding is weak for two reasons: 1) The results approached statistical significance ( $p = .12$ ) and 2) the results hinged on the decision to include or exclude Vietnam from the dataset. See pp. 517-518. A later study by the same authors using an expanded dataset is stronger and comes to same conclusion, finding that the “defender’s possession of nuclear weapons makes little difference.” Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900 to 1980,” *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, July 1984; Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “Deterrence Failure and Crisis Escalation,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, 1988. The authors again caution against excessive faith in their results, emphasizing that they only have “limited confidence” in their statistical analysis.

from 1945 to 2001 and find that nuclear weapons do not affect conflict propensity.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Bell and Miller re-evaluate the analysis of Robert Rauchhaus, mentioned in the caution model section, concluding that interactions between nuclear-armed states are not significantly less likely to result in war.<sup>87</sup> Other empirical quantitative studies have come to similar conclusions.<sup>88</sup>

### *Empirical Predictions and Implications for Mainland Strikes*

The logic of the null model predicts that a leader will be willing to use force or escalatory measures against nuclear-armed adversaries. In the historical case studies, the null model, if correct, suggests that top decision-makers will select targets and write rules of engagement without regard for the enemy's nuclear capabilities. The model also suggests that the interview and survey responses will show American elites to be indifferent or perhaps unafraid of Chinese nuclear weapons when considering conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. Either because other considerations already determine their decision-making (the irrelevance logic) or because leaders believe mutual nuclear arsenals cancel out each other's effects (the stalemate logic), leaders will not give much weight to nuclear weapons when deciding on rules of engagement for employing conventional force.

The implications of the null model for strikes on the homeland of a nuclear power are clear: an American administration would view adversary nuclear threats as incredible and therefore feel free to strike targets on an adversary's homeland as operational concerns dictate. The irrelevance logic suggests that adversary nuclear weapons would play only a minor role, if any, in the president's decision-making calculus; there already exist a sufficient number of other critical factors to understand a president's actions. The stalemate logic envisions a president and his advisers believing that the American nuclear arsenal makes adversary nuclear use irrational, enabling the use of conventional forces as if nuclear forces did not exist at all.

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<sup>86</sup> Of note, their specific theory and empirical testing suggests that opponents accommodate nuclear powers during disputes and the authors theorize that this accommodation accounts for the null effect on conflict. This causal mechanism is in tension with the other predictions of the null model, but I have decided to include this article within the null model given the statistical evidence in favor of no effect of nuclear weapons on conflict. Erik Gartzke and Dong-Joon Jo, "Bargaining, Nuclear Proliferation, and Interstate Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 2, April 2009.

<sup>87</sup> Bell and Miller, "Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict."

<sup>88</sup> Because these studies use relatively crude methods, most modern researchers will consider these articles outmoded. Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1978, pp. 127-129; A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, esp. pp. 147-179; Jacek Kugler, "Terror without Deterrence: Reassessing the Role of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1984.

## Nuclear Emboldenment

A third school of thought views nuclear symmetry as potentially increasing the frequency and intensity of conflict and conventional escalation between nuclear-armed rivals. Nuclear arsenals neither induce caution nor simply produce stalemate. Instead, nuclear weapons and especially nuclear superiority can be used to bargain during crisis and war, enabling states to achieve outcomes more favorable than those in a non-nuclear world. In fact, leaders might use ever higher levels of conventional force against another nuclear power due to their belief that their rival fears nuclear escalation to a greater degree. In other words, nuclear weapons can be marshalled to use levels of conventional force that might otherwise be eschewed. Importantly, two separate logics undergird the predictions made by emboldenment theorists. The nuclear superiority logic argues that a superior nuclear arsenal allows some leaders to “push harder” in a crisis, using greater levels of force or more escalatory tactics, increasing the likelihood that states with superior nuclear arsenals achieve their international political goals. The stability-instability paradox logic suggests that a leader can use an enemy’s perception of nuclear stalemate to employ increasingly higher levels of conventional escalation.

### *Nuclear Superiority Logic*

Matthew Kroenig explicates the chain of assumptions that connects nuclear superiority to behavior in crises between nuclear-armed states.<sup>89</sup> Possessing a larger nuclear arsenal compared to another nuclear adversary first convinces the leader of the state with superiority that it will incur fewer costs in the event of nuclear war than it otherwise would if it lacked nuclear superiority. This confidence leads to an increase in resolve. Buoyed by this increase in resolve and willing to “push harder,” the state with nuclear superiority can use riskier tactics, greater levels of force, and ultimately achieve victory.

### *Stability-Instability Paradox*

Another logic predicts that mutual nuclear possession leads to increases in the frequency and intensity in the use of conventional force between nuclear rivals. This logic claims that nuclear weapons enable both sides to engage in “low-level” uses of force with impunity. Glenn Snyder most famously formulated this theory: “the greater the stability of the ‘strategic’ balance, the lower the stability of the overall balance at lower levels of violence.”<sup>90</sup> Robert Jervis has also contributed to this theory, characterizing it in

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<sup>89</sup> Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 15-26. See also Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,” *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2013, pp. 146-152.

<sup>90</sup> Glenn Snyder in Paul Seabury, *Balance of Power*, New York: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965, pp. 198-199.

this way: “To the extent that military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence.”<sup>91</sup>

In plain language, the stability-instability paradox predicts that when both adversaries possess nuclear weapons, perhaps especially when both achieve secure second-strike status, then both states will engage in more provocative behavior at “lower” levels of conflict.<sup>92</sup> “Stability” in the nuclear realm, often defined as a state of mutually assured destruction, results in “instability,” in the form of more use of conventional force and conventional escalation at all levels short of nuclear war.

### *Historical and Statistical Evidence*

Believers in emboldenment, especially the nuclear superiority logic, often point to the Cuban Missile Crisis as an example that lends credence to their argument. Marc Trachtenberg makes a version of this argument when he claims that in the Cuban Missile Crisis “the Soviets seem to have been profoundly affected by their ‘strategic inferiority.’”<sup>93</sup> In this interpretation, the effect of American nuclear superiority was to “tie their [the Soviet’s] hands, to limit their freedom of maneuver, and thus to increase their incentive to settle the crisis quickly.”<sup>94</sup> Matthew Kroenig, the key modern proponent of theories of nuclear superiority, also points to the Cuban Missile Crisis for evidence. He cites statements by several senior American officials—Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other anonymous senior officials—that suggest that the favorable American nuclear balance increased the resolve of the American side.<sup>95</sup> Some scholars also point to India-Pakistan crisis behavior as similar evidence of nuclear emboldenment.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, p. 31.

<sup>92</sup> The precise definition of “lower” levels of violence is contested. Snyder’s essay mentioned earlier includes “initiating conventional war...[and] the limited use of nuclear weapons” in his definition of lower levels of violence. Snyder, 1965, p. 199. Others believe that “lower” levels of violence should be confined to insurgency and terrorism. For the purposes of this study, I use the wider definition originally employed by Snyder.

<sup>93</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, “The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1985, p. 163.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* Strangely, Trachtenberg also reports that the nuclear balance “did not have an important direct influence on American policy.” Nuclear superiority seems to have mattered less to the American side than nuclear inferiority to the Soviets. See his summary of the results on pages 162-163.

<sup>95</sup> Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,” pp. 150-151.

<sup>96</sup> S. Paul Kapur, “India and Pakistan’s Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not Like Cold War Europe,” *International Security*, Vol., 30, No. 2, 2006, p. 142. Kroenig also cites this case. Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,” p. 151. See also Ashley J. Tellis, C. Christine Fair, and Jamison Jo Medby, *Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001, pp. 77, 79.

The emboldenment school also relies on statistical evidence. Kroenig's 2013 *International Organization* article defines this line of research. Using a dataset of twenty post-WWII crises, he argues that nuclear superiority leads to victory in crisis.<sup>97</sup> Rauchhaus's statistical research, mentioned earlier in the caution school section, also bears on the emboldenment school. His statistical results conform with the predictions of the stability-instability paradox: the statistical analysis suggests that disputes, disputes with fatalities, and uses of force all increase under conditions of nuclear symmetry.<sup>98</sup> Nuclear weapons might therefore provide a shield from behind which nuclear-armed states are even more willing (compared to a nuclear free world) to challenge even nuclear-armed adversaries.

### *Empirical Predictions and Implications for Mainland Strikes*

The emboldenment model sees leaders employing more and greater conventional escalation in situations of mutual nuclear possession compared to a nuclear-free world. Due either to nuclear superiority or the freeing effects of the stability-instability paradox, this school of thought sees more conflict, potentially waged at greater intensity, among nuclear-armed states. In the historical case studies, the emboldenment model suggests that decision-makers may opt for escalatory uses of conventional force against nuclear opponents. The model further suggests the interviewees and survey-takers will be willing to authorize mainland strikes to the extent that they perceive America to be in a position of nuclear superiority or that they believe America's nuclear arsenal shields it from Chinese counter-actions.

The emboldenment model implies that American decision-makers will be willing to authorize conventional strikes on the homeland of a nuclear power, if decisionmakers perceive American nuclear superiority or there is a belief that nuclear weapons provide protection from escalatory Chinese responses.

### Final Comments on Nuclear Symmetry and Conventional Escalation

Some readers might object to defining nuclear symmetry as mutual possession of nuclear weapons and delivery capabilities capable of striking relevant targets. Such a reader might prefer a definition that restricts the definition to mutual possession of secure second-strike arsenals, a nuclear posture invulnerable to an adversary's surprise attack. One response to this concern is to concede that there are two versions of each

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<sup>97</sup> Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve," p. 154. This article has generated controversy. For one exchange between Kroenig's main critics, Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd Sechser, and Kroenig himself, see Duck of Minerva Blog, "Debating the Benefits of Nuclear Superiority for Crisis Bargaining," Parts I, II, III, and IV, 2013. See also Dana Higgins, Connor Huff, and Anton Strezhnev, "Survivability not Superiority: A Critique of Kroenig (2013)", Working Paper, Harvard University, 2013.

<sup>98</sup> Rauchhaus, "Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis," p. 270.

model described earlier: one that uses the broad definition that emphasizes possession and another that uses the narrower secure second-strike definition. Which variant is superior can be left to empirical research. Some critics might emphasize that small nuclear arsenals, arsenals that lack protection from an enemy's first strike, should not count as nuclear symmetry. There is some theory and evidence that supports this view.<sup>99</sup> More generally, the line between secure second-strike and other arsenals is murky, and worthy of a research project explicitly geared to measuring the transformation of an arsenal. Given the blurriness, this project takes no definitive stand and instead pays attention to this concern in its empirical sections, especially the historical case studies.

Another broad objection to my discussion of the caution and emboldenment models is my failure to specify whether nuclear use must be explicitly threatened for these logics to operate. This project opts for a broad definition of nuclear threat: both the explicit and implicit threat of nuclear use. My sympathy lies with the slightly amended passage below:

A standoff between nuclear-armed opponents is a nuclear crisis whether or not nuclear weapons are used, are explicitly threatened, or are the subject of the dispute, because the very existence of nuclear weapons and the possibility that they could be used [potentially] have a decisive bearing on bargaining dynamics.<sup>100</sup>

I inserted "potentially" into the Kroenig quote to signal my view that his observation is a working hypothesis and not a proven statement. Until sufficient empirical evidence proves otherwise, it seems prudent to allow for the possibility that nuclear weapons need not be explicitly threatened to trigger caution or enable coercion. Nuclear weapons, unless the null model operates, are not so unassuming that world leaders ought to overlook their opponent's possession.

## Scenario Characteristics

Attributes of the situation that a foreign policy maker faces, which I label scenario characteristics, also potentially explain levels of conventional escalation.<sup>101</sup> A foreign policy situation includes, for instance, the actions and preferences of an ally, enemy

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<sup>99</sup> Goldstein, "Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter? The Sino-Soviet Crisis of 1969." Basrur objects to the evidence in Goldstein's article though. Basrur, "Correspondence: Do Small Arsenals Deter?"

<sup>100</sup> Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve," p. 142. Kroenig was not the first to make this point as he mentions in his article. For instance, see Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 126-146.

<sup>101</sup> This emphasis on the importance of a scenario has its genesis in James Q. Wilson's "situational imperatives." While Wilson focus on street-level operators like police "handling the situation," this section emphasizes that leaders and advisors must deal with the external pressures created by other parties. James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, New York: Basic Books, 1989, pp. 36-44.

actions, military-operational aspects, and the availability of other foreign policy tools. Scenario characteristics lack systematic treatment in international relations scholarship. Individual pieces of scholarship sometimes emphasize scenario-related variables, but there is no theoretical category for these variables with the same status as Kenneth Waltz's three images: individuals, states, and the international system.<sup>102</sup> Readers who wonder if this lack of focus on scenarios is the result of a disciplinary focus on system-level outcomes in international relations might be surprised that even *Foreign Policy Analysis*, the journal devoted to studying a state's foreign policy, has an explicitly "actor-specific" focus.<sup>103</sup> Scenario characteristics and their effects on phenomena within international relations is an under-theorized and under-explored aspect of international relations. This section describes several salient features of a scenario that potentially bear on a decisionmaker's or advisor's willingness to authorize (or recommend) conventional escalation, particularly mainland strikes. This listing is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather a first step towards formalizing the different dimensions of a foreign policy situation.

This theoretical perspective is also motivated by the observation that participants in the early mainland strikes debate often stressed different and sometimes contrasting scenario characteristics when analyzing the likelihood of mainland strikes. The analysis from CSBA often highlights the likelihood of Chinese conventional strikes on American forces in the Pacific during a future U.S.-China conflict; T.X. Hammes' writings does not accentuate this scenario factor to the same degree.<sup>104</sup> These divergent views of a future war could partially explain their different attitudes towards mainland strikes. Similarly, CSBA analysis often emphasizes relatively comprehensive conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland as part of a "blinding" campaign while Elbridge Colby's analyses tend to note the possibility of relatively limited strikes on the Chinese mainland. This potential difference in scenarios could also be salient in a future conflict.

### Ally Actions and Preferences

Alexander George and Richard Smoke originally identified the important role of allies in defining the likelihood and nature of American conventional escalation.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, Columbia University Press, 1959.

<sup>103</sup> "About the Journal," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, accessed April 18, 2019, available at <https://academic.oup.com/fpa/pages/About>.

<sup>104</sup> van Tol et al, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, pp. xiii-xv, 12, 19-21, 24; See the T.X. Hammes articles cited in Chapter 1, footnote 23.

<sup>105</sup> Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1974, p. 50. One note on terminology: the word ally, for the purposes of my project, denotes both formal treaty allies and partners, or nations that share interests with the United States but with which there is no formal military obligation. In the context of a potential U.S.-China war, the distinction between ally and partner is significant. American military operations potentially rely on facilities in partner countries. See Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Jennifer Kavanagh, *Access Granted:*

American foreign policy is often executed on behalf of its allies and partners and American conduct in East Asia is no exception. Any conflict with China would likely involve an American ally or partner: Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, or, most importantly for this research, Taiwan. The conflict could even be fought explicitly to protect these countries from Chinese aggression. The actions and preferences of these allies could therefore be important in shaping American elite and public attitudes towards conventional escalation.

If an ally acts recklessly or otherwise provokes an attack upon itself, American decisionmakers could be less inclined to intervene and even if they did intervene, decisionmakers might be less inclined to cross conventional escalation thresholds. In the case of Taiwan, past American strategy has emphasized that strong American support is predicated upon a moderate Taiwanese policy towards China and cross-strait relations.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, should an ally prefer to be left out of a conflict and therefore potentially shielded from the harm of war or the harm of a particular action, it might object to American use of bases for the purposes of the conflict. Moreover, allied leaders could threaten to reduce their military contributions in future conflicts. For instance, Japan could object to the use of its bases for mainland strikes. American decision-makers might heed Japanese objections in order to protect the alliance relationship.

### Enemy Actions

In war, because the enemy gets a vote, their actions must be a central part of a framework for scenario characteristics. Enemy decisionmakers play a part in controlling the pace and geography of war, influencing the pace of escalation in the process. Their actions can create American casualties and attrition, cross American redlines, and play a role in defining the situation American policymakers face. Adversary actions can also indicate their level of aggressiveness, shaping American perceptions of future adversary behavior and the justifiability of a given American response.<sup>107</sup> More escalatory enemy actions will likely lead to a greater willingness on the behalf of American leaders and advisors to recommend conventional escalation and mainland strikes.

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*Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence, 1945-2014*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2016.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, "A Strong and Moderate Taiwan," speech delivered at the 2007 U.S.-Taiwan Business Council, Defense Industry Conference, Annapolis, Maryland, September 11, 2007.

<sup>107</sup> This idea that an adversary's action, if left without a response, could lead to future adversary aggression matches Glenn Snyder's idea of "deterrent value," which he describes as "the effect of a response in reducing the probability of enemy attacks against other areas in the future." Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 32.

## Operational Aspects

A host of factors related to the military operation associated with conventional escalation can also influence the likelihood of an American president embracing a particular action. The geographic location of a target can be important; its location near international borders, across an international border, or near diplomatically sensitive sites, for instance, could all affect crossing a particular conventional escalation threshold.

Two factors are especially worth highlighting. First, the early stages of a scenario could differ greatly from later stages. The first days, weeks, or even months of a conflict can be filled with uncertainty about potential enemy actions, the possibility of peaceful resolution, and other considerations too. Decision-makers might be reluctant to engage in using greater levels of force before the situation becomes clearer. Second, the probability of operational failure and the possibility of failing to accomplish key political and military objectives will surely be an important part of any calculation to use mainland strikes. All things equal, the worse the prospects for political and operational victory, the greater the need and likelihood of mainland strikes.

## Availability of Other Foreign Policy Tools

A final formal category of scenario-related characteristics concerns the availability of alternative foreign policy tools in a given situation.<sup>108</sup> Decisionmakers and advisers considering a particular form of conventional escalation, such as whether to initiate mainland strikes and to what extent, must weigh that option against relevant alternatives. Diplomatic, economic, and even other military alternatives might all out-perform some form of conventional escalation, leading the President and his advisers to shelve a particular action.

The implication is that decision-makers with more appealing alternatives to some form of conventional escalation will, all things equal, be less likely to endorse conventional escalation. In this sense, conventional escalation will only be considered by its *relative* merits and not on an absolute scale.

The scenario characteristics described above are not intended to be a comprehensive list. However, these are the specific scenario-related factors that this research will focus upon.

## Final Comments on Scenario Characteristics

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<sup>108</sup> Amy Oakes formally recognizes the importance of policy alternatives in her theorizing on when leaders initiate diversionary conflict. Amy Oakes, *Diversionary War: Domestic Unrest and International Conflict*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Scenario characteristics as a conceptual category within international relations have gotten short shrift and, within the mainland strikes debate, scenario characteristics have been treated largely implicitly. This dissertation attempts to redress this situation. Future work ought to expand or revise these proposed scenario-related categories.

## **Individuals**

That different individuals might make different foreign policy decisions is both appealing to common sense and backed—to varying degrees—by a long research tradition in political science. A theoretical emphasis and investigation of leaders (so-called “first image” theorizing) has been an important, though sometimes criticized, part of international relations theorizing since Kenneth Waltz’s *Man, the State, and War*.<sup>109</sup> And while the mainland strikes debate in its written form has largely omitted discussion of the role of individual leaders and administrations, analysts have often voiced to this author their perceptions that the beliefs and attributes of the future American president and the president’s advisers surely matter in determining the likelihood and scope of mainland strikes.

This section therefore articulates several attributes and beliefs of individuals that are potentially linked to a willingness to endorse higher levels of conventional escalation and mainland strikes in particular.

## Military Background

This study pays particular attention to the effect of current or prior military service on the willingness of a leader or advisor to authorize conventional escalation during war. A focus on military service as a determinant of foreign policy attitudes and behavior has a long history in strategic studies scholarship. Samuel Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State* first articulated the idea of a distinct military mindset that “rarely favors war”

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<sup>109</sup> A recent special issue of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* focuses on the importance of leaders in international conflict. See volume 62, Issue 10 of the *Journal of Resolution* (2018). Michael Horowitz and Matthew Fuhrmann introduce this special issue with a helpful summary article. Michael C. Horowitz and Matthew Fuhrmann, “Studying Leaders and Military Conflict: Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2018. For two defenses of first-image approaches to international relations, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesmen Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2001; Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*, Cornell University Press, 2011. For a set of articles that treat leader characteristics—including both backgrounds and beliefs—as an important independent variable in international politics, see Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, “Honor and War: Southern U.S. Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation,” *World Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 2, 2016; Julia Macdonald, “Presidential Risk Orientation and Force Employment Decisions: The Case of Unmanned Weaponry,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2017; Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, “Nuclear Beliefs: A Leader-Focused Theory of Counter-Proliferation,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2017.

compared to the preferences of his civilian counterparts.<sup>110</sup> Richard Betts qualified Huntington's characterization, arguing that military officers have distinct pre-war and intra-war attitudes towards the use of force.<sup>111</sup> Drawing on early Cold War historical cases including the Korean War and Vietnam War, he argues pre-war caution transforms into a preference for intra-war escalation. In a reference to the attitudes of military officers after a war starts, he writes, "Generals prefer using force quickly, massively, and decisively."<sup>112</sup> Betts also finds that Air Force generals, Navy admirals, and field commanders most exemplified this tendency.<sup>113</sup> Two statistical articles, one by Christopher Gelpi and Peter Feaver and another by Michael Horowitz and Allan Stam, find evidence that corroborates the theory advanced by Betts.<sup>114</sup>

Military advisors, according to Huntington's depiction of military officers as cautious realists, will eschew conventional escalation. Military officers will be less likely than their civilian peers to recommend strikes on the mainland. Bett's image of military advisors suggest the opposite once the war has begun. Military leaders will embrace conventional escalation mid-war in their preference for decisive force. Military officers might therefore have more favorable attitudes towards mainland strikes.

A vein of scholarship that explores the exact content of the so-called military mindset blossomed after the early civil-military relation texts of Huntington and Betts. In separate lines of research published in the 1980s, Barry Posen, Jack Snyder, and Stephen van Evera all developed this theoretical perspective.<sup>115</sup>

### Political Party

Conventional wisdom among commentators on American foreign policy holds that Republicans tend to hold more "hawkish" views than Democrats. Survey evidence supports this assertion.<sup>116</sup> There is some recent, though tentative, evidence that

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<sup>110</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, Belknap Press, 1957, p. 69.

<sup>111</sup> Richard Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, pp. 4-5.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 117, 119-122, 142.

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Gelpi and Peter D. Feaver, "Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick? Veterans in the Political Elite and the American Use of Force," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4, 2002; Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 3, 2014.

<sup>115</sup> Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars*, Cornell University Press, 1984; Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1984; Stephen van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1984.

<sup>116</sup> Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, "What Americans Think about America First: Results of the 2017 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2017, pp. 9, 32, 34; Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and

Republican hawkishness also extends to views towards China. In a recent Chicago Council of Global Affairs survey, for instance, 46 and 47 percent, respectively, of Republicans and core supporters of President Trump backed the use of U.S. troops if China initiated a military conflict with Japan about disputed islands. Only 35 percent of Democrats supported the use of U.S. troops in this situation.<sup>117</sup> There also exists a moderately-sized statistical literature that finds leaders from right-wing parties tend to use force abroad more often than their left-wing counterparts.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, experimental evidence from simulated international crises buttresses the conventional wisdom.<sup>119</sup> Whether this relationship results from ideology, personal values, or some other connection is unclear, but the strong positive relationship between holding conservative values (or being a Republican) and holding hawkish views is clear. There exists one caveat: segments of the Republican party, especially since the election of Donald Trump, appear to have embraced a foreign policy worldview that is less internationalist, which could mean that old theories about Republican hawkishness need amending.

Recent trends notwithstanding, the implication for crisis scenarios involving mainland strikes is that conservative, Republican leaders and advisors are more likely, on average, to authorize mainland strikes.

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Craig Kafura, "America Divided: Political Partisanship and U.S. Foreign Policy, Results of the 2015 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy," *The Chicago Council of Global Affairs*, pp. 11-12, 26; Peter Hayes Gries, *The Politics of American Foreign Policy: How Ideology Divides Liberals and Conservatives over Foreign Affairs*, Stanford University Press, 2014.

<sup>117</sup> Smeltz et al., "What Americans Think about America First," p. 34. This might be a recent phenomenon. A 2015 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found similar support between Democrats and Republicans if China initiated a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands or if China invaded Taiwan. In the China-Japan conflict, Republican support for use of U.S. troops was at 32 percent and Democratic support at 33 percent. In the Taiwan scenario, Republican support for the use of force stood at 28 percent and Democratic support 29 percent. Smeltz et al., "America Divided," p. 30. Another cautionary piece of evidence comes from a survey of Americans on their beliefs about being "tough on China." There were no partisan differences found. But the survey questions were excessively broad in this author's opinion and therefore the specific questions asked by the Chicago Council are to be favored. Thomas J. Scotto and Jason Reifler, "Getting Tough with the Dragon? The Comparative Correlates of Foreign Policy Attitudes toward China in the United States and UK," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2017.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Bertoli, Allan Dafoe, and Robert F. Trager, "Is There a War Party? Party Change, the Left-Right Divide, and International Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Online, 2018; Philip Arena and Glenn Palmer, "Politics or the Economy? Domestic Correlates of Dispute Involvement in Developed Democracies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 2009; Glenn Palmer, Tamar London, and Patrick Regan, "What's Stopping You?: The Sources of Political Constraints on International Conflict Behavior in Parliamentary Democracies," *International Interactions*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2004.

<sup>119</sup> Dominic D. P. Johnson, Rose McDermott, Jon Cowden, and Dustin Tingley, "Dead Certain: Confidence and Conservatism Predict Aggression in Simulated International Crisis Decision-Making," *Human Nature*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2012.

## Gender

This study also considers whether gender affects the willingness of an individual to recommend mainland strikes. Previous scholarship on gender and foreign policy attitudes among the general public has demonstrated that “on average, women are less supportive of the use of military force for any purpose.”<sup>120</sup> Richard Eichenberg, a scholar of public opinion and foreign policy, analyzed nearly 500 separate questions on American surveys between 1990 and 2003 to arrive at this conclusion.<sup>121</sup> A survey experiment on American adults by Deborah Jordan Brooks and Benjamin Valentino amends this finding though; the researchers discovered that women are actually more supportive of humanitarian war in comparison to men.<sup>122</sup> Because this dissertation focuses on war for strategic purposes and because Brooks and Valentino find that men are more supportive of war for strategic reasons, their research actually buttresses this study’s focus on gender. Rose McDermott has also pioneered a research agenda that employs techniques from experimental psychology to examine the effects of gender on foreign policy attitudes and decision-making. The cumulative findings, in large part based on laboratory setting crisis simulation experiments, strongly suggest that men are more likely to employ aggressive behavior during crises and conflicts.<sup>123</sup>

There are two caveats related to this research. The first concerns the differences between women in the general public and female foreign policy professionals. Women who rise to leadership positions, either as an elected leader or adviser, could differ from women in the general public. One perspective holds that women in leadership positions are likely to hold attitudes similar to male foreign policy professionals and are therefore unlikely to exhibit behavioral differences from their male peers. A second caveat relates to the extant research’s focus on behavior in crisis simulations. Skeptics could wonder if female leaders behave differently than male leaders while discharging their foreign

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<sup>120</sup> Richard Eichenberg, “Gender Differences in Public Attitudes towards the Use of Force by the United States, 1990-2003,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2003, p. 112.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Deborah Jordan Brooks and Benjamin Valentino, “A War of One’s Own: Understanding the Gender Gap in Support for War,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 2, 2011.

<sup>123</sup> Rose McDermott and Peter K. Hatemi, “The Relationship Between Physical Aggression, Foreign Policy, and Moral Choices: Phenotypic and Genetic Findings,” *Aggressive Behavior*, Vol. 43, 2017; Matthew H. McIntyre, Emily S. Barret, Rose McDermott, Dominic D.P. Johnson, Jonathan Cowden, and Stephen P. Rosen, “Finger Length Ratio (2D:4D) and Sex Difference in Aggression During a Simulated War Game,” *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 42, 2007; Rose McDermott, Dominic Johnson, Jonathan Cowden, and Stephen Rosen, “Testosterone and Aggression in a Simulated Crisis Game,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, November 2007; Dominic D.P. Johnson, Rose McDermott, Emily S. Barrett, Jonathan Cowden, Richard Wrangham, Matthew H. McIntyre, and Stephen Peter Rosen, “Overconfidence in Wargames: Experimental Evidence on Expectations, Aggression, Gender and Testosterone,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 273, 2006; Rose McDermott and Jonathan A. Cowden, “The Effects of Uncertainty and Sex in a Crisis Simulation Game,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2001.

policy duty. Perhaps the imperatives of statecraft leave no room for gender differences. A nascent research agenda has broached this topic.<sup>124</sup>

Regardless, the bulk of existing evidence leads to the tentative hypothesis that female leaders and advisers would be less willing than their male counterparts to authorize strikes on the Chinese mainland.

### Age

Another potential correlate of views towards mainland strikes could be an individual's age. Recent research at RAND and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs has focused on the effect of age on foreign policy beliefs with an emphasis on whether younger Americans possess different attitudes towards national security in comparison to older Americans. The RAND researchers found that millennials (those born between 1982 and 1996) were less worried about national security issues in comparison to older generations.<sup>125</sup> A recent CATO institute report, done in collaboration with the Charles Koch Institute, found that "each generation from the Silent Generation onward entered adulthood somewhat less supportive of expansive American internationalism, with more recent generations expressing lower support for militarized approaches to achieve foreign policy goals."<sup>126</sup> Finally, an empirical investigation of the relationship between age and the outbreak of militarized dispute finds that older leaders are more likely to initiate and escalate disputes.<sup>127</sup>

A simple hypothesis emerges from this literature: older leaders will be more likely to employ conventional escalation and to endorse mainland strikes.

### Foreign Policy Beliefs

One more important variable is an individual's foreign policy beliefs. Although harder to observe than variables like military background, party, gender, and age, foreign policy beliefs are relevant because of their logical proximity to foreign policy

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<sup>124</sup> Ulkar Imamverdiyeva and Patrick Shea, "Female Leaders and Interstate Conflict," Working Paper, 2017, available at [http://texastriangle.weebly.com/uploads/2/5/2/4/25249202/womenconflict\\_011817.pdf](http://texastriangle.weebly.com/uploads/2/5/2/4/25249202/womenconflict_011817.pdf), accessed October 1, 2018; Oeindrilla Dube and S.P. Harish, "Queens," Working Paper, 2017, available at [http://odube.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Dube\\_Harish\\_Queens\\_Paper.pdf](http://odube.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Dube_Harish_Queens_Paper.pdf), accessed October 1, 2018.

<sup>125</sup> Marek N. Posard, Jennifer Kavanagh, Kathryn Edwards, and Sonni Efron, *Millennial Perceptions of Security: Results from a National Survey of Americans*, RAND, 2018, p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> Trevor Thrall, Dina Smeltz, Erik Goepner, Will Ruger, Craig Kafura, "The Clash of Generations? Intergenerational Change and American Foreign Policy Views," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2018, p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> Michael Horowitz, Rose McDermott, and Allan C. Stam, "Leader Age, Regime Type, and Violent International Relations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 5, 2005.

behavior.<sup>128</sup> For instance, leaders and advisers who believe that their enemy is unremittingly hostile are more likely to embrace more aggressive tactics than leaders and advisors who view an enemy as only semi-hostile. After noting the history of this research tradition, this section describes key beliefs related to the definition of national interests, the use of force, and nuclear weapons.

Investigating beliefs and connections of related beliefs (belief systems) has been a staple of international relations scholarship for the past fifty years.<sup>129</sup> Scholars have attempted to first identify coherent beliefs, assemble them into an internally consistent worldview, and examine their ability to predict other beliefs or even behavior.

The first grouping of beliefs refers to those that influence how one defines and measures the national interest. Specifying the “national interest” is an important and difficult step for leaders and advisers dealing with a given foreign policy scenario.<sup>130</sup> Specifying the “national interest” is often a matter of debate. Moreover, the resolution of that debate within a given individual’s mind often reveals important policy preferences and potentially predicts the actions that actor will endorse. When it comes to conventional escalation, individuals who ascribe relatively more importance to the national interest at stake in a given scenario are, all things being equal, more likely to endorse higher levels of force.

Beliefs about the use of military force form the second grouping. Scholars have long identified beliefs related to the use of force as salient and meaningful for understanding the foreign policy attitudes of citizens and elites alike.<sup>131</sup> Beliefs about the use of military force can be further sub-divided. Civilian-versus-military questions concern whether military officers or civilians should exert more control over the course of war and whether the goals of top military officers or the civilians should be important while prosecuting a war.<sup>132</sup> Another sub-division is beliefs about how force should be

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<sup>128</sup> Beliefs, for the purposes of this project, are defined as a mental representation of the world. A representation includes both actors and objects and relationships among them.

<sup>129</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1976; Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, *American Leadership in World Affairs: Vietnam and the Breakdown of Consensus*, Allen & Unwin Publishers, 1984; Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, Routledge, 2002.

<sup>130</sup> Early awareness of the difficulty of pinning down the national interest can be found in Arnold Wolfers, “National Security’ as an Ambiguous Symbol,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 4, 1952. See also Stanley Hoffman, *Gulliver’s Troubles: Or, the Setting of American Foreign Policy*, McGraw-Hill, 1968.

<sup>131</sup> Holsti and Rosenau, *American Leadership in World Affairs*; Gacek, *The Logic of Force*, 1994.

<sup>132</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*; van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War”; Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984”; Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*; Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, The Free Press, 2002; Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations*, Harvard University Press, 2005.

applied, especially whether limited uses of force are ever justified and the relative importance of defensive versus offensive operations.<sup>133</sup>

Finally, this project's focus on the prospect of nuclear escalation during a conventional war also calls for paying attention to the beliefs of leaders and advisers with regard to nuclear war and nuclear weapons.<sup>134</sup> Will mainland strikes lead to Chinese nuclear use? Will American elites fear that Chinese leaders will misperceive mainland strikes as part of a counterforce campaign?<sup>135</sup> Presumably, decision-makers who answer affirmatively to these questions will be less willing to recommend mainland strikes. This project will therefore focus on these nuclear-related beliefs and their connection to mainland strikes.

### Final Comments on Individuals

While the written mainland strikes debate has been silent on the role of future leaders and advisors on the likelihood of mainland strikes, a burgeoning international relations literature on leaders suggests that this theoretical factor could be important, even decisive.

### **Final Thoughts on the Three Theoretical Perspectives**

The three perspectives presented here—the role of nuclear weapons, scenario characteristics, and individuals—are used to focus the analytical attention of the remainder of this dissertation. Other perspectives such as structural factors like unipolarity versus bipolarity or regime characteristics (democracy vs. autocracy) might also matter in a future mainland strikes decision, but pursuing all of these analytical angles is beyond the scope of any one research project. Duly noted is the important implication that these theoretical perspectives have had on the course of this research project. Their selection derived in part from the content of the mainland strikes debate that transpired in the early 2010's and in part from my own reading of international

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<sup>133</sup> Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War"; Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984"; Gacek, *The Logic of Force*.

<sup>134</sup> Jervis singles out beliefs as especially important in the realm of nuclear strategy because there is so little empirical experience. Jervis, *The Illlogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 37-40.

<sup>135</sup> This nuclear-related belief that also might be grouped under the larger category of beliefs related to strategic empathy. Strategic empathy refers to attempts to factor in the perspective of the enemy during a crisis. Richard Smoke and Robert Jervis have each separately highlighted this factor in their work on international relations and conventional escalation. Referring to the historical cases in his study, Smoke wrote, "inattentiveness to, or outright unawareness of, the basic assumptions and presuppositions of decision-makers in other capitals and their overall perspectives on the situation...contributed[d] substantially to many instances of escalation getting out of control." Smoke, *War*, pp. 252-253; Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, pp. 152-153.

relations scholarship. Other researchers would doubtless emphasize or deemphasize other conceptual factors.

## **Methods for Studying the Mainland Strikes Decision**

Understanding my selection of methodologies for studying the willingness of a future American president and their advisors to authorize or recommend conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland starts with my identification of the central methodological problem for this project. As more than a few persons have pointed out and have done their best to convince me, researchers can't study the future.<sup>136</sup> Scholars lack a crystal ball to study an event that has never happened. The so-called mainland strikes decision, if one embraces this research logic, can therefore not be studied. It is an event that has thankfully never occurred. But I must respectfully disagree, at least partially. This initial section thus explains my use of traditional historical methods and also of an approach I term "synthetic history." Later sections then broadly explain method-by-method my use of historical case studies, interviews with American national security elites, and scenario-based surveys of American national security elites.

### **Historical Methodologies: Traditional and Synthetic**

While it is true that conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland are the stuff of a hypothetical and hopefully unlikely potential future war, traditional and synthetic historical approaches exist that allow an analyst to shed light on this phenomenon.

Readers will be more familiar with the traditional historical approach. Historians, political scientists, and others have developed a rich literature on using history in the pursuit of knowledge about the future. The applied history school, exemplified in the work of Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, has done an admirable job of probing the uses and abuses of history in service of policymaking, a domain that must ultimately be future-oriented.<sup>137</sup> Political scientists use similar historical methods, though they often

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<sup>136</sup> Professor Thomas Christensen, now of Columbia University, repeated this often while I was within earshot, and his students, many of them my close friends, have repeated this advice to me. It's good advice, but I suggest not taking it too literally.

<sup>137</sup> Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, Freedom Press, 1986. Many other historians are part of or follow in this tradition. For long-time practitioners, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, 2005; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500-2000*, Random House, 1987. For more recent scholars and scholarship in this applied history vein, see Frank Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age*, Cornell University Press, 2012; William Inboden, "Statecraft, Decision Making, and the Varieties of Historical Experience: A Taxonomy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2014; Hal Brands and William Inboden, "Wisdom without Tears: Statecraft and the Uses of History," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 7, 2018.

focus on a relatively greater number of cases, less often do archival research, more often explicitly use social science theory, and pay greater attention to methodological issues related to causal inference.<sup>138</sup> Policy analysts more broadly also often turn to history to understand emergent phenomena.<sup>139</sup> Because there are often historical precedents and analogues for any given phenomenon, including mainland strikes, traditional historical approaches offer one promising method for studying a future that has never occurred. In other words, you can study the past to understand, albeit imperfectly, the future.

Readers will likely be less acquainted with an approach I term “synthetic history.” Scholars within security studies have embraced synthetic history methods, although few, if any, scholars would currently identify their research with this label. Synthetic history refers to any method that creates an artificial decision-making environment and populates it with decision-making agents in order to make inferences about how similar real-world events will transpire. Researchers often turn to this approach given that actual history is far from a perfect laboratory, sometimes offering no examples of a phenomenon of interest and often precluding the researcher’s control over the decision-making environment or the decision-makers. For instance, Erik Lin-Greenberg’s dissertation examined how groups of American military officers participating in a crisis simulation responded when a remotely-piloted aircraft (a “drone”) versus a manned aircraft was shot down.<sup>140</sup> Reid Pauly used records from declassified political-military wargames to investigate why nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945.<sup>141</sup> Elizabeth Bartels and co-authors researched the effects of different analytical products on Department of Defense decision-making by placing former officials in wargames with

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<sup>138</sup> For the canonical literature that addresses case study research design for scholars of international relations, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, Cornell University Press, 1997; Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton University Press, 1994. For exemplary uses of historical case studies in international relations research, see Evan Braden Montgomery, “Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2006; Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, “The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2014.

<sup>139</sup> Examples of analysts turning to history for understanding the future include Jason Healey (editor), *A Fierce Domain: Conflict in Cyberspace, 1986 to 2012*, Cyber Conflict Studies Association, 2013; Max Boot, *War Made New: Weapons, Warriors, and the Making of the Modern World*, Gotham Books, 2006.

<sup>140</sup> For a summary of this research, see Erik Lin-Greenberg, “Game of Drones: What Experimental Wargames Reveal about Drones and Escalation,” *War on the Rocks*, January 10, 2019; Erik Lin-Greenberg, “Game of Drones: The Effect of Remote Warfighting Technology on Conflict Escalation (Evidence from Wargames),” Social Science Research Network, working paper. For news coverage of this dissertation, see Kyle Rempfer, “War Game: If China or Russia Downed an ISR Aircraft, How Would the U.S. Really Respond?” *The Air Force Times*, January 17, 2019.

<sup>141</sup> Reid B. C. Pauly, “Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button? Wargames and the Sources of Nuclear Restraint,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2018.

different analytical inputs.<sup>142</sup> Andrew Reddie and co-authors have devised a “next-generation wargame,” an online game that simulates international politics in the hope of studying nuclear deterrence and conflict escalation.<sup>143</sup> Jacqueline Schneider has used Naval War College wargames to study the influence of cyber operations on crisis and escalation.<sup>144</sup> Lest the reader think that this use of synthetic history is recent, it’s worth pointing to a now declassified RAND report by Marc Dean Millot and his colleagues that surveyed senior American military and civilians officials to understand their decision-making related to their willingness to implement different readiness actions during a nuclear crisis scenario involving the Soviet Union.<sup>145</sup> Synthetic history offers the exciting prospects of studying a phenomenon that has never occurred or one that has occurred but over which a researcher had little control. Practitioners of this new method will still face problems, but this broad school of approaches does seem to offer a means for studying the future at least partially free of the constraints of the traditional historical methodology.

These approaches qualify the earlier injunction that no researcher can study the future. Analogous previous historical episodes can sometimes provide grist for a curious researcher interested in a phenomenon that has not yet and may never occur. And synthetic historical methods can conjure up a situation similar to the one imagined. The next sections elaborate on the exact traditional and synthetic historical methods employed to study the topic of mainland strikes.

## Historical Case Studies

The first analytical approach employed is that of traditional historical research. Two case studies focus on the geographic restraints on conventional bombing during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Based on archival research at the Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson presidential libraries, in combination with a broader reading of secondary historical material, these two chapters examine whether nuclear weapons

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<sup>142</sup> Elizabeth M. Bartels, Igor Mikolic-Torreira, Steven W. Popper, and Joel B. Predd, *Do Differing Analyses Change the Decision?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2019.

<sup>143</sup> Andrew W. Reddie, Bethany L. Goldblum, Kiran Lakkaraju, Jason Reinhardt, Michael Nacht, and Laura Epifanovskaya, “Next-Generation Wargames,” *Science*, Vol. 362, Issue 6421, 2018. This article has caused a stir. See Jenny Oberholtzer, Abby Doll, David Frelinger, Karl Mueller, and Stacie Pettyjohn, “Applying Wargames to Real-World Policies,” *Science*, Vol. 363, Issue 6434, 2019; Andrew W. Reddie, Bethany L. Goldblum, Jason Reinhardt, Kiran Lakkaraju, Laura Epifanovskaya, and Michael Nacht, “Applying Wargames to Real-World Policies—Response,” *Science*, Vol. 363, Issue 6434, 2019.

<sup>144</sup> Jacquelyn Schneider, *The Information Revolution and International Stability: A Multi-Article Exploration of Computing, Cyber, and Incentives for Conflict*, Dissertation, The George Washington University, 2017.

<sup>145</sup> Marc Dean Millot, Walter Perry, Preston Niblack, Beth Lachman, Corinne Replogle, and Jeannette Van Winkle, *Response to Warning: Making Decision on Strategic Force Readiness*, R-3984-AF, RAND Corporation, 1993. This report was declassified by the Air Force on March 30, 2017.

can account for the restraints on American bombing present in those wars and also the role of other political and military factors.

These cases were selected based on a number of criteria. Most importantly, both of these cases involve the United States engaged in a major war in which there was intense debate over the proper dimensions of the American bombing campaign. China was also a member of the adversary coalition in both wars. The crude outlines of a historical analogy to a mainland strikes decision are obvious. Also importantly, Soviet nuclear weapons, tested in 1949 a year before the start of the Korean War, could have influenced American decisions about the dimensions of its conventional bombing campaign in Korea. Chinese and Soviet nuclear weapons both could have influenced American bombing decisions in the Vietnam war. Important prior historical interpretations of these bombing campaigns have sometimes even emphasized Communist nuclear weapons as one reason for American restraint. T.X. Hammes, in fact, invoked the Korean War example in his argument that Chinese nuclear weapons reduce the likelihood of American conventional escalation.<sup>146</sup> These cases therefore provide a test bed for whether Chinese nuclear weapons will decrease the willingness of future American leaders and advisors to authorize or recommend conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. There is also ample historical, unclassified data in English to study these wars.

Undoubtedly, some readers will wonder why this dissertation doesn't focus on other potentially useful historical cases such as the Cuban missile crisis and the India-Pakistan Kargil crisis. The Cuban missile crisis, while it did generate intense fears of nuclear war and has become the historical episode most associated with the role of nuclear weapons in international politics, differs in critical ways from a future U.S.-China war. First, as pointed out by Richard Smoke in his seminal study on conventional escalation, the Cuban missile crisis "was not, technically, a case of escalation in an ongoing war."<sup>147</sup> It was a crisis, a time of heightened tension, and never boiled over into combat. It is therefore conceptual stretching to include the Cuban missile crisis in my study of conventional escalation during war. Second, President Kennedy and his advisors were considering conventional strikes on Soviet nuclear weapons stationed in Cuba, not simply Soviet or Cuban conventional forces. Of course, these particular strikes would create a fear of nuclear war. These strikes are different from the strikes a future U.S. administration would consider in a U.S.-China war. American leaders would likely target Chinese conventional forces and, at least potentially, avoid deliberately targeting Chinese nuclear forces, though this dissertation will later return to this topic. The Kargil War is a relatively more appropriate case study for this dissertation. Its key weakness is that the United States was not involved as a belligerent. A future project

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<sup>146</sup> T.X. Hammes, "Sorry, AirSea Battle is No Strategy."

<sup>147</sup> Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*, p. 44.

could return to this case for the purpose of studying conventional strikes on the homeland of a nuclear power, but this task was too much for this particular research undertaking.<sup>148</sup>

These analytic cases do not explore the individual determinants of attitudes towards conventional escalation. While there is a literature on the causes of differing attitudes towards force among American elites during the Vietnam war, there was simply too much conceptual ground to cover within these cases to also pursue this analytical perspective. The individual perspective receives more attention in the synthetic historical methods discussed next.

Finally, these cases are not perfect analogies; their limits will be explained in the appropriate chapters. But the resemblance to a future U.S. mainland strikes decision is close enough that close analytical scrutiny yields analytic insights.

### **Interviews with American National Security Elites**

The second method of this project can be viewed as a first step into the methodological universe of synthetic history. This stage of the project involved interviewing twenty American national security elites about their views towards mainland strikes during a potential future war between China and the United States. Interviewees were selected based on their long careers in national security and foreign policy. The sample was also chosen with an eye towards political diversity and to ensure representation from the Defense Department, State Department, and the intelligence agencies. The majority of interviewees had served in senior levels of responsibility within the American government, either in uniform or as a civilian. The goal was to examine the range of views towards mainland strikes and to elicit the decision-making logic these elites would use in order to gauge their willingness to recommend mainland strikes. After recording and transcribing the interviews, the analysis used qualitative thematic analysis to answer three research questions. First, what role, if any, do Chinese nuclear weapons play in the decision-making about mainland strikes among these elites? Second, what scenario factors do these elites emphasize? And finally, are there any systematic individual differences that explain patterns of nuclear escalation beliefs?

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<sup>148</sup> While writing this dissertation, in fact, the Indian Air Force did conduct conventional strikes on Pakistani territory in the so-called Balakot air strike. This air strike was in response to a bombing by Jaish-e-Mohammad that killed 40 Indian paramilitary police in Indian-administered Kashmir. "Balakot: India Launches Air Strike in Pakistan," *BBC*, February 26, 2019, available at [https://www.bbc.com/news/video\\_and\\_audio/headlines/47379558/balakot-india-launches-air-strike-in-pakistan](https://www.bbc.com/news/video_and_audio/headlines/47379558/balakot-india-launches-air-strike-in-pakistan).

The methodological contribution of these elite interviews is two-fold. First, by interviewing American national security elites about future U.S-China scenarios and eliciting their decision-making logic, this method serves as an example of synthetic history. Second, this dissertation uses a relatively formal interview method to study a topic in international relations. Many previous international relations studies have employed interviews, but many use this method relatively informally, sometimes only broadly describing the number of interviewees interviewed, the background of the interviewees, the interview protocol used, and the method used to analyze the interviews.<sup>149</sup>

### **A Scenario-Based Survey of American National Elites**

The scenario-based survey of American national security elites fully embraces the synthetic history approach. This method entailed providing an online scenario-based survey experiment to American national security and foreign policy professionals working at a diverse group of American foreign policy research institutions. The final survey sample included 85 national security elites. The four scenarios in each survey explored how changing scenario conditions affected respondent willingness to recommend conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland in a potential U.S.-China war. The survey instrument also included questions about the background and foreign policy beliefs of each respondent. The analysis largely relies on descriptive statistics, data visualization, and linear regression to understand the effects of different scenarios and respondent characteristics on the willingness of elites to recommend mainland strikes.

While surveying elites has a long history in international relations research and while even survey experiments have grown in popularity recently, the use of a survey experiment as part of a synthetic history project is relatively novel. This dissertation combines several elements of past projects—an online collection method, a survey, an experiment, an elite sample, and close-ended questions—in order to offer another demonstration of the potential usefulness of this approach for future studies of security and conflict.

### **A Diverse Methodological Approach**

These methods offer three different approaches to studying the topic of mainland strikes. The traditional historical method is retrospective. It probes the fit of the debate over geographic restrictions on conventional bombing campaigns in the Korean and Vietnam wars to a potential debate over conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland

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<sup>149</sup> For an exemplary use of formal interviews as evidence within security studies, see Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2012.

in a future U.S.-China war. This method also offers the advantage of providing insight into how an actual American president thinks in a relevant wartime situation and how the machinery of the American national security bureaucracy operates in real time. The interview and survey methods are prospective and invoke what this dissertation calls synthetic history. These approaches ask experienced national security professionals to envision a future U.S.-China war and to describe or reveal their decision-making logic. The interviews are a relatively rich source, but their lack of structure precludes easy comparison. The survey provides data well-suited to comparison and statistical analysis, though the survey scenarios are, of course, artificial compared to a real-world war.

Admittedly, the three methods do not answer precisely the same research questions. Instead, these methods provide three overlapping streams of evidence about the willingness of a future American president and their advisers to authorize or recommend mainland strikes in a future U.S.-China war.

This dissertation uses the combination of three theoretical lenses and three distinct methods to study the mainland strikes issue. These lenses and methods should not be misconstrued as the definitive word on mainland strikes. Other lenses and methods are feasible and potentially worthwhile. This dissertation does, however, attempt to be the most thorough analysis to date on the willingness of a future American president and their advisers to authorize or recommend mainland strikes. It also attempts to use relatively formal methodological approaches, borrowed from history and social science, to analyze this issue. Whether this research has succeeded or not can be measured by whether strategists, planners, and researchers who consider this question find that it illuminates the mainland strikes issue more than past analysis and intuitive logic already do.

## Chapter 3. The Korean War

Arguably the most puzzling aspect of the Korean War is the same feature that should most intrigue analysts interested in the mainland strikes issue: the Truman administration's decision to limit the Korean war from expanding to Chinese territory. The Chinese military poured over the Yalu river and into North Korea in November 1950, dealing massive defeats to United Nations (UN) forces. Striking Chinese air bases, masses of army forces, or supply lines on Chinese territory could have at least slowed down the rout of UN forces.<sup>150</sup> Instead, President Harry S. Truman and his advisers chose, as a matter of high policy, to refrain from attacking any targets in China proper, with nuclear or non-nuclear weapons.<sup>151</sup> As a result, the U.S. Air Force operated under tight restrictions. Not only could American pilots not bomb the ample targets in China, targets crucial to the Chinese war effort, but American pilots could neither fly over Chinese territory nor engage in hot pursuit, that is, counter-attacking Chinese MIG's based in China.<sup>152</sup> General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of UN Command and therefore the field commander for U.S. and allied forces in the Korean War, criticized these restrictions as constituting an "enormous handicap, without precedent in military history."<sup>153</sup>

Explaining this limit on the conduct of American operations in the Korean War, long an academic interest, has recently become important to the modern debate over U.S. military strategy toward China. In an extended debate in the *National Interest*, National Defense University researcher T.X. Hammes writes, "Given that Truman and Johnson refused to strike China when hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops were in combat, are we sure a future

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<sup>150</sup> The adverse impact of granting sanctuary to Chinese forces in Manchuria (the northern part of China adjacent to North Korea) was severe, especially given the deteriorating UN position in Korea after the Chinese intervention. Key texts for understanding these points and the broader topic of American airpower strategy in Korea include Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, Air University Press, 1983, pp. 183, 195, 222, 240-241, 246, 253, 313, 315, 701. Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953*, Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 23-24, 89-90, 117. Conrad Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953*, University Press of Kansas, 2000, pp. 50, 83-84, 157-159.

<sup>151</sup> The study of this peculiar fact has a long history. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Princeton University Press, 1959, pp. 328-329. Morton H. Halperin, "The Limiting Process in the Korean War," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (1963), pp. 13, 30. Harvey A. DeWeerd, *The Triumph of the Limiters: Korea*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1968, pp. 12-13. Richard Smoke, *National Security and the Nuclear Dilemma*, Second Edition, Random House, 1988, pp. 77-78.

<sup>152</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, p. 222.

<sup>153</sup> Harry S. Truman Library, SMOF: Selected Records...Relating to the Korean War, Box 1, Department of State: Chronology File Subseries, June-November 1950, Chronology of Principal Events Relating to the Korean Conflict, December 1950, undated. All archival references will note the library, collection, box, folder, and document date. The Harry S. Truman Library will be abbreviated HSTL.

President will authorize an extensive strike campaign into China?"<sup>154</sup> Elsewhere, he asks and answers a similar question: "We need to ask if the President is likely to allow strikes into China. President Truman in Korea and President Johnson in Vietnam did not think it was a good idea."<sup>155</sup> Noted *Atlantic* writer James Fallows has echoed this criticism. In reference to the new U.S. Air Force bomber program designed with the ability to penetrate Chinese airspace, he claims that "bombing runs deep into China" is a "step so wildly reckless that the U.S. didn't consider it even when fighting Chinese troops during the Korean War."<sup>156</sup> This interpretation of the Korean war analogy suggests that a future administration might similarly deny permission for strikes on the mainland, instituting tight rules of engagement for U.S. forces and providing China a sanctuary.

This chapter scrutinizes the Korean war analogy offered by Hammes and Fallows, but it goes further. It broadly assesses the influence of the Soviet's nascent nuclear arsenal on American decision-making, assessing which of the nuclear models outlined in the theory chapter explain American restraint during the Korean War. Additionally, the chapter offers further discussion of the geographic constraints on bombing by focusing on the particular characteristics of the scenario President Truman and his advisers faced. The final section discusses what can and cannot be inferred from the Korean War experience about the likelihood of mainland strikes in a conflict with China.

Before previewing the chapter's key findings, a couple of comments on methodology are in order. The case studies in this dissertation borrow not only from the structured, focused comparison methods common in political science research, but also from the archival historian's toolkit. The political science lens provided a series of a priori questions: What explains the existence of geographic restraints during the Korea War? Did Soviet nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union's close alliance with China lead to American forbearance in attacking the Chinese mainland? If not Soviet nuclear weapons, then what accounted for U.S. restraint? The archival approach of the historian allowed me not only to appraise the secondary literature, treating historical texts as evidence themselves, but also to perform extensive archival research.<sup>157</sup> This chapter therefore cites extensively the holdings of the Harry S.

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<sup>154</sup> T.X. Hammes, "Sorry, AirSea Battle is No Strategy," *The National Interest*, August 7, 2013; Elbridge Colby, "Don't Sweat AirSea Battle," *The National Interest*, July 31, 2013. Elbridge Colby, "The War over War with China," *The National Interest*, August 15, 2013. This debate occurred in the online version of the magazine.

<sup>155</sup> T.X. Hammes, "Hammes: Strategy and AirSea Battle," *War on the Rocks*, July 23, 2013.

<sup>156</sup> James Fallows, "The Tragedy of the American Military," *The Atlantic*, January/February 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Ian S. Lustick, "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 3, 1996. While written by a

Truman Presidential Library, especially from the national security council meetings of late 1950 and early 1951 after Chinese intervention. The historian's perspective also encouraged me to probe the fit of the larger historical analogy.<sup>158</sup>

My selection of the Korean War as a case and the specific focus on the late 1950 and early 1951 Truman administration decision not to bomb targets in China also requires explanation. The Korean War is an important case study in any debate about the willingness of an America president during a future U.S.-China war to strike targets on the Chinese mainland. Most obviously, it is the only time that the United States and China have engaged in open combat. That there was an extensive American debate in late 1950 and early 1951 about whether to bomb targets in China makes this case excellent for the purposes of the study. Additionally, the Soviet Union had acquired nuclear weapons in 1949, which potentially cast a shadow over president Truman's decision-making given the Sino-Soviet alliance.<sup>159</sup> This development permits the case to test models of the relationship between nuclear weapons and conventional escalation developed in the theory chapter: the caution, null, and emboldenment models. Finally, my decision to focus on fall 1950 and the following winter months for intensive inquiry has two primary justifications. First, large-scale intervention by China into the Korean war only occurs in November 1950.<sup>160</sup> Active consideration of bombing China began only after China intervened. Second, active consideration of strikes with conventional weapons on Chinese territory only lasted for a few months before "no strikes" became the policy status quo. A later section will explain why this happened, but this crystallizing of policy means that there was active debate in the first few months and then little to none later. Studying later periods of the Korean war in which this option was not considered brings relatively little to the debate.

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political scientist, this article's focus on secondary sources as biased but still useful sources of historical information informed my argument.

<sup>158</sup> Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time*, Free Press, 1988; William Inboden, "Statecraft, Decision-Making, and the Varieties of Historical Experience: A Taxonomy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2014, pp. 298-299.

<sup>159</sup> The Soviets had 1 nuclear weapon in 1949, 5 in 1950 and 25 in 1951. Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945-2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 69, No. 5, 2013, p. 78. For delivery systems, the only "long range" Soviet bomber capable in the year 1950 of carrying a nuclear weapon was the Tu-4. The nuclear-capable version was the Tu-4A. The maximum range of a Tu-4 on a one-way mission is approximately 3,000 nautical miles. It could therefore only be used for strikes relatively close to Russia. For information on the Tu-4, see Pavel Podvig (editor), *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces*, MIT Press, 2001, p. 340. For range information on the Tu-4, see *Jane's All the World's Aircraft*, 1956. This Jane's information was provided by an analyst from Jane's. For another helpful resource on the early Soviet nuclear arsenal, see Edward M. Geist, *Two Worlds of Civil Defense: State, Society, and Nuclear Survival in the USA and USSR, 1945-1991*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Dissertation, 2013.

<sup>160</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 89-90.

This chapter makes three main claims. First, Soviet nuclear weapons did not figure prominently in the decision-making of the Truman administration over whether to expand the war to China. Neither the most thorough histories of the Korean War, nor primary documents from the period after Chinese intervention, contain any evidence that the Soviet's nuclear arsenal led to the tight rules of engagement barring strikes on China. Second, the null model best explains this outcome; the shadow supposedly cast by Soviet nuclear weapons and predicted by the caution model did not constrain American decision-making. The emboldenment model also provided a poor theoretical fit. Third, nonetheless there were many overlapping situational reasons that Truman and his advisers decided to limit the war. Some were likely unique to the Korean War, but not all. The main reasons behind President Truman's decision appear to be uncertainty over Chinese intentions at the beginning of their intervention, a fear of a new world war, a preference for devoting military resources to Europe given the Soviet threat and a related concern that European allies did not support expansion of a war in Asia, a belief that American forbearance actually constrained Communist actions, and a desire for armistice talks.

The poor performance of the nuclear caution model casts doubt on the claim of mainland strike skeptics that Chinese nuclear weapons will entirely preclude strikes on the Chinese mainland. The null model, however, performs relatively well in explaining the source of geographic constraints on American bombing. Modern China's possession of nuclear weapons therefore also might not entirely preclude mainland strikes. But this historical case is unable to adjudicate an important variant of this theory: that the co-location of Chinese conventional and nuclear military forces means that strikes on certain targets on the mainland introduce a chance of accidental nuclear war, the chance that Chinese leaders might perceive American strikes as part of a conventional counterforce campaign.<sup>161</sup> China did not possess nuclear weapons during the Korean War and so strikes on China did not contain that potential escalatory element. Additionally, the finding that there was an extensive list of overlapping reasons that President Truman barred strikes on China should worry proponents of mainland strikes. Grand strategic concerns of the President and his advisers trumped the operational concerns of commanders in the field. Even if Chinese nuclear weapons do not preclude mainland strikes, there are still a host of other situation factors—including a belief that American forbearance might reduce Chinese conventional escalation and a worry about the

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<sup>161</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Spring 2017. Talmadge's article draws on earlier theorizing that the tactics of modern conventional war can inadvertently prompt nuclear war. See Barry Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks*, Cornell University Press, 1991. Finally, my later parts of this dissertation, especially the elite interviews and, to a lesser extent, the survey, do try to adjudicate this variant of the theory.

preferences of allies, to mention only two—that could constrain, delay, or preclude mainland strikes.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. Sections one and two, respectively, document the absence of concerns about Soviet nuclear weapons during Truman administration deliberations and explain why the war remained limited anyway. The second section focuses on the how the foreign policy situation constrained the Truman administration. Section three considers the implications for the mainland strikes issue.

## Nuclear Weapons and The Escalation Debate

The single most striking fact that emerged from historical analysis of the late 1950 and early 1951 period in which the Truman administration decided to prohibit strikes on targets in China is that Soviet possession of nuclear weapons does not figure into the decision. The caution model strongly implies that the close alliance between China and the Soviet Union should prompt American leaders to fear that the high costs of an atomic war and an unknowable sequence of events could result in nuclear war. Some scholarship even implies that this was the case.<sup>162</sup> Military historian Russell Weigley argued that “the atomic bomb had raised expectations about the next war” and that the “very apocalyptic nature of those expectations now held back the Korean contestants and persuaded them to limit their warfare.”<sup>163</sup> Carl Builder, the late RAND researcher, argued that restrictions against expanding the Korean War to Chinese territory resulted “not because of the range of airplanes but the political limitations imposed by the threat of an expanded war in a world of atomic bombs.”<sup>164</sup> Historian H.W. Brands in his 2016 book *The General vs. the President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War* explains Truman’s decision not to expand the war to China by informing the reader that Truman “couldn’t go forward without risking a nuclear World War III.”<sup>165</sup> But these claims are inconsistent with the most thorough secondary historical research on this decision and my own archival research at the Truman library.

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<sup>162</sup> Beyond the examples I list below, see Frank Gavin’s claim that these limits were “necessary for the nuclear age” in Francis J. Gavin, “What’s in a Name? The Genius of Eisenhower,” *War on the Rocks*, June 15, 2017.

<sup>163</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, The Macmillan Company, 1967, p. 506.

<sup>164</sup> Carl H. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome: The Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force*, Transaction Publishers, 1993, p. 147. Builder, again in the context of the Korean War, also writes about the “world of constraints that nuclear deterrence had wrought.” *Ibid.*, p. 148

<sup>165</sup> H.W. Brands, *The General vs. the President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War*, Doubleday, 2016.

## Korean War Scholarship and the Role of Soviet Nuclear Weapons

The claim that Soviet nuclear weapons and the fear they created among American decision-makers explains President Truman's decision not to expand the war to China finds no support in arguably the three key texts on this decision. British academic Rosemary Foot's 1985 *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953* explicitly focuses on "American policy discussions during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations concerning the objectives and likely consequences of any expansions of the Korean conflict into China."<sup>166</sup> She finds that the debate on expanding the war to China to have been "extensive, rich" and "one of the most important and all-consuming questions of the period."<sup>167</sup> Yet nowhere does she find evidence—despite her own archival digging in the United States and the United Kingdom—that Soviet nuclear weapons produced the limitations on bombing China. Instead, she places weight on a variety of factors including an American decision-making process dominated by the State Department early in the war and a related emphasis on allied unity over military expediency.<sup>168</sup> Her inductive approach to explanation, a method of inquiry often associated with historians, therefore does not uncover evidence that Soviet nuclear weapons constrained American operations.<sup>169</sup>

Military historian Conrad Crane provides a remarkably detailed chronology and interpretation of the U.S. Air Force's role in the Korean War in his 2000 book *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953*.<sup>170</sup> Through detailed archival work in Air Force and Navy archives in addition to combing through the personal papers of key figures including Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall and U.N. Commander Douglas MacArthur, he provides nearly a month-by-month account of the contributions and limits of airpower to the Korean War. He gives extensive attention to the decision to forbid expanding the war to China, but never mentions Soviet nuclear weapons.<sup>171</sup> Instead, he attributes this policy decision to fear of Soviet intervention and American accommodation of allied reservations about expanding the war.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953*, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 9.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 37, 90-91, 124-125, 128, 137.

<sup>169</sup> I should note a caveat. One reason that Foot fails to find evidence of Soviet nuclear weapons is that Foot expresses skepticism that Americans feared Soviet intervention on behalf of China. On this point, I believe she greatly overstates her case. A latter section of this chapter will provide ample counter-evidence and demonstrate that, in fact, early in the Korean War American decisionmakers did fret over Soviet intervention.

<sup>170</sup> Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953*, University Press of Kansas, 2000.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50, 56-57, 72, 85, 157

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57, 85.

Once again, a careful historian's inductive spadework turns up no evidence that Soviet weapons explains Truman White House decision-making related to the geographic constraints on conventional bombing.

Finally, Robert Frank Futrell wrote the definitive United States Air Force history of the Korean War titled *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953*.<sup>173</sup> This 700-page text deals with nearly every aspect of the air war in Korea, including the geographic limitations placed on the Air Force. In fact, Futrell extensively treats the decision to restrict operations against China.<sup>174</sup> Nowhere does his comprehensive explanation mention fear of Soviet nuclear weapons. Instead Futrell gives weight to American concern for allied and U.N. preferences.<sup>175</sup>

These three scholarly sources on the American air war over Korea, all of which address the American decision to bar strikes on China, fail to mention Soviet nuclear weapons as a factor in American decision-making. Skeptics might object that I have either selectively read these texts or that I have overlooked other sources of evidence. The former charge requires the reader to trust my analysis, but a critic, in my defense, could verify my claim by reading those texts independently. The latter charges can be addressed at least partially. There are many other texts that deal partially with the American decision to prohibit strikes on China proper during the Korean War. My reading of these also failed to turn up evidence that Soviet nuclear weapons played a role in the discussions of top decision-makers.<sup>176</sup> Perhaps, the most compelling method for assuaging critics can be found in my examination of the archival records of the Truman administration, especially national security council meeting records and memos. In these documents, Soviet nuclear weapons are not mentioned, further suggesting that that these weapons do not explain patterns of conventional escalation in the Korean War.

### **Archival Documents from NSC Meetings and the Role of Soviet Nuclear Weapons**

From November 1, 1950 to February 28, 1951 there were fifteen national security council meetings.<sup>177</sup> Each of these meetings occurred after the October 1950 Chinese

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<sup>173</sup> Robert Frank Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953*, Revised Edition, Office of Air Force History, 1983.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222, 230, 235, 240-243, 285.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>176</sup> Morton H. Halperin, "The Limiting Process in the Korean War," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 1, 1963; Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1988/89; Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, Free Press, 1989; Christopher M. Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy*, Columbia University Press, 1994; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, Revised and Expanded Edition, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>177</sup> A finding aid at the Truman Library for the Papers of Harry S Truman provides a chronology of the national security council meeting. National security council meeting 70 occurred on November 2, 1950.

intervention in the Korean War, but crucially all the meetings also transpired before a policy of not striking Manchuria had crystallized and become the policy status quo.<sup>178</sup> The Chinese military had already intervened on behalf of the North Korean army and begun dealing massive defeats to U.N. forces.<sup>179</sup> This military pressure on the United States created obvious incentives for President Truman to expand the war to China by striking airfields, troop concentrations, and supply lines.<sup>180</sup> As a result, these fifteen meetings are an ideal venue to examine the Truman cabinet discussion on the policy of striking targets in China. National security council documents from this period also provide a useful window into the views of top policymakers and advisors and will be referenced below.<sup>181</sup>

Meeting 71 on November 10, 1950 is the first high-level policy discussion in which President Truman and his advisers grapple with how to respond to Chinese intervention.<sup>182</sup> Several participants including CIA director Walter Bedell Smith, Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall, and Secretary of State Dean Acheson directly mentioned attacks on Manchuria by the U.S. Air Force as an option, though none advocate it.<sup>183</sup> Yet there was not a single mention of Soviet nuclear weapons as a consideration in expanding the war despite concerned talk about the close relationship between China and the Soviet Union.

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National security council meeting 84 occurred on February 21, 1951. The next meeting, number 85, was not until March 7, 1951.

<sup>178</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 89-90. Foot identifies November 6<sup>th</sup> as the day that Americans recognized “extensive Chinese involvement in Korea.” A later section of this chapter will take up the claim that not striking Manchuria become the policy status quo by late February 1951.

<sup>179</sup> See HSTL, President’s Secretary’s Files, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 70<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, November 3, 1950. At this mid-January 1951 meeting, General Bradley, representing the Joint Chiefs, opines, “if the Chinese Communists continue to press, we cannot hold out for a protracted period.” General Bradley and others at this meeting seemed to believe that an evacuation of Korea might become necessary as a result of the Chinese communist onslaught.

Hereafter, President’s Secretary’s File will be abbreviated PSF. National Security Council will be abbreviated NSC.

<sup>180</sup> General MacArthur strongly desired to bomb (with conventional weapons) targets in China. And MacArthur was not alone. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953*, pp. 240-241,

<sup>181</sup> The National Security Council documents in the 81, 93, 95, 100, and 101 series were especially helpful.

<sup>182</sup> Meeting 70 hardly mentions the war in Korea, likely because evidence of Chinese intervention was inconclusive at the time. See HSTL, PSF Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 70<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, November 3, 1950.

<sup>183</sup> HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 71<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the NSC, November 10, 1950. CIA Director Smith mentions an “attack on Manchuria by our planes.” Secretary of Defense Bradley brings up the “increasing questions of how much pressure we could stand without attacking Manchurian bases.” Secretary of State Acheson summarizes the outcome of the meeting by stating, “General MacArthur is free to do what he militarily can under his present directive without bombing Manchuria.”

The potential of bombing targets in China resurfaced in the November 28<sup>th</sup> meeting (No. 73) of the national security council.<sup>184</sup> General Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the vulnerability of American airfields in Korea to strikes from Communist bombers based in Manchuria. He stated that the Joint Chiefs are “not recommending authority to violate the border at this time,” but his characterization of the situation certainly impressed upon other attendees, including the President, the potential military benefits of attacking Chinese air bases and, conversely, the drawbacks of prohibiting strikes on targets in China.<sup>185</sup> Secretary Acheson later in the meeting cautioned, “Very careful thought should be given before authorizing air operations over Manchuria...such an authorization would extend our commitment and might even cause the Russians to come in under their pact with China.”<sup>186</sup> But he doesn’t explain further. No participant in this meeting mentions Soviet nuclear weapons despite the concern expressed about a possible Soviet intervention.

The 74<sup>th</sup> meeting, which took place on December 12, 1950, again returned to the discussion about U.S. policy on whether to bomb targets on Chinese territory.<sup>187</sup> Secretary Marshall, General Bradley, and President Truman discussed the matter, which had come up in a meeting with British Prime Minister Clement Atlee earlier in the month. The notes read:

The President: ...He noted that it has also been agreed that it would be terrible to get tied down in a war with the Chinese Communists.

Secretary Marshall questioned whether it was not agreed that war with China should be avoided.

General Bradley noted that we had reserved the right to take action against China, although we did not desire to be tied down there.

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<sup>184</sup> The 72<sup>nd</sup> meeting does not discuss operations in Korea. It is focused on the long-term military program. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 72<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the NSC, November 24, 1950.

<sup>185</sup> HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 73<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the NSC, November 28, 1950. The meeting notes record that General Bradley said, “The Chinese Communists therefore have the potential of striking a hard blow by air.”

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. It is worth noting that a CIA memorandum prepared in November 1950 states the CIA opinion that “action by U.N. forces to attack troop concentration or air fields north of the Yalu River, or to pursue enemy aircraft into Chinese territory would not increase the already substantial risk that the situation may degenerate into a general war involving Russia.” The CIA assessment, led by Walter Bedell Smith, therefore disagrees with that of Secretary Acheson. HSTL, PSF, Box 182, Meetings: 72: November 22, 1950, 1950, CIA Memorandum for the NSC, November 9, 1950.

<sup>187</sup> HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 74<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, November 28, 1950.

Secretary Marshall thought that we had indicated we did not want to be restrained from bombing Chinese bases, although we would not do it for other than the protection of our units...

...

The Vice President asked if it wasn't agreed that we would not precipitate a general war with China.

The President agreed, but said that we made it clear that we would not stand idly by.<sup>188</sup>

The participants were reluctant to authorize strikes on China for fear of getting "tied down," not due to Soviet nuclear weapons. There is no mention of Soviet nuclear weapons in the notes.

Discussion of American attacks on Manchuria does not occur again until the January 18<sup>th</sup> 80<sup>th</sup> meeting of the national security council.<sup>189</sup> Secretary of State Dean Acheson raised "the question of removing present restrictions on aerial reconnaissance over Communist China" and voiced his objection to this step. General Bradley supported the policy, noting that the proposal does not "involve penetration into the interior of China." Bradley also openly pondered whether the United States should "take off on a unilateral course of action in Korea," obliquely referring to action like bombing targets in Manchuria.<sup>190</sup> The meeting is notable because even reconnaissance over China generated bureaucratic disagreement. Consideration of bombing Manchuria doesn't even emerge as a point of discussion. A Joint Chiefs of Staff memo associated with this meeting, NSC report 101, does directly discuss "naval and air attacks on objectives in Communist China" but only recommends this action "at such time as the Chinese Communists attack any of our forces outside of Korea."<sup>191</sup> The memo, which does not mention Soviet nuclear weapons, appears to accept that attacks on targets in China were not under consideration unless China expanded the war first.

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> There is no mention of this topic at the 75<sup>th</sup>, 76<sup>th</sup>, 77<sup>th</sup>, 78<sup>th</sup>, or 79<sup>th</sup> NSC meetings. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 75<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, December 15, 1950. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 76<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, December 26, 1950. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 77<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, January 6, 1951. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 78<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, January 11, 1951. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 79<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, January 13, 1951.

<sup>190</sup> HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 80<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, January 18, 1951.

<sup>191</sup> HSTL, PSF, Meetings: 80: January 17, 1951, NSC 101 A Report to the National Security Council, January 12, 1951.

The 81<sup>st</sup> meeting, held on January 25, 1951, largely concerned the reactions of top leaders to a paper prepared by the National Security Resources Board, an organization then led by Stuart Symington. The paper advocated attacks on lines of communication in China and “aggression-support-industries” in Manchuria.<sup>192</sup> Secretary Acheson, the meeting notes record, “stated his belief that if the United States followed certain of the courses recommended in this paper, it would probably bring on a third world war.”<sup>193</sup> But neither he nor any other members present mentioned a specific fear of Soviet nuclear weapons.

At the next three meetings of the national security council, there was no discussion about the possibility of striking targets in Manchuria.<sup>194</sup> The status quo of no attacks on targets in China appears to have crystallized by late February 1951. Foot’s *The Wrong War* also identifies this time period as one in which the United States “settled” for a “limited conflict” rather than expand the war to China.<sup>195</sup> U.N. forces recovered from their rout and the forward line of battle stabilized. In addition, talks related to an armistice began. In other words, striking targets in China lost salience as a policy option as the war entered a new phase.

### **Nuclear Weapons and Conventional Escalation in the Korean War**

The review of secondary texts and primary research reveals that the caution model is inconsistent with Truman White House decision-making after Chinese intervention. The high costs logic and the accidental war logic of the caution model predict that Soviet nuclear weapons (plus the Sino-Soviet alliance) might have impressed upon American decision-makers either the high costs of war or the difficulty of controlling escalation in the nuclear age. No such logic was invoked by key decision-makers. Despite extensive discussion about this topic among President Truman and his top advisers and the belief held by some cabinet members that the Soviets might intervene on China’s behalf should the United States had expanded the war, no participant in the fifteen national security council meetings after Chinese intervention mentions a fear that American strikes on Manchuria could lead to Soviet nuclear use or nuclear war.

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<sup>192</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*. Volume I, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), pp. 7-18.

<sup>193</sup> HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 81<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, January 25, 1951.

<sup>194</sup> HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 82<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the NSC, February 2, 1951. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 83<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the NSC, February 14, 1951. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President, Summary of Discussion at 84<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the NSC, February 23, 1951.

<sup>195</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 120.

Neither does the emboldenment model accurately represent Truman administration decision-making during the debate over geographic limits of the bombing campaign. Importantly, the Truman administration never did authorize a bombing campaign across the border, which conflicts with the emboldenment model's prediction of greater levels of conventional force used against another nuclear adversary. But perhaps more importantly, and somewhat surprisingly, President Truman and his top advisors (at least at the level of the national security council) did not invoke American nuclear superiority as an aspect of the situation that increased their willingness to use greater levels of force.<sup>196</sup>

The null model is most consistent with actual Truman White House decision-making. Soviet nuclear weapons did not weigh heavily on the President or the cabinet. In other words, the possibility of Soviet nuclear use did not constrain American decisionmakers as some past scholars suggest or, equally importantly, as modern opponents of mainland strikes might theorize. Because Soviet nuclear weapons were not mentioned among these discussions, this case study supports the irrelevance logic over the stalemate logic. No evidence surfaced that top decision-makers saw the Soviet nuclear arsenal and the American nuclear force cancelling each other out. Admittedly though, the Soviet nuclear arsenal consisted of only a handful of nuclear weapons that could only be delivered in theaters near the Soviet Union. Modern Chinese nuclear forces have greater ranges and are larger numerically. The analogy with a modern U.S.-China war is therefore imperfect.

But before proponents of mainland strikes see this case as simple confirmation of their side of argument, there's a second component of this chapter. The Truman administration did nevertheless prohibit strikes on China. Although there were sound military reasons to strike air bases, troop concentrations, and supply lines in China, President Truman and his advisers decided against this course of action for a variety of political and strategic reasons related to the foreign policy situation. The next section examines these reasons and assesses whether these factors would similarly create reluctance to strike mainland China in a future war.

## **Scenario Characteristics and the Escalation Debate**

There are at least five distinct scenario-related explanations for President Truman's decision to not expand the war to Chinese territory despite engaging in large-scale combat with Chinese forces on the Korean peninsula. These explanations are

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<sup>196</sup> General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of United Nations Command, might have thought differently, admittedly, but his opinion was not decisive in determining the geographic boundaries of the war.

presented in rough temporal order. Uncertainty over Chinese intentions in November 1950 first delayed serious consideration of strikes on China. Once Chinese intervention became obvious, American leaders, still keenly aware of the costs of the recent world war, hoped to avoid repeating that grueling experience. Maintaining military strength sufficient for a war in Europe and preserving allied unity then emerged as priorities that reduced the likelihood of strikes on Manchuria. Simultaneously, American leaders perceived an element of mutual restraint in UN-Communist military interactions and therefore avoided expanding the war to China so that the Chinese and the Soviets would exhibit similar restraint. Finally, the pursuit of armistice talks curbed appetites for strikes on China for fear that such an action would dash all hopes of successful talks.

### **Uncertainty over Chinese Intentions Immediately after Chinese “Intervention”**

The first impediment to striking Chinese territory can be found in the confusion and uncertainty about Chinese intentions in November 1950. Only limited numbers of Chinese troops initially appeared in North Korea, fostering a belief among Americans that Chinese leaders were not committed to a full-scale intervention and that attacking China was an unnecessary and perhaps excessively escalatory step. The small-scale incursions by the Chinese could have been, according to one hypothesis popular at the time, an attempt to establish a “cordon sanitaire,” a buffer zone in between UN troops and Chinese territory.<sup>197</sup> Another possibility, advanced by the U.S. Ambassador in Seoul John Muccio, was that the Chinese forces were fighting a “delaying action,” buying time for the retreat of North Korean forces.<sup>198</sup> More generally, the chaos and uncertainty of the battlefield complicated any definitive judgement.<sup>199</sup> Faced with this basic uncertainty, American decision-makers preferred to probe Chinese intentions rather than expand the conflict.<sup>200</sup> Consequently, the rules of engagement, which barred strikes on China, were left unchanged for the fighting forces in Korea. It was only in the last week of November that a sufficiently large Chinese offensive convinced American decision-makers that China intended something more than a small-scale intervention.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> HSTL, National Security Council File (hereafter NSC file), Box 3, Memoranda for the President, Korean Situation & Daily Korean Summary/Bulletin, September 1, 1950-March 30, 1951 [Folder 1 of 2], CIA Memorandum for the President on Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea, November 1, 1950. Futrell also finds evidence for this view. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, p. 235.

<sup>198</sup> HSTL, NSC File, Box 3, Memoranda for the President, Korean Situation & Daily Korean Summary/Bulletin, September 1, 1950-March 30, 1951 [Folder 1 of 2], Daily Korean Summary, November 20, 1950.

<sup>199</sup> Foot quotes a late November 1950 CIA report claiming that intelligence on Chinese intentions was “not conclusive.” Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 99.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> HSTL, NSC File, Box 3, Memoranda for the President, Korean Situation & Daily Korean Summary/Bulletin, September 1, 1950-March 30, 1951 [Folder 1 of 2], Daily Korean Summary, November 28, 1950.

Initial uncertainty over Chinese intentions therefore delayed serious discussion of expanding the war to China for at least the month of November 1950. A similar uncertainty over Chinese intentions in a future war might also delay a mainland strikes decision.

### **Fear of a New World War**

President Truman and his senior advisers were also generally wary of any prospect of re-igniting a world war. A broader conflict with the Soviet Union was considered all too likely if the United States expanded the war to Chinese territory.<sup>202</sup> Secretary of State Dean Acheson worried, “to do so would, we believe, increase—and materially increase—the risk of general war in the Far East and general war throughout the world.”<sup>203</sup> Even the Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed worries that actions against forces in Manchuria could potentially lead the Soviets to join the fight.<sup>204</sup>

It’s worth engaging a likely counter-argument forthrightly at this point. Some readers will counter that this American fear of general war implicitly includes fear of war with a nuclear-armed Soviet Union. The shadow of nuclear weapons exerts its effect, these readers might believe, through this more general fear. To be sure, although American leaders never explicitly worried about atomic weapons when discussing this fear, this fear could have been present in their thoughts. But as the ample evidence in the earlier section on Soviet nuclear weapons documented, Soviet nuclear weapons never appear in the discussions of President Truman and his advisors. This is a glaring omission.<sup>205</sup> If Soviet nuclear weapons so greatly constrain American conventional escalation, one would expect at least some verbal or written acknowledgement. President Truman and his advisers openly discussed other reasons for restraint, often repeatedly. Why should Soviet nuclear weapons receive nary a line of ink nor a verbal comment? The irrelevance logic of the null model, as argued earlier, most likely explains this omission.

### **Importance of Defending Western European Allies**

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<sup>202</sup> Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, pp. 317-318.

<sup>203</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, pp. 241-242; see also HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memoranda for the President: Meeting Discussions: 1950, Memorandum for the President, November 28, 1950.

<sup>204</sup> Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953*, p. 56.

<sup>205</sup> Scholars might recognize this methodological obstacle at that of the unspoken assumptions issue. For a recent mention of this methodological issue in connection to the study of international security, see Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, “Reputation and Status as Motives for War,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 17, 2014, p. 385. My own research in the past has also tried to navigate this admittedly tricky methodological issue, see John Speed Meyers, “Reputation Matters: Evidence from the Korean War,” *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2015, p. 21.

Once Chinese intentions became clear, another set of reasons for delaying or avoiding strikes on China emerged: the beliefs that American military strength should be reserved for the defense of Europe and that strikes on China would damage American relations with its UN allies.

Though General MacArthur, the UN commander, saw Asia and Korea as the critical theater in the emerging Cold War and supported an escalation of the war in Asia to accomplish American objectives, most other senior leaders thought differently.<sup>206</sup> Epitomized by Secretary of State Dean Acheson, this group of advisers, which arguably included the President himself, thought that the “real enemy is the Soviet Union” and that a larger fight in Asia would divert resources from Europe.<sup>207</sup> Military leaders especially worried that a serious attempt to bomb important sites in China could sap the American military strength that deterred the Soviet Union from starting a war in Europe.<sup>208</sup> A related worry was that the Soviets were actually attempting to ensnare the United States in a war in Asia and intentionally dilute American strength before a Soviet attack on Europe.<sup>209</sup> These concerns were exacerbated by the widespread belief that American military forces were weak and required rapid rebuilding.<sup>210</sup> President Truman’s advisers could not support an expansion of the war in Asia when they viewed Europe as the true prize of the Cold War struggle.

Concern with unity among the UN allies, especially those governments contributing forces to oppose North Korean and Chinese troops, also partially explains the Truman administration’s reluctance to strike targets in China.<sup>211</sup> Other UN member governments, particularly the British, were strongly opposed to expanding the geography of the war to China.<sup>212</sup> The British even opposed “hot pursuit,” the practice of pursuing Communist aircraft into Chinese airspace.<sup>213</sup> Bombing Manchuria, at least from the perspective of America’s allies, was out of the question. For President Truman and his advisers, maintaining allied cohesion helped ensure these nations would keep

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<sup>206</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 116; Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, The Free Press, 1984, p. 487.

<sup>207</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 124-125. Gacek, *The Logic of Force*, p. 57; DeWeerd, “The Triumph of the Limiters: Korea,” p. 15.

<sup>208</sup> Futrell, *United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>209</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 123. Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, pp. 317-318. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memoranda for the President: Meeting Discussions: 1950, Memorandum for the President, November 10, 1950

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>211</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 13.

<sup>212</sup> Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea 1950-1953*, p. 85.

<sup>213</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 90-91.

providing forces in Korea and cooperating in case of further Communist aggression around the world, especially in Europe.

These countervailing values created restraint in America's war with China. The Truman White House wanted to keep its powder dry in the event of war with the Soviet Union. An expanded war in Asia, one that included bombing targets in China, clashed with that desire. President Truman and especially Secretary of State Acheson also wanted to maintain allied unity, even at the expense of operational effectiveness. Because UN allies opposed expanding the war to China, a decision to do that would have severely strained alliance relationships.

The influence of this dynamic on a future decision to authorize mainland strikes is ambiguous. Should allies such as Japan call for restraint, this could weigh heavily on American decision-makers. Alternatively, should American allies push for mainland strikes, allied concerns could tip the scales in that direction.

### **Mutual UN-Communist Restraint and Fear of UN Vulnerability**

Restraint was also a mutual phenomenon.<sup>214</sup> President Truman and his advisers seem to have barred strikes on China partially because the Soviets and Chinese had limited their fighting geographically too.<sup>215</sup> The Communist side did not attack American targets and supply lines outside of the Korean peninsula or American air bases in South Korea.

A decision to expand the war to China became premised on whether the Chinese and Soviets attacked UN forces outside of Korea. January 1951 NSC documents call for "initiat[ing] damaging naval and air attack on objectives in Communist China at such time as the Chinese Communists attack any of our forces outside of Korea."<sup>216</sup> Chief of Naval Operations Forrest Sherman and Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force Nathan Twining supported this reasoning; Admiral Sherman noted "the advantage of keeping our air on our side of the frontier" as long as China reciprocally restrained its air

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<sup>214</sup> Halperin observed this phenomenon over fifty years ago, though he lacked archival documentation from both sides to corroborate this theory. Halperin, "The Limiting Process in the Korean War," p. 36. Foot emphasizes this aspect of the narrative in explaining American restraint. She writes about the period, "at this point it seemed that the absence of a Chinese air attack was all that kept the administration from an expansion of the war." Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>215</sup> There were, in fact, a host of restrictions on Communist jets flying from Manchuria. Xiaoming Zhang, *Red Wings over the Yalu: China, the Soviet Union, and the Air War in Korea*, Texas A&M University Press, 2003, p. 139.

<sup>216</sup> HSTL, PSF, Box 182, Meetings: 80: January 17, 1951, NSC 101 A Report to the National Security Council, January 12, 1951. NSC 101/1 has similar language. See, in the same folder, NSC 101/1 dated January 15, 1951.

forces.<sup>217</sup> Chief of Staff of the Air Force Hoyt Vandenberg also endorsed this logic. He reasoned, “the sanctuary business...is operating on both sides.”<sup>218</sup>

This “sanctuary business” was considered a boon to UN forces because American military leaders believed that the UN forces would be at a greater disadvantage should mutual restraint disappear. Secretary of Defense Marshall questioned attacking “scattered targets in Manchuria” given how “vulnerable” and “highly concentrated” American targets were in Korea.<sup>219</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Omar Bradley similarly expressed concerns that Chinese aircraft in Manchuria could strike crowded and vulnerable UN airfields in Korea and Japan.<sup>220</sup>

In sum, the decision to prohibit strikes on Manchuria stemmed, in part, from Communist forbearance, itself the result of a fear of American escalation.<sup>221</sup> The Korean War analogy therefore requires caution in an application to a modern U.S.-China war. Assuming Chinese restraint in attacking American air bases and aircraft carriers, there might indeed be a mutual restraint logic operating, constraining American operations. Should China attack American air bases though, and Chinese doctrine indicates that such an attack is plausible, the Korean War analogy breaks down.<sup>222</sup> A modern American president might be more disposed to attacks on mainland China in this case than President Truman was.

## **Armistice Negotiations**

A disgruntled officer best, if perhaps too crudely, summarized the effect of the pursuit of an armistice on the geographic rules of engagement during the Korean War: “Don’t employ air power so the enemy will get mad and won’t sign the armistice.”<sup>223</sup> The desire to sign an armistice and the necessity of maintaining a congenial negotiating environment complicated, to say the least, any decision to strike targets in China.

The policy of seeking an armistice began in December 1950 when President Truman’s military and civilian advisers agreed that a ceasefire agreement and an end to

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<sup>217</sup> Gacek, *The Logic of Force*, pp. 57-58. See also Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>218</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 138.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Gacek, *The Logic of Force*, p. 57. For the original source, see HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memoranda for the President: Meeting Discussions: 1950, Memorandum for the President, November 28, 1950.

<sup>221</sup> For a discussion of the reasons behind Communist restraint, see Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, p. 286. Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 168.

<sup>222</sup> Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon’s Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States*, RAND Corporation, 2007, pp. 62-64.

<sup>223</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 20.

fighting represented the best exit from the war.<sup>224</sup> Secretary Acheson appears to have been the strongest supporter of this position and therefore also an opponent of actions that threatened the success of the armistice talks, like bombing air bases in Manchuria.<sup>225</sup> Military historian Conrad Crane documents the tension between pursuing military advantage and attempting to achieve armistice negotiations and writes about how that tradeoff created a “crisis” for senior Air Force leaders.<sup>226</sup> The pursuit of armistice so constrained American escalation that an expansion of war to China eventually became premised on China breaking off negotiations first. Although this phenomenon happened largely in the later years of the war and outside the temporal scope of the rest of the case study, it’s worth mentioning that one operational plan and another high-level American meeting with the British explicitly called for attacks on targets in Manchuria if China broke off armistice talks.<sup>227</sup> Because the armistice talks never fully broke down and actually successfully concluded in the summer of 1953, there was never a chance to observe if American leaders intended to carry out their plan for expanding the war.

The pursuit of an armistice gathered a momentum of its own during the Korean War and provides yet another explanation of why China remained off-limits to American bombing. American commanders in a future U.S.-China war could be subject to a similar diplomatic pressure. Pursuing peace talks could constrain the tempo or type of military operations directed against the Chinese mainland, though it is also possible that strikes on the mainland could be used as part of coercive diplomacy to induce China to initiate or conclude a negotiation.<sup>228</sup>

### **Summary of Scenario Factors and Conventional Escalation in the Korean War**

A number of scenario factors overrode the military imperative of expanding the Korean War to Chinese territory through conventional bombing. American military planners ought to consider a similar possibility that a range of political and strategic factors could similarly constrain a contemporary decision about mainland strikes. Initial uncertainty over Chinese intentions, allied demands to avoid mainland strikes, or even Chinese restraint could also constrain American decision-makers. There could also be other idiosyncratic factors that reduce American willingness to employ mainland strikes.

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<sup>224</sup> Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, p. 373.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. See also a December 1950 meeting in which Secretary Acheson appears to oppose blockade of China partly because of his pursuit of an armistice. HSTL, PSF, Box 188, Memorandum for the President: Meeting Discussions: 1950, Memorandum for the President, December 15, 1950.

<sup>226</sup> Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953*, p. 75.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, pp. 155-157. Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>228</sup> Vincent A. Manzo, “After the First Shorts: Managing Escalation in Northeast Asia,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 2, 2015, pp. 95-96.

Some scenario factors could also increase American willingness to recommend mainland strikes. For instance, this analysis of the Korean War experience suggests Chinese and Soviet restraint partially explains American restraint in the Korean War. If the Communist side had attacked American forces outside of Korea, the American side might have been more willing to expand the war to China. It stands to reason that if in a future U.S.-China war the Chinese forces strike American air bases or aircraft carriers in East Asia, then an American president might be relatively willing to authorize mainland strikes.

Assessing the ultimate import of this analysis therefore also requires a judgment about the likelihood of each scenario factor in a future U.S.-China conflict which is beyond the scope of this empirical analysis. Suffice it to say that a range of scenario-related factors constrained American escalation against China in the Korean War. It is therefore possible to imagine a future major conventional war against China operating, at least initially, with similar restraints.

## **The Korean War and Implications for Mainland Strikes**

This chapter is the first to present empirical evidence relevant to the central question of this dissertation: under what conditions would a future U.S. president and his or her advisers authorize mainland strikes? The beginning of the chapter described how T.X. Hammes invoked the restraints in the bombing campaign from the Korean War to cast doubt on the likelihood that a future president would authorize conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. The analogy is fruitful, though not as straightforward as Hammes's early analysis suggested.

On the one hand, the evidence on Soviet nuclear weapons shows that the Truman administration had a freer hand to consider strikes on China than T.X. Hammes' analogizing allows. The nuclear caution model did not seem to operate in this case. The shadow of nuclear weapons did not loom over American decision-making on conventional escalation. Instead, the null model and specifically its irrelevance logic best explains American decision-making; Soviet nuclear weapons, despite the Sino-Soviet alliance, hardly factored in President Truman and his adviser's decision-making on whether to expand the war into China. To be sure, the Chinese lacked their own nuclear arsenal and the Soviet nuclear arsenal was nascent and limited in range at this time. Additionally, because China lacked its own nuclear forces, there were no fears of conventional-nuclear entanglement as there might be in a future U.S. decision to employ mainland strikes against China. But it's worth pointing out that these limitations are the fallback positions of strategists who earlier might have argued that

nuclear weapons are so influential as to constrain American conventional escalation options through the effects of the nascent Soviet nuclear arsenal operating in conjunction with the Sino-Soviet alliance. This chapter therefore puts a dent in the belief that the presence of nuclear weapons is so strong as to smother intra-war conventional escalation.

On the other hand, the analysis of scenario factors and their relationship to conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland suggests that a range of political and strategic factors could delay, constrain, or preclude mainland strikes. Just as uncertainty over Chinese intentions, alliance concerns, and communist restraint reduced the Truman administration's willingness to expand the Korean War to China, similar or other situational factors could reduce the willingness of a future administration to authorize conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. The perspective of mainland strikes skeptics therefore receives some backing too in this chapter.

The Korean War case, while not definitive, is suggestive. Adversary nuclear weapons, at least in this case, did not preclude American conventional escalation; contemporary Chinese nuclear possession, it seems possible, might not preclude mainland strikes. Some aspects of the foreign policy situation also militated against the expansion of the war to China. Political and strategic concerns in a modern U.S.-China war could also trump the military imperative for mainland strikes.

## Chapter 4. The Vietnam War: Operation Rolling Thunder

Operation Rolling Thunder, the codename for U.S. air operations over North Vietnam, was fought, in a metaphor that pervades the historical record, with “one hand tied behind our back.”<sup>229</sup> For some stretches of the air campaign over North Vietnam from 1965 to 1968, all North Vietnam was off limits.<sup>230</sup> The entire air campaign would grind to a halt on presidential orders and Communist troops could resupply without the threat of air attack. At other times, only particular geographic sections of North Vietnam were deemed open for bombing. Especially at the beginning of Rolling Thunder, only targets relatively close to the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel were allowed.<sup>231</sup> Targets farther north were barred. Most famously, targets in Hanoi and Haiphong, the capital of North Vietnam and the main port of North Vietnam, respectively, were often prohibited.<sup>232</sup> In fact, there were politically-imposed rings, of varying diameters, centered on these zones in which bombing required presidential authorization.<sup>233</sup> The Chinese border also had a buffer zone, 25 or 30 miles depending on the particular geography, in which U.S. planes were often denied access on political orders. This restriction was in force despite heavy communist use of this area for transportation of war material from China to North Vietnam and eventually to the communist-supported insurgents, the Viet Cong, in South Vietnam.<sup>234</sup> Targets inside China, including Chinese air bases that harbored North Vietnamese planes, were emphatically placed beyond American attack.<sup>235</sup> Certain target types were also off limits. North Vietnamese air bases, which often housed fighters that posed a threat to American pilots and

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<sup>229</sup>For an example of this imagery, see U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect*, Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1978, book jacket; Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 19. A 2017 *War on the Rocks* article about the Vietnam war uses this metaphor in its title, though the author is trying to debunk the myth of this imagery. That author underplays the extent of restrictions, though his conclusion that these restrictions are not responsible for the war's outcome are reasonable, if contested. Arnold R. Isaacs, “Facts about the Vietnam War, Part I: They Didn’t Fight with One Hand Tied Behind Their Backs,” *War on the Rocks*, September 11, 2017. President Lyndon B. Johnson also used this imagery. Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Meeting Notes File, Box 1, July 25, 1967 – 6:10 p.m. Senate Committee Chairmen, Meeting of the President on July 25, 1967, at 6:00 p.m., with the Senate Committee Chairmen, July 25, 1967.

All references to archival materials include, in this order, the library, collection, folder, document name, and document date. I also abbreviate Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library as LBJPL and Meeting Notes File as MNF.

<sup>230</sup> Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*, New York: Free Press, 1989, pp. 91-92, 119. In fact, President Johnson stopped Rolling Thunder eight times between March 1965 and March 1968.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. pp. 63-64, 83, 85; Earl H. Tilford, Jr. *Crosswinds: The Air Force's Setup in Vietnam*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993, p. 71.

<sup>232</sup> Guenter Lewy, *American in Vietnam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 379; Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 89.

<sup>233</sup> Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 73.

<sup>234</sup> John F. Kreis, *Air Warfare and Air Base Air Defense 1914-1973*, Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1988, p. 281.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid. p. 297.

operations, were, for at least a time, inviolate from American attack.<sup>236</sup> Surface-to-air missile sites and North Vietnamese airfields, thought to be under construction by Soviet advisors, were also often shielded from attack by the rules of engagement.<sup>237</sup> Though many of these restrictions loosened in the later years of the war, their existence for months or years prior to their loosening reduced the effectiveness of the air campaign.<sup>238</sup>

This chapter sets out to answer two questions about these restrictions. First, which of the models relating nuclear weapons to conventional explanations best explain these restrictions on conventional bombing during Operation Rolling Thunder? Second, more broadly, what are the scenario-related factors that explained patterns of restraint in conventional bombing during Operation Rolling Thunder? The motivation for this case study is ultimately to provide some evidence about the conditions under which mainland strikes might or might not be authorized. The first question, which concerns the effect of Chinese and Soviet nuclear weapons, relates to the debate about whether Chinese nuclear weapons reduce the probability of mainland strikes or constrain mainland strikes. The second question explores what scenario-related factors influenced conventional escalation during Rolling Thunder. Analysis of these questions helps shed light on how future decision-makers will view mainland strikes.

My findings correspond to the two questions above. First, the available historical materials provide little to no evidence that Chinese and Soviet nuclear weapons played a role in President Johnson and his advisers' decision-making on target selection during Operation Rolling Thunder. This lack of fear was despite a deeply-held belief that China and the Soviets might directly intervene on North Vietnam's behalf.<sup>239</sup> The null model thus out-performs the other models of conventional escalation for a second time. This ought to surprise mainland strike skeptics and satisfy proponents. Second, there are a host of decision-making factors that led to restrictions on bombing during Rolling Thunder: fear of Chinese and Soviet intervention, tit-for-tat retaliation, an aversion to supporting a failing South Vietnamese government, a belief

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<sup>236</sup> Air bases Kien An, Cat Bai, Gia Lam, Phuc Yen, and Kep were kept off the target list for much of Rolling Thunder. Ibid. p. 281; Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 18.

<sup>237</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 85.

<sup>238</sup> Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, pp. 378-379, 383. Lewy documents the loosening of restrictions, including the gradual movement of strikes northward, the widening of targets to include bridges, airfields, railroad yards, oil storage sites and power plants. The approved target set eventually expanded to the Hanoi Thermal power plant, high-value industrial sites and mining of rivers and estuaries south of the 20th parallel. The targeting of petroleum, oil, and logistics targets in the summer of 1966 is a clear example of this gradual erosion of restrictions. Other accounts also document this phenomenon of gradually disappearing restraints. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1984, p. 510; Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, pp. 92, 95-96, 106; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 95-96. A document from late 1967 illustrates how President Johnson loosened controls later in the war. After exhibiting extreme caution about strikes on ports, he grants permission to theater commanders to strike North Vietnamese ports if there are no foreign ships in port. LBJPL, MNF, Box 2, September 5, 1967 – 1:05 p.m. Tuesday Luncheon, Weekly Meeting with Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, Walt Rostow, George Christian, Dick Helms, and General Harold K. Johnson, September 5, 1967.

<sup>239</sup> Intervention could mean either sending military aid—which the Chinese and Soviets did in spades—or sending combat forces to directly and overtly participate in combat. President Johnson and his advisers were worried about the possibility of the latter.

in bombing as a coercive diplomatic tool, fear of civilian casualties, a need for U.S. public support, operational considerations, tactical cost imposition, and a desire by American leadership to minimize adversary misperceptions. That there were so many different, largely political origins of restrictions should concern those who believe in the strict military necessity of mainland strikes.

Before presenting evidence for the claims above, a short defense of this case study is in order. Essentially, why should those interested in the modern debate over mainland strikes devote their attention to the wrangling over target selection during Rolling Thunder nearly fifty years ago? First, debates over target selection defined the air war over North Vietnam. Different geographies and different targets in North Vietnam were often shielded from American air attack. Political restrictions led to the creation of “sanctuaries” above the 17th parallel in which the North Vietnamese could operate freely. Any researcher inquiring into debates over intra-war conventional escalation in American military history need look no further. Second, the debates over target selection during Rolling Thunder were acrimonious.<sup>240</sup> As a result, this airing of bureaucratic grievances provides insight into the reasons why particular actors supported or opposed particular strikes.<sup>241</sup> Third, there exists a possibility that this historical episode can shed light on whether Chinese possession of nuclear weapons will constrain American decision-makers in their choice to employ mainland strikes. Because Chinese and Soviet nuclear weapons did not constrain the Johnson administration in their selection of targets during Rolling Thunder, this case provides some evidence that a future U.S. administration might not be as reluctant to employ mainland strikes in a future U.S.-China war as skeptics claim. A later section of the chapter re-engages this discussion.

This chapter answers the two research questions sequentially. The first section documents the absence of concerns about Chinese and Soviet nuclear weapons in discussions about American conventional escalation despite the Johnson administration’s fear of direct intervention by China or Russia. The next section discusses the range of scenario-related concerns that did inform the Johnson administration’s target selection for the air war over North Vietnam. A final section uses the analytical interpretations to engage the debate over mainland strikes.

## **Communist Nuclear Weapons and Conventional Escalation in the Vietnam War**

Despite the Soviet possession of nuclear weapons and the Chinese acquisition of nuclear weapons in late 1964, the historical record—many meetings and memos related to bombing over North Vietnam—is notably absent of concern by American policymakers of Chinese or Soviet nuclear use. A reader should be especially surprised given the extent to

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid. pp. 73-75, 144-145.; Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat*, pp. 2-3.; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, pp. 149, 172-173.

<sup>241</sup> Dick Betts first analyzed Vietnam, along with many other cases, to test for the existence of differences between civilian and military attitudes on the use of force before and during war. Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.

which President Johnson and his advisers feared the possibility of Chinese and Soviet intervention on behalf of North Vietnam. This pattern of facts is most consistent with the null model's irrelevance logic: nuclear weapons, at least in this conflict, did not affect conventional escalation decisions. This section first documents the intense concerns of President Johnson and his advisers about Soviet and Chinese intervention and then systematically addresses the role of Soviet and Chinese nuclear weapons in explaining patterns of American escalation in Operation Rolling Thunder.

## A Fear of Chinese and Soviet Intervention

The many, often conflicting historical accounts of President Johnson's decision-making agree on this point: preventing Soviet or Chinese entrance into the Vietnam war became a central consideration for the President and his advisers during deliberations over target selection in Rolling Thunder.<sup>242</sup> Neither President Johnson, nor his advisers, shied away from voicing their fear of this outcome. A few examples, from both second and primary sources, should convince even the most skeptical reader. Of note, communist power intervention should be conceptually divided into two types: increasing military assistance to North Vietnam and, more importantly, direct entrance of land, sea, and air forces into the Vietnam War.

Before Operation Rolling Thunder commenced, the President and his advisers spent the better part of a year considering different forms of airstrikes on North Vietnam. In one meeting, Central Intelligence Agency Director John McCone opposed a sustained air attack on North Vietnam because this action might "trigger major increases in Chinese communist participation."<sup>243</sup> Secretary of State Dean Rusk and William Bundy, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, also opposed more overt measures against the North in this early stage of the Vietnam War for fear of Chinese involvement.<sup>244</sup> Other advisors, throughout the war, expressed a similar fear. Clark Clifford, who replaced Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense, opposed expansion of Rolling Thunder in early 1968 because of the prospect of Russian or Chinese intervention.<sup>245</sup>

In the summer of 1966, during discussions about targeting petroleum, oil, and lubricants [POL] sites, General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and President Johnson exchanged moderately acrimonious words about the possibility of Chinese and Soviet intervention. After General Wheeler proposed potentially mining Haiphong harbor, a key port in

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<sup>242</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 113; Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, pp. 277, 283; Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat*, pp. 4, 33; David M. Barrett, "'Doing Tuesday Lunch' at Lyndon Johnson's White House: New Archival Evidence on Vietnam Decisionmaking," *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 1991, p. 678; Herring, *America's Longest War*, pp. 164, 166; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 504; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, pp. 82, 91, 196; Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 19.

<sup>243</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, September 9, 1964 – 11:00 a.m. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam, Memorandum for the Record, September 9, 1964.

<sup>244</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*, New York: Free Press, 1989, p. 113.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

Northern Vietnam through which the Soviet transported war materiel, President Johnson asked, “Do you think this will involve the Chinese Communists and the Soviets?” When Wheeler replied, “No, sir,” the President fired back, “Are you more sure than MacArthur was?”<sup>246</sup>

Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* contains a collection of quotations from ex-President Johnson in which he discussed how he feared Chinese and Soviet intervention. In a conversation with Kearns, he said:

I never knew as I sat there in the afternoon, approving targets one, two, and three, whether one of those three might just be the one to set off the provisions of those secret treaties. In the dark at night, I would lay awake picturing my boys flying around North Vietnam, asking myself an endless series of questions. What if one of the targets you picked today triggers off Russia or China? What happens then? Or suppose one of my boys misses his mark when he’s flying around Haiphong? Suppose one of his bombs falls on one of those Russian ships in the harbor? What happens then?<sup>247</sup>

President Johnson clearly expressed fears that some targets in North Vietnam, if struck, might lead to a wider war with China or the Soviet Union.<sup>248</sup> Elsewhere in Goodwin’s book, she quotes Johnson: “By keeping a lid on all designated targets, I knew I could keep the control of the war in my own hands. If China reacted to our slow escalation by threatening to retaliate, we’d have plenty of time to ease off the bombing.”<sup>249</sup> Historical research by John Lewis Gaddis and Stanley Karnow corroborates that President Johnson genuinely feared Chinese and Soviet intervention—including direct intervention—and therefore restricted strikes on certain targets.<sup>250</sup>

## Communist Nuclear Weapons

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>247</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976, p. 283.

<sup>248</sup> One caveat: these conversations happened after the war. A skeptical reader could understandably worry that the ex-President was rationalizing and trying to explain his behavior, behavior that led to a divisive and unpopular war. Perhaps, this reader might worry, ex-President Johnson thought that this worry exculpated him and therefore expressed it in order to deflect blame. He might therefore have never actually had this worry. To assuage this concern, I use statements from other sources too. But this admission to Kearns is so vivid—and because it jibes with other historical evidence—it clearly demonstrates the analytical point and therefore merits inclusion.

<sup>249</sup> Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, p. 277.

<sup>250</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (expanded edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 245, 248-9; Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 426, 481, 499-501.

The Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons in 1949.<sup>251</sup> China developed nuclear weapons in October 1964, only months before the start of Rolling Thunder.<sup>252</sup> Given that there is an abundance of evidence that President Johnson and his advisers feared Chinese and Soviet intervention and that so many restrictions on target selection existed, one might expect that communist possession of nuclear weapons led to constrained rules of engagement. One of the most prominent secondary sources on Rolling Thunder, Mark Clodfelter's *The Limits of Airpower*, even emphasizes Soviet and Chinese nuclear weapons as an explanation of President Johnson's strict rules of engagement.<sup>253</sup> This historical interpretation is similar to the argument advanced by skeptics of mainland strikes—that Chinese nuclear weapons reduce the probability of mainland strikes and constrains any decision to employ mainland strikes.<sup>254</sup>

According to the best available historical evidence, however, fear of nuclear war does not appear to underpin the caution that Johnson and his advisers displayed when restricting targets in North Vietnam. Instead, the null model and its irrelevance logic best explains the

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<sup>251</sup> David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

<sup>252</sup> The landmark work on Chinese nuclear weapons, especially their development, is John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991. For a widely respected source documenting the start and growth of nuclear weapon inventories country-by-country, including China, see Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945-2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol. 69, No. 5, 2013. Kristensen and Norris estimate that China possessed 1 nuclear warhead in 1964, 5 in 1965, 20 in 1966, 25 in 1967, and 35 in 1968. See page 25. Another source, also written by Robert Norris but with different co-authors also provides data on China's limited nuclear weapon delivery capabilities from 1964 to 1968. Chinese nuclear-capable bombers, including the Tu-4 (~3000 nautical mile one-way maximum range), H-6 (~3,500 nautical mile one-way maximum range), and H-5 (~1,500 nautical mile one-way maximum range), grew from a combined inventory of 14 in 1964 to an inventory of 19 in 1968. China's DF-2A (NATO codename CSS-1) missile (~1,250 kilometer range) inventory increased from 5 in 1966 to 15 in 1968. See table 7-1, "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 1964-1993", from Robert S. Norris, Andrew S. Burrows, and Richard W. Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook: British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1994, p. 359. A link to this table can be found at William Burr, "The Chinese Nuclear Weapons Program: Problems of Intelligence Collection and Analysis: 1964-1972," The National Security Archive, George Washington University, <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB26/index.html>. The data for the ranges of the bombers are from: *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* editions 1956, 1966, and 1965, respectively. This is an annual aviation publication published by Jane's Information Group. An analyst from Jane's with access to these old editions provided this information; my intent was to use range estimates from that time period, estimates that are more likely to be salient to American policymakers than in comparison to retrospective estimates. The DF-2A range is from *Jane's Strategic Weapon Systems*, "Jane's by IHS Markit" Online Portal, posted 10/13/2011.

<sup>253</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, pp. 142, 209-210.

<sup>254</sup> Among the anti-mainland strike camp, T.X. Hammes most clearly emphasizes the argument that Chinese nuclear weapon possession might preclude strikes on the Chinese mainland. He writes, "The United States must accept that China's nuclear arsenal imposes restrictions on the way American forces might attack Chinese assets." T.X. Hammes, "Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict," Washington: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Forum, 2012, p. 4. Joshua Rovner has also argued that Chinese nuclear weapons could lead to restrictive rules of engagement and therefore to a protracted U.S.-China war. Joshua Rovner, "Two Kinds of Catastrophe: Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2017. Michael Beckley also makes a similar argument. Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2017, pp. 118-119.

pattern of conventional escalation decision-making in Operation Rolling Thunder. Soviet and Chinese nuclear weapons were not a salient concern to President Johnson and his advisers as they made decisions about conventional bombing over North Vietnam.

This argument contradicts the historical interpretation offered by Clodfelter, who offers several pieces of evidence to support his argument. For instance, Clodfelter places weight on a line from the president's memoir, *The Vantage Point*, in which ex-President Johnson wrote, "Above all else, I did not want to lead this nation and the world into nuclear war or even the risk of such a war."<sup>255</sup> But this quotation, which is from the ex-President's memoir, is relatively vague, was written after his Presidency, and does not specifically refer to targeting decisions. Clodfelter also cites Secretary of State Dean Rusk's observation regarding the effect of nuclear weapons on the President. President Johnson's fear of nuclear war was, according to Rusk, "difficult to overestimate. That box [containing the command mechanisms needed to launch nuclear weapons] constantly followed the President and hung like a millstone around his neck."<sup>256</sup> But this is a psychological interpretation offered by Rusk without concrete evidence. Clodfelter also writes, "Johnson thought that North Vietnam had entered into secret treaties with the Chinese and Soviets, under which increasing force beyond a certain level would trigger communist...involvement. That involvement could in turn lead to nuclear conflict."<sup>257</sup> Elsewhere he writes, "By influencing the Soviets to support Hanoi, Rolling Thunder intensified the President's fear that Vietnam might trigger a nuclear holocaust."<sup>258</sup> This assertion contains a fact but then an unsupported analytical claim. President Johnson did indeed fear secret treaties between North Vietnam and Beijing or Moscow, but there is no evidence in the citation that Clodfelter provides that this concern derived from fear of a nuclear war.<sup>259</sup> The fourth quotation rests on two citations, neither of which provide evidence of a "fear that Vietnam might trigger a nuclear holocaust."<sup>260</sup>

Clodfelter then places an important claim near the end of his book. He writes,

They [post-Vietnam air commanders] parade Linebacker II as proof that bombing will work in limited war, and they dismiss the notion that too much force could trigger nuclear devastation. Yet no matter how remote the threat of nuclear war, American political leaders must respect that threat when fighting an enemy with superpower

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<sup>255</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 42.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>259</sup> Clodfelter cites pages 66 and 67 of Johnson's *The Vantage Point*. A close reading of those two pages provides no evidence linking Johnson's fear of these potential secret treaties with fear of nuclear war. Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971.

<sup>260</sup> The first citation, merely a note about Sino-Soviet interaction, is irrelevant. And the second citation is to a memo written by Ambassador Thompson to the Secretary of State, a memo contained in the Pentagon Papers. There is no mention of nuclear war in this memo. Message, Ambassador Thompson to Secretary of State, 1 March 1968, *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, IV: 246-47, as cited by Clodfelter, p. 142.

backing. Vietnam's political controls were no anomalies; the atomic bomb has made them a standard feature of war in the modern era.<sup>261</sup>

The implication of Clodfelter's argument should concern those strategists who believe that mainland strikes must be authorized for victory. Clodfelter believes that political controls on bombing will be a "standard feature" of future war when the United States squares off with nuclear adversaries.

But an examination of the historical records of the Johnson administration— especially meeting minutes and memos related to targeting decisions during Operation Rolling Thunder— does not reveal an American fear that Chinese and Soviet intervention would lead to nuclear war. The remainder of this section examines meetings and memos in which this fear, if it existed, would materialize, though no evidence of it appears.<sup>262</sup>

At a July 1965 meeting, President Johnson and his advisers—most advisors at this particular meeting are connected to the military—extensively discussed the possibility of Chinese intervention. President Johnson repeatedly discussed the proper American response and the outcome should China intervene, but no advisor (nor the President himself) raised the possibility of nuclear escalation.<sup>263</sup> An absence of concern over nuclear war can also be seen in President Johnson's civilian advisors. A July 1965 meeting, with significantly more civilian attendance, also did not produce worries of nuclear conflagration if China intervenes. Notably, Undersecretary of State George Ball pointed out that "there remains a great danger of intrusion by Chicoms [Chinese communists]" but went on to discuss not the problem of nuclear war but the problem of casualties lowering U.S. public support for the war and the difficulty for great powers of defeating guerillas.<sup>264</sup> The high cost of nuclear war or its possibility owing to

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<sup>261</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>262</sup> A critical reader will correctly note that not all records on the Vietnam War have been declassified. My analysis and findings are necessarily only based on records that are unclassified and available.

<sup>263</sup> The advisors present are Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Earle Wheeler, Chief of Staff of the Army General Harold Johnson, Undersecretary of the Army Stanley Resor, Chief of Staff of the Air Force General John McConnell, Commandant of the Marine Corps General Wallace Greene, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral David McDonald, unofficial White House counsel Clark Clifford, Secretary of the Navy Paul Nitze, Secretary of the Air Force Eugene Zuckert, Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. These are predominantly military advisors, which could explain this finding. Other meetings and memos, however, contain more civilian representatives and similarly lack discussion of nuclear war. LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, July 21-27, 1965 – Meetings on Vietnam, Untitled [Meeting on Vietnam], July 22, 1965.

<sup>264</sup> Civilian advisors present include Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Undersecretary of State George Ball, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William (Bill) Bundy, senior diplomat Leonard Unger, Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Richard Helms, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency William Raborn (who was, admittedly, a career naval officer), soon-to-be Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., assistant direct of the Bureau of the Budget Henry Rowen, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton, and two presidential aides. LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, July 21-27, 1965 – Meetings on Vietnam, Untitled [Meeting on Vietnam], July 21, 1965.

inadvertent causes was not one of Undersecretary Ball's concerns when discussing Chinese Communist intervention.

In a June 1966 national security council meeting, President Johnson and his advisers discussed the potential advantages and disadvantages of striking North Vietnamese POL targets. Despite prodding by the President meant to elicit all the benefits and drawbacks of such a move and despite a clear worry of potential large-scale Chinese and Soviet intervention, no adviser mentioned nuclear war as a possible result. Even Ambassador to the United Nations Arthur Goldberg and Undersecretary of State George Ball, both noted skeptics of the bombing, did not mention nuclear war despite their opposition to bombing POL targets.<sup>265</sup>

Meeting notes from the fall of 1967 reveal a similar absence of references to nuclear weapons. President Johnson and his advisors discussed strikes on MiG air bases in North Vietnam, a target set that had long been restricted despite the threat that MiGs posed to U.S. aircrew and aircraft. Because MiGs had been supplied to North Vietnam and even operated by China and the Soviet Union, these air bases had been considered off-limits in order to minimize possible adverse reactions by the Communist superpowers. But the conversation about striking these targets never mentioned, even obliquely, worries about nuclear escalation.<sup>266</sup> A meeting from earlier that falls on the same topic strengthens the confidence with which an analyst can say that nuclear fears were not important when the Johnson administration considered strikes on MiG air bases. Despite a warning from Secretary of Defense McNamara that these strikes put more "pressure on the Chinese and Soviets to react," neither McNamara nor other advisors raised the possibility of nuclear escalation.<sup>267</sup>

Some of the evidence suggesting that the Johnson administration did not factor in Communist nuclear weapons when making conventional escalation decisions comes from President Johnson himself. In an August 1967 meeting with news correspondents, he stated:

We have many more targets authorized than have been hit. The ones which have not been authorized are delicate and dangerous. There are two reasons they are delicate and dangerous: hitting them might result in the possible involvement of China and the Soviet Union; there could be more loss of lives and aircraft involved than the destruction of targets would gain.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, June 22, 1966 National Security Council Meeting, Notes of the President's Meeting the National Security Council, June 22, 1966.

<sup>266</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 2, October 11, 1967 – Prior to Regular Weekly Luncheon Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors, Private Meeting in the President's Office, October 11, 1967.

<sup>267</sup> LBJPL, Tom Johnson Meeting Notes, Box 1, August 24, 1967 – 5:33 p.m. Rusk, McNamara, Gen. Johnson, Gen. McConnell, Nitze, Notes of the President's Meeting with Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, General Harold Johnson, General John P. McConnell, Under Secretary Paul Nitze, August 24, 1967. I will abbreviate all references to the Tom Johnson Meeting Notes as TJMN.

<sup>268</sup> LBJPL, TJMN, Box 1, July 1967 - May 1968, Meeting with Correspondents, Notes of the President's Meeting with Bob Lucas, August 14, 1967.

But President Johnson does not elaborate further on the first reason. If nuclear fears were hanging over President Johnson's decision-making, such an elaboration would be reasonable and perhaps even expected. Later that fall, President Johnson again had an opportunity to demonstrate the fear that Chinese intervention could eventually lead to nuclear war, but his thinking and decisions do not reveal such a consideration. In a discussion between the President and Secretary McNamara about hitting targets that were previously restricted, including those in the Haiphong Harbor where Soviet ships transported supplies, Secretary McNamara noted that the "basic argument" against striking ships in Haiphong harbor is "the fear of hitting Soviet ships."<sup>269</sup> But neither President Johnson nor Secretary McNamara directly mentioned any fear that accidentally striking a Soviet ship could lead eventually to a nuclear war. President Johnson again failed to mention a nuclear dimension to his political restrictions on some targets during a candid conversation with young sailors in February 1968. The President was on the U.S.S. Constellation, an aircraft carrier, and was fielding questions from young sailors. When one sailor suggested that the United States "hit them more," the President launched into a long explanation of why there are restrictions on some targets:

We are trying to keep them (meaning Chinese and Russia) actively out of it. If you hit two or three ships in that harbor – it is like slapping and I would slap back. We don't want a wider war. They have a signed agreement that if they get into a war, the Russians and Chinese will come to their aid. They have two big brothers that have more weight and people than I have. They are very dangerous. If the whole family jumps on me – I have all I can say grace over now – this is the reason the Secretaries of Defense and State have to see that what damage we will do them will be in the end not so dangerous. We will do better tomorrow than yesterday, but if we provoke both of them and get them on us, if we have all three actively fighting us – we are not trying to make this a wider war.<sup>270</sup>

President Johnson clearly feared a "wider war" but his admittedly vague language never defined wider as "nuclear." If the President truly did fear nuclear war, one would expect that language to be used here, but it is not. A meeting between President Johnson and ex-President Dwight Eisenhower produces a similar finding; the two presidents exchanged frank remarks about the possibility of Chinese intervention— President Johnson even asks about what ex-President Eisenhower would recommend should Chinese forces "come South"—and instead of the two shuddering at the possibility of nuclear war, President Eisenhower urged military measures like ("hit them at once with air") and raised the possibility of American use of tactical

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<sup>269</sup> LBJPL, TJMN, Box 1, October 4, 1967 – 7:02 p.m. McNamara, Rusk, Rostow, Notes of the President's Meeting with Secretary McNamara, Secretary Rusk, Walt Rostow, and George Christian, October 4, 1967.

<sup>270</sup> LBJPL, TJMN, Box 2, February 18, 1968 – 8 a.m. President's breakfast with boys on Aircraft Carrier Constellation, Summary of President' Breakfast with Boys on Carrier Constellation, February 18, 1968.

nuclear weapons.<sup>271</sup> Chinese or Soviet nuclear use and the possibility of a nuclear exchange seems relegated to a lesser or non-existent role in this conversation.

The strongest pieces of evidence can be found in a memo and an information paper prepared by Undersecretary of State George Ball and head of the Far Eastern Division of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the Department of State, Allen Whiting. Both officials were skeptics of bombing in North Vietnam and both worried about the possibility of a large-scale intervention by China reminiscent of China's previous entrance into the Korean War. Prior to the so-called Honolulu Conference, a major Vietnam war policy conference in early 1966, government officials and analysts debated many aspects of the war, including Rolling Thunder. Undersecretary of State George Ball wrote a long, lawyerly memo (transmitted to national security advisor McGeorge Bundy and then placed into the President's nightly reading) laying out reasons why Rolling Thunder should be halted, but the central reason is captured in the memo's title: "The Resumption of Bombing Poses [a] Grave Danger of Precipitating a War with China."<sup>272</sup> He wrote, "sustained bombing of North Viet-Nam will more than likely lead us into war with Red China—probably in six to nine months." He warned that a "sustained bombing program acquires a life and dynamism of its own" and that this dynamic could lead to undesirable escalation. But the memo, despite laying out a forceful case against bombing premised on a likely massive Chinese intervention, never mentioned the possibility of nuclear war. Additionally, this memo is based on a piece of writing, somewhat unofficial, produced by Allen Whiting, a China scholar then working in the State Department's intelligence bureau.<sup>273</sup> Whiting's memo is similarly thorough and also detailed the dangers of Chinese intervention—the memo has a series of rebuttals to common claims about why China will not intervene more directly in the Vietnam War.<sup>274</sup> Clearly attempting to marshal the strongest case possible about the perils of continuing to bomb North Vietnam, Whiting still never mentioned explicitly the possibility of nuclear war. At the very least, other reasons were sufficiently compelling that the logic of a conventional war transforming into a nuclear war never appears.

In sum, available unclassified records do not indicate that President Johnson and his advisers feared Chinese and Soviet nuclear use when making target selection decisions during Operation Rolling Thunder. As in the Korean War case study, the null model and its irrelevance

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<sup>271</sup> LBJPL, TJMN, Box 1, February 17, 1965 – 10:00 a.m. Meeting with General Eisenhower and Others, Memorandum of Meeting with the President, February 17, 1965.

<sup>272</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume IV, Vietnam, 1966, Document 41, "Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State (Ball) to President Johnson," January 25, 1966, available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v04/d41>, accessed June 3, 2019; LBJPL, National Security File, National Security Council History, Honolulu Conference, Box 44, Honolulu Conference, February 6-8, 1966, Vol. 1, Tabs 11-31, Tab 18, Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy, 25 January 25, 1966. I will abbreviate all references to the National Security File, National Security Council History as NSF, NSCH.

<sup>273</sup> The modern field of China studies, especially research on the Chinese use of force, owes an intellectual debt to Allen Whiting, who authored *China Crosses the Yalu*, among several other important scholarly works on Chinese foreign policy.

<sup>274</sup> LBJPL, NSF, NSCH, Box 44, Honolulu Conference, The Resumption of Bombing and Chinese Communist Involvement, January 24, 1966.

logic most easily accounts for this pattern. The null model's stalemate logic, though it predicts that Communist nuclear weapons will play a minor role in American decision-making, performs poorly because President Johnson and his advisers hardly discussed Communist nuclear weapons, let alone any cancelling effect of American and Communist nuclear arsenals. The caution and emboldenment models find no support. These findings cast some doubt on the beliefs of modern strategists who believe that Chinese possession of nuclear weapons will preclude mainland strikes.

These claims are not without two caveats. First, nuclear use does occasionally surface during these meetings over target selection, but it is *American*, not Chinese or Soviet, nuclear use. For instance, in a summer 1965 meeting, President Johnson wonders out loud to his advisors whether the United States could win "without using nuclear weapons" if China intervenes on North Vietnam's behalf.<sup>275</sup> Neither Chinese nor Soviet nuclear weapons are mentioned.

The second caveat is that China possessed only a rudimentary nuclear arsenal at the time and likely only had the capability, at most, to strike regional targets— U.S. allies or military bases—in the East Asia region with nuclear weapons.<sup>276</sup> This regional capability is in contrast with the capability to target the U.S. homeland with nuclear weapons. The Chinese inability to target the continental United States with nuclear weapons could explain why President Johnson and his advisors did not fear Chinese nuclear use. Nonetheless, China could have struck American allies in East Asia or American bases in East Asia. Additionally, the Soviet Union, also aiding North Vietnam and also a possible entrant into the Vietnam War, did possess the ability to target the American homeland.<sup>277</sup>

## Scenario Factors and Conventional Escalation in Operation Rolling Thunder

This next section explains the variety of factors that did impinge upon the target selection process led by President Johnson and his advisers. Each section briefly comments on the relevance of that factor in a future U.S.-China war for a mainland strikes decision. In

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<sup>275</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, July 21, 1965 – Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors in Vietnam, Memorandum for the Record, July 21, 1965. For an additional similar episode, see LBJPL, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, Vietnam, Special Meeting on Southeast Asia, Vol. I, Basic Recommendation and Projected Course of Action on Southeast Asia, May 25, 1964.

<sup>276</sup> See footnote 17 for a full description of the Chinese nuclear arsenal and its nuclear weapon delivery platforms from 1965 to 1968, the years of Operation Rolling Thunder.

<sup>277</sup> The Soviet Union nuclear stockpile increased from approximately 6,100 warheads to 9,500 warheads in the years 1965-1968. And the Soviet Union had developed intercontinental ballistic missiles that could carry nuclear warheads to the continental United States by this time. For stockpile figures, see Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945-2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 69, No. 5, 2013. For a thorough scholarly work on Soviet nuclear forces, see Pavel Podvig, ed., *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

aggregate, the large number of political and strategic reasons that inhibited conventional escalation during Operation Rolling Thunder should concern American strategists that see mainland strikes, especially mainland strikes early in a conflict, as important for American operational success in a potential U.S.-China war.

### **Tit-For-Tat Retaliation**

The proximate origins of Operation Rolling Thunder can be found in a series of decisions in 1964 and early 1965 in which aerial strikes on North Vietnam were authorized in a tit-for-tat fashion. Only increasingly bold and brazen attacks on American forces triggered, albeit in many small steps, the massive bombing campaign in the North. The attacks associated with the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the raid at Pleiku on a U.S. air base, and a bombing in Qui Nhon at a hotel housing American enlisted men precipitated limited, retaliatory strikes, though this circumscribed campaign eventually gave way to a much larger, sustained campaign of strikes on North Vietnam.

After an alleged attack in August 1964 by North Vietnamese patrol boats on U.S. destroyers offshore of Vietnam in international waters, President Johnson authorized the first air attack against North Vietnam.<sup>278</sup> The air attacks, called Operation Pierce Arrow, were limited to targets directly related to the original attack: patrol boats, port facilities and nearby oil storage facilities.<sup>279</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended a much larger campaign of strikes on 94 targets, but President Johnson and his advisors were willing to ratchet up American air attacks only in measured doses.<sup>280</sup> In a Joint Chiefs of Staff memo in September 1964, the chiefs even express their opposition to the term “tit for tat” which had been used in contingency planning for the air war in North Vietnam. The chiefs argue that the term “could be interpreted to limit too narrowly our response to an attack on U.S. units.”<sup>281</sup>

The tit-for-tat retaliation pattern continued in February 1965 despite the concerns of the top brass. Viet Cong attacks destroyed a score of aircraft and killed eight Americans on February 7. Operation Flaming Dart I began the next day. American and South Vietnamese planes then struck North Vietnamese barracks just across the demilitarized zone; retaliation was therefore limited and proportional. The then-commander of Pacific Command, Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, called this decision an example of an “unfortunate pattern throughout the war” in which the civilian policymaker chose the “weakest attack option available.”<sup>282</sup> Notes from a post-Pleiku

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<sup>278</sup> Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 15. For the landmark study of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, see Edwin E. Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: UNC Press, 1996.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*; Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (4th edition), New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002, p. 144.

<sup>280</sup> Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 15.

<sup>281</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, September 9, 1964 – 11:00 a.m. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam, Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, Courses of Action for South Vietnam, September 9, 1964.

<sup>282</sup> Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 68.

national security council meeting reveal that Secretary of Defense McNamara and U.S. Ambassador at Large for Soviet Affairs Llewelyn Thompson both viewed American actions as retaliatory. Thompson suggested, "The punishment should fit the crime. No additional air strikes should be made now."<sup>283</sup>

Another attack, this one on February 10<sup>th</sup> at an American quarters for enlisted men, produced another American retaliatory attack.<sup>284</sup> Operation Flaming Dart II included nearly 30 South Vietnamese planes and twenty American planes. These attacks were on targets previously struck a few days earlier or on sites near the demilitarized zone.<sup>285</sup>

These air operations quickly lost their tit-for-tat character. Operation Rolling Thunder commenced in March 1965 and was intended to be a sustained campaign of air strikes de-linked from any particular North Vietnamese provocation.<sup>286</sup>

This tit-for-tat dynamic constrained bombing operations over North Vietnam because the United State Air Force could only strike targets north of the 17th parallel after North Vietnam had committed sufficiently grave attacks. This phenomenon could foreshadow a future situation in which the U.S. military only gains permissions for mainland strikes after sufficiently escalatory attacks by China, e.g. missile attacks on an American air base or aircraft carrier. This sort of "defensive" authorization may be in contrast to the preferences of some strategists for early strikes on the Chinese mainland.

## **A Weak South Vietnamese Government**

President Johnson expressed and demonstrated reluctance to bomb targets in North Vietnam when domestic politics in South Vietnam appeared in disarray. Especially in late 1964 and early 1965, President Johnson believed, "[there is] no point in hitting the North if the South [is] not together."<sup>287</sup> He therefore, in at least one instance after a bombing in Saigon, denied permission for attacks on targets in the North so that U.S. reprisals did not spark further attacks while South Vietnam was "too shaky."<sup>288</sup> President Johnson had previously stated that he was loathe to "enter the patient [South Vietnam] in a 10-round bout, when he was in no shape to hold out for one round. We should get him ready to face 3 or 4 rounds at least."<sup>289</sup> He also

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<sup>283</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, February 7, 1965 – 8:00 a.m. National Security Council Meeting, Summary Notes of 546th NSC Meeting, February 7, 1965.

<sup>284</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam*, p. 153.

<sup>285</sup> Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 68.

<sup>286</sup> Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 16.

<sup>287</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 56. See also pp. 95-96.

<sup>288</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam*, p. 151.

<sup>289</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, September 9, 1964 – 11:00 a.m. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam, Memorandum for the Record, Meeting on South Vietnam, 9 September, 1964, 11:00 a.m., Cabinet Room, September 9, 1964.

appears to have felt unwilling to authorize attacks that might be seen as condoning and supporting a regime with chaotic internal politics.<sup>290</sup>

While this concern could be idiosyncratic, a future U.S. administration might worry about supporting an ally or partner—for instance, Taiwan—that could be experiencing severe internal domestic turmoil during a future conflict with China. This is a concern not previously mentioned in the strategic debate over the likelihood of mainland strikes.

### **Bombing as a Tool of Coercive Diplomacy**

The bombing in the North eventually morphed into a diplomatic tool. American leaders wielded it to inflict pain on the North Vietnamese leadership in the hope of inducing peace talks and repeatedly paused bombing in an attempt to signal American willingness to engage in talks. Early in Rolling Thunder, senior officials began to view Rolling Thunder as a means to “hurt” the North Vietnamese leadership.<sup>291</sup> More bombing meant greater damage which theoretically produced more diplomatic leverage. This view was well-expressed through the words of retired General Curtis Lemay: “The military task confronting us is to make it so expensive for the North Vietnamese that they will stop their aggression against South Vietnam and Laos. If we make it too expensive for them, they will stop.”<sup>292</sup>

The belief in bombing as a form of coercive diplomacy eventually transformed into a controversial argument in favor of periodic restrictions on bombing in North Vietnam. One bombing halt was in late December 1965. All bombing operations over North Vietnam were stopped. President Johnson and his top civilian advisors hoped that a temporary halt might increase the chances for diplomacy to work; a Polish diplomat, sent by the Soviets, was negotiating in Hanoi and the Americans did not want to sabotage the effort.<sup>293</sup> This instance was part of a larger pattern of “signaling,” in which the United States leadership sought to convey to North Vietnam American willingness to halt bombing and, simultaneously, to hint at the threat of resumed bombing.<sup>294</sup> Critics have found fault in the attempt to use “studied restraint” in an attempt to send signals to Hanoi.<sup>295</sup> Whatever the merits, it is clear that these attempts to signal grew out of an earnest belief that American restraint might lead to a similar move by the

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<sup>290</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 151.

<sup>291</sup> Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 20. For instance, director of the CIA John McCone wrote in April 1965 that the bombing had not yet been “sufficiently heavy and damaging really to hurt the North Vietnamese.”

<sup>292</sup> Curtis E. LeMay with MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965, p.564.

<sup>293</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>294</sup> For a discussion of the American interest, especially among civilian academics, in signaling via the use of force, see Stephen Peter Rosen, “Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War,” *International Security* Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1982). John Lewis Gaddis also notes a recurrent use of periodic bombing pauses in an attempt to bring Hanoi to the conference table. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 245.

<sup>295</sup> Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 19.

North.<sup>296</sup> But to return to the late 1965 episode, American restraint did not produce the intended response from the adversary. Ho Chi Minh, the North Vietnam Communist leader, rejected the offer of peace talks presented by the Polish diplomat and criticized the bombing pause as a “sham peace trick.”<sup>297</sup> This rejection led President Johnson and his advisers to resume bombing the North. There would be at least eight bombing pauses throughout the course of Operation Rolling Thunder.<sup>298</sup>

This restraint could be peculiar to the Vietnam War. A future U.S. decision about mainland strikes might not be influenced by considerations about coercive diplomacy. That said, one analyst has previously suggested that mainland strikes “could change their [China’s] calculus and motivate them to seek a peaceful off-ramp” during a war.<sup>299</sup> And that coercive diplomacy via target selection featured so prominently during Operation Rolling Thunder does suggest that mainland strikes could become entangled in a high-stakes debate over American “signaling” to Chinese leaders.

### **Avoiding Civilian Casualties**

Top decision-makers were also anxious to avoid civilian casualties during Operation Rolling Thunder. As a result, some targets, especially those in Hanoi and Haiphong, were restricted.<sup>300</sup> For instance, when discussing whether to bomb several bridges in the politically sensitive northeast quadrant of North Vietnam, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara worried that these targets are “smack in the middle of Haiphong and Hanoi” and though he conceded that they may need to be struck “at some point” that this would be contingent on the “civilian casualties not being heavy.”<sup>301</sup> This concern about bombing targets in Hanoi and the potential

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<sup>296</sup> Another example of this belief can be seen in May 1965. The United States had halted bombing for six days. In a meeting with his advisers discussing the pause, President Johnson remarks, “For six days we have held off bombing. Nothing happened. We had no illusions that anything would happen. But we were willing to be surprised. We are anxious to pursue every diplomatic adventure, to get peace. But we can’t throw our gun away.” LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, May 16, 1965 6:45 p.m. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam, Untitled Document, May 16, 1965. Similarly, President Johnson tells his advisers in late 1967 that he will only halt bombing in the North in return for “prompt” and “productive” negotiations.” LBJPL, TJMN, Box 1, October 5, 1967 – 6:55 p.m. McNamara, Rusk, Rostow, Notes of the President’s Meeting with Secretary McNamara, Secretary Rusk, Walt Rostow, October 5, 1967.

<sup>297</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>298</sup> See footnote 2. Also see LBJPL, TJMN, Box 1, September 26, 1967 – 5:46 p.m. Educators from Cambridge, Mass. Small Colleges and Universities, Notes of the President’s Meeting with Educators from Cambridge, Massachusetts Colleges and Universities, September 26, 1967.

<sup>299</sup> Vincent A. Manzo, “After the First Shots: Managing Escalation in Northeast Asia,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 2, p. 96.

<sup>300</sup> Bruce M. Russett, “Vietnam and Restraints on Aerial Warfare,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol. 26, No. 1 (1970), p. 12.

<sup>301</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 2, September 5, 1967 – 1:05 p.m. Tuesday Luncheon, Untitled Document, September, 1967. Another target selection meeting from this time period also contains several references to civilian casualties as an important criterion in target selection. LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, August 18, 1967 – 8:35 p.m. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam, Untitled Document, August 18, 1967. President Johnson in a 1967 interview also implies that

for civilian casualties resurfaces in a February 1968 meeting when McNamara objects to shrinking the no-bomb circle around Hanoi with the observation that “the chance for civilian casualties is very high.”<sup>302</sup> Secretary of State Dean Rusk shared McNamara’s concern for civilian casualties when authorizing airstrikes in North Vietnam. In one targeting meeting, Secretary Rusk explicitly noted the “possibility of large civilian casualties” when expressing reservations about a request by the Joint Chiefs that bombing be permitted in areas close to the core of Hanoi and Haiphong.<sup>303</sup> Military exigencies did occasionally dampen concern for civilian casualties. The Tet offensive, during which Viet Cong forces staged major coordinated attacks through South Vietnam in early 1968, did lead Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Earle Wheeler to shed his worries about civilian casualties. With the backdrop of a large, bloody attack by the Viet Cong, the chairman gained additional authority for more targets from Johnson.<sup>304</sup>

A future presidential adviser might similarly caution against targets—for instance, cyber units interspersed in major Chinese cities—that could entail civilian casualties.<sup>305</sup>

## Public Opinion

Partially because of public aversion to civilian casualties but for other reasons as well, President Johnson and his advisors paid attention to American public opinion when making decisions about targets in Rolling Thunder. Historian Mark Clodfelter emphasizes that restrictions on target selection owed their origins, in part, to President Johnson’s desire to protect the Great Society (a package of domestic programs), maintain a favorable American image abroad, and keep the support of Western allies.<sup>306</sup> The eventual halting of Rolling Thunder in March 1968 can similarly be partially attributed to the growing anti-war movement in the United States and President Johnson’s reaction to it.<sup>307</sup>

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“populated areas” (Hanoi in this document) are sometimes off-limits, ostensibly because of the chance of civilian casualties. LBJPL, TJMN, Box 1, July 1967 - May 1968, Meeting with Correspondents, Notes of the President’s Meeting with Bob Lucas, August 14, 1967.

<sup>302</sup> LBJPL, TJMN, Box 2, February 13, 1968 – 1:12 p.m. Tuesday luncheon group – Rusk, McNamara, Helms, Clifford, Wheeler, Rostow, Notes of the President’s Luncheon Meeting, February 13, 1968.

<sup>303</sup> Humphrey, “Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment,” p. 91.

<sup>304</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 113. Secretary Rusk’s civilian casualty concerns also seem to weaken in the aftermath of Tet. During discussion of targeting a Hanoi radio headquarters and in response to a question from the President about Rusk’s views, he reveals, “It will get a lot of civilians but I feel less strong about the matter now.” LBJPL, TJMN, Box 2, February 20, 1968 – 1:05 p.m. Tuesday luncheon with Rusk, McNamara, Wheeler, Helms, Rostow, Clifford, Notes of the President’s Luncheon Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisers, February 20, 1968.

<sup>305</sup> Chinese cyber unit 61398, which has been connected with an “overwhelming percentage” of the attacks on American companies and government agencies, appears to be located in a nondescript Shanghai suburb office building. One can imagine many other such units. David E. Sanger, David Barboza, and Nicole Perloth, “Chinese Army United Is Seen as Tied to Hacking Against U.S.” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2013.

<sup>306</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 118. Stanley Karnow argues that Johnson took moderate steps partly to “reassure the American people.” Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 426.

<sup>307</sup> Clodfelter. p. 4.

But political concerns didn't always negate more aggressive targeting. During hearings in the fall of 1967 led by Senator John Stennis, military commanders used the publicity to gain approval for targets that were previously restricted. On the opening day of the hearing, a forum in which Johnson expected the chiefs to publicly express their frustration at bombing restrictions, the chiefs simultaneously requested authorization for seventy restricted targets. President Johnson quickly granted permission for sixteen of these strikes, likely to pre-empt criticism. In further weeks, he eventually authorized over twenty more.<sup>308</sup>

Meeting notes from the summer of 1966 corroborate the importance of domestic and international audiences in wartime decisions. In response to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and former Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor's urging to escalate the war, President Johnson demurs, "I think that public approval is deteriorating, and that it will continue to go down." In that same national security council meeting, Ambassador to the United Nations Arthur Goldberg defends his opposition to an expansion of the war by noting his worry about "attrition of friends abroad and people at home." Similarly, once again at this summer 1966 meeting, Undersecretary of State George Ball worries that an expansion of bombing will "affect Europe," undermining allied support.<sup>309</sup>

American public opinion influenced targeting decisions during Rolling Thunder. Public opinion and political jockeying could also have determined the nature and timing of mainland strikes, or even whether mainland strikes are employed at all.

### **Operational Considerations**

Top leaders, both military and civilian, also paid close attention to the military value of targets: the contribution of a target to operational goals and the military price in lives and aircraft paid to accomplish a mission. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara laid out his formula for making targeting decisions during the Vietnam War:

The decision to hit or not hit is a function of an equation that has three primary elements: the value of the target, the risk of U.S. pilot losses, and the risk of widening the war.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid. p. 109.

<sup>309</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, June 22, 1966 National Security Council Meeting, Notes of the President's Meeting the National Security Council, June 22, 1966. These last two quotations come from skeptics of the Vietnam War. Both Ambassador Goldberg and Undersecretary Ball have been recognized, then and later, as officials often opposing expansion of the war. Their invocation of an expansion's effect on domestic and international audiences might therefore be cynical and could be merely because they think this a compelling argument. If this is true, then the point remains that insiders thought domestic and international opinion were important to President Johnson and other presidential advisers in deliberations over Vietnam and Operation Rolling Thunder.

<sup>310</sup> Russett, "Vietnam and Restraints on Aerial Warfare," p. 12.

Secretary McNamara, often implicated in charges of mismanagement of the air war because of a focus on political concerns, at least claimed to prioritize military considerations, especially the contribution to the war effort and the possibility of casualties. President Johnson shared this sentiment. At a June 1966 national security council meeting on the issue of potential strikes on POL targets in North Vietnam, President Johnson voiced a similar sentiment. He stated,

We know that the North Vietnamese are dispersing their POL stocks in an effort to anticipate our bombing. The effect of not disrupting POL shipments to the North Vietnamese forces in the field is to pay a higher price in U.S. casualties. The choice is one of military lives vs. escalation.<sup>311</sup>

Secretary Rusk framed the military value of targets during this meeting as a necessary consideration given the “elementary obligation to support our combat troops when they are carrying out an assignment.”<sup>312</sup> Secretary McNamara also demonstrates that a changing military situation had altered his views on the worth of strikes on POL targets. During the meeting, he revealed,

Strikes on POL targets have been opposed by me for months. The situation is now changing and the earlier bombing decision must be reconsidered. POL targets are military targets. The military utilization of these targets has been greatly increased. The North Vietnamese dispersion of their POL is lessening our chance of ever destroying their POL supplies. Military infiltration from the North is up sharply. Consequently, the pressure on their lines of communication has increased. Their POL imports have doubled. The military importance of their POL system is way up and will increase further.<sup>313</sup>

General Harold Keith Johnson, Chief of Staff of the Army, hammered home the importance of military considerations, emphasizing that the then ongoing dispersion of POL by North Vietnam meant that only strikes in the immediate future could ensure the complication of North Vietnamese supply routes.<sup>314</sup>

An American President and their presidential advisers will naturally consider the military value of different targets when contemplating strikes. President Johnson and his administration did so when making target decisions during Rolling Thunder. So too will a future president faced with the decision to authorize mainland strikes.

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<sup>311</sup> LBJPL, MNF, Box 1, June 17, 1966 – 6:05 p.m. National Security Council Meeting, Summary Notes of the 559th NSC Meeting, June 17, 1966.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

## Tactical Cost Imposition

The secondary literature on Rolling Thunder has generally overlooked a concern that motivated President Johnson in his decision to continue bombing targets in North Vietnam. President Johnson had a tactical cost imposition goal; he sought to use the bombing to “tie” down North Vietnamese manpower in a massive reconstruction process devoted to repairing the damage inflicted by Rolling Thunder.<sup>315</sup> President Johnson explained:

Numerically, the North Vietnamese outnumber us 3 to 1. The difference is in the 400 U.S. planes which tie down up to 700,000 of their people repairing their railroads, replacing their bridges, and rebuilding their highways. All of this would be freed to be used against us if we stopped the bombing.<sup>316</sup>

In another meeting with top foreign policy advisors, President Johnson brought up this consideration in an effort to develop a justification for Congressional audiences for continuing to bomb targets in North Vietnam. The meeting notes read:

The President commented on the picture in today’s *New York Times* showing about 20 North Vietnamese troops in water re-building a bridge. He suggested this picture be blown up along with another picture of North Vietnamese troops shooting American soldiers. He said the two pictures can be shown to Congressional committees and you can ask, “do you want their boys doing this (repairing bridges) or shooting your men?”<sup>317</sup>

President Johnson therefore saw tying down North Vietnamese manpower in the non-threatening task of rebuilding as an important consideration in continuing to strike targets in North Vietnam.

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<sup>315</sup> My use of the term “tactical” cost imposition is intended to draw a distinction with the term cost imposition as is currently commonly used in the U.S. military planning community. Cost imposition has recently referred to the procurement of weapons meant to induce adversary spending—usually during peacetime—on weapons and strategies that are considered less threatening. For instance, during the 1970’s and 1980’s the United States reportedly procured stealthy bombers partly to induce higher spending by the Soviet Union on air defense, a Soviet military investment deemed less threatening than spending on nuclear weapons or ground forces. See John A. Battilega, “Soviet Military Thought and the U.S. Competitive Strategies Initiative,” in Thomas G. Manhken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.

<sup>316</sup> LBJPL, TJMN, Box 1, September 26, 1967 – 5:46 p.m. Educators from Cambridge, Mass. Small colleges and Universities, Notes of the President’s Meeting with Educators from Cambridge, Massachusetts Colleges and Universities, September 26, 1967.

<sup>317</sup> LBJPL, MNF Box 1, August 18, 1967 – 8:35 p.m. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam, Untitled Document, Meeting with Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, General Earl Wheeler, and Walt Rostow, August 18, 1967.

This desire to occupy the enemy with a less threatening task could emerge during a future U.S.-China war. Mainland strikes could conceivably play a tactical cost imposition role—by focusing Chinese forces on defending their homeland and forcing the Chinese to invest in air defense systems—and therefore lessen the pressure on U.S. forces operating in the Pacific theater.

### **Managing Adversary Perceptions**

Top American government officials also based their target selection calculations on the likely perceptions of Chinese, Soviet, and North Vietnamese officials. Clodfelter first mentioned this general tendency.<sup>318</sup> He writes, “To assure that the war remained limited, Johnson prohibited military actions that threatened, or that the Chinese or Soviets might perceive as threatening, the survival of North Vietnam.”<sup>319</sup> A Central Intelligence Agency assessment from May 1964 expresses a similar belief that U.S. leaders ought to consider the perceptions of their Communist adversary. This draft special national intelligence estimate notes that “as the scale of GVN [South Vietnam] and US attacks mounted, however, especially if the US seemed adamant against entering negotiation, Hanoi would tend increasingly to doubt the limited character of US aims.”<sup>320</sup> If Hanoi, i.e. the leaders of North Vietnam, came to believe that the United States intended to overthrow the North Vietnamese state, then the United States would lose its ability to negotiate an end to the conflict.

Future American leaders could also incorporate Chinese perceptions into their decision-making, which could potentially constrain mainland strikes if American leaders feared that Chinese leaders might misperceive mainland strikes as an element of a nuclear counterforce campaign.

### **Summary of Scenario Factors**

These factors, in sum, should temper those claims of mainland strike proponents that military imperatives will likely lead to prompt authorization of conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. A range of factors constrained President Johnson and his advisers when considering conventional escalation in Operation Rolling Thunder. These same strategic and political concerns—the need for proportional retaliation or to incorporate adversary perceptions—could one day constrain, delay, or preclude mainland strikes.

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<sup>318</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, p. 43.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, Box 201, Vietnam, Special Meeting on Southeast Asia, Vol. I, Draft SNIE 50-2-64: Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos, May 23, 1964.

## Addressing Case Study Counter-Arguments

This section addresses several two general concerns about using case studies for this project and then addresses one Operation Rolling Thunder-specific concern.

### Concern #1: Case Studies Cannot Prove a Negative

Doubtless some readers will wonder whether these cases have overlooked the truism that an absence of evidence does not equate to evidence of absence. The central finding of these case studies—that neither President Truman nor President Johnson and their advisers feared nuclear war when making target selection decisions—requires the reader to believe that this case proved a negative. But how can a case prove a negative?

In the abstract, “proving a negative” first requires that if a proposition is true, then a particular type of evidence should be expected. The case studies then need to demonstrate that that type of evidence does not appear.<sup>321</sup>

My argument must therefore begin with the proposition and the evidence expected. The caution model expects that an adversary’s possession of nuclear weapons will reduce conventional escalation because of the high costs of nuclear war or the possibility that a conventional war will inadvertently transform into a nuclear war. This statement implies that during a situation like the Korean War or during Operation Rolling Thunder the President and his advisors should have worried about Chinese and Soviet nuclear use when discussing target selection decisions that affected the probability of Chinese and Soviet intervention. The expected evidence is therefore statements by Presidents Truman or Johnson and their advisers that they feared Soviet or Chinese intervention because of their possession of nuclear weapons, which could ultimately lead to nuclear war.

But I found no such evidence of such statements despite a thorough search. President Truman and his advisers extensively discussed expanding the war to China both verbally and in memos. So did Johnson and his advisers discuss target selection during Operation Rolling Thunder. In both wars there were dozens of meetings related to target selection and many of these records still survive. Yet not one of them provides evidence that these leaders feared Chinese or Soviet intervention because of the potential for Chinese and Soviet nuclear use.

It therefore seems unlikely that these presidents and their advisers feared nuclear war as a result of decisions about conventional bombing and rules of engagement. Is this inductive finding definitive? No. Further records, yet identified, or further declassification could change this finding. Given the current historical documents available, however, this finding is the closest to definitive that the evidence permits.

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<sup>321</sup> Steven D. Hales, “Thinking Tools: You Can Prove a Negative,” *Think*, 2005. <http://departments.bloomu.edu/philosophy/pages/content/hales/articlepdf/proveanegative.pdf>, accessed 12/23/2017.

## **Concern #2: Is the Nuclear Weapons Situation Too Different?**

Some readers will immediately worry that these cases have no applicability to a modern U.S.-China war. China now possesses nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles that can reach the American homeland.<sup>322</sup> During the Korean War, the Soviet Union had only a nascent nuclear arsenal and China had no nuclear weapons. During the Vietnam War, North Vietnam had no nuclear weapons and China had only a handful of nuclear weapons with limited range. In this view, these historical cases are fundamentally different from a future U.S.-China war and therefore no valid inferences can be drawn.

This view overlooks that President Truman and his advisers worried about Soviet intervention on China's behalf if the U.S. military expanded the war to China. The Truman administration expressed concern that the Soviet Union could intercede on China's behalf; hence, China's lack of nuclear forces is therefore beside the point in that case. The nuclear caution model would predict that Soviet nuclear weapons should have figured into Truman administration decision-making about conventional escalation.

It also overlooks that President Johnson and his advisers worried sincerely about Chinese and Soviet intervention on North Vietnam's behalf. The Johnson administration officials worried that striking some targets in North Vietnam would increase the probability of direct Communist power intervention. North Vietnam's lack of nuclear weapons is therefore moot; Chinese and Soviet nuclear weapons should have been sufficient to induce the fear that a conventional war would turn into a nuclear war. Additionally, while China did possess a handful of nuclear weapons, it had developed a regional nuclear capability at that time: the ability to strike the U.S. military and American allies in East Asia.<sup>323</sup> Is this different than the capability to strike the U.S. homeland? Perhaps. But one should also not omit the Soviet capability to strike the U.S. homeland with nuclear weapons during the 1960's.

In sum, the situations are not the same, but there remains a crucial continuity: the theoretical possibility that American conventional escalation could lead to nuclear war. This similarity suggests that the case still provides useful insight into the effect of adversary nuclear weapon possession on target selection.

## **Concern #3: Why Operation Rolling Thunder and Not Operation Linebacker?**

Students of American military history during the Vietnam War might worry that the selection of Rolling Thunder as the analytical focus biased the results. If the case had instead focused on Operation Linebacker from 1972, a different result would have emerged. During Operation Linebacker, President Richard Nixon used airpower against North Vietnam free from

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<sup>322</sup> Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2016," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 72, No. 4, 2016, esp. p. 206.

<sup>323</sup> See footnote 24 in this chapter.

many—though not all—of the constraints imposed during the Rolling Thunder.<sup>324</sup> An analysis of Operation Linebacker would have suggested that political restraints sometimes play a minor role in the employment of airpower and that, by extension, political restraints on mainland strikes are not as likely as the previous analysis of Rolling Thunder suggests.

But this worry misunderstands the purpose of a case study of Rolling Thunder for this project. The foremost goal of the case was to examine a war in which a U.S. president and his advisers feared that target selection decisions could trigger war with a nuclear-armed power and to determine if there exists evidence that adversary possession of nuclear weapons influenced target selection. Rolling Thunder provided such a case. President Johnson and his advisers agonized over target selection for fear that a Communist superpower might intervene on North Vietnam's behalf.<sup>325</sup> There is strong evidence that during Operation Linebacker President Nixon did not fear Chinese and Soviet intervention when he was considering strikes on North Vietnam.<sup>326</sup> President Nixon believed that the Sino-Soviet rift in addition to American diplomacy had nearly eliminated the chance of Communist superpower intervention.<sup>327</sup> This difference means that Operation Linebacker has little analytical utility for this study.

## **The Vietnam War and Implications for Mainland Strikes**

The most striking implication is that Chinese nuclear weapons might not preclude or constrain mainland strikes to the extent suggested by mainland strike skeptics. Despite the Johnson administration's fear of Chinese and Soviet intervention, the President and his advisors did not exhibit a fear of conventional war turning into nuclear war. The caution model cannot explain this pattern of conventional escalation. Admittedly, there could be documents yet to be declassified and documents do not always capture every significant aspect of a meeting. But this finding suggests a President could have a freer hand in employing mainland strikes against a nuclear-armed China than skeptics previously allowed. The null model, which does fit the facts of this case, predicts that American decision-makers will see Chinese nuclear weapons as not particularly relevant to their decisions to strike targets on the Chinese mainland—short of Chinese nuclear weapons themselves.

But before skeptics admit defeat, they should insist that one interpretation of the evidence does still benefit their case: the many, diverse, non-military considerations that informed target selection could foreshadow an array of factors that could preclude, delay, or constrain mainland strikes. If the Johnson administration target selection decision-making process is any guide, then an adherence to tit-for-tat retaliation, an aversion to supporting an

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<sup>324</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>325</sup> See the earlier section titled "President Johnson and His Advisers Feared Chinese and Soviet Intervention."

<sup>326</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, pp. 149-150, 204.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

ally riven by domestic dissent, a belief in bombing as a coercive diplomatic tool, fear of civilian casualties, a need for U.S. public support, operational considerations, tactical cost imposition, and a desire by American leadership to minimize adversary misperceptions could all influence the decision to wield mainland strikes. Some of these factors could favor the prompt use of mainland strikes; operational considerations and a desire to impose tactical costs could argue in favor of swift authorization. Several others, however, push in the opposite direction. For instance, an American leadership might fear that Chinese leaders could perceive American strikes as prelude or part of a decapitation strike aimed at Chinese nuclear weapons or leadership.<sup>328</sup> This might reduce the likelihood of mainland strikes, especially early in a conflict.

These interpretations are likely to irritate both camps. Skeptics of mainland strikes will argue that the historical context is too different to draw any inferences about the effect of Chinese nuclear weapons on the likelihood of mainland strikes. I have made my strongest argument possible why this is not the case and why skeptics should be surprised that Johnson did not fear conventional war turning into nuclear war. The caution model is not as powerful as some might expect. But proponents of mainland strikes will see the possible sources of restraint as idiosyncratic and isolated to Operation Rolling Thunder. They might be right. But that there were so many sources of restraints—so many reasons why the United States fought with “one hand tied behind its back”—should caution those who see mainland strikes as necessary for operational victory during a future U.S.-China war.

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<sup>328</sup> This argument mirrors the recent work of Caitlin Talmadge who has argued that Chinese leadership could reasonably develop this fear. Caitlin Talmadge, “Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Spring 2017.

## Chapter 5. Interviews with National Security Elites

The second component of this project involved interviewing twenty American national security elites about their views on mainland strikes during a hypothetical war between China and the United States. The goal was to understand the range of views on mainland strikes across a diverse set of elites and elicit the decision-making logic they would use to gauge their willingness to recommend mainland strikes. To that end, interviewees had both civilian and military credentials and a range of national security and foreign policy professional backgrounds that include the State Department, the Defense Department, and the intelligence agencies. They also had a variety of political leanings. After recording and transcribing the interviews, the analysis used qualitative thematic coding. A later section of this chapter describes the methodology in full. The chapter seeks to answer two research questions. First, what role, if any, do Chinese nuclear weapons play in decision-making about mainland strikes among these elites? Second, which scenario factors do these elites emphasize?

My answers, in short, are that Chinese nuclear weapons do induce fear among many of the elites, but that this nuclear fear is not so great as to preclude all forms of mainland strikes. Even skeptics of mainland strikes among the interviewees can imagine a range of strikes limited by geography and target type against Chinese mainland targets despite the danger of Chinese nuclear use, intentional or inadvertent, especially if American forces suffered direct attack. There is, however, enough variation among participants in their beliefs about Chinese nuclear weapons that both mainland strikes skeptics and proponents will feel partially vindicated. Second, interviewees identified a number of situational factors as significant for their decision-making: the more that American interviewees perceived China to be at fault, the greater their willingness to recommend mainland strikes; interviewees were extremely reluctant to consider mainland strikes in a South China Sea scenario, but more open to the possibility in a conflict over Taiwan; attacks on U.S. forces dramatically increased the willingness of interviewees to recommend mainland strikes; and interviewees expressed more willingness to recommend mainland strikes against targets constrained by geography and type.

Skeptics of mainland strikes will point to the fact that Chinese nuclear weapons do induce caution and that specific scenario factors must be present for mainland strikes to become thinkable. Proponents of mainland strikes will rightly argue that elites are nonetheless willing to recommend mainland strikes despite Chinese nuclear possession and that the scenario factors that make mainland strikes more thinkable are likely to be present in a future U.S.-China conflict.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section describes the interview methodology. Sections two and three address each research question. The final section discusses the importance of these findings for scholars and policymakers.

## Methodology

This chapter's interview methodology comprises a sample of twenty national security elites, an interview protocol, and a thematic analysis.<sup>329</sup> The sub-sections below explain each component.

### Interview Sample

The first step in defining the project's sample involved conceptualizing the universe of American national security elites. This admittedly broad term refers to persons with extensive professional experience in American defense and foreign policy. For the purposes of this project, potential interviewees had to have gained this experience through sustained professional service in the military or as a civilian in the Defense Department, intelligence agencies, the Department of State, Congress, or on the national security staff. Unfortunately, no single list enumerates American national security elites.

Turning my broad conceptualization of national security elites as persons with extensive experience in defense policy and foreign policy into reality therefore required that I contact persons with the requisite professional background.<sup>330</sup> Approximately thirty emails, many with an introduction from a trusted colleague, turned into twenty interviews.<sup>331</sup> This sample was chosen with an eye to ensuring diversity on several

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<sup>329</sup> Broad methodological advice about interviewing elites for political science research can be found in the December 2002 issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*. See Beth L. Leech, "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2002; Kenneth Goldstein, "Getting in the Door: Sampling and Completing Elite Interviews," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2002; Joel D. Aberbach and Bert A. Rockman, "Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2002; Laura R. Woliver, "Ethical Dilemmas in Personal Interviewing," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2002; Jeffrey M. Berry, "Validity and Reliability Issues in Elite Interviewing," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2002; Sharon Werning Rivera, Polina M. Kozyreva, and Eduard G. Sarovskii, "Interviewing Political Elites: Lessons from Russia," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2002.

<sup>330</sup> All interviews were unpaid.

<sup>331</sup> Twenty interviews became the target largely on the advice of a RAND researcher with experience in large-scale qualitative interviewing. His broader advice was to ensure diversity of opinion and to stop when interviewees began repeating each other. I explain my attempt at diversity above. On the point

dimensions. First, the interviewees included both military officers and civilians. There were five senior (generals or admirals) and two mid-level military officers (O4-O6) in the sample. The thirteen other interviewees were civilian. Second, the sample included persons with service at a range of organizations: the Defense Department including U.S. Pacific Command, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense; the Department of State including the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the national security staff; and intelligence agencies. Third, interviewees came from both sides of the aisle; there were (excluding the senior military officers) eight Democrats, four Republicans, and three without an obvious public partisan affiliation.<sup>332</sup>

A final note about the sample is that approximately half the interviewees have served at the highest levels of the American government. These persons have direct experience with advising Presidents and can credibly channel the types of considerations that a President might encounter when deliberating over mainland strikes. The remainder of the sample was far from junior though, perhaps with the exception of one, though even he had unusually close access to senior levels of decision-making and therefore merits inclusion. All interviewees had significant and relevant professional experience. Additionally, none of the persons had views on mainland strikes that were previously known to me and none were close professional associates to me before the interview.

## **Interview Protocol**

All interviews were semi-structured, that is, while the interview followed a loose script, probing questions sometimes led down unexplored and previously unconsidered avenues. The questionnaires I present in this section should therefore not be taken too literally. They demonstrate the general categories of questions that I asked, but the exact order in which I asked questions varied and there were as many idiosyncratic probes in these interviews as there were planned questions.

The interview questionnaire also evolved over the course of its implementation. The first ten interviews, beginning in September of 2017, were relatively open-ended. Appendix one contains the questionnaire I employed. These questions were intended to identify concepts and language related to mainland strikes that were meaningful to these elites. Additionally, these interviews tried to enumerate considerations related to

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about interviewees repeating each other as a threshold for stopping, I can confidently say that I had stopped hearing much that was new by the end of twenty interviews.

<sup>332</sup> These categorizations were made based on the professional positions that these interviewees had held in the past. Senior-level officers were not assigned a political affiliation given that many former officers adhere to a nonpartisan ethic.

the decision to recommend mainland strikes. See appendix A for the questionnaire employed. Finally, these interviews were also essential in providing the grist for the initial draft of my survey instrument. The second round of ten interviews, which concluded in August 2018, used relatively specific questions and sometime even modified versions of the survey instrument. These early versions of the survey instrument, which I called vignettes, can be found in appendix B. I often sent these vignettes to the interviewee before the interview so that the interviewee had a chance to read them beforehand or could read them during the interview process. I sometimes read language from these vignettes to the interviewee to elicit their views on specific aspects of a scenario.

Seventeen interviews were audio-recorded. One interviewee declined to be recorded and the interview process with two others precluded recording. I kept interview notes for the three interviews that were not recorded. All others were transcribed in full. The interviews lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour and the majority were conducted over the phone. I interviewed three individuals multiple times so the total number of interviews actually exceeds twenty. All identities are kept anonymous so that interviewees could be candid. I identify interviewees by their former profession role and the date of their interview.

Finally, it is worth adding some more detail about the questions I asked. First, I asked extensively about the interviewee's view of Chinese nuclear weapons. This grouping of questions includes:

- Do Chinese nuclear weapons make you reluctant to strike targets on the Chinese mainland? Why or why not?
- Do you worry about inadvertent or accidental nuclear war?
- Do you worry about nuclear-conventional entanglement?
- Do you worry about intentional Chinese nuclear use?
- Does the fact that America also possesses nuclear weapons affect your decision-making?

Second, I attempted to discover the potentially wide range of situational factors that would affect the interviewee's decision-making process. I often vaguely described a potential war between China and the United States and then filled in details as the interviewee asked for context. The questions included but were not limited to:

- If you were in a presidential advisor role, what would be your strategic and tactical considerations? How would you prioritize these considerations?
- How does the scenario matter to you?

These interviews led to ten hours of audio recording and nearly 100 pages of transcripts.

## **Thematic Analysis**

The next step was the identification of recurring themes present in the interviews. Before formal analysis began, I drafted a code tree—an *a priori* series of themes and sub-themes. Emergent themes were also created as they became apparent. In total, the analysis discovered 233 quotations associated with key themes. See appendix C for the full list of codes that emerged from the analysis. To conduct this qualitative analysis, I used Atlas.ti version 8. Key themes focused on Chinese nuclear weapons and also on scenario-specific factors.

## **Chinese Nuclear Weapons**

These interviews provide intriguing evidence on the three competing theoretical perspectives on the relationship between nuclear weapons and conventional escalation. To briefly remind the reader, the theoretical chapter outlined the existence of the caution model (mutual nuclear possession leads to less conventional escalation), the null model (no difference in escalation), and the emboldenment model (more conventional escalation). These models compare the level of conventional escalation in conflicts in which both sides possess nuclear weapons to conflicts in which neither side possesses nuclear weapons. The caution model expects interviewees to fear Chinese nuclear escalation either because of the high costs of nuclear war or the possibility of accidental or inadvertent nuclear use, potentially exacerbated by the fear of Chinese conventional-nuclear entanglement. The null model predicts that the interviewees will evince indifference towards Chinese nuclear weapons when considering conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. This theoretical variant argues that adversary nuclear weapons are made irrelevant by other policy considerations or that leaders believe mutual nuclear arsenals lead to nuclear stalemate. Finally, the emboldenment model holds that interviewees and survey-takers will be willing to authorize mainland strikes to the extent that they perceive America nuclear superiority or believe the stability-instability paradox operates.

The findings are two-fold. First, the caution and null models perform similarly well despite their contrasting predictions. A number of national security elites express views consistent with one of these two positions. In short, Chinese nuclear weapons do induce fear among some, though not all, interviewed national security elites when considering mainland strikes. Second, the emboldenment model finds no support from the

interviewees. American nuclear superiority did not figure in the decision model of these national security elites considering mainland strikes. The remainder of this sub-section explains these findings.

### **Caution Model**

Eleven of the twenty interviewees made statements that expressed at least some caution about conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland and the danger of nuclear war. A handful of these interviewees demonstrated extreme skepticism of mainland strikes and a heightened sense of fear, while the rest of the eleven exhibited minimal to moderate levels of reservation. Some interviewees expressed worries about nuclear-conventional entanglement and the possibility of Chinese misperception. The caution school therefore finds moderate, though not overwhelming, evidence in its favor. Some elites do express the intensity of caution that this theoretical perspective predicts. The rest of this section provides exemplary quotations and a more fine-grained analysis.

A few national security elites voiced intense concerns about the potential for conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland to lead to Chinese nuclear escalation. For instance, one former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command told me:

Doing mainland strikes on somebody's country is 1960's thinking, 1950's thinking...It's just not realistic. Like some superpower is just going to stand by and let you just plink away on their homeland. We wouldn't do it. We wouldn't stand by.<sup>333</sup>

The same individual mentioned the opposite perspective—that “we’ll just go in and attack the mainland, we’ll just drop three or four thousand precision weapons on top of another country that is emerging as a nuclear superpower”—and stated, “that’s probably not something you would like to do.” He also worried that mainland strikes would “probably” lead to a nuclear conflagration. And while he did concede that an American President might be willing to take this step in some circumstances, he warned:

I think you've got superpowers out there that think they can win a nuclear war with the United States, they can survive it...They've said it already back to Mao and I think it has been repeated in the Chinese approach...This is something that if you're the president of the United States you've got to consider as you think about actions you take against a nuclear power.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Interview with former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command, September 7, 2017.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

Another interviewee, this one a former senior Department of Defense civilian official, cautioned that mainland strikes would be “escalatory” and that “launching thousands of strike into Beijing or mainland China elsewhere doesn’t seem like the smartest way to keep things constrained and below the nuclear threshold.”<sup>335</sup> The interviewee added, “I think you would take significant pause at the fact that the Chinese had nuclear ICBMs,” and further clarified that this worry would hold even though the Chinese leaders would know the United States “would hit back.” Another senior civilian official repeated the fear that American nuclear weapons might not preclude Chinese nuclear use. The interviewee explained, “You can’t convince ourselves that just because the theory says they should be deterred...It may not work that way.”<sup>336</sup> China’s possession of nuclear weapons was salient to this interviewee and motivated the interviewee’s search for “asymmetric” options (the interviewee’s term) other than mainland strikes.

Other national security elites expressed moderate concern about Chinese nuclear weapons when considering mainland strikes. A former high-level civilian at the Defense Department described nuclear weapons as “hanging over” the situation. He said, “There’s no way it can’t hang over and can’t be a consideration. And any presidential advisor would have to have that be a consideration.”<sup>337</sup> Another interviewee argued that China’s nuclear weapons “changes how you are going to fight them.” He elaborated, “The possession of nuclear weapons by China puts us into something where we have to be more judicious in our connection of the ends of what we are trying to pursue with the ways and the means.”<sup>338</sup> Others also expressed concern, though their language suggested that Chinese nuclear weapons were simply one important concern among many when considering mainland strikes.<sup>339</sup>

Several interviewees did worry out loud about the potential for Chinese nuclear-conventional entanglement in combination with mainland strikes to lead to Chinese fears of an American counterforce or leadership decapitation campaign. A civilian with experience at Pacific Command wondered if the United States can “demonstrate to China or guarantee to China that our strikes are not meant to limit their first strike stability and are purely focused on conventional?”<sup>340</sup> He feared that mainland strikes could be interpreted as aimed at eliminating

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<sup>335</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, August 1, 2018.

<sup>336</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 7, 2018.

<sup>337</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 1, 2018.

<sup>338</sup> Interview with a former senior officer with Pacific Command experience, May 7, 2018.

<sup>339</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official with East Asia experience, May 2, 2018; Interview with former national security staff member with Asia-related responsibility, September 6, 2017; Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, May 24, 2018.

<sup>340</sup> Interview with a former Pacific Command civilian, December 7, 2017.

China's secure second-strike capability. Another interviewee expressed general concern about "blinding" Chinese decision-makers, that is, striking systems that provide Chinese leadership with early warning of American nuclear attacks and general situational awareness.<sup>341</sup> Several national security elites singled out Chinese nuclear command and control systems, the technical capabilities to direct Chinese nuclear forces, as particularly dangerous when it came to mainland strikes.<sup>342</sup> One interviewee specifically mentioned the possibility that the Chinese leadership could perceive the United States as engaged in a leadership decapitation strategy and another worried about Chinese fears of losing "integrity" in their command and control systems.<sup>343</sup>

In sum, slightly more than half of the national security elites that I interviewed demonstrated thinking consistent with the predictions of the caution school. Mainland strikes, at least under some circumstances, could generate the possibility of Chinese nuclear use. Much of the evidence did not directly bear on the exact logic at play, high costs or inadvertent nuclear use, but there were a handful of interviewees who did express concern about Chinese nuclear-conventional entanglement and the possibility that Chinese leaders might misperceive mainland strikes as part of a counterforce campaign. The caution model therefore performed moderately well, though the next section will demonstrate its limits.

## **Null Model**

The null model and its prediction that American national security elites will believe Chinese nuclear weapons to be irrelevant or stalemated by American nuclear weapons was also consistent with the thinking of some interviewees. A number of the elites expressed outright skepticism about a potential connection between mainland strikes and Chinese nuclear use. Others seriously qualified the circumstances under which mainland strikes, in their opinion, could lead to Chinese nuclear use.

One former national security staff member summed up the logic of nuclear stalemate by stating that China knows "what is coming second," an allusion to America's possession of nuclear weapons.<sup>344</sup> Another interviewee, an experienced diplomat, described his belief that "in general I think the calculation would be that

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<sup>341</sup> Interview with former national security staff member with Asia-related responsibility, September 6, 2017

<sup>342</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official, December 14, 2017; Interview with a retired military officer and military strategist, May 2, 2018; Interview with a former intelligence official, May 28, 2018.

<sup>343</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official, December 14, 2017; Interview with a retired military officer and military strategist, May 2, 2018.

<sup>344</sup> Interview with former member of the national security staff, September 29, 2017.

nuclear capabilities cancel each other out and you would proceed on the assumption that neither side would initiate a nuclear conflict.”<sup>345</sup> Other comments suggested that Chinese nuclear weapons were not necessarily a central consideration among some elites. One interviewee revealed that Chinese nuclear possession only “very slightly” reduces his willingness to recommend mainland strikes.<sup>346</sup> Another emphasized that the threshold for Chinese nuclear use was high and his skepticism that “any conflict with a nuclear armed state necessarily and inevitably becomes a nuclear conflict.”<sup>347</sup> Another interviewee, when asked about his views on the claim that mainland strikes could lead to Chinese nuclear use, responded, “I think it [this worry] is overdrawn. My sense would be that [the] Chinese would be cautious, not just any strike on the mainland [would lead to Chinese nuclear use].”<sup>348</sup>

Several interviewees also stated their beliefs about the conditions under which mainland strikes would not lead to Chinese nuclear escalation. For instance, one said, “China won’t go nuclear if we hit their coast line,” referring to targets located geographically near China’s coastline.<sup>349</sup> Another referred to strikes on “peripheral targets” in a “tactical move” and told me that the Chinese are not “going to commit suicide” in response to these strikes.<sup>350</sup> One interviewee also implied that Chinese nuclear use became virtually a moot concern for him if the Chinese should strike American forces in East Asia.<sup>351</sup>

More broadly, a number of interviewees refused to take a strong position, either determining that intelligence was insufficient on the likely Chinese response to mainland strikes or this was a decision for the U.S. President alone to ponder.<sup>352</sup>

The null model therefore receives some evidentiary support too. Either because of their belief in nuclear stalemate or the importance of additional concerns, Chinese nuclear weapons do not preclude some elites from recommending at least some forms of mainland strikes.

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<sup>345</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017.

<sup>346</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, May 24, 2018

<sup>347</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 1, 2018.

<sup>348</sup> Interview with former diplomat, May 15, 2018.

<sup>349</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, May 24, 2018

<sup>350</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017.

<sup>351</sup> Interview with former senior Defense Department official, April 16, 2018.

<sup>352</sup> Interview with a former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command, October 29, 2017; Interview with a former senior military officer, September 15, 2017; Interview with a former senior military officer, September 15, 2017. The latter two interviews are separate.

## The Emboldenment Model

A third and final model predicts that interviewees will be willing to authorize mainland strikes due to perceived American nuclear superiority or the logic of the stability-instability paradox. If this model accurately describes the relationship between nuclear weapons and conventional escalation, then America's nuclear arsenal, roughly an order of magnitude larger than China's, should free American leaders to use force with fewer operational constraints.<sup>353</sup>

Yet not a single interviewee made reference to either logic. Put another way, among the nearly sixty interview passages—i.e. excerpts of interviews—that my analysis identified as relevant to nuclear weapons, none were consistent with the logic of the emboldenment model. American nuclear superiority was not a salient factor to any of the interviewees when considering mainland strikes. The logic of the stability-instability model similarly never materialized during interviews.

Advocates of nuclear superiority will likely apply extra scrutiny to this finding. They might therefore view a shortcoming of my interview questionnaire as responsible for this finding: none of my questions directly asked interviewees about their views on American nuclear superiority. An absence of evidence, in these critic's eyes, should therefore not be confused with evidence of absence. And while the inclusion of this question would certainly be preferable in retrospect, this view goes too far. Interviewees repeatedly had a chance to answer open-ended questions about their considerations when thinking about mainland strikes. Interviewees voiced dozens of different approaches, many nuclear-related. None mentioned American nuclear superiority. This is, at least, strongly suggestive evidence of absence. Why was American nuclear superiority not salient then to these interviewees? Perhaps because the fact of American nuclear superiority provides cold comfort to American national security elites when considering mainland strikes.<sup>354</sup>

## Interview Evidence on the Competing Nuclear Models

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<sup>353</sup> The Federation of American Scientists reports that the U.S. nuclear arsenal comprises 1750 deployed nuclear warheads and 2,050 stockpiled nuclear warheads for a total of 3,800 warheads. The Chinese arsenal is 280 stockpiled nuclear weapons. Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists, November 2018, <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>, accessed January 7, 2019.

<sup>354</sup> Alternatively, another interpretation might be that these elites do not perceive American nuclear superiority as measured by warhead count as equivalent to nuclear superiority as conceptualized by some strategists.

Both the caution model and the null model received support from the interview evidence. A slight majority of the interviewees did express reluctance to recommend mainland strikes. Some truly do fear Chinese nuclear use as a result of mainland strikes, citing concerns such as Chinese conventional-nuclear entanglement. But some of those interviewees and others who didn't express concern also voiced a willingness to authorize mainland strikes. Both proponents and skeptics of mainland strikes can find support for their original debating points. Chinese nuclear weapons, despite American superiority, do dampen American national security elites' attitudes towards conventional escalation and mainland strikes in particular, but this fear does not preclude all forms of mainland strikes.

The emboldenment model was inconsistent with the interview evidence. The interviews turned up no supporting evidence for the view that American nuclear superiority might actually make American national security elites more willing to recommend mainland strikes.

Supporters and skeptics of mainland strikes may both have reservations. Skeptics could charge that interviewees are hiding their nuclear fears strategically. Because these national security elites will fear that Chinese leaders will come to believe that Americans are reluctant to authorize mainland strikes, these skeptics might allege that some American national security elites will overplay their willingness to authorize mainland strikes in order to deceive Chinese leaders. This concern is a legitimate one. One interviewee even warned about this possibility.<sup>355</sup> But the interview evidence is inconsistent with a strong form of this worry. Many interviewees did express a worry about mainland strikes. Perhaps more would have except for this strategic motivation to deceive. It is hard to know. But given the willingness of many interviewees to recommend mainland strikes in certain situations, the potential fears of skeptics seem overblown.

## **Scenario Factors**

The interviewees also discussed aspects of potential scenarios and their relationship to mainland strikes. Scenario factors appear to exert a strong influence on the interviewees and their decision-making. The theoretical chapter described the potential effects of allied actions and preferences, enemy actions, comprehensive versus limited strikes, and the timing of any mainland strikes. After first addressing a central finding about attitudes towards mainland strikes during a South China Sea

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<sup>355</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, May 24, 2018. I am also indebted to Steven Popper of RAND for raising this possibility during my dissertation proposal defense.

scenario versus a Taiwan conflict scenario, this section addresses each of these scenario characteristics.

The key findings include: mainland strikes are noticeably more plausible in a Taiwan-related scenario than a South China Sea scenario; interviewees were less willing to recommend mainland strikes when they perceived that an American ally provoked the conflict; Chinese strikes on American forces in East Asia greatly increased the willingness of interviewees to recommend mainland strikes; strikes on mainland targets near the Chinese coast and against targets directly associated with combat were relatively more acceptable to interviewees; and many interviewed national security elites resisted recommending prompt authorization of mainland strikes early in a conflict.

### **South China Sea Scenario vs. Taiwan Scenario**

Arguably the two most-discussed potential flashpoints for the United States and China are the South China Sea and Taiwan. In the South China Sea there has been a simmering territorial dispute between China and a number of southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, a U.S. ally.<sup>356</sup> The Taiwan Straits have been a potential flashpoint between China and the United States for nearly 70 years. This historic tension, in combination with China's unwillingness to renounce the use of force in dealing with Taiwan and America's adherence to the Taiwan Relations Act, means that the U.S. involvement in a China-Taiwan war is a real possibility.<sup>357</sup> Asking interviewees about their willingness to consider mainland strikes in these two scenarios was an important component of the interviews.

Many respondents conveyed a relative unwillingness to consider mainland strikes in a South China Sea scenario and a relative willingness to recommend mainland strikes in Taiwan scenario. These national security elites repeatedly emphasized the relatively low stakes for the United States in any potential South China Sea confrontation. One interviewee said, "I think the South China Sea stakes are clearly of less importance," dismissing the possibility the United States would "escalate...over rocks in the South China Sea," though he did leave open the possibility of defensive retaliation.<sup>358</sup> The most forceful dismissal of the possibility of mainland strikes came from another interviewee. He argued:

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<sup>356</sup> For background, see Taylor Fravel, "Threading the Needle: The South China Sea Disputes and U.S.-China Relations," *Social Science Research Network*, August 10, 2016. Available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2826109](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2826109), accessed January 8, 2019.

<sup>357</sup> For background, see John Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan's Democratization*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997.

<sup>358</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017.

Let's say you're the President...somebody walks into [the Oval Office], says...I want to start a war in the South China Sea over rocks and fish that will include doing strikes on mainland China that takes you right up to the nuclear threshold, possibly. If you were President, what would you say? He'd say, "You've got to be kidding me." If you ask the average American, "Do they care about rocks and fish on the South China Sea?" No.<sup>359</sup>

One interviewee reasoned that mainland strikes are "hard to imagine" in a South China Sea scenario.<sup>360</sup> Another wondered whether mainland strikes would even "come into play" during a South China Sea scenario.<sup>361</sup> Other interviewees questioned the general likelihood of a potential conflict in the South China Sea or the willingness of China to use force in the South China Sea.<sup>362</sup>

Not all respondents believed American stakes were minimal in a South China Sea conflict. One did mention the "credibility" of American treaty commitments and another emphasized Chinese actions in the South China Sea as a "signal of China's maritime ambitions."<sup>363</sup> But even these elites appeared to agree that the likelihood of mainland strikes was lower in a South China Sea scenario.

Mainland strikes were considered more appropriate for a Taiwan scenario by many of the participants. One national security elite noted, "I do think it's probably more likely to be on the table in the Taiwan scenario."<sup>364</sup> Another implicitly recognized the possibility of mainland strikes in a Taiwan scenario when he dismissed the South China Sea scenario as "not a Taiwan strait scenario, it's not all-out war."<sup>365</sup>

The interview evidence suggests that the interviewed national security elites see mainland strikes as relatively more plausible in a Taiwan scenario than in a South China Sea scenario. This evidence is consistent with results of a South China Sea wargame exercise conducted by Peter Wilson of RAND in 2018. He found participants in a South China Sea scenario exercise to be similarly cautious about U.S. conventional strikes

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<sup>359</sup> Interview with former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command, September 7, 2017.

<sup>360</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 7, 2018.

<sup>361</sup> Interview with former diplomat, May 15, 2018.

<sup>362</sup> Interview with retired military officer and military strategist, May 2, 2018; Interview with former member of the national security staff, September 29, 2017.

<sup>363</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official with East Asia experience, May 2, 2018; Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, August 1, 2018.

<sup>364</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 7, 2018.

<sup>365</sup> Interview with former diplomat, May 15, 2018.

against the Chinese mainland.<sup>366</sup> This strong finding influenced the later methodological decision in the survey section to focus all survey vignettes on a Taiwan scenario.

### **Allied Actions and Preferences**

The interviewed elites also identified American perceptions of ally<sup>367</sup> behavior and the preferences of allies as key considerations related to mainland strikes. If elites believed that ally behavior provoked a conflict, their willingness to recommend mainland strikes decreased markedly. Similarly, allied objections or an ally perceived as unwilling to fight could also dampen the willingness of elites to recommend mainland strikes. These concerns are grouped together given that an American ally's actions or beliefs is the key determinant of this scenario aspect.

### **Perceptions of Blame for Conflict Onset**

Six of the interviewees believed that the extent to which China or the ally was at fault was a fundamental node in their decision-making logic. Their language was unambiguous. One asked, "Did Taiwan cause this?" in reference to a potential China-Taiwan-U.S. conflict.<sup>368</sup> The same interviewee further suggested that should Taiwan "start the war" that American support might be "tentative." Another elite also placed significant weight on, in his words, "who provoked the conflict and the degree to which the United States held Taiwan responsible for provoking the Chinese."<sup>369</sup> Several others expressed a similar sentiment.<sup>370</sup> Of course, this sentiment is nothing more than an expression of the status quo in American foreign policy towards China and Taiwan, that is, that American support of Taiwan is contingent upon a moderate Taiwanese foreign policy.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Email communication with Peter Wilson, January 9, 2019.

<sup>367</sup> The word ally, in this dissertation, refers to both treaty allies and partners, or nations that share interests with the United States but with which there is no formal military obligation. See footnote 55 of chapter 2 for further explanation.

<sup>368</sup> Interview with a former senior military officer, September 15, 2017

<sup>369</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017.

<sup>370</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official with East Asia experience, May 2, 2018; Interview with former senior Defense Department official, April 16, 2018; Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 1, 2018.

<sup>371</sup> Christensen, Thomas J., "A Strong and Moderate Taiwan," speech delivered at the 2007 U.S.-Taiwan Business Council, Defense Industry Conference, Annapolis, Maryland, September 11, 2007. Thomas Christensen was then a deputy assistant secretary of state in the bureau of East Asian and Pacific affairs.

## Ally Preferences

Elites, especially ones with more foreign policy experience rather than defense policy experience, also incorporated the attitudes of America's Asian allies into their decision-making. If an ally should object to mainland strikes, or to mainland strikes conducted from bases on their territory, then this would, according to several interviewees, reduce their willingness to recommend mainland strikes.<sup>372</sup> These interviewees saw respecting ally wishes as sufficiently important to long-term alliance relationships to justify these operational constraints. In the South China Sea context, several elites also mentioned that their views about mainland strikes would be partly conditional on the willingness of America allies to fight and share the burden of conflict.<sup>373</sup> As one interviewee put it, "It's not a politically sustainable position for us [the United States] to go fight for something that belongs to another nation that they're not willing to fight for."<sup>374</sup>

Ally culpability, views, and perceived willingness to fight all appear to bear on mainland strike decision-making for at least some elites and could operate as sources of operational restraint. There is one caveat worth noting on the finding related to assigning fault to China versus Taiwan for conflict onset. The elites I interviewed could have been strategically using the interview to signal to Taiwanese leaders that American support for Taiwan is predicated upon a moderate Taiwanese foreign policy; this potential messaging means that these sentiments were potentially instrumental and not genuine (or genuine and instrumental). It also could be a matter of habit since this position is reiterated in virtually all interactions between U.S. and Taiwan government officials and even in interactions between academics and others who have no official responsibility to signal to Taiwan's representatives.

## Chinese Actions

China's actions were a key determinant of how interviewees viewed mainland strikes. Scenarios in which Chinese forces attacked U.S. forces in Japan or on American territory in Guam greatly increased the willingness of interviewees to consider and recommend at least some forms of mainland strikes.

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<sup>372</sup> Interview with former national security staff member with Asia-related responsibility, September 6, 2017; Interview with former diplomat, May 7, 2018.

<sup>373</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official with East Asia experience, May 2, 2018; Interview with a former senior officer with Pacific Command experience, May 7, 2018.

<sup>374</sup> Interview with a former senior officer with Pacific Command experience, May 7, 2018.

One interviewee's remarks summarize the views of many: "If they attack Kadena [the U.S. air base in Japan], they would be attacking the United States."<sup>375</sup> Consequently, conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland, especially on Chinese forces directly responsible for the attack, became a natural option to the interviewed elites. Interviewees suggested that Chinese strikes on U.S. forces in Asia would "chang[e] the calculus" and that it would "trigger" serious consideration of mainland strikes.<sup>376</sup> One elite whose tone early in the interview suggested strong skepticism towards mainland strikes became firm when queried about the effects of a Chinese attack on Guam in conjunction with a U.S.-China-Taiwan scenario. He said, "Would we then attack the mainland? Yes. Yes, we would, but it would be in response to a Chinese attack on the United States, not initiating it as our first attack on Chinese territory."<sup>377</sup> Another interviewee who had also expressed caution about mainland strikes similarly showed a different attitude when considering a Chinese attack on American forces. He offered this opinion:

I think to the extent that U.S. assets are being struck from mainland China... one could easily envisage retaliatory or defensive strikes against airfields, for instance, that were launching attacks on U.S. aircraft carriers or bases.<sup>378</sup>

Otherwise skeptical interviewees demonstrated increased willingness to consider mainland strikes in response to a Chinese attack on U.S. forces in East Asia. Of course, as noted earlier, these elites may habitually use every opportunity (even interviews for dissertations) to signal to Chinese decisionmakers this intent, thereby exaggerating their willingness to recommend mainland strikes to create a deterrent effect. It is also possible that their answer is both deterrent signaling as well as a sincerely held belief.

### **Comprehensive versus Limited Strikes**

American national security elites also divided mainland strikes into two categories depending upon target type: limited strikes and comprehensive strikes. Strikes on targets relatively close to the Chinese coast and directly associated with Chinese military operations against an ally or the United States were often deemed "limited" and interviewees expressed a relative willingness to consider these strikes.

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<sup>375</sup> Interview with former senior Defense Department official, April 16, 2018. At least seven interviewees expressed strong support for this position. Additionally, none of the other interviewees disagreed with this position.

<sup>376</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017; Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 7, 2018.

<sup>377</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official, December 14, 2017.

<sup>378</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017.

More “comprehensive” strikes on an inland target set and objectives not directly associated with the immediate tactical battle were the object of caution and trepidation. Some elites—though far from all—were especially worried about strikes that could impinge upon Chinese nuclear forces, even accidentally.

“All mainland strikes are not the same,” one interviewee suggested.<sup>379</sup> Others agreed.<sup>380</sup> The distinction appeared to be based on at least three characteristics. First, targets located relatively close to the Chinese coast were considered different than strikes far inland—strikes on this second category were often referred to as “deep strikes.” One elite described strikes “deep into mainland China” as a “different kettle of fish” in comparison to strikes on “coastal” targets.<sup>381</sup> Another specifically called out “coastal artillery” and rhetorically asked if this specific strike really refers to “mainland strikes” as the term is more commonly used.<sup>382</sup> Many of the interviewed elites expressed a much greater willingness to recommend strikes on coastal targets compared to deep inland targets. Conversely, these elites treated targets such as radars and anti-satellite weapon launch sites located deep inland as distinct and meriting greater caution. Second, targets associated with an immediate tactical battle were considered separate from targets only indirectly related to the operational fight. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned that any Chinese ports being used for staging amphibious operations would be considered directly related to combat.<sup>383</sup> Air fields from which the Chinese military was operating aircraft engaged in direct combat were also placed in this mental category.<sup>384</sup> The interviewees suggested a relative willingness to strike such targets. Third, some elites worried about target sets that impinged upon Chinese nuclear forces.<sup>385</sup> This “entanglement” concern caused some elites to be reluctant to recommend some mainland strikes that could sever the Chinese leadership command and control of nuclear forces or put in danger China’s threat of assured nuclear retaliation.

Two caveats stand out. Some elites were reluctant to consider even limited mainland strikes; these same elites emphasized the perspectives of Chinese leadership

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<sup>379</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 1, 2018.

<sup>380</sup> Interview with a former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command, October 29, 2017; Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, August 1, 2018; Interview with a former senior officer with Pacific Command experience, May 7, 2018; Interview with former diplomat, May 15, 2018; Interview with a former senior military officer, September 15, 2017; Interview with former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command, September 7, 2017.

<sup>381</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, August 1, 2018.

<sup>382</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 1, 2018.

<sup>383</sup> Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 1, 2018; Interview with a former senior officer with Pacific Command experience, May 7, 2018.

<sup>384</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017.

<sup>385</sup> Interview with retired military officer and military strategist, May 2, 2018.

and the panic among Chinese leadership any mainland strikes would generate.<sup>386</sup> In contrast, not all interviewed elites were concerned about conventional-nuclear entanglement. One interviewee, when asked whether he had any concerns about attacks on entangled Chinese forces, said, “It’s too late for that...They [the Chinese] should have thought about that before they attacked the United States of America.”<sup>387</sup> Another thought fear of nuclear war arising from entanglement was a “marginal concern.”<sup>388</sup>

In sum, the distinction between comprehensive and limited strikes was meaningful to the interview participants. Importantly, more limited strikes lead to greater support. More comprehensive strikes—especially ones that targeted inland targets, indirectly related military assets, and nuclear-conventional entangled Chinese forces—generated relatively more opposition.

### **Timing of Mainland Strikes**

Debates about the conditions under which mainland strikes would occur often allude to whether decision-makers in the first few days or weeks of a U.S-China conflict would authorize mainland strikes. The interviews therefore included questions about whether the timing of mainland strikes during a conflict was a salient consideration. Several interviewees did resist the idea of prompt authorization of mainland strikes, lending some credence to those that suspect that restrictive rules of engagement will prevail in the opening days of a conflict.

One former national security staff member with experience on Asia policy identified early authorization of mainland strikes as a “flaw” in some operational concepts that rely on mainland strikes. He thought that policymakers, presumably including himself, “will be loath to go to a war winning strategy by preemptively striking targets within China.”<sup>389</sup> He appeared to believe that such, in his words, “early escalation” would be resisted, though his remarks do leave open the possibility that Chinese attacks on American forces could change his calculus. Another worried about employing mainland strikes “at the first chance we have” because of the “second and third order effects that could go wrong.”<sup>390</sup> A former diplomat made similar comments: “I

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<sup>386</sup> Interview with former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command, September 7, 2017; Interview with former Defense Department senior civilian, June 7, 2018.

<sup>387</sup> Interview with former senior Defense Department official, April 16, 2018.

<sup>388</sup> Interview with a former senior State Department official with East Asia experience, May 2, 2018

<sup>389</sup> Interview with former national security staff member with Asia-related responsibility, September 6, 2017.

<sup>390</sup> Interview with a former senior officer with Pacific Command experience, May 7, 2018.

think that any escalation would be gradual and designed to test Chinese responses and see if the crisis could be de-escalated.”<sup>391</sup> This gradual escalation philosophy conflicts with the demands of an operational plan that requires prompt authorization of mainland strikes. One former military interviewee, drawing on his professional expertise, thought that a prompt Chinese attack without a prolonged build-up was unlikely to result in prompt authorization of mainland strikes.<sup>392</sup> But not all interviewees were willing to contemplate delaying authorization of mainland strikes. One former senior military officer said, “You’re going to want to create a strategic advantage...delays don’t do that.”<sup>393</sup>

The evidence on timing seems to indicate that at least some portion of elites would be reluctant to quickly employ mainland strikes early in a U.S.-China conflict.

### **Summarizing the Scenario Factor Evidence**

At the broadest level, the interviews find evidence that the characteristics of a scenario exert a strong influence on the willingness of American national security elites to recommend mainland strikes during a future U.S.-China conflict. Both skeptics and proponents of mainland strikes will find evidence to support their positions. Detractors will point to the implausibility of mainland strikes in a South China Sea scenario, the reluctance of elites to consider mainland strikes when elites perceive that an ally provoked the conflict, the unwillingness of elites to recommend mainland strikes on deep targets, and the reluctance to recommend prompt authorization of mainland strikes early in a conflict. Proponents will find succor in the mirror image of these arguments. Mainland strikes, the interview evidence reveals, are more thinkable in a Taiwan-related scenario, especially if the elites perceive China as culpable. Analysis of the interviews also indicates that if China should strike American forces in East Asia, American national security elites become more willing to recommend mainland strikes. Additionally, elites are relatively willing to consider mainland strikes bounded by geography and target type.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter used twenty interviews with American national security elites to examine their views on conventional strikes on mainland China during a potential U.S.-China war. These interviewees answered questions about their views towards potential

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<sup>391</sup> Interview with former diplomat, November 17, 2017.

<sup>392</sup> Interview with a former senior officer with experience at Pacific Command, October 29, 2017.

<sup>393</sup> Interview with a former senior military officer, September 15, 2017.

Chinese use of nuclear weapons during a U.S.-China conflict and the influence of these nuclear weapons on their willingness to recommend mainland strikes during a potential war. The interviewees also addressed how particular scenario characteristics might influence their decision-making regarding mainland strikes.

The findings correspond to each section. Chinese nuclear weapons produced fear among many of the interviewees about the consequences of mainland strikes, but this fear was not so great as to preclude conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland. In fact, some skeptics of mainland strikes saw strikes limited by geography and target type as plausible even though Chinese nuclear use weighed on their decision-making. More generally, Chinese nuclear weapons did not produce uniform fear or indifference. Characteristics of the scenario appeared to matter greatly to the interviewed elites: when interviewees perceived China as at fault for a crisis, when the scenario involved Taiwan, when China attacked U.S. forces in East Asia, and when mainland strikes were constrained by geography and type, interviewees became noticeably more willing to consider and potentially recommend mainland strikes.

The implications for the mainland strikes debate are several. Chinese nuclear weapons, for the majority of interviewees, do not preclude their willingness to consider mainland strikes. Mainland strikes, in the context of a war, are not so “escalatory” to American national security elites that they would avoid this tactic at all costs. That said, Chinese nuclear possession does induce caution among some interviewees. The caution model and null model of the relationship between adversary nuclear weapons and American conventional escalation therefore each receive partial support. The scenario characteristics also matter greatly. In other words, the actual course of a war would exert a strong influence on the willingness of American national security elites and, by extension, the American president to recommend or authorize mainland strikes. Those who view these characteristics—such as a China attacking American forces first in East Asia—as likely to obtain in a potential U.S.-China conflict will see this finding as evidence about the high likelihood of mainland strikes. Those who worry that the scenario factors mentioned are unlikely or unlikely until late in a conflict will find their sympathy leaning towards skeptics of mainland strikes.

## Chapter 6. A Survey of National Security Elites

This survey chapter investigates how willing a sample of American national security and foreign policy experts are to recommend mainland strikes across a variety of U.S.-China wartime scenarios. Eighty-five American national security professionals, largely drawn from eight prominent American think tanks, roleplayed as an American national security advisor and answered questions related to their willingness to recommend conventional strikes on the Chinese mainland (“mainland strikes”) in a variety of scenarios. The survey also collected information on their backgrounds and foreign policy beliefs. This approach compensates for the limitations of previous chapters. The historical case studies focused on conflicts occurring sixty years ago. The interview data was rich, but hard to compare across participants. This future-oriented, scenario-based survey experiment—what I term a synthetic history approach—sidesteps any charges of strained analogies and, because all participants answered all questions, survey participants are easily compared across scenarios and between participants.

The survey results, explained in much greater depth below, include three findings. First, the details of a given conflict scenario can exert a strong influence on the willingness of elites to recommend mainland strikes. Chinese attacks on an American air base greatly increase the willingness of elites to recommend mainland strikes. On the other hand, elites become less willing to recommend mainland strikes if the proposed target set becomes too large and broad, potentially impinging on Chinese nuclear capabilities. And, surprisingly, elites are just as willing to recommend mainland strikes in a scenario in which Taiwan and China share the blame for the onset of conflict as one in which responsibility for conflict onset is assigned fully to China.<sup>394</sup> Second, some elites are less willing to recommend mainland strikes, especially Democrats and those who are older. Previous military experience, gender, and level of expertise related to Asia make no difference. Third, foreign policy beliefs and attitudes might matter as much or more than an elite’s background. Elites who view the defense of Taiwan as a vital U.S. interest and evince little fear of Chinese nuclear weapons are relatively more willing to recommend mainland strikes.

These results suggest some useful guidelines for military planners and defense analysts preparing for a potential U.S. China conflict. Importantly, mainland strikes are a contingent phenomenon, but this contingency arises from more than randomness. Elite willingness to recommend mainland strikes will depend on whether China attacks U.S. forces and the comprehensiveness of the proposed strikes. Advisor backgrounds

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<sup>394</sup> This is a surprising finding given that the interview respondents seemed to indicate that even partial Taiwanese responsibility would lessen their appetite for mainland strikes.

(partisanship and age especially) and beliefs (related to Taiwan's importance and Chinese nuclear weapons) will also matter. Therefore, planners and strategists should consider developing plans (and the operational concepts and supporting forces) that enable American forces to fight and win with and without mainland strikes.

## Methodology

This chapter employs a survey of American national professionals to examine the effect of scenario characteristics and an individual's demographic background and foreign policy beliefs on their willingness to recommend mainland strikes in a hypothetical U.S.-China war. While surveys, including elite surveys<sup>395</sup>, have long been employed in international relations research, survey experiments have recently grown in popularity among political scientists.<sup>396</sup> The merits of an elite survey experiment include using a sample with relevant knowledge and expertise, asking close-ended questions that enable quantitative comparison, and possessing control over the randomized treatment. The most significant disadvantage is the artificiality of the scenarios. This section describes the sampling procedures, the survey questionnaire, and the analytic methods employed.

## The Sample

The survey sampling procedure attempted to gather the views of American national security elites, i.e. experienced foreign and defense policy professionals, both civilian and military, Democrat and Republican. Towards this end, the sample plan involved asking staff at seven private American public policy research institutions and one DOD strategy research organization to participate in the study. The private public policy research institutions (referred informally elsewhere in this dissertation as

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<sup>395</sup> For a pathbreaking early project using elite surveys over time, see Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, *The Foreign Policy Leadership Project*, documentation available from the University of Michigan's Inter-university Consortium on Political and Social Research at <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/2614>, accessed April 15, 2019; Paul Avey and Michael C. Desch, "What Do Policymakers Want from Us? Results from a Survey of Current and Former National Security Decision-Makers," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 2, 2014; Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Brad L. LeVeck, David G. Victor, James H. Fowler, "Decision Maker Preferences for International Legal Cooperation," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 4, 2014.

<sup>396</sup> Kai Quek and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Can China Back Down? Crisis De-escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Winter 2017/18; Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, Benjamin A. Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1, 2013; for an intriguing related but still nascent effort, see Andrew W. Reddie, Bethany L. Goldblum, Kiran Lakkaraju, Jason Reinhardt, Michael Nacht, and Laura Epifanovskaya, "Next-Generation Wargames," *Science*, Vol. 362, No. 6421, 2018.

“thinktanks”) are: the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the Brookings Institution (Brookings), the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Heritage Foundation (Heritage) and the RAND Corporation (RAND). The DOD organization is The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University (NDU).

These organizations were chosen because of their partisan diversity (including conservative, liberal and non-partisan institutions) and notable foreign policy and defense policy staffs. A senior staff member working at each of these thinktanks emailed their colleagues with foreign and defense policy experience and requested that they voluntarily take the survey. This email requested that the respondent not forward the email. Respondents could then take an anonymous online survey. Of note, to increase the sample size, some additional recruiting was done via channels other than these research organizations. Table 1 documents the number of potential participants contacted via each organization or method. The survey window spanned January to March 2019.

<b>Organization and Method</b>	<b>Potential Participants Contacted</b>
AEI	12
Brookings	10
CNAS	27
CSBA	28
CSIS	15
Heritage	62
RAND	50
NDU	47
Other	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>271</b>

**Table 6.1. Number of Potential Participants Contacted by Organization and Method**

The survey sample eventually included 85 persons for a participation rate of 31 percent. A later section will provide quantitative details about the demographics of this sample. No information is available on the actual number of surveys completed by the staff of any particular organization; the survey intentionally did not ask a question about organization affiliation in order to preclude participant cross-identification via a combination of organizational affiliation and demographic information.

## The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument evolved from a series of operational vignettes that were field-tested during the interview process into a structured series of scenarios built into a survey experiment. All scenarios involved a wartime scenario set in 2020 involving the United States and China; this decision resulted from the finding in the interview chapter that many national security elites considered mainland strikes inappropriate in a South China Sea scenario. Consequently, the survey only deals with a Taiwan-related scenario. All participants were asked to play the role of the U.S. national security adviser in this hypothetical scenario. This sub-section describes how the survey was administered, the survey scenarios including the survey experiment, the demographic questions, and the foreign policy belief questions.

Participants accessed the survey via a website that provided participation information and survey instructions. Appendix D contains an image of the survey website landing page.<sup>397</sup> When a participant clicked on the “next” button of the landing page to proceed to the survey itself, the participant was then randomly assigned one of four surveys, explained further below. These surveys were all created with SelectSurvey technology, a survey software used widely at the RAND Corporation.<sup>398</sup> The survey itself was approved by RAND’s institutional review board, also known as the Human Subjects Protection Committee.<sup>399</sup>

The first level of randomization involved assigning half of the participants to scenarios in which the participant was told that China initiated an amphibious invasion of Taiwan because “peaceful unification with Taiwan had been advancing too slowly.” This language was meant to place responsibility for the war on the Chinese government and will be henceforth referred to as the China “at fault” condition. The other half of participants were assigned scenarios in which the responsibility for the war was shared between Taiwanese and Chinese leaders. The key statements in the “ambiguous fault” scenarios include “intelligence indicates China is attempting an invasion of Taiwan after several months of military posturing and hostile statements by both sides” and that “U.S. intelligence analysts find it difficult to judge who is more ‘at fault.’” See appendix E for the relevant survey language. No condition in which Taiwan was entirely “at fault” for the war was included in the survey experiment; because the United States government

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<sup>397</sup> I am indebted to Karen Lee of Pardee RAND for her web design skills.

<sup>398</sup> The homepage for ClassApps.com, the owner of SelectSurvey, can be found here: <http://www.classapps.com/>, accessed March 26, 2019. I am also indebted to Amy Clark of RAND for helpful advice on using SelectSurvey.

<sup>399</sup> The study ID is 2017-0319. The survey component of this study was approved on October 23, 2018.

might not intervene at all in such a situation, this scenario was judged insufficiently important to merit inclusion.

All participants then sequentially completed questions related to four scenarios. See table 6.2 for a summary of the four scenarios. The first two scenarios proposed only relatively limited strikes against targets on the Chinese mainland. The participants were given this proposal:

At a National Security Council meeting, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs proposes strikes on military targets adjacent to the Taiwan Strait. These strikes would be on Chinese military units located at the staging site for the anticipated amphibious invasion such as air defense sites, Chinese ships and naval bases and aircraft and air bases.

This “limited” target set was intended to involve targets geographically close to the military theater of operations and likely unrelated to Chinese nuclear systems. In scenarios three and four, the respondents were offered a more “comprehensive” target set. The survey described the comprehensive target set with this language:

At a National Security Council meeting, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs proposes strikes on military targets throughout China. These strikes would be on both Chinese military units located at the staging site for the anticipated amphibious invasion and on units located elsewhere in China that will likely support the invasion. The expanded category of targets includes Chinese intelligence centers, command centers, over-the-horizon radars, Chinese ballistic missiles, and anti-satellite weapon launch sites.

This comprehensive target set was intended to represent targets across a wide geography of China, to include inland targets, and targets that are potentially associated with Chinese nuclear systems. This wider target set is meant to be similar in scope to the targets discussed in the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment’s 2010 report *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Jan van Tol with Mark Gunzinger, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, Washington, D.C.: The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010.

	<b>No Attack on U.S. Forces</b>	<b>Chinese Attack on U.S. Forces at Kadena Air Base</b>
<b>Limited Mainland Strikes</b>	Scenario 1	Scenario 2
<b>Comprehensive Mainland Strikes</b>	Scenario 3	Scenario 4

**Table 6.2 The Four Scenarios and Associated Scenario Characteristics**

The two scenarios associated with each target set can be sub-divided. Scenarios one and three specified that there had been no attack on U.S. forces; the respondents were explicitly told, “China has not attacked any U.S. forces or bases.” In scenarios two and four, China has attacked U.S. forces at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan. The scenario states, “China attacked American forces at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan with ballistic missiles launched from the Chinese mainland. The commander reports severe damage to the runways, two dozen damaged U.S. aircraft, and scores of American casualties.” Adding a Chinese attack on U.S. forces allowed the analysis to determine if such an attack was an important threshold affecting respondent willingness to authorize mainland strikes.

After each scenario, the survey-taker responded to this question: “Under these circumstances, how likely are you to recommend to the president strikes on at least these targets?” Respondents then chose an option from a six-point scale: very unlikely, unlikely, somewhat unlikely, somewhat likely, likely, very likely. The phrase “at least these targets” was added to the question to reduce the probability that respondents who preferred broader, more expansive target sets would voice opposition to a given option.

Respondents then completed a section about potentially relevant foreign policy beliefs and attitudes and another section related to demographic information and professional background. The foreign policy beliefs section contained a randomization component—half of the participants received questions with a positive framing and the other half of participants received questions with an alternative framing. This approach allowed the analysis to determine if the statistical results were robust to question wording. See table 6.3 for a list of all questions and the positive and alternative framings. All respondents faced the same five-point scale for each belief and attitude question: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. A positive and alternative question framing experiment was useful because these questions are not validated, i.e. their psychometric validity in survey research has not been proven

through a rigorous battery of tests. Therefore, to reduce methodological criticism of these survey questions, this survey used two framings. Some of the alternative framings are nearly equivalent to the inverse of the positive framing. For instance, the positive frame statement related to Taiwan is “Defending Taiwan is a vital U.S. interest.” Its alternative frame simply adds a “not” after “is.” Other statements lack an obvious inverse though and therefore the alternative framing is not an inverse. The decisive force, military initiative, and misperception questions possess this quality. The alternative framing in these cases should be viewed as a second analytical attempt to reveal an underlying belief or attitude.

	<b>Positive Framing</b>	<b>Alternative Framing</b>
<b>Taiwan Question</b>	Defending Taiwan is a vital U.S. interest.	Defending Taiwan is not a vital U.S. interest.
<b>Generals Question</b>	I believe that once a war starts, the generals should be in charge.	I believe that once a war starts, civilians (not generals) should be in charge.
<b>Goals Question</b>	When force is used, military rather than political goals should determine its application.	When force is used, political rather than military goals should determine its application.
<b>Decisive Force Question</b>	Force should be used only if the U.S. military is allowed to decisively defeat the enemy.	Force should sometimes be used even if the United States is not prepared to decisively defeat its enemy.
<b>Military Initiative Question</b>	Military operations must emphasize seizing the initiative from the enemy.	Military operations do not need to emphasize seizing the initiative from the enemy.
<b>Chinese Nukes Questions</b>	Chinese possession of nuclear weapons makes me less willing to authorize strikes on the Chinese mainland.	Chinese possession of nuclear weapons does not affect my willingness to authorize strikes on the Chinese mainland.
<b>Misperception Question</b>	Chinese leaders will interpret any strikes on Chinese mainland targets as an attempt to destroy Chinese nuclear weapons.	Strikes on Chinese mainland targets will not be interpreted by Chinese leaders as an attempt to destroy Chinese nuclear weapons.

**Table 6.3 Positive and Alternative Framing of Foreign Policy Belief and Attitude Questions**

All analysis that uses these foreign policy belief and attitude questions will be performed once with the positive framing data and a second time with the alternative framing data; any results that are inconsistent suggest either an unreliable survey question or at least call for close analytical attention.

The respondents also answered questions related to their demographic information and professional background. See table 6.4 for these questions and possible responses.

	<b>Question</b>	<b>Response Options</b>
<b>Age</b>	What is your age?	20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60+
<b>Career Length</b>	How long have you been working in the foreign policy or national security field?	0-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-20 years, 20+ years
<b>Gender</b>	What is your gender?	Female, Male, Other
<b>Professional Background</b>	What is your professional background? (Check all that apply.)	Military, Government – Civilian, Think-tank, Academia, Business, Other
<b>Political Party</b>	With what political party do you identify?	Democrat, Republican, Neither
<b>Asia Expertise</b>	Would you describe yourself as a subject matter expert on Asia?	No, Only a little, Moderately so, Yes
The questions below only pertained to those with who checked “military” in response to the professional background question.		
<b>Active Duty</b>	Are you currently on active-duty?	Yes, No
<b>Military Branch</b>	In what branch of the military did you or do you serve?	Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps
<b>Military Length</b>	For how long have you served/did you serve in the military? (Count from year you first joined.)	0-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-19 years, 20 years or more

**Table 6.4 Demographic and Professional Background Questions and Response Options**

## Analysis

There are three analytical stages: descriptive statistics of the survey sample, an examination of the effects of different scenarios on respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes, and an investigation of individual characteristics on respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes.

The descriptive statistics section documents the characteristics of those persons who took the survey. This section uses histograms of the demographic data to accomplish this objective.

The scenario analysis section examines whether scenario characteristics affect respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes. The first sub-section determines whether attributing blame for starting the war solely to China versus China and Taiwan affects respondent willingness. Because this scenario characteristic was randomized, relatively simple statistical comparison can reveal whether blame attribution changes respondent willingness. In particular, this analysis uses chi-squared tests and Fisher's exact tests because the response variable is categorical. Fisher's exact test also compensates for the small sample size. As an additional check given the small sample size, this sub-analysis verifies if recoding answers into three categories—low willingness, medium willingness, and high willingness—changes the analytical results. The second and third sub-sections examine whether Chinese attacks on U.S. forces and different potential target sets affect respondent willingness. Because these statistical tests compare the same respondents across scenarios (a so-called paired comparison), the analysis employs McNemar's test.<sup>401</sup> This test determines whether the distribution of responses to a question (sometimes called "marginal homogeneity") changes when the scenario changes. This analysis employs the recoded three category response variable given the small sample size and the low expected values in each cell.

The individual characteristics section assesses the effect of demographic characteristics and foreign policy beliefs and attitudes on respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes. The demographic background analysis section uses several statistical tests—Fisher's exact test, a t-test, and multiple linear regression—to examine the effect of military service, party affiliation, gender, age, and Asia-related

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<sup>401</sup> To be precise, the statistical test is a generalization of McNemar's test. McNemar's test was designed to be used for 2x2 contingency tables. A generalized McNemar test, sometimes called the Stuart-Maxwell test, performs a similar function but for variables with more than two values. For an explanation of this Generalized McNemar's test, see Sun, Xuezheng and Zhao Yang, "Generalized McNemar's Test for Homogeneity of Marginal Distributions," *SAS Global Forum 2008, Paper 382-2008*, available at <https://support.sas.com/resources/papers/proceedings/pdfs/sgf2008/382-2008.pdf>, accessed March 29, 2019.

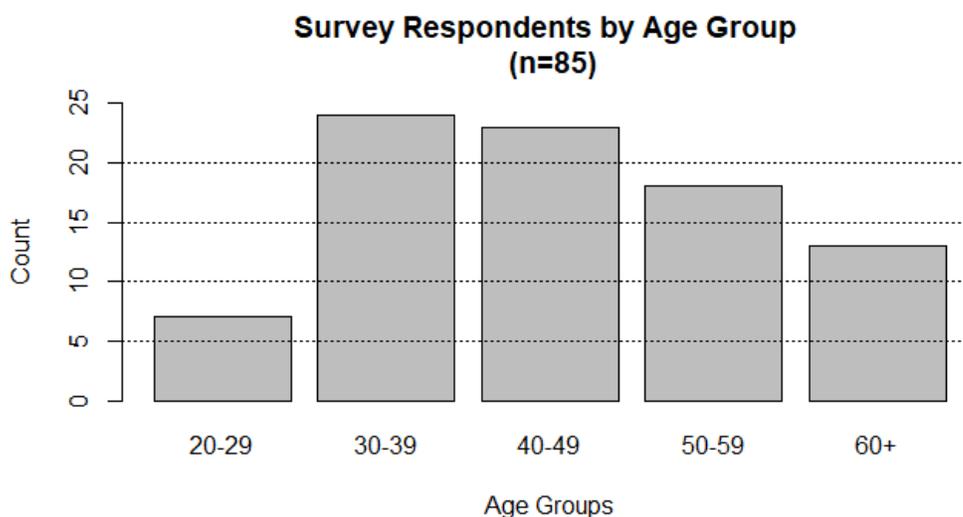
expertise level on participant willingness to recommend mainland strikes across the scenarios. A final analytical section assesses the effect of several foreign policy beliefs—categorized into national interest beliefs, use of force beliefs, and nuclear beliefs—on participant willingness to recommend mainland strikes. Because the framing of these belief-related questions varied randomly among participants, all analyses are done separately for those who received the positively framed questions and those who received the alternative framing. The statistical tests used for this last section include correlation, multiple linear regression, and a principal components analysis of the questions related to use of force.

## Survey Sample Descriptive Statistics

The sample includes a diverse selection of experienced national security and foreign policy professionals. This section uses histograms to describe the demographic and professional background characteristics of the eighty-five individuals who completed the survey.

### Age

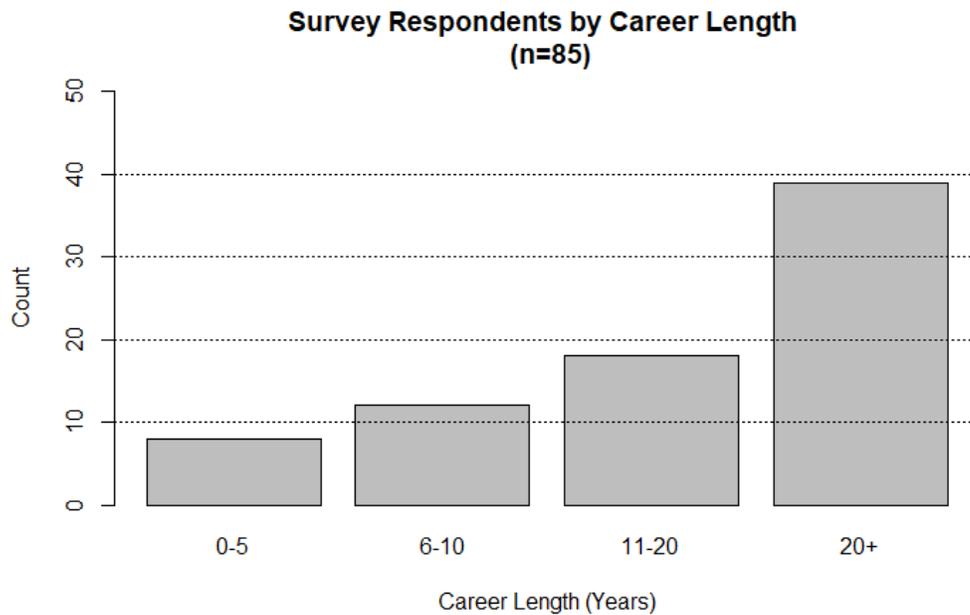
Figure 6.5 demonstrates that the majority of respondents are forty or older. This age distribution is consistent with a sample largely composed of mid-career to late-career professionals.



**Figure 6.5 Survey Respondents by Age Group**

## Career Length

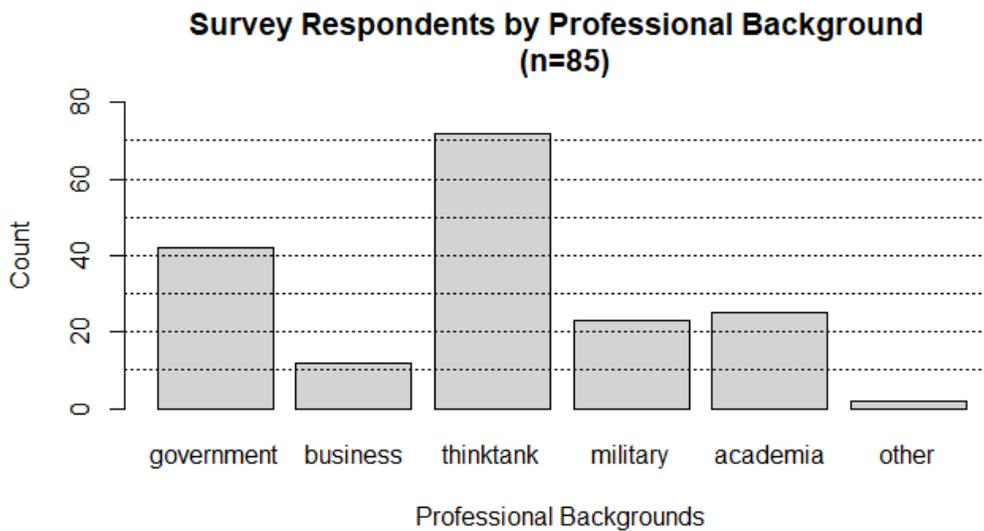
The majority of respondents also have had careers in national security for longer than ten years. See figure 6.6 for a graphical analysis of career length among respondents. In fact, nearly half the sample has had a career in national security for twenty or more years. The exact question asked of respondents was: “How long have you been working in the foreign policy or national security field?”



**Figure 6.6 Survey Respondents by Career Length**

## Professional Background

The vast majority of respondents have spent some time working at a thinktank. See figure 6.7.



**Figure 6.7 Survey Respondents by Professional Background**

Note: Respondents checked all experiences that apply. The count therefore does not sum to 85.

That so many respondents share this background confirms that the survey sampling strategy, which focused on a number of prominent research organizations, achieved its main goals. Because respondents checked all professional experiences that applied, the survey reveals that respondents have had diverse experiences beyond a career in the thinktank industry. Nearly half of the respondents have served in the government and a quarter in the military.

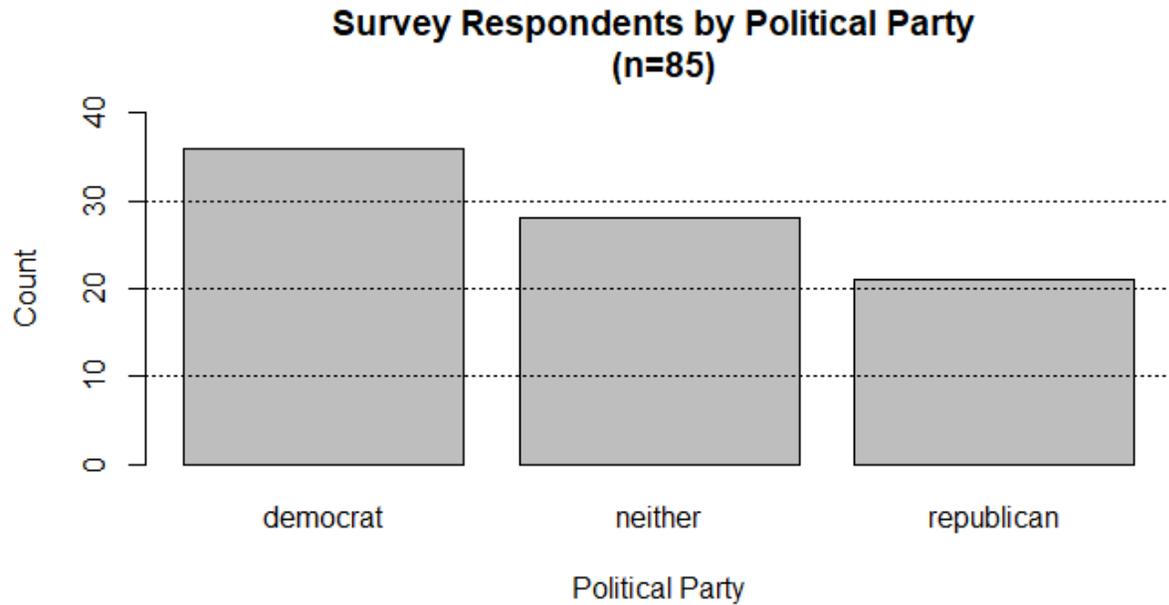
## Party

Figure 6.8 shows that the respondent sample includes a variety of political affiliations. All respondents answered the question “With what political party do you identify?” A plurality (42 percent) identified with the Democratic party, a third chose neither party, and a minority (25 percent) of survey-takers identified themselves with the Republican party. This distribution differs some from Gallup’s 2018 poll of Americans which found that 31 percent of Americans identify as Democrat, 38 percent as independent, and 26 percent as Republican.<sup>402</sup> In particular, Democrats are overrepresented in our sample (42%) compared to Gallup’s result (31%). The survey representation of Republicans was essentially identical to Gallup’s finding (25% vs 26%).<sup>403</sup> Of course, the distribution of partisanship among American think-tank staff

<sup>402</sup> “Political Independents: Who They Are, What They Think,” Pew Research Center, 2019, p. 3.

<sup>403</sup> For a clear statement from 122 self-identified “members of the Republican national security community” against a Donald Trump presidency, see “Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders,” *War on the Rocks*, March 2, 2016.

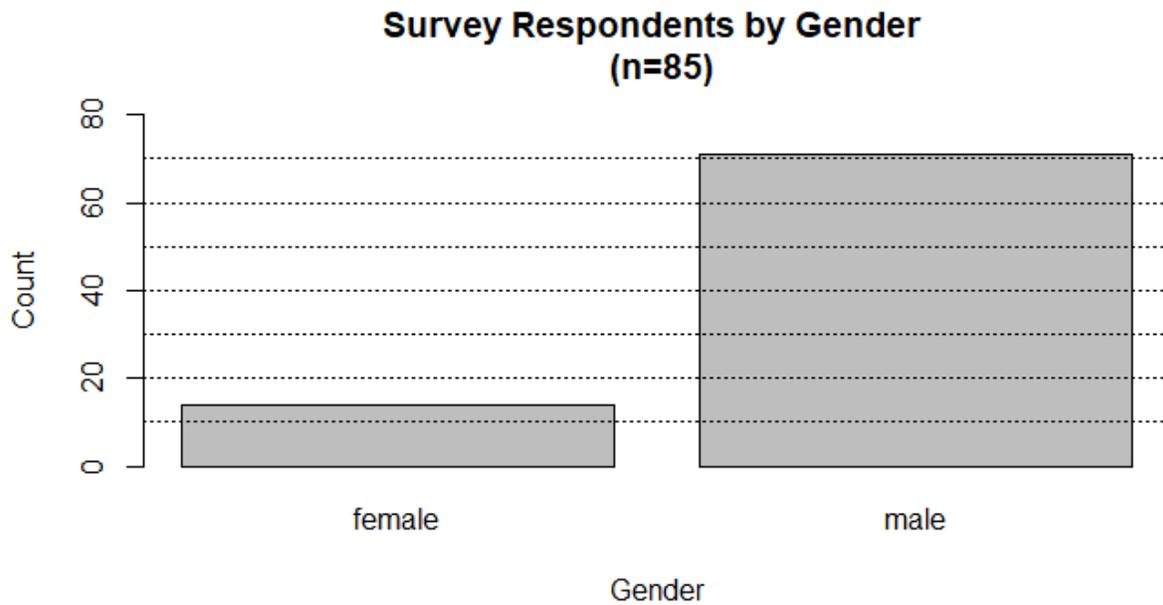
could be different from the distribution of partisanship in the broader American public. Because there is no available data on partisanship among think tank staff, it is hard to know if this survey's sample is generally representative of this population.



**Figure 6.8 Survey Respondents by Political Party (Self-Identified)**

### **Gender**

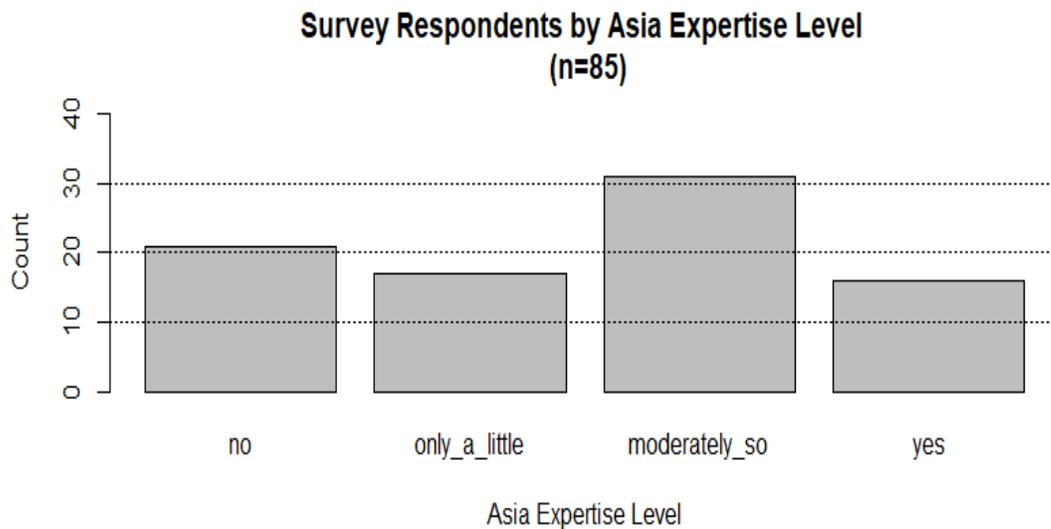
The survey sample, as indicated in figure 6.9, is composed primarily of male respondents. Less than twenty respondents were female. This relatively small sample of women limits the confidence a reader can have in any analytical results in this study related to gender.



**Figure 6.9 Survey Respondents by Gender**

### Asia Expertise

All respondents answered a question related to their expertise on Asian affairs: “Would you describe yourself as a subject matter expert on Asia?” The survey respondents reported a range of Asia-related expertise. Figure 6.10 indicates that all four possible responses include at least fifteen respondents.



**Figure 6.10 Survey Respondents by Level of Asia Expertise**

## Summary of Sample

While it is hard to determine if the sample is “representative,” the demographic data at least suggests that the sample truly did capture national security and foreign policy elites and that these respondents are diverse on several key dimensions including, importantly, partisan affiliation.

## Scenario Results

This section describes and analyzes the effects of scenario characteristics on respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes. There are three central findings. First, altering the scenario such that China and Taiwan share the blame for causing the war—rather than solely China provoking the war—does not reduce the willingness of participants to recommend mainland strikes. Second, Chinese attacks on a U.S. air base (Kadena) in Japan dramatically increase participant willingness to recommend mainland strikes of all types. Third, expanding the target set from limited strikes to comprehensive strikes substantially reduces participant willingness to recommend mainland strikes whether China has attacked an American air base or not.

Figure 6.11 displays the distribution of responses across all four scenarios and between experimental conditions.

Simple analytical methods produced the finding that assigning blame for conflict onset solely to China versus China and Taiwan has no effect on respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes. First, in order to ensure that this result is not the function of improper randomization, the analysis checked for balance between the two groups on all key demographic and background characteristics; there are no statistically significant differences between the respondents assigned to the two conditions.<sup>404</sup> Second, a chi-squared test and Fisher’s exact test were performed for each scenario to determine if altering political blame changed respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes. The experiment produced a statistical null effect. Third, because the sample size is relatively small, which results in relatively few respondents for each answer response, an additional, coarsened analysis was performed.<sup>405</sup> The respondent

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<sup>404</sup> Statistical tests included a chi-squared test and Fisher’s exact test on age, career length, gender, political party, Asia expertise, thinktank experience, and military experience. No p-value on any test was less than .05. Career length did obtain a p-value of .077 for the chi-squared test and .079 for the Fisher’s exact test. Given that I performed seven tests, it is not surprising that one obtained a p-value below .1.

<sup>405</sup> A Chi-squared test traditionally requires at least five respondents for each answer response per condition.

willingness to recommend mainland strikes was simplified to three categories: less willing (those who answered “very unlikely” or “unlikely”), somewhat willing (those who answered “somewhat unlikely” or “somewhat likely”) and more willing (those who answered “likely” or “very likely”). A chi-squared and Fisher’s exact test were then performed for each scenario and compared the responses of those that received the different conflict onset blame conditions. Again, there were no statistically significant differences. Of note, several survey participants used the end-of-survey comment box to explain what impact blame attribution had on their decision-making. One comment potentially illuminates the thinking of many respondents and explains this null finding: “I was not concerned with whose fault it was once China started launching missiles.” That said, several participants did note that if Taiwan has been clearly and solely at fault for initiating the conflict, these respondents would have been unwilling to recommend mainland strikes or (potentially) any American action. The survey design—that there was no scenario in which Taiwan was solely to blame for conflict onset—therefore also potentially explains the null finding.

A similar method determined that Chinese strikes on Kadena Air Base dramatically increase respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes. The analysis that produced the result used a generalized McNemar’s test: a matched-pair test for comparing changes in the distribution of a categorical variable.<sup>406</sup> Because McNemar’s test assumes a relatively high number of responses per answer category, this analysis uses the coarsened willingness response discussed earlier. There were two separate statistical comparisons: 1) the limited strikes, no Chinese attack on Kadena scenario vs. the limited strikes, Chinese attack on Kadena scenario and 2) the comprehensive strikes, no Chinese attack on Kadena scenario vs. comprehensive strikes, Chinese attack on Kadena scenario. Both comparisons produced evidence of a statistically significant increase of respondent willingness to recommend mainland strikes; both p-values were less than .01. In the limited strike scenarios, an attack on Kadena Air Base leads to over 80 percent of respondents rating themselves as likely or very likely to recommend mainland strikes. In the comprehensive strike scenario, an attack on Kadena Air Base produces a statistically significant increase in willingness, but there is not the same high level of willingness found in the limited strikes scenario. In fact, the comprehensive strikes, attack on Kadena scenario is statistically indistinguishable—using McNemar’s test—from the limited strikes, no attack on Kadena scenario: there is a wide range of willingness levels in both scenarios.

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<sup>406</sup> Xuezheng Sun and Zhao Yang, “Generalized McNemar’s Test for Homogeneity of the Marginal Distributions,” SAS Global Forum 2008, Paper 382-2008, available at <https://support.sas.com/resources/papers/proceedings/pdfs/sgf2008/382-2008.pdf>, accessed April 8, 2019.