

This article was downloaded by: [University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)]

On: 09 April 2012, At: 09:33

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Security Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fsst20>

### Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis

Marc Trachtenberg<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of California, Los Angeles

Available online: 24 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Marc Trachtenberg (2012): Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis, *Security Studies*, 21:1, 3-42

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2012.650590>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## **Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis**

MARC TRACHTENBERG

*This article examines the argument that the ability of a government to generate “audience costs”—to create a situation, that is, in which it would pay a domestic political price for backing down—plays a key role in determining how international crises run their course. It does this by looking at a dozen great power crises to see how well various aspects of the audience costs argument hold up in the light of the historical evidence. The audience costs mechanism, it turns out, does not play a major role in any of those crises—a conclusion which, the author claims, has certain important methodological implications.*

It used to be taken for granted that relative power and relative interest were of fundamental importance in determining how international crises run their course—that the weak would defer to the strong and the side that cared less about the issues at stake would tend to give way in the dispute. But in an important article published in 1994, James Fearon argued that in a rational world relative power and relative interest and indeed anything observable in advance should already have been taken into account as the policies that

---

Marc Trachtenberg, an historian by training, is a professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The author is grateful to a number of scholars—above all Robert Jervis, John Mearsheimer, Leslie Johns, Robert Trager, and Barry O'Neill—for commenting perceptively and helpfully on earlier drafts of this paper. He also very much appreciates the feedback he got when those drafts were presented at workshops at both UCLA and the University of Chicago. He would especially like to thank the *Security Studies* editors and two anonymous reviewers, all of whom commented, intelligently and at length, and not just once but twice, on earlier versions of this article. It never ceases to amaze him how much time and effort people are willing to put into improving other people's work—it is one of the glories of our profession—and he is very grateful to them for all the help they provided.

A longer and more extensively footnoted version of this paper is available online at [http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/audcosts\(long\).doc](http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/audcosts(long).doc)

led up to a crisis were being worked out. Outcomes would therefore be determined by new information revealed during the crisis about how far each state was willing to go. Information of that sort, he said, could not be effectively conveyed through “quiet diplomatic exchanges,” given that states “have strong incentives to misrepresent their willingness to fight in order to get a better deal.” The rival powers would have to do things that “allow them credibly to reveal their own preferences.” “Cheap talk” could not convey new information, since “a state with low resolve may have no disincentive to sending” such signals; a move made during a crisis had to be “costly signal” if it was to “warrant revising beliefs.” Only costs “generated in the course of the crisis itself” could “convey new information about a state’s resolve”; only costly signaling could enable the receiver of the signal to distinguish between low-resolve and high-resolve adversaries.<sup>1</sup>

What then allows a state to make its true preferences known? Fearon argued that one particular mechanism played a key role in this regard. Crises take place in public, and a government might well have to pay a domestic political price if it backed down in the dispute. In such circumstances, it would be less likely to make threats that it did not intend to follow through on than if it could bluff with impunity; those threats it did make would therefore be taken more seriously. This audience costs mechanism, as it was called, thus allowed states to make credible commitments in this kind of conflict. And indeed the claim was that this mechanism was of fundamental importance—that it played a “crucial role” (as Fearon put it) in “generating the costs that enable states to learn” during a crisis.<sup>2</sup> Or as Alastair Smith, another leading audience costs theorist, put the point: public foreign policy statements “are *only* credible when leaders suffer domestically if they fail to fulfill their commitments.”<sup>3</sup>

It follows, these theorists argue, that democracies probably have a bargaining advantage in international crises. Relative audience costs, in Fearon’s model, matter a great deal: “the side with a stronger domestic audience (for example, a democracy) is always less likely to back down than the side less able to generate audience costs (a nondemocracy).”<sup>4</sup> Fearon himself, to be sure, was quite cautious in developing that argument. The idea that democratic leaders “have an easier time generating audience costs” he advanced simply as a “plausible working hypothesis.”<sup>5</sup> Other writers, however, have made stronger claims, and the basic idea that the audience costs mechanism gives democracies a certain bargaining advantage, especially in crisis situations, is taken quite seriously in the international relations literature.

---

<sup>1</sup> James Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 578, 586, 579.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 579 (for the quotation), 577–78.

<sup>3</sup> Alastair Smith, “International Crises and Domestic Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 3 (September 1998): 623 (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 577.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 582.

Fearon and other scholars who argued in that vein were basically making a theoretical argument, and they developed that argument by showing how particular models work; but a theory is of value only to the extent that it rings true when one examines the empirical evidence. And clearly their assumption was that the “audience costs story” was empirically plausible—that it was empirically true that many crises appear “as competitions in creating domestic political audience costs.”<sup>6</sup> Fearon’s argument, as he himself pointed out, was rooted in an “empirical claim, namely that crises are public events carried out in front of domestic political audiences and that this fact is crucial to understanding why they occur and how they unfold.”<sup>7</sup>

Does the audience costs theory in fact hold up in the light of the empirical evidence? It is not obvious how one should go about answering this question. Direct statistical tests, as Kenneth Schultz points out, “are fraught with methodological difficulties.”<sup>8</sup> The more effective the audience costs mechanism is, the less likely it is that audience costs themselves would actually be incurred (since the opposing side would back down). “This creates a problem for statistical inference,” Schultz notes, “because the outcomes that we observe should be associated with lower domestic costs, on average, than the outcomes that we do not observe.”<sup>9</sup> It is hard, therefore, to draw inferences about how powerful the audience costs mechanism is by just studying the costs that are actually incurred; and yet statistical inference deals with observables.

If direct tests are impossible, one can always try to infer additional propositions from the model and subject them to empirical analysis. The problem here, however, is that those propositions might also be consistent with very different sets of assumptions. Hypotheses inferred from an audience costs model might thus make perfect sense to people who do not find the audience costs theory plausible, so even if a statistical analysis supports those hypotheses, that finding would not convince these skeptics that the theory is basically valid. Given these problems, perhaps the best way to get a handle on this issue is to do historical analysis. “Where large sample statistical tests come up short,” Schultz writes, historical case studies “may be the most effective way of deciding whether the search for audience costs is a fruitful enterprise.”<sup>10</sup>

So my goal here is to examine the audience costs theory in the light of the historical evidence—that is, to see how much of a role the audience costs mechanism, as Fearon defined it, plays in determining the way international crises run their course. I will be looking at a set of crises—episodes in which

---

<sup>6</sup> James Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997): 68, and also 87.

<sup>7</sup> Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 577.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Schultz, “Looking for Audience Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 1 (February 2001): 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

there was a significant perceived risk of war—involving great powers, at least one of which was a democracy, and that were settled without war.

These criteria were chosen for the following reasons. The cases are all crises because the Fearon theory explicitly deals with crises, but I will be looking only at great power crises for essentially practical reasons. In crises between minor powers, or between a great power and a minor power, the possibility of intervention on the part of an outside great power is often very real, and this considerably complicates the analysis. Great power crises generally have a simpler structure, so their logic should stand out more clearly; and that means that if audience costs play a key role in shaping outcomes, that role should be easier to see in such cases.

The focus here, moreover, is on crises in which at least one of the contending parties is a democracy, since much of the debate on this issue has to do with whether the audience costs mechanism gives democracies an advantage over non-democratic regimes. This means that the crises to be examined all took place after 1867. It was in that year, with the passage of the Second Reform Act, that Great Britain became a democracy, or at least that is what both historians and political scientists commonly argue. No other great power (if certain brief revolutionary periods in France are ignored) could be considered a democracy before that point.

Finally, only those crises that did not terminate in war will be examined here. The rationale has to do with the basic thrust of the Fearon theory. His argument, both in his audience costs paper and in his very important article “Rationalist Explanations for War,” is that rational states in a sense should be able to reach a bargain that would enable them to avoid war but sometimes cannot do so because they suspect each other of bluffing.<sup>11</sup> It follows that anything that would allow them to credibly reveal their actual preferences might point the way to a clear outcome and thus enable them to head off an armed conflict, and the audience costs mechanism, in Fearon’s view, provides an effective way for them to do so. What this means is that if this mechanism is as important as Fearon suggests, we are more likely to see it in operation in crises that end peacefully than in those that end in war.

That set of criteria generates a list of about a dozen crises: the “War-in-Sight” crisis of 1875; the Eastern Crisis of 1877–78; the Fashoda crisis; the two Moroccan crises; the Rhineland crisis of 1936; the Czech crisis of 1938; the Turkish and Iranian crises of 1946; the Berlin Blockade of 1948; and the Berlin and Cuban crises of 1958–62. This is not a long list, and all of those episodes will be examined here. But there is nothing sacrosanct about that set of crises. One could easily argue, for example, that China was a great power in the 1950s and that the Sino-American crises of that decade should

---

<sup>11</sup> James Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995).

be included in the list. I have no fundamental quarrel with arguments of that sort. I assume only that if the audience costs mechanism is as powerful as many scholars believe, we should see it at work in crises that unambiguously meet the criteria laid out here and especially in the crises discussed in the next section.

That section will deal with crises in which a democratic power prevailed—that is, with crises in which its opponent backed down. These are the cases in which the audience costs mechanism is most likely to have played an important role, but how important was it in reality? Did the democratic state deliberately try to exploit it, and (more importantly) did that state's opponent pull back because it could now see that the democratic power's threats were credible because audience costs would be incurred if that power gave way in the dispute? The section after that, much shorter and less systematic, will look at what happens when democracies lose. How much of a price do their leaders pay in such cases and how does it compare with the price paid by leaders in non-democratic regimes? Finally, in a concluding section, I will discuss the basic points that emerge from this analysis and what the findings here imply about the way this sort of issue needs to be studied.

### WHEN DEMOCRACIES PREVAIL

In this section, we will look at great power crises that were won by democracies—five cases from the pre-World War I period and five from the Cold War period. We will be interested in two main questions. The more minor question has to do with the tactics employed by the democratic power. Audience costs theorists sometimes suggest that the leaders of those countries choose to “go public” in a crisis with the deliberate goal of “burning their bridges” or “tying their hands” in order to gain a bargaining advantage.<sup>12</sup> But how often do those leaders in fact opt for tactics of that sort? The second and far more important question focuses on the calculations of their adversaries. Whatever the intentions of the leaders of the democratic state, the audience costs mechanism can be decisive only if the opposing power understands why it would be hard for those leaders to back down. Unless the adversary is able to see why the democratic power's leaders' hands are tied, it would have no reason to conclude that they are not bluffing. So for the audience costs argument to hold, the adversary power has to understand that the democratic leaders would find it hard to give way for fear of incurring audience costs. But do governments confronting democratic states actually make this kind of calculation?

---

<sup>12</sup> Fearon talks, for example, about why leaders “would want to be able to generate significant audience costs in international contests.” Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 585.

## The “War-in-Sight” Crisis (1875)

On 9 April 1875, the Berlin *Post* published an article called “Is War in Sight?” arguing that because of developments in France, a Franco-German war might well be imminent. The *Post* was closely linked to the German government, and other newspapers with official connections sounded similar themes. It was commonly assumed at the time that German chancellor Otto von Bismarck was behind the press campaign, and it seems quite clear in retrospect that that assumption was correct.<sup>13</sup> Certainly Bismarck himself, both at the time and earlier, and both openly and in private, had argued that a preventive war against France would be justified as soon as it became clear that an armed confrontation was inevitable. Other German leaders also defended the idea of a preventive war in talks with foreign diplomats.<sup>14</sup>

What was Bismarck up to? Following her defeat in 1871, France had been forced to cede Alsace and much of Lorraine to Germany, but the French never accepted that arrangement as final. France was rebuilding her military strength, but unless she had allies she could pose no real threat to Germany. The danger was that a strong France might ally with one or more of Germany’s neighbors, and that danger would be particularly great if, as seemed possible, the monarchists, who in 1875 controlled the French government, seized power in that country. Strong pressure therefore had to be brought to bear to prevent that from happening. Germany’s threatening behavior might convince the French to pursue a non-provocative policy. It might persuade French voters to back the republicans, or at least keep the monarchists from attempting a coup.<sup>15</sup>

If, however, Germany had an interest in keeping France as weak and as isolated as possible, the other main powers had an interest in a relatively strong France as a counterweight to Germany. The Russian and British governments thus sought to make sure Germany did not attack France, but when Russian leaders, with British support, brought up the issue in Berlin, they had little trouble getting the assurances they wanted. Bismarck had been bluffing. When his bluff was called, he had little choice but to give way, and that was the end of the crisis.

What does this story tell us about the audience costs theory? The audience costs mechanism played no real role at all in this crisis. Britain, the one clearly democratic power, intervened, but in a fairly low-key way, especially as far as the public was concerned. It had not engaged in “costly signaling.” “What we did,” the foreign secretary wrote, “involved no risk and cost no

---

<sup>13</sup> See James Stone, *The War Scare of 1875: Bismarck and Europe in the Mid-1870s* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2010), 212–24.

<sup>14</sup> For a general account, see Stone, *War Scare*, 224–45.

<sup>15</sup> This is basically Stone’s argument.

trouble.”<sup>16</sup> And even after the crisis had been settled, the government did not try to cash in on its “victory” in domestic political terms. It sought to play down what it had done and to stress how “unostentatious” its policy had been; the details of its action were deliberately not revealed to the nation.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is hard to see how the fact that Britain was now a democracy made any difference at all—how the democratic system gave British leaders more effective tools for the conduct of foreign policy than those they had long possessed.

So this particular case does not provide much support for the audience costs theory, but it does not count heavily against that theory either. Bismarck’s bluff was called rather easily, if only because the emperor was dead set against the idea of a preventive war with France. Britain and Russia were pushing on an open door. It did not take much to get Bismarck to back down. There was no need, in other words, for Britain to engage in “costly signaling.” That, however, leaves open the possibility that in a more serious crisis, the audience costs mechanism might play a more important role.

There is, however, one final point bearing on the theory that should be noted. The audience costs theorists think that states profit in bargaining terms from an ability to generate audience costs—that taking a tough public stand strengthens a country’s position and gives it the upper hand in a crisis. But the 1875 case shows why “going public” might not always be a good idea: public threats might alienate third powers and lead them to take action that weakens one’s general political position. Public threat-making, in other words, is not necessarily an effective instrument of statecraft.

### The Eastern Crisis, 1877–78

In April 1877, Russia declared war on Turkey. That action came after prolonged efforts to get Turkey to end the mistreatment of her mainly Christian subjects in southeastern Europe and only after Russia had reached an important agreement with Austria governing the outcome of the war. The Russian aim at first was to pursue only limited goals and to avoid conflict with Austria and Britain, the two other great powers with strong interests in the area, but as the war ran its course Russian objectives escalated, especially after the fall of Plevna and the collapse of Turkish resistance in December 1877. The government, carried away by or unable to resist strong nationalist and pan-Slav feeling, was tempted to end Turkish rule in the Balkans, liberate the Christian populations there, and even seize control of Constantinople and the Turkish Straits. That program was utterly unacceptable to the British

<sup>16</sup> Derby to Disraeli, 20 May 1875, in William Monypenny and George Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 2:764.

<sup>17</sup> Disraeli to Derby, 30 May 1875, *ibid.*; Lord Derby’s 31 May 1875 speech in Parliament, *Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, series 3, vol. 224, col. 1098.

government, and it seemed increasingly likely that Austria would side with Britain in a showdown.<sup>18</sup>

From January through March 1878, Russia and Britain seemed to be on the verge of war. In 1877, before it had become apparent just how far Russia was going to go, British opinion had been divided about how strong a line to take. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli was quite warlike even then, but the foreign secretary, Lord Derby, wanted very much to head off a conflict with Russia.<sup>19</sup> So the actions the British government took in 1877 were relatively restrained. By the beginning of 1878, however, it seemed quite possible that Russia might actually occupy Constantinople, and British policy hardened. The fleet was sent up the Dardanelles and anchored within sight of the Turkish capital; Parliament approved supplementary appropriations and “military and naval preparations were pressed on with yet more urgent haste.”<sup>20</sup> The Russians, as it turned out, did not occupy Constantinople, but their armies did move to within a few miles of the city. At the beginning of March they were able to dictate peace terms to the Turks—terms not in line with what the Austrians had been promised before the war and which neither the British nor the Austrians could accept.

It thus seemed (for about ten weeks) that “violent nationalist feelings” in both Russia and Britain would sweep both countries into war.<sup>21</sup> The British, at the end of March, “called up the reserves and decided to bring a contingent of Indian troops to the Mediterranean.”<sup>22</sup> That decision led to the resignation of Lord Derby and his replacement at the Foreign Office by Lord Salisbury. Derby’s departure was seen by the Russians as a sign that Britain was heading toward war and that in fact a military conflict was imminent.<sup>23</sup> The immediate effect was to lead to a hardening of the Tsar’s attitude: it was important to preempt a British move to seize Constantinople.<sup>24</sup> But his brother, the military commander in the theater, did not do what the Tsar wanted. He was replaced in April, but by then the whole political situation had changed.

The pan-Slav tide had by that point receded, and Russian leaders were now prepared to approach the problem in a more sober, less emotional way. Russia was in no position militarily, financially, or politically to go to

---

<sup>18</sup> On this crisis, see B.H. Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans, 1870–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937); R.W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question: A Study in Diplomacy and Party Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1935); David MacKenzie, “Russia’s Balkan Policies under Alexander II, 1855–1881,” in *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Hugh Ragsdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Marvin Swartz, *The Politics of British Foreign Policy in the Era of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> On Disraeli’s bellicosity, see especially Seton-Watson, *Eastern Question*, 216–19.

<sup>20</sup> Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans*, 374.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 374, 380, 406.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 389. See also Seton-Watson, *Eastern Question*, 364.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 374, 393–95.

war against Britain and probably against Austria as well.<sup>25</sup> The situation in Britain had also changed. Disraeli was now willing to allow Salisbury to call the shots, and Salisbury was prepared to make a reasonable peace with Russia—to compromise on the Balkan issues and to accept some Russian territorial gains in both Europe and Asia. On that basis he and the Russian ambassador in London, Count Peter Shuvalov, were able in May to reach an agreement that essentially settled the crisis; the details were worked out at the Congress of Berlin later that year.

What light does this story throw on the audience costs question? Do you see governments stirring up opinion at home to strengthen their bargaining position in confrontations with other powers? Did governments interpret their adversaries' public moves as creating situations in which, for domestic political reasons, they would find it hard to pull back? And did that calculation play a crucial role in convincing them that the other side was not bluffing and that they themselves would therefore have to give way if war was to be avoided?

It turns out that the audience costs logic did come into play during the Eastern Crisis, albeit in a fairly limited way. As B.H. Sumner points out (referring to a relatively early stage of the crisis), for the Russian chancellor, Prince Gorchakov, “patriotic effervescence in Russia was in one sense far from unwelcome. It could be used to strengthen his hand abroad, provided that it did not go beyond controllable limits.”<sup>26</sup> And Disraeli, in October 1877, did consider a maneuver based on stirring up public opinion at home. Britain, he thought, could in effect recommend terms for ending the Russo-Turkish War. If Russia rejected those terms, “she would put herself much more in the wrong, and if the terms were publicly acknowledged by England as just and satisfactory, *it would be very difficult for us to adhere to our present neutrality*. Opinion at home would force us to action.”<sup>27</sup> But Disraeli soon dropped the idea, and the Russians did not really believe that the British government's hands were tied by a bellicose public opinion. Indeed, Lord Derby told the Russian ambassador not to take Britain's warlike moves too seriously. “I know my colleagues well: they do not want war, but to satisfy their party by demonstrations.” If the Russians did not allow themselves to be provoked, war might yet be avoided. And Shuvalov, after some reflection, advised his government that Derby might well be right.<sup>28</sup>

The Russians, in fact, were not impressed when the British government claimed at the Congress of Berlin that its hands were tied for domestic political reasons. The issue here, the status of the port of Batum, was fairly

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 396–97, 406.

<sup>26</sup> Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans*, 197.

<sup>27</sup> Disraeli to Layard, 11 October 1877, quoted in Seton-Watson, *Eastern Question*, 234 (emphasis in original text).

<sup>28</sup> Shuvalov to Gorchakov, 29 and 30 March 1878, quoted in *ibid.*, 378.

minor. The British sought to convince the Russian government that because of Jingo feeling in Britain, the Russians should take a relatively moderate line on that issue. They should be told, Disraeli thought, that if they were “not wise, they will have a Jingo Govt. & war with England in a month.” Salisbury agreed to “do all that I can to frighten” Shuvalov. His heart, however, was not in it, and the real purpose of the effort was to demonstrate the government’s “firmness to their Jingo followers” at home.<sup>29</sup>

Looking at the crisis as a whole, it is quite clear that the British government did not calculate that it had to go public in order to tie its own hands for bargaining purposes. Disraeli and Salisbury did not seek to limit their own freedom of action; their goal was simply to make it clear, to both the country and the world, that Britain would go to war if Russia did not moderate her position. The Russians, for their part, understood that the Disraeli government had the power to carry out that policy, and they did not doubt that the British would carry it out if no settlement were reached. This judgment was based on all sorts of indicators; what Shuvalov was able to learn about the views of key British leaders was of particular importance in this context.<sup>30</sup> The whole question of whether Disraeli would be unable to pull back for domestic political reasons was of no great importance for the simple reason that he clearly was not interested in pulling back if the terms were not satisfactory. It was scarcely as though the Russians were trying hard to see whether the British were bluffing and were only convinced that this was not the case when they realized Britain would incur significant audience costs if it gave way during the crisis. If anything, the Russian leaders thought the Disraeli government was more bellicose than it in fact was.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the audience costs mechanism did not play a key role during the crisis, and this particular story helps us understand why that mechanism might be weaker than some theorists think. Tough talk tended to be vague. Disraeli’s Guildhall address of November 1876 is a good case in point. “Although the policy of England is peace,” he said, “there is no country so well prepared for war as our own.” Britain’s resources were “inexhaustible,” and if she went to war, “she will not terminate till right is done.”<sup>32</sup> This, however, gave no clear sense for the terms Britain would insist on; there was no precise commitment that Disraeli could be blamed for not honoring.

Even if the thrust of a policy is relatively clear, a government that wants to draw back can often finesse the situation in various ways. One is struck in this context by R.W. Seton-Watson’s interpretation of Disraeli’s policy in 1878. In allowing Salisbury to work out a compromise with Shuvalov, Disraeli was

---

<sup>29</sup> Seton-Watson, *Eastern Question*, 456; Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans*, 540; Swartz, *Politics of British Foreign Policy*, 94–96.

<sup>30</sup> Seton-Watson, *Eastern Question*, 250, 298; Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans*, 29–30, 321; Swartz, *Politics of British Foreign Policy*, 48–49, 70–72.

<sup>31</sup> See Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans*, esp. 472, 475.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 226.

actually retreating from his earlier hard line. The warlike measures he took at the time served to “conceal his retreat and pacify the impatient Jingoës,” and the way he packaged the Berlin settlement as a defeat for Russia served the same purpose.<sup>33</sup>

The Russians had a different way to avoid paying audience costs. In early 1878 they had pursued a very ambitious policy “in reckless disregard,” as Sumner puts it, of the probable reactions of Britain and Austria.<sup>34</sup> Shuvalov was appalled by this policy, and it was largely thanks to his rather extraordinary efforts that Russia was able to avoid what would certainly have been a disastrous war with Britain, and probably with Austria as well.<sup>35</sup> Russian public opinion, however, was deeply disappointed by the Berlin settlement, and Shuvalov, the main architect of the settlement on the Russian side, was held responsible for what had happened. His political career was ruined, and the German government was also blamed. The Tsar spoke of a “European coalition against Russia, under the leadership of Prince Bismarck.” In that way, those responsible for the failed policy—the Tsar especially—were able to limit the audience costs they had to pay.<sup>36</sup>

### The Fashoda Crisis (1898)

For much of the nineteenth century, Britain sought to prevent Russia from getting control of the Turkish Straits. A Russian presence in the eastern Mediterranean would weaken Britain’s position in what was for her a region of central strategic importance. When Russia formed an alliance with France in the early 1890s, the problem became acute: the British could not risk a conflict with Russia if their fleet could be attacked from behind by France. One possible solution was for Germany to threaten to attack France if she joined with Russia in such a case; Britain would then be able to pursue with Germany’s ally Austria a policy directed at the containment of Russia. The Germans, however, were not willing to go along with the idea.<sup>37</sup>

By the mid-1890s, the old strategy of defending Constantinople was thus becoming increasingly untenable. The British would instead consolidate their position in Egypt, which they had originally occupied in 1882; the corollary was that they would also have to dominate the entire Nile valley. Indeed, Lord Salisbury, who in the late 1890s was once again foreign secretary, had long understood that Britain might have to go this route. As Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher note in their classic work on the subject, it had been

<sup>33</sup> Seton-Watson, *Eastern Question*, 379, 397, 530–31, 535, 560–61.

<sup>34</sup> Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans*, 425.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 471.

<sup>36</sup> See Seton-Watson, *Eastern Question*, 461–71; Sumner, *Russia and the Balkans*, 554–56.

<sup>37</sup> See William Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism*, vol. 1 (New York: Knopf, 1935), 52–54.

Salisbury's "set policy since 1889 to exclude European rivals" from the upper Nile.<sup>38</sup>

The French, on the other hand, very much wanted to end the British occupation of Egypt.<sup>39</sup> Key officials thought that by sending a military expedition to the upper Nile, France could reopen the Egyptian question. An international conference would be convened, and Britain would be made to withdraw from Egypt. Some French leaders thought this policy was insane. The government, however, approved the plan, and in late 1896 the parliament, by a vote of 477 to 18, agreed to fund what was to become the Marchand Mission. Marchand's arrival at Fashoda on the upper Nile, the foreign minister said, would be a "pistol shot": it would force Britain to negotiate.<sup>40</sup>

The French, however, had totally misread the situation and were in a much weaker position than they had realized. French leaders had hoped that their Russian ally would support their Egyptian policy, but it was clear by early 1898 that no real support would be forthcoming.<sup>41</sup> This was in part because they themselves were unwilling to support Russia in other areas, but was also because the shift in British strategy away from the defense of Constantinople meant that Britain was in a better position to strike a deal with Russia. Salisbury, in fact, made a point of staying on good terms with that country: "In six months' time," he said in early 1898, "we shall be on the verge of war with France; I can't afford to quarrel with Russia now."<sup>42</sup>

With France isolated, the British government could take a very firm stance. An Anglo-Egyptian army under Lord Kitchener was in the process of reconquering the Sudan and by mid-September had reached Fashoda. Marchand had arrived there two months earlier. The British insisted that the French force be withdrawn. The new French foreign minister Théophile Delcassé tried to negotiate, but Salisbury would scarcely throw him a crumb. On 3 November, with their backs to the wall and in no position to go to war, the French gave way. Marchand was ordered to evacuate Fashoda.

---

<sup>38</sup> See C.J. Lowe, *The Reluctant Imperialists: British Foreign Policy 1878–1902* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 196–204, 377–78; Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Climax of Imperialism* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), 254–73, 354 (for the quotation). The two most important books on the British side of what was to become the Fashoda affair are the Robinson and Gallagher book just cited, a brilliant analysis, and G.N. Sanderson's more detailed study, *England, Europe and the Upper Nile, 1882–1899* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965).

<sup>39</sup> See Pierre Guillen, *L'Expansion 1881–1898* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1985), 397–425, 461–62. For the French side of the Fashoda affair, see also Roger Brown, *Fashoda Reconsidered: The Impact of Domestic Politics on French Policy in Africa, 1893–1898* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); Marc Michel, *La Mission Marchand, 1895–1899* (Paris: Mouton, 1972); C.M. Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, "Gabriel Hanotaux, the Colonial Party and the Fashoda Strategy," in *European Imperialism and the Partition of Africa*, ed. E.F. Penrose (London: Frank Cass, 1975).

<sup>40</sup> See Guillen, *L'Expansion*, 409; Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, "Gabriel Hanotaux," 77.

<sup>41</sup> See Guillen, *L'Expansion*, 428–40, esp. 439; Michel, *Mission Marchand*, 130–31, 135; Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 327.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 367n.

The Fashoda crisis is of special interest from the point of view of the audience costs theory, and indeed, to the extent that any historical evidence is given to support the theory, that support comes largely from an analysis of this episode. According to Kenneth Schultz, Salisbury deliberately “manipulated the popular mood in order to bolster his bargaining position. By taking advantage of and stoking the public’s outrage, Salisbury was able to convince the French that he had no leeway to offer concessions.”<sup>43</sup> The most important step of this sort he took was to release a Blue Book containing hitherto secret diplomatic documents relating to the affair. The Blue Book, Schultz writes, “was intended to inflame [Salisbury’s] domestic audience.”<sup>44</sup> The French understood that in taking this step the British government was cutting “itself off from all retreat” (as their ambassador in London put it). The government would not survive if it backed down after taking such a clear stance.<sup>45</sup> The audience costs mechanism, the argument runs, thus played a key role in determining how the crisis ran its course and why it was resolved the way it was.<sup>46</sup>

Did Salisbury in fact deliberately seek to “stoke the public’s outrage”? Was that why the Blue Book was published? The conventional view among historians is that Salisbury personally did not want to draw the line so sharply in public, but that he was not a free agent. Much as he would have liked to conduct policy without worrying about what was being said in the press, he understood that he could not ignore public opinion, and it was also obvious to him that the strong feelings of his colleagues in the Cabinet had to be taken into account.<sup>47</sup> The publication of the Blue Book, as Salisbury himself argued, thus has to be understood as a defensive act. He had been accused of weakness and his own public needed to see that he was perfectly able to defend British interests. English opinion, he said, was “extremely over-excited”; when the facts were made public, he hoped, people would be able to approach the issue in a more sober way.<sup>48</sup> Salisbury thus probably did not intend to inflame public opinion. His goal, it seems, was not to curtail his own freedom of action, but rather to safeguard the freedom of action he normally had. Whatever his intentions, the release of the documents led to a “flood of political oratory” in Britain, and the “vehemence of the speakers” meant that even minor concessions could not now be made.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 182, 186, 190.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–87, 190, 195.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 256, 373–74; Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 400.

<sup>48</sup> For Salisbury’s explanation for the publication of the Blue Book, see Courcel to Delcassé, 6 October 1898, *Documents Diplomatiques Français (1871–1914)*, series 1, vol. 14, 633–35 (hereafter cited as DDF).

<sup>49</sup> Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 347.

This does not mean, however, that the audience costs mechanism was of fundamental importance in this affair. The basic Fearon argument was that the mechanism plays a crucial role because it provides new and compelling information during a crisis. The idea was that information available before a crisis—information, for example, about relative military power or about each side's intrinsic interests—cannot explain why the crisis ran its course the way it did. Only new information about a state's resolve can explain why a crisis ends the way it does.<sup>50</sup> The key point to note here, however, is that the British had made it quite clear to French observers well before the affair reached the crisis stage that a meaningful French presence in the Nile valley would simply not be tolerated. That policy had been pursued from 1890 on no matter which party was in power. British warnings had been unambiguous.<sup>51</sup> French diplomats, well before the affair came to a head, were under no illusions as to how the British government, and the British public as well, felt about the subject.<sup>52</sup> So as the crisis was brewing, French officials had all the information they needed—including information from intelligence sources—to assess the situation accurately.<sup>53</sup>

The problem was that the authorities in Paris simply refused to believe the British would go to war over the issue.<sup>54</sup> Even the most important public warning, the Grey declaration of March 1895, was dismissed at the time by the French foreign minister as “not seriously intended.”<sup>55</sup> It was only during the crisis itself, when the evidence of Britain's willingness to go to war became utterly overwhelming and with military action imminent, that the French gave way. The idea that Salisbury's hands were tied played only a minor role in the crisis. Strong public feeling might explain why he was unable to make even a token concession designed to allow the French to save face, but this was not the key reason why French leaders concluded that Britain was not going to give way on fundamentals. A more general picture had taken shape. Public opinion was certainly one element in that picture. The tough line taken by political leaders in both parties, and especially by Salisbury's Cabinet colleagues, also fed into that overall assessment of how far the British were prepared to go in this affair. What the French were learning through intelligence channels was another key element in the equation; in particular, what they were learning about the military measures the British were taking—above all, the mobilization of the British fleet on 28 October—was a very important indicator. Indeed the news that the Royal

---

<sup>50</sup> Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 586. See also Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*, 177–80.

<sup>51</sup> See Guillen, *L'Expansion*, 403; Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 264.

<sup>52</sup> See Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 209; Geoffray to Delcassé, 29 September 1898, DDF 1:14:601–2; Courcel to Hanotaux, 27 March 1897, quoted in Michel, *Mission Marchand*, 133.

<sup>53</sup> See Brown, *Fashoda Reconsidered*, 73–74.

<sup>54</sup> See Guillen, *L'Expansion*, 462; Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 361.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, “Gabriel Hanotaux,” 66.

Navy was being put on a war footing proved decisive. It was this move that led directly to the French decision to evacuate Fashoda.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that things had to reach this point before the French drew back—and even at the peak of the crisis their government was apparently considering a plan that their ambassador in London viewed as totally insane—suggests that French policy in this affair is not to be understood in essentially rational terms.<sup>57</sup> This, in fact, is the prevailing view among historians who have studied this episode in some depth. Behind the policy that led to the Marchand Mission, G.N. Sanderson says, “There was little rational calculation. It rested rather on a quite irrational conviction that a successful expedition to the Upper Nile *must* somehow lead to a favourable solution of the Egyptian question.” Pierre Guillen thinks that the French policymakers were appallingly inept and utterly incapable of seeing things for what they were. And A.S. Kanya-Forstner refers to the “strong current of irrationality running through French policy” at this time.<sup>58</sup>

It is for this reason that a study of the Fashoda crisis does not provide much support for a “rationalist explanation for war” like the audience costs theory. Fearon himself put his finger on the problem when he pointed out that if “relative capabilities or interests” determined outcomes and were accurately assessed, “then we should not observe crises between rational opponents: if rational, the weaker or observably less interested state should simply concede the issues without offering public, costly resistance.” “Crises,” he wrote, “would occur only when the disadvantaged side irrationally forgets its inferiority before challenging or choosing to resist a challenge”—and that was precisely what happened in 1898.<sup>59</sup>

### The Moroccan Crises (1905–1906 and 1911)

During its first two decades, the German empire was a satiated state, but after the fall of Bismarck in 1890, German policy changed dramatically. By the end of the decade Germany had developed far-reaching imperial ambitions. The goal now was to become a world power and perhaps even ultimately to displace Britain as the world’s premier imperial power. The new policy thus had a certain anti-British cast, which the British were quick to sense.<sup>60</sup> Britain was already at odds with her two traditional imperial rivals, France and Russia, over a whole range of issues in Asia and Africa, and the

<sup>56</sup> See Brown, *Fashoda Reconsidered*, 104, 113, 116.

<sup>57</sup> See Courcel to Geoffray, 31 October 1898, DDF 1:14:743–44.

<sup>58</sup> Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 391; Guillen, *L’Expansion*, 461–62; A.S. Kanya-Forstner review of the Sanderson book, in the *Historical Journal* 9, no. 2 (1966): 254.

<sup>59</sup> Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences,” 586.

<sup>60</sup> See especially Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), chap. 13.

emergence of a new German threat deepened her sense that her resources were overextended and that her old policy of avoiding commitment was no longer viable. She therefore made an alliance with Japan in 1902 and then entered into negotiations that led to the Anglo-French entente of 1904.<sup>61</sup> But the coming together of the Western powers was for the Germans evidence of British hostility. "It cannot be denied," the emperor said, that England "underhandedly" was working "to isolate us."<sup>62</sup>

The German goal now was to counteract Britain's "encirclement" policy by demonstrating to the French that their entente with Britain had brought them nothing of value. The French, in the 1904 agreement, had recognized Britain's preeminent position in Egypt. The British, in exchange, had agreed in effect that France would have a free hand in Morocco. The Germans, however, could prevent France from achieving her goal of transforming Morocco into a French protectorate. The entente with Britain would then be revealed as worthless, and the French might feel they needed to improve their relationship with Germany and perhaps even join with Germany and Russia in a continental bloc directed against Britain.<sup>63</sup>

So the Germans took their stand. The emperor went to Tangier in March 1905 and made it clear that Germany supported the independence of Morocco. The German position was strong, especially in military terms. France's ally Russia was not doing well in her war with Japan, and indeed that war had led to serious disturbances at home; the French army was still suffering from the effects of the Dreyfus affair; and the British Navy could not shield France from a German attack. The French therefore could not risk a military confrontation with Germany. Their anti-German foreign minister, Delcassé, was thus forced to resign, and Prime Minister Rouvier sought negotiations. The Germans refused and insisted instead on convening an international conference attended by all the major powers, calculating that most of the other countries would side with them at the conference. But the plan backfired. German leaders, and especially the emperor, made it quite clear that their goal was not war but a better relationship with France; French leaders therefore knew they could take a relatively tough line without running any real risk of a military confrontation.<sup>64</sup> The French also knew that most of the other powers would support them even if they took a hard line on the Moroccan question. They were therefore able to turn the tables on Germany at the conference, and the German government could scarcely reject the decisions of a conference it had insisted on convening.<sup>65</sup> In March 1906, the

---

<sup>61</sup> On these developments, see especially George Monger, *The End of Isolation: British Foreign Policy, 1900-1907* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1963).

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Norman Rich, *Friedrich von Holstein: Politics and Diplomacy in the Era of Bismarck and Wilhelm II*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 680.

<sup>63</sup> See Rich, *Holstein*, 2:678-745, for a very revealing analysis of German policy in the crisis.

<sup>64</sup> See *ibid.*, esp. 708-10, 718, 722, 724, 726-28, 741.

<sup>65</sup> See *ibid.*, esp. 738, 743-44.

Germans decided, as Norman Rich puts it, “to make whatever concessions were required to settle the Moroccan crisis in order to prevent the failure of the conference.”<sup>66</sup>

Despite their favorable military position, the Germans thus ended up suffering a quite extraordinary diplomatic defeat in 1906, brought on in large part by the policy choices they themselves had made. The key point to note here, however, is that they did not give way because the audience costs mechanism had come into play. It was not as though they had thought the French were bluffing over Morocco and were convinced only by strong public statements made by French leaders that France would not give way in the crisis. That conclusion is scarcely surprising, since the French were in no position to opt for a strategy of deterrence and thus had no interest in adopting tactics designed to enhance the credibility of their deterrent threats. Given the military situation, a more subtle strategy—one that deemphasized the possibility of armed conflict—was clearly in order.

The agreement worked out at the 1906 conference did not permanently settle the Moroccan affair. The French were still determined to take over Morocco and to that end in the spring of 1911 sent a military expedition to the Moroccan capital of Fez. They had no right to do so under the 1906 agreement, and the Germans responded by sending a gunboat to Agadir in southern Morocco. The German government was willing to accept what the French were doing in that country but demanded compensation. To make sure the French took that demand seriously, the Germans felt they needed to go public: quiet diplomatic efforts, they were convinced, would be futile.<sup>67</sup> The German government did not want a war, but Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, the German foreign secretary and main architect of German policy in the 1911 crisis, felt that Germany could achieve her goals only if her adversaries felt she was willing to go all the way.<sup>68</sup>

By way of compensation, the Germans asked for the whole French Congo; the French thought Germany was asking for far too much. The British agreed and worried about the broader implications of the German move. As the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, put it: Britain could not go to war to “put France in virtual possession of Morocco,” but an “attempt by Germany to humiliate France might affect British interests so seriously that we should have to resist it.”<sup>69</sup> David Lloyd George, a key member of

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 740.

<sup>67</sup> See Jean-Claude Allain, *Agadir 1911: Une crise impérialiste en Europe pour la conquête du Maroc* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1976), 325.

<sup>68</sup> See Kiderlen to Bethmann, 17 July 1911, quoted in Emily Oncken, *Panthersprung nach Agadir: Die deutsche Politik während der Zweiten Marokkokrise 1911* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1981), 283. For the point that the German leadership wanted to avoid war and had simply adopted a bluff strategy, see *ibid.*, 421.

<sup>69</sup> Grey to Bertie, 20 July 1911, in *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914*, vol. 7, ed. G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley (London: HMSO, 1926–38), 382 (hereafter cited as BD).

the Liberal government, after first getting the green light from Grey, issued a public warning to Germany in his famous Mansion House speech of 21 July 1911. Lloyd George's goal was "to make it clear that if Germany meant war, she would find Britain against her."<sup>70</sup> Germany, he suggested in that speech, was treating Britain "as if she were of no account in the Cabinet of Nations"; "peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure." The Germans were furious. Hadn't they been ignored as the French pushed ahead in Morocco? Weren't they the ones who had been treated as they had been "of no account" in this affair?<sup>71</sup> The British threat, however, could not be ignored. The emperor and the chancellor very much wanted to avoid war and again essentially gave way in the crisis.<sup>72</sup>

What does this story tell us about the audience costs theory? It is quite clear, first of all, that Kiderlen sought, in at least a limited way, to stir up opinion at home in order to "strengthen Germany's bargaining position" in the crisis.<sup>73</sup> This, however, did not turn out to be a wise strategy. Nationalist feeling was aroused during the crisis, and the government ended up paying a huge political price for what was seen as its willingness to accept a humiliating defeat.<sup>74</sup> From this Germany's leaders learned an important lesson: these sorts of pressures could not be turned on and off like a faucet; they might get out of hand and limit the government's freedom of action in very unpalatable ways.<sup>75</sup> So while in principle a government might be able to get a certain bargaining advantage by exploiting the audience costs mechanism, that tactic can be quite risky and is thus not nearly as attractive to statesmen as audience costs theorists sometimes suggest.

Lloyd George's Mansion House speech is also of particular interest from the point of view of the audience costs theory, since it is clear that the speech had a major bearing on how the crisis was resolved.<sup>76</sup> The speech, however, was no mere bargaining ploy. British leaders were not trying to tie their own hands by creating a situation where retreat was impossible for domestic political reasons. The goal was simply to make it clear that they were willing

<sup>70</sup> Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911–1914* (New York: Scribner's, 1930), 43.

<sup>71</sup> See Kiderlen to Metternich, 24 and 25 July 1911, *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871–1914*, ed. Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and Friedrich Thimme (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1922–1927), 40 vols. in 54, 29:211, 212; Grey to Goschen, 25 July 1911, BD 7:398.

<sup>72</sup> See Geoffrey Barraclough, *From Agadir to Armageddon: Anatomy of a Crisis* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 134; Oncken, *Panthersprung*, 292, 294–95, 421.

<sup>73</sup> Wolfgang Mommsen, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in Wilhelmine Germany, 1897–1914," in Wolfgang Mommsen, *Imperial Germany, 1867–1918: Politics, Culture and Society in an Authoritarian State* (London: Arnold, 1995), 196. Mommsen's view is probably too extreme. See Oncken, *Panthersprung*, 332–50, esp. 340.

<sup>74</sup> See Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 447, 367; Mommsen, *Imperial Germany*, 176.

<sup>75</sup> See Mommsen, *Imperial Germany*, 192–95; Klaus Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich: Deutsche Aussenpolitik von Bismarck zu Hitler, 1871–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995), 263.

<sup>76</sup> It is in fact one of a handful of cases Fearon refers to in his article on the subject. See Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences," 582.

to go to war if Germany asked for too much; and indeed Lloyd George personally, despite his reputation as a moderate, was amazingly bellicose at the time.<sup>77</sup> It was that policy—a policy they knew the government was quite capable of carrying out—that the Germans were reacting to. The idea that the British government could not draw back now for fear of paying a domestic political price does not appear to have entered Germany's calculations.

This does not mean that the Germans failed to understand the political situation in Britain. Indeed, the British government did not have a domestic political incentive to hold to the hard line symbolized by the Mansion House speech. Quite the contrary: the government did back off from that policy, in large part because it understood it would have paid a price if it had *not* done so. Many Liberals, especially in Lloyd George's own wing of the party, were happy neither with the speech nor the general policy it represented. Grey, as one historian put it, "found himself at the centre of an angry debate within the Liberal Party about foreign affairs which threatened to undermine the foundations of his foreign policy, and, indeed, to drive him from office." The Mansion House speech was a key count in the critics' indictment of the government's policy during the crisis. By the end of the year, in part as a result of that criticism, Grey had changed course and was now trying, cautiously, to improve relations with Germany.<sup>78</sup>

But even if the Germans had understood at the time the speech was given that the British government would not have to pay a major political price if it softened its policy, it is by no means clear that they would have inferred from this that Britain was bluffing—that because no audience costs would be incurred, British threats would not have to be taken seriously. Indeed, the Germans in such circumstances could have made exactly the opposite calculation. The fact that British leaders were prepared to alienate their own political base and put their own political survival at risk might have suggested that British threats could not be dismissed as mere bluff: the fact that British leaders were willing to pay this sort of price showed how important the issue was to them and that they might well go to war if Germany went too far. Costly signaling would still be a major factor here, but in this case it would be actual rather than potential costs that would play the key role in communicating resolve.

### The Early Cold War: The Turkish and Iranian Crises (1946) and the Berlin Blockade (1948–49)

In the summer of 1945, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin pinned to a wall a map showing the USSR's new borders. He liked what he saw in the Baltic

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, M.L. Dockrill, "David Lloyd George and Foreign Policy before 1914," in *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays*, ed. A.J.P. Taylor (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), 19.

<sup>78</sup> M.L. Dockrill, "British Policy during the Agadir Crisis of 1911," in *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey*, ed. F.H. Hinsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 286.

area, his foreign minister at the time later recalled, and in the Far East as well. But then, “stabbing a finger at the southern Caucasus, he exclaimed, ‘But *here* is where I don’t like our frontiers.’”<sup>79</sup> This was not just talk. By late 1945, the Soviets were promoting the establishment of “friendly” regimes in the part of Iran their armies controlled. They had agreed to pull their forces out of that country within six months of the end of the war, but it was clear in early 1946 that they would not be out by the 2 March deadline. Instead, the level of Soviet aggressiveness was ratcheted up, and what the Soviets were doing was major news in the *New York Times*: “Heavy Russian Columns Move West in Iran” the main 13 March headline ran; “Soviet Tanks Approach Teheran” was headline news the next day.

The us government, which up to that point had not committed itself to the defense of that area, decided to take a tough line. On 7 March, after being briefed about Soviet military movements in Iran, Secretary of State James Byrnes, “beating one fist into the other,” remarked, “Now we’ll give it to them with both barrels.”<sup>80</sup> President Truman thought the situation might lead to war.<sup>81</sup> The us government made it clear to the Soviets, through both public and private channels, that it expected them to keep their promises and withdraw their troops from Iran.<sup>82</sup> The Iranians, with strong us backing, brought up the issue in the United Nations Security Council. The Americans at this time placed great emphasis on the UN, and Secretary Byrnes stated explicitly on 16 March that “should the occasion arise, our military strength will be used to support the purposes and principles of the Charter.”<sup>83</sup> The Soviets then began to back off, reaching an agreement with Iran on 4 April that the withdrawal would be completed by early May. “There is no doubt,” as one scholar writes, that this shift in Soviet policy was “induced by the continuous pressure of the Truman administration.”<sup>84</sup> Stalin himself certainly understood why the Soviets had decided to pull their forces out of Iran. As he told an Azerbaijani Communist leader, “We cannot start a new war.”<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Woodford McClellan, “Molotov Remembers,” Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) *Bulletin* 1 (Spring 1992): 17.

<sup>80</sup> Edwin Wright, “Events relative to the Azerbaijan Issue—March 1946,” 16 August 1965, quoted in US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) 1946, 7:347.

<sup>81</sup> See W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941–1946* (New York: Random House, 1975), 550.

<sup>82</sup> US Note to Soviet Government, 6 March 1946, *Department of State Bulletin* 14, no. 350 (17 March 1946), 435–36 (hereafter cited as DOSB); Kuross A. Samii, “Truman against Stalin in Iran: A Tale of Three Messages,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 1 (January 1987): 98–103; “U.S. Accuses Soviet of Violating Word by Staying in Iran,” *New York Times*, 8 March 1946; “Russian Situation Moves toward Showdown,” *New York Times*, 10 March 1946.

<sup>83</sup> James Byrnes, “United States Military Strength—Its Relation to the United Nations and World Peace,” in DOSB 14, no. 351 (24 March 1946), 483.

<sup>84</sup> Samii, “Truman against Stalin,” 100.

<sup>85</sup> Georges Mamoulia, “Les crises turque et iranienne 1945–1947: L’apport des archives caucasiennes,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 45, nos. 1/2 (January–June 2004): 281.

The USSR during this period was also putting pressure on Turkey. Stalin clearly had his sights set on getting control of the Turkish Straits. In late 1945, as Soviet pressure on Turkey began to build, Truman felt he could not do anything about what was going on there. By January 1946, however, his attitude had hardened. "There isn't a doubt in my mind that Russia intends an invasion of Turkey and the seizure of the Black Sea Straits to the Mediterranean. Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language another war is in the making."<sup>86</sup> There were growing indications—troop movements, a propaganda campaign, and so on—that the USSR might move against Turkey, and when in August the Soviets sent that country a note calling for a joint defense of the Straits, the US government felt it had to make some fundamental decisions. Truman and his top advisors thought the only thing that could deter the Russians was the conviction that America was "prepared, if necessary, to meet aggression with force of arms."<sup>87</sup> An American naval force was soon sent to the eastern Mediterranean, and again the Soviets pulled back, in part because they had learned through intelligence channels just how far the US government was prepared to go.<sup>88</sup>

The Near Eastern crises of 1946, however, had a lasting effect and in fact played a key role in triggering the Cold War. The main lesson US leaders drew from those crises was that Europe could not be divided in a more or less friendly way: there had to be an effective counterweight to Soviet power in Europe; opinion had to be mobilized at home and western Germany had to be drawn into the Western bloc. But that whole policy of "organizing" the western part of Germany economically, politically, and ultimately militarily, and integrating it into the Western world—and the policy of winning the Germans over by pointing to the Soviets as the great enemies of German unity—was bound to be a source of deep concern in Moscow. So when the Western powers decided to move ahead with the establishment of a West German state, it was natural that the USSR would react. If western Germany was being "organized" not just without the Soviets but against them, that might lead to very serious problems in the long run. It would be best to nip those problems in the bud, by getting the Western powers to rethink their German policy and work out some sort of solution the Soviets could live with. But how could America and her friends be made to do that? Berlin, a land island in the middle of the Soviet zone of Germany—half of which was garrisoned by the Western powers—was the obvious lever. So when the Western governments reached a formal agreement at the beginning of June

---

<sup>86</sup> Truman to Byrnes (unsent), 5 January 1946, in *Strictly Personal and Confidential: The Letters Harry Truman Never Mailed*, ed. Monte Poen (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), 40.

<sup>87</sup> Acheson to Byrnes, 15 August 1946, and Acheson-Inverchapel meeting, 20 August 1946, FRUS 1946, 7:840–42, 849–50; Eduard Mark, "The War Scare of 1946 and its Consequences," *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1997), 383, 399–400.

<sup>88</sup> Mark, "War Scare of 1946," 387, 401, 408; Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 93.

1948 setting up a process that would lead to the establishment of a West German state, the Soviets responded three weeks later by cutting off surface communication between Berlin and western Germany.

The us government announced that it would “not be coerced or intimidated in any way,” but its actual policy was fairly moderate. It set up an airlift to supply the western sectors of the city but was very reluctant to take military action if the Soviets interfered with the operation. Nor were the Soviets, for their part, particularly confrontational. They did not even take non-military measures (like jamming radars) that could have compromised the effectiveness of the airlift. Stalin’s goal, as he himself said, was not to drive the Western powers out of Berlin but to reach a political understanding with them on the German question. Each side understood that the other was not especially bellicose.<sup>89</sup> Looking back, the risk of war does not seem to have been particularly great, and the crisis limped along until an agreement was reached and the blockade was lifted in early 1949.

What role did the audience costs mechanism play in these episodes? That question is easiest to answer for the case of the Turkish crisis: the mechanism clearly did not play a significant role in this affair. us leaders made a point of playing down the importance of what the Soviets were doing with Turkey. As Eduard Mark pointed out, in what is by far the best scholarly study of the crisis, “There were few public announcements, and cautious efforts to mobilize public opinion had scarcely begun before the acute phase of the crisis suddenly ended.”<sup>90</sup> What was crucial in determining the way the crisis was resolved, according to Mark, was not what was said in public, but rather what the Soviets were learning through secret channels—above all, the reports they were getting about the us attitude from their spy Donald Maclean, a British diplomat then based in Washington. Maclean reported that Truman would “never abandon Turkey,” and as a result “Stalin backed-pedaled.”<sup>91</sup> Perhaps there was more to it than that. After all, Maclean found out about Truman’s decision to go to war if necessary very soon after the decision was made in mid-August, and it was only in late September that the Soviets “abruptly turned conciliatory.” Even if other factors came into play, however, the key point to note is that the audience costs mechanism was not a major factor here.

The Iran crisis, on the other hand, was played out in full public view, but that in itself does not mean that audience costs were a major factor in this case. Perhaps the us government went public mainly to mobilize support for its policy; perhaps it did so with an eye to scoring points at home by taking

---

<sup>89</sup> See Mikhail Narinsky, “Soviet Policy and the Berlin Blockade 1948” (paper presented at a conference in Essen, Germany, 1994), 13, and quoted in Elke Scherstjanoi, “Die Berlin-Blockade 1948/49 im sowjetischen Kalkül,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 46, no. 6 (1998): 500n.

<sup>90</sup> Mark, “War Scare of 1946,” 386, esp. n. 8, 404.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 387, 401, 408.

a tough line. Allowing the crisis to play out in public, moreover, could put pressure on the Soviets in various ways—for example, by making it clear to them that they would pay a price with American opinion, and with world opinion more generally, if they did not back off. The idea, however, that the Soviets would pay a price with American opinion if they continued is very different from the idea that the US government would incur costs with the same “audience” if it backed down. And there is no evidence that US leaders had any interest in tying their own hands for bargaining purposes, let alone that they sought to do so by exploiting the audience costs mechanism.

Did the Soviets, however, calculate that US leaders had taken such a strong stand in public that they could not back down without paying a big price at home, and was it this that led the USSR to end the crisis? We still do not have anything like the sort of evidence on Soviet policymaking in this affair that we have for the American side, but it seems quite unlikely that the Soviet leadership was thinking in those terms. The evidence strongly suggests that Stalin and his top associates did not believe that public opinion was nearly as important in America as the US government claimed.

That was certainly the impression of US officials who dealt directly with Soviet affairs at the time.<sup>92</sup> Indeed the Soviets seemed irritated when the Americans talked about how important US public opinion was. When Harry Hopkins, in his famous meeting with Stalin in May 1945, spoke at length about how feeling with the United States had shifted and how important it was to take American public opinion into account, Stalin was dismissive to the point of rudeness. In replying to Hopkins, he said “he would not attempt to use Soviet public opinion as a screen.” His anger had gotten the better of him, and he later actually apologized to Hopkins, but it is clear that he felt the US government was just using these arguments about public opinion as a fig leaf.<sup>93</sup> One has the sense, in fact, that in analyzing US policy, the basic Soviet view was that the government’s policy was crucial—that the press could be guided, that domestic political pressures could be finessed, that “public opinion” was not a major independent factor the government had to contend with, but rather was something that could be manipulated for instrumental purposes. It is thus not likely Stalin calculated that the Americans could not pull back in the Iran crisis because of the domestic political price the administration would have to pay if it did so, and that this was the crucial factor that led him to give way in that affair.

The basic point here—that the audience costs mechanism was not a major factor in the Iran crisis—is also supported by a comparison of this episode with the Turkish crisis of the same year. Those two Near Eastern crises—so

---

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Llewellyn Thompson to Dunn, 3 February 1945, FRUS 1945, 5:814; Harriman to Secretary of State, 21 August 1944, FRUS 1944, 4:1183.

<sup>93</sup> Stalin-Hopkins meetings, 26 and 27 May 1945, FRUS: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference) 1945, 1:26–28, 32 (for the quotation), 37 (for the apology).

similar in many respects, but differing basically in that in one the administration went public in a major way while in the other it did not—provide us with as close to a controlled experiment as we ever get in international relations. This simple comparison strongly suggests that audience costs were not a major factor and that other factors, common to the two crises, played the key role in determining the very similar way in which those conflicts were resolved.

Do these points about the unimportance of audience costs also apply to the third case examined in this section, the Berlin Blockade affair of 1948? The administration, one might think, might have been particularly tempted to exploit the audience costs mechanism in this case. The presidential election was only a few months away, and the public took a relatively tough line when the blockade was instituted: the price US leaders would have to pay for backing off from a firm stance would be unusually high. The administration, moreover, had a domestic political interest in taking a hard line. In a document which, according to one historian, was to serve as the “blueprint for Truman’s campaign in 1948,” Clark Clifford argued that (short of war) “the worse matters” got and the more there was “a sense of crisis,” the better off Truman would be, because “in times of crisis the American citizen tends to back up his President.”<sup>94</sup> Still, the administration’s rhetoric was fairly mild during this affair, mainly because of its sense for America’s military weakness at the time.<sup>95</sup> The US government was not interested in taking advantage of the audience costs mechanism to make its threats credible, since the basic tactic of threat-making was not particularly appealing at this point.

The key question here, however, has to do with Soviet calculations in 1948. Was it the case that prior to the imposition of the blockade, the Soviets thought they could push the Western powers out of Berlin and pulled back only after the US government had taken a firm line in public, calculating that it would be hard for American leaders to give way, given the price they would have to pay at home for doing so? It turns out there is some evidence to the effect that the Soviets understood, before the blockade, that many Western officials were thinking in terms of an eventual withdrawal from the city, and it might well have come as a surprise to them that the Western reaction was as firm as it was.<sup>96</sup> But the American position in the crisis was not rock solid—the US government had not decided that if necessary it would go to war over the issue—and the Soviets probably had a good sense for what US policy was.<sup>97</sup> Given what they knew, the Soviets had no

---

<sup>94</sup> See Robert Divine, “The Cold War and the Election of 1948,” *Journal of American History* 59, no. 1 (June 1972): 93.

<sup>95</sup> See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 87, 90.

<sup>96</sup> Scherstjanoi, “Berlin-Blockade,” 499, summarizes some conclusions William Stivers reached in an unpublished paper dealing with this issue presented at a conference in Berlin, 1998.

<sup>97</sup> See Scherstjanoi, “Berlin-Blockade,” 500.

reason, for example, to think that the Western powers would use force if they made the airlift impossible by jamming the radars guiding the planes flying into the city. The fact that they did not go that route—that they did not even experiment with such tactics—suggests that their real goal was not to push the Western powers out of Berlin, but rather to pull them back into negotiations on Germany as a whole.

If, however, that was the case, the sorts of statements the Americans made about how the United States “would not be coerced” into abandoning Berlin would scarcely have led the Soviets to change their strategy. It was in fact America’s reluctance to withdraw from Berlin under Soviet pressure that gave the Russians the leverage they needed if they were to achieve their political goals. For that reason, if for no other, the audience costs mechanism was not a major factor in 1948.

### The Berlin and Cuban Crises (1958–1962)

As the Soviet Union developed its military power in the 1950s, many people in Western Europe wondered whether they could rely forever on the United States to protect them. Would America be willing to go to war for the sake of her NATO allies once US cities were vulnerable to Soviet attack? If, however, the Europeans were to become less dependent on the United States, and perhaps ultimately able to defend themselves, they needed to build nuclear forces of their own. There was no way Western Europe could stand up to a great nuclear power like the USSR armed only with conventional weapons.

This logic applied in particular to West Germany. In the 1950s, German chancellor Konrad Adenauer certainly thought his country needed nuclear weapons.<sup>98</sup> The American president at the time, Dwight Eisenhower, sympathized with those European concerns and did not even object to the idea of a nuclear-armed Federal Republic.<sup>99</sup> But a strong Germany—a Germany that would not be dependent on America for her security and would therefore not be locked into a status quo policy—was a real danger to the USSR. By provoking a Berlin crisis in November 1958, the Soviets would force the Western powers to take their concerns seriously. The Eisenhower government, however, was not going to capitulate on Berlin; people thus felt there was a certain risk of war. But the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, was never prepared to risk a real military showdown with the West, and when the US attitude became clear in 1959, he in effect shelved the crisis.<sup>100</sup> That,

<sup>98</sup> See Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 231–37. The discussion in this section is based largely on chapters seven and eight in that book.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 5 and esp. 261–62.

<sup>100</sup> See Oleg Troyanovsky, “The Making of Soviet Foreign Policy,” in *Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbott Gleason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 237.

however, was not the end of the problem. In 1961, after John Kennedy took over as president, Khrushchev again threatened to liquidate Western rights in Berlin, but again the Soviet leader was bluffing. Anatoly Dobrynin, who for years was to serve as Soviet ambassador in Washington, made this quite clear in his memoirs. “The possibility of a military confrontation,” he wrote, was “absolutely excluded from our plans.”<sup>101</sup>

The Americans, however, were worried and felt they had to prepare for a showdown. Kennedy gave an important televised speech to the nation on 25 July 1961, stressing America’s resolve and outlining various steps that would be taken to strengthen the country’s military position. Now it was Khrushchev’s turn to be alarmed. He had earlier ruled out the idea of sealing the border between the two parts of Berlin because he had wanted to keep the Berlin issue alive. Now, however, he authorized the construction of the Berlin Wall. But as the Americans saw it, this did not mean the USSR was willing to accept a divided Berlin, with the western part of the city under the military protection of the Western powers. Instead, they saw the building of the wall as an aggressive act that might foreshadow further aggressive acts; to avoid a confrontation, us leaders now pressed for negotiations, making it clear that they were willing to make major concessions relating, above all, to the status of the East German regime. In his July speech, the president said that America could not “negotiate with those who say ‘What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is negotiable,’” but, given that the Soviet position on Berlin was as rigid as ever, that was precisely what Kennedy was now proposing to do. The “audience” at home, however, did not seem to mind that shift in policy; the administration was certainly not raked over the coals in the press for having moderated its position.<sup>102</sup>

The American goal was to stabilize the status quo, not just in Berlin but in Europe as a whole. In the US plan, West Germany would remain non-nuclear. The Soviets would thus be getting the one thing they most wanted from the West. In exchange, the USSR would have to accept the status quo in Berlin. That, however, was something Khrushchev was not prepared to do. The fact that the Americans had gone so far so quickly showed how determined they were to avoid war. Maybe that fear of war could be exploited to draw out further concessions? So in late 1961 and through most of 1962 the Soviets were utterly intransigent in their talks with the Americans. The US attitude

---

<sup>101</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents* (1962–1986) (New York: Random House, 1995), 45.

<sup>102</sup> A *Washington Post* editorial of 11 October 1961 captured what seems to have been the prevailing view: “President Kennedy, in his TV report to the Nation last July, warned that ‘We cannot negotiate with those who say “what’s mine is mine, what’s yours is negotiable.”’ That is, nonetheless, precisely what Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko was saying in London Tuesday. . . . If the President now stood on his July position, he would be justified; but the search for some balancing adjustments and concessions in Berlin itself, or within the larger framework of a European settlement must go on, no matter how difficult and discouraging.”

then hardened. It was coming to seem that a showdown over Berlin was just a question of time. Khrushchev made it fairly clear that he would do nothing before the American mid-term elections in November but would then bring the crisis to a head. Kennedy, by the late summer of 1962, had thus come to accept a showdown as inevitable. Indeed, in his view, given the way the nuclear balance was shifting, the sooner the West had it out with the Soviets the better.<sup>103</sup>

The climax of the crisis, as it turned out, came not in Berlin but in Cuba. It was discovered that the Soviets were deploying missiles on the island, perhaps to improve their position in a showdown over Berlin. The Americans reacted by insisting in a very public way that the Soviets remove their missiles from Cuba. To give point to those demands, the island was blockaded, and US forces (especially the Strategic Air Command) were put on alert. For the Soviets, a real military confrontation was still totally out of the question. With a US invasion of Cuba imminent and with the Soviets being told that the “time of reckoning had arrived,” they agreed to settle the crisis on the terms the Americans proposed (which included a secret US promise to withdraw the Jupiter missiles from Turkey).<sup>104</sup> This decision marked the end not just of the Cuban missile crisis but also of the great Berlin crisis that had begun four years earlier.

What role did audience costs play in this story? For the Eisenhower period, it is hard to see it is hard to see how they played any role at all. US rhetoric at that time was relatively restrained. American policy, as Eisenhower saw it, needed to be calm and steady, and he in fact would have liked some kind of negotiated settlement.<sup>105</sup> He thus preferred quiet measures (which he knew Soviet intelligence would pick up) to overt threats, in large part because he thought they would be less alarming to the public. Insofar as the management of public opinion was concerned, Eisenhower’s goal was not to take such a tough line that fear of a hostile public reaction would prevent him from subsequently pursuing a more moderate policy. He was instead worried that taking too tough a line in public would scare people and thus actually prevent him from pursuing a sufficiently firm policy.<sup>106</sup> His aim, in other words, was not to limit his own freedom of action (by generating audience costs through tough public statements), but rather to maintain it (by pursuing a sober policy and cautiously guiding opinion at home).

---

<sup>103</sup> Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 325–51. For the point about the nuclear balance, see *ibid.*, 351, 353. On the point about postponing the crisis until after the elections, see also Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev’s Cold War* (New York: Norton, 2006), 458, 462.

<sup>104</sup> Quotation from Troyanovsky’s account, in William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), 575.

<sup>105</sup> See Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 194–95, 211–14; Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 256–63.

<sup>106</sup> See Eisenhower meeting with Dulles and other top officials, 29 January 1959, FRUS 1958–60, 8:303.

For the Kennedy period, however, things were not that simple, and a case can be made that the audience costs mechanism did play a certain role at that time. First of all, it is quite clear that some major presidential statements and speeches were important parts of the story in both 1961 and 1962. Weren't the Soviets bound to calculate that the us president, subject to strong right-wing pressure as it was, could not back down after having taken a very strong stand in those statements without paying a prohibitive price at home? After all, Kennedy himself knew that his room for maneuver was narrow. During the missile crisis in particular, us leaders felt that having made those statements they had to insist on a withdrawal of the missiles.<sup>107</sup> In taking that view, they were probably thinking mainly of what a failure to act would do to America's international reputation, but they clearly realized they would pay a price at home if they now softened their line.<sup>108</sup>

So isn't it plausible that the Soviets understood the situation—that they realized how limited Kennedy's freedom of action actually was in both 1961 and 1962? Certainly Soviet officials like Ambassador Dobrynin understood that it would be hard for Kennedy to withdraw from Berlin: a withdrawal, he reported to Moscow, would be seen as a sign of weakness, not just internationally but domestically as well.<sup>109</sup> And Khrushchev himself often took the line that Kennedy was too weak to resist pressure from more bellicose elements within the United States—too weak, perhaps, to pull back from the brink of war for fear that “he will be called a coward” at home.<sup>110</sup> Didn't this show that Khrushchev understood the pressures Kennedy had to deal with, pressures that might prevent him from pulling back once he had committed himself in public to a particular policy? Didn't the fact that Khrushchev made such a point of putting off the Berlin showdown until after the us elections show that he recognized the role domestic politics played in America and how it limited Kennedy's freedom of action, especially when elections were imminent (as they were in October 1962)?

But none of this actually proves that a desire to exploit the audience costs mechanism was a key factor on the American side or that Soviet awareness of the importance of audience costs played an important role in determining how the Berlin and Cuban crises ran their course. As one scholar points out with regard to one key set of public warnings, “The impact of

---

<sup>107</sup> See, especially, Kennedy's and McGeorge Bundy's comments, in meeting of Kennedy with his main advisors, 16 October 1962, quoted in Sheldon Stern, *Averting "The Final Failure": John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 80, 82. On one important set of statements (and their hand-tying effect), see Jeremy Pressman, “September Statements, October Missiles, November Elections: Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy Making, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Security Studies* 10, no. 3 (Spring 2001).

<sup>108</sup> See Kennedy's remarks in an NSC meeting, 20 October 1962, FRUS 1961–63, 11:135.

<sup>109</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 64.

<sup>110</sup> Khrushchev at meeting with Warsaw Pact leaders, 3–5 August 1961, quoted in Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 140.

domestic politics was more unintended than premeditated.”<sup>111</sup> The policy of going public might have had nothing to do with audience costs. The decision, for example, to give a major speech to the nation during the missile crisis could have been made for all sorts of reasons. Kennedy might have just felt he needed to explain what he was doing and why in order to head off criticism both at home and abroad and to mobilize support for his policy. If his goal in going public had been to burn his bridges in order to gain a bargaining advantage, then one would expect to find some evidence of that in the documents, which are particularly rich in this case. And yet that evidence is just not there, nor does one find any evidence of this sort in the documents relating to the Berlin crisis in 1961.

The validity of the audience costs theory, however, really depends in these cases on the sorts of calculations the Soviets made, and there are a number of problems with the argument that they understood that Kennedy’s ability to retreat was limited for domestic political reasons, and that this understanding played a key role in shaping their policy in these crises. First of all, Khrushchev’s argument that Kennedy was too weak to stand up to right-wing pressures at home is scarcely to be taken at face value. If the Soviet leader had really believed his own rhetoric, he would certainly have pursued a more cautious policy during this period. The proof, he argued, that Kennedy was weak was that he was unable to settle the crisis on Soviet terms—that he lacked “the authority and prestige to settle [the Berlin/Germany] issue correctly.”<sup>112</sup> But it is hard to believe that Khrushchev really felt Kennedy’s refusal to give way to Soviet threats was proof of weakness; if he did, one could scarcely argue he was being rational.

To be sure, the more sophisticated Soviet officials understood how domestic political factors influenced what the US president could do. Even the foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, warned that the deployment of missiles in Cuba, as Jonathan Haslam points out, “could cause a political explosion in Washington—of this he was ‘absolutely certain, and this had to be taken into account.’” But Khrushchev was not particularly interested in what people like Dobrynin and even Gromyko had to say. The American political situation was not taken into account in any serious way.<sup>113</sup>

This point has a direct bearing on the audience costs theory. The theory stresses the importance of new information about resolve that is revealed when statesmen go public in the course of a crisis. In the Cuban case, however, the relevant body of information had been available all along. The problem was that it had been ignored. In the case of the Berlin crisis in 1961,

<sup>111</sup> Pressman, “September Statements,” 86.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 188–89.

<sup>113</sup> See Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 143; Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 541–42; Troyanovsky, “Making of Soviet Foreign Policy,” 235–36; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 64, 79; Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, 201–2.

one cannot go quite that far. Kennedy's July speech obviously played a major role, but the tough line he took was but one element in a larger picture. The military measures that were taken, what the Soviets were learning through intelligence channels, and what was being said in private—all this fed into an assessment of how far the Americans were willing to go, and the same sort of thing was true during the Cuban missile crisis as well.<sup>114</sup> From Khrushchev's point of view, it was important that every scrap of information be taken into account. "You've got to take note of everything," he told a Soviet agent in September 1962, "—the tone, gestures, conversations. We in Moscow need to know everything, especially at a time like this."<sup>115</sup> All sorts of things had to be factored into the equation, but calculations about audience costs did not rank very high in that list.

So what conclusion is to be drawn from the discussion in this whole section of the great power crises won by democratic states? The basic finding is quite simple. There is little evidence that the audience costs mechanism played a "crucial" role in any of them. Indeed, it is hard to identify any case in which that mechanism played much of a role at all. There are all kinds of ways in which new information is generated in the course of a crisis, and that new information, for the reasons Fearon outlined, plays a fundamental role in determining how that crisis runs its course. Audience costs, however, were not a major factor in any of the crises examined here.

#### WHEN DEMOCRACIES LOSE

The audience costs mechanism was thus much weaker in practice than many scholars have assumed, but how is that finding to be explained? Why did audience costs not play a major role in any of the great power crises in which a democracy prevailed? By looking at the crises in which democratic powers were defeated—the Fashoda crisis (focusing now on the French side), the Rhineland crisis of 1936, and the Czech crisis of 1938—we can perhaps get some clues as to why this was so. Studying those cases (as Schultz noted) might not tell us much about how large audience costs are in general, but it might give us some sense for the sorts of things that determine how much of a price would actually be paid if a country suffered a diplomatic defeat and why that price in many cases might not be nearly as great as some theorists seem to think.

The Fashoda case is of particular interest in this context because one might have expected the French government's political weakness to give it something of a bargaining advantage—or at least to cancel out the bargaining

---

<sup>114</sup> On the role of intelligence, for 1961, see Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 373–74; for 1962, see Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, 209.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 556.

advantage the domestic political situation had given the British government. It was not just that the current French ministry might fall if it gave way during the crisis. The whole republican system was in danger because of the Dreyfus affair, which was also going on at that time. Would the British really want to trigger a military coup in France by taking too hard a line? With the stakes so high at home, did the French government have much room for maneuver? It seemed to the British ambassador in Paris that Delcassé's back was to the wall and for domestic political reasons simply could not withdraw from Fashoda. Salisbury, however, was unmoved. The British took naval measures that suggested war was imminent, and the French, despite their domestic political situation, felt they had no choice but to give way.<sup>116</sup>

The republic survived, but what happened to the French leaders responsible for the policy that had led to this dramatic diplomatic defeat? The historian Gabriel Hanotaux had served as foreign minister, almost without interruption, from 1894 to June 1898, and the Fashoda affair put an end to his political career.<sup>117</sup> But Hanotaux had scarcely been the driving force behind the policy. He had in fact at times opposed a forward policy in the Upper Nile, but with no political base of his own, he could easily be overruled.<sup>118</sup> Delcassé, on the other hand, had played a key role in launching the policy that led to the Marchand Mission and in early 1898 still championed that policy.<sup>119</sup> To be sure, he took a more moderate line after he became foreign minister in June 1898, but he was not forced to resign when the policy he had for years been so closely associated with collapsed in November. People, in fact, had to plead with him to stay in office, and he remained foreign minister until 1905.<sup>120</sup>

It is no wonder that people like Delcassé were not held accountable for the Fashoda *débâcle*. The policy that led to Fashoda had very broad support in parliament, even from the Socialists; in one key vote held at the end of 1896, only a handful of deputies were opposed.<sup>121</sup> If the political class as a whole was to blame, it was scarcely going to punish itself for what had happened, and so no audience costs would be incurred by those who were really responsible for the policy.

In the crises of the 1930s, somewhat different mechanisms came into play. The Western governments during that period had to deal with certain commitments they had made but did not wish to honor. On 6 March 1936,

<sup>116</sup> Roger Brown, in *Fashoda Reconsidered*, stresses the link between the domestic and international crisis. For the British ambassador's report, see *ibid.*, 99–100. For the fear of a coup, see *ibid.*, 105–6, 110; Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 374–75.

<sup>117</sup> See Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, "Hanotaux," 93; Michel, *Mission Marchand*, 224.

<sup>118</sup> See Brown, *Fashoda Reconsidered*, 53.

<sup>119</sup> See Christopher Andrew, *Théophile Delcassé and the Making of the Entente Cordiale: A Reappraisal of French Foreign Policy 1898–1905* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 41, 90, 91; Guillen, *L'Expansion*, 412, 418.

<sup>120</sup> See Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 353.

<sup>121</sup> See Michel, *Mission Marchand*, 57–58; Guillen, *L'Expansion*, 462; Sanderson, *Upper Nile*, 391.

Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland. The French prime minister announced on the radio the next day that his government was not prepared to allow "Strasbourg to be exposed to German cannon fire."<sup>122</sup> The French foreign minister had warned the previous month that France would not permit the Rhineland to be remilitarized.<sup>123</sup> The British for their part (in the 1925 Locarno treaty) had agreed to guarantee the demilitarized status of the Rhineland, and Foreign Secretary Eden told Parliament at the end of March that he was "not prepared to be the first British Foreign Secretary to go back on a British signature."<sup>124</sup> Yet for France, a unilateral use of force was utterly out of the question for military, financial, and domestic political reasons. The assumption was that to take action France would have to mobilize, but a frightened public was not prepared to risk war. Elections were imminent, and the voters, it seemed, would react to strong measures by voting for the anti-militarist left-wing parties. The "audience," in other words, would punish the government for following through with its threats, not for backing down from them.<sup>125</sup> The same basic point applies to Britain. For that country, the remilitarization of the Rhineland was simply not a fighting issue. Since practically no one in Britain thought that force should be used in 1936, the government paid no real domestic political price for failing to live up to its Locarno pledge.

In the Czech crisis of 1938, the story is less clear-cut. The French had an alliance with Czechoslovakia, and in early September their foreign minister announced that his government would "remain committed to the pacts it has entered into."<sup>126</sup> In March of that year British prime minister Neville Chamberlain publicly warned that if war broke out, "other countries, besides those which were parties to the original dispute, would almost immediately be involved"; and this was "especially true," he noted, "in the case of two countries like Britain and France."<sup>127</sup> The problem developed into a crisis in September. To head off what seemed to be an imminent German attack on Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain flew off to meet Hitler and came back with a plan to turn over to Germany those parts of Czechoslovakia in which most of the inhabitants were ethnically German. The French went along with the plan, and the Czechs were made to accept it. Chamberlain then

---

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat: The Collapse of French Diplomacy, 1932-1939* (New York: Enigma Books, 2004), 130.

<sup>123</sup> See Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "Les milieux gouvernementaux français en face du problème allemand en 1936," in Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Itinéraires: Idées, hommes et nations d'Occident* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1991), 315.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), 65.

<sup>125</sup> See Stephen Schuker's extraordinary article, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936," *French Historical Studies* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1986): esp. 316-17, 329. Note also Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat*, chap. 5, esp. 128-31.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat*, 280.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Parker, *Chamberlain*, 139.

returned to Germany, thinking that a settlement was at hand. But Hitler now insisted on more extreme terms: he demanded that specific areas on a map he displayed be turned over to Germany almost immediately. That was too much for most of Chamberlain's Cabinet colleagues, although Chamberlain himself was willing to accept the arrangement; the French, although deeply divided, were also prepared to face war over the issue.<sup>128</sup> An armed conflict seemed imminent, but then both sides drew back. A conference was held at Munich. Hitler made some minor concessions and war was avoided—not just a major European war, but also the localized war with Czechoslovakia Hitler had very much wanted.

We now think of the Munich agreement as a disaster for the Western powers, but at the time, Hitler felt that he himself had been defeated—cheated out of the war he had craved.<sup>129</sup> Did he back down to the extent he had because the Western governments had been able to generate audience costs? Certainly Chamberlain himself tried to make it clear to Hitler that he was under considerable pressure at home and that if the Führer wanted to keep such a conciliatory prime minister in power, he needed to be more accommodating.<sup>130</sup> It was not that Chamberlain had sought to generate audience costs by taking a strong stand in public. He in fact very much disliked public threats and was quite upset when the Foreign Office issued a strong public warning to Germany at the peak of the crisis.<sup>131</sup> That, however, did not prevent him from seeking to exploit the political situation as a way of getting Hitler to see reason. It does not seem, however, that this tactic had much of an effect. The domestic political situation in Britain is not cited in the historical sources as a key factor that led Hitler to pull back at the last minute, and it is hard to believe that a calculation about how public statements had locked the British government into a position from which it could not draw back played much of a role in this crisis.<sup>132</sup> If the domestic political situation played any role at all, it would have been because of substantive changes that had taken place in the country, not tactical “bridge-burning” moves: political opinion within the Cabinet, within Parliament, and within the country at large had shifted, and as a result, the British government was now less inclined to give way.

Chamberlain, however, was still strong enough in late 1938 to get his colleagues to accept the Munich agreement, but the détente with Germany

---

<sup>128</sup> See Parker, *Chamberlain*, 167–73; Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat*, 287–91; Anthony Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 217–18.

<sup>129</sup> See Richard Overy, “Germany and the Munich Crisis: A Mutilated Victory?” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 10, nos. 2/3 (1999).

<sup>130</sup> See Parker, *Chamberlain*, 167, 174, 186–87.

<sup>131</sup> See *ibid.*, 157, 174–75; Cockett, *Twilight of Truth*, 82.

<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Gerhard Weinberg, “Munich after 50 Years,” *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 171–72; Overy, “Germany and the Munich Crisis,” 205–10.

he had hoped for never materialized, and relations between Germany and the Western powers rapidly deteriorated. As far as the broader public was concerned, the key change took place in March 1939 when the Germans seized what was left of what was now called "Czecho-Slovakia." Germany was now taking over territories not inhabited mainly by Germans, and the appeasement policy was thoroughly discredited.

The Munich agreement had called upon the powers to guarantee the rump Czechoslovak state. A British minister, on Chamberlain's authority, announced in October 1938 that the government felt "under a moral obligation to Czechoslovakia to treat the guarantee as being now in force."<sup>133</sup> But now that the Germans had moved into Prague, no one thought this guarantee should be honored. The official justification for doing nothing was that the guarantee did not apply to the case at hand, since Czecho-Slovakia had succumbed to "moral pressure." The government did not pay a major political price for its failure to honor its commitment in this case, although some people were annoyed by the hypocritical excuse Chamberlain had given.<sup>134</sup> Its behavior in this episode was just a brushstroke in a larger picture: the public had turned against the Chamberlain policy as a whole, and his political position at home was not nearly as strong as it had been.

Chamberlain, however, was not forced to resign. How was he able to avoid paying the obvious price for the failure of his policy? The answer is quite simple. He never really changed his mind about the need for appeasement, but he pretended to pursue a tougher policy in order to remain prime minister. After the Germans moved into Prague, one scholar notes, he "was reduced to pursuing his policies by stealth. When, on 2 September, that became known, he came close to being turned out."<sup>135</sup> Even then, with the failure of his policy manifest, he remained in office.

French prime minister Edouard Daladier had also signed the Munich agreement, and he also remained in power until war broke out in September 1939, and indeed beyond. His political position, in fact, became stronger after Munich.<sup>136</sup> This is not too surprising, since the sort of policy Daladier pursued had broad public support. The simple fact that the French government was backing off from public threats could scarcely be held against it, given the profound wish of the country to avoid war. The Chamber of Deputies backed the Munich agreement by an overwhelming majority,

---

<sup>133</sup> See Sidney Aster, *1939: The Making of the Second World War* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973), 24.

<sup>134</sup> See Franklin Gannon, *The British Press and Germany, 1936-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 256-57.

<sup>135</sup> R.A.C. Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 263, and also 216, 223.

<sup>136</sup> See Yvon Lacaze, *L'opinion publique française et la crise de Munich* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1991), 609; Adamthwaite, *France*, 315.

although many deputies voted with a heavy heart.<sup>137</sup> Given the circumstances, Daladier could hardly be blamed for pursuing the policy he did.

So in these cases when democracies were defeated, the domestic political bill that leaders had to pay was not very high. To avoid misunderstanding, let me again stress the point that this does not mean that as a general rule audience costs would not be incurred if a government backs down in a crisis. There are many cases—the Cuban missile crisis, most obviously—where audience costs would have been substantial (although that fact does not in itself mean they played a major role in those episodes). The findings presented in this section relate to the audience costs argument in a rather different way. There is a certain tendency in the literature to treat audience costs as a kind of surtax: certain costs might be incurred for giving way in a crisis simply because of the intrinsic importance of the interests being sacrificed, but beyond that, an additional price would be paid because people feel that making threats and then backing down is worse than simply not contesting the issue in the first place. If that “surtax” varies at all, it is mainly because regime type differs: the effect is assumed to be much greater for democracies than for other sorts of regimes. What the cases discussed here suggest, however, is that the basic attitude of the “audience”—how hawkish or dovish it is—is a very important source of variation, as in fact a number of scholars have noted. Leaders might not be punished for backing down when the public believes that choice is correct. In those cases, there might be no “surtax” at all; indeed, the government might be punished politically if it did *not* give way.

On the other hand, regime type is less important than many scholars assume in determining how large the audience costs are. The Tsarist regime had to take audience costs into account during the Eastern Crisis in the 1870s, and this sort of factor also had a certain impact on German policy in the period from Agadir to World War I. Audience costs played a role in shaping Khrushchev’s policy in 1958, and indeed his “audience”—the rest of the Soviet leadership—made him pay the price for his failures when it removed him from power in 1964.<sup>138</sup> As Jessica Weeks writes in a recent article, the idea that because of their greater ability to exploit the audience costs mechanism “democracies have an advantage over autocracies in signaling their intentions” is “now axiomatic.” Weeks takes issue with that assumption, and the historical evidence supports her basic conclusion. That “axiom,” it turns out, is more problematic than many people think.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>137</sup> See Lacaze, *Crise de Munich*, 526.

<sup>138</sup> On 1958, see Troyanovsky, “Making of Soviet Foreign Policy,” 217. On 1964, see Paul Du Quenoy, “The Role of Foreign Affairs in the Fall of Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964,” *International History Review* 25, no. 2 (June 2003).

<sup>139</sup> Jessica Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization* 62 (Winter 2008): 35.

## THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

In an article written more than half a century ago, Thomas Schelling discussed the advantages of basing the study of strategy on the assumption that behavior was rational. It was not that of “all possible approaches,” he said, this was the one that stayed “closest to the truth.” The real advantage was that it gave a “grip on the subject that is peculiarly conducive to the development of theory.” But whether the theory that takes shape gives us any real “insight into actual behavior” was a matter for judgment: the results reached, he said, might “prove to be either a good approximation of reality or a caricature.”<sup>140</sup> The implication was that purely abstract theorizing is just a beginning—that one has to look at the empirical evidence to see whether a particular theory actually helps us understand how things work.

That, in fact, was what I tried to do in this article. My goal was to see whether the theory Fearon laid out in 1994, and which is still taken quite seriously by many scholars, holds up in the light of the historical evidence. The basic conclusion reached here was that the audience costs mechanism is not nearly as important as Fearon and many other scholars have assumed. That mechanism is supposed to play a crucial role in determining how crises, especially those involving democracies, run their course. It is hard, however, to point to a single great power crisis won by a democracy in which audience costs generated by public threats were an important factor. And yet those are the cases where one would presumably have the best chance of seeing the audience costs mechanism at work.

Why exactly does the audience cost mechanism count for so little in determining outcomes? The key historical finding here—that this mechanism does not play much of a role in determining how crises are resolved—suggests there must be something wrong with the Fearon theory. Perhaps some of the assumptions on which the theory was based were mistaken, or maybe it simply failed to take certain important factors into account. If so, maybe the historical analysis here can tell us something about which particular assumptions were problematic and which particular factors were not taken into account—that is, about why exactly the theory had gotten it wrong.

The idea that the Fearon theory is not perfect is by no means new. Over the years even scholars working within the rational choice tradition have pointed to a number of problems with that theory and have tried to remedy those problems by developing it in various ways. And very recently a handful of scholars have (as I have) reached the conclusion that the empirical evidence supporting audience costs theory is not particularly strong; a couple of them have tried to explain why the audience costs mechanism seems to

---

<sup>140</sup> *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 4.

play so slight a role in determining how crises run their course, questioning in the process some basic assumptions that lie at the heart of the theory.<sup>141</sup> In this section, I want to tackle that fundamental issue myself. In doing so, I will certainly be making points other scholars have made before; a new article by Jack Snyder and Erica Borghard is of particular interest in this context.<sup>142</sup> My aim here, however, is not to lay out a purely original argument, but rather to try to pull things together and deal with the question in as systematic a way as I can.

Why then does the audience costs mechanism play such a slight role in determining the way crises run their course? In part, it is because direct threat-making (as some theorists have in fact pointed out) is often not a particularly attractive strategy.<sup>143</sup> Too explicit a threat may backfire, by engaging the adversary's prestige (and provoking the adversary's own domestic audience) in too direct a way; even a successful threat of this sort, resulting in a public humiliation of the adversary, might have unpleasant long-term consequences. It often makes sense, therefore, to muddy the waters a bit and avoid direct threats; this is particularly true when political leaders want to avoid alarming their own publics, or third parties, or when they want to acquire a reputation for responsible, statesmanlike behavior, which might be of some value both at home and abroad. Hence threats are often couched in general language, and such threats are relatively easy to back off from without paying much of a political price at home. Thus it might have been "the policy of the United States," as President Truman proclaimed in his famous "Truman Doctrine" speech of March 1947, "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures," but the administration paid no real domestic political price when it did not lift a finger to prevent the subjugation of Czechoslovakia a year later. The "threat" was very general; it was not meant to be taken, and was not understood as, a blueprint for action.

Even when a state does commit itself in a relatively unambiguous way to a particular policy, backing off from such a policy might not have major political consequences at home, especially if the "audience" wants to avoid war and prefers a relatively moderate policy. If, on the other hand, the "audience" is hawkish, the government might still be able to moderate its position without paying a big political price at home. It can resort to scapegoating; it can talk tough to cover up its retreat; it can conceal (from the public) the

---

<sup>141</sup> See especially Jack Snyder and Erica Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011); Alexander Downes and Todd Sechser, "Democracies and the Credibility of Coercive Threats," forthcoming in *International Organization*.

<sup>142</sup> Snyder and Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats."

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, Shuhei Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy: Public versus Private Threats in Crisis Diplomacy," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (August 2007): 554.

more moderate aspects of its policy and misleadingly present itself as having taken a harder line than it actually had.

This, of course, does not mean that there is no way leaders can ever tie their hands by generating audience costs. There are certainly times when audience costs can be generated—when a government can take such a tough line that it could not pull back without paying a major political price at home. The point here is simply that leaders in practice are often reluctant to go this route. The reason is that “bridge-burning” is just not a very attractive tactic. Statesmen, generally speaking, do not like to limit their freedom of action. This is not to say tactics of that sort are never considered. One in fact does come across examples of “bridge-burning” from time to time. The decision to pursue that sort of policy, when it actually is made, *does* convey information, as the basic Fearon theory says it should: risk-taking is a form of costly signaling; a less resolute state would be less likely to run risks; and indeed the more of a disincentive there is to surrender control and thereby accept a certain risk of escalation, the more information is conveyed when a government actually chooses to do so. The problem, however, is that such tactics do not seem to play much of a role in international political life. Governments, of course, often try to guide and sometimes even whip up domestic political opinion, but normally this is with a view to maintaining their own freedom of action by mobilizing support for their policies and not to limiting it by generating audience costs.

Given all this, it is by no means obvious, from an adversary’s point of view, that the degree to which a government has “gone public” should be taken as the key measure of its seriousness in a crisis—that this is a key indicator that would allow the adversary to judge whether or not that government is bluffing. Indeed one has the impression that other factors—other sources of information generated during a crisis—play a much more important role. What is really crucial is the overall picture that takes shape in your mind about how far your adversary is prepared to go in the conflict. In forming that picture all sorts of things get taken into account: what the other power’s leaders are saying—not just in public but in private as well—among themselves, to your representatives, and to third parties; what you learn about public attitudes and the attitudes of the government’s political opponents, most obviously through the press; and what your adversary is actually doing, especially in the military sphere. You learn what you can through diplomatic channels and intelligence channels; you try to assess the political situation that your adversary’s government has to deal with, in part to get some sense for how much freedom of action its leaders have. You try to figure out how strong an interest the rival power has in what is at stake; you try to think about what you yourself would do if the situation were reversed. So all sorts of indicators are generated as a crisis runs its course, each a brushstroke in a larger picture, each important only in the context of all the others.

Many of these indicators can be understood in costly signaling terms. As a crisis deepens and the risk of war seems to increase, even a simple willingness to stay the course can be a costly signal; it is not something a country that is not prepared to run a serious risk of war would do. Escalatory actions—indeed anything that seems to bring the two sides closer to war—are even more significant, and this is true whether or not there is a risk of preemptive or accidental war. The basic problem is that the more deeply you commit yourself, the harder it is to pull back—and not just for domestic political reasons. Even adding in a concern for one's international reputation (as some scholars do) would not exhaust the range of possibilities. Humiliation might be undesirable in its own right: a country might end up paying a price in terms of how it feels about itself. It also seems clear empirically that the sheer momentum of a mounting crisis can constrain the behavior of even the most powerful dictators and cause them to do things they might not have planned on doing at the start of a crisis. German policy in 1939, for example, is to be understood in these terms.<sup>144</sup>

Military measures, in particular, can be revealing because they are an important part of that general picture. In 1962, military actions—like the blockade of Cuba, the preparations at that time for an invasion of the island, and the fact that the Strategic Air Command was put on a high level of alert—were important because the Soviets understood them in the context of what was being learned in all kinds of ways about how seriously the Americans took the issue and how far they were prepared to go. Those specific actions, to be sure, had certain direct effects. It was assumed, for example, there was a certain risk that the Soviets would respond to the US blockade of Cuba by imposing a counter-blockade around Berlin and that the Americans would then be faced with the problem of how far they were willing to go in a confrontation over the city. The Americans' willingness to face that Berlin problem (when they decided to blockade Cuba) could thus be taken as a measure of a more general willingness to risk war. The key thing here, however, is that when you saw all those military preparations, it was hard to think that the Americans were bluffing; and that would have been true whether the United States was a democracy or not. Those measures in themselves (and not just because they were, to a certain extent, being publicly observed) suggested that the US government was quite serious in this crisis.

What a government is saying in private can also play a key role in this context. One does not have to abandon the costly signaling idea to accept that point.<sup>145</sup> Mere talk, of course, is not necessarily to be taken at face value.

---

<sup>144</sup> See Raymond Sontag's remarkable article, "The Last Months of Peace, 1939," *Foreign Affairs* 35, no. 3 (April 1957): 507, 524.

<sup>145</sup> See Robert Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 2 (May 2010): esp. 349, n. 12.

Deception is obviously not unheard of in international politics; but, as many scholars have noted, it often has a price tag. An ability to make one's true intentions understood, and one's explanations believed, can be of enormous value. There is a real cost to debasing a currency that is almost indispensable in the day-to-day conduct of foreign policy.<sup>146</sup>

Beyond that, sometimes new information can be generated during a crisis that can be credible even if no cost is involved. Years ago Robert Jervis distinguished between what he called signals and indices. Signals were issued "mainly to influence the receiver's image of the sender" and were thus inherently suspect, whereas indices were "believed to be inextricably linked to the actor's capabilities or intentions" and so were thought to be "beyond the ability of the actor to control for the purpose of projecting a misleading image."<sup>147</sup> "Private messages the perceiver overhears or intercepts," including documents obtained through espionage, could be indices; mere talk—the "internal dialogue" within another state—could also function as an index if the listener feels that the government has no control over what is being revealed.<sup>148</sup> These are strong indicators of intent; they can yield new information that can influence the way a crisis runs its course; yet the costly signaling perspective does not allow for the role played by indicators of this sort.

Given all this, it is not hard to understand why the audience costs mechanism is not nearly as important in determining how crises get resolved as many theorists seem to assume. But perhaps the basic conclusion to be drawn here is methodological in nature. The bottom line here is not that theorizing is devoid of value. This is obviously not the case, and Fearon's contributions to the field, in particular, have been quite extraordinary. The basic problem is simply one of balance. It is very easy, when you are grappling with a problem on a purely abstract level, to get carried away with a particular idea and lose sight of all the reasons the particular effect you are focusing on might not count for as much in the real world as you might think—and this is true, whether you are working in the rational choice or in some other tradition. The way to control for that kind of problem is to analyze the theoretical issue you are concerned with in the light of the empirical, and especially the historical, evidence. Indeed, it is only by doing that kind of analysis that you can reach a judgment about the value a particular theory has. It is the only way to see whether a theory is just an interesting intellectual construct or whether it gives you any real insight into how things actually work.

---

<sup>146</sup> See especially Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 2, n. 18, 70–83.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19, 26.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19, 35.