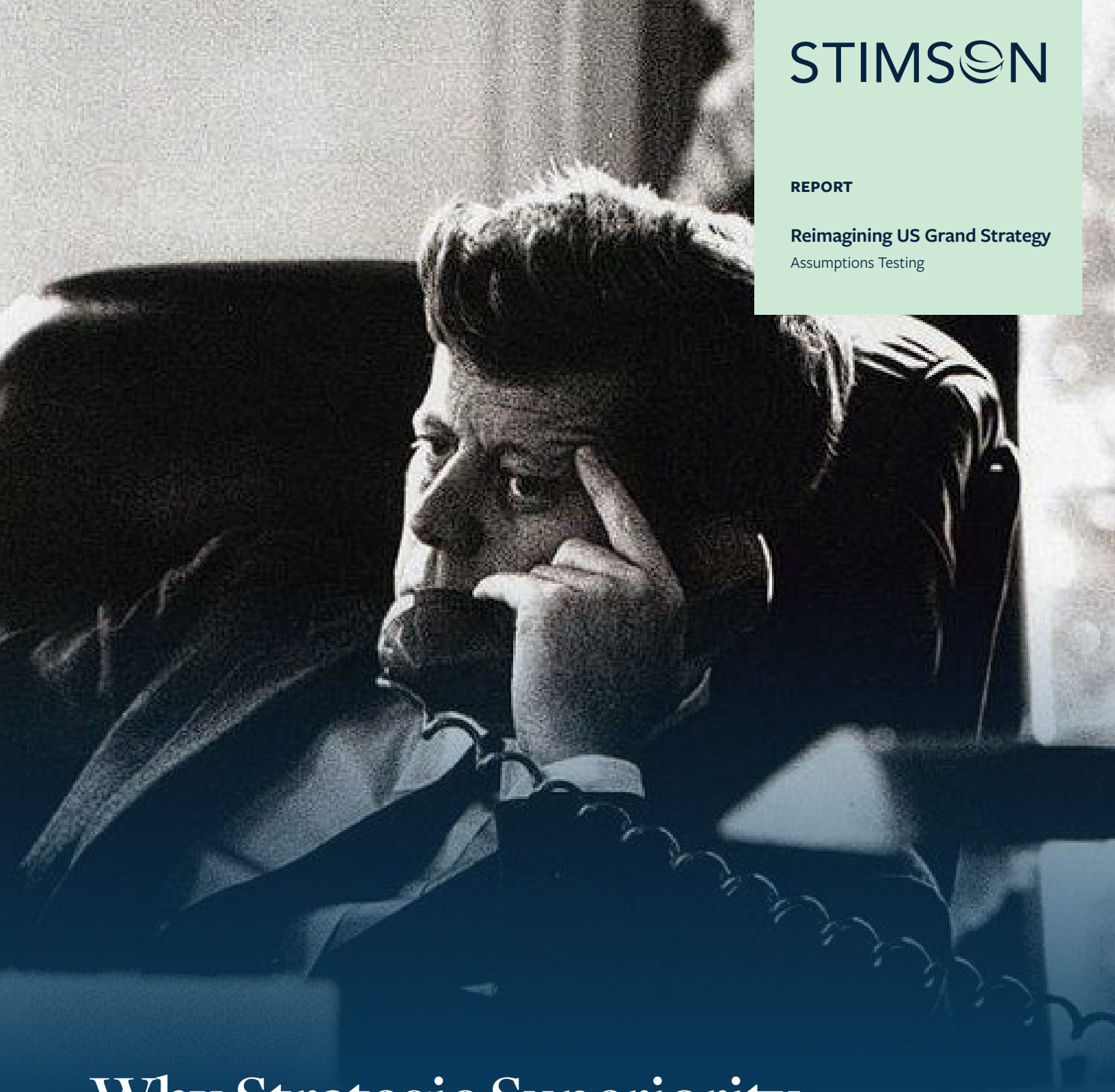

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REPORT

Reimagining US Grand Strategy

Assumptions Testing

Why Strategic Superiority (Still) Doesn't Matter

By Christopher Preble and Lucas Ruiz

April 2026

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Why Strategic Superiority (Still) Doesn't Matter

Nuclear Crises and the Failure of Theory

Examining and refuting arguments in support of nuclear superiority

By Christopher Preble and Lucas Ruiz

Amid growing global nuclear tensions, some theorists have argued that the United States should make a bid for nuclear superiority — that is, seeking a technologically or numerically superior arsenal of nuclear weapons in order to achieve a strategic advantage. In particular, they claim that nuclear superiority is necessary to compel other nuclear powers, such as China and Russia, to back down in a crisis, and they utilize interpretations of past events involving the threat of nuclear use to support their ideas. This paper examines the logic and evidence for the importance of nuclear superiority and finds it to be seriously flawed on both counts. The quest for nuclear superiority misunderstands the nature of nuclear crises, which are intensely personal, uncertain, and contextual, and overstates the role that nuclear weapons have played, or may play, in compelling other states' behavior.

Editor's Note

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Lucas Ruiz and Christopher Preble

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Executive Summary

At the moment of maximum danger during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. leader whose judgment mattered most reached a conclusion that decades of U.S. nuclear strategy have preferred to ignore — nuclear superiority is a fool's gambit. This paper takes that conclusion seriously.

The case for nuclear superiority rests on a conceptual confusion that its proponents have never adequately resolved. Deterrence and compellence belong to fundamentally different categories of statecraft — one oriented toward dissuasion, the other toward coercion — and the weapons, postures, and resolve required for each are not interchangeable. Superiority theory collapses this distinction, repurposing weapons designed to prevent catastrophe into instruments for extracting political concessions. This paper argues that this is not merely analytically imprecise. It is the source of a decades-long distortion in American strategic thinking, one with measurable consequences for force structure, arms control, and strategic stability.

Advocates for superiority do not rest their case on theory alone. They invoke history — the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969, the 1973 Arab-Israeli (Yom Kippur) War, and the Kargil Crisis — as empirical proof that nuclear advantage confers coercive leverage. This paper examines each case in turn, drawing on declassified documents, transcripts, and primary sources that superiority theorists have either neglected or selectively read. What the full record reveals is considerably more unsettling than the standard account suggests. The leaders who actually bore responsibility for nuclear decisions did not experience superiority as leverage. They

experienced it as irrelevant, at best, and as a source of dangerous pressure at worst. In at least one case, the crisis came within a single individual's judgment call of going nuclear — through a mechanism entirely beyond the control of any head of state, and entirely invisible to the theoretical framework that claims to explain these events. This points to a deeper problem: Superiority theory treats these singular events as interchangeable data points from which generalizable causal laws can be extracted, abstracting away the very personalities, miscalculations, and contingencies that determined their outcomes.

The policy implications are significant. Effective deterrence requires sufficiency — a survivable force capable of inflicting unacceptable retaliation regardless of what an adversary does first — not superiority. Beyond that threshold, additional capability does not enhance security; it signals offensive intent, invites countermeasures, and erodes the stability that deterrence is supposed to protect. The current administration's nuclear modernization agenda, its missile defense ambitions, and its abandonment of arms control are consistent with a bid for escalation dominance. If the historical record examined in this paper establishes anything, it is that no American president confronting the actual prospect of nuclear war has believed such dominance to be achievable — or safe. The gap between what superiority promises and what it delivers is not incidental; it is a failure of American nuclear orthodoxy. And it is past time for American scholars and strategists to reckon with it.

Introduction

For as long as nuclear weapons have existed, statesmen and strategists have debated whether possessing more of them — or better ones — confers meaningful advantages in a crisis. The question is not academic. Force structures, targeting doctrines, arms control decisions, and the allocation of vast national resources have all turned on the answer. A substantial body of scholarly literature has concluded that beyond a threshold of assured retaliation, additional nuclear capability purchases no additional security. Yet the contrary view — that nuclear superiority translates into coercive leverage, that the state with the larger or more sophisticated arsenal can credibly threaten escalation and thereby extract political concessions — has proven remarkably resilient, repeatedly escaping the academy to animate actual policy. This paper examines that view. It finds the theoretical foundations to be incoherent, the historical evidence marshaled in its support to be selectively deployed and often flatly contradicted by the primary record, and the policies it underwrites to be not merely wasteful but genuinely dangerous.

Premised upon a conception of nuclear weapons as a coercive tool, nuclear superiority adherents contend that the state possessing a superior arsenal in numerical and/or technological conditions — or a combination of these — can compel an adversary to take a specific action, or stop an ongoing action. In practice, nuclear superiority rationalizes a particular nuclear force posture designed to ensure the capacity — and hence the resolve — to fight and win a nuclear conflict by dominating every level of escalation.

This is not a strategy of deterrence.[1] Fundamentally, deterrence is the geopolitical art of dissuasion where the political leadership of one state attempts to discourage the leadership of another from taking a particular action. Typically, this takes the form of instilling fear — of overwhelming retaliation, for example — or doubt that the action will succeed. In the context of simple nuclear deterrence, the use of nuclear weapons is threatened as a retaliatory punishment in the event of an adversary's aggression.[2] Thus,

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[1] It is necessary here to clarify that the discussion of nuclear deterrence in this paper is exclusively focused on what some might call "simple" deterrence, that is the attempt to dissuade an adversary from attacking its people, territory, and military with nuclear weapons. Simple nuclear deterrence refers to deterring a nuclear attack on one's own homeland; this is a relatively straightforward proposition, since few doubt a state would retaliate for an attack aimed at its own destruction. Extended nuclear deterrence, by contrast, involves threatening nuclear use to protect allies or interests beyond one's own territory, as with the American "nuclear umbrella" over NATO, Japan, South Korea, and others. The credibility problem here is far more acute: Would the United States really trade Boston for Berlin, or Honolulu for Taipei? This gap between commitment and believability drove much of American Cold War nuclear strategy, from forward-deployed weapons to NATO's intentionally ambiguous flexible response doctrine, yet the fundamental tension has never been fully resolved. The murkiness that attends extended deterrence – where the line between deterring intervention and compelling acquiescence often blurs – does not afflict simple deterrence, and it is simple deterrence with which this paper is concerned.

[2] Some favor the threat of nuclear use even in the event of attacks not involving nuclear weapons, for example sole use vs. flexible response, but the wisdom of expanding the range of incidents warranting a nuclear response is hotly debated.

anticipated deterrent effectiveness is calculated according to the likely survivability of a state's strategic forces, and the capability of those surviving forces to strike what some assume to be an adversary's strategically valuable targets. Focusing on terminology may seem pedantic, yet establishing a shared understanding between two or more parties can be the difference between stability and instability, or between war and peace.

Semantics matter in international policy. Nuclear superiority, otherwise known as strategic superiority,[3] is a scholarly theory that has transcended the academy. The 2023 report released by the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, a bipartisan committee of 12 nuclear policy experts, demonstrates its influence. For example, according to the commission, "U.S. defense strategy to address the two-nuclear-peer threat [Russia and China's combined arsenals] requires a U.S. nuclear force that is either larger in size, different in composition, or both" to maintain its "traditional role [in]: deterrence of adversaries; assurance of Allies; achieving U.S. objectives should deterrence fail; and hedging against adverse events."[4] While vague on what would constitute a satisfactory nuclear force structure, the implication is that the United States would need a force capable of inflicting a comparable level of destruction on both Russia and China in a simultaneous conflict. A force designed for deterrence alone could fall short if deterrence should fail; more and different nuclear weapons are needed as a hedge against uncertainty.

Many advocates for nuclear expansion rationalize primacy on the belief that it will deliver favorable bargaining power in social, political, and economic disputes. By their logic, if the United States can achieve and maintain a technologically or numerically superior force, one that is capable of bypassing adversary defenses and neutralizing strategically valuable targets in Russia, China, or both, then it can prevail in a crisis, including by limiting the damage that the adversary can impose in response (i.e. damage limitation). An exquisite capability, one that would allow the United States to strike without fear of retaliation, might even allow it to win without fighting. Such proposals, however, assume the other nuclear powers will not take measures to avoid being caught in such a dilemma, and thus dismiss their policy's potential to stimulate arms races.

Nuclear superiority theorists attempt to prove their case by invoking a blinkered and self-serving interpretation of past nuclear crises. They omit key information that would

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[3] The terms "nuclear primacy" and "strategic superiority" will be used interchangeably and within different contexts to reflect the varied terminology used to characterize a state of "nuclear superiority" throughout the archival and public record.

[4] Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, Marshall S. Billingslea, Gloria C. Duffy, Rose E. Gottemoeller, Lisa E. Gordon-Hagerty, Rebeccah L. Heinrichs, John E. Hyten, Robert M. Scher, Matthew H. Kroenig, Franklin C. Miller, and Leonor A. Tomero, "America's Strategic Posture," Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (October 2023), p. 39, https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/A/Am/Americas%20Strategic%20Posture/Strategic-Posture-CommissionReport.pdf.

challenge their theory, including concessions made by the side possessing supposed nuclear superiority. And they over-extrapolate the impact of the nuclear balance on decision-making. Boiling the influence of nuclear weapons down to a science — calculated in numbers of warheads, or based on the weapons' destructive potential — ignores the intimately personal factors at play. Each individual leader's experience, and every crisis, is unique. Rather than citing sources that offer a window into a leader's thought processes and risk calculus during a nuclear crisis, nuclear primacists opt instead for simplistic and superficial renderings of past crises in which the nuclear balance is the determining factor.

To be sure, the quest for strategic superiority is not new. In one of its earliest articulations, the concept of American "atomic superiority" surfaced in the seminal Cold War militarization text NSC 68.[5] Soon after, concern about strategic inferiority manifested in the "missile gap" debates of the late 1950s and factored in John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign. Later, it was a key topic during Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, extending into his first term. And yet, both Kennedy and Reagan, upon reaching the Oval Office, experienced nuclear crises with the Soviet Union that were resolved through peaceful compromise. Both understood that reckless brinkmanship had no place under the shadow of mutually assured destruction. In his June 10, 1963, commencement address at American University, Kennedy urged Americans to rethink their Cold War biases that framed the "Free World" against the Soviet-led "Communist World":

> *"[W]e must re-examine our own attitude – as individuals and as a Nation…Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy – or of a collective death-wish for the world."*[6]

Just over 20 years later, Reagan had reached the same conclusion. In his State of the Union address on January 25, 1984, he addressed himself to the "people of the Soviet Union":

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[5] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, Volume I, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, eds. Neal H. Petersen, John P. Glennon, David W. Mabon, Ralph R. Goodwin, William Z. Slany, S. Everett Gleason & Frederick Aandahl (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1977), Document 85, Enclosure 2, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v01/d85.

[6] "Commencement Address at American University," JFK Speeches, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, June 10, 1963, https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610.

> *"[T]here is only one sane policy, for your country and mine, to preserve our civilization in this modern age: A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. The only value in our two nations possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used."*[7]

American leaders should heed such wisdom today. Instead, the Trump administration seems committed to following his predecessors' pursuit of nuclear superiority, including weapons intended for nuclear warfighting, not merely deterrence. The country's $1.7 trillion (and growing) nuclear modernization agenda, combined with Trump's "Golden Dome" missile defense initiative and the absence of any meaningful arms control efforts, threatens to reverse decades of comparatively decreasing nuclear risks. In order to avert a costly and unnecessary expansion of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and further exacerbation of global tensions, it is imperative to dispel the assumptions that nuclear superiority is achievable, safe, or logical.

To demonstrate the counterintuitive character of pursuing nuclear superiority, as promoted by certain nuclear scholar-strategists, the authors of this study will test the critical assumptions underpinning it using a multidisciplinary framework. We will start by extricating the rationale for nuclear superiority from concepts of deterrence. Then, using primary sources, we will explore the historical contours of some popular nuclear crises invoked by nuclear supremacists to present a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the role that nuclear weapons may or may not have had on key decision-makers. The paper concludes with implications for policy derived from this review of strategic theory and practice.

Superiority: At the Nexus of Literature & Policy

Nuclear superiority is a complex concept. It frequently appears in academic and policy discourse, albeit through varying, sometimes euphemistic, terminology.

For example, in 2006, the political scientists Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press argued that U.S. nuclear modernization had already achieved, or was on the verge of achieving, a condition of nuclear primacy. This was an observation, rather than a normative endorsement of that condition. In the *Foreign Affairs* exchange prompted by their article,

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[7] "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union - January 1984," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, January 25, 1984, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-state-union-january-1984.

they acknowledged the destabilizing implications of nuclear primacy, noting the risk that an adversary fearing a U.S. first strike might make rash moves that could precipitate exactly the conflict primacy was supposed to prevent.[8] By 2020, however, their position had shifted toward a more explicitly normative argument that nuclear competition is rational and that maintaining nuclear advantages serves U.S. strategic interests.[9] Expressing concern about perceived American nuclear vulnerability, experts and policymakers cast the expansion and transformation of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and adjacent technology as necessary in an environment of "great power competition," with "two near-peer rivals" and/or the "multiple nuclear challenger problem."[10]

Perhaps the most explicit contemporary endorsement of a theory of superiority is the monograph *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* by Matthew Kroenig. Published by Oxford University Press in 2018, Kroenig's work challenges — and takes its title from — Robert Jervis' path-breaking book *The Illogic of*

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[8] Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Spring 2006), pp. 7–44, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/end-mad-nuclear-dimension-us-primacy; "The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy," *Foreign Affairs*, March 1, 2006, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2006-03-01/rise-us-nuclear-primacy; and Peter C. W. Flory; Keith Payne; Pavel Podvig; Alexei Arbatov; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "Nuclear Exchange: Does Washington Really Have (or Want) Nuclear Primacy?" *Foreign Affairs*, September 1, 2006, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2006-09-01/nuclear-exchange-does-washington-really-have-or-want-nuclear.

[9] See Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). For the parallel argument by Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long that second-strike forces are more vulnerable than assumed and that counterforce competition is strategically rational, see Green, *The Revolution That Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Long and Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies,* Vol. 38, nos. 1–2 (2015), pp. 38–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.958150.

[10] For government and military sources see, Jim Garamone, "General Says Deterring Two 'Near Peer' Competitors Is Complex," U.S. Department of Defense, August 17, 2023, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3496656/general-says-deterring-two-near-peer-competitors-is-complex/; Vipin Narang, "'Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies': Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS," U.S. Department of Defense, August 1, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistant-secretary-of/; Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research, *China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Strategy*, Spring 2023, https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf. For civilian sources see, Rebeccah L. Heinrichs, Ryan Tully, Kyle Balzer & Matthew Costlow, "Relearning Escalation Dynamics to Win the New Cold War," Hudson Institute, September 20, 2024, https://www.hudson.org/defense-strategy/relearning-escalation-dynamics-win-new-cold-war-rebeccah-heinrichs; Greg Weaver, "The imperative of augmenting U.S. theater nuclear forces: An examination of alternatives," Atlantic Council, March 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-imperative-of-augmenting-US-theater-nuclear-forces.pdf; Greg Weaver and Amy Woolf, "Requirements for nuclear deterrence and arms control in a two-nuclear-peer environment," Atlantic Council, February 2, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/requirements-for-nuclear-deterrence-and-arms-control-in-a-two-peer-nuclear-peer-environment/; Keith B. Payne, "The Great Divide in U.S. Deterrence Thought," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer 2020), pp. 16–48, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26915276.

American Nuclear Strategy, published in 1984. Where Jervis saw contradictions and inconsistencies in U.S. nuclear strategy that were dangerously destabilizing, Kroenig argues that strategic superiority provides the United States with coercive leverage that is conducive to peace. Kroenig's arguments are grounded in "superiority-brinkmanship synthesis theory," a concept he spent nearly a decade developing.[11] It is therefore necessary to consider how he articulates his theory, specifically how he evaluates nuclear superiority, his explanation of leadership risk-tolerance and resolve, and how these factors together inform crisis bargaining.[12]

Kroenig advances his argument through a combination of mathematical modeling and the empirical analysis of case studies. As will be discussed below, his findings are flawed, incomplete, or misleading, and, thus, unconvincing. In fairness, this is the nature of scholarship; experts advance novel perspectives based on original research, and other experts come forward to challenge these claims. Some of these academic debates inform policy.

Indeed, U.S. nuclear force structure, targeting, and posture are subtly driven by impulses for superiority. Eric S. Edelman, the former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy; Franklin C. Miller, a former advisor to the first Trump administration on nuclear policy; Madelyn R. Creedon, the former Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA); and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sen. Roger Wicker have all called for U.S. nuclear expansion in numerical and/or technological terms without providing an estimate of what force size or composition would be sufficient.[13] Support for growing the U.S. nuclear arsenal derives from concern about America's presumed nuclear inferiority due to the "multiple nuclear challenger problem."[14] The framing of the U.S. arsenal's sufficiency as contingent upon an imprecise estimate of the material conditions of Russia and/or China's arsenal(s)

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[11] Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15. His earlier article, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," served as the testing ground for Kroenig's theory; "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1, Winter 2013, pp. 141-171, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000367.

[12] As the three categories through which Kroenig attempts to defend his theory, it is imperative to consider them in his framing to identify the underlying assumptions fueling theories of nuclear superiority. Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, p. 15.

[13] Eric Edelman and Franklin Miller, "President Trump, Don't Fall into Putin's Arms Control Trap," *National Review*, October 29, 2025, https://www.nationalreview.com/2025/10/president-trump-dont-fall-into-putins-arms-control-trap/; Edelman and Miller, "No New START"; Franklin Miller and Madelyn R. Creedon, "Deterring the Nuclear Dictators," *Foreign Affairs*, November 20, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/deterring-nuclear-dictators; United States Senate, Office of U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, "Senator Wicker Leads Armed Services Republicans in Nuclear, Space Posture Hearing," February 29, 2024, https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2024/2/senator-wicker-leads-armed-services-republicans-in-nuclear-space-posture-hearing.

[14] Narang, "Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies."

reveals how nuclear superiority pathologies have taken root in contemporary American strategic debates.[15]

The authors of this paper, by contrast, argue that the quest for superiority must be understood in more than numerical and technical terms. Although the intersection between scholarly literature and policy are often complex and difficult to discern, confidence in the notion of nuclear superiority is a driving force of U.S. nuclear modernization, which, in turn, threatens to accelerate strategic instability. The search for superiority undermines U.S. foreign policy and deterrence goals by reinforcing a focus on threats at the expense of constructive diplomatic engagement. It need not be this way. To encourage American strategists to reexamine the assumptions underpinning current trends in U.S. nuclear policy, we will begin by unpacking and challenging the flaws inherent in the theory of nuclear superiority.

Demystifying Nuclear Deterrence

It is critical to disentangle the coercive intent of nuclear superiority from the foundational criteria of strategic deterrence. This distinction cuts to the heart of our inquiry: To what extent does the balance of nuclear postures matter in shaping outcomes in international relations?

The honest answer is: far less than advocates of nuclear superiority assume.

Deterrence hinges on sufficiency, the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage in retaliation, regardless of what the adversary does first, not superiority. Once a state possesses a survivable second-strike capability, additional warheads do not purchase additional security. They purchase only the illusion of leverage.

Bernard Brodie recognized this at the dawn of the nuclear age. “The capacity to deter is usually confused with the capacity to win a war,” he cautioned in 1959, but “deterrence has always suggested something relative, not absolute.” He concluded that deterrence “does not depend on superiority.”[16] Nuclear deterrence should foster mutual restraint

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[15] See Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021). Colby, by arguing for the United States to achieve the capability to execute a “strategy of denial” in the Asia-Pacific region, implicitly justifies American nuclear superiority as a backstop for conventional deterrence in Asia. As the current Under Secretary of War (Defense) for Policy in the second Trump administration, Colby’s belief in nuclear superiority cannot be overlooked; his role as an architect of the 2026 National Defense Strategy and announcement before the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2026 that the administration has no intention of conducting a nuclear posture review underlines the potential gravity of his views on nuclear superiority.

[16] Bernard Brodie, “The Anatomy of Deterrence,” *World Politics*, Vol. 11, no. 2, January 1959, pp. 176-178, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009527.

and encourage diplomatic negotiations; a fixation on winning is likely to produce the opposite effect.

A clarification on terminology is necessary. Thomas Schelling famously treated deterrence and compellence as subspecies of coercion — two applications of the same logic, differing only in whether one sought to prevent action or compel it.[17] This paper rejects that framing. Deterrence belongs not to the genus of coercion but to the genus of dissuasion. It seeks to discourage, not to force; to maintain, not to alter; to preserve the status quo, not to overturn it. Deterrence operates in the negative: *do not attack, or suffer consequences*. Compellence operates in the positive: *do what we demand, or suffer consequences*. The first is achievable with modest forces because the consequences of nuclear retaliation are so catastrophic that even small probabilities concentrate the mind. The second is far more difficult — not because the weapons lack destructive power, but because the threat to initiate nuclear war over anything less than existential stakes strains credibility, and because compellent threats over non-existential issues are inherently escalatory, and more likely to provoke defiance and resentment than compliance. To be sure, some American policymakers throughout the nuclear age have sought to harness nuclear weapons for compellent purposes, and U.S. nuclear strategy bears the marks of this impulse. But this paper contends that the compellent temptation has been a destabilizing force from the beginning — corrupting American understanding of nuclear dynamics and making the pursuit of superiority for coercion appear rational when it is not.

Deterrence belongs not to the genus of coercion but to the genus of dissuasion. It seeks to discourage, not to force; to maintain, not to alter; to preserve the status quo, not to overturn it.

Deterrent threats are made credible by interests and achievable by capabilities. An attack on one's own territory, one that would claim the lives of one's own citizens, threatens a state's vital interests. Compellent threats, by contrast, are typically associated with objectives that fall short of vital interests for the state issuing the threat. Deterrence strategies should be directed toward maintaining strategic stability by focusing on vital interests. Only this can ensure that all parties realize that any nuclear exchange, regardless of magnitude, is a catastrophic error that no one will walk away from unscathed. The foundational error of nuclear superiority theory is the conflation of these categories: treating weapons designed for dissuasion as tools of compellence, and stressing capabilities over interests.

[17] Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 69-91.

We must also clarify that nuclear superiority is not itself a strategy. It is a material condition, a favorable asymmetry in the balance of forces, that advocates believe delivers a strategic advantage. The theory holds that the state possessing superiority can credibly threaten nuclear use because it would suffer proportionally less in an exchange, and that this translates into coercive leverage. The strategy is compellence; superiority is merely its supposed prerequisite. This distinction matters because it clarifies what is actually being tested when we examine historical cases. The question is not whether superiority "works" in some abstract sense, but whether the material condition of superiority enables successful compellent threats.

> **The foundational error of nuclear superiority theory is treating weapons designed for dissuasion as tools of compellence, and stressing capabilities over interests.**

Glenn H. Snyder developed the logic of deterrence further in 1960, articulating three different modes: "deterrence by punishment," "deterrence by denial," and "deterrence by incentive."[18] Where the first two, operating in the negative sense, are embodied by the "retaliation" and "warfighting" schools of thought respectively, the latter, operating in the positive, is largely synonymous with assurances – the often-overlooked complement to deterrence that makes restraint sustainable.[19] The impulse for nuclear superiority — weapons and systems that prioritize the capability to overwhelm, disrupt, or limit an adversary's ability to inflict damage through "disarming" first strikes — is often couched as a strategy conducive to "damage limitation" and "strengthened deterrence."[20] Such weapons and doctrine, their advocates say, are needed to maintain

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[18] Glenn H. Snyder, "Deterrence and Power," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 4, No. 2, June 1960, p. 163, https://www.jstor.org/stable/172650. It is important to note that Snyder did not coin the term "deterrence by incentive." Instead, he postulated the deterrent effect of "deterrence by reward" in which one party seeks to dissuade a party from taking a specific action by offering an incentive. However, as deterrence by reward presupposes the party to be deterred seeks concessions in the positive (concessions that are unilaterally favorable to the party being deterred) the authors of this paper have decided to frame it as "deterrence by incentive" to encapsulate a broader conception. Indeed, one can "deter by incentive" through diplomatically negotiating a mutually agreeable settlement that satisfies both parties, as was the case with the Cuban Missile Crisis, which will be discussed later in this study.

[19] Traditionally focused deterrence theorists, such as Brodie and Schelling, or scholars belonging to the "Security Dilemma" school of thought, such as Jervis or Jack L. Snyder, often implicitly overlooked or characterized adversary assurances as a mutually exclusive concept with deterrence in International Security literature. To his credit, in *The Strategy of Conflict*, Schelling wrote, "the threat of massive destruction may deter an enemy only if there is a corresponding implicit promise of non-destruction in the event he complies…" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1960), pp. 6-7. Some contemporary experts have moved away from their predecessors, recognizing how the concepts may be complementary and, indeed, codependent. See Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Varieties of Assurance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 35, number 3, 2012, pp. 375–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.643567; Stephen M. Saideman and Marie-Joëlle Zahar (eds), *Intra-State Conflict, Governments and Security: Dilemmas of Deterrence and Assurance* (London, England: Routledge, 2008).

[20] Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); and Brad Roberts, ed., *Counterforce in Contemporary U.S. Nuclear Strategy*, CGSR Occasional Paper (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, May 2025), especially Austin Long, "Damage Limitation in the 21st Century," pp. 66–

parity in a multi-peer environment. Yet proponents of nuclear superiority envision a world in which fighting and winning a nuclear war is not only possible but perhaps even likely, and should thus be prepared for.

Kroenig's superiority-brinkmanship synthesis theory systematizes this logic. According to his framework, "The quantitative nuclear balance between states is an important, if not the central, determinant of the expected cost of nuclear war." States with greater ability to degrade an adversary's strategic capabilities purportedly have an advantage in crisis bargaining: "an advantage over an adversary in the expected cost of nuclear war."[21] Recognizing the importance of how one measures such things, he allows that "there is meaningful variation in the expected cost of nuclear war." Nevertheless, he contends that "[e]ven if there was a time in the past when nuclear war among major powers meant Armageddon (which is at least doubtful), it is quite clear that we are not in that situation today."[22]

The theory contains a revealing internal contradiction. Despite Kroenig's contention that advantages in damage limitation abilities (offensive counterforce targeting) bestow favorable bargaining power, he emphasizes anticipated deaths — a metric typically associated with countervalue targeting, that is, attacks on population centers — as the most important determinant of resolve.[23] But counterforce targeting (destroying enemy weapons) and countervalue targeting (destroying population centers) represent fundamentally different strategic logics. One cannot simultaneously optimize for both.

Asymmetry in risk tolerance has purported strategic consequences. Under the impression they can inflict disproportionate costs on an adversary, nuclear-superior states are, theoretically, more willing to escalate in nuclear crises. If that state can escalate to a point beyond the level of its adversary's resolve — said otherwise, to dominate escalation — then the nuclear-superior state can conceivably prevail. Thus, Kroenig holds: "The more resolved state, which can be thought of as the state that is

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86, and Benjamin Bahney and Braden Soper, "The Soft Side of Superiority: Damage Limitation and Qualitative Advantage in Future U.S.-China Crises," pp. 234–244, https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-05/2025-0529-CGSR-Occasional-Paper-Counterforce-In-Contemporary-US-Nuclear-Strategy.pdf.

[21] Embracing a counterforce targeting framework, Kroenig explains away the importance of explosive yield saying, "even large-yield weapons cannot compensate for numbers because greater numbers of warheads can physically cover more targets." Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, p. 19.
[22] Ibid, pp. 16-18.
[23] On this point, Kroenig quotes then-Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown when he argued in the late 1960s that "even 25% casualties might not be enough for deterrence if U.S. casualties were disproportionately higher." Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, p. 17. [Kroenig is quoting Brown from comments he made at a Congressional hearing in 1968, which he misattributes to the 1970s: Harold Brown, "Preparedness Investigation Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services. Hearings on the Status of U.S. Strategic Power" (90th Congress, 2nd session, April 30, 1968), p. 168.]

willing to tolerate the greatest risk of nuclear war, will win as long as the crisis does not end in disaster."[24]

This runs counter to the core design of deterrence. Nuclear crises are not bargaining scenarios, and strategic deterrence does not seek the extraction of material or political concessions from the party being deterred. Rather, it seeks, through the credible threat of overwhelming retaliation, to dissuade an adversary from pursuing social, economic, political, or strategic goals that threaten the deterring state's vital interests. To dissuade does not require unilateral triumph; it merely requires ensuring the capacity to impose reciprocal suffering.

To be clear, we recognize that deterrence is, essentially, an unproven theory conceptualized by a group of political scientists and game theorists during the early days of the Cold War that has been adapted and extended ever since. As nuclear weapons have not been detonated as a tool of war since 1945, despite several close calls, it is reasonable to contemplate the role these weapons may have played in international relations. Confident claims that they have *deterred* a host of things that did not occur are necessarily speculative. Yet the fact that this technology has existed as a destructive tool of statecraft for more than 80 years, and has coincided with the absence of great power conflict, suggests a linkage worth taking seriously.[25]

CONVENTIONAL CRITIQUES

This paper is hardly the first to identify the illogic of nuclear superiority.[26] A substantial body of scholarship has demonstrated that the theory's foundations are weak at every

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[24] Ibid, pp. 22-26.

[25] This topic deserves significantly more attention within the subdisciplines of diplomatic, U.S., and international history in light of their methodological evolutions from the antiquated Orthodox-Revisionist-Post-Revisionist (or Neoorthodox, in the case of John L. Gaddis) historiographical debates of old.

[26] For a selection of sources, see Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 94, No. 4, Winter 1979-1980, pp. 617-633, https://doi.org/10.2307/2149629; Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Bruce G. Blair and Chen Yali, "The Fallacy of Nuclear Primacy," *China Security*, Autumn 2006, pp. 51-77, https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2021-02/Blair-and-Yali-2006b.pdf; James Lebovic, *The False Promise of Superiority: The United States and Nuclear Deterrence after the Cold War* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2023). The most comprehensive empirical treatment is Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), which demonstrates that nuclear-armed states have been less successful at compellence than non-nuclear states, finding that nuclear monopolists prevailed in only 16 percent of coercive attempts compared to 33 percent for states without nuclear weapons. See also their earlier article, Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail," International Organization, Vol. 67, no. 1 (2013), pp. 173-95, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000392. For contrasting views that accept the basic limits of nuclear coercion while questioning certain aspects of the nuclear revolution thesis, see Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age*

level of analysis — in how it measures the thing it claims matters, in what it assumes that thing can accomplish, and in the internal logic connecting the two.

The measurement problem is foundational. Superiority theorists typically treat warhead count as the operative variable: The state with more warheads is superior. But this metric "fails to take into consideration the sophistication of a nuclear arsenal, the nature of a nuclear posture, or the development of related systems which might matter for substantive superiority more than numbers alone."[27] Scholars have never reached consensus on which aspects of nuclear posture are most strategically significant, and raw numbers have consistently proven a poor proxy. More troublingly, research on asymmetric crises — precisely those in which one state's arsenal dwarfs another's — finds that numerical advantage either provides no coercive benefit or actively undermines it, because weaker adversaries characteristically show greater resolve when their survival is at stake. A nuclear buildup premised on numerical superiority may, under these conditions, backfire.[28]

Even granting a meaningful measure of superiority, the theory faces a second problem: Marginal differences in force size lose strategic significance once both sides can inflict catastrophic damage. Once a state suffers tens of nuclear detonations against major cities, "the differences in outcomes that are implied by differences in the size of the attacks are likely to be illusory." Standard damage models "almost certainly severely underestimate the impact of a large nuclear attack" by neglecting fire, fallout, and the probability of societal collapse — conditions under which survivors face "lives of misery, famine, and disease."[29] The coercive leverage supposedly derived from suffering

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(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). On the broader theoretical problems with nuclear coercion, see Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987); and Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[27] Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, "Review" in James Goldgeier, Charles Glaser, T. Negeen Pegahi, Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, and Matthew Kroenig, "Roundtable 10-25 on The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters," H-Diplo | ISSF Roundtable, Volume X, No. 25, March 29, 2019, pp. 16-22, https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-10-25.pdf. On the point that numbers of warheads are inadequate, see also David Logan, "The Nuclear Balance Is What States Make of It," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (Spring 2022), pp. 184–85, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00434.

[28] Lauren Sukin, "When Nuclear Superiority Isn't Superior: Revisiting the Nuclear Balance of Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 17, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/10/when-nuclear-superiority-isnt-superior-revisiting-the-nuclear-balance-of-power. See also Abby Fanlo and Lauren Sukin, "The Disadvantage of Nuclear Superiority," *Security Studies*, Vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 446-475, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2225779; and Lauren Sukin, Review of "The logic of American nuclear strategy: why strategic superiority matters: by Matthew Kroenig, Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 2018," *Global Change, Peace & Security*, Volume 32, No. 3, pp. 345–347, https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2020.1708299.

[29] Glaser, "Review," in H-Diplo | ISSF Roundtable, pp. 7, 8.

proportionally fewer casualties dissolves when the absolute scale of destruction makes meaningful political recovery impossible for either side. The deeper point is political rather than actuarial: The purpose of going to war is to preserve a certain kind of society, and a nuclear exchange that destroyed the social and democratic fabric of the United States would "destroy the objectives for which it was fought" — a conclusion that requires no special theoretical sophistication to reach.[30]

The third problem is internal to the theory's own logic. Superiority theory equates material capabilities with resolve: The state with the larger arsenal is presumed more willing to escalate because it expects to suffer proportionally less. But this conflation is self-defeating. If capabilities and resolve are identical, then when the nuclear balance is known, crises should not occur at all — each side would simply calculate who would win and concede accordingly. And when the balance is genuinely uncertain, it cannot shape decisions to back down or escalate, and therefore cannot determine outcomes. The theory eliminates the phenomenon it claims to explain.[31] This logical dead end is compounded by a methodological one: Superiority theory requires quantifying concepts like "victory" in nuclear crises when who won or lost is "subjective and debatable, or even beside the point," and the attempt to derive generalizable causal laws from a small number of singular historical events produces models that confirm their premises rather than test them.[32]

That these objections have been raised not only by academic critics but by military professionals — officers with operational experience who conclude that superiority-brinkmanship is "unwise for guiding U.S. nuclear strategy" and "falters both in theory and in practice"[33] — underscores how thoroughly the framework has failed on its own terms. And yet these critiques have not penetrated where they are most needed. Skepticism of nuclear superiority has not registered in the broader policy debate. Calls

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[30] Campbell Craig, Review of "The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters, By Matthew Kroenig, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018," Journal of Strategic Studies, Volume 45, No. 1, 2022, pp. 164, https://doi.org/10.10 80/01402390.2020.1798582.

[31] Todd S. Sechser, Review of "The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters. By Matthew Kroenig. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 280p. $31.95 Cloth." *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 17, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1266–67, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719003050. See also Sechser's earlier book with Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, op. cit., where they argued that nuclear weapons are not useful tools for coercive diplomacy.

[32] Craig, Review of 'The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy,' pp. 161-165.

[33] Daniel A. McGinnis-Welsh, Maj. (USAF), "Disentangling from Nuclear Superiority-Brinkmanship Theory: Combating a Legacy of Bootstrapping toward Armageddon," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, May 8, 2024, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3768365/disentangling-from-nuclear-superiority-brinkmanship-theory-combating-a-legacy-o/.

for increasing deployed warheads, expanding the arsenal, and developing weapons designed for escalation dominance have become orthodoxy. This paper challenges those claims to counteract their influence.

Past critiques share a common thread: the abstraction of historical events as interchangeable data points from which generalizable causal laws can be extracted. This is a categorical error. The Cuban Missile Crisis happened under specific circumstances that will never recur. The same is true of every nuclear crisis. History offers insight, not prediction; it illuminates the range of possible reactions under irreplicable conditions of uncertainty. To treat Kennedy's experience in October 1962 as an "observation" testing a hypothesis about nuclear coercion is to misunderstand what historical knowledge can provide. The section that follows does not attempt to "test" whether superiority "works." It seeks to reconstruct what decision-makers actually experienced, using the documentary record to recover the emotions, beliefs, miscalculations, and uncertainties that theory systematically obscures. The object is to emphasize and contextualize the importance of agency and contingency in shaping the world as it was.

Unpacking the Epistemological Confusion Surrounding Nuclear Crises

The case for nuclear superiority rests on historical interpretation. Nuclear supremacists do not argue from first principles alone; they claim that past nuclear crises validate their framework. The Cuban Missile Crisis, the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and the Kargil Crisis – these events, properly understood, supposedly demonstrate that nuclear-superior states prevail through superior resolve. The historical record, they insist, is on their side.

It is not. But demonstrating this requires more than marshaling counter-examples. It requires confronting a deeper problem: the epistemological flaws inherent in how the discipline of international security studies employs historical evidence.

There is a widespread tendency to treat historical crises as interchangeable "cases" that can be sorted into theoretical categories and mined for generalizable laws. This approach strips events of their context, flattens the contingencies and personalities that shaped them, and privileges outcomes over processes. It asks whether the nuclear-superior state "won" without asking what victory meant to the participants, if the outcome was actually caused by nuclear factors, whether the resolution owed more to

luck, miscalculation, or compromise than to the balance of forces, and, most importantly, whether it was necessary at all.[34]

The historian's task is different. It is to reconstruct events as they actually unfolded, to narrate the contours of contingency that shaped events and decisions as they occurred. To understand what nuclear weapons meant in crises requires attending to what decision-makers actually thought, felt, and feared, not what a theoretical framework predicts they should have thought.

Below, we examine four crises commonly invoked by nuclear primacists as evidence supporting their arguments for superiority. In each instance, close attention to primary sources reveals a gap between what superiority-brinkmanship theory predicts and what decision-makers actually experienced. Nuclear superiority could frighten adversaries. It could not compel them. And the pursuit of coercive leverage through nuclear advantage repeatedly generated exactly the crisis instability it was supposed to prevent.

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS (1962)

"What difference does it make?" President John F. Kennedy asked senior members of his administration on October 16, 1962, contemplating whether the United States could destroy Soviet nuclear-armed missiles before they launched. "They've got enough to blow us up now anyway."[35] This was not the reasoning of a leader confident in escalation dominance. It was the reasoning of a leader who understood that nuclear weapons had severed the traditional relationship between military advantage and political leverage. Once an adversary possessed even a modest capability to inflict catastrophic damage, the disproportion of forces became strategically meaningless. What mattered was the shared vulnerability, not the asymmetry of arsenals.

The standard account treats the crisis as a vindication of nuclear preponderance.[36] Yet the person best positioned to assess whether American superiority translated into

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[34] Francis J. Gavin, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons: A Review Essay," H-Diplo/ISSF Forum, no. 2 (June 2014), pp. 11–36, https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-2.pdf. While Gavin's critique challenged the quantitative turn in nuclear security studies on methodological grounds – arguing that large-N statistical approaches are ill-suited for understanding nuclear decision-making – this paper focuses on a different problem: the misuse of historical evidence even within case-study analysis. Kroenig's 2018 monograph, which postdates Gavin's essay, claims to ground its argument in historical cases, but does so in ways that distort the documentary record.

[35] John F. Kennedy, "Off the Record Meeting on Cuba," October 16, 1962, 6:30–7:55 p.m., in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, Volume XI, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, Document 21, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d21. See also Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 92.

[36] The international relations scholars Mark S. Bell and Julia Macdonald sought to dispute the orthodox coding of the Cuban Missile Crisis. See Bell and Macdonald, "How to Think About Nuclear Crises," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (February 2019), pp. 40-65, especially pp. 54-60, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/964810. For a critical review of their article and a response by the authors, see Brendan Rittenhouse Green, Austin Long, Mark S. Bell, and Julia

strategic confidence, the President of the United States in October 1962, the person who bore sole American responsibility for the decision to escalate, drew precisely the opposite conclusion according to the records of his deliberations.

Indeed, Kennedy's actual experience of the crisis reveals the irrelevance of nuclear superiority at the moment of decision. By any objective measure, American nuclear forces dwarfed those of the Soviet Union in October 1962.[37] The United States possessed a strategic triad capable of delivering thousands of warheads from intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles, and long-range bombers operating from forward bases encircling Soviet territory. The Soviets had no comparable capability. Yet Kennedy, confronting perhaps two dozen missiles in Cuba, felt no sense of security from this vast disproportion. The ExComm recordings, which Kennedy secretly made and which his advisers did not know existed, capture a president acutely aware that escalation dominance meant nothing if escalation itself was catastrophic.

Consider his reasoning on the question of trading the Jupiter missiles in Turkey for Soviet withdrawal from Cuba. Kennedy grasped immediately that the trade made strategic sense. "To any man at the United Nations, any other rational man," he told his advisers, "it will look like a very fair trade."[38] The Turkish missiles were obsolete; their removal had already been under consideration. Kennedy understood that insisting on their retention while demanding Soviet withdrawal would appear to the world as exactly what it was: a refusal to accept symmetry while claiming the right to asymmetry. The missiles in Turkey threatened Moscow just as the missiles in Cuba threatened Washington. Kennedy saw this clearly.

His advisers did not. McGeorge Bundy warned that any such deal would demolish confidence in American extended deterrence. "If we appear to be trading the defense of Turkey for the threat in Cuba," Bundy argued, allied faith in American security guarantees would evaporate. This was, he insisted, "the universal assessment of everyone in the government who's connected with alliance problems."[39] The logic was impeccable within its own premises: Credibility required resolve, resolve required

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Macdonald, "Contrasting Views on How to Code a Nuclear Crisis," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (August 2019), pp. 130-139, especially pp. 131-134, 137-138, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/965639.

[37] Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Status of World Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists, March 26, 2025, table: "Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Stockpiles, 1945-2025," https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/.

[38] John F. Kennedy, "Executive Committee Meeting of the National Security Council on the Cuban Missile Crisis," October 27, 1962, 10:00 a.m., in Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings of John F. Kennedy*, vol. 3, *The Great Crises* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Miller Center Presidential Recordings Program), https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/8030028. See also May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 489-492.

[39] McGeorge Bundy, in "Executive Committee Meeting of the National Security Council on the Cuban Missile Crisis," October 27, 1962, 10:00 a.m., in Naftali and Zelikow, eds., *Presidential Recordings of John F. Kennedy*, vol. 3, https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/8030028. See also May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 495-499.

refusing concessions, and refusing concessions required treating the Turkish missiles as non-negotiable.

> **By insisting that no one in his administration ever acknowledge the missile trade, Kennedy transformed a crisis resolved through reciprocal compromise into a usable legend of superior resolve — one that would distort American strategic culture for decades.**

Far from validating the logic of nuclear coercion, Kennedy's management of the crisis depended on *appearing* to reject concessions while secretly making them. The appearance of resolve was useful precisely because it masked the reality of accommodation. He dispatched his brother Robert to meet privately with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, authorizing him to offer precisely the trade that Bundy and others had deemed unthinkable. Kennedy thus exploited the very mythology his advisers advocated. He was, in this sense, the first and most consequential practitioner of what we might call performative superiority: publicly projecting coercive resolve while privately achieving deterrence by incentive. But the consequences of that exploitation extended far beyond October 1962. By insisting that no one in his administration ever acknowledge the missile trade, Kennedy transformed a crisis resolved through reciprocal compromise into a usable legend of superior resolve — one that would distort American strategic culture for decades.[40] The President of the United States, at the most dangerous moment of the Cold War, concluded that the considered judgment of his entire national security apparatus was wrong, and acted accordingly in secret.

This tells us something important about the psychology of nuclear crisis decision-making that nuclear supremacists routinely obscure. The ExComm transcripts reveal a president probing each proposal for hidden escalatory pathways, unsatisfied with

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[40] Key misconceptions have built up around the standoff in October 1962, sustained by secrecy and years of outright deception. Kennedy's insistence that no one in his administration ever admit that a deal had been made boosted the case for coercion, threats, and seeming intransigence, and undermined faith in negotiations and diplomacy as a vehicle for advancing U.S. national interests over many subsequent decades. Kennedy concealed the missile trade even from his own Vice President, Lyndon Johnson, who assumed the presidency following Kennedy's assassination, and carried out U.S. foreign policy believing the official, but inaccurate, story about how the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved. Kennedy's national security advisor McGeorge Bundy later admitted that hushing up the missile trade produced pernicious consequences: "We misled our colleagues, our countrymen, our successors, and our allies" into believing "that it had been enough to stand firm." Bundy, *Danger and Survival* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 432–433. For an argument that the missile crisis myth distorted U.S. foreign policy for fifty years by celebrating "threats and confrontation" and discouraging "realistic compromise," see Leslie H. Gelb, "The Myth That Screwed Up 50 Years of U.S. Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2012, https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/08/the-myth-that-screwed-up-50-years-of-u-s-foreign-policy/.

assurances, and acutely conscious that the stakes rendered even small probabilities of catastrophe unacceptable.

Kennedy's private reflections after the crisis confirmed this insight. He told Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara that "even what they had in Cuba alone," what they thought were some two dozen missiles, "would have been a substantial deterrent to me."[41] A substantial deterrent. Not the estimated 3,350 warheads in the Soviet strategic arsenal in 1962, but merely the missiles on the island.[42] The margin of overkill provided no margin of safety. The ability to destroy the Soviet Union many times over conferred no additional bargaining power when the Soviets could destroy even one American city in response.

Kennedy's actual behavior during the crisis – his resistance to military options, his willingness to make concessions his advisers deemed unthinkable, and his persistent focus on finding an exit that avoided escalation – reflected this understanding of nuclear reality. He grasped that superiority's supposed coercive leverage dissolved upon contact with the responsibilities of actual decision-making. The president who would bear the consequences of nuclear war did not experience American nuclear advantage as leverage; he experienced it as a trap, one that narrowed his options and amplified the catastrophic potential of every misstep. In short, Campbell Craig concludes, "During the tense days of 26-28 October, the fact that the U.S. had a larger arsenal mattered nothing to JFK."[43]

Khrushchev, even though he had initiated the crisis, had grave doubts, too. During the "last few days" of the crisis, writes Craig, the two leaders "began to worry that the showdown was on the verge of nuclear war, and at this point they scrambled to avoid it. Both offered more concessions than the other side demanded; both, when a deal seemed possible, moved quickly to secure it even in the face of political costs."[44] Kennedy's

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[41] John F. Kennedy, quoted in Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths versus Reality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 143. Stern's account draws on his extensive work with the ExComm recordings at the Kennedy Library.

[42] See Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Status of World Nuclear Forces," above. It is now understood that the Soviets actually had some "158 nuclear warheads of five types already in Cuba by the time the military blockade, or quarantine, was imposed" of which "only about 95-100 warheads were readily available for use." A large proportion of these, about 80, were land-attack cruise missiles which could only have been used in the event of an American invasion of Cuba. "[O]nly some six to eight SS-4 [MRBMs] had reached operational status, and IL-28 nuclear capable bombers were still in their crates." Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Nuclear Order of Battle, October and November 1962." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 68, no. 6 (2012), pp. 86-98. https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340212464364.

[43] Craig, Review of "The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy," p. 162.

[44] Ibid. To Craig's point, Khrushchev, in a handwritten note on a letter to Fidel Castro, whom he characterized as impulsive and dangerously pushing for the Soviets to initiate a nuclear war, articulated his rationale to peacefully negotiate an end to the crisis: "In a word, we have concluded this operation and the goal which was set has been achieved, that is, we wrung a statement from America that they will not invade and will restrain others from invading

experience in particular, however, demonstrates the psychological and strategic irrelevance of nuclear primacy at the moment of maximum danger, precisely when its advocates claim it matters most.

As noted above, this understanding of the crisis, grounded in what Kennedy actually said and did, has struggled to displace the mythology. This is because the voices who shaped the public record were not the voices who bore the weight of the decision. Secretary of State Dean Rusk's boast that the superpowers had gone "eyeball to eyeball" and the Soviets "blinked" became the authoritative interpretation, one that served Kennedy's political interests heading into the midterm elections and that aligned with what Americans *wanted to believe* about their nuclear arsenal. Khrushchev's subsequent fall from power reinforced the perception of unambiguous American victory. The secret understanding on the Turkish missiles remained concealed for decades, allowing the myth of total Soviet capitulation to harden into historical consensus. "Our nuclear preponderance was essential," Secretary of the U.S. Treasury C. Douglas Dillon, who participated in a number of ExComm meetings, concluded. "That's what made the Russians back off."[45]

Rusk and Dillon were not privy to information about the missile trade deal. Nor were they the president, who bore sole responsibility for American decision-making and the global repercussions. Rather, Kroenig seems to elevate these voices because they support his thesis, not because they reflect objective analysis of the available evidence.[46] Importantly, he does not conduct a search for evidence to the contrary, instead focusing on oral history. And while he argues that "[t]he more damning evidence for [superiority-brinkmanship synthesis theory] would have been if the topic of nuclear superiority had never even been broached," the presence of specific rhetoric does not, on its own, validate the degree of a concept's import, nor does its absence confirm the opposite.[47]

Cuba." "Notes of N.S. Khrushchev [on a Letter to Fidel Castro]", October 1962, Wilson Center Digital Archive, RGANI, f. 52, op. 1, d. 600, l. 8. Contributed by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300937.

[45] C. Douglas Dillon, quoted in Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 88; Original source: Dillon, quoted in James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Noonday, 1990), p. 153.

[46] Kroenig admits as much, "I look for evidence from both sides of 'Superiority talk'... Evidence of superiority talk in the empirical record will provide additional support for the central argument of this book." Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 83-84. In another instance, Kroenig quotes General Curtis LeMay, who claimed that U.S. officials were emboldened by U.S. nuclear superiority. This, Kroenig asserts, is a "smoking gun." But, as Campbell Craig notes acidly, Kroenig "does not mention such a statement by Kennedy himself. That is the true smoking gun." Craig, Review of "The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy," p. 162.

[47] Kroenig states, "Utterances made in the midst of the nuclear crisis, or shortly thereafter, likely provide better insight into how leaders were actually thinking at the time decisions were being made," with which we agree. However, he goes much too far in saying "But nearly all of the available statements denying the importance of the nuclear balance came

But even setting aside questions of presidential psychology and scholarly methodology, the triumphalist narrative founders on a more fundamental problem: The crisis nearly went nuclear through mechanisms entirely beyond Kennedy's control. Those who would draw on it as the ultimate example of successful nuclear brinkmanship, one that was only possible because the United States possessed clear and overwhelming nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, would be wise to consider the role that fortunate accidents and pure dumb luck played in thwarting Armageddon.

Put differently, the Cuban Missile Crisis may have been a case of successful nuclear coercion, sustained by the United States' decisive nuclear advantage. It is equally plausible, however, that Moscow's plan would have collapsed under its own weight. After all, the Soviet bid to level the strategic playing field was hardly a master stroke. Some have called it "one hell of a gamble."[48] But the dangerous nature of the operation reveals a range of faulty assumptions and flawed reasoning that raises serious questions about whether it ever could have succeeded.[49] So while hagiography and deception paint the picture of an unalloyed U.S. victory, facts from the archives show just how reckless the entire enterprise was from the beginning – and also how close, Kennedy's steady hand notwithstanding, the crisis came to going nuclear.

Take, for example, the case of Vasili Arkhipov, Chief of Staff of the 69th Soviet Submarine Brigade, who deployed during the crisis on board B-59, a Soviet submarine. When U.S. naval forces discovered the sub on October 27th, they deployed depth charges to force it to the surface. The B-59's commander, Valentine Savitsky, ordered the launch of the submarine's one nuclear-armed torpedo in response. He thought the war had started.

But Arkhipov, whose consent was required, refused to go along. As brigade commander, he was Savitsky's superior. He interpreted the depth charges as a signaling mechanism,

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well after the crisis had been resolved, sometimes decades later." It is difficult to quantify what he meant by "available statements," as there is a considerable volume of recorded deliberations during the Cuban Missile Crisis, known as the ExComm Tapes, which he does not directly engage with in this study, and which highlight a key flaw in Kroenig's reasoning: he implicitly and repeatedly asserts an equivalence between the importance of a committee member's perception and that of President Kennedy. The former bore considerably less psychological and emotional pressure than the latter in this situation, as it was ultimately Kennedy's decision making which could have initiated a nuclear conflict. Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 89-90.

[48] Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997).

[49] For newly declassified Soviet documents revealing the operational dysfunction of Khrushchev's scheme, and the importance of luck and compromise in resolving the crisis, see Sergey Radchenko and Vladislav Zubok, "Blundering on the Brink: The Secret History and Unlearned Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023), pp. 44-63, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/cuba/missile-crisis-secret-history-soviet-union-russia-ukraine-lessons?check_logged_in=1. The documents, declassified by the Russian Ministry of Defense in May 2022, show that Soviet military officers on reconnaissance in Cuba immediately recognized the missiles could not be concealed under the sparse palm trees, but this information never reached Khrushchev. The operation was plagued by incompatible electrical systems, missing maps, no interpreters, and camouflage netting colored for Russian foliage that stood out sharply against the Cuban landscape.

not an attack. The B-59's nuclear weapon remained in its torpedo tube. The incident was kept secret for many years but is now a stark reminder of how hard it is for policymakers to control nuclear use in a crisis. Once nuclear weapons are placed under the control of commanders in the field or at sea, the possibility for accidents or misperception increases dramatically. It is not hyperbole to call Arkhipov "The Man Who Saved the World," the title of a PBS program that told his story years after his death.[50] But would a different person, presented with the same set of facts, have decided differently? In some cases, the answer is almost certainly yes. And in the case of the B-59, it may have been simply good fortune that Arkhipov happened to be onboard. The B-59 was the flotilla flagship, but there were three other submarines in the brigade. Had Arkhipov not been there to countermand Savitsky's order, the weapon likely would have been used.[51]

To be fair, information about nuclear weapons is notoriously opaque, generally kept out of the public domain, and often shielded for many years or even decades. Assuming they are transparent about the limits of their epistemological or methodological abilities, it is forgivable for scholars to rely on histories that are later shown to be incomplete or inaccurate because of newly surfaced materials. However, it is not forgivable — and, indeed, malpractice — to omit inconvenient evidence. Those choosing to invoke history to write about policy must take special care to present the most holistic and accurate interpretation possible based on the broadest extent of the available evidence. Considering the unpredictable release or discovery of new sources and adoption of new interpretive techniques in the historical discipline that alter how one understands key events or trends, scholars should not expect to reach confident conclusions about the most important questions pertaining to nuclear weapons.[52]

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[50] For the primary source account of this episode, see Svetlana Savranskaya, ed., "The Underwater Cuban Missile Crisis at 60," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 808, October 3, 2022, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2022-10-03/soviet-submarines-nuclear-torpedoes-cuban-missile-crisis; For the documentary, see "The Man Who Saved the World," *Secrets of the Dead*, PBS, October 23, 2012, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/the-man-who-saved-the-world-about-this-episode/871/.

[51] The incident reveals a category of risk that superiority-brinkmanship theory cannot address: the gap between command authority and operational control. American nuclear preponderance was irrelevant to what happened aboard B-59.

[52] For a relevant critique from within the discipline of political science, see Mark S. Bell, "The Nuclear Taboo and the Inevitability of Uncertainty," *Security Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (April 2023), pp. 166-172, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2178966; and Bell, "The Russia-Ukraine War and Nuclear Weapons: Evaluating Familiar Insights," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (July 2024), pp. 494-508, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2024.2425379. The historian Francis Gavin has leveled similar critiques against political science broadly and nuclear security studies in particular in his 2014 H-Diplo/ISSF Forum article. Francis J. Gavin, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons: A Review Essay," H-Diplo/ISSF Forum, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 11-36, http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-2.pdf.

THE SINO-SOVIET BORDER CONFLICT (1969)

"What would the U.S. do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China's nuclear installations?"

The question came from Boris Davydov, a KGB officer operating under diplomatic cover at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, during a lunch conversation with a State Department analyst on August 18, 1969. Davydov elaborated: such a strike would eliminate the Chinese nuclear threat "for decades" and so weaken the "Mao clique" that "dissident senior officers and Party cadres could gain ascendancy in Peking." Davydov "insisted that a strike against the nuclear facilities would not affect the U.S. and there was nothing to fear from this; furthermore, he believed that this would not cause the Chinese to attack the Soviet Union because they would fear a more massive Soviet attack in retaliation and because Mao's position would be weakened by this blow."[53] The diplomatic probe was extraordinary — a nuclear superpower openly soliciting American collaboration in a first strike against a fellow nuclear-armed state. Henry Kissinger, despite not being a central figure in this episode, was disturbed by Davydov's query. In a handwritten note on a draft memorandum for Richard Nixon, Kissinger opined that the "Soviets would not ask such questions lightly."[54] In this sense, it was also, as subsequent events would reveal, part of a broader Soviet campaign of nuclear coercion that would test the limits of what superiority could actually achieve.

The Sino-Soviet split had been building for years. By the mid-1960s, ideological tensions had given way to genuine strategic rivalry; the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 especially alarmed Beijing. The Brezhnev Doctrine, which asserted Moscow's right to intervene militarily wherever it perceived threats to the stability of existing socialist governments, raised obvious questions about its applicability to China.[55] Mao Zedong concluded that a demonstration of resolve was necessary to deter

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[53] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969–1976, Volume XXXIV, National Security Policy, 1969–1972, ed. M. Todd Bennett, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2011), Document 63, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v34/d63.

[54] Memorandum from John Holdridge and Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry Kissinger, "The US Role in Soviet Maneuvering Against Peking," September 12, 1969, in Burr, "Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," Document 20, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.20.pdf. This document should be reviewed in relation to the preceding document in the collection where Secretary of State William Rogers downplayed the significance of the Davydov incident, estimating the odds of a Russian strike at less than "fifty-fifty." See Memorandum for the President from Secretary of State William Rogers, "The Possibility of a Soviet Strike Against Chinese Nuclear Facilities," 10 September 1969, in Burr, "Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," Document 19, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.19.pdf.

[55] On the Brezhnev Doctrine's impact on Chinese threat perception, see Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History,* Vol. 1, no. 1 (2000), pp. 21-52, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Sino-Soviet-Border-Clash-of-1969%3A-From-Zhenbao-Kuisong/4c5b23a3f911189275466f63081a18b85cb0514e?utm_source=direct_link; Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, 2010), pp. 19-23.

Soviet aggression. On March 2, 1969, Chinese troops ambushed Soviet border guards on Zhenbao Island in the Ussuri River, killing 31 Soviet personnel.[56]

Beijing intended the attack as a warning. Moscow interpreted it as an act of predation. Fighting erupted again on March 15, and over the following months, the conflict spread along the 2,600-mile border. By June, clashes had reached Xinjiang, two thousand miles from where the crisis began. On August 13, Soviet forces killed 28 Chinese soldiers at Tielieketi.

The Soviets combined this military escalation with an ambitious campaign of nuclear intimidation. They broadcast threats in Mandarin via radio into China. They communicated their purported intentions to diplomats from numerous countries. And, as Davydov's probe revealed, they approached foreign governments directly to gauge reactions to a potential first strike on Chinese nuclear facilities.[57] On August 12, six days before the Davydov inquiry, an interagency group of U.S. intelligence services, led by the CIA, released a national intelligence estimate which assessed "it is reasonable to ask whether a major Sino-Soviet war could break out in the near future. The potential for such a war clearly exists. Moreover, the Soviets have reasons, chiefly the emerging Chinese nuclear threat to the USSR, to argue that the most propitious time for an attack is soon."[58] Allen S. Whiting, a leading China scholar who had served at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, broadly agreed when he briefed Kissinger at the Western White House (La Casa Pacifica in California). Whiting warned of massive Soviet deployments that "spelled early offensive action against the PRC, such as an attack against nuclear facilities."[59]

Political leaders in Beijing shared similar concerns. While accompanying President Nixon on his tour of Asia in early August 1969, Kissinger spoke with Pakistani Air Marshall Nur Khan. During their discussion, Khan relayed information from his recent meeting with Zhou Enlai who emphasized that China "feared Soviets might try preemptive attack on China," warning that "if this happened, [the] Chinese knew they

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[56] Gerson, *Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, pp. 23-27. The Soviet Foreign Ministry publicly reported 31 casualties in its March 7, 1969 statement. See Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 66, no. 4 (December 1972), pp. 1175-1202, https://doi.org/10.2307/1957173.

[57] On the Soviet diplomatic campaign and nuclear threats, see William Burr, ed., "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969: U.S. Reactions and Diplomatic Maneuvers," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 49, June 12, 2001, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/. Burr notes that the Soviets "use[d] covert military threats to coerce Beijing into entering diplomatic negotiations."

[58] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969–1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969–October 1970, ed. Erin R. Mahan (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006), Document 73, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v12/d73.

[59] Letter from Allen S. Whiting to Henry Kissinger, August 16, 1969, enclosed report "Sino-Soviet Hostilities and Implications for U.S. Policy," National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, box 839, China. See also Burr, "Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," Document 9, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.9.pdf.

would be vastly outweighed in technology and materiel, but were prepared to respond in [a] war that would 'know no boundaries'," signifying their rejection of Soviet coercive tactics, despite full awareness of the unfavorable nuclear disparity.[60] Zhou's sentiments aligned with a broader trend noticed by China analysts in the State Department who were "struck by frequency with which [the Chinese had been putting out] feelers [to improve relations] accompanied by the new and more urgent expressions of concern that the Soviets may be about to take military action against China."[61] Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms's August 27th public statement that the Soviets had been approaching foreign governments about their reactions to a nuclear strike on China could not have eased Chinese concerns. Zhou agreed to bilateral talks with the Soviets and met with Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin at the Beijing airport on September 11th.[62]

Taken together, this suggests that nuclear matters were an area of mutual concern for the parties, yet there is little evidence to suggest it was the determinant in Chinese decision-making. Indeed, in his ensuing letter to Kosygin on September 18th, Zhou characterized the nuclear threat as secondary to Beijing's broader desire to avoid a general war. In his letter, he appealed to Kosygin that certain preconditions be met for constructive diplomacy to take place: "I. The two sides agree that until the border dispute is settled, the status quo of the border should be strictly maintained…; II. The two sides agree to avoid armed conflict." As a caveat to the second point, he urged that "The two sides promise that the armed forces of each side, including nuclear forces, will not attack and open fire on the other side."[63]

Chinese fears should not be conflated with supposed acquiescence. Nor can we extrapolate generalized conclusions about a strategically inferior state's behavior in these crises, as nuclear primacists would have us believe. Behavior is inherently contingent. Superiority-brinkmanship is conditioned upon the presupposition that state behavior follows patterns that can be predicted, yet Chinese responses varied as the result of specific circumstances and personalities.

The Chinese were intent on not being coerced into a disadvantageous deal by Soviet nuclear threats. Even as Beijing agreed to negotiate, it conducted two nuclear tests in late September, demonstrating that it possessed the capacity for retaliation even under

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[60] Available in Burr, "Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," Document 8, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.8.pdf.
[61] Burr, "Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," Document 13, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.13.pdf.
[62] "Information about A.N. Kosygin's Conversation with Zhou Enlai on 11 September 1969," Wilson Center Digital Archive, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/information-about-kosygins-conversation-zhou-enlai-11-september-1969.
[63] "Letter, Zhou Enlai to Alexei Kosygin," September 18, 1969, Wilson Center Digital Archive, *Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan* (Selected Works of Zhou Enlai on Diplomacy) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990), pp. 462-464. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110475.

Soviet pressure.[64] This perception of resolve tracks with other senior Chinese officials such as Huang Yongsheng, then-Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, who emphasized similar points to a group of Albanian politicians. "The possibility" of war "is not ruled out … but such a decision could cost [the Soviets] dearly." Huang continued, "we are also preparing to withstand a surprise attack by the Soviets against our nuclear bases, or from the ground, or an immediate attack in both directions… Whatever kind of bombing or attack the Soviets carry out against our country, we will consider this a war… we will immediately take initiative."[65] By mid-October, Beijing had grown so alarmed about an imminent Soviet attack that senior leaders, including Mao, fled the capital. On October 18th, China placed its nuclear forces on full alert, the first and only time in its history it has done so.[66]

The crisis eventually subsided. Border negotiations began in late October and continued, inconclusively, for over a decade. The territorial disputes were not definitively resolved until after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

Nevertheless, Matthew Kroenig treats the circumstances in 1969 as vindication of nuclear superiority. "Throughout the crisis," he writes, "The Soviet Union was more willing to engage in risk-taking behavior, responding with conventional force along the border, issuing a series of escalating nuclear threats, and turning the crisis into an explicit game of nuclear brinkmanship." China, he continues, "backed down in the face of what was perceived to be the credible threat of Soviet nuclear attack." This, in his telling, was "a rare case of successful nuclear compellence."[67]

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[64] China conducted two nuclear tests in September 1969: an underground test on September 23 (approximately 25 kilotons, China's first underground test) and a thermonuclear device on September 29 (approximately 3 megatons). The government announced the first test on October 4, 1969. See Robert S. Norris, Andrew S. Burrows, and Richard W. Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook, Volume V: British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), Appendix A; Thomas B. Cochran, William M. Arkin, and Milton M. Hoenig, *Nuclear Weapons Databook, Volume I: U.S. Nuclear Forces and Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1984). On the timing of these tests as signals of deterrent capability amid Soviet threats, see Gerson, *Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, pp. 52–53.

[65] "Notes Kept during the Verbal Report given to the First Secretary of the CC of the PLA, Comrade Enver Hoxha, on 19 September 1969, by Comrade Rita Marko," September 19, 1969, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (Central State Archives, Tirana, Albania), Fondi 14/AP, Marrëdhëniet me Partinë Komuniste të Kinës, V. 1969, Dos. 9, Fl. 11-43. Contributed by Joseph Torigian and translated by Elidor Mëhilli, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300037.

[66] Gerson, *Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, pp. 46-48. Caitlin Talmadge notes that placing nuclear forces on alert "increased the risk of an unauthorized or accidental launch." See Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security,* vol. 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 83-84, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00274.

[67] Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 95, 98–99. Gerson similarly characterizes the case as "a rare case of successful nuclear compellence" (*Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, p. 46), though he offers important caveats about the limits of that success.

But what exactly did Soviet superiority achieve?

Moscow did not extract concessions from Beijing. It did not impose penalties on the clear aggressor. It did not alter the territorial status quo. The border talks that followed produced no settlement for more than two decades. Indeed, China's behavior after agreeing to negotiate suggests something more complex than simple capitulation.[68]

The deeper problem with Kroenig's interpretation is that it conflates Beijing's fear of nuclear attack with its submission to Soviet demands. These are not the same thing. China agreed to talks, something it had resisted, but it did so without conceding anything substantive. Moreover, it bogged down the Russians in more than two decades of negotiations — hardly an achievement worth celebrating. As Zhou Enlai explained to Romanian Prime Minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer on the same day he met with Kosygin, "There are many, very many, too many problems, which would take not three hours to discuss but three months."[69] China was prepared to talk. It was not prepared to yield.

Moreover, even the decision to negotiate cannot be attributed straightforwardly to Soviet nuclear superiority. As Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark notes, "The credibility of the Soviet attack threat… ultimately caused the Chinese to back down, not their inherent inferiority."[70] The critical shift in Beijing's threat perception came not from Moscow's direct intimidation but from Washington's public confirmation of Soviet overtures. It was Helms's August 27th statement that convinced Chinese leaders the threat was real.[71] In other words, Soviet nuclear superiority was not, by itself, sufficient to make Chinese leaders take the threat seriously. Third-party confirmation was required.

What, then, restrained Soviet ambitions? Part of the answer lies in China's asymmetric deterrent. The Soviets possessed overwhelming nuclear superiority, but China possessed something Moscow feared: a massive conventional army and a doctrine of protracted people's war. Senior Soviet military officers worried that even a successful counterforce strike would not be sufficient to coerce the Chinese. Nikolai Ogarkov, later chief of the Soviet General Staff, argued that a nuclear attack "would inevitably mean

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[68] Hyun-Binn Cho, "Nuclear Coercion, Crisis Bargaining, and the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969," *Security Studies,* vol. 30, no. 4 (2021), pp. 550-577, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1976820.
[69] "Note of Conversation between Ion Gheorghe Maurer and Zhou Enlai on 11 September 1969," Romanian National Central Historical Archives, published in *Relatiile Romano-Chineze, 1880–1974*, ed. Ioan Romulus Budura (Bucharest, 2005), pp. 943–959, available at Wilson Center Digital Archive, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/note-conversation-between-ion-gheorge-maurer-and-zhou-enlai-11-september-1969.
[70] Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark in *H-Diplo | ISSF Roundtable*, p. 18.
[71] Gerson, *Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, pp. 40–41: "Beijing's perception of the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats changed when Chinese leaders learned that Moscow had been approaching foreign governments."

world war" because a few nuclear weapons would "hardly annihilate" a country the size of China, which would "fight unrelentingly" in response.[72]

This points to a fundamental limitation of nuclear superiority that believers in supposed coercive power cannot accommodate. The Soviets were the superior nuclear power. They were willing to threaten first use. They communicated those threats through multiple channels. And yet they could not translate their advantage into meaningful political gains; not because they lacked resolve, but because China's capacity for conventional resistance imposed costs that made escalation unattractive regardless of the nuclear balance. Superiority did not empower Moscow. It confronted Moscow with a choice between accepting a stalemate and escalating a war whose costs would vastly exceed any conceivable benefits.

The 1969 crisis also reveals the dangers that superiority-brinkmanship dynamics can unleash, dangers that operate independently of rational calculation at the top. Beijing's October alert placed rudimentary nuclear forces in a heightened state of readiness, increasing the risk of unauthorized or accidental launch.[73] Chinese leaders, convinced a Soviet strike was imminent, interpreted normal events, including the scheduled arrival of a Soviet negotiating delegation, as potential cover for attack.[74] Fear and paranoia, not strategic calculation, drove these responses. And the paranoia was itself a product of the coercive campaign: Moscow's nuclear threats, intended to compel Chinese compliance, instead produced crisis instability that neither side could fully control. Superiority-driven coercion increases the risk of exactly the kind of uncontrolled escalation that superiority is supposed to prevent. The tool defeats its own purpose.

Superiority-driven coercion increases the risk of exactly the kind of uncontrolled escalation that superiority is supposed to prevent. The tool defeats its own purpose.

The Sino-Soviet border conflict does not demonstrate the coercive utility of nuclear superiority. It demonstrates its limits. A superpower with overwhelming nuclear advantage confronted not just an inferior nuclear state, but a nascent one. Even though China *initiated* the crisis, the Soviets issued explicit coercive nuclear threats yet came away with nothing more than a restoration of the *status quo ante*, which one can hardly argue is an example of Soviet success. The superior power certainly frightened its

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[72] Gerson, *Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, p. 53, citing Soviet military deliberations.
[73] Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear?", pp. 83–84.
[74] Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear?", p. 83: "Once, when Moscow sent representatives to talks in Beijing, China suspected that the plane transporting the delegation was in fact carrying nuclear weapons."

adversary. It did not, however, compel the Chinese to do anything they were not already inclined to do.

THE LIMITS OF THEORY: CASES WITHOUT CONTEXT

Two additional cases are routinely invoked to support the logic of nuclear superiority: the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the 1999 Kargil crisis. Neither withstands scrutiny. The first misidentifies the relevant actors; the second lacks the archival foundation necessary for reliable assessment. But even with the appropriate actors in positions of authority and open archives, reducing these unique events to data points for theory-testing misrepresents, and perverts, what historical knowledge can provide.

The Arab-Israeli Crisis: The Wrong Actors, The Wrong Dynamics

Kroenig classifies the Yom Kippur War and its aftermath as a strategic win for the United States, enabled by a nearly two-to-one advantage in nuclear warheads and a "qualitative edge in the accuracy and reliability of delivery vehicles." "In the 1973 nuclear alert," he concludes, "The United States achieved its major goal of deterring Soviet intervention in the Middle East. Washington also succeeded in persuading Israel to promptly implement the cease fire with Egypt and come to the negotiating table."[75]

The problem is that this was not primarily a US-Soviet confrontation. The belligerents were Israel, Egypt, and Syria. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad both suspected Israel possessed nuclear weapons yet launched their offensive anyway in October 1973.[76] They were not deterred by Israeli nuclear capabilities, nor by Israel's demonstrated conventional superiority. The element of surprise gave them temporary advantages, but these evaporated within days, once Israeli lines stabilized.

Israeli nuclear weapons did not prevent the war. Nor were they decisive in determining its outcome. After the conflict, Sadat reportedly told Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Yigael Yadin that Egypt had not advanced to the Sinai passes because "you have nuclear weapons. Haven't you heard?"[77] But this single retrospective comment, if accurate, suggests only that Israeli nuclear weapons may have deterred deeper Egyptian

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[75] Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, p. 102.
[76] Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 273-298; Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and its Cold War Deals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 97-124.
[77] Avner Cohen and William Burr, "Israel Crosses the Threshold," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists vol. 62, no. 3 (2006), pp. 22-30; "Then Sadat Told the Israeli Minister: 'You Have Nuclear Arms. Haven't You Heard?'" Haaretz, September 30, 2021.

penetration at a moment when Egyptian forces were collapsing on other fronts. This is not evidence of nuclear superiority enabling strategic coercion.

The US-Soviet dimension was even more peripheral. The CIA reported detecting Soviet nuclear weapons being sent to Egypt, prompting the brief move to DEFCON 3. The Soviets denied this, and subsequent research has concluded the reports were erroneous.[78] Moscow may have briefly considered intervention to prevent complete Arab defeat, but both superpowers had sufficient conventional and diplomatic interests to explain their behavior without reference to the nuclear balance. The Soviets were not going to risk direct confrontation with the United States over Syria and Egypt. Nuclear superiority was irrelevant to these calculations.

Moreover, the Brezhnev Doctrine itself undermines the notion that Moscow would have employed nuclear weapons in this context. The doctrine, articulated in 1968 to justify Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, explicitly limited intervention to socialist states within the Soviet bloc where "socialist rule" was threatened by internal or external forces hostile to communism.[79] Egypt and Syria were non-aligned nations that maintained relationships with Moscow but operated well outside the Warsaw Pact framework. Leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), including Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sadat's predecessor, had criticized Soviet interventionism following the invasion of Czechoslovakia, viewing the Brezhnev Doctrine's "fraternal assistance" as a pretext for great-power dominance.[80] Soviet ideologists drew sharp distinctions between "socialist countries" and those bearing the label of "socialist orientation," a category that, while including Syria, did not carry the same obligations or justifications for military intervention.[81] The idea that Moscow would risk nuclear war to defend states outside its doctrinal sphere of protection strains credulity.

What we observe instead is two superpowers managing a regional conflict between their clients through conventional diplomatic channels. No evidence suggests U.S. nuclear

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[78] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969–1976, Volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, ed. Nina J. Noring (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2011), Document 294, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v25/d294. On the erroneous nature of these reports, see "The Alert," Arms Control Association, October 2013, https://armscontrolcenter.org/yom-kippur-war/.

[79] "Sovereignty and the International Obligations of Socialist Countries," *Pravda*, September 26, 1968; For the relevant excerpt of Leonid Brezhnev's speech where he first articulated the logic of the Brezhnev Doctrine, see Leonid Brezhnev, "'Speech at the Fifth Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party,' November 13, 1968," Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, August 1997, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1968brezhnev.asp;

[80] On NAM criticism of the Brezhnev Doctrine, see Robert Legvold, "The Soviet Union and the Other Superpower: Soviet Policy Toward the United States," in *Soviet Foreign Policy in a Changing World*, eds. Robbin F. Laird and Erik P. Hoffmann (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1986), pp. 675-711.

[81] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1977–1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan, ed. David Zierler (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2018), Document 222, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v12/d222. This document analyzes Soviet ideological distinctions between "socialist countries" and those of "socialist orientation," noting that Syria fell into the latter category.

superiority enabled Washington to extract concessions from Moscow. The deeper problem, however, is the assumption that a singular historical episode can validate generalizable claims about nuclear coercion.

The Kargil Crisis: Insufficient Evidence and Double Standards

In mid-1999, Pakistani forces infiltrated across the Line of Control into Indian-administered Kashmir. India eventually expelled them through conventional military operations, aided by international diplomatic pressure that uniformly condemned Pakistan's incursion. To what extent did the nuclear balance shape these events? The available record is insufficient to allow us to assess this claim with confidence. Much of the relevant material from both Indian and Pakistani archives remain classified.

But even complete documentation would not resolve the fundamental problem: Kargil happened once, under specific circumstances that will never recur. Further still, neither India nor Pakistan reliably knew who had the numerical or technical advantage during the crisis. As General V.P. Malik, India's then-Chief of Army Staff, later wrote, "Kargil was a limited conventional war under the nuclear shadow where space below the threshold was available, but it had to be exploited carefully."[82] Unlike the Cuban Missile Crisis or Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, where declassified documents allow us to reconstruct decision-making with considerable precision, the Kargil crisis occurred recently enough that we are limited primarily to public statements, media reporting, and retrospective accounts, none of which can be considered definitive.

Consider Kroenig's treatment of oral histories from the Cuban Missile Crisis. While the former Kennedy administration officials Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, George W. Ball, Roswell L. Gilpatric, Theodore Sorensen, and McGeorge Bundy later denied that nuclear superiority drove their decisions in a 1982 essay for *Time*, Kroenig dismissed these accounts on the grounds that "statements of Cuban Missile Crisis veterans denying the importance of nuclear superiority years later can… be questioned because these statements were motivated at least in part by partisan politics and an effort to shape contemporary debates." In particular, Kroenig accused "These former Democratic administration officials [of employing] this argument in 1982 as part of a broader effort to criticize Republican President Ronald Reagan's plans for a defense build up." He does not hold C. Douglas Dillon, the sole Republican official in Kennedy's administration, to the same standard.[83]

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[82] V.P. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory* (New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2006), p. 343.
[83] Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 88-90. For the *Time* essay see, Dean Rusk et. al., "The Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Time*, September 27, 1982, https://time.com/archive/6859647/essay-the-lessons-of-the-cuban-missile-crisis/.

The evidentiary standard applied here is inconsistent in ways that undermine the entire analytical enterprise. McNamara and Bundy are dismissed as unreliable despite having participated in a crisis that generated thousands of pages of contemporaneous documentation — meeting transcripts, intelligence assessments, memoranda — against which their recollections can be cross-checked. Yet former Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes and National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra, who have made claims supporting nuclear superiority, are treated as credible.[84] If American officials cannot be trusted despite access to contemporaneous records, on what basis should we trust Indian officials' retrospective accounts when we cannot verify them against classified archives? The standard applied to American officials — that political motivations render retrospective testimony unreliable — is precisely the standard that should govern the Kargil evidence.

Even if we accept this evidence on its own terms with a healthy dose of charity, what it actually shows is not nuclear superiority determining outcomes but nuclear anxiety constraining options on both sides. India fought carefully, not boldly. Pakistan withdrew under American diplomatic pressure after its conventional position collapsed and international opinion turned decisively against Islamabad.[85] These are the outcomes of a limited conventional war conducted under mutual nuclear shadow — which is precisely how General Malik described it. That shadow fell on both sides equally. It did not confer coercive advantage on the state with the marginally larger or more sophisticated arsenal; it imposed caution on everyone.

More fundamentally, the Kargil crisis illustrates the ceiling of what historical case studies can responsibly establish. Even if we possessed complete archives from both Islamabad and New Delhi, we would be examining a singular event shaped by specific personalities, specific miscalculations, and specific geopolitical circumstances that will never recur in precisely the same configuration. This is not a case from which generalizable laws of nuclear coercion can be extracted.

IMPLICATIONS

These problems expose something deeper than methodological carelessness. They reveal the impoverishment of a scholarly enterprise that treats historical crises as

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[84] Kroenig claims that neither "had anything to gain by appealing to Indian strategic superiority." It should be noted that Kroenig, consistently, misspells George Fernandes's last name as "Fernandez," but is nevertheless referring to the same individual. Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, p. 110.

[85] Bruce Riedel, "American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House," Policy Paper Series 2002 (Philadelphia: Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, 2002); Peter R. Lavoy, ed., *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

interchangeable “cases” to be sorted into theoretical categories. The ambition driving superiority-brinkmanship theory — the desire to derive predictive causal models from a handful of unique historical episodes — exceeds what historical knowledge can honestly provide.

The Cuban Missile Crisis happened once. The Sino-Soviet confrontation happened once. Kargil happened once. These are not experiments whose results can be replicated under controlled conditions. They are singular events shaped by specific cultures, specific personalities, specific historical circumstances that will never recur in precisely the same configuration. To treat them as interchangeable data points, extracting lessons that predict how future leaders will behave in future crises, mistakes what historical knowledge can and cannot provide. History offers understanding, not prediction. It does not yield the generalizable causal laws.

When we return to the documentary record, the meeting transcripts, the intelligence assessments, the private communications, we find human beings grappling with impossible choices under conditions of profound uncertainty. What we do not find is evidence that nuclear superiority conferred the coercive advantages that its advocates assert. Nuclear-superior powers could frighten their adversaries. They could not compel them.

In Memoriam: Superiority-Brinkmanship Synthesis Theory

There is a deeper problem with nuclear superiority that transcends flawed historical interpretation. The framework assumes a model of crisis decision-making that bears no resemblance to how crises actually unfold, or how individuals actually think.

Superiority-brinkmanship theory imagines nuclear confrontations as strategic chess matches played by rational actors at the apex of command, each calculating costs and benefits, each escalating or conceding based on assessments of the nuclear balance. This is a fantasy. Crises are not governed solely by heads of state consulting force ratios. They are shaped by exhausted submarine commanders operating on incomplete information, by intelligence failures and miscommunication, by bureaucratic momentum and domestic political constraints — in other words, fear, fatigue, and the fog of near-war.

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political constraints — in other words, fear, fatigue, and the fog of near-war.

Advocates for nuclear superiority like to believe that decision-makers have complete control over how their orders are executed, and dismiss the role of chance, both good luck and bad. But the Soviet submarine captain Savitsky neither knew nor cared that the United States had nuclear "superiority"; he believed his ship to be under attack, and was prepared to take all necessary measures to defend himself. His superior Arkhipov's refusal to concur was not a product of strategic calculation about the nuclear balance. It was a judgment call made by a man, under conditions impossible to replicate, who happened to interpret depth charges differently than his captain did. Had Arkhipov been assigned to a different submarine, had he been less confident in himself, had he been a radical cold warrior, the Cuban Missile Crisis might have ended very differently, and no amount of American nuclear superiority would have mattered.

Put differently, nuclear brinkmanship imagines a decision-making process devoid of emotion, and completely insulated from chance, misperception, or unintended consequences. It is the stuff of war games, computer simulations, and fairy tales, not real life.

The historian's task, by contrast, is to understand events as they actually unfolded, including the emotions, miscalculations, and uncertainties that shaped decisions in real time. Kennedy did not experience October 1962 as a case testing superiority-brinkmanship synthesis theory. He experienced it as a terrifying confrontation in which he might inadvertently destroy civilization. Zhou Enlai did not consult theoretical frameworks when deciding how to respond to Soviet nuclear threats; he weighed specific dangers against specific Chinese interests in a specific historical moment. Fernandes and Mishra were not conducting experiments in coercive diplomacy; they were managing a crisis whose outcome was radically uncertain.

A certain peculiarity still remains: If nuclear superiority does not improve national security, why did American policymakers pursue it so relentlessly? One explanation, developed by Alexandre Debs, draws on the political economy of visible policy choices under uncertainty. When the effectiveness of nuclear policies is difficult to assess, given the small number of crises and their complex dynamics, policymakers face strong incentives to hew closely to accepted standards of optimal policy. Pursuing superiority became the marker of competent nuclear management, a signal to allies and domestic

audiences that leaders were taking security seriously. The policy persisted not because it worked, but because deviating from it would have appeared incompetent.[86]

This is not an abstract methodological complaint. Nuclear superiority-brinksmanship theory informs U.S. nuclear policy. It provides intellectual legitimacy for force structures designed to achieve bargaining advantage in a crisis through escalation dominance. It justifies postures premised on fighting and winning nuclear wars. It legitimizes the abandonment of arms control in favor of unconstrained competition. If the theory's historical foundations are rotten — and they are — then the policies it underwrites are misguided, at best.

The quest for nuclear superiority promises a world in which the United States can coerce its adversaries without risk, prevail in crises through resolve backed by capability, and escape the tragic constraints of mutual vulnerability. History offers no evidence that such a world is achievable. What it reveals instead is a record of leaders who, when confronting the actual prospect of nuclear war, discovered that superiority provided no refuge. They found safety not in dominance but in compromise, not in escalation but in restraint, not in the logic of coercion but in the recognition that some gambles are too catastrophic to take, regardless of the odds.

> **The requirement for effective deterrence is sufficiency, not superiority: a survivable second-strike force capable of inflicting unacceptable damage regardless of what an adversary does first.**

The historical record consistently demonstrates not that nuclear weapons are strategically irrelevant, but that their utility is fundamentally defensive. The leaders who confronted actual nuclear crises — Kennedy in October 1962, Zhou Enlai facing Soviet nuclear threats in 1969 — were not reassured by numerical advantage or the diversity of their options. They were sobered by the shared recognition that even a modest retaliatory capability rendered escalation catastrophic for both sides. Kennedy was deterred not by the full weight of the Soviet strategic arsenal, but by the handful of

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[86] Alexandre Debs, "On Nuclear Superiority and National Security," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (forthcoming draft, April 2025), Section 4, pp. 32-39, https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/7/2534/files/2025/04/Debs-2025-On-Nuclear-Superiority-and-National-Security-April-11.pdf. Debs argues that under deep uncertainty over the effectiveness of different foreign policies, incentives were (and are) strong for policymakers to hew closely to accepted standards of optimal policy. He draws on the political economy literature on "transparency," particularly Brandice Canes-Wrone, Michael C. Herron, and Kenneth W. Shotts, "Leadership and Pandering: A Theory of Executive Policymaking," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 45, no. 3 (2001), pp. 532-550. He positions this assertion in opposition to Robert Jervis who anticipated this dynamic but dismissed the resulting policies as "illogical" rather than what Debs would call politically "rational." See Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 186, 196.

missiles in Cuba. The lesson is not that nuclear weapons do not matter; it is that they matter in a specific, limited, and discernible way. What deters is the credible prospect of unacceptable retaliation — not the capacity to dominate every rung of an escalation ladder, but the assurance that no first strike, however sophisticated, can eliminate the victim's ability to strike back.

This conclusion has clear implications for contemporary policy. The requirement for effective deterrence is sufficiency, not superiority: a survivable second-strike force capable of inflicting unacceptable damage regardless of what an adversary does first. Survivability, properly understood, encompasses the entire retaliatory chain — the hardening, dispersal, and concealment of systems against a disarming first strike, but also their resilience against the full spectrum of efforts to neutralize them before, during, and after launch.

To be sure, maintaining this capability requires effort and constant revisions. A retaliatory force that survives a first strike but can be disabled through cyberattack, prevented from launching through electronic or physical interference, or intercepted before delivery, provides no credible deterrent. Genuine survivability requires that retaliatory systems remain functional and retain the ability to deliver their terrifying payloads even under the most degraded and contested conditions imaginable. That is the strategic imperative — not the accumulation of warheads or the multiplication of delivery options designed to hold an adversary's arsenal at risk.

A force structured around survivability in this full sense renders the coercive logic of superiority theory moot, because no combination of first strike, electronic warfare, or missile defense can eliminate the retaliatory threat. Beyond that threshold, additional capability purchases not security but instability, signaling to adversaries that the United States seeks a disarming capability rather than a deterrent one, and thereby incentivizing exactly the countermeasures and crisis instability that superiority is supposed to prevent.[87]

In other words, survivability is not achieved through unilateral accumulation alone. Mutual limits on counterforce capabilities and missile defense systems — the core logic of arms control — directly constrain an adversary's ability to execute a disarming first strike, making such agreements a strategic complement to, rather than a substitute for, a resilient retaliatory force. The current administration's abandonment of arms control in favor of unconstrained competition is therefore self-defeating not merely on

[87] For more on what an optimal nuclear posture for simple deterrence would entail, see Geoff Wilson, Christopher Preble, and Lucas Ruiz, "Gambling on Armageddon: How US Nuclear Policies Are Undercutting Deterrence and Lowering the Threshold for Nuclear War," Stimson Center, February 2025, pp. 27-29, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Gambling-on-Armageddon_Final-Design.pdf.

diplomatic grounds but on the narrower terms that superiority theorists themselves claim to care about: If the goal is a credible deterrent, hollowing out the agreements that limit adversary counterforce capacity undermines it.

> **Continuing to build toward a capability that history consistently shows to be strategically inert, at enormous cost and with genuine escalatory risk, is not strength. It is the institutionalization of a mythology that serious statecraft can no longer afford.**

Advocates of superiority may object that the emergence of China as a near-peer nuclear power renders arms control infeasible, on the grounds that any meaningful agreement would require Chinese participation — and Beijing has so far declined formal trilateral negotiations. The objection has surface plausibility but deteriorates upon contact. China's arsenal remains substantially smaller than those of the United States or Russia, and Beijing has historically justified its refusal to negotiate on precisely the grounds that superiority theorists celebrate — that numerical asymmetry matters, and that China will not constrain a force it regards as barely sufficient for minimum deterrence until the larger powers reduce to comparable levels. The superiority theorists' own logic, in other words, reinforces Chinese reluctance.

More fundamentally, the absence of a comprehensive trilateral agreement does not foreclose bilateral restraint between Washington and Moscow, which together still account for the overwhelming majority of the world's nuclear warheads, nor does it preclude informal understandings or reciprocal unilateral measures that reduce counterforce pressure on all sides. The choice is not between a perfect trilateral treaty and unconstrained competition; it is between diplomatic engagement of any kind and the arms race that superiority theory actively invites.

The United States currently maintains a nuclear modernization program whose logic, whatever its official justification, is legible only as a bid for escalation dominance. The Golden Dome initiative, the expansion of low-yield options, the absence of any meaningful arms control diplomacy — these are choices reflecting the assumption that nuclear superiority matters. If the historical record examined here establishes anything, it is that no American president when facing the prospect of nuclear war has believed this to be true. The gap between what American nuclear strategy has long promised — coercive leverage, crisis dominance, a usable advantage — and what it has delivered in practice is not a failure of implementation. It is a failure of theory. Continuing to build toward a capability that history consistently shows to be strategically inert, at enormous cost and with genuine escalatory risk, is not strength. It is the institutionalization of a mythology that serious statecraft can no longer afford.