



Talking to the Enemy: Explaining Diplomatic Strategy in Conflicts with China



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THE COSTS OF CONVERSATION

Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime

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How China Ends Wars: Implications for East Asian and U.S. Security

Scholars have long noted the higher likelihood of war that seems to accompany the rise and decline of great powers. Harvard professor Graham Allison most recently argued that war with China in the coming decades is “more likely than not,” if China and the United States do not go through the “tremendous effort” of avoiding it.¹ Conflict could break out due to deliberate action or miscalculation in the South China Sea or the East China Sea, on the Korean Peninsula, or across the Taiwan Strait. A recent RAND report also notes that “despite cautious and pragmatic Chinese policies, the risk of conflict with the United States... will grow in consequence, and perhaps in probability, as China’s strength and assertiveness increases in the Western Pacific.”²

But how would the People’s Republic of China (PRC) end wars? The real possibility of a conflict involving China justifies an examination of Chinese strategic thinking beyond deterrence, crisis behavior and conflict initiation to include how Beijing thinks about conflict termination. In particular, how has China historically approached diplomacy, mediation and escalation in conflict? To what degree are these historical patterns of behavior likely to manifest themselves in future conflicts, especially given all the changes to China’s internal and external environment since China’s last war in 1979? And how might the U.S. role in the region, and shifting power balances more generally, affect China’s decisions about war termination in future conflicts?

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Research Question

- After a war breaks out, what factors influence belligerents' decisions about whether to talk to the enemy, and when may their position on wartime diplomacy change?

Diplomatic Posture Defined

- A belligerent's willingness to engage in direct talks with its enemy at a given point in a war
 - Open: the warring party is willing to talk directly with the enemy in a given period unconditionally
 - *Necessary conditions: Direct and unconditional*
 - Closed: either warring party is unwilling to talk directly to the enemy or unwilling to do so unless preconditions are met

The Puzzle

- Near universal tendency to have period of fighting without talking
 - Clinton on talking to Taliban -“diplomacy would be easy if we only had to talk to our friends. But that is not how one makes peace.”
- States diplomatic posture varies over time, over conflicts
- No theoretical framework to understand this crucial aspect of war

The Role of Talks in Security Studies

- Talks are a key component of state behavior and military strategy
 - Understanding the process of war, not just its onset and termination
- Talks central to costly signaling literature
 - Public, privately, secret talks (Carson, Yarhi-Milo, Stasavage, Kurizaki)
 - Diplomacy can influence the likelihood of escalation to war by revealing information about resolve (Ramsay)
 - Reputation for honesty enhances deterrent (Sartori)
 - Existence of diplomatic channels affects likelihood of conflict (Trager)
 - Break off diplomacy as a part of brinkmanship (Snyder/Diesing)
- Facilitates war ending settlement
 - States can now learn through the exchanging of offers (Slantchev; Filson and Werner)
 - Face-to-face interaction conveys intentions, builds trust for agreement (Hall/Yarhi-Milo, Holmes)
 - Could change negotiating positions, strengthen the hand of doves
- But wartime diplomacy lacks theoretical base
 - Direct interaction between political entities, their principals, and accredited agents has lost its routine nature and takes place **with violence in the backdrop**

Costly Conversations Thesis

- Expected *strategic* costs of conversation determine diplomatic posture
- When leaders cost valuation is HIGH, they chose CLOSED diplomatic postures
- When leaders cost valuation is LOW, they chose OPEN diplomatic postures
- Strategic costs determined by:
 - 1) likelihood of adverse inference
 - 2) enemy's ability to respond given adverse inference

Adverse Inference

- How will the enemy understand an open diplomatic posture?
- Leaders are chiefly concerned that a willingness to talk may signal weakness to the adversary
 - Schelling: “one side or both may fear that even a show of willingness to negotiate will be interpreted as excessive eagerness”
 - Pillar: “be cautious in making the first ever offer to negotiate, lest the enemy interpret this as a sign of weakness and harden his position”

Strategic Capacity

- How may the enemy respond to perceptions of weakness?
- Depends on enemy's capacity to *persist, intensify, or escalate* its war effort, given material, motivational, international, and domestic factors

As Henry Kissinger said . . .

The frequently heard advice to ‘take risks for peace’ is valid only if one is aware that the consequences of an imprudent risk are likely to be escalation rather than peace

Getting to the Table

- States try to minimize this possibility of adverse inference by taking actions designed to demonstrate strength and resiliency
 - Increasing the tempo or intensity of fighting
 - Refusing to talk
 - Establishing preconditions, or maximalist demands
 - Shows not under duress
 - If met, can claim talking because of concessions, not weakness
 - Often designed to constrain adversary's strategic capacity

Getting to the Table

- Strategic capacity may be limited for a number of reasons
 - Fighting at full capacity (material)
 - Destruction of war (material, motivational, domestic)
 - Limited effectiveness of escalation (material, motivational)
 - Critical allies, partners unwilling to support operations (international)

China's Diplomatic Posture in Korean War

- China had a closed diplomatic posture October 1950-July 1951
 - Strict preconditions for talks: PRC representation to the UN and the Taiwan issue must be discussed in conjunction with resolving the Korean War
- China responds favorably to Soviet suggestion for peace talks July 2, 1951 – talks begin July 10.
- Beijing maintains open diplomatic posture for remainder of war

Historical Puzzles

- What explains China's diplomatic posture and the timing of the change?
 - Why closed?
 - Why not open after failure of fourth campaign?
 - Why change position even though preconditions were not met?
- The Korean War is hard case for the costly conversations thesis
 - Domestic politics, role of Soviet Union, power of Mao's personality

Selection of Chinese Sources

- Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives
- Newspapers (Renmin Ribao, Jiefangjun Bao)
- Official and Semi-official Histories and Memoirs

Sources

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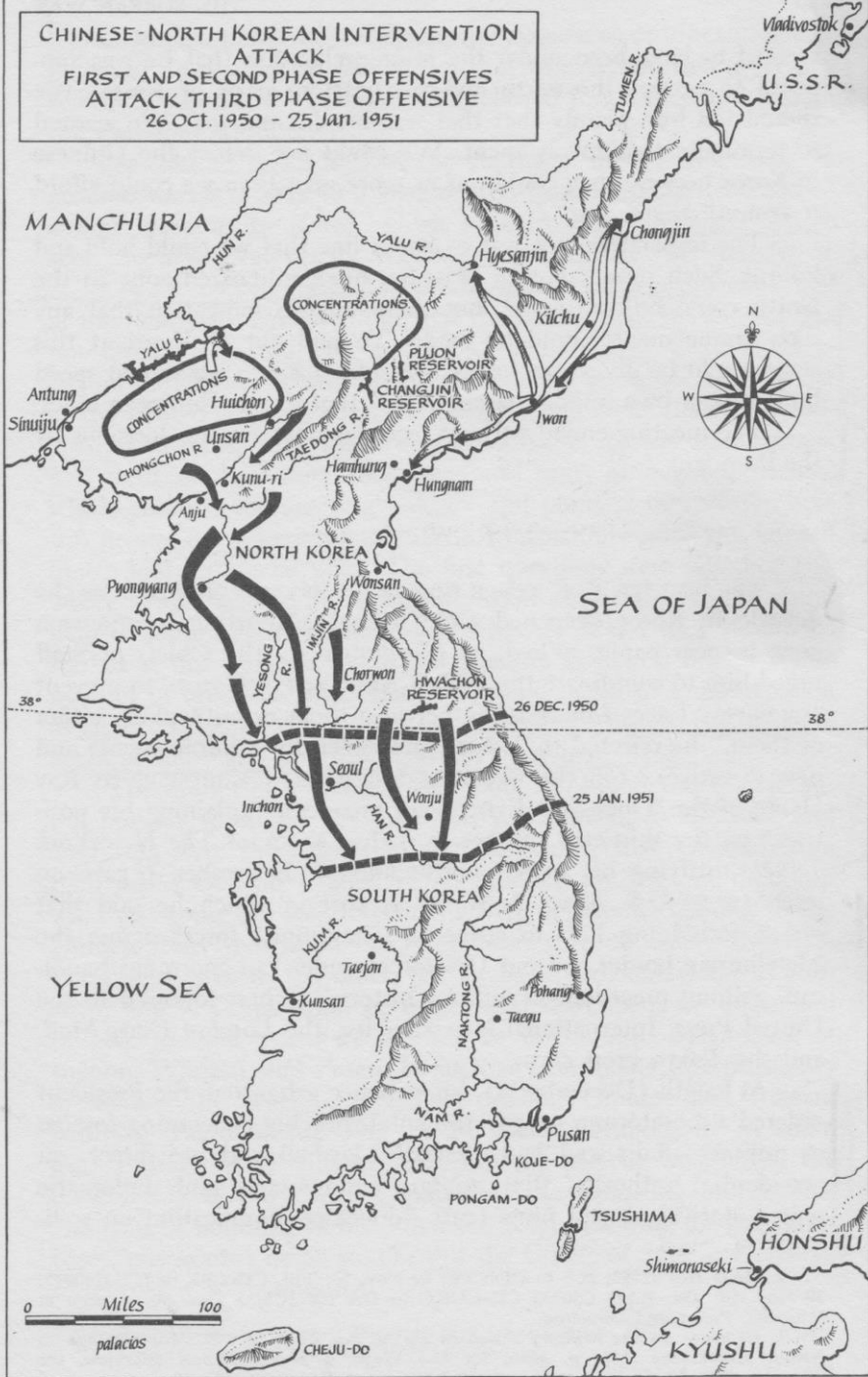
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Strategic Costs Determining Factor

- China had a closed diplomatic posture due to absolute aims October 1950-February 1951
- Against talks
 - Did not want to signal downgrading of aims
 - Did not want to encourage U.S. persistence, delay of surrender as 'costly'
- Mao confident goal of driving UN forces off PEN, unified Korea under North Korean control, was achievable
 - US-led UN forces needed to surrender

CHINESE-NORTH KOREAN INTERVENTION
 ATTACK
 FIRST AND SECOND PHASE OFFENSIVES
 ATTACK THIRD PHASE OFFENSIVE
 26 OCT. 1950 - 25 JAN. 1951



Showing Strength and Resiliency

- Zhou Enlai: “still take the approach of ‘he is in a hurry but I am not’; do not give them chances to reconnoiter [probe their position]. Do not lay our cards on the table for them too early.”
- Mao wanted to launch a third campaign at this stage
 - Failure to do so “would arouse the capitalist countries to speculate a great deal [on our intentions].” Only by “annihilating a few more divisions or American units” would this “enhance the pessimism among them.”
- Dec 31, China launches third campaign to destroy enemy between 37th and 38th parallel
- Mao: “if the enemy is not destroyed, it will not quit Korea”

Strategic Costs Too High

- China maintains a closed diplomatic posture with limited aims for four months
- Threat of conveying weakness is serious
 - US still believes tech superiority will allow it to prevail
 - US confident after a number of operational successes
- US to respond with escalation/intensification
 - Reduce likelihood of victory
 - Increase damage to China itself

Strategic Costs Decrease, Paving Way for Talks

- US strategic capacity limited
 - General MacArthur, advocate of escalation, replaced
 - Elite statements doubted escalation would resolve issue
 - US domestic support for the war waning
 - Changes in US military strategy signals desire to end war
- Demonstrate resiliency
 - Purpose of 5th campaign– show UN forces had not hurt PRC in Feb
 - 38th parallel recovered

China Cautiously Hedges

- China evaluates strategic costs to be acceptable by July 1951, BUT
- Probe U.S. position indirectly through USSR – ‘inadvisable’ for China to raise the question of negotiations
 - Only accept once the US had accepted
 - Holding talks at Kaesong further indicate that China came to the table not out of weakness, but because it “won”
- PRC reinforced defenses and prepared to react militarily to any subsequent escalation
 - Mao to Peng and Kim: “heighten vigilance up to the limit. Units of the first line must be prepared to repulse a possible large scale attack by the enemy and intensive bombing of our rear either before or during negotiations...”

Alternative Explanations

- Learning and the bargaining model: China agreed to talks because it was 'losing'
 - Mao was optimistic about future prospects - troops tripled between July 1951 and 1953
 - Share expectations about potential agreement: two years of fighting, nothing changed at negotiating table; both sides unwilling to offer concessions in face of defeat

Alternative Explanations

- Ideational explanations: Mao's belief in martial effectiveness
 - But Mao did embrace talks
 - And was open during the Sino-Indian War
- Domestic Costs:
 - No evidence “mobilize the masses as well as to inspire the comrade-in-arms” was a reason to delay talks initially or to accept them in July 1951
 - No indications domestic actors had strong divergent views
 - Or that Mao considered the preferences of domestic audiences
- International Costs
 - China was not heavily reliant on USSR –received less assistance than expected

Contributions to Policy and Defense Planning

- Preconditions are not obstacle to talks
- Explains why states may engage in negotiations for extended periods of time without a resolution
 - Decision to talk is distinct from decision to settle – so they require different strategies
- Expect asymmetric conflicts to be longer in duration
- Escalation rarely works
- Design appropriate ‘off-ramps’

Escalating Force and Missed Opportunities for Peace

- Escalation does not get adversary to negotiate short of destroying capacity to fight
 - Difficulty of compellence – can't talk 'under the shadow of a gun'
 - Strategic bombing hardens resolve of people, escalating pressure does this to governments
- Better to offer concessions, or credibly signal will not/cannot escalate

Contributions to Policy and Defense Planning

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Flaws in Face-Saving Measures

- Success of face-saving measures depends on the audience
 - Need to create opportunity for other side to explore negotiations w/out losing face
 - To have an impact, the one offering must be different than target audience

Recommendations

- Rethink the role of mediators: less on info transmission, more on reducing costs of conversation
 - Offer positive inducements so agreement to talk isn't seen as clear sign of weakness
 - Guarantor that escalation will not occur
- Rethink U.S. approach to wartime diplomacy
 - Universally open to talks?
 - Make talking to its enemies more natural, not a reward
 - Preconditions are stopgap measures, not real obstacles to peace talks
- Integrate diplomats into contingency planning
 - Devise best practices for taking advantage of military victories, reducing costs of operational setbacks
- Reconsider which countries can shape China's choices
 - Appeal to friends of China – Pakistan, Russia, Cambodia



Questions?

