Conceptualizing the Crisis: The Debate between Rationalists and Skeptics

Igor A. Istomin, Nikita N. Neklyudov, Andrei A. Sushentsov

Igor A. Istomin, PhD in Political Science
MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia
Department of Applied International Political Analysis
Acting Head of Department

SPIN RSCI: 8424-4697
RSCI AuthorID: 333124
ResearcherID WoS: A-8494-2017
Scopus Author ID: 57185537900

E-mail: iaistomin@gmail.com
Tel.: (+7) 495-225-40-42
Address: 76 Vernadsky Prospect, Moscow 119454, Russia

Andrei A. Sushentsov, PhD in Political Science
MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia
School of International Relations
Dean;
Department of Applied International Analysis
Associate Professor

ORCID: 0000-0003-2076-7332

E-mail: asushentsov@gmail.com
Address: Room 3036, 76 Vernadsky Prospect, Moscow 119454, Russia

Nikita N. Neklyudov
MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia
School of International Relations,
Lecturer

ORCID: 0000-0003-1240-4339

SCOPUS ID: 57217057784

E-mail: nehkludow96@gmail.com
Tel: +7-909-216-91-00
Address: 76 Vernadsky Prospect, Moscow 119454, Russia

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How important are international political crises from a historical perspective?

If we look at major confrontations of the 1940s-1950s (the dispute over Iran, tensions over West Berlin, or the Korean War), the Soviet Union failed to achieve its goals in any of them. Nevertheless, at the end of the first decade of the Cold War, the Soviet Union emerged as a formidable opponent of the United States. Its rise was due to the growing economic and military might, and this growth was in no way hindered by occasional foreign policy setbacks.

The end of the Cold War was not triggered by some local clash ending in some particular way either. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the Soviet Union fell flat because of the Afghan war. Despite its contradictory and painful nature, it diverted a relatively small portion of the Soviet Union's capacity. The end of the bipolar confrontation came because the Soviet Union had lost the ability to compete with the West, above all in the economic and technological spheres, after the vitality of the socialist society's ideological foundations had been shattered (Zubok, 2021).

The more important the crisis, the greater the divergence in the interpretation of the outcomes of military-diplomatic interaction. The Cuban missile crisis is often seen as a failure of Soviet diplomacy: insufficient preparedness and ill-conceived steps to raise the stakes brought the world to the brink of a nuclear war ~~an~~d eventually a painful

retreat (Horelick, 1964; Garthoff, 1988). At the same time, the crisis played a major role in coercing the United States into starting dialogue with the Soviet Union later and approaching Moscow more seriously. This reassessment brought about the détente. In other words, the Soviet Union managed to reap long-term benefits.

In terms of strategic analysis, these crisis episodes need to be placed in a broader context. The question is: To what extent can isolated events influence macro-historical trends? How would bipolar rivalry have proceeded without crises? For example, could the détente have taken place sooner if the 1960 Paris summit had not failed because of the controversy over the downed U-2 spy plane? Attempts to answer such questions may lead to the shaky ground of counterfactuals.

If we are to understand these crises, we must consider the logic of the actors against the nature of the ultimate outcomes. Seemingly well-conceived plans often defy expectations. The problem is that nation states have limited capacities to calculate how their opponents will react to their own steps, all the more so since interaction often takes several rounds, and the parties learn different lessons from previous contacts (Axelrod, 2001). This discrepancy obscures the potential for conflict management.

The lessons learned from the analysis of crisis situations also show the risk of seeing the actors involved in a crisis as enemies. This is partly due to political posturing on their part: to assert their interests, the parties tend to exaggerate their resolve, going as far as demonizing their opponents. In reality, however, international politics is rarely a struggle between unconditional good and universal evil.

Nobel Prize winner Thomas Schelling noted that the zero-sum game is not the correct framework for analyzing international conflicts (Schelling, 1960). Schelling was convinced that they should be considered from the perspective of a "variable sum game," in which one side's gain does not necessarily entail the other side's loss. For example, during the Cold War, there were disagreements between the superpowers, but there was also interdependence and common goals, above all, the

shared interest in preventing a nuclear Armageddon. In some cases, Moscow's and Washington's interests overlapped. For instance, the mutually beneficial outcome of the Suez crisis for the Soviet Union and the United States was that they showed the "old" powers their place in the emerging bipolar configuration. It signaled that former colonial empires were leaving the global stage. Likewise, the arms race had a mutually beneficial outcome: the superpowers established a quasi-monopoly on nuclear weapons (Britain, France, and China obtained them, but the ambitions of other states were thoroughly suppressed following the adoption of the Non-Proliferation Treaty).

Despite the presence of such cooperative elements, international political crises are primarily competitions of political will. During the Cold War, the sides had perhaps an imperfect, but nonetheless stable idea about each other's military capabilities, such as the strength of conventional and nuclear forces. The degree to which either was prepared to use these forces and means remained an open question in view of the cost of a potential conflict. Therefore, the crises performed an important function and were designed to show the opponent the superpower's commitment to defend its interests regardless of the risks (Gartzke et al., 2017; Fearon, 1997).

However, neither side sought an armed clash in earnest, and this fact led to the emergence of the "last but one step" concept, which tied the amount of exerted pressure to the probability of victory (Schelling, 1967). It highlighted strategic incentives to escalate the situation to the limit, approaching the point where political confrontation turns into a military one. The privilege to take the final step, crossing the threshold of escalation, was left to the opposite side. Hence the enemy was made to choose between a painful retreat and a head-on collision.

U.S. President John F. Kennedy's decision to impose a naval blockade of Cuba is a case of escalating a confrontation to the brink of conflict. Kennedy rejected options involving direct attacks on the island, which would have made Washington the initiator of the armed phase of the conflict. But in the case of a blockade, a potential attempt by the Soviet

Union to break through the cordon would have made the Soviet Union responsible for the military clash between the superpowers. In this situation Moscow preferred to de-escalate and agreed to withdraw the missiles stationed in Cuba.

But even the most rationalistic approaches to managing conflicts point to an element of unpredictability in brinkmanship. To make the opponent take threats seriously, the risk of a collision must be greater than zero. Moreover, a state should demonstrate "reasonable irrationality." It must show that it is prepared to take actions that would look disadvantageous or even erroneous in a normal situation. For example, it may be required to enter into a conflict over a strategically insignificant and geographically remote area in order to prevent possible pressure in a more important area.

In fact, the very concept of nuclear deterrence, which took shape during the Cold War, relies precisely on "reasonable irrationality," in which the parties pledge that, if needed, they will commit collective suicide (a nuclear war between the superpowers could not have ended in anything else). Ironically, maintaining stability requires potentially destabilizing steps to convince the enemy that you will indeed use strategic forces if needed.

However, this kind of signaling runs into a political and psychological difficulties caused by discrepancies in the assessment of the same military and diplomatic moves by different observers (Jervis, 1976). In international crises the sides have to rely on unreliable communication channels and often interpret the other sides' intentions based on the nature of the actions being taken. This guesswork expands the room for speculation and misinterpretation. The latter, in turn, makes the situation extremely difficult to calculate and, hence, even more dangerous.

For example, in 1979, the Soviet leadership regarded the diplomatic maneuvers of the Afghan leaders as an attempt to reorient their foreign policy, and the hypothetical consolidation of the U.S. presence in the neighboring country was perceived as a direct threat to the national security of the Soviet Union, giving rise to fears of possible

destabilization of Soviet Central Asia. These fears largely determined the decision to deploy a limited contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan (Zubok, 2007). In turn, Washington erroneously interpreted Moscow's actions as part of a larger plan to get access to the strategically important Gulf oil resources and responded by providing massive support to the anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

The behavior of state leaders in crises is influenced not only by strategic considerations and mentality, but also by public opinion and internal political strife, interagency squabbles, bureaucratic routine, and formal procedures (Allison, 1969). As a result, the decision-making process becomes slower and more complicated, and proposed solutions become less rational. Taken together, these effects greatly complicate attempts to manage confrontation when balancing on the brink of conflict.

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