
Emotion and Strategy in the Korean War

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Abstract What makes a diplomatic or military signal credible? In strategic settings where deception is possible, rational actors' interpretations rely on their beliefs, intuition, and imagination—they rely on emotion. Two properties of emotion—as an assimilation mechanism and its use as evidence—are key to addressing four strategic problems. First, emotion explains why actors worry needlessly about their reputations. Second, emotion is important to understanding costly signals. Third, emotion explains radical changes in preferences. Fourth, emotion sharpens understanding of strategic problems without being self-invalidating: common knowledge of emotion's effects do not always change those effects. Understanding how rational actors think requires turning to emotion. Evidence from the Korean War captures strengths and weaknesses of competing perspectives.

What makes a diplomatic or military signal credible? In strategic settings where deception is possible, rational actors' interpretations rely on their beliefs, intuition, and imagination—they rely on emotion. Actors must go beyond the evidence, weaving it together in plausible ways to create their own understanding of what another actor is likely to do. Two properties of emotion can help to explain how people interpret signals. The first is emotion as an assimilation mechanism, which means that feelings influence interpretations of evidence. How one feels about someone—can they be trusted?—influences interpretation of that person's behavior. The second property is emotion as evidence: people use how they feel as an independent source of evidence for their beliefs. How one experiences an event—does one feel panic, anger, relief?—is evidence for what one wants (or one's preferences) and for what one believes. If feelings influence how one interprets evidence and provide evidence for those interpretations, then how one assesses credibility (including how one thinks others assess one's own credibility) depends on emotion.

Emotion addresses four strategic problems. First, it helps to resolve enduring puzzles over the role reputations for resolve play in international politics, such as why decision makers wrongly believe they obtain reputations. Second, “cost” can be important to what makes a signal credible and emotion is important to under-

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standing cost. Third, emotion helps to explain both why decision makers poorly predict their future preferences, and when one can anticipate radical changes in those preferences. Fourth, emotion sharpens understanding of strategic problems without being self-invalidating: common knowledge of emotion's effects does not always change those effects.

I use two cases of signaling during the Korean War to test my arguments. First, why did Soviet leader Joseph Stalin believe the United States would not respond to a North Korean attack on South Korea and why was he wrong? Second, why did the United States believe that the Chinese would not respond militarily to American efforts to unify the Korean peninsula? I selected these cases for two reasons. First, recent rationalist scholarship uses the second case to confirm either a reputation or a cost argument.¹ Rationalists provide a sharp alternative to my explanation because they exclude emotion. Second, an abundance of evidence makes assessing signals in the Korean War easier than in a contemporary case.

Cost and Reputation

Schelling linked the credibility of a signal with its cost.² He suggested that “deeds” were generally more credible than “words”: threatening to invade a neighbor is more credible when one also masses troops on the border. Distinguishing resolute actors from bluffers is difficult when the costs of a behavior are low. The higher the cost, the more credible the signal becomes and the easier it is to distinguish credible from incredible commitments. Schelling and then Jervis proposed a variety of ways to make signals costly, from public commitments guaranteed to create electoral backlash if broken, to sending troops to disputed territory.³ Fearon refined the argument and discussed two types of cost.⁴ The first are costs entailed in a concession; the second are the domestic political and international reputational costs of backing down in a crisis. In this view, the credibility of a signal depends on its cost, which is why a costless signal (or cheap talk) is incredible. Some scholars view costly signaling as the only path to credibility: “As is well known, to achieve credibility, an actor must engage in an action that he would not have taken if he were unresolved.”⁵ Cost makes a signal credible.

Schelling also developed the argument that a reputation makes a signal credible. A reputation for irresolution or for bluffing degrades one's signal and makes it unpersuasive. A good reputation means one's signals are likely to be accepted as credible and one is unlikely to be challenged. Economists used reputation to address several issues (such as the problem of backward induction found in the chain store

1. See Sartori 2005; and Slantchev 2010.
2. Schelling 1966, 150.
3. Jervis 1970.
4. Fearon 1994, 579–81.
5. Slantchev 2010, 359.

paradox), and political scientists then reintroduced the argument to international politics.⁶ A record of bluffing means one's signal will be discounted and a record of honesty means one's signal will be credible. Because behavior reveals one's type (or reputation), rational actors will use reputation to assess credibility. Reputation makes a signal credible.⁷

Like any normative approach, rational choice theory articulates norms and standards about how one ought to think.⁸ This perspective means rationalist cost and reputation arguments share four characteristics. First, each assumes rational actors, which means to rational choice theorists that everyone interprets behavior the same way. Because actors might begin with different prior beliefs, common interpretations of the same evidence do not mean immediately identical beliefs, but eventually rational actors will converge around reality.⁹ Second, knowing how one ought to think means one can view credibility as a property or attribute of an actor (and not of the perceiver). Credibility is a function of cost or of past behavior and rational actors will interpret that cost or past behavior in the same way. An American commitment is credible if it is costly to the Americans to send or if the United States has a reputation for keeping its commitments. Because credibility is a property of an actor, it is sensible for decision makers to invest in reputation just as one might invest in any other asset.

Third, cost and reputation arguments address the problem of deception by eliminating it. When the costs of a signal outweigh the benefits of deception then rational actors will view that signal as credible. Reputation arguments rely on either cost or on "type" to eliminate deception from strategy. If one has a good reputation, then not keeping one's commitment is costly, which makes the commitment credible. The more costly it is to obtain a bad reputation—perhaps because one will suffer electoral defeat at home if one fails to keep a commitment—then the more credible the commitment.¹⁰ Reputation arguments also introduce "type" to eliminate deception: a state becomes a dishonest or an honest type based on past behavior. Type must reflect some characteristic of an actor that one cannot easily change. The easier it is to change one's type, the easier to deceive others, and because others would know this to be true the concept becomes useless. A signal is credible when the costs of deception outweigh the benefits or when past behavior reveals an actor's type.

Fourth, eliminating deception from strategy means costly signaling and reputation arguments are valid even when the strategies are commonly known. An argument is self-invalidating when common knowledge of the argument changes behavior in ways that make the argument no longer valid, which is why strat-

6. Walter 2009.

7. See Jervis 1970; Fearon 1994 and 1995; Sartori 2005; and Walter 2009. For the distinction between a "signaling" reputation and a "general" reputation, see Jervis 1970.

8. See Elster 1986; and Dawes 1998.

9. Kydd 2005, 19.

10. See Jervis 1970; Guisinger and Smith 2002; and Tomz 2007.

egies that depend on logic and deduction are problematic: if I know that a specific signal or reputation makes my commitment credible, then you know this too and will discount my signal or reputation if you think I might have a reason to deceive. As long as deception is possible, then strategies based on logic and deduction are self-invalidating: once one discovers a winning solution to a strategic problem it cannot work because the other will know it, too. For example, if I know that I have a reputation for resolve based on my past behavior, then I am more likely to bluff in the future (because others are unlikely to believe I am bluffing). But because others know this to be true, they are more likely to think I am bluffing—creating the paradox that a reputation for resolution means others think one is more likely to bluff and a reputation for irresolution means others think one is less likely to bluff.¹¹ Rationalists provide a technical solution that also eliminates strategy (or the possibility of deception) from strategy: just as cost must be observable and objective, one's reputation must be fixed, otherwise strategic actors will know, and will know others know, how to exploit these beliefs.

The self-invalidating quality of rationalist approaches to strategy does not exist when exogenous constraints give one side a dominant strategy. For example, Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan learned where to place small land mines by watching how U.S. Marines dispersed when under fire.¹² Though knowing this Taliban tactic is helpful, no simple solution exists to render it ineffective. Likewise, Schelling's various techniques for changing one's capabilities (burning bridges), reducing an enemy's options (last clear chance), or otherwise demonstrating one's commitment (threat that leaves something to chance) can work because familiarity with the techniques does not invalidate their effects, which is also true of cost and reputation. When cost is greater than the gains of deception or when one has a fixed reputation, then a signal is persuasive because a rational actor cannot use it to deceive.

Emotion and Strategy

Schelling believed that game theory was helpful in establishing the contours of behavior, but that in the end poets might be better strategists than logicians are.¹³ Strategy has no technical solutions, only creative ones: deduction kills strategy because anything you can deduce I can deduce, too. Sending and interpreting signals depends on imagining the preferences, beliefs, and feelings of others. It requires understanding what is expected, what would seem fair, what might enrage, as well as imagining the beliefs that one's adversary holds about oneself—do they think I am irresolute or resolute? Interpreting a signal means going beyond the evidence

11. See Jervis 1970, 88; and Mercer 2012.

12. C.J. Chivers, "As Marines Move in, Taliban Fight a Shadowy War," *New York Times*, 2 February 2010, A1.

13. Schelling 1960, 58.

to create meaning. The greater creativity's role, the harder predicting interpretations becomes. Political scientists have driven creativity out of their subjects, often turning sophisticated political actors into lab rats responding as they must to a nut at the end of a maze. They have done so because predicting creativity is difficult and perhaps impossible—if one can predict creativity it cannot be very creative. More to the point, an ability to routinely predict creative strategies makes them self-invalidating. One is stuck between relying on a rational approach that eliminates strategy from strategy or relying on poets and championing creativity at the expense of prediction.

Emotion provides a middle ground. It allows one to approach strategy as more than a technical problem, but it does not require that one give up to creativity the problem of assessing another's signal. Because strategic problems require policy-makers to assess a signal's credibility, even imperfect solutions are useful. Emotion is a good candidate for addressing strategic problems for two reasons.

First, credibility is an emotional belief.¹⁴ An *emotion* is a subjective experience of some diffuse physiological change whereas a *feeling* is a conscious awareness that one is experiencing an emotion. I treat emotion and feeling as synonyms. A *belief* is a proposition, or collection of propositions, that one thinks is probably true. Whereas a belief presupposes uncertainty, *knowledge* is risk free, impersonal, and constant. A commitment (such as a threat or a promise) is *credible* when an observer believes it will probably be kept; this belief generally depends on an assessment of an actor's ability, interest, and resolve to keep that commitment. An *emotional belief* is one where emotion both constitutes and strengthens the belief. Emotion constitutes credibility because it is important to the selection (and interpretation) of evidence and to assessments of risk. Credibility without emotion becomes knowledge for one "knows" if a commitment will be kept. Emotion also strengthens (or weakens) credibility. Emotion is not simply a consequence of a belief; it is motivation for that belief. An emotional belief means relying on "some internally generated inference" to go beyond the evidence and to assume some risk that one might be wrong.¹⁵

Second, emotion improves understanding of strategic problems without being self-invalidating. Common knowledge that feelings constitute and strengthen beliefs about a signal's credibility probably does not diminish emotion's influence. Because one cannot assess credibility without emotion, one cannot exclude emotion from one's assessment. For example, the basis of trust is a feeling of optimism in another's goodwill and competence.¹⁶ Knowing that one's trust makes one vulnerable to exploitation does not eliminate that trust. Common knowledge that the Danes trust the British will not lead the Danes to distrust the British. Likewise, knowing that interpreting signals depends on emotion does not alter those assess-

14. Mercer 2010.

15. Fielder and Bless 2000, 144.

16. See Mercer 2005; and Rathbun 2011.

ments even if it makes those assessments easier to understand and predict.¹⁷ Knowing emotion's influence might make one scrutinize one's belief or search for disconfirming evidence, but actors should do this independent of emotion's effect. Observing that emotion is not a mistake (that it is not true or false and that rationality depends on it) does not imply that emotion always leads to accurate judgments.¹⁸ If (as I argue) emotion explains why actors wrongly think they have reputations, then adversaries can exploit these emotion-generated mistakes. When emotions' effects are known to be mistakes, this awareness changes these effects.

Properties of Emotion

I use two properties of emotion to develop three arguments. First, I expect the credibility of a signal to depend on the cost to the receiver rather than only the cost to the sender. Second, I expect the stability of a preference to depend on how actors experience an event. Third, I expect actors to use how they feel about their resolve as evidence for how observers feel about that same resolve.

Emotion as an assimilation mechanism. The influence that feelings have on interpretations of evidence is a property of emotion.¹⁹ People do not have beliefs, see new evidence, then revise those beliefs in light of that evidence. Instead, people use their beliefs to interpret evidence. Because beliefs such as trust and credibility depend on emotion, emotion is important to how people interpret evidence. Whereas rationalists imagine that people use evidence to revise their beliefs, political psychologists have long noted that people also assimilate evidence to fit their beliefs.²⁰ Analysis cannot be free of emotion, but that does not mean emotion governs analysis. People revise their beliefs based on evidence they find credible, but the evidence they find credible depends on their beliefs. One will necessarily and properly view a signal from a distrusted actor as less credible than from a trusted actor. Feelings influence interpretations, which makes emotion an important assimilation mechanism.²¹

Viewing emotion as an assimilation mechanism is important for how strategists should understand cost. Cost is subjective, which means that different actors interpret cost differently. The cost to the sender is less important than the cost to the target. Analysts must pay attention to how a target experiences a signal because the target determines whether a signal is credible: was it a surprise, would it seem unjust, would it make one angry? A target that experiences a signal as harmful might reason that it was costly to the sender. This perspective makes it possible

17. Eznack 2011.

18. Bechara and Damasio 2005.

19. Mercer 2010.

20. Jervis 1976.

21. Mercer 2010.

for a sender's cheap signal to be credible, and a costly signal to be incredible. Whereas rationalists expect cost to the sender to determine a signal's credibility, I expect the target's feelings to influence interpretations of a signal's cost and credibility.

Emotion as evidence. "Feeling is believing" is a second property of emotion.²² People use how they feel as independent evidence for a belief.²³ Bem's "self-perception" theory struck a similar note. Bem argued that one often uses one's own behavior to infer one's own motivation.²⁴ Newer research in social cognitive neuroscience finds that people rely on their own feelings as a guide to understanding the feelings of others. Psychologists Zaki and Ochsner explain that "when perceivers reflect on the emotions of others, they do so using mechanisms similar to those they use to process their own emotions."²⁵ People use self-knowledge as a way to understand others' mental states.²⁶

One might view "emotion as evidence" as irrational: internally generated feelings would seem to tell one nothing one does not already know or would be misleading if taken as having external validity. Yet someone without emotion is incapable of making a rational choice.²⁷ People need an internal mechanism, a feeling, to make decisions: emotion indicates when one has enough information, when it is appropriate to change one's mind, whom to trust, how credible is a commitment, or what someone else might be thinking. Emotion also indicates what one wants. Psychologists view preferences as so dependent on emotion that they suggest calling them attitudes.²⁸ One cannot have preferences, let alone stable and hierarchical ones, without emotion. Viewing emotion as evidence has two implications for understanding signaling.

First, feelings as evidence explains radical changes in preferences. If preferences depend on emotion, then preferences change when feelings change. Decision theorists refer to "experienced utility" to capture how experience (or process) is important to one's preferences (or utility).²⁹ Rather than imagine a fixed utility that one consults to determine the best course of action, experienced utility means that experience or feelings are important to preferences.

Predicting a future preference depends on imagining a future emotion. Predicting future feelings (and thus preferences) is difficult because current feelings are

22. *Ibid.*

23. Clore and Gasper 2000.

24. See Bem 1972. For discussion and application, see Larson 1985. For neurological evidence, see Ochsner and Lieberman 2001, 724.

25. Zaki and Ochsner 2011, 33.

26. Jenkins and Mitchell 2011.

27. Damasio 1994.

28. Kahneman 2000a.

29. See Kahneman 2000b; and Kahneman and Krueger 2006. Kier shows how procedural justice shapes preferences, May emphasizes the role experience (rather than calculation) plays in preference formation, and Larson stresses the importance of experience and intuition. An emotion-based argument is compatible with these arguments. See Kier 2010; May 1962; and Larson 2003.

stronger and more influential than hypothetical future feelings. In some cases, analysts can predict someone's future preference even when the actor's expectations about their own preferences are wrong: professors denied tenure will not be as unhappy as they expect, lottery winners will not be as happy as they expect, and the newly paralyzed will initially contemplate suicide but will become satisfied with life.³⁰ But novel situations—such as a nuclear exchange or a ground invasion of an ally—make prediction unreliable. Iraqi leaders could not understand why the United States did not explain to Saddam Hussein what it would do if Iraq invaded Kuwait. As two analysts noted, “The Iraqi leadership discounted the possibility that Washington did not know what it would do in response to an invasion until one actually occurred.”³¹ Because unexpected events amplify emotional reactions, surprised people can have surprising reactions.³² This observation that unexpected feelings can cause a reversal of preferences is a reminder that preferences are unstable, that they depend on emotion, and that people can respond in surprising ways to unexpected—and expected—outcomes.

Second, emotion as evidence explains why actors worry unnecessarily about their reputation. My reputation is what others think of me, not what I think of myself. The concept of reputation does not depend on emotion, but the belief that one has a reputation often does. Emotion as evidence—a feeling that others view one as irresolute—explains why decision makers believe reputation matters independent of evidence that it does. In her study of reputation, Walter finds it “hard to believe that so many leaders in so many contexts” would wrongly believe that reputations form when they do not.³³ Yet these leaders rarely seek evidence to assess the validity of their beliefs. Zhang discovered that while Presidents Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and other decision makers continued to fight wars primarily out of a concern for their reputations, they did not investigate the validity of their beliefs.³⁴ In each case, their focus on reputation building was unwise and unquestioned. The stronger one feels, the more certain one is and the less need one has for (external) evidence. Political scientists demonstrate the same tendency. For decades political scientists asserted that states should fight wars to defend their reputation, yet they never examined whether those reputations formed. Although one can speak of the illogic of reputations forming as easily as the logic, the belief that one's past behavior reveals to others one's future resolution was apparently so seductive and intuitive that it had to be true. It felt right.

Because people use feelings as evidence for their beliefs, a fear that one is or will be viewed as irresolute serves as evidence of a reputation. The notion of feelings as evidence of reputation also explains why it is hard for people to recognize

30. Mercer 2010.

31. Duelfer and Dyson 2011, 82.

32. McDermott 2004.

33. Walter 2009, 10.

34. Zhang 2011.

that they might have multiple reputations based on the same behavior. Different observers often use different explanations to account for an actor's behavior: an irresolute character, a compelling situation, domestic politics, or a strategic calculation might explain a state's retreat. Because behavior is subject to different interpretations, and if these different interpretations are the basis for reputations, then decision makers should speak of their multiple reputations for resolution, so that, for example, the French think the United States is resolute, the Chinese think the United States is irresolute, and the British think domestic politics drives U.S. behavior.

Comparing Explanations

The four characteristics discussed earlier that cost and reputation arguments share contrast with my approach that relies on emotion. First, rationalists reject the science on emotion (and thus believe emotion undermines rationality) and assume that rational actors use evidence to revise beliefs.³⁵ A psychological approach accepts the science and assumes that rational actors use beliefs to interpret evidence. Second, cost and reputation arguments view credibility as an attribute of an actor. A psychological approach views credibility as dependent on observers' beliefs. Third, cost and reputation arguments predict credibility when deception would be irrational (because the costs of deception outweigh the benefits) or when a signal is otherwise beyond manipulation (because one cannot simply switch from one "type" to another). Emotion arguments predict credibility even when deception is possible. Fourth, none of the arguments are self-invalidating. Common knowledge does not invalidate rational cost or reputation arguments because (with a technical fix) rationalists make deception impossible. Common knowledge does not invalidate emotion arguments because knowledge of emotion's effects often does not change those effects.

North Korea Attacks and the Surprising American Response

After thirty-five years of Japanese domination, the Soviet Union and the United States occupied Korea in 1945 and divided the Korean peninsula at the thirty-eighth parallel. North Korea's Kim-il Sung and South Korea's Syngman Rhee each wished to unify the country. The Americans and the Soviets initially prevented their clients from attacking, though after repeated requests from Kim, Stalin consented in March 1950: "The Soviet Union has decided also to satisfy fully this request of yours."³⁶ Although the invasion was Kim's idea, it was Stalin's decision.

35. Elster 2004, 47.

36. Quoted in Millett 2010, 48.

Stalin's Calculations: U.S. Reputation and Costly Signaling

Reputation plays a crucial role in why Stalin believed the United States would not respond to the North Korean attack and why he was wrong, though not in the way rationalists expect. Although Stalin did not give the United States a reputation for irresolution, American decision makers thought he did, and they were certain that a failure to respond in Korea would destroy America's reputation. Emotion is key to understanding both the sudden switch in U.S. preferences (from abandoning to defending South Korea), as well as American decision makers' certainty that U.S. reputation was in jeopardy.

Stalin initially opposed Kim's requests for war in part because he believed that the Americans would feel compelled to respond militarily as long as U.S. troops remained in South Korea.³⁷ The Soviet ambassador to Pyongyang used past U.S. behavior to predict the opposite behavior in the future. He believed Americans would intervene because of their "lack of success in China."³⁸ Because the Americans did not intervene in the Chinese civil war, they were more likely to intervene in the Korean civil war. The politburo agreed and opposed Kim's plans for war. Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung might have drawn the opposite conclusion: because the United States had not intervened in the Chinese civil war and was not intervening to stop the liberation of Taiwan, it would not intervene in the Korean civil war.³⁹ Mao probably did not view the United States as an irresolute type; he based his expectations on situational factors.⁴⁰ Mao supported Kim's attack in part because he believed that the United States would not get involved over "such a small territory as Korea."⁴¹ Stalin and Mao viewed American resolve as a consequence of U.S. interests and capabilities, which meant the United States would respond in different ways in different regions depending on the interests at stake and the capabilities at hand.

Stalin puzzled over American intentions, interpreting even apparently costly signals that the United States would not fight for Korea—such as the final withdrawal of U.S. soldiers from South Korea in June 1949—as a prelude to an all-out South Korean attack.⁴² But the evidence that the Americans had "written off" South Korea (as General Omar Bradley later put it) became substantial.⁴³ The Pentagon wanted out of Korea, Congress opposed funding a continued American presence in Korea, the American focus was on Europe not Asia, and defending Japan did not require South Korea.⁴⁴

American decision makers believed that the North might invade the South, but differed over South Korea's ability to defend itself. In late 1949 intelligence ana-

37. Kim 2010, 196.

38. Quoted in Millett 2010, 46.

39. See Stueck 1995, 39; and Twomey 2010, 150.

40. See Christensen 1996, 142; and Twomey 2010, 149–53.

41. Mao, quoted in Christensen 1996, 161.

42. See Stueck 2002, 71; Weathersby 2004, 67; and Christensen 2011, 45.

43. Bradley and Blair 1983, 535.

44. See Stueck 2002, 78–79; and Stueck and Yi 2010, 179–80.

lysts' discussion of a North Korean invasion was almost routine.⁴⁵ The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported that the North "would probably" invade the South once U.S. forces were withdrawn.⁴⁶ Shortly before the North's attack, the CIA reported that the North had superior military capability and would be able to capture Seoul.⁴⁷ The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said in early May 1950 that communists were likely to overrun South Korea "whether we want it or not."⁴⁸ The possibility of an attack was common knowledge. A reporter asked U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson (in January 1950) if the South could withstand a North Korean attack; Acheson referred him to the Pentagon.⁴⁹ Acheson later testified in secret that the South could defend itself, but that if the situation became dire, the United States could intervene only in conjunction with the United Nations. Because Acheson believed a Soviet veto would make UN intervention implausible, he viewed U.S. intervention to save South Korea as equally implausible.⁵⁰ The possibility of a North Korean invasion was commonly discussed, South Korea's ability to defend itself was uncertain, and any U.S. intervention to rescue South Korea was implausible.

Stalin studied American signals and concluded that the United States would probably not respond to a North Korean attack and, if it did respond, that it would not have time to stop Kim's forces. The North anticipated that its superior capability would result in a rapid victory in weeks.⁵¹ Other factors also mattered to Stalin. The success of Mao's revolution made Stalin worry that Mao might become an Asian Josip Tito (so he was eager to increase Mao's dependence on the Soviet Union) and the Soviet Union now had atomic bombs. Stalin approved Kim's attack, but he still worried about American intervention and hedged his bets by, among other things, making sure the Chinese were on the hook if the war went poorly.⁵² No American observers thought war was imminent.⁵³ The attack on 25 June 1950 was a surprise.

Explaining the U.S. Reaction

The Truman administration reversed its policy and decided to send combat troops to defend South Korea. Truman's decision to intervene astonished General Douglas MacArthur who said to a colleague: "I don't believe it ... I don't understand!"⁵⁴ Historians Schnabel and Watson report that on the day of the North's

45. Stueck 1981, 164.

46. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1949, 1.

47. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950a, 1, 13.

48. Quoted in Stueck 1995, 36.

49. Beisner 2006, 328.

50. *Ibid.*, 329.

51. Millett 2010, 37.

52. Weathersby 2004, 69–70.

53. Stueck 1981, 169–70.

54. Quoted in Millett 2010, 118.

invasion, General Bradley “evidently had little or no thought that the United States might reverse its earlier decision and fight to save South Korea.”⁵⁵ The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff also saw no reason to change policy and they opposed sending troops to Korea as late as 28 June. Historian Beisner noted that the decision to intervene “surprised, even astounded, almost everyone, especially Stalin.”⁵⁶ Stalin’s mistake was failing to anticipate how the experience—the emotion—of Kim’s invasion would cause a reversal of American preferences. In this case, American decision makers used their alarm as evidence that adversaries and allies viewed the United States as irresolute, which explains the American change of heart. My argument depends first on American leaders experiencing alarm at the North’s attack, and second on demonstrating that they used this emotion as evidence for what others believed.

U.S. reputation in jeopardy! Stalin would have been surprised to learn that U.S. decision makers believed he thought Americans were irresolute. Special adviser John Dulles and State Department official John Allison were in Tokyo on the day of the North’s attack and their telegram captured the tone for the American response: “To sit by while Korea is overrun by unprovoked armed attack would start a disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war.”⁵⁷ Historian Millett characterizes Truman as outraged at the attack.⁵⁸ On the day of the attack Truman said to Acheson over the phone: “Dean, we’ve got to stop the sons of bitches no matter what.”⁵⁹ And later, “By God, I am going to let them have it!”⁶⁰ Truman wrote to his wife: “Haven’t been so badly upset since Greece and Turkey fell into our lap.”⁶¹ The surprise intensified the reaction and contributed to a feeling that it was also immoral.⁶² General Bradley later said “an intense sense of moral outrage” characterized the conversation about how to respond to the attack.⁶³ In early August, the British ambassador to the United States recorded his impression of the mood in the United States: “there are too many Puritan avenging angels about who feel that at last a straight moral issue of real principle has been raised and there is a clear Call to get on with punishing the guilty.”⁶⁴ The Truman administration viewed the North’s attack as a Soviet challenge demanding a response to prevent an erosion of U.S. prestige and credibility. Truman warned congressional leaders: “We had to make a stand some time, or else let all of Asia go by the board. If we were to let Asia go, the Near East would collapse and no telling what would happen in Europe . . . it was equally necessary for us to draw the line at

55. Schnabel and Watson 1979, 71.

56. See Beisner 2006, 333; Millett 2010, 85; Shen 2010, 213; and Christensen 2011, 19.

57. Elsey Papers 1950a, 1.

58. Millett 2010, 111.

59. Quoted in Beisner 2006, 340.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Truman letter, 26 June 1950, in Ferrell 1983, 562.

62. Barsky et al. 2011.

63. Bradley and Blair 1983, 535.

64. Quoted in Jones 2010, 59.

Indo-China, the Philippines, and Formosa.”⁶⁵ Acheson feared that a failure to respond would encourage U.S. adversaries and discourage U.S. allies. In a cable to British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, Acheson worried that the Chinese would next target Indochina, Burma, the Philippines, Malaya, Hong Kong, Siam, India, and Japan.⁶⁶ Beisner comments that “Some of this smacks of panic.”⁶⁷

Experiencing the attack did not cause officials to worry about U.S. credibility. These concerns were long-standing.⁶⁸ Instead, emotion influenced assessments and served as evidence for those assessments, which made analysts certain that American prestige and credibility were in danger. State Department analysts reported that a U.S. failure to respond to this Soviet test would be a “severe blow” to “U.S. prestige throughout Asia” and that “the feeling would grow among South East Asian peoples that the USSR is advancing invincibly, and there would be a greatly increased impulse to ‘get on the bandwagon.’”⁶⁹ The State Department warned that the United States should expect a Chinese attack against Formosa: “If a defeat for U.S. policy in Korea is not counteracted by a strong move elsewhere in the Far East, developments in Korea may be expected to cause Chinese Communist leaders to adopt more bold and militant tactics in their attempts to promote Communism in other parts of Asia . . . Effective intervention by the U.S. in Korea would produce a marked psychological reaction in the public mind and in the minds of the Chinese communist leaders.”⁷⁰ The forecast for Europe was equally grim: “Success of the current Soviet-sponsored invasion of South Korea will cause significant damage to U.S. prestige in Western Europe. The capacity of a small Soviet satellite to engage in a military adventure challenging, as many Europeans will see it, the might and will of the U.S., can only lead to serious questioning of that might and will.”⁷¹ The CIA reported that the attack was a “challenge” to U.S. world leadership.⁷² Truman’s resolute behavior in the 1948–49 Berlin Crisis was but a distant memory.⁷³ Across the intelligence community and among key U.S. decision makers, the reaction was nearly identical: U.S. credibility was in jeopardy.

During the first days of the crisis, Truman said privately: “Korea is the Greece of the Far East. If we are tough enough now, if we stand up to them like we did in Greece three years ago, they won’t take any next steps.”⁷⁴ Truman believed Stalin had challenged in the past and was challenging again because Stalin viewed Truman or the United States as irresolute. In Truman’s narrative, he had tried to fight off Republican isolationists over joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the collapse of Nationalist China, but he thought Stalin must have

65. Elsey Papers 1950b, 4.

66. Acheson to Bevin, 10 July 1950, in Beisner 2006, 335.

67. Beisner 2006, 335.

68. Stueck 1981, 156, 169.

69. U.S. Department of State 1950a, 150.

70. *Ibid.*, 153.

71. *Ibid.*, 154.

72. CIA report, quoted in Beisner 2006, 342.

73. Larson 2011.

74. 26 June 1950 conversation, quoted in Casey 2008, 30.

sensed weakness and he suspected Stalin would strike again in Yugoslavia, Turkey, or Iran.⁷⁵ “But if we just stand by,” said Truman, “they’ll move into Iran and they’ll take over the whole Middle East. There’s no telling what they’ll do, if we don’t put up a fight now.”⁷⁶ Millett observed that Truman “assumed the worst: Stalin had ordered the North Korean attack because he interpreted American diplomatic behavior for the past eight months as cowardly.”⁷⁷ Neville Chamberlain had failed to meet Hitler’s challenges in Manchuria, Ethiopia, and Austria; Truman later recounted that he was not about to make the same mistake.⁷⁸ Although analogies are typically presented as coldly cognitive, emotion plays a crucial role in an analogy’s impact on a decision—and feelings (including moral judgments) probably explain the choice of analogy (or reasoning).⁷⁹

Truman called a meeting of congressional officials and asked Acheson to summarize the situation. Acheson gave two reasons to stand firm. The first was that the Korean leadership was weak, indecisive, and might lose. The second reason concerned U.S. reputation: “the governments of many Western European nations appeared to be in a state of near-panic, as they watched to see whether the United States would act or not.”⁸⁰ Truman spoke next and noted that Acheson neglected to mention that U.S. assistance was being given pursuant to a June 25 UN Security Council resolution. The notes of the meeting report that Acheson “was quite obviously embarrassed at his failure to mention the United Nations.”⁸¹ To Acheson what mattered most was the alarm in European capitals that the United States would prove irresolute. Even if the U.S. intervention failed, “it was important for us to do something.”⁸² Standing up to the Russians and the Chinese was crucial to American prestige, to discourage the communists and encourage U.S. allies.

One U.S. journalist had access to key U.S. decision makers and reported that early in the crisis “many observers got the impression that the President and his advisers were irresolute, or divided . . . One friendly foreign diplomat reported to his government: ‘The time has come when Uncle Sam must put up or shut up, and my guess is he will do neither.’”⁸³ This journalist reported Acheson’s belief that “the governments of the rest of the world, especially in Western Europe, were in a state of jitters and near panic, wondering whether the United States would take this lying down. If we let this pass, other aggressions would occur one after another, leading on to a third world war.”⁸⁴ Acheson later recalled that the attack “had been followed by a very severe shock throughout the world when the United States,

75. Millett 2010, 111.

76. Quoted in *ibid.*, 116.

77. *Ibid.*, 111.

78. Schnabel and Watson 1979, 74.

79. See Haidt 2012, 27–51; and Rosen 2005, 22–70.

80. Elsey Papers 1950b, 3.

81. *Ibid.*, 4.

82. U.S. Department of State 1950i, 6.

83. Beverly Smith, “Why We Went to War in Korea,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 10 November 1951, 80. Smith provides no citation for the cable.

84. *Ibid.*, 82.

with all its power and grandeur, was having a terrible time with a tenth rate satellite, and a great shudder of fear and alarm went around.”⁸⁵ Truman worried as well about how others were feeling and said “he was doing his best to avoid any feeling of panic and to keep people from being scared.”⁸⁶

American decision makers could not have known that their beliefs about Stalin and Mao were wrong. They could have known that their beliefs about European reactions were wrong. Europeans were not worried about American irresolution. American decision makers used their own feelings of panic or alarm as evidence for what U.S. allies had to be thinking.

Panicky allies doubting U.S. resolve? The British cabinet did not meet until 27 June. Korea was the fourth item on the agenda and it was not of great concern. According to Farrar-Hockley’s official British history of the war: “Not all ministers discussing this item . . . were exactly sure where Korea lay in the Far East. Some of the senior officials present were no better informed, but one at least had helped a colleague with the explanation that it lay ‘between China and Japan.’”⁸⁷ Farrar-Hockley notes that given the massive British debt from World War II, burdensome imperial commitments including fighting a counterinsurgency in Malay, and a variety of other problems (such as German rearmament), “it is not surprising that an early reaction in many departments of state in Whitehall was that the struggle in Korea was a problem which Britain should let others solve.”⁸⁸ The British felt they had no interest in Korea after World War II and viewed any commitment there as “most undesirable.”⁸⁹

The British condemned the North’s invasion but immediately pushed back against the American desire to portray it as “centrally directed Communist Imperialism.”⁹⁰ Far from wanting the Americans to take an aggressive stand, the British voiced caution, stemming in part from their concern over the possibility of Chinese retaliation in Hong Kong and in part from their desire to keep the Americans focused on Europe. The U.S. ambassador to France reported to Acheson that the French thought the “British seemed rather calm over the Korean episode” and that the French ambassador to Britain was disappointed in what he viewed as the “phlegmatic British attitude.”⁹¹ A British cabinet secretary remarked to Clement Attlee that “Korea is a rather distant obligation, Prime Minister.” Attlee responded: “Distant—yes, but nonetheless an obligation.”⁹²

The British depended on continued American support and were careful to back the Americans while also trying to restrain them. In late August, Foreign Secretary Bevin wrote in a confidential report: “American opinion is in a highly emo-

85. Acheson at 11 October 1953 Princeton seminar, quoted in Acheson 1953, box 80.

86. Truman at 28 June 1950 NSC meeting, quoted in Millett 2010, 123.

87. Farrar-Hockley 1990, 1.

88. *Ibid.*

89. Cabinet Office Report, 30 August 1945, in *ibid.*, 7.

90. Farrar-Hockley 1990, 32.

91. U.S. Department of State 1950c, 175.

92. 27 June 1950 cabinet meeting, quoted in Farrar-Hockley 1990, 33.

tional state . . . In such a state of mind the American public is likely to be irrational . . . towards the United Kingdom where our policy diverges from that of the United States.”⁹³ The driving goal of British policy from the start of the crisis was to keep the conflict limited to Korea and, above all, to keep the Americans focused on Europe.⁹⁴ Possible American irresolution never came up.

The Canadian leadership did not expect a U.S. response to the North’s attack. Canadian Foreign Minister Lester Pearson held a partly off-the-record news conference the day after the invasion where he said, as paraphrased by historian Stairs:

Korea was a special case, and one that the Soviets had obviously picked because its significance for the strategic and political balance of cold war affairs was ambiguous (as, for example, it would not have been had the aggression taken place across clearly defined international boundaries in a vital area like the North Atlantic). He thought an intervention might be ill-advised, given that it could lead to the direct participation in the hostilities of the USSR, and perhaps also of the Communist Chinese.⁹⁵

The American decision to intervene surprised, and in some cases alarmed, the Canadian leadership.⁹⁶ Like the British, Canadians were primarily concerned that the intervention be conducted under the authority of the United Nations, which would give them some control over U.S. policy.⁹⁷

The French reaction was mixed. The Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry expressed his personal view that to lose South Korea meant “Western prestige irretrievably impaired,” and he expressed “grave concern at repercussions in Indochina in event all Korea fell to Communist forces.”⁹⁸ Former Prime Minister Georges Bidault compared the situation to “Hitler tactics in 1938 and 1939 and the plucking of the leaves of an artichoke.”⁹⁹ Special Assistant to the President Averell Harriman reported to Truman on June 28 that the French (and the Europeans) were greatly relieved at the direction of U.S. policy, for they had doubted U.S. resolve.¹⁰⁰ Historian Stueck wrote that “in France, fears verged on panic, as rumors circulated that major war was certain if UN forces did not hold in Korea and housewives hurried to augment their stocks of necessities.”¹⁰¹ Yet this panic was due to American resolution, not irresolution. The French did not fear a communist takeover of South Korea; they feared the U.S. reaction to this loss. Officials at the Quai d’Orsay explained: “It will not matter if they manage to hold Fusan, but if they are pushed into the sea, then a major war will become

93. Quoted in Stueck 2002, 99.

94. Dockrill 1991, 21.

95. Stairs 1974, 41.

96. See former Prime Minister King’s alarm in King 1950, 30 June.

97. Stairs 1974, 43, 53, 68.

98. Quote is a paraphrase, U.S. Department of State 1950c, 175–76.

99. *Ibid.*

100. Paige 1968, 225.

101. Stueck 1995, 79–80.

inevitable.”¹⁰² French citizens feared the United States might use nuclear weapons, which led in the first few weeks of the Korean War to an additional four million French signatures on the Stockholm appeal to outlaw the atom bomb.¹⁰³

The French newspaper *Le Monde's* first editorial on the war referred to Soviet-inspired aggression, but also to the “incoherence and the hesitations of American policy” and noted that the United States had evacuated the peninsula in 1948 because of Korea’s “doubtful strategic value.”¹⁰⁴ The editorial continued that while France would support the Americans at the United Nations, “have not the prestige of the United States and that of United Nations been engaged in a most unfortunate way?”¹⁰⁵ An editorial the next day urged the Americans to cut their losses in Korea and in Formosa and instead focus on Indochina.¹⁰⁶ French anticommunists worried that the United States would become so involved in Korea that it would damage Europe’s financial recovery and divert U.S. attention from European security issues. French leftists attacked the United States for its support of fascist regimes in Greece, Spain, Taiwan, and South Korea. A popular leftist magazine derided the “Munichites” for suggesting that the Munich analogy might apply to Korea and condemned the U.S. response: “With suspect haste, the United States used [the] UN to legitimize a decision which corresponded rather too closely to its own selfish interests.”¹⁰⁷ From day one, the French aimed to limit the conflict to Korea and to keep the American focus on Europe. On the day of the attack, the French ambassador to the United Nations encouraged the United States to change the language of the UN resolution so that both sides would be ordered to cease fire, rather than only the North.¹⁰⁸ One can find examples that capture French concern at possible American irresolution, but the more common concern was that American resolution would lead to a major war over strategically inconsequential territory that would harm French interests.

The Dutch criticized the French for failing to appreciate the serious implications the North’s attack had on the “over-all Asian situation.”¹⁰⁹ The Dutch worried most about Indonesia. The Dutch foreign minister “was extremely concerned for he felt that if the U.S. should ‘permit’ south Korea to fall the consequences for all Asia, but particularly [South East Asia], would be absolutely disastrous. We, he continued—the Western world—could write the whole area off forever.”¹¹⁰ An American attaché reported that the “consensus of official Dutch opinion is that ‘Korea will be lost as a result of American default, as usual.’”¹¹¹ The Dutch reac-

102. Quoted in Werth 1956, 472.

103. *Ibid.*, 473.

104. Quoted in *ibid.*, 471.

105. Quoted in *ibid.*

106. Quoted in *ibid.*, 471–72.

107. *Esprit*, quoted in *ibid.*, 474.

108. U.S. Department of State 1950b, 145.

109. *Ibid.*, 1950d, 191.

110. *Ibid.*, 1950e, 185.

111. *Ibid.*, 186.

tion might be an example of panic, though it should be put into the broader context of U.S. policy toward Dutch policy in Indonesia. In 1949, the State Department put decisive pressure on the Dutch to concede independence to Indonesia.¹¹² The Dutch bitterly opposed American policy and it seems expected what they viewed as American irresolution in Indonesia to be replicated in Korea.¹¹³

Although the division of Germany had only superficial similarities to the division of Korea (Soviet and American troops in Germany meant any war would be a world war), American fears of a Soviet attack led it to push for rapid German rearmament, which supported German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's desire for greater economic independence and for remilitarization.¹¹⁴ Adenauer wrote in his memoirs that the attack alarmed West Germans who, without a strong American response, would lose faith in the United States and would become neutral in the case of a Soviet attack.¹¹⁵ The response Adenauer wanted was not war in Korea but rearmament in Germany. The UK Commissioner for Germany provides anecdotal evidence of panic: "The impact of [the North's attack] on Germany was tremendous . . . There was a wave of panic and many sought to re-insure with the Russians."¹¹⁶ But historian Willis provides the opposite impression: polling indicates that most Germans opposed rearmament and that "the Korean invasion brought surprisingly little change in attitude."¹¹⁷ German Social Democrats opposed rearmament and viewed events in Korea as unrelated to events in Germany. Instead, they referred to Allied "blackmail," where German sovereignty would be restored in exchange for rearmament.¹¹⁸ Germans did not discount the possibility of a Soviet attack, but their preferred solution was to deter it by increasing occupation forces. A leading German newspaper saw a bright side to the North's invasion for it guaranteed that the West would not repeat the mistake it made in Korea and withdraw troops prematurely from West Germany.¹¹⁹ Because reassuring panicky allies was one of two reasons Acheson gave for war, the absence of panic in the most vulnerable country in Europe is striking.

American decision makers never wavered in their belief that the Korean War jeopardized America's reputation. This belief rested on mere projection. I found no evidence that U.S. policymakers asked either the State Department or the CIA to assess allied views of U.S. resolve.¹²⁰ Acheson's decisions rested, in part, on introspection: "During the afternoon [of the 25th] I had everyone and all messages kept out of my room for an hour or two while I ruminated about the situation."¹²¹ The next day, he again spent several hours in isolation where he created

112. Jones 2010, 46.

113. McMahon, 1981, 251–303.

114. Parsons 2003, 60.

115. See Adenauer 1966, 273; and Dockrill 1991, 22.

116. Kirkpatrick 1959, 238.

117. Willis 1968, 147.

118. *Ibid.*, 152.

119. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 June 1950, cited by *ibid.*, 147.

120. For similar findings in different cases, see Zhang 2011.

121. Acheson 1969, 405.

the response that Truman would present the next day to congressional leaders and to the American public.¹²² American decision makers used their feelings as evidence for how others had to feel about American resolution. Even small countries dependent on the United States did not urge American intervention. Danish Foreign Minister Gustav Rasmussen worried about the possibility of a world war and viewed the South Korean government as “corrupt and semi-fascist;” the U.S. ambassador to Denmark viewed Rasmussen’s support for the U.S. position as insufficiently positive and pressed him for a more enthusiastic response.¹²³ If American alarm explains U.S. decision makers’ belief that its allies feared American irresolution (even when there was substantial contrary evidence), then reliance on emotion is even more likely when assessing the beliefs of adversaries (because evidence is scarce).

Stalin’s Dilemma: Predicting Future U.S. Preferences

Stalin confronted two challenges. First, predicting the U.S. reaction required imagining preferences that the Americans did not have, but would have after North Korea’s attack.¹²⁴ Second, predicting future preferences required Stalin to imagine that the Americans held beliefs about his beliefs that he did not hold. Stalin authorized Kim’s offensive for a variety of reasons, though not as Truman thought because he considered Americans irresolute. To predict the American response, Stalin would have to imagine that the Americans believed he would infer American irresolution if they did not respond. But because American irresolution was not a basis for Stalin’s support for war, it would have been difficult for him to imagine this American fear. Strategy depends on imagining not only how another feels, but how another will feel as a result of one’s policy. Emotion explains the American reversal of preferences, the mistaken belief that the U.S. reputation was in jeopardy, and thus the surprising U.S. commitment to fight a war in Korea.

Approaching the Yalu: American and Chinese Calculations

The American decision to send UN and South Korean troops to the Chinese border to unify Korea has been studied extensively. Analysts agree that the Americans thought Chinese threats to intervene were bluffs, but why the Americans thought the Chinese were bluffing is unclear. Some analysts blame the Chinese for failing to send costly signals, for deciding not to send costly signals, or for obtaining a reputation for dishonesty premised on past bluffs over Taiwan.¹²⁵ Other ana-

122. See *ibid.*, 407; and Paige 1968, 158, 161.

123. Quoted in Midtgaard 2011, 152.

124. Larson 2007, 17.

125. See Huth 1988, 144–48; Slantchev 2010; and Sartori 2005.

lysts blame the Americans: the signals were clear, but for a variety of psychological, political, or doctrinal reasons the Americans failed to accurately interpret them.¹²⁶

Reputation and Emotion

Sartori suggests that American decision makers doubted Mao would intervene in the war because he had recently bluffed: “The credibility of China’s diplomacy at the start of the Korean War was hindered by the fact that it came in the context of a series of unfulfilled threats over Taiwan . . . China’s record of threatening and not following through was one of the reasons why its threats to intervene in the Korean War were not more credible.”¹²⁷ The Chinese had threatened to liberate Taiwan from Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek’s forces and had attacked other off-shore islands, but their failure to carry out their threat to take Taiwan made their threats to intervene in the Korean War incredible. The argument has two problems. First, U.S. policymakers worried about a Chinese invasion of Taiwan throughout much of 1950, as Twomey observed: “Even after the U.S. naval deployments to the region became routine, repeated ‘war scares’ in the Taiwan Strait caused grave concern in Tokyo and in Washington.”¹²⁸ Second, Sartori’s only direct evidence is a 1972 interview where Secretary of the Army Frank Pace accuses the Chinese of “crying ‘wolf’” so often that no one believed they would enter the war.¹²⁹ Pace’s recollection after twenty-one years might be correct, but given the extensive documentary record one would expect that someone—from the White House, the State Department, the CIA, or the Pentagon—would state in 1950 that the Chinese were bluffers because they did not capture Taiwan. Americans were obsessed with their own reputation; why did they never discuss China’s reputation? I think that American decision makers’ alarm over their own reputation explains why they thought the Chinese were bluffing.

Continued American fear over U.S. reputation. The Americans thought the Chinese were bluffing because U.S. decision makers thought the Chinese viewed the United States as irresolute, not because the Americans viewed the Chinese as irresolute. As the CIA observed: “Among the known and presumed private views of the Chinese Communist leadership” was “Peiping’s view of the West, especially the U.S., as too feeble or hesitant to make a genuine stand.”¹³⁰ According to the CIA, this Chinese view of an irresolute United States

126. See Lebow 1981; Beisner 2006; and Twomey 2010.

127. Sartori 2005, 34, 39.

128. Twomey 2010, 191.

129. Sartori 2005, 36–37.

130. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950b, 19.

explains why the Chinese believed the West “could be bullied or bluffed into backing down before Communist might.”¹³¹ The CIA anticipated that over time the Chinese would develop “a realistic respect for U.S. military power.”¹³²

The closer U.S. forces got to the Yalu River (North Korea’s border with China) and the more evidence accumulated that the Chinese might intervene, the more Acheson insisted on the importance of standing firm. Responding to Bevin’s concern that the Chinese might intervene, Acheson said that “he believed a greater risk would be incurred by showing hesitation and timidity” and that the only proper course was “a firm and courageous one and that we should not be unduly frightened at what was probably a Chinese Communist bluff.”¹³³ In November, Acheson thought Chinese forces might intervene but worried more about U.S. reputation: “if Peiping discovers that nothing at all happens in the face of its intervention it will be emboldened to act even more aggressively by what it might consider proof of weakness or nervousness on our part.”¹³⁴ Acheson opposed a British plan to discover if the Chinese might be interested in establishing a buffer zone to reassure the Chinese of UN intentions: “I believe it would be taken by them as . . . an indication of the greatest weakness upon our part. I think that we will hurt rather than advance the prospect of aiding the situation by negotiation.”¹³⁵ Acheson called on the British to support MacArthur’s offensive, which would test Chinese intentions: “The results of his operation will make much more clear many matters which are now obscure. The strength and effectiveness of the Chi forces, the intention and capacity of the Commie authorities to support and reinforce them, etc.”¹³⁶ As UN forces were poised to conquer North Korea and Acheson confronted what he recognized as a grave situation that had “far reaching consequences of any misstep,” Acheson worried more about signaling weakness than in reassuring the Chinese.¹³⁷

America’s reputation for resolve. That U.S. policymakers did not draw on allied views to understand Chinese perceptions implies the role of emotion. Americans felt so strongly that their reputation was in jeopardy that they had no need to consider their allies’ perspectives. Had Americans used their allies for insight into how the Chinese might interpret American credibility, they would have suspected that the United States appeared frighteningly resolute. American allies believed that the United States was risking world war and that it would be willing to use nuclear weapons to accomplish its objectives.

131. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

132. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

133. U.S. Department of State 1950f, 868–69.

134. *Ibid.* 1950g, 1053.

135. *Ibid.* 1950h, 1229.

136. *Ibid.*

137. *Ibid.*

The British (as well as the Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders) felt obliged to support the United States to cement its “special relationship,” but this did not prevent them from working assiduously—and over U.S. objections—to arrange a diplomatic end to the Korean War.¹³⁸ The British worried that the Americans might use nuclear weapons and they worked with India in July and August to mediate a deal, proposed concessions in October to keep the Chinese from intervening, and then they pushed for a demilitarized zone in November.¹³⁹ The Canadians also worked for peace, advanced the idea of a buffer zone, tried to reassure the Chinese, opposed crossing the thirty-eighth parallel, and according to Stairs “were horrified” when the United States bombed a bridge across the Yalu.¹⁴⁰ Efforts to end the war irritated Acheson, who told Bevin in early July that the United States would not “pay appeasement prices” for peace.¹⁴¹

The French had two concerns. First, that the U.S. decision to march to the Yalu was a step toward preventive war against China and the Soviet Union.¹⁴² Second, that the United States would use the Korean War to advance German rearmament which, in turn, might provoke a Soviet invasion.¹⁴³ The Germans were consumed with the debate over rearmament. The CIA reported that the German government had “warily supported U.S. actions in Korea” and had used the war to support their desire for rearmament.¹⁴⁴ Supporters of rearmament saw ominous parallels between a divided Germany and a divided Korea. German opponents of rearmament thought the parallel ridiculous. After observing that several thousand allied troops were stationed in West Germany, the Social Democratic Party leader commented sarcastically: “I hope [they] are not only for decoration.”¹⁴⁵ German Social Democrats (as well as the French and British governments) opposed the American (and Adenauer’s) push for rearmament.¹⁴⁶

That American decision makers held the same incorrect belief—that the United States either had or would acquire a reputation for irresolution with the Chinese—suggests that they used the same evidence. The only evidence supporting this belief was, as Stueck put it, “fear [of] the consequences of showing weakness.”¹⁴⁷ American decision makers’ feelings provided sufficient evidence to sustain an incorrect belief so widely held it elicited no debate and contributed to a disastrous miscalculation.

138. Grey 1988.

139. See Belmonte 1995, 645; Beisner 2006, 347; Crane 2000, 77; U.S. Department of State 1950f; and *ibid.*, 1950h.

140. Stairs 1974, 129–30.

141. Quoted in Beisner 2006, 354.

142. Werth 1956, 473.

143. Beisner 2006, 359.

144. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950b, 9.

145. Quoted in Granieri 2003, 40.

146. Dockrill 1991, 23.

147. Stueck 2002, 116.

Costly Signals and Emotion

Rationalists treat costly signaling as a technical problem. One must deploy massive numbers of troops, make public commitments that if broken will cause one to lose reelection, or take other costly steps to convey credibility. But cost depends on one's beliefs, which also means it depends on emotion. Because feelings constitute credibility, analysts should focus on what the signal costs the target (not only on what it costs the sender). The Chinese interpretation of the American decision to send the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Straits, and the American interpretation of Chinese signals before and after the massive Chinese intervention, capture emotion's influence on strategy.

Credible cheap talk. Truman intended the deployment of the Seventh Fleet to deter Mao from liberating Taiwan, but also to deter Chiang from attacking the mainland.¹⁴⁸ Acheson intended this deployment to be a temporary step that would also be a show of strength to Stalin.¹⁴⁹ Truman gave little thought to how the Chinese might interpret this minor defensive readjustment of U.S. forces.¹⁵⁰ Stueck characterizes the threat as a bluff and Twomey views it as a “symbolic deployment” that consisted of one carrier and a series of air patrols.¹⁵¹ American military leaders repeatedly expressed concern that the token patrols could not stop a Chinese attack, which led Twomey to conclude that the “strength of the military signal was initially quite weak.”¹⁵² The deployment was not costly, could easily be reversed, and was largely symbolic. An irresolute state could make that threat as easily as a resolute one. It was “cheap talk.”

It was not cheap to Mao, who saw it as a reversal of a U.S. hands-off policy on the Chinese civil war. Mao and his colleagues interpreted the deployment as a declaration of war. Mao was furious at the U.S. intervention in the Taiwan Straits, not only because it sabotaged his plans to capture Taiwan, but also because it was unexpected: surprise amplifies emotion.¹⁵³ Truman publicly declared that the United States would not become involved in the Chinese civil war and would neither seek bases in Taiwan nor provide military aid to Chiang. A week later in his National Press Club speech, Acheson had not only excluded South Korea from the U.S. defense perimeter, he also excluded Taiwan. The United States seemed headed toward recognition of the PRC.¹⁵⁴ Mao's hope of reuniting China was dashed. He

148. Millett 2010, 206.

149. Beisner 2006, 350, 341.

150. See Ovodenko 2007, 282; Jervis 1980, 582; Halberstam 2007, 317–18; and Christensen 2011, 34, 87.

151. See Stueck 1981, 196; and Twomey 2010, 172, 192.

152. Twomey 2010, 195. Americans might have thought withdrawing the deployment would hurt U.S. reputation (thus making it a costly signal), but neither they nor the Chinese made this argument.

153. See Matray 2011, 112; and Twomey 2010, 150.

154. Jones 2010, 60.

now believed that the United States would invade North Korea, then use it to attack China, as the Japanese had also used North Korea to attack China earlier in the century.¹⁵⁵ Sending troops to Korea, according to Millett, “confirmed Mao’s judgment” that the Americans sought to destroy the Chinese revolution, perhaps even using nuclear weapons.¹⁵⁶ A minor deployment of U.S. forces that was intended to prevent a war between Taiwan and China and to indicate American power to Stalin convinced Mao that the United States posed a mortal threat to his revolution and that the Americans must be confronted wherever it was most propitious.¹⁵⁷ How one experiences a signal is important to how that signal is interpreted.

Incredible costly signaling. After summarizing a mid-October CIA assessment of recent Chinese signals, Twomey asks: “One wonders what evidence could have convinced the CIA if statements by senior leaders, troop deployments of enormous scale, and propaganda to prepare the local populace were insufficient.”¹⁵⁸ Even after the massive Chinese intervention that began on 25 November—which would seem to be a costly signal—analysts debated Chinese intentions. Did Mao intend to use his 200,000 troops now in Korea for offensive purposes or only to defend the Chinese border?¹⁵⁹ American decision makers believed before the intervention that Mao would intervene only if so directed by Stalin; they used the intervention as further evidence of a monolithic communism with China as a “Soviet catspaw.”¹⁶⁰

Sending and interpreting signals demands creativity, but one should not exaggerate emotion’s influence. Psychologist Tetlock relies on cold cognition to demonstrate that the more one knows, the harder it is to “learn.”¹⁶¹ This is true in part because it takes more evidence to overturn a belief, and in part because discrepant information can often be made to “fit” one’s beliefs. One can recognize a belief’s dependence on emotion and often capture the belief’s influence without focusing on emotion. For example, American decision makers’ reasons for believing that the Chinese would not intervene in the war were excellent and shared by many in the Chinese politburo. Americans believed war and revolution meant Mao needed to focus on reconstruction and that war would make Mao even more dependent on Stalin (and Stalin did not appear to want war); the best time for intervention had passed; and Chinese forces lacked the capability to fight and win.¹⁶² Most of the Chinese politburo initially opposed intervention for similar reasons.¹⁶³ Mao him-

155. See Christensen 1996, 160–62; Stueck 2002, 104, 108; and Millett 2010, 149.

156. Millett 2010, 233.

157. See Christensen 1996, 160–61; Christensen 2011, 87; and Twomey 2010, 186–96.

158. Twomey 2010, 103–4.

159. Barnes 2010, 238.

160. Quote from U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950c, 3. See also Lebow 1981, 209, 213; Jervis 1980, 583; and Jian 1994, 171.

161. Tetlock 1999.

162. See Ovodenko 2007, 262, 270; and Stueck 1995, 106, 107.

163. See Shen 2010, 223; Millett 2010, 293–96; Jian 2004, 108–9; and Christensen 1996, 159.

self wavered, as did Stalin, about the desirability of intervening.¹⁶⁴ Twice Stalin told Kim: “The Chinese have again refused to send troops . . . you must evacuate Korea and retreat in the northern direction in the shortest possible period.”¹⁶⁵ American beliefs that Mao would not intervene were sensible and these beliefs necessarily influenced American interpretations.

In three other areas emotion is important to how Americans understood Chinese signals. First, and as I discussed, Americans discounted signs of Chinese intervention because they believed Mao viewed the United States as irresolute, which meant he was probably bluffing. Second, Americans knew that the Chinese might believe that the United States posed an objective military threat to China but felt this Chinese belief was unlikely. Psychologists have found that people do not change their minds unless they feel that their position is incorrect: “Even in the case of purely logical argumentation, people need to feel that the case against their position is compelling before they change their minds.”¹⁶⁶ Not until early November when Chinese forces were poised for a massive attack did Acheson, in Beisner’s words, “finally admit” that the Chinese might view the United States as a military threat.¹⁶⁷ In a cable to Bevin, Acheson recognized that one of the ten possible motivating factors behind Chinese behavior was that they “may have come to believe that UN forces are in fact aiming at Manchuria and present intervention may be based on fear of attack.”¹⁶⁸ Acheson imagined the Chinese might fear a limited UN intervention in Manchuria; he did not begin to understand Mao’s alarm over U.S. intentions. Acheson knew the United States would not invade China and he felt it was implausible that the Chinese would hold this incorrect belief—it would be “sheer madness” for Mao to enter the war.¹⁶⁹

Third, American decision makers underestimated the influence a desire for prestige had on Mao and did not recognize that Mao’s concern for China’s reputation might be no different than their own concern. American analysts understood the prestige benefits to Mao of intervening in the conflict. A National Intelligence Estimate concluded that defeating UN forces would “constitute a major gain in prestige for Communist China,” though the costs outweighed the benefits and made intervention improbable.¹⁷⁰ Acheson understood that the Chinese might intervene to demonstrate that they were not “standing idly by.”¹⁷¹ Americans did not consider how the Chinese might view the domino theory or the importance to Beijing of having a reputation for resolve. Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai captures Chinese “domino theory” thinking: “If Korea fell down, breaches in other places

164. Weathersby 2004, 75–76.

165. Stalin to Kim, quoted in Millett 2010, 294.

166. Clore and Gasper 2000, 25.

167. Beisner 2006, 408.

168. U.S. Department of State 1950g, 1051.

169. Acheson quoted in Jay Walz, “Acheson Doubts Peiping War Entry,” *New York Times*, 11 September 1950, A1.

170. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1950c, 1, 4.

171. U.S. Department of State 1950g, 1051.

would also be opened one by one.”¹⁷² Mao thought that a failure to respond to American aggression would encourage the reactionaries within China and in Taiwan; he also viewed Indochina as part of the confrontation between revolutionary and reactionary forces, which led him to increase military aid to the Viet Minh.¹⁷³ Historian Zhang contends that Mao was preoccupied in late December with crossing the thirty-eighth parallel, which “would demonstrate China’s resolve and ability to stand up against external pressures. Conversely, staying behind the parallel would be a sign of weakness.”¹⁷⁴ American decision makers did not feel that Mao was irresolute and it seemed implausible that a fear of obtaining a reputation for irresolution would drive Mao’s behavior.

Accurately predicting Chinese behavior required the Americans to believe that Mao held beliefs about the United States that American decision makers either viewed as untrue (that the United States was already at war with China) or that they knew were untrue (that the United States intended to launch a counterrevolution in China). Just as Stalin would have had difficulty imagining American beliefs about his beliefs about a supposed U.S. reputation, or just as Mao would have been surprised to discover that the Americans believed he would consider them irresolute if they did not invade North Korea, Americans would have found Mao’s beliefs about American intentions implausible. Mao was upset at Truman’s deployment of the Seventh Fleet and these feelings—which Americans did not try to imagine—help to explain his belief that war with the United States was inevitable.

Conclusion: Catching Emotion

Approaching emotion as psychologists do—with a reliance on controlled experiments or discerning shades of specific emotions—means emotion in international politics will remain elusive. Political scientists need to study emotion in ways appropriate to the political or strategic problems of interest and to exploit characteristics of emotion that ease analysis. Attending to emotion’s properties is one way to “catch” emotion and to better understand strategy. This approach improves understanding of four theoretical issues important to strategy.

First, understanding that emotion is evidence for beliefs helps to explain why actors become certain that their reputations are in jeopardy when they are not (and could be known not to be in jeopardy). The certainty with which these beliefs are held also explains why actors rarely understand that different actors will explain their behavior in different ways. People tend to think of their reputation as a property because they use how they feel as evidence for how others must also feel about their reputation. Strong feelings become proof that requires no further evidence and no debate. Truman “knew” that Stalin viewed him as irresolute, Acheson

172. Quoted in Jian 1994, 159.

173. *Ibid.*, 128, 132–33, 178.

174. Zhang 1995, 153.

“knew” U.S. allies were panicking, or American decision makers “knew” they had to advance past the thirty-eighth parallel to prevent a reputation for irresolution. They had no evidence other than feelings that were so strong they made little attempt to assess the validity of these beliefs.

Second, emotion is important to understanding cost. Attending to emotion shifts attention from the sender to the observer: cost depends on the subjective beliefs of observers. Emotion can help one imagine how observers will interpret cost because how people feel is part of what they think. How a target experiences a signal (how much pain, anger, or fear it causes) influences how the target assesses the sender’s credibility. The deployment of the U.S. Seventh Fleet cost the Americans little, but it ruined Mao’s plans and made him certain that the United States intended to support a counterrevolution.

Third, emotion helps explain radical changes in preferences, as well as why people poorly predict future preferences. Because emotion constitutes preferences, correctly imagining future feelings and the intensity of those feelings is difficult. This is true in part because hypothetical feelings are rarely as strong as real ones and so will not lead one to change one’s preferences. The intense experience characteristic of crises can lead to a reversal of preferences. South Korea was of no greater strategic value after the North’s attack than before, but the attack led to a radical change in U.S. preferences. Understanding Truman’s decision to defend South Korea depends on appreciating how crises generate emotions that constitute preferences.

Fourth, emotion improves understanding of strategic problems without being self-invalidating. Emotion occupies a middle ground between rationalist solutions that are self-invalidating (or technical ones that eliminate deception from strategy), and creative ones that cannot be predicted. A recommendation to be imaginative—being a poet in Schelling’s view—is of limited value to policymakers. However, being aware of emotion’s properties and attuned to how rational actors think should help policymakers become better strategists. Strategists should understand that neither reputation nor cost makes a signal credible. Instead, feelings influence what people want and what they believe. Emotion makes a signal credible.

Scientists have known for nearly twenty years that people incapable of experiencing emotion are irrational. The experience of emotion affects what and how one thinks and in strategic settings improves the chances that one will make a decision that is both rational and correct. Schelling warned game theorists not to treat strategy as if it were a branch of mathematics: In “the final analysis we are dealing with imagination as much as with logic; and the logic itself is of a fairly casuistic kind.”¹⁷⁵ Logic can help, but Schelling thought strategy depends on imagination, creativity, even aesthetics—all three of which require emotion.¹⁷⁶ The focus in international relations theory on inhuman (emotionless) rationality robs politi-

175. Schelling 1960, 58, 10.

176. See *ibid.*, 57; and Bleiker and Hutchison 2008.

cal decision makers of imagination, turning them into either passionless calculators or irrational (emotional) actors. Strategy depends on knowing how rational actors think—and that requires turning to emotion.

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