

### 3 *Standoffs: Nuclear Weapons in Crisis Bargaining*

In the previous chapter, we developed a theory about coercion in international politics. At its core, coercion is about persuading an adversary to get out of the way so that a state can achieve its foreign policy objectives without war. This endeavor is more likely to work if the coercer can convincingly say, “If you don’t get out of the way, I’ll either push you out of the way myself or cause you so much pain that you’ll acquiesce just to make it stop.” A coercive target is more likely to concede without a fight if it is faced with inevitable defeat, or if the price of victory is too much to bear.

We argued that nuclear weapons fall short as instruments of coercion. For military conquest, nuclear weapons have limited utility. Nuclear weapons can accomplish some missions better than conventional weapons (such as destroying hardened targets), but those missions are few in number and extremely rare. More importantly, they tend not to be the kinds of missions required for successful coercion. Coercion often involves seizing objects: taking territory, rescuing hostages, or liberating victims of conquest. Nuclear weapons are not useful for any of these tasks. Instead, nuclear weapons are best for inflicting pain: they destroy, irradiate, and kill indiscriminately. But their extraordinary lethality is what limits their usability in coercive contexts. For self-defense, nuclear weapons can be credible and persuasive tools of punishment. For coercion, however – when the challenger’s survival is rarely at stake – they are simply too costly to be credible.

We now turn to the empirical record to evaluate these claims. Does the evidence support our argument about the irrelevance of nuclear weapons in coercion? In this chapter, we examine coercion in its most explicit form. We analyze more than 200 instances in which one state made an explicit *compellent threat* against another state, and we assess the effect of nuclear weapons on the outcomes of these threats. The evidence is clear: states that possess nuclear weapons enjoy no more

success when making compelling threats, even when they enjoy nuclear superiority over their opponent. Moreover, we find that nuclear states are not “manipulating risk” in the way that 1960s-era nuclear strategists and some contemporary game theorists expect them to. To the contrary, leaders frequently pass up opportunities to leverage their nuclear arsenals, even when doing so might mean political defeat. In short, nuclear weapons are of little use as instruments of coercion.

### Theoretical Predictions: The Nuclear Coercionist School Versus Nuclear Skepticism Theory

In international politics, leaders would prefer to get their way without having to use military force. As a result, leaders often issue explicit warnings and threats to allow adversaries the opportunity to back down before escalating to military combat. Often these threats take the form of deterrent warnings, intended to prevent an adversary from taking certain prohibited actions. However, states also use verbal threats for coercive purposes – that is, to persuade an adversary to change its behavior or relinquish a possession. In his canonical work about military coercion, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Thomas Schelling termed these “compellent threats” – threats designed to compel an opponent into taking action that it would not otherwise take.<sup>1</sup>

Compellent threats represent coercive diplomacy in its most overt and explicit form. For this reason, they are a useful place to begin our inquiry about the coercive effects of nuclear weapons. Before looking at the empirical record, however, we first clarify what our theory – and its chief competitor – expects to find. Each theory makes competing predictions about how nuclear weapons influence (1) the efficacy of coercive threats and (2) the level of escalation during crises.

#### *Do Nuclear Weapons Make Coercive Threats More Effective?*

The most obvious way that nuclear weapons could aid coercive diplomacy is by making a challenger’s threats more effective. Are countries armed with nuclear weapons more likely to issue successful threats than nonnuclear states?

<sup>1</sup> Schelling (1960). Schelling discussed compellence in even greater detail in another classic book, *Arms and Influence* (1966).

### The Nuclear Coercionist View: Nuclear Arsenals Produce Coercive Victories

Nuclear weapons are the most destructive weapons known to man. The prospect of facing an attack with nuclear weapons therefore ought to be sobering for any leader engaged in a diplomatic confrontation. This basic logic underlies the nuclear coercionist prediction about nuclear weapons and compellence: that a leader faced with a coercive threat is more likely to capitulate peacefully if the adversary has nuclear weapons at its disposal. In this view, few issues short of a nation's own survival would be worth enduring a nuclear attack. When a nuclear state issues a compellent demand, the argument holds, the odds of success multiply.<sup>2</sup>

An important element of this claim, as we discussed previously, is that nuclear states possess a coercive advantage even when they do not make explicit nuclear threats. Indeed, the use of nuclear weapons has rarely been threatened explicitly in conjunction with a compellent threat. Art, for instance, notes that nuclear compellent threats historically have been "guarded, ambiguous, or leave sufficient room for backtracking."<sup>3</sup> Yet many scholars argue that nuclear weapons exert implicit crisis bargaining leverage even when they are not invoked. Henry Kissinger, for instance, warned that "overt threats have become unnecessary; every calculation of risks will have to include the Soviet stockpile of atomic weapons and ballistic missiles."<sup>4</sup> Beardsley and Asal argued along similar lines, asserting that "the possession of nuclear weapons helps states to succeed in their confrontations with other states even when they do not 'use' these weapons."<sup>5</sup> In short, according to this perspective, the mere possession of nuclear weapons enables states to make more successful threats:

**Nuclear Absolutist Prediction:** *Compellent threats from nuclear states are more likely to succeed, on average, than compellent threats from nonnuclear states.*

A more qualified version of this argument asserts that the compellent effects of nuclear weapons depend on the target's retaliatory

<sup>2</sup> Pape (1996, 38).

<sup>3</sup> Art (1980, 21).

<sup>4</sup> Kissinger (1956, 351).

<sup>5</sup> Beardsley and Asal (2009b, 296).

capabilities. If a target has nuclear weapons, this view holds, the compelling leverage of a nuclear arsenal will be neutralized. In this view, the compelling effects of nuclear weapons are particularly powerful when nuclear capabilities are one-sided – that is, when a challenger possesses nuclear weapons but the target does not. Since the target cannot threaten nuclear retaliation in response to the threat, it cannot match the challenger's bargaining leverage. When a nuclear-superior state issues a compelling threat, the logic goes, the target will be more likely to back down rather than risk provoking the challenger into exercising its nuclear advantage:

**Nuclear Relativist Prediction:** *Compellent threats from nuclear states are more likely to succeed, on average, than compellent threats from nonnuclear states only if the coercer has a nuclear advantage over the target.*

### **Nuclear Skepticism Theory: Nuclear Weapons Contribute Little to Coercive Diplomacy**

The theory developed in the previous chapter disagrees sharply with the nuclear coercionist viewpoint. We maintain that even if nuclear weapons might be effective for defending against threats to national survival, they generally are not useful for compelling adversaries to relinquish possessions or change their behavior. There are three main reasons why this is the case.

First, there are very few military missions that nuclear weapons can accomplish but conventional weapons cannot. Indeed, for many critical missions, nuclear weapons are actually less useful. Compellent threats often center on disputed cities and territories that a challenger seeks to obtain from the target state. Coercive demands for these objects would be more effective if the challenger could threaten to seize the item by force, since the target might decide to forgo costly fighting if it expects to lose the object anyway. Nuclear weapons, however, contribute little to a challenger's ability to seize possessions. Although nuclear weapons can destroy enemy forces that stand in the way of an invading military, an offensive nuclear attack could destroy the very object that prompted the dispute. Except in rare conditions, it will be difficult for a nuclear state to use its arsenal to physically wrest away an item that the target refuses to relinquish.

Instead, a nuclear state might hope to coerce a target by threatening to attack the target's valued possessions. A challenger could threaten

to incinerate a target state's capital city, for example, unless it relinquished a disputed territory. But this possibility highlights the second major limitation of nuclear weapons: the costs of executing nuclear punishment would likely be tremendous. A state that launched a nuclear attack to achieve compelling objectives would provoke international backlash, potentially triggering economic sanctions and international isolation, encouraging nuclear proliferation, and provoking other states to align against it. Faced with such costs, crisis challengers will find it difficult to threaten nuclear punishment credibly except under extreme circumstances.

A third and related problem is that the stakes in coercive crises are rarely dire for the coercer. The exorbitant diplomatic, economic, and political costs of executing a nuclear threat might be worth paying if the benefits of doing so were equally high – but for coercers, this is rarely the case. Whereas states issuing deterrent threats are more likely to believe that their existence (or that of their governing regime) is at risk, coercive threats generally address less dire issues such as disputed territory or an objectionable policy. This is not to say that the stakes for coercers are low – from the coercer's perspective, they certainly are not. But they are rarely so high as to outweigh the tremendous price that the coercer would pay for using nuclear weapons against a target, especially a nonnuclear target.

Consider a few illustrative examples. Possessing nuclear weapons did not help China compel Vietnam to terminate its invasion of Cambodia in 1979. Nuclear forces also did not aid Britain's attempt to compel Egypt to peacefully reopen the Suez Canal in 1956, nor did they help the United States and its allies expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait without a fight in 1991. These cases are all notable because the issue at stake was important enough to the coercer that the use of nuclear weapons might have been considered plausible, but the challenger's threats failed. Compelling threats from nuclear-armed challengers have even failed in instances when the target's acquiescence would have been relatively inconsequential for its national security. For instance, nuclear weapons did not help South Africa coerce several of its neighbors into cracking down on African National Congress (ANC) insurgents during the 1980s. And the U.S. nuclear arsenal did not help in securing the release of hostages held at the American embassy in Tehran from 1979 to 1981.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The hostages were released in 1981, but not as a result of American compelling threats.

In principle, nuclear states could overcome credibility problems by making coercive threats that “leave something to chance,” as Schelling and others have suggested. They could, for example, order a nuclear alert or forward-deploy nuclear missiles after making a demand. However, nuclear brinkmanship is costly, and leaders prefer to maintain control rather than cede it. Most of the time, then, leaders lack the will to do what it takes to make coercive nuclear threats potentially believable. Assuming that they recognize this in advance, leaders are unlikely to view nuclear brinkmanship as a solution to the credibility problem.

Thus, our theory suggests that nuclear weapons provide challengers with little, if any, additional compellent leverage in crises:

**Nuclear Skepticism Prediction:** *Compellent threats from nuclear states are no more effective, on average, than threats from nonnuclear states.*

### *Do Nuclear Weapons Influence Crisis Escalation?*

Nuclear weapons may affect the dynamics of crisis bargaining in another respect: they could influence the way that coercers behave during disputes, even if they do not ultimately force targets to capitulate. In particular, having nuclear weapons might embolden challengers to escalate military crises. Do nuclear weapons embolden states to take dangerous risks during crisis encounters?

### **The Nuclear Coercionist View: Nuclear Coercers Push Harder in Crises**

According to the coercionist perspective, nuclear weapons motivate states to escalate crises and launch risky gambles. In turn, these risky gambles, according to the logic of brinkmanship, are the reason nuclear states prevail more often. The reason nuclear states are more willing to escalate is simple: from the standpoint of nuclear-armed coercers, war would be relatively more costly for their opponents. Knowing this, nuclear coercers can raise the ante during crises with greater confidence. This logic is fundamental to the nuclear coercionist perspective, particularly the version of the theory that emphasizes brinkmanship as a tool of coercion. Indeed, some scholars in this camp suggest that nuclear states prevail in crises precisely because they push harder during these “competitions in risk taking.”<sup>7</sup> This view implies

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Nitze (1976/1977) and McDonough (2006).

that having nuclear weapons emboldens countries to take greater risks during crises:

**Nuclear Absolutist Prediction:** *Nuclear states are more likely to escalate coercive crises, on average, than nonnuclear states.*

As before, the degree to which nuclear weapons embolden challengers to engage in brinkmanship may depend on the nuclear capabilities of targets. If the target also possesses nuclear weapons, a nuclear-armed challenger may not be able to impose higher costs than its opponent. In that case, nuclear weapons would not necessarily encourage escalatory behavior. This leads to a more qualified prediction:

**Nuclear Relativist Prediction:** *Nuclear states are more likely to escalate coercive crises, on average, only if the coercer has a nuclear advantage over the target.*

### **Nuclear Skepticism Theory: Nuclear Coercers Do Not Take Greater Risks**

We argue, by contrast, that nuclear weapons do not cause states to take greater risks during crises. Like targets, challengers recognize that coercive nuclear threats are usually incredible. In most coercive episodes, the likelihood of nuclear use is exceedingly low – so low that challengers often rule out the nuclear option entirely. The possibility of a nuclear attack is rarely even mentioned by leaders. Indeed, scholars have observed a strong inhibition among government officials against even the suggestion of nuclear escalation, especially in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Having nuclear arsenals (or nuclear superiority), therefore, does not necessarily provide a challenger with peace of mind. Even if a crisis escalates to war, the nuclear option will remain off the table most of the time.

To illustrate, consider the U.S. threat against Serbia over ethnic cleansing in Kosovo in 1999. It would be hard to argue that the U.S. nuclear arsenal encouraged President Bill Clinton to push harder during this crisis. No senior U.S. official (to our knowledge) suggested that the use of nuclear weapons might be considered if Serbia did not comply. The United States did, in fact, ratchet up the pressure on Serbia,

<sup>8</sup> Tannenwald (2007) and Paul (2009).

but it strains credulity to suggest that it did so because it had nuclear weapons.

**Nuclear Skepticism Prediction:** *Nuclear states are not more likely to escalate coercive crises, on average, than nonnuclear states.*

### Collecting Data on Compellent Threats

How can we go about evaluating these competing claims? Choosing where to look for evidence is a critical issue in any academic study. The reliability of one's results depends, in part, on whether the evidence is appropriate for the question being investigated. If unreliable or inappropriate data are used, the study will be unable to provide a satisfying answer to the question that inspired it in the first place. A scientist who believes he has stumbled upon a drug for curing cancer should test it on a set of cancer patients – not on patients whose only affliction is a common cold.

One way we could evaluate the effectiveness of nuclear coercion would be to pull a prepackaged collection of historical data off the shelf – like shopping in a grocery store. International relations scholars have many such options. For example, some studies have used the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) data set, a database maintained by scholars at Duke University and the University of Southern California, to evaluate whether nuclear states win crises more often than nonnuclear states.<sup>9</sup> Other studies of coercion in international relations use data from the Correlates of War Project, another large-scale data collection effort that aims to catalog international incidents involving military threats or action.

For our purposes, however, these data sets have significant limitations. For the most part, they were designed to assess the causes and frequency of conflict – not the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy or compellence. As a result, they suffer from several problems that force us to look elsewhere for appropriate data.

First, the data sets used in these studies do not actually contain very many coercive threats. A recent analysis of quantitative data sets in international relations found that roughly eighty-five percent of the crisis observations in the ICB data set do not contain a coercive threat.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For example, Beardsley and Asal (2009b).

<sup>10</sup> Downes and Sechser (2012).



The Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data set, also commonly used to evaluate crisis outcomes, fared even worse: the same analysis found that barely ten percent of the disputes in the MID data set contain threats. Instead, most crises in these data sets revolve around trespassing fishing boats, minor border clashes, and other trivial events in which no coercive diplomacy was attempted. Yet many studies assume otherwise, leading to historically inaccurate conclusions. For example, the ICB data set lists the 1964 Congolese hostage crisis as a victory for the United States since Belgian paratroopers used U.S. military transports to rescue hundreds of civilians taken captive by Congolese rebels.<sup>11</sup> The data set also lists the crisis as a defeat for the Soviet Union because the Soviets publicly denounced the rescue operation. Quantitative models using the ICB data set therefore consider this a case of one nuclear state achieving “victory” over another.<sup>12</sup> Yet this interpretation is misleading. The United States did not attempt to coerce the Soviets in any way during this crisis: the United States did not make any threats, and the Soviets did not make any concessions. The case therefore does not belong in a data set of coercive threats. Unfortunately, since the ICB and MID data sets do not distinguish cases containing threats from those that do not, researchers studying nuclear coercion cannot readily exclude (or recode) such cases in their empirical analyses.

A second problem is that these data sets often conflate military and coercive outcomes. To determine whether nuclear-armed states make more effective threats, one naturally needs to know the outcomes of threats that are made. Data sets such as ICB and MID provide some of this information – but, crucially, they do not distinguish between crisis victories achieved by brute force from those achieved through successful coercive diplomacy. For instance, many studies of coercive diplomacy treat the 1991 Gulf War as a “crisis victory” for the United States and its coalition partners, on the grounds that the U.S.-led coalition ultimately won the war. Yet the compelling threat associated with this crisis was a clear failure: the U.S. ultimatum demanding Iraq’s evacuation from Kuwait was rejected, thus necessitating the war in the first place. This case – like dozens of other military victories in the data set – should not be classified as a success for coercive diplomacy since

<sup>11</sup> Brecher and Wilkenfeld (1997).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Kroenig (2013).

the central purpose of making a threat is to achieve one's objectives without large-scale military action. With so many military victories coded as successes in these data sets, it is unclear whether studies that employ them can tell us anything about the effectiveness of coercive threats.

### *The Militarized Compellent Threats Data Set*

We use a better data set to evaluate the effectiveness of threats made by nuclear-armed states. Sechser's Militarized Compellent Threats (MCT) data set contains information about 210 interstate compellent threats – that is, episodes in which one or more challengers issued a compellent demand against a target and threatened to use force if it did not comply – comprising 242 challenger-target dyads overall.<sup>13</sup> The data set, which spans the years 1918–2001, contains both well-known superpower crises (for example, the 1956 Suez crisis), as well as lesser-known disputes between small states (for example, the 1995 Hanish Islands crisis between Eritrea and Yemen). Likewise, it includes crises in which nuclear weapons seemed to play a central role (for example, the Cuban missile crisis) as well as episodes in which the possibility of nuclear attack was never mentioned (for example, the 1993–1994 Bosnian crises). It is important to note that the data set does not include compellent demands made by states already at war.<sup>14</sup>

The structure of the MCT data set is ideal for assessing the coercive utility of nuclear weapons. First, it contains only compellent threats, defined as “*interstate demands to change the status quo which are backed by the threat of military force.*”<sup>15</sup> Episodes in the MCT data set have two components: a coercive *demand* and a *threat* to use military

<sup>13</sup> Sechser (2011). The number of challenger-target dyads (242) is greater than the number of threat episodes (210) because some demands are jointly issued by more than one challenger. However, the findings below are largely unaltered if we include only one challenger (the principal challenger) for each multilateral threat in the MCT data set.

<sup>14</sup> In Chapters 5 and 6, we examine several cases of wartime nuclear coercion.

<sup>15</sup> Sechser (2011, 379). Emphasis in original. Deterrence and compellence are often difficult to distinguish, of course, because disputants often disagree about what constitutes the legitimate status quo. The MCT data set requires that compellent threats contain a demand for a material change in the status quo in order to be included in the data set. This helps address the problem of subjectivity by establishing an objective reference point for differentiating deterrence and compellence. See Sechser (2011, 380–382).

force. While threats to use force are often transmitted verbally, they may also be communicated implicitly through militarized actions such as troop maneuvers or exercises. Both varieties are included in the MCT data set. However, the data set consciously excludes military clashes, raids, and wars in which coercive demands were not made. It therefore allows us to distinguish coercive diplomatic successes from military victories, thus providing a more valid assessment of the extent to which nuclear weapons make compelling threats more effective.

Second, the MCT data set is not restricted to nuclear crises; it contains threats made by nuclear and nonnuclear challengers alike.<sup>16</sup> This variation is essential because it allows us to answer a central question in the study of nuclear coercion: do nuclear challengers succeed more often than nonnuclear challengers? Studies that examine nuclear crises alone fail to answer this question since they have no baseline against which nuclear states can be compared. The research design employed here addresses this problem by comparing threats made by nuclear and nonnuclear states, thus yielding more reliable inferences about the relative benefits of nuclear possession.<sup>17</sup>

### *Evaluating the Coercive Effects of Nuclear Weapons*

The central objective of our analysis is to determine whether nuclear-armed states enjoy consistently higher odds of success when making compelling threats. To achieve this, we use a common statistical model designed for precisely this purpose. Using our database of compelling threats, this model estimates the effect that a variety of factors – both nuclear and otherwise – exert on the probability that a given compelling threat will succeed.

Our approach first requires us to determine which threats in the database were successful, and which were not. We use the information contained in the MCT database to measure the target's level of compliance with the challenger's demands. We define a successful compelling threat as a threat that meets two criteria: first, the target

<sup>16</sup> In the MCT data set, forty-nine of 242 challengers (twenty percent) possessed nuclear weapons at the time they made compelling threats.

<sup>17</sup> For this reason, it is appropriate to include cases occurring before 1945, since the prenuclear era provides valuable information about the outcomes of compelling threats made by nonnuclear states. As we note below, however, the results are unchanged if the study sample is limited to the nuclear age.

voluntarily complied with all of the challenger's demands, and second, the challenger did not have to use military force to achieve its goals. By this definition, more than thirty percent of the compellent threats in the data set were successful, suggesting that successful compellent threats are quite common, even if compellence is indeed "harder" than deterrence.<sup>18</sup>

Next, we need to measure the possession of nuclear weapons by the states in the database. Which states had nuclear weapons? Which enjoyed some level of nuclear advantage over their opponents? Which states had the greatest advantage? We measure nuclear capabilities in five different ways. First, we simply distinguish between states that possess nuclear weapons and those that do not. Second, we count the actual number of nuclear weapons that states possess, to obtain a more accurate measurement of their nuclear arsenals. Third, we devise a crude measure of nuclear "superiority" by determining which state in a "dyad" pair had more operational nuclear warheads in its arsenal. Fourth, we calculate the ratio of a crisis challenger's warheads to those of its target. Fifth, we measure how many more (or fewer) nuclear weapons the challenger possessed than the target, since a ratio would not necessarily account for large numerical disparities in nuclear arsenal sizes.<sup>19</sup>

Our analysis also accounts for several other factors that are often believed to influence coercive diplomacy outcomes, including the balance of conventional power and the history of conflict within each dyad. Two additional factors are worth mentioning here. First, relative stakes are important for explaining crisis outcomes. States with critical interests at stake should be more tolerant of costs and less likely to back down without a fight. Specifically, issues related to territory and leadership are generally thought to be more important to states than matters of policy and ideology. We therefore distinguish between threats made over territory or leadership issues – roughly sixty-eight percent of the compellent threats in the data set – and threats made over smaller stakes.

Second, signals of resolve during a crisis could impact a threat's credibility: specifically, challengers who signal their willingness to use force

<sup>18</sup> Schelling (1966).

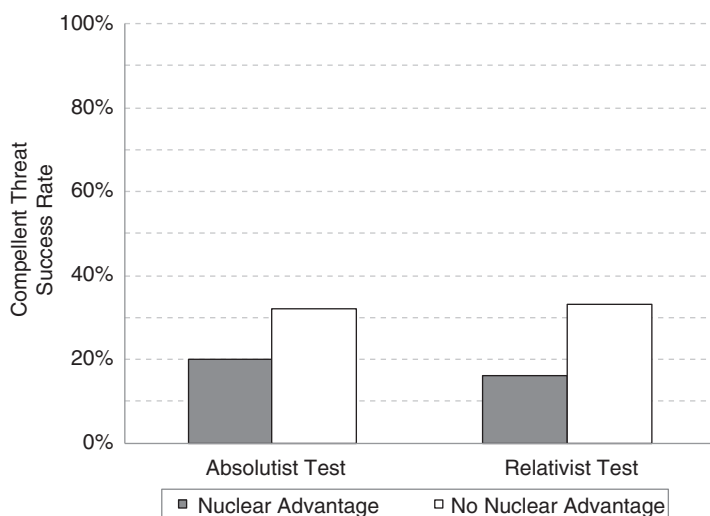
<sup>19</sup> For example, a warhead ratio of 2:1 would yield the same value as a ratio of 20,000:10,000, even though the numerical gap is significantly larger in the latter case.

may be more likely to prevail.<sup>20</sup> We address this by identifying demonstrations of military force and conspicuous military mobilizations undertaken by challengers.<sup>21</sup>

## The Evidence: Nuclear Weapons and Compellent Threats

### *Coercive Threat Success*

Is nuclear possession correlated with successful coercion? Figure 3.1 offers a first glimpse at the answer, reporting overall threat success rates for both nuclear and nonnuclear challengers. It demonstrates that challengers possessing the bomb are not more likely to make successful compellent threats overall. Indeed, they actually may be somewhat less likely to make successful threats: we observe success in just twenty percent of the cases involving nuclear challengers, compared to thirty-two



**Figure 3.1** Nuclear weapons and compellent threat success.

<sup>20</sup> Fearon (1994).

<sup>21</sup> One could argue that nuclear-armed challengers may be more likely to signal their resolve during crises, because they are more powerful than their nonnuclear counterparts. If true, the effects of nuclear possession could be picked up by the resolve variable. We address this issue in the appendix by replicating all of our regression models without the measure of resolve, and the results are similar.

percent of nonnuclear challengers.<sup>22</sup> Of the more than 200 compelling threats in the data set, just ten involve successful coercion by nuclear weapons states. Having a clear nuclear advantage does not seem to make things any better for challengers, as implied by nuclear relativists. When they have a dyadic nuclear “monopoly,” nuclear-armed challengers make effective threats sixteen percent of the time, compared to thirty-three percent otherwise.<sup>23</sup>

We now turn to a more complex statistical analysis, the details of which are described in the appendix, to find out whether this result holds up under scrutiny. This analysis accounts for the nuclear status of the challenger and the target, as well as the other variables described above. The coercionist school expects that we should find measures of nuclear possession to be positively associated with successful compelling threats, indicating that challengers possessing nuclear weapons (or nuclear superiority) are more likely to issue successful coercive challenges. Our theory of nuclear skepticism, however, expects that possessing nuclear weapons should have little effect on compelling threat outcomes.

The findings from this analysis are unambiguous: nuclear skepticism receives strong and consistent support, whereas the nuclear coercionist school finds barely any support at all. Based on our statistical model, the predicted probability of successful coercion declines by twelve points (from forty-one percent to twenty-nine percent) when the challenger’s status changes from nonnuclear to nuclear and all other factors are held constant.<sup>24</sup> However, from a statistical standpoint, the challenger’s nuclear status is insignificant: the success rates for nuclear and nonnuclear challengers are statistically indistinguishable. Even against nonnuclear targets, nuclear-armed challengers do not enjoy a coercive advantage. Indeed, our findings contradict the nuclear relativist prediction: when facing nonnuclear opponents, the predicted probability of success for nuclear challengers is twenty-four percent, compared to forty percent when nonnuclear coercers square off against other nonnuclear states.<sup>25</sup>

It could be the case, however, that the size of one’s nuclear arsenal, rather than the mere fact of nuclear possession, influences compelling threat outcomes. We therefore repeated our statistical models using

<sup>22</sup> This difference is statistically significant at the ninety percent level.

<sup>23</sup> This difference is statistically significant at the ninety-five percent level.

<sup>24</sup> These calculations are based on Model 1 in the appendix.

<sup>25</sup> These calculations are based on Model 2 in the appendix.

several alternative ways of measuring nuclear capabilities, as described earlier. However, *none* of the other measures of nuclear capabilities yielded results supportive of the nuclear coercionist hypotheses. In every case, a challenger's nuclear weapons – or nuclear advantage – was unrelated to the likelihood that its threats would succeed.

We then repeated our analyses using two more lenient measures of successful compellent threats. First, whereas our original coding scheme defined a successful threat as one that achieved compliance with no military force, we created a new dependent variable that reclassified compellent threats as successful even if the challenger used limited military force, as long as the target suffered fewer than 100 fatalities. A second reclassification adopted this 100-fatality threshold in addition to a more lenient standard for compliance, coding threats as successful if the target complied with any (as opposed to all) of the challenger's demands. The results remain the same: nuclear weapons do not make for more effective compellent threats.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Manipulation of Risk*

Do nuclear weapons embolden challengers to escalate crises? If it were true that atomic arsenals give states advantages during metaphorical games of Russian roulette, we should have found that coercive threats issued by nuclear challengers were more effective, on average, than demands made by nonnuclear states. Instead, we found that nuclear states do not prevail more frequently than nonnuclear states in coercive crisis bargaining. We explore this issue further here, examining more directly whether nuclear states are greater risk takers during international crises.

Figure 3.2 suggests that they are not. This figure compares the escalatory behavior of nuclear and nonnuclear states during the crises in our data set of compellent threats. Specifically, it reports how often each type of state engaged in some sort of military demonstration or show-of-force during the crisis – precisely the sort of behavior that nuclear coercionists see as central to brinkmanship and the escalation of risk. The figure shows that there is actually very little difference between nuclear and nonnuclear challengers in terms of

<sup>26</sup> As a further check, we replicated these analyses using a limited sample that includes only post-1945 observations. The findings remain similar.

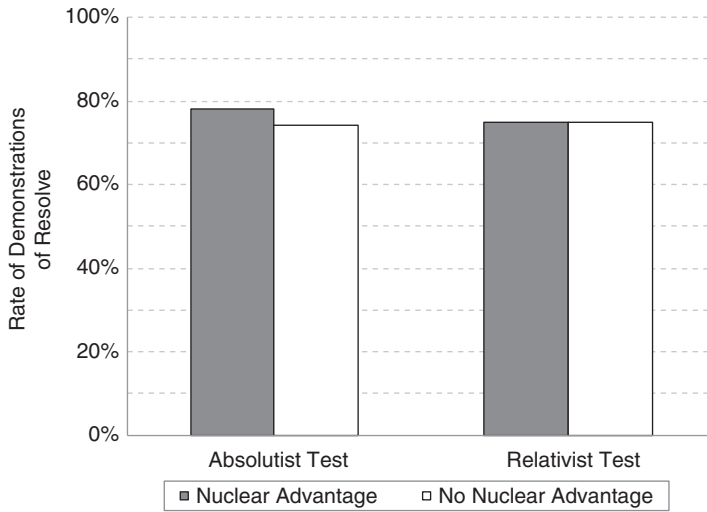


Figure 3.2 Nuclear weapons and demonstrations of resolve.

their propensity to take military risks during coercive crises. Nuclear-armed challengers engage in escalatory behavior roughly seventy-eight percent of the time, compared to seventy-four percent for nonnuclear challengers.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the rate at which states escalate when they have a nuclear monopoly is identical to the rate of escalation when they do not (seventy-five percent in both cases). If nuclear weapons systematically made states more willing to accept the risk of war in coercive crises, as the nuclear coercionist school suggests, the difference in the behavior of nuclear and nonnuclear challengers should be far more striking than what we actually observe.

This initial analysis could be misleading. It does not account for other factors that might influence escalatory behavior, so the simple comparison depicted in Figure 3.2 may not reflect the true relationship between nuclear weapons and crisis risk taking. We carry out a more rigorous statistical analysis that accounts for several other relevant considerations: the stakes in a crisis, the relative balance of conventional military power, whether the challenger and the target are both democracies, geographic contiguity, and the distance between the challenger and the target.<sup>28</sup> Our findings reaffirm our earlier conclusion.

<sup>27</sup> This difference is not statistically significant.

<sup>28</sup> These same variables are included in a recent study that supports the nuclear coercionist position that nuclear weapons embolden challengers to take greater



Regardless of how we measure the challenger's nuclear status, it is not statistically associated with a greater likelihood of military escalation. Even when challengers have nuclear superiority, they are not more likely than nonnuclear states to display resolve. Overall, the evidence supports our theory that coercive nuclear threats lack credibility at a fundamental level: the behavior of coercive targets and challengers is not systematically related to the nuclear balance.

### *Possible "Selection Effects"*

These results suggest that neither nuclear possession nor nuclear superiority is associated with more effective compellent threats. However, it is possible that this finding is due to what social scientists call "selection effects" in the data.<sup>29</sup> Broadly speaking, a selection effect is a hidden process that subtly influences the kinds of cases we observe, while causing other cases to not appear at all. If not addressed, selection effects can cause scholars to draw the wrong conclusions from observational data by systematically hiding cases that would alter those conclusions.

When studying the relationship between nuclear weapons and compellent threat outcomes, selection effects are a potentially serious problem. Specifically, it could be the case that nuclear states tend to issue threats over more valuable issues, thus selecting themselves into crises in which threats are inherently less likely to work.<sup>30</sup> If true, then the coercive benefits of nuclear weapons might be obscured in the compellent threats we observe, since nuclear and nonnuclear states would not be playing on a level field. We might then conclude that nuclear states succeed at lower rates than nonnuclear states, when in reality the lower success rate was the result of other factors. To definitively test this possibility, one would need to conduct a controlled experiment, randomly assigning nuclear weapons to some compellence challengers while holding other crisis conditions – in particular, the issues at stake – constant. Since this is obviously an unrealistic solution, we use three

risks during crises. Adopting that study's design, therefore, should make it harder to find evidence in favor of nuclear skepticism theory. See Kroenig et al. (2015).

<sup>29</sup> Morrow (1989) and Fearon (2002).

<sup>30</sup> Fearon (2002).

alternative techniques to evaluate the severity of selection effects in the data.

First, we examine the cases in the data set to determine whether failed compellent threats from nuclear states indeed tend to be over high-stakes issues. Table 3.1 lists all episodes in the MCT data set in which nuclear challengers failed to compel their adversaries according to our rules. This list provides little support for the selection effects hypothesis: most cases on the list are not, in fact, high-stakes crises, but rather crises in which the target could have acquiesced without significantly harming its national security. For example, in the *Pueblo*, *Mayaguez*, and Iran embassy crises, U.S. threats failed to compel non-nuclear adversaries to release American hostages, even though their release would have had little material consequence for the target state. In these cases, the issue at stake was considerably more important to the challenger than the target, yet nuclear superiority did not make the challenger's compellent threats effective. This suggests that the failure of compellent threats by nuclear states has been due to the limited coercive potential of nuclear weapons rather than disproportionately difficult crisis conditions.

More concretely, we can measure the frequency of high-stakes demands – that is, demands over leadership or territory – in the MCT data set to evaluate whether nuclear powers are more likely to be involved in high-stakes crises. If crises involving nuclear challengers are disproportionately likely to involve high stakes, then the STAKES variable would detect this trend. However, nuclear powers are actually less likely than nonnuclear states to make compellent demands over high-stakes issues: fifty-one percent of demands made by nuclear challengers in the MCT data set are related to territory or leadership, compared to seventy-two percent for nonnuclear challengers.

A second method for evaluating selection effects is to assess whether the coercive effects of nuclear weapons depend on the stakes of a crisis. If self-selection into high-stakes crises puts nuclear challengers at an inherent disadvantage, then the analysis should distinguish between high- and low-stakes crises in order to properly estimate the effects of nuclear possession. It turns out, as shown in the appendix, that nuclear states neither enjoy a consistent advantage in high-stakes crises (when nuclear threats might be most credible) nor in low-stakes crises (when the risk of nuclear punishment is most likely to outweigh the issue at stake).

Table 3.1 *Unsuccessful compellent threats from nuclear-armed challengers, 1945–2001.*

Challenger	Target	Year	Demand
China	India	1965	Withdraw from outposts in Kashmir
China	India	1965	Destroy military structures along Chinese border
China	Vietnam	1979	End occupation of Cambodia
France	Serb Republic	1993	Accept Bosnian peace plan
France	Serbia	1998	Stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo
Great Britain	Saudi Arabia	1952	Withdraw from Buraimi Oasis
Great Britain	Egypt	1956	Open Suez Canal
Great Britain	Argentina	1982	Withdraw from Falkland Islands
Great Britain	Iraq	1990	Withdraw troops from Kuwait
Great Britain	Serb Republic	1993	Accept Bosnian peace plan
Great Britain	Serbia	1998	Stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo
Great Britain	Iraq	1998	Readmit weapons inspectors
Great Britain	Afghanistan	2001	Extradite al Qaeda leaders
India	Pakistan	2001	Suppress terrorist organizations
Israel	Egypt	1967	Reopen Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping
Israel	Lebanon	1970	Suppress Palestinian commandos
Israel	Lebanon	1972	Expel Palestinian guerrillas
Israel	Syria	1978	Stop shelling Beirut
Israel	Syria	1981	Remove surface-to-air missile batteries
South Africa	Mozambique	1981	Stop supporting African National Congress (ANC) rebels
South Africa	Lesotho	1985	Stop supporting ANC rebels
South Africa	Botswana	1985 (×2)	Stop supporting ANC rebels
South Africa	Zimbabwe	1985	Stop supporting ANC rebels
South Africa	Zambia	1985	Stop supporting ANC rebels
Soviet Union	Yugoslavia	1949	Stop repression of Soviet nationals
Soviet Union	Czechoslovakia	1968	Reverse political reforms*
Soviet Union	China	1969	Withdraw from Zhenbao Island
Soviet Union	China	1969	Participate in territorial dispute negotiations*
Soviet Union	China	1979	Withdraw from Vietnam
United States	Vietnam	1964	Stop supporting Viet Cong
United States	North Korea	1968	Release USS <i>Pueblo</i>
United States	Cambodia	1975	Release USS <i>Mayaguez</i>
United States	Iran	1979	Release American embassy hostages
United States	Panama	1989	Remove Manuel Noriega from power
United States	Iraq	1990	Withdraw troops from Kuwait
United States	Serb Republic	1993	Accept Bosnian peace plan
United States	Serbia	1998	Stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo
United States	Afghanistan	1998	Extradite Osama bin Laden
United States	Iraq	1998	Readmit weapons inspectors
United States	Afghanistan	2001	Extradite al Qaeda leaders

NOTE: Targets denoted with asterisks complied after minor military combat. These cases are recoded as successful threats under a looser definition of compellence success.

Third, we employ a statistical model that is designed to account explicitly for the possibility of selection effects (see the appendix). This model simultaneously estimates both the likelihood that a compelling threat will be made and the probability that it will succeed. By modeling these two outcomes jointly, we address the possibility that nuclear states may coerce their adversaries without having to make threats at all. However, the findings do not change significantly: states possessing nuclear weapons are not more likely to issue successful compelling threats, even when we adjust for factors that explain the onset of crises. This analysis also casts doubt on the notion that nuclear weapons embolden states to behave more aggressively. We find that nuclear states are not more likely than their nonnuclear counterparts to issue compelling threats in the first place.

### **A Look at the Cases**

Let us now take a a brief look at the cases in our quantitative data set to be sure that the statistical models are not missing important dynamics.<sup>31</sup> The overall picture confirms our theory of nuclear skepticism, illustrating the minimal role played by nuclear weapons during coercive crises in the last seven decades.

A useful place to begin is Table 3.1, which lists all forty-one cases in the MCT data set in which nuclear-armed challengers failed to compel their adversaries. This list includes a wide variety of cases, including failed efforts by China to coerce territorial concessions from India without force during the 1960s, unsuccessful Soviet attempts to coerce China in the 1960s and 1970s, and failed efforts by the United States to compel North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and other adversaries.

One lesson that jumps out immediately from this list is that compelling threats from nuclear-armed challengers have often failed even under conditions that ought to have facilitated their success. In many such cases, it was at least conceivable that the use of nuclear weapons might be considered, yet the challenger's threats failed. Britain and France, for example, tried to coerce Egypt into reopening the Suez Canal in 1956 – an issue viewed by both countries as having vital national economic and security importance. Despite Britain's possession of nuclear weapons, however, the threat was unsuccessful, and the two allies had to resort to war. Similarly, the United States attempted

<sup>31</sup> We thoroughly examine the most serious nuclear crises in Part III.

to coerce the government of Afghanistan into surrendering Osama bin Laden following the 2001 terrorist attacks against New York and Washington, D.C. Afghanistan, however, refused, despite America's keen interest in finding bin Laden and its overwhelming level of nuclear superiority.

These cases illustrate the three central components of our theory of nuclear skepticism. First, in almost all of the cases in Table 3.1, nuclear weapons were either militarily useless or redundant to conventional capabilities for achieving the coercer's objectives. Using nuclear weapons against a poor and rural Afghanistan in 2001, for example, would not have helped the United States find Osama bin Laden – indeed, it required more than a decade of careful military and intelligence work to achieve that objective. In the Suez crisis, Britain might have been able to use nuclear weapons to destroy Egyptian military formations near the canal, but it already possessed conventional capabilities adequate for the job. The remaining cases in Table 3.1 have a similar flavor: either nuclear weapons had little military utility, or they were redundant to the coercer's existing capabilities. In each case, nuclear weapons added little to the challenger's coercive leverage.

Second, although we can never know for certain what costs might have been imposed on the coercers in Table 3.1 for using nuclear weapons, one can surmise that they would have been severe. Britain and France faced an international uproar simply for using conventional force in the Suez crisis; using nuclear weapons likely would have triggered a much higher level of backlash. Likewise, had the United States used nuclear weapons against any of the opponents listed in the table – all of whom were nonnuclear at the time – the diplomatic and political reaction would have been unprecedented.

Although such costs might be worth paying in some circumstances, Table 3.1 affirms that for coercive challengers, the stakes are rarely high enough to justify such costs. In none of the cases on this list was the survival of the coercer – or even the coercer's government – at stake. This is not to say that the stakes in these cases were trivial – surely they were not, as evidenced by the fact that the challengers in these cases often opted for war. However, they were not worth the price of violating an important international opprobrium and risking the wrath of friends and enemies alike.

It is also telling that challengers rarely “manipulated risk” with nuclear weapons in the cases listed in Table 3.1. In two of these cases – the Sino-Soviet crisis of 1969 and the Indo-Pakistani crisis of

**Table 3.2** *Successful compellent threats from nuclear-armed challengers, 1945–2001.*

Challenger	Target	Year	Demand
France	Serb Republic	1994	Withdraw heavy artillery from Sarajevo
Great Britain	Serb Republic	1994	Withdraw heavy artillery from Sarajevo
Soviet Union	France	1956	Withdraw forces from Suez canal region
Soviet Union	Great Britain	1956	Withdraw forces from Suez canal region
United States	Dominican Republic	1961	Permit elections following Trujillo assassination
United States	Soviet Union	1962	Withdraw missiles from Cuba
United States	Soviet Union	1970	Cease construction of submarine base in Cuba
United States	Serb Republic	1994	Withdraw heavy artillery from Sarajevo
United States	Haiti	1994	Restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power
United States	Iraq	1997	Readmit weapons inspectors

2001–2002 – countries did engage in significant nuclear brinkmanship.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as we will show later in the book, these crises fail to clearly support the conventional wisdom about nuclear superiority and risk manipulation.

This does not necessarily imply, however, that nuclear weapons have *never* been useful for coercive diplomacy. In fact, there are ten instances in the MCT data set in which a nuclear-armed challenger issued a successful coercive threat. Table 3.2 lists these cases. After accounting for compellent threats made jointly by multiple challengers, these observations represent a total of seven crisis episodes. If there is any evidence that nuclear weapons aid compellent threats, we would find it in these episodes. In two crises (Suez and Cuba), threats of

<sup>32</sup> Some have suggested that Soviet nuclear coercion worked against the Chinese in 1969. We classify this case as “apparently successful” in Part III, and discuss it at length in Chapter 6.

nuclear attack were implied, but even then the coercive effects of nuclear weapons were ambiguous (see Chapter 6). The other cases are noteworthy for the total absence of nuclear threats, implicit or otherwise. None of the seven cases provide clear support for the view that nuclear weapons convey the ability to blackmail other states.

## Conclusion

Do nuclear weapons improve the effectiveness of compellent threats? Using a database of more than 200 militarized compellent threats from 1918 to 2001, this chapter presents evidence that they do not. Compellent threats from nuclear states have not been more successful than threats from nonnuclear states, even after accounting for other factors that influence coercive diplomacy outcomes. Moreover, this finding is robust to a wide variety of measurements of nuclear superiority, compellence success, and possible selection effects. In contrast to what Schelling and others have argued, this chapter showed that countries rarely manipulate risk with their nuclear arsenals to coerce their adversaries. Collectively, these results support our argument that nuclear weapons are not credible instruments of compellence in international politics.

To be sure, the findings presented here should not be taken to imply that nuclear weapons have no compellent value whatsoever. The analysis in this chapter showed that nuclear weapons do not provide additional compellent leverage to their possessors beyond what is already afforded by their conventional capabilities. But this does not mean that nuclear weapons have never played a role in crises triggered by compellent threats. As the Suez and Cuban missile crises illustrate, nuclear weapons have indeed weighed heavily on the minds of decision makers throughout the nuclear age. The contribution of this chapter is simply to suggest that, on the whole, the outcomes of compellent threats are not systematically different when nuclear weapons are present.