Provocation, Crisis Escalation, and Inadvertent War

In the South China Sea today, Chinese efforts to build artificial islands, and U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), have led some observers to voice concern that tensions may spiral into unwanted conflict. Graham Allison, for instance, warns that a minor incident between the U.S. and China may “escalate to conflict far beyond anyone’s original intent,” even when “the consequences would be so obviously disproportionate to any gains either side could hope to achieve.”¹ Concerns of provoking unwanted conflict are indeed a perennial feature of interstate crises. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara made the case to president Kennedy that a key advantage of a naval blockade over an airstrike was that “it avoids a sudden military move which might provoke a response from the U.S.S.R which could result in escalating actions leading to general war.”² How could states provoke war if they desire peace?

In contrast to recent scenario-based approaches to study the dangers of unwanted conflict, this article revisits our theories of unwanted crisis escalation and war to identify three distinct logics in the international relations (IR) literature and then advance an underappreciated fourth logic.³ The three logics are referred to as an ‘accidental escalation logic,’ a ‘security dilemma logic,’

and a ‘crisis bargaining logic.’ Collectively, these three logics underscore the widespread concern that accidents, misunderstandings/misperceptions, and miscalculations will lead to unwanted crisis escalation. The fourth logic is the logic of provocation. This captures the notion that the behavior of states during a crisis can aggravate the adversary and counterproductively increase its willingness to fight a war rather than concede the stake in dispute. In recent years, a resurgent interest in studying interstate provocation has led to a growing literature that draws insights ranging from the study of human emotions to the study of reputation and honor. Yet, our understanding of provocation is beset by three challenges. First, if provocation is not just about some individuals getting hot-headed, it is unclear what the disparate notions of provocation mean together. Second, if provocation includes several different things, it is unclear whether and how provocation operates as a coherent and distinct mechanism from other logics, such as those based on the role of threat perceptions, as in the security dilemma, or on imperfect information about the adversary’s resolve, as in traditional crisis bargaining models.


And third, if a distinct logic of provocation exists, it is unclear how important it is for international politics. This article address these gaps. It ties existing notions of provocation into a single, unified framework; it explains how provocation operates as a distinct causal mechanism of unwanted crisis escalation and war; and it integrates this logic of provocation with the rationalist bargaining theory of war to show how strategically avoiding and engaging in provocation – both pervasive features of international politics – can affect crisis dynamics and even lead to a costly war between states that could have lived in peace.6

The unified framework of provocation combines three insights from recent IR scholarship: (1) provocation entails an increase in the adversary’s resolve,7 (2) resolve arises from an interaction between dispositional factors (i.e. individual attributes, such as risk-preferences) and situational factors (e.g. costs of war, costs of backing down),8 and (3) provocation can be distinguished at the individual- and state-levels.9 Thus, studies that view provocation as angering individuals can be seen as changing dispositional factors because anger increases risk-taking and impatience, and studies that view provocation as increasing the perceived reputational costs of backing down or honor at stake can be seen as changing situational factors for individuals because reputation and honor have inter-subjective meaning.10 At the state-level, aggregating individual reactions increase the adversary’s resolve both because it increases the adversary’s public costs of backing down and because it cuts their diplomatic and political costs of initiating conflict by providing them with a pretext to escalate. The former affect is consistent with studies that view provocation in terms of increasing the adversary’s audience

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10 Ibid., pp. 5-14 is an example of the former; Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang, “Coercion and Provocation,” pp. 12-14 is an example of the latter.
costs. These two political effects at the state-level, however, change situational factors for the adversary’s leaders, and ultimately increase the adversary’s resolve by interacting with how provoked the leaders themselves become. This unified framework ties disparate notions of provocation into a single logic, but provocation is defined and distinguished from other logics of escalation at the individual-level because changes in public opinion that affect the political costs of escalating or backing down are not driven solely by provocation. I thus define an act or incident to be provocative if it increases the adversary’s resolve over a given stake through changes in dispositional factors and situational factors that have meaning for individuals.

The combined effects of provocation both at the public and leadership levels, and both by increasing the perceived costs of backing down and the utility of war, can make an unresolved adversary become resolved for war. This effect essentially ‘ties the adversary’s hands’ for war. When both states are unresolved at the beginning of a crisis, but a deliberate war is initiated after a state becomes resolved unintentionally because of the provocative behavior of its counterpart, I refer to such a war as an inadvertent war. That such a war is logically possible and historically unaccounted for does not mean that it is highly likely or common – indeed, war is a low probability event. Yet, understanding the logic of provocation is important because it highlights two overlooked dangers in crises. First, if a previously unresolved adversary is sufficiently provoked to become resolved over a given stake, this provoked ‘switch’ in resolve is difficult to infer observationally from the adversary’s behavior during a crisis. Depending on how far along the bargaining process the disputants have come (e.g. how far they have

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escalated), an adversary that has inadvertently become resolved for war may abruptly launch a war or it may continue to bargain because war is always _ex post_ costly.¹³ One state being resolved, however, is _a necessary condition_ for a deliberately initiated war because a state must either be resolved to defend rather than concede the stake, or to fight rather than live with the status quo. Provocation can thus alter the underlying incentives of a crisis in dangerous and unobservable ways, and this behooves policymakers to avoid inadvertent provocation: neither perfect signaling nor reassuring the adversary of one’s limited intentions can fully alleviate the logic of provocation, as I explain later. Second, however, the logic of provocation can be used strategically. I analyze how a state can wield the logic of provocation to its advantage in three coercive military strategies: a naval blockade/tripwire, coercion/signaling through deliberate provocation, and military skirmishes/‘gray zone’ conflicts.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section surveys the existing literature and elaborates the unified framework of provocation; the third section distinguishes the logic of provocation from three other logics of unwanted crisis escalation; and the fourth section outlines how the logic of provocation provides a causal pathway to _inadvertent war_. The fifth section discusses the strategic use of provocation with the aid of three game-theoretic models that are developed in an online appendix. The sixth section applies the unified framework to an in-depth case study of the Sino-India War of 1962. I draw on Chinese archival sources and newly available material to show how the logic of provocation contributed to unwanted crisis escalation and the outbreak of war. The concluding section draws three policy implications for coercive diplomacy and discusses them in the context of the South China Sea dispute today.

**Provocation in International Politics**

The extant literature on interstate provocation can be divided into four strands. The first are studies that view provocation in terms of inciting individual leaders of the adversarial state. Snyder and Diesing, for instance, warn of “emotionally provoking the opponent’s leadership into rash behavior.” Second are studies that view provocation in terms of increasing the political constraints the adversary’s leadership faces from backing down – what might be called ‘inflicting’ audience costs. For example, Fearon once claimed that when a state’s “public declaration creates audience costs for the opponent as well, the state is risking provocation.”

Kurizaki later developed a game-theoretic model in which public diplomacy, unlike secret diplomacy, raises audience costs for the home state but also engages the domestic audience of the adversary to make it harder for the adversary to back down. Third, Hall advances the study of provocation by incorporating the emerging literature on emotions in international politics, particularly insights from the literature on anger in social psychology. He further distinguishes provocation at the public- and leadership-levels and outlines how outraged emotions can reinforce each other at both levels. Fourth are studies on insults, honor, and reputation. For example, O’Neill pioneers game-theoretic models that capture the strategic dynamics of insults, face, and honor; Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang recently advance a theory of provocation in terms of increasing the reputational costs of backing down and find supporting evidence through survey experiments.

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These four strands in the literature can be subsumed under a single framework. Kertzer recently developed a theory of resolve in international politics as an interaction between situational and dispositional factors.\textsuperscript{19} When applied to a crisis setting, resolve to stand firm can be understood as the relative utility of fighting a war versus backing down: a resolved defending state prefers to fight a war rather than concede the stake; a resolved offensive state (or \textit{revisionist state}) prefers to fight a war rather than live with the status quo. The situational factors that affect the utility of escalating to war include a state’s relative power, costs of war, and the spoils that can be attained through war; situational factors that affect the utility of backing down include the reputational costs of backing down, the stake that must be conceded, and audience costs. These situational factors, however, affect the relative weight of escalating to war or backing down conditioned by dispositional factors – individual-level attributes, such as risk-preferences and patience. Kertzer finds, for instance, that resolve is higher when the costs of war are lower, the reputational cost of backing down are greater, and individuals are more risk-accepting and impatient, but that more risk-accepting individuals are more sensitive to reputational costs.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{figure}
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{PROVOCATION} & \textbf{Dispositional Factors} & \textbf{Situational Factors} \\
\hline
\textbf{Individual Level} & e.g. Increase risk preferences and impatience through anger & e.g. Higher perceived reputational costs of backing down & e.g. More national honor at stake to fight \\
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\textbf{State Level} & e.g. Leader’s risk preferences and impatience increase through anger & e.g. Increases political opposition to backing down & e.g. Reduces political costs of war by providing pretext \\
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\end{tabular}
\caption{A Unified Framework of Provocation in International Politics}
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\textsuperscript{19} Kertzer, \textit{Resolve in International Politics}, pp. 27-48.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pp. 58-81.
Adopting this framework, then, the four strands of existing studies on provocation fall under the following categories. Angering individuals change the value of dispositional factors such as risk-preferences and impatience. Experiments in social psychology find that foreign threats against one’s country can generate both emotions of anger and fear/anxiety, but whereas fear and anxiety reduce risk-taking, anger makes individuals more risk-accepting and supportive of escalatory policies against the foreign threat. Increasing the reputational costs of backing down or national honor at stake changes situational factors that have meaning for individuals. Provocative acts by an adversary create additional reputational costs than simply conceding the stake in dispute, such as conceding after being humiliated or mocked; they can also make fighting appear more valuable, such as a means to redeem national honor. Reputation and honor in this context, moreover, can mean different things to different individuals. For instance, provoked individuals may view the reputational costs of backing down in terms of a ‘reputation for weakness’ or as ‘bad for prestige;’ in so far as individuals feel that some kind of reputational penalty for backing down is added after a foreign provocation, escalation will appear more appealing than before. At the state-level, a public that becomes provoked either

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21 To be clear, provocation is theorized as an incidental change in these individual-level factors, rather than a change in the underlying disposition of individuals.


because they become angry or view their country’s reputation and honor as more engaged will act as a change in a situational factor that constrains the leadership from backing down. The extent to which the greater prospects of public punishment affect a state’s resolve, however, depends on how risk-accepting and impatient the leaders themselves become after provocation.\textsuperscript{25} This unified framework of provocation is shown in Figure 1.

Integrating the existing literature on provocation into a single framework using Kertzer’s formulation of resolve, however, leaves one important situational factor unmentioned – the costs of war. Yet, provocation can also increase the adversary’s resolve by reducing their political costs of war. The costs of war can be distinguished into \textit{material costs} and \textit{political costs}: the material costs include human lives, the financial costs of deployment, and the adverse impact on the economy; the political costs include the political and diplomatic capital that must be spent to overcome public and elite opposition as well as international condemnation. These political costs can have a significant impact on decisions to wage war. Reiter, for instance, argues that one of the principle reasons that preemptive wars are so rare is because of “the political costs of striking first.”\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, he points out that the “political costs of attacking first have also stopped states from launching non-preventive, non-preemptive surprise attacks.” During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, “Attorney General Robert Kennedy argued that a surprise attack [on Cuba] would impose too high a political cost on the United States, especially given the U.S. experience with Pearl Harbor.”\textsuperscript{27} Provocation, however, reduces the political costs of war. As Lebow observes, during the Vietnam War, the “Gulf of Tonkin

\textsuperscript{25} On how individual-level characteristics of leaders affect decisions to fight a war, see Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C. Stam, and Cali M. Ellis, \textit{Why Leaders Fight} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 26-27.
incident provided [U.S. President Johnson] with the opportunity to cut dramatically the political costs of escalation;” Saunders also points out that the Gulf of Tonkin incident reduced opposition to the war particularly among U.S. political elites.28 Importantly, the costs of escalation can be distinguished from the costs of backing down: although the Gulf of Tonkin incident was unlikely to tie the hands of the U.S. government if it backed down, the incident provided Johnson with a pretext that cut the political costs of escalating. Provocation can thus reduce the political costs of war, as well as increase the costs of backing down. This view of provocation is shown in the bottom right corner of Figure 1.

The unified framework of provocation can be applied to a variety of crisis settings, such as when provocation occurs in secret and when the adversary is an autocratic state. For instance, if a provocative incident is kept secret from the public, it can increase the resolve of the adversary’s leaders by affecting dispositional factors such as risk-preferences and impatience; if the provocative incident is known to the public and the adversary is a democratic state, then the adversary’s leadership may escalate because of public pressures to punish the leadership electorally in the event that it backs down; and if a provocative incident is known to the public and the adversary is an autocratic state, then the adversary can find that it has a pretext that cuts the international political costs of taking an assertive step. Importantly, the unified framework of provocation makes clear that enraging individual leaders, increasing the costs of backing down, and lowering the political costs of war all operate under a single logic of increasing the adversary’s resolve to fight. This logic differs from three well-known logics of unwanted escalation in interstate crises.

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Provocation and Crisis Escalation

The unified framework of provocation presents a coherent logic of unwanted crisis escalation that is distinct from three existing logics: an ‘accidental escalation logic,’ a ‘security dilemma logic,’ and a ‘crisis bargaining logic.’

A major concern that arises during crises is accidental escalation. The logic of accidental escalation is seemingly intuitive, but it involves two steps. The first is the accidental escalatory step itself, such as fighter jets accidentally colliding and killing a pilot. Such accidents are fundamental to Schelling’s “threat that leaves something to chance” and hence, the strategy of brinkmanship: “If two climbers are tied together...one can credibly threaten to fall-off accidentally by standing near the brink.”29 The logic of provocation, however, differs from the logic of accidental escalation principally because it does not require any accident to occur. For example, a state that deliberately shoots down an enemy reconnaissance plane can find to its surprise that it provokes widespread outrage among the adversary’s public. The second, and arguably more important, step in the logic of accidental escalation is whether the accident will trigger additional unwanted escalation. In this regard, accidental escalation is closely associated with the notion that crises can ‘spin out of control.’ Yet, as Powell points out, a minor accident might “set the dice rolling,” but for a crisis to escalate further, it must be “followed by a series of interacting decisions” that are made to escalate deliberately.30 The logic of accidental escalation, however, does not explain why states will deliberately escalate after an accident. One reason why states may escalate after an accident is preexisting military

30 That is, unless multiple accidents occur or the accident itself ends a crisis by launching war. See Robert Powell, “The Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Nuclear Deterrence,” Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 100, No. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 75-96; and Powell, Nuclear Deterrence Theory, pp. 21-22.
rules of engagement – certain contingencies require pre-planned escalatory steps in response. But if a state is unresolved to escalate past a certain point in a crisis, the logic of accidental escalation predicts that the crisis will not escalate past that point because the state will prefer to back-down. The logic of provocation, in contrast, explains why an accident can incentivize a state to escalate more than it initially desired: an accident can provoke a state to make it more resolved. A vicious cycle of escalation can ensue if the initial accident and subsequent steps to escalate are provocative because crisis participants will keep increasing each other’s resolve.

A second logic of unwanted crisis escalation follows the logic of the security dilemma, or more precisely, the spiral model. Status quo states that take deterrent steps to ensure their security can threaten the security of other status quo states and prompt these states to take deterrent measures that ultimately undermine the first state’s security, thus triggering a spiral of unwanted escalation. This logic underscores the widespread notion that ‘misunderstandings’ will lead to unwanted crisis escalation. What is crucial for the logic of the security dilemma, however, is that states feel threatened: uncertainty about another state’s intentions and/or perceptual biases of individuals in the state – misperceptions – can make a state feel threatened even when the other state is in fact benign. But the logic of provocation differs from a threat-based logic of unwanted escalation in two crucial respects. First, a state can be provoked even if the adversary appears less threatening. For example, if the adversary’s reaction to the state’s deterrent threat is underwhelming but mocking, the state’s leaders and public may become enraged even though they view the adversary as less threatening than previously

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31 I refer to this logic of escalation as a ‘security dilemma’ logic rather than a ‘spiral model’ logic to avoid confusion with the view that crises can accidentally ‘spin/spiral out of control.’

thought.\textsuperscript{33} Second, even when states want to appear threatening, provocative threats can be counterproductive. For instance, a ‘revisionist’ adversary that poses a genuine threat of war will have an incentive to induce a capitulation of the state through means short of war since war is costly, but if the adversary issues threats that are provocative, even a state that was willing to concede can become resolved to resist. Conversely, status quo states that issue compellent threats – and not just deterrent threats – can provoke more than coerce, such as possibly during U.S. efforts to roll back the North in the Vietnamese War.\textsuperscript{34}

Third, the ‘crisis bargaining logic’ of unwanted escalation best captures the view that ‘miscalculations’ will lead to unwanted crisis escalation. There are two central mechanisms that underpin the logic of unwanted escalation in game theoretic models of crisis bargaining, both of which differ from the logic of provocation. First, unwanted escalation results from \textit{imperfect information} regarding the adversary’s resolve.\textsuperscript{35} Under conditions of imperfect information, a state that is uncertain of the adversary’s resolve can take a calculated risk to escalate; but after escalating, it may find that the adversary is indeed resolved, thereby ending up with tensions that it would have preferred to avoid had it had perfect information. In this way, a state may ‘miscalculate,’ or ‘underestimate,’ an adversary’s resolve. Provocation, however, differs from this mechanism because the central problem is not so much imperfect information about the adversary’s resolve, but imperfect information about whether and by how much the adversary’s resolve will increase. From the adversary’s perspective, the crucial question to ask in terms of provocation is not whether the state prefers to fight or concede the stake, but instead, whether its own actions will make the state prefer to fight when the state would have otherwise been willing to concede. A second difference between the logic of

\textsuperscript{33} Deliberate provocation can be rational, as I argue later.
\textsuperscript{35} Glaser, \textit{Rational Theory of International Politics}, p.113.
provocation and a ‘crisis bargaining logic’ of escalation concerns the role of signaling.36 Under conditions of imperfect information, signaling allows states to ‘update beliefs’ about each other’s resolve and make more informed decisions to back-down or escalate. But signaling can also result in unwanted escalation because it does not always allow states to update beliefs with certainty: states may only have an updated estimate of each other’s resolve and make a rational gamble to escalate.37 The logic of provocation differs from this kind of unwanted escalation because a signal can be provocative even if it allows an adversary to update beliefs with certainty. For instance, if a defending state generates audience costs by making a public statement, the adversary may correctly update its belief that the state is now resolved to defend the stake, but the statement may nevertheless provoke the adversary’s public and increase the adversary’s resolve to fight.38

The logic of provocation thus differs from existing logics of unwanted crisis escalation, but there are mechanisms by which information updating can also increase the adversary’s resolve that is consistent with a threat-based logic and ‘crisis bargaining logic’ of escalation. For example, if the adversary increases its belief that the state’s military capabilities are weak after observing the state’s actions during a crisis, the adversary’s resolve to fight will increase. Similarly, and in terms of a threat-based logic, if individuals view war as inevitable after they update their beliefs that the adversary is more threatening, they may become more supportive of war in an effort to unite and repel the adversary. This “rally-‘round-the-flag” effect will

37 Correct signaling of threatening intent can also have a counterproductive effect. See Trager, “Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy,” pp. 351-353.
38 See Kurizaki, “Efficient Secrecy,” pp. 546-551. Kurizaki’s model of public versus secret diplomacy stands out as being consistent with the logic of provocation at the state-level.
lower the political costs of war and make the state more resolved. These arguments show that provocation is not the only mechanism by which an adversary’s resolve can increase inadvertently. Indeed, this overlap is one reason why it has been difficult to clearly distinguish provocation from existing logics of escalation. Yet, becoming resolved through information updating is qualitatively different from being provoked at the individual-level. Provocation increases an individual’s resolve over a given stake by changing dispositional factors and situational factors that have meaning for the individual: it increases the individual’s sense of national honor at stake or the reputational costs of backing down as well as making the individual more risk-accepting and impatient. Informational updating involves factors that are private information to the adversary, such as threatening intent or military capabilities.

**Provocation and War**

The logic of provocation can explain the occurrence of war when the other logics predict peace. When two states are unresolved at the beginning of a crisis, their provocative behavior during a crisis can inadvertently ‘tie the hands’ of their adversary and lead to war. George defines “inadvertent war” as “a war that is authorized during the course of a crisis, even though at the outset of the crisis central decision makers did not want or expect war.” Reformulating this definition, I define an inadvertent war as an authorized war between states that were initially unresolved, but unintentionally become resolved during a crisis. The logic of provocation, then,

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39 The rally-effects literature is extensive. For a pioneering study, see John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1973). The rally-effects literature does not distinguish a threat-based logic from the logic of provocation. Lambert et al., comes closest to the logic of provocation, as it finds that anger from a foreign action against the individual’s home state increases support for the president. But as Dafoe and Weiss point out, provocation is different from a rally-effect because backing down from a provocative foreign act is expected to lead to less public approval. See Lambert et al., “Rally Effects, Threat, and Attitude Change,” pp. 887-900; and Dafoe and Weiss, “Provision, Public Opinion, and Crisis Escalation,” p.21.

40 Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang also distinguish provocation from “information revelation.” Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang, “Coercion and Provocation,” pp. 16-17.

provides a causal mechanism for inadvertent war. An inadvertent war that arises through provocation can be sudden and impulsive, but it need not be: once a state becomes resolved through provocation, it may continue to bargain in order to reach a more efficient outcome short of war and only initiate war after bargaining fails.\textsuperscript{42} But one state being resolved is a necessary condition for a deliberately initiated war because a state must either be resolved to defend rather than concede the stake, or to fight rather than live with the status quo. Moreover, an inadvertent war differs from both an accidental war that can arise between unresolved states (e.g. a commander presses a wrong button) and an “unwanted war” that arises either because a state escalates to find its adversary already resolved or because a state generates resolve deliberately (e.g. raises audience costs or engages in public diplomacy).\textsuperscript{43}

The tragedy that inadvertent war highlights is that steps that states take to test each other’s resolve during a crisis can themselves provoke and create resolve in the other state even when neither state was resolved at the outset of the crisis. When a previously unresolved adversary is sufficiently provoked to become resolved over a given stake, moreover, this provoked ‘switch’ in resolve is difficult to infer observationally from the adversary’s behavior during a crisis. Provocation can thus alter the underlying incentives of a crisis in dangerous and unobservable ways, and the historical record of inadvertent wars must carefully account for whether states were unresolved at the outset of the crisis and whether resolve increased.

\textsuperscript{42} On how provocation can lead to impulsive war, see Hall, “On Provocation,” pp. 16-27. In game-theoretic terms, this may be explained by a higher discount factor. Once one state becomes resolved through provocation, however, standard accounts of the rational causes of war can explain the outbreak of war.

Inadvertently. I investigate one case in-depth later; below, I explain how inadvertent war also differs from a war that arises from a security dilemma.

Inadvertent war differs from a war that arises from a security dilemma in two key respects. First, if two status quo states enter a crisis, provocation can make one state become a revisionist state. I define a *status quo state* as one that has an expected utility of war that is no better than the status quo, and a *revisionist state* as one that has an expected utility of war that is greater than the status quo. A sufficiently provocative act by the adversary, however, can increase a status quo state’s resolve and make it prefer to fight a war rather than live with the status quo in peace. Second, the security dilemma relies on the logic of preemptive war to explain the outbreak of costly war, but inadvertent war differs from standard accounts of preemptive war. The logic of a preemptive war arising from a security dilemma is the following: a status quo state that feels highly threatened by its adversary comes to believe that war is imminent and thus decides to strike before it is struck to increase its chances of prevailing. The incentives to preempt can indeed be an important reason for crisis instability, but inadvertent war differs from standard accounts of preemptive war because an unresolved status quo state that believes that war is imminent will prefer to concede the stake in dispute rather than launch a preemptive strike. In this situation, however, a provocative threat by the adversary can increase the state’s resolve and make the state prefer to fight rather than concede. Resolve in a crisis setting thus pertains to a particular stake in dispute whereas being a status quo or revisionist state is always in relation to the status quo. A status quo state, then, can be resolved or unresolved to fight a defensive war over a given stake. The logic of inadvertent war helps point out that war arises in standard accounts of the spiral model only when at least one state is initially resolved. This

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44 These definitions are equivalent to what Powell refers to as “satisfied” and “dissatisfied” states. See Powell, “Stability and the Distribution of Power,” pp. 248-249.
45 This logic parallels what Hall refers to as Prussia provoking France and ‘tipping the balance’ in France to favor war. See Hall, “On Provocation,” p. 23.
last point – that is, that one state needs to be initially resolved for war – is also common to many existing crisis bargaining models.\textsuperscript{46}

**Provocation and Strategy**

Not all provocation is inadvertent, however. In fact, states strategically use the logic of provocation in multiple ways. How provocation affects crisis dynamics thus depends on the strategy that states adopt. This section analyzes the logic of provocation in three coercive military strategies during crises: a naval blockade/tripwire, deliberate provocation to signal resolve/coerce, and military skirmishes/gray-zone conflicts. The discussion of each is aided by a formal game-theoretic model, the details of which can be found in an online appendix.

**NAVAL BLOCKADE / TRIPWIRE**

A defending state in a crisis can wield the logic of provocation to its advantage by setting up a naval blockade/tripwire. The intuition is that the defender creates a situation in which the burden of provocation is placed on the adversary: the adversary must provoke the defender to revise the status quo. The prospects of provoking and tying the defender’s hands, however, can deter the aggressor. When the defender sets up a naval blockade/tripwire, the aggressor must decide to either escalate to breach the blockade with force or live with the status quo. If the aggressor breaches the blockade and thereby harms the defender’s military forces, this ‘trips the wire’ and provokes the elites and public in the defending state, thereby lowering the defending state’s political costs to escalate to war. This can make the defending state resolved to fight a defensive war even if it would have preferred to concede the stake had it not been

provoked. Thus, a state can create a credible commitment to fight in defense of a stake by setting up a blockade/tripwire. The formal model highlights that the credibility of the blockade/tripwire arises both from a logic of sunk-costs and the logic of provocation: tripping the wire provokes the defender and increases its resolve, but to credibly signal that the increase in resolve will be sufficient to make the defender prefer to fight, the blockade/tripwire must expose sufficiently costly military assets that would be damaged and ‘sunk’ in the event that the wire is tripped. This logic underscores how deploying ‘tripwire’ forces, such as U.S. forces in South Korea, can create resolve and credibly signal this fact.

**COERCION / SIGNALING RESOLVE THROUGH DELIBERATE PROVOCATION**

States often eschew provocative acts during crises, but at other times, they engage in them deliberately to demonstrate resolve and coerce a target. For example, president Kennedy decided to forego a violent retaliation after a U-2 was downed during the Cuban Missile Crisis whereas the People’s Republic of China decided to bombard the Taiwan Straits in 1996. Indeed, by reversing the logic of provocation in the naval blockade/tripwire strategy, it is possible to show through game-theoretic analysis that a state can rationally decide to coerce an opponent by signaling resolve through deliberate provocation. In the blockade/tripwire strategy, the defending state decides how provoked it will become by adjusting the value of its military assets that are put under harm’s way; under the current strategy, the aggressor chooses how provocative it will be towards the defender, even though it remains uncertain of how provoked the defender will ultimately become and whether the defender will become resolved to fight a war. Yet, it is precisely this uncertainty – the *risk of provocation* – that the aggressor can manipulate to signal resolve. A resolved adversary can signal its type by making a provocative threat that runs a higher risk of provoking the defender into war than a bluffing type of adversary is willing to run. If by outbidding a bluffing type, the resolved adversary ends up
provoking the defender to prefer war, the resolved adversary’s gambit turns sour even though it successfully signals its type. But if the defender is provoked short of preferring war, the resolved adversary successfully signals its type and is able to obtain a larger concession than is possible without provoking the defender. Manipulating the risk of provocation is thus dangerous business, but its logic is distinct from sunk cost signals, hand-tying signals, and brinkmanship: sunk costs signals burn-up the difference between the resolved and unresolved type of coercers’ payoffs, hand-tying signals make an unresolved coercer become resolved deliberately, and brinkmanship manipulates an “autonomous risk” of war – like rolling a dice – so that war breaks out regardless of whether the coercer is resolved to fight.

*MILITARY SKIRMISHES / ‘GRAY ZONE’ CONFLICTS AND INADVERTENT WAR*

The logic of this final strategy captures some important dynamics involved in China’s recent use of maritime constabulary forces in the South China Sea. By implementing an assertive policy that first deliberately provokes a ‘defending state’ and then places the onus of escalation on the defending state to take a provocative step in return, a ‘rival state’ can force a revision of the status quo even when the defender knows that the rival is unresolved to launch a war outright to obtain the stake. This strategy thus combines the two directions of provocation in the previous strategies – it involves a ‘double-provocation logic’ – and can be thought of in

47 The deliberate provocation model differs from a classic “risk-return tradeoff” because, 1) the demander is unable to signal its type by only making a large demand, so it ends up in a pooling equilibrium when it does not deliberately provoke; yet, it can signal its type (i.e. create a fully separating equilibrium) by making a larger demand than in the pooling equilibrium while also deliberately provoking the defender, and 2) even the weak type of defender can reject this larger demand if it is sufficiently provoked. See online appendix for proofs. On the risk-return tradeoff, see Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).


terms of engaging in military skirmishes or ‘gray zone’ conflicts. The intuition is that the rival first provokes the defender deliberately through a minor skirmish with military or constabulary forces – it manipulates a risk of provocation – to signal that it is a type that will be willing to launch a war only if provoked back. It then encircles the defender’s military troops or blocks their path of retreat to force the defender to provoke it back, initiate a war first, or concede. If the defender is a type that is already resolved to fight a costly war to defend the stake, a war ensues either because the defender is provoked enough to initiate a war first or because it escalates to breach the rival’s encirclement so that the rival is provoked to initiate a war. If the defender is a type that finds war too costly for the stake in dispute, it concedes to a revision of the status quo when the skirmish is provocative enough to hit a ‘sweet spot’: not provocative enough to make it resolved but provocative enough to make it believe that the rival will launch a war if provoked back. If this unresolved type of defender is overly provoked through the skirmish, however, it becomes resolved to breach the rival’s encirclement so that the rival becomes resolved to launch an inadvertent war. Thus, if the rival successfully pulls off this assertive policy, it can revise the status quo, even though the defender knows that the rival is currently unresolved for war. To obtain this payoff, however, the rival’s assertive policy not only risks provoking a war against a defender that is already willing to fight a costly war, but provoking an inadvertent war against a type of defender that would have been willing to overlook the rival’s transgression.

Several aspects of this strategy can be identified in the ongoing South China Sea disputes. First, the strategy does not require the use of military forces. Because the side initiating the assertive policy only needs to be able to provoke an opponent, such as by harassment, constabulary

forces suffice. Second, the use of constabulary forces correctly signal that the state adopting this policy is currently *not* a revisionist state that is resolved to launch a war outright to change the status quo. Third, but if the constabulary forces are provoked back, this provides the initiating state with a pretext to escalate by using military force. This logic of skirmishes as a competition to avoid outright aggression and appear as the provoked party differs from conventional views of skirmishes as either a signal of belligerent revisionist intent or a form of brinkmanship that manipulates a risk of accidental war. According to the logic of provocation, a skirmish can provoke even a previously unresolved state to escalate and initiate war.

**The Sino-India War of 1962**

This case study shows how the unified framework of provocation can be applied to analyze the logic of provocation that contributed to the outbreak of war. A principle advantage of the case study method is that the theorized mechanism can be traced in detail; a principle disadvantage is that it cannot establish the frequency with which provocation contributes to the outbreak of war across cases. As a first step to demonstrate the utility of the unified framework and the significance of the logic of provocation, however, I use the case study method. I choose the Sino-Indian War of 1962 for two reasons. First, the logic of provocation appears to be a key driver of crisis escalation, yet existing accounts of the war fail to explore this logic. Second, the case appears to have important implications for understanding the possible processes of inadvertent escalation in ongoing disputes today, such as in the South China Sea. Not only was the Himalayan territory that India and China ended up fighting over so remote that India was unaware that China had built a highway through it until after the fact, but at the outset of the crisis, a war between the two countries appeared so unlikely and unreasonable that Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru publically declared that “[n]othing can be a more amazing
fool than for two great countries like India and China to go into major conflict and war for the possession of a few mountain peaks, however beautiful the mountain peaks may be.”

The Sino-Indian War erupted on October 20, 1962, but the border dispute behind it can be traced back at least to when the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) consolidated communist control in Tibet in 1951. Chinese and Indian military forces now stood face to face for the first time in the long history of both nations, and in 1954, an historic agreement was reached in which India recognized Chinese sovereignty over Tibet while China gave Tibet a special political status of autonomous region. This agreement heralded a new era of Sino-Indian friendship as the two sides jointly declared the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, known as Panchsheel in India. But because the borders of the two newly found states had never been officially delimited or demarcated, efforts to strengthen border control soon led to skirmishes.

In 1959, three events threw this brewing border dispute to the forefront of domestic politics. First, in March, there was a large uprising in Tibet which was heavily suppressed by the PLA and resulted in the Dalai Lama fleeing to India and being granted asylum. India viewed this incident both as a breach of the 1954 agreement that China will grant autonomy to Tibet and an outrage that violated the spiritual identity of the Indian people. In China, the uprising was seen as a “provocative act” which broke the 1954 agreement as China believed that India had

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assisted the rebels and thus meddled in China’s internal affairs. Second, on August 25, an armed clash between border troops erupted at Longju, on the eastern sector of the border, which led to a flurry of accusations from both sides that the other began the shooting. Third, the Indian government released information on August 28 that China had built a new highway to Tibet and claimed that it transverses Indian territory in the western border region, the Aksai Chin plains in Ladakh. Yet, the Indian government had not even known about the road until embassy officials in Beijing read about it in a Chinese newspaper one month prior to its opening. News about the Chinese highway further inflamed Indian public opinion; in the parliament, suggestions were even made that the highway should be bombed “out of existence.”

ROAD TO FORMAL NEGOTIATIONS: SEPTEMBER 1959 – APRIL 1960

Despite these incidents, in September 1959, neither side expected a war, and India even indicated a willingness to make territorial concessions. Room for a negotiated settlement, however, all but disappeared by the time of the New Delhi negotiations in April 1960 because a provocative incident occurred.

Soon after the armed clashes at Longju, Nehru made it publicly clear that he held two positions regarding the border dispute. First, regarding the disputed territory, Nehru held steadfast to the McMahon Line in the eastern sector while expressing more flexibility towards the western sector. Nehru stated in parliament on August 28 that “[w]e stick with the McMahon Line.

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57 External Publicity Division, Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 99.
58 The “McMahon Line” is a product of the Simla meetings in 1914, where then Indian foreign secretary Sir Henry McMahon came to an agreement with Tibetan delegates on the boundary between India and Tibet. China officially repudiates this boundary as they see Tibet as having no right to conclude agreements with India. See Neville Maxwell, India’s China War (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1970), pp. 39-64; Allen S. Whiting, The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), pp. 3-6; and Raghavan, War and Peace in Modern India, pp. 229-233.
But it is quite another thing that along this long line there may be minor arguments about a mile here or a mile there...We admit that these are differences which exist and which should be settled.”⁵⁹ In contrast, Nehru claimed in parliament on September 10 that India had “always looked upon the Ladakh area as a different area, as I may say so, some vulgar area so far as the frontier is concerned because the exact line of the frontier is not at all clear as in the case of the McMahon Line [in the east].”⁶⁰ Nehru reiterated this position in parliament two days later, claiming that “[t]his place, Aksai Chin area, is in our maps undoubtedly. But I distinguish it completely from other areas. It is a matter of argument as to what part belongs to us and what part of it belongs to someone else.”⁶¹ Not only did Nehru send public overtures that the western sector was open to compromise, former foreign secretary R.K. Nehru recalls that as far back as 1953, experts had advised prime minister Nehru that India’s claim to Aksai Chin was “not too strong” and that the prime minister had been “agreeable” to adjustments in “Aksai Chin and one or two other places” if they were “part of a satisfactory overall settlement” with China.⁶² In January 1959, the Indian Chief of Army staff also claimed in a meeting of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) that Aksai Chin had “no strategic importance to India.”⁶³

Second, however, Nehru saw the dispute with China as something beyond remote areas of territory: “[i]t is not a question of a mile or two or ten or even a hundred miles. It is something more precious than a hundred or a thousand miles and it is that which brings up people’s passions to a high level.”⁶⁴ What did Nehru view as having so incited the Indian public? On September 12, Nehru declared in parliament that, “It is not a yard of territory that counts but the coercion. Because, it makes no difference to China or India whether a few yards of territory

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⁵⁹ External Publicity Division, Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 91.
⁶² Raghavan, War and Peace in Modern India, p. 240.
⁶⁴ External Publicity Division, Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 135.
in the mountain are on this side or on that side. But it makes a great deal of difference if that is done in an insulting, aggressive, offensive, violent manner, by us or by them." Thus, while Nehru indicated that he was willing to take a conciliatory stance regarding the Aksai Chin area, he was concerned that coercive actions taken to gain such territory would cause a political backlash and provoke harder resistance.

Yet, Nehru was optimistic that a major conflagration with China would not occur. Even after receiving Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai’s letter of September 8, which stated that China cannot accept the McMahon Line because it was a vestige of British colonialist aggression, Nehru claimed in parliament on September 12 that “I do not expect, and I do not want the House to imagine that something very serious is going to happen on our frontiers. I do not at all expect that to happen.” In a private letter to his chief ministers, Nehru wrote as late as October 16 that “[s]o far as our border with Tibet-China is concerned...I do not think there is going to be a major conflict there.”

On October 21, however, an armed clash at Kongka Pass in the western border area hardened Nehru to resist a border deal. In contrast to his reply to Zhou on September 26, Nehru’s letter to Zhou on November 16 now attached a new precondition for negotiations with China: the withdrawal of Chinese forces from Ladakh. As Allen Whiting argued, this “constituted a fundamental impasse since such a withdrawal would leave the Akai Chin road defenseless [for China].” By December 22, 1959, Nehru declared in parliament that, “the chief difficulty at

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66 Ibid., p. 155.
the present moment which the House faces and the country is *angered* at is, as everyone knows, because scraps have occurred... *it is the scraps that rouse passions.*"^70\footnote{External Publicity Division, *Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations*, Vol. 1, Part 1, pp. 271-272. Emphasis added.} Indeed, when the director of the historical division of the MEA returned to India in November 1959 from researching archives in London for India’s territorial claims, he found Nehru to be in a state of “defiance and resistance against the idea of handing over territory to the Chinese,” even before he took Nehru through the evidence he had found.\footnote{Steven A. Hoffman, *India and the China Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 82-83. On the arrival of Dr. Gopal to India, see Maxwell, *India’s China War*, pp. 119-120.} As Raghavan points out, “[a]fter the Kongka Pass incident, Nehru was disinclined to concede anything to China under duress.”^71\footnote{Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, p. 260.}

Chinese archival evidence, however, suggests that while Beijing recognized Nehru’s initial willingness to concede Aksai Chin, they failed to realize the change in Nehru’s position after the Kongka Pass incident. A report from the PLA General Staff Department (GSD) on October 29, 1959 – barely a week after the Kongka Pass incident – concludes that “it seems that India plans to recognize our present border in the western sector in return for our recognition of the ‘McMahon Line’ in the eastern sector.”^72\footnote{Report from the PLA General Staff Department, ‘Behind India’s Second Anti-China Wave,’ October 29, 1959. History and Public Program Digital Archive, People’s Republic of China Foreign Ministry Archive 105-00944-07, trans., 7Brands, pp. 84-90.} The report was also optimistic that a major conflict with India will not occur: “[i]t shows that India is prepared to enter into negotiations with us and that the tense situation at the border may ease somewhat.” Not realizing Nehru’s hardened resolve, on November 3, the Chinese leadership held a conference in Hangzhou and decided that a new policy should be adopted to ease tensions and bring India to the negotiating table.\footnote{Lei Yingfu, *Zai zuigao tonghuai bu dang canmou: Lei Yingfu huiyilu* [Staff officer at the supreme command: General Lei Yingfu’s recollections] (Nanchang: Baihuashou wenyi chubanshe, 1997), pp. 202-203.} This was the “separation policy” (*geli zhengce*) which led to Zhou’s letter of November 7 that proposed a 20km withdrawal by both sides. But Nehru rejected this proposal in his letter on
November 26, which demanded a Chinese withdrawal from Ladakh. When Zhou went to New Delhi for the negotiations in April 1960, India turned down a “swap deal.”

The Kongka Pass incident therefore played an important role in hardening Nehru’s position on a negotiated settlement, but the historical evidence is unclear on whether the incident was an accident or a deliberate attempt at coercion. The evidence does suggest, however, that China understood that pushing India too far would provoke a political backlash and reduce room for a bargain. On October 3, only weeks before the incident, Zhou told Indian communist party leaders in a meeting that there were two basic approaches that China could take towards the border dispute with India: “one type is to yield (rangbu), the other type is to struggle (douzheng).” He continued to tell them that China would “on the one hand give those in the center of India’s political spectrum some leeway and actively win them over, while on the other hand resolutely carry out a struggle.” After the Kongka Pass incident, however, the political climate in India turned so bellicose that even the Indian communist party passed a resolution “deploring the shooting.”

TEMPORARY LULL: MAY 1960 – NOVEMBER 1961

After the negotiations failed, both sides intensified efforts to strengthen border areas while simultaneously making sincere efforts to avoid provocation. On May 5, Zhou sent a telegram to Chairman Mao Zedong stating that PLA border units should “decisively set up posts” within China’s claim line, but if encountered by Indian troops, they were to “avoid armed conflict.”

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75 See Record of Talks between Prime Minister Nehru and Premier Zhou Enlai, April 24, 1960, History and Public Policy Program Division Archive, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, P.N. Haksar Papers (I-II Installment), Subject File No. 24, especially pp. 5-12. Also see Raghavan, War and Peace in Modern India, p. 264.
On May 29, 1960, Indian foreign secretary Dutt signed a minute which proposed to set up new posts and patrol yet-unoccupied territories while strictly avoiding provoking the Chinese.79

PLA documents captured by the CIA at the time reveal an important reason why Beijing wanted to avoid provocation. In 1960, China was mired in troubles from the failed Great Leap Forward and the decision by the Soviet Union to cut off aid after Mao’s polemics against Khrushchev in April 1960, and was eager to gain leadership within the communist block and among the Third World countries.80 It is within this context that the following central PLA directive of November 14, 1960 was dispatched to western border units: “We absolutely cannot view the provocations and attacks of the neighboring country on our border merely from the military standpoint. We must not replace policies with emotions and erroneously regard the struggle strategy of avoiding armed clashes as an indication that we are weaker than the neighboring country...[if you do not] wait for directions from above before opening fire and striking back...we might gain a greater military victory, but politically we would fall into the trap of the other side and would cause only great injury to the party and state – the biggest mistake.”81

The argument that this document employs is that even though the provocations by India are infuriating, and even though China can achieve a military victory in a border conflict with India, the political costs of such an engagement would still be too high to make the conflict feasible – it would be “the biggest mistake.” General Lei Yingfu, then deputy director of the GSD’s Operations Department, also recalls that when the “separation policy” was launched, “many comrades were still puzzled: having commanded three major military campaigns such as the war against the United States in Korea, why was Mao so ‘soft’ on India?” Lei continues that it

79 See Hoffman, India and the China Crisis, p. 94; Maxwell, India’s China War, p. 200; Mullik, The Chinese Betrayal, p. 307; and Raghavan, War and Peace in Modern India, p. 271.
eventually became clear that Mao’s decision was to make “a strong impression on global public opinion that the PLA had controlled itself.” In this light, it is understandable that Chinese central authorities wanted to assure border units of China’s broader policy of restraint. It is also apparent that China understood the logic of provocation to work both ways: provoking India would reduce leeway for a bargain, but if India provoked China sufficiently, the costs of launching a Chinese attack would also fall.

ROAD TO WAR: NOVEMBER 1961 – OCTOBER 1962

On November 2, 1961, the Indian government decided to implement a new strategy which became known as the “forward policy.” This decision stated that, “[in Ladakh] we are to patrol as far forward as possible...This will be done with a view to establishing our posts which should prevent the Chinese from advancing further and also dominating from any posts which they may have already established in our territory. This must be done without getting involved in a clash with the Chinese, unless this becomes necessary in self defence.” Yet, as Riedel observes, “India’s implementation of the Forward Policy served as a major provocation to China.” In terms of the logic of provocation, the forward policy was distinct from previous Indian policies in one crucial respect: it gave rise to a ‘double-provocation logic.’ As discussed in the section on military skirmish/gray zone conflict model, this logic is that a state provokes its opponent to become more resolved but also creates a situation in which the opponent must provoke the state back in order to escalate. The forward posts set up by India to force a Chinese withdrawal provoked the Chinese, but because some Indian posts were also positioned behind Chinese posts, a Chinese attempt to counter-maneuver and pressure Indian troops was bound

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82 Lei, Zai zuigao tonghuaibu dang canmou, pp. 202-203.
83 This is from a top secret Indian Army report in 1963 by Lieutenant General T.B. Henderson Brooks and Brigadier P.S. Bhagat. The report was partially leaked online by Neville Maxwell in 2014. I refer to the report as the Henderson Brooks report, as does Maxwell in his book, India’s China War.
84 Riedel, JFK’s Forgotten Crisis, p. 111.
to provoke the Indians back, even if Chinese forces did not advance further into contested territory. Indeed, Nehru admitted in parliament on May 3, 1962, that “[s]ometimes [Indian] check-posts are behind their check-posts, behind their lines. It is not a straight line. And this has rather annoyed them.”85 Still, India was careful not to provoke the Chinese by using violence. Slantchev puts India’s quandary succinctly: “India was pursuing a military policy which hoped to somehow force the Chinese out of areas where the Chinese were militarily superior without provoking the Chinese into resisting force with force.”86

Yet, as the recently leaked secret Indian internal review of the war, the Henderson Brooks report, states, “[t]his probe forward activated the Chinese.”87 On May 14, Zhou convened a meeting with senior military commanders and stated that China must complete preparations for possible armed conflict with India by the end of June.88 On June 20, the GSD issued instructions to western border units to begin “counter-nibbling” measures, and on June 23, the Chinese ambassador to Warsaw met with his U.S. counterpart and received assurances that the United States will not support an invasion of the mainland by Chiang Kai-shek.89 This assurance reduced the possibility of a two-front war for China and allowed them to focus on India in the west. Yet in India, overruling Western Command’s May 16 recommendation that a post should not be established in the Galwan Valley of Aksai Chin because of possible reactions from the Chinese, a platoon strength post was established on July 5 by orders from Indian Army Headquarters.90 On July 10, however, Chinese forces encircled this Indian post

86 Slantchev, Military Threats, p. 186.
and laid a siege. Mao said at a GSD secretariat meeting on July 14 that China had all the reason to strike India but that it must still demonstrate restraint. He gave two main reasons: first, Nehru’s true colors need to be fully exposed, and second, it must be made clear that India is the wrongdoer in the border dispute so that the international community can sympathize with China.\footnote{Jiang and Li, eds., \textit{Zhong Yin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi}, p. 142.} On July 20, Mao gave China’s border strategy a new name: “armed coexistence” (\textit{wuzhuang gongchu}). This strategy aimed to “counter-coerce” the forward policy of India by applying military pressure with “counter-encircling” posts set up in a “zig-zag” fashion.\footnote{Ibid., p. 143. Also see Xu Yan, \textit{Zhong Yin biaojie zhi zhan lishi zhenxiang} [The true history of the Sino-Indian border war] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1993), p.87.}

As Mastro points out, China’s “political objective of gradually ratcheting up military and political pressure was to force [India’s] acceptance of unconditional negotiations.”\footnote{Oriana Skylar Mastro, “The Great Divide: Chinese and Indian Views on Negotiations 1952-62,” \textit{Journal of Defense Studies}, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2012), p. 94.} But “armed coexistence” proved to be a provocative strategy. The day after Mao adopted “armed coexistence,” a skirmish broke-out near Chip Chap Valley in the western sector – the first armed clash since the Kongka Pass incident in 1959. India then made several diplomatic gestures towards China: Indian defense minister Krishna Menon met with Chinese foreign minister Chen Yi on the sidelines of a United Nations conference in Geneva to discuss the border dispute; the Indian charge d’affairs in Beijing was thereafter ordered to inform Zhou that India will drop its precondition to talks that the Chinese must withdraw troops in Ladakh; and references to preconditions were omitted from India’s diplomatic note to China on July 26.\footnote{See Liu Shufa ed., \textit{Chen Yi nianpu} [The chronicles of Chen Yi] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995), p. 926; P.M. Banerjee, \textit{My Peking Memoirs of the Chinese Invasion of India} (New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1990), pp. 51-53; Ministry of External Affairs, \textit{NMLE, July 1962 – October 1962}, White Paper VII (New Delhi: Government of India, 1963), p. 4.} When China replied on August 4 by reconfirming that “there need not and should not be any preconditions [to talks],” however, India back-tracked: preconditions reappeared in India’s
note of August 22. In the interim month, the Indian press had lambasted the seeming concession that the Indian government was willing to make. According to The Times of London on August 13, “last week has seen an outpouring of exhortation in the press that Mr. Nehru abjure the ‘road to dishonor.’ That he is tempted to take that direction, writing off Ladakh in return for negotiations and some hazy settlement, has been inferred by almost all observers here from the passage in Delhi’s most latest note [to Beijing] (July 26).” Thus, after the Chinese siege in Galwan Valley and the outbreak of skirmishes in Chip Chap Valley, the Indian government found that room for a public compromise was vanishingly small. Indeed, China’s “armed coexistence” was in many ways similar to India’s “forward policy.” As Fravel points out, the “Chinese leaders hoped that the policy of armed coexistence would compel an Indian retreat or at least arrest the momentum of the forward policy.” In terms of the logic of provocation, encircling Indian troops and creating “interlocking positions” made China’s “armed coexistence” follow a double-provocation logic.

An action-reaction cycle thus ensued. As the official Indian history of the war notes, the escalating tensions in July demonstrated that “the basic assumption behind the forward policy” that China would keep avoiding confrontation “was no long valid.” Yet, as Garver point out, “Indian leaders made that policy still more aggressive.” On August 17, Indian Western Command sent a letter to the General Staff Branch Army Headquarters reappraising the situation in Ladakh as one in which it was “vital” that India “did not provoke the Chinese into armed conflict” and the forward policy was “held in abeyance” until western units were

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strengthened. But not only did the reappraisal fall on deaf ears, when the Chinese surrounded an Indian post at Dhola in the eastern sector on September 8, the Indian government responded by initiating “Operation Leghorn” to evict the Chinese forcefully. The meeting of the Indian leadership on September 12 shows that this decision was taken even when the Army Commander stated that China was likely to retaliate along the eastern border and the Director of the Intelligence Bureau pointed out three specific locations that the Chinese might target. In reaction to the Chinese move to encircle Dhola post, therefore, India decided to take an escalatory step that risked a significant probability of armed conflict.

A battle broke out in the eastern sector of the border in mid-October. On October 4, India raised an entirely new Army Corps – IV Corps – to take command of the eastern front and expel the Chinese. But when the new commander, Lieutenant General Kaul, took over the reins of the eviction operation, 4 Infantry Division commander Prasad, who was operating in the Dhola area, cautioned the Corps commander and prompted him to send an appreciation to his superiors on October 6 stating that an overwhelming Chinese response could not be ruled out. Despite expressing his misgivings, and not receiving any instructions to the contrary, Kaul commenced eviction operations on October 8. The Chinese, however, had already decided on October 6 to “resolutely repulse any Indian attack and hit them hard so it hurts.” On October 10, the Chinese put this decision into effect by engaging Indian troops and swiftly inducing their withdrawal. As Prasad recalls, the Chinese did not “indulge in indiscriminate killings” and “allowed the defeated garrison to withdraw honorably.” That the Chinese

101 Ibid., p. 60.
105 Prasad, *The Fall of Towang, 1962*, p. 64.
allowed such a withdrawal is noteworthy because, as the Henderson Brooks report points out, they could have prevented one.\textsuperscript{106} This indicates that although China found the timing ripe to hit-back – thus, taking an escalatory step from Mao’s call for restraint in July – they were careful not to excessively provoke the Indians. China’s decision to use force was still shy of initiating war.

The Indian leadership, including Kaul, held a late-night meeting in Delhi on October 11 to reevaluate their plans to evict the Chinese. The outcome of this crucial meeting was that Indian forces were to cease eviction operations but maintain their current positions.\textsuperscript{107} Kaul issued orders in accordance with this decision on October 14, but the next day, the \textit{Times of India} ran an article quoting Nehru as declaring on October 12 that orders had been issued “to free Indian territory in [the northeastern sector] of Chinese intruders.”\textsuperscript{108} Meanwhile in China, the head of the Chinese military strategy small group, and a principle architect of China’s military operations in the border dispute with China, General Liu Bocheng, advocated a “blitzkrieg” \textit{(su zhan su jue)} against Indian forces that took advantage of “the movement of troops during the night and a surprise attack at dawn.”\textsuperscript{109} On October 17, Kaul fell ill and flew back to Delhi; on the same day, the Chinese Central Military Commission issued orders to “annihilate the invading army.”\textsuperscript{110} The Chinese politburo gave out the final order to launch a “Self-Defensive Counter-Attack” on October 18, and two days later, the Chinese struck at dawn simultaneously in the eastern and western sectors.\textsuperscript{111} 

\textsuperscript{106} Brooks and Bhagat, \textit{Henderson Brooks report}, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{107} See Ibid., p. 95; Mullik, \textit{The Chinese Betrayal}, p. 364; and Kaul, \textit{The Untold Story}, pp. 385-386.
\textsuperscript{108} “China Itching to Deploy Paratroops on the Border,” \textit{Times of India}, October 15, 1962.
\textsuperscript{109} Li Manchun, Chen Fu, and Hwang Yuzhang, eds., \textit{Liu Bocheng zhuankan} [A biography of Liu Bocheng] (Beijing: Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 1992), pp. 669-671. Liu made these comments between October 10 and 17.
\textsuperscript{110} Jiang and Li, eds., \textit{Zhong Yin bianjing zhei fanji zuozhan shi}, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p. 179, 471-474.
Why did the Chinese decide to initiate a “Self-Defensive Counter-Attack” in mid-October, after resisting multiple opportunities to strike? Why did India make its policy “still more aggressive” when Indian frontier forces were inadequately deployed and the assumption that the Chinese would keep avoiding confrontation was proven wrong? Indeed, why did India become resolved to risk war when it was initially open to compromise?

THE PROVOCATION HYPOTHESIS

A ‘provocation hypothesis’ expects to see a state’s resolve increase after provocative actions by the adversary because individuals become enraged, their sense of reputation and honor engaged in the dispute increases, and the leadership finds the political costs to escalate decrease. The available evidence suggests that the logic of provocation indeed contributed significantly to the outbreak of war. For India, the increase in resolve can best be seen by contrasting Nehru’s initial public overtures to compromise in Aksai Chin from the Indian leadership’s later willingness to risk armed conflict by insisting that the Chinese withdraw from it. The deadly skirmishes in Longju and Kongka Pass in 1959 turned both the Indian public and political elites vociferously against conceding Aksai Chin. Moreover, although Nehru initially expressed a willingness to come to an agreement with China over Aksai Chin, he also viewed a territorial concession in face of Chinese provocations as dishonorable: “[c]ertainly not an inch of territory or anything if someone forces or compels me...I will not submit to coercion. I will not submit to dishonor.”

Thus, provocation increased Nehru’s resolve by increasing the honor he saw at stake – it changed a situational factor. A few days after the Kongka Pass incident, Nehru also expressed anger towards the Chinese: “[i]t is natural...that there should be a strong reaction in the country of indignation and resentment [against the Chinese]. We all feel that.”

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112 External Publicity Division, Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations Vol. 1, Part 1, pp. 144, 146. Statement made in Parliament (Lok Sabha) on September 12, 1959.
The Kongka Pass incident, therefore, provoked Nehru to resist a “swap deal” with China, but this resistance by itself does not show that India had become resolved to fight a war to defend Aksai Chin because there was no ultimatum of war put on the table if such a deal was rejected. Instead, subsequent events revealed and increased India’s resolve. As China began to push back against India’s “forward policy” with “armed coexistence,” instructions to Indian border units changed progressively: on July 10, 1962, when the Chinese laid a siege on an Indian post in Galwan Valley, instructions to Indian border units changed from “fire only if fired upon” to “fire in self-defence;” on July 22, a day after the new skirmishes in Chip Chap Valley, Indian border troops were given the discretion to fire if “threatened;” and on September 12, when the Indian leadership decided to initiate “Operation Leghorn,” Indian border troops were given the latitude to fire if the Chinese “entered Indian territory.” Indeed, India became increasingly resolved as both sides implemented policies that entailed a double-provocation logic. One mechanism that explains this increase in resolve is that provocation lowered India’s political costs to escalate. By August 14, 1962, Nehru stated in parliament that, “if I am asked when I will get [the Chinese] to vacate, that involves greater preparation...On the political field I think I am right in saying that the position is more satisfactory than it was.” China’s overt attempts to apply military pressure on India thus lowered the political costs for Nehru to contravene his public persona as a champion of Panchscheel and use force to evict the Chinese despite inadequate Indian forces on the border and the considerable risk of conflict.

For China, its increase in resolve can best be inferred from its decision to eschew multiple opportunities to strike back at India before launching its “Self-Defensive Counter-Attack.”

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Although China had been building up its frontier forces for some time, China was also wary of using force because the *political costs* would be too high, even if it could attain a “military victory.” Furthermore, Mao decided against hitting back during the Galwan Valley incident even when China had “all the reason to strike back.” It was only after India declared and began using overt force to evict the Chinese that Beijing believed that the international political costs to strike back had fallen sufficiently through Indian provocation. What is more difficult to establish, however, is whether China was unresolved to fight at any point earlier in the crisis: there is no evidence that China would have been willing to withdraw from Aksai Chin if push came to shove. Yet, there is no conclusive evidence to the contrary either: no available evidence definitively shows that China was always resolved to fight for Aksai Chin from the outset of the crisis. In this sense, the available historical evidence does not determine whether the Sino-Indian War was an inadvertent war. What the evidence does suggest, however, is that both sides correctly understood that India was initially willing to compromise at the outset of the crisis. Moreover, both sides were aware of the dangers of provocation and took numerous efforts to avoid provoking their counterpart. Despite these efforts, both sides drifted into a war they expected to avoid. This tragedy is only compounded by the fact that the two-year build-up to the war gave decision makers ample time to defuse tensions and find a peaceful resolution.

*ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENTS*

There are four main alternative arguments: two that are consistent with a crisis bargaining logic and two that broadly follow the logic of a security dilemma.

First, a ‘miscalculation hypothesis’ posits that India underestimated China’s intentions and/or capabilities. According to this view, Indian leaders were almost delusional in thinking that the Chinese would not attack or that India could win a war with China because of the new roads
and posts it had built up since 1960. In contrast to a simple miscalculation, Vertzberger claims that perceptual biases made the Indian leadership discount information that was inconsistent with their beliefs about Chinese capabilities and resolve.\(^{118}\) Yet, after the battle in mid-October, Nehru clearly believed that Chinese capabilities were formidable and that a war was imminent. In a private letter to his chief ministers on October 12, 1962, Nehru wrote that, “[t]his incident and other facts have brought into light that the Chinese had been strengthening their forces very considerably...This situation in the North East Frontier is definitely a dangerous one, and it may lead to major conflicts. We shall, of course, try to do our best. But it seems likely that conflicts on a bigger scale might take place there.”\(^{119}\) On this very day, however, Nehru reportedly declared in public that Indian forces will “free Indian territory...of Chinese intruders.”\(^{120}\) Nehru thus continued to confront the Chinese despite recognizing the possibility of large scale conflict.

Second, a ‘classic audience costs hypothesis’ asserts that the Indian government deliberately raised the costs of backing down by making public commitments to resist China, thus tying their own hands. The Indian government certainly faced gargantuan public pressure to resist China. In an interview after the war, Menon stated that “[s]o inflamed was the state of Indian public opinion [at the time] that if any Defense Minister or Prime Minster had wanted to let the Chinese take our territory in the hope that we would take it back soon...he could not have done so.”\(^{121}\) Yet, a classic audience costs argument does not distinguish audience costs that are generated by the Indian government from audience costs that are ‘inflicted’ by provocative statements and actions by the Chinese. Several actions by the Indian government indeed had

\(^{119}\) Parthasarathi, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, p. 531.
\(^{120}\) “China Itching to Deploy Paratroops on the Border,” *Times of India*, October 15, 1962.
the effect of generating audience costs, such as the public release of the letters between Nehru and Zhou regarding the border dispute and Nehru’s public statements that Indian forces will evict the Chinese from Indian territory. But a distinguishing characteristic of Nehru throughout the two-year period leading up to the war was his persistent efforts to temper public emotions and maintain political flexibility. For instance, he warned in public that “any step that we may take now cannot be taken in a huff, if I may say so, because we are angry and we do something regardless of the consequences of that step.”122 In private, he cautioned his chief ministers that “no correct policy can be evolved in a state of anger.”123 Yet, the armed confrontations in Longju and Kongka Pass in 1959 and in the Galwan Valley and Chip Chap Valley in 1962 galvanized the Indian public to oppose a concession; by the summer of 1962, even diplomatic gestures by the Indian government to drop preconditions to talks were met with the public’s wrath. The audience costs that the Indian government faced thus arose both from its own words and deeds as well as the behavior of the Chinese. As for China, a classic audience costs hypothesis has limited relevance since Chinese leaders faced no risk of electoral punishment if they backed down.124 But to the extent that they faced greater political pressure to resist capitulation later in the crisis, a classic audience costs hypothesis neglects the public costs that were inflicted on China by Indian actions and statements to thrust forward.

Third is a ‘security dilemma’ hypothesis: China was a status quo state that wanted to maintain stability in Tibet by building a road through Aksai Chin, but the loss of Aksai Chin threatened India’s security, and India’s efforts to return to what it perceived as the status quo with the Chinese vacated from Aksai Chin threatened China in return. The central problem with this

122 External Publicity Division, Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 115. Statement made in parliament (Lok Sabha) on September 4, 1959.
security dilemma hypothesis, however, is that regardless of whether China or India was a status quo state, India initially displayed a willingness to live with a new status quo in which the Chinese remained in Aksai Chin. At the outset of the crisis, India’s Chief of Army Staff even claimed that the Aksai Chin road had “no strategic importance to India.” It was only later in the crisis that India became resolved over Aksai Chin, and this increase in resolve cannot be explained by a corresponding increase in the strategic value that India attached to controlling Aksai Chin itself: the boisterous calls in India to reclaim Aksai Chin by risking war barely mentioned Aksai Chin as a vital Indian security interest. Instead, and as noted above, it was the provocative effects of Chinese actions and statements during the crisis that played a crucial role in increasing Indian resolve over Aksai Chin.

Fourth is an extension of the security dilemma logic: India came to believe that ceding Aksai Chin will be taken as a sign of weakness that invites further Chinese aggression and expansionism, yet India’s newfound resolve to compel China was misconstrued by the Chinese as intentions to disrupt Tibet. I refer to this as an ‘extended security dilemma’ hypothesis for two reasons. First, if India was initially unresolved over Aksai Chin, but later became resolved because they thought that a concession would invite more Chinese aggression, then India must have inferred from Chinese actions later in the crisis (i.e. updated beliefs) that China presented a larger threat that was grave enough to counter with force.\footnote{Raghavan presents an argument along these lines. See Raghavan, War and Peace in Modern India, p. 263. A similar logic is what Schelling refers to as “salami tactics.” See Schelling, Arms and Influence, pp. 66-69. Gurantz and Hirsch develop a related logic. See Ron Gurantz and Alexander V. Hirsch, “Fear, Appeasement, and the Effectiveness of Deterrence,” Journal of Politics, Vol. 79, No. 3 (July 2017), pp. 1041-1056.} Shankar, for instance, advances a similar argument that focuses on the role of reputation: India became resolved over Aksai Chin because it wanted to avoid a “reputation for weakness” in its relations with China.\footnote{Mahesh Shankar, “Showing Character: Nehru, Reputation, and the Sino-Indian Dispute, 1959-1962,” Asian Security, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2015), p. 105.} This argument is compatible with a security dilemma logic to the extent that when India did not find
China sufficiently threatening, it was willing to concede Aksai Chin, but when it came to believe that China was an expansionist state that would not stop at Aksai Chin, it saw a concession as dangerously leading to a “reputation for weakness.” Second, for the present hypothesis to be a security dilemma, India’s greater perceived threat from China must have been a misunderstanding. Indeed, as Mastro argues, after China initiated their “Self-Defensive Counter-Attack,” the Indians hardened their belief that holding formal negotiations would “signal weakness” and “encourage China to use more military force.” If this logic is applied prior to the war, India became resolved because it was insufficiently reassured by China that a concession in Aksai Chin will not lead to further demands. This ‘extended security dilemma’ hypothesis certainly has merits: several Indian cabinet members thought that China would not stop at Aksai Chin, and the Chinese expressed their discomfort with Indian activities in Tibet. Yet, if the above hypothesis is true, India should have initiated eviction operations in locations where the Chinese had intruded farthest – and hence, where India’s reputation for weakness was most evident – and where Indian operations were in the strongest positions to succeed. Dhola post was neither. The post was indeed situated in the eastern sector, where India’s presence was stronger than in the western sector; but as the Henderson Brooks report makes clear, Dhola post suffered from an inadequate induction of troops and was set up north of the McMahon Line, even on Indian maps that were given to China. The Indians, moreover, were aware of this discrepancy. This means that Dhola post conferred the least legitimacy to counter ‘Chinese expansionism,’ yet it was at this post that India made its forward policy “still more aggressive.”

128 On (re)assuring a target see, for instance, Schelling, Arms and Influence, p. 88.
129 On Chinese views about India’s intentions to disrupt Tibet, see Garver, “China’s Decision for War with China in 1962,” pp. 86-91; and Fravel, Strong Border, Secure Nation, pp. 81-2.
130 Brooks and Bhagat, Henderson Brooks report, pp. 53-54.
Conclusion: Provocation, Coercive Diplomacy, and the South China Sea Today

Scholars and policymakers have frequently warned of the dangers of provocation in international politics. Robert Jervis, for instance, once claimed that “[s]tates sometimes fail to deploy threats that benefit them and on other, probably more numerous, occasions employ threats that provoke rather than deter.”[^131] Yet, only recently have IR scholars begun to theorize and research provocation. This article develops the idea of provocation into a distinct causal mechanism of crisis escalation. The *logic of provocation* is that it increases the adversary’s resolve to fight by changing dispositional factors, such as risk-taking, and situational factors that have meaning for individuals, such as reputation and honor. The *unified framework of provocation* shows how several different notions of provocation, such as angering an adversary or increasing its audience costs, operate under a common logic. The combined effects of provocation at both the individual- and state-levels can be a significant driver of unwanted escalation in crises, as the case study of the Sino-Indian War highlights. Yet conversely, states can also use the logic of provocation to their strategic advantage. Provocation thus affects international politics in important ways, and this behooves scholars and policymakers to better understand its logic.

The policy implications of provocation for coercive diplomacy are threefold. First, combining signals of resolve with reassurances can ameliorate a security dilemma, but it is inadequate to avoid the pitfalls of provocation. Reassurance means conveying to the target that the state has limited intentions so that coercive pressure will be relieved if compliance is forthcoming.[^132] But even when the target is reassured that the state does not mean to fundamentally harm it, provocative behavior will increase the resolve of the target to resist and fight. Second, simply

making stronger signals of resolve will fail to overcome the counterproductive effects of provocation. Provocation increases the resolve of the target to fight even when the signal is ‘perfect’ and the target correctly understands that the state is resolved to wage a war to back its claims. As long as provocation is sufficient to tip the target’s existing level of resolve away from capitulation, provocative signals will backfire and lead to unwanted escalation. Third, avoiding the logic of provocation during crises is not always the best way to achieve peace. The logic of provocation can be used strategically to deter challenges to the status quo, such as by setting up a tripwire and placing the burden of provocation on a potential challenger.

These insights can be applied to the South China Sea today. China observers have been debating whether China is a revisionist or status quo state and whether China will be willing to use force to exert its claims in disputed waters. Yet, the logic of provocation points out that even if China is unwilling to use force to defend its claims today, provocative actions by other parties will increase China’s resolve to use force tomorrow. In this sense, the idea that China’s behavior in the South China Sea can be changed with U.S. FONOPs by ‘increasing the costs of non-compliance’ overlooks the logic that imposing such costs can provoke and reduce China’s political costs to escalate. Increasing the strength of the U.S. signal or reassuring China of the limited intentions of the U.S., moreover, will not fully alleviate this logic. Challenges to the status quo can be deterred, however, by reversing the logic of provocation. As Ratner points out, another limitation of using FONOPs as a deterrent strategy is that it does not clearly signal what the United States is resolved to do if its will is defied, particularly if it is resolved to use force. One way to increase U.S. resolve in the South China Sea, as White claims, is to foster

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greater nation-wide debate within the United States and reach a political consensus that freedom of navigation in the region is an important U.S. interest.\(^\text{135}\) A strategy that places the burden of provocation on a challenger, however, can use the prospects of solidifying U.S. public resolve to deter challenges to the status quo: by presenting a challenger with the option of either provoking the U.S. directly or living with the status quo, the burden falls on the challenger to tie U.S. hands. If non-military assets are used instead of a military tripwire, the level of provocation can be kept below the threshold of necessitating an immediate military retaliation but still high enough to increase the public’s resolve. The use of non-military assets, moreover, would have the added benefit of competing in the ‘gray zone’ and avoiding accusations of militarizing the region.

This article has focused on applying the logic of provocation to Asia, but the logic and unified framework are likely to travel to other regions and contexts. The specific types of actions and statements that anger or increase an individual’s sense of honor, and the pathways and institutions through which these dispositional and situational changes impact foreign policy outcomes, however, will be context-dependent. Future research should identify these variations and explore their significance. The first step, however, is to understand the common logic behind them and be clear about the unique dangers and opportunities that this logic presents.