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Collection
On the Brink of War
Explaining Asymmetric Brinkmanship Crises

임박한 전쟁
비대칭적 벼랑 끝 외교의 위기 분석

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On the Brink of War

Explaining Asymmetric Brinkmanship Crises

A Thesis Presented By

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ABSTRACT

What factors compel regimes to act in ways which may well lead to their own destruction? Saddam Hussein’s brinkmanship behaviour during the Gulf Crisis 1990-91 which eventually resulted in a disastrous defeat of his army or the stubborn resistance of the North Korean regime to yield U.S.-led demands to verify the nature of its nuclear development program (1993-94) which almost ended in a shooting-war on the Korean Peninsula, are both examples of puzzles in international relations. Thus, the study aims to uncover patterns of behaviour which drive less powerful states in escalatory behaviour vis-à-vis a much more powerful adversary. While debates in systemic and decision-level theories often discount the behaviour of certain states as ‘irrational’ or ‘erratic’, there is ample evidence that brinkmanship, i.e. challenging an important commitment of an adversary by going to the ‘brink’ of war, has repeatedly been used by smaller powers to compel or deter greater powers. Examining the processes of such seemingly ‘irrational’ decisions taken by leaders of certain states in conflict with much more militarily potent adversaries contributes to IR theorization in various ways. In the selected case studies of Iraq and North Korea, it is revealed that policies are executed primarily conforming to regime security considerations, i.e. there is a clear ordering of preferences among the available policy choices in crisis. Since ‘asymmetric brinkmanship’ has not been studied systematically so far, the study is an effort to both add to the brinkmanship crisis conceptualization, and to unearth potential causalities by the application of a paired comparison.

Keywords: Brinkmanship ● Power Asymmetries ● First Nuclear Crisis ● Gulf War ● Paired Comparison

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INTRODUCTION

“Appear weak when you are strong and strong when you are weak.”

On Christmas Eve 1990, in the midst of the crisis in the Arab Gulf that was triggered by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait some five months earlier, led the Los Angeles Times report the following on the stalled negotiations of Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait between the United States (U.S.) and the Iraqi government:

“Sharpening the contest of brinkmanship in the Persian Gulf, Iraq's foreign minister said Sunday that it is up to the Bush Administration to renew deadlocked efforts to open peace talks and that Iraq will not yield to pressure to change its offered date for a round of negotiations in Baghdad.”

The negotiations ultimately failed and resulted in a (from the Iraqi perspective) highly destructive war from January to February 1991. Less than four years later, in the middle of what would become known as the “first nuclear crisis”, negotiations between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) and the U.S. on the former’s nuclear development program did not look promising either. An excerpt from the New York Times highlights the urgency of this international crisis on the Korean peninsula:

“The recalcitrance was tolerable when talks [on negotiating a nuclear free Korea] were inching toward progress. But now the North [DPRK] is rushing to unload spent fuel from its nuclear

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1 Sun Tzu, the Art of War.
reactor while delaying talks. If that is a negotiating tactic, it is one that the North Koreans must abandon immediately as *deal-breaking brinkmanship*.

What does *brinkmanship* mean? While in American media the term has often been used in the post-Cold War era – mostly in relation to U.S. foreign policy and Washington’s clashes with some states in the international arena – a clear definition is mostly not provided. From the context of such newspaper texts it may be deduced that brinkmanship has something to do with aggressive and dangerous behaviour sometimes maybe even bordering to a kind of erratic, ‘irrational’ conduct. The English term ‘brinkmanship’ is defined as “a *policy* or the *art* of advancing to the *very brink* of some action (esp. war) but *not* engaging in it”. In other words, the North Korean and Iraqi regime were employing some sort of aggressive bargaining strategy vis-à-vis their adversary, the United States, by using ‘brinkmanship’. At the same time, such a strategy is inherently “dangerous”. Even though one party may advances consciously to the “very brink”, it risks losing control over the situation. The logical extension of this would then be that any given brinkmanship scenario may easily get out of hand, possibly resulting in disastrous war neither side initially wanted. Going back to the excerpts above, this translates into situations in which minor powers like North Korea or Iraq have employed a *policy* or *art* – brinkmanship – that could potentially end up in a military confrontation with the United States, the most powerful power. This leads us to

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5 This study follows Monteiro’s definition of differing units in the unipolar system. According to him, the international system is currently consisting one unipolar power (the sole great power, i.e. the U.S.), some major powers (i.e. states that have sufficient power capabilities to deter any state in the system, including the unipolar power), and minor powers (basically the rest). Written after the first nuclear test of North Korea (2006), Monteiro categorizes North Korea as a major power due to its nuclear capabilities. In 1990/91 (Iraq) and 1993/94 (North Korea), during the times of brinkmanship crises of the respective cases,
the second concept central to this study, power asymmetry. An eminent scholar of causes of war, Bernard Brodie, repeatedly asked how governments behave in the presence of awesome dangers. His answer was, very carefully. Then *what triggers states to initiate a crisis against a much more powerful adversary that may end up in war?* And assuming that war is a possible outcome of such a crisis, *how do asymmetric brinkmanship crisis lead to war?* One is quick in assuming that this can only be explained by the ‘irrational’ behaviour of certain leaders, or at least, by a gross miscalculation of the relative capabilities of the contending states. The aim of this study is to find appropriate answers to these questions by examining two historical cases: the Iraqi-U.S. standoff in the Middle East leading to the ‘Gulf War’ in January 1991, i.e. Iraq’s refusal to withdraw its troops from Kuwait proper despite clear U.S. threats of the use of force, and the ‘first nuclear crisis’, i.e. North Korea’s defiance of U.S. demands of verifiable non-proliferation in the early 1990s – another asymmetric confrontation which was eventually resolved through a bilateral treaty in October 1994.

The study aims to contribute to the existing international crisis and conflict literature by outlining a systematic explanation of the factors in which a state in conflict with a more powerful adversary decides to commit itself and initiates a brinkmanship crisis, even

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both challengers did probably not possess over sufficient conventional deterrence power to deter the unipolar power, thus, they can be classified as minor powers according to Monteiro’s typology. See Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011): 14.


7 The war is often termed Second Gulf War as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) has been referred to as Gulf War already. This study uses ‘Gulf War’ for the 1991 confrontation between the United States (and its allies) and Iraq. The study will focus on the United States and Iraq, the two parties most directly confronting each other during the whole period following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.

8 As in the case of the Gulf War, the crisis on the Korean Peninsula was not only a crisis between the United States and North Korea, but also other third states, especially South Korea and Japan. The focus will be on the confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea however, the two parties most actively involved in the bargaining process.
though such crisis could escalate to (an asymmetric) war with an adversary that possesses over significantly larger military and economic capabilities. As will be shown in the following chapters, the analysis of these cases permits to find valuable insights and determine factors which condition an asymmetric brinkmanship crisis and which may help to unravel differing outcomes, which essentially are, war or peace. Observable actions by the Iraqi and North Korean regime certainly reinforced simplified Western conceptions depicting irrationality. However, a detailed review of two specific brinkmanship crises, the crisis leading to the Gulf War 1990/91 and the “first nuclear crisis” 1993/94 on the Korean Peninsula can contribute to understand these actions while highlighting that certain internal factors and perceptions regarding the more powerful adversary condition the propensity for a smaller state to initiate a brinkmanship crisis. The evidence suggests that a less powerful state that faces a much more powerful adversary does only escalate a crisis if it is confronted with a serious internal and/or external threat prior to the crisis. Moreover, brinkmanship is only pursued if the less powerful state believes that it has good chances to defend itself, or at least, inflict enough damage on the more powerful adversary to make an attack too costly to be a valid policy option for the more powerful state. Furthermore, the less powerful side expects that the more powerful state will eventually renege on its initial commitment, i.e. back down at the height of the crisis. In a second stage, the study proposes that a ‘poliheuristic’ decision-making model may convincingly explain the (seemingly irrational) choices made by the less powerful parties in each crisis situation. Due to the inherent lack of data on the nature of North Korea’s decision-making, this part of the study does not an attempt to provide a strong test case for this theoretical model, but rather aims to provide a possible and convincing explanation of how decisions were taken in the
leadership circles in Bagdad and Pyongyang respectively which have eventually led to a crisis confrontation with the United States. The model convincingly evinces that if decision-makers in highly authoritarian regimes weigh domestic political considerations heavily prior, during, and after the crisis, they are likely to face considerable constraints in their subsequent decision-making which cannot be explained by treating states as ‘black boxes’ or leaders as rational cost-benefit maximizers. Thus, this decision-making model offers an alternative account that can explain why North Korean leaders were able to avoid war as an outcome while Iraqi leaders were not.

Brinkmanship crises have received little attention in scholarly research, with most existing research focused on ‘brinkmanship’ cases that evolved during the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. While it is unlikely that the current Iraqi government pursues brinkmanship policies, brinkmanship behavior by North Korea is still one of the potential destabilizing factors in Northeast Asia as it was most recently highlighted by the attack on the ROKS Cheonan (March 2010) and shelling of Yeongpyeong Island (November 2010). Furthermore, there are a couple of other seemingly smaller and weaker states (relative to their adversary) that could potentially exercise brinkmanship in the future (e.g. Iran, Pakistan, or Syria). A more nuanced understanding of what brinkmanship means, and why it is employed by a weaker side in a given conflict dyad, may also bear some policy-relevance. As mentioned above, asymmetric brinkmanship behavior often appears to be ‘irrational’ and is thus hard to explain by existing conflict initiation theories (e.g. decision-level theory or systemic theories) based on the rational and unitary actor model. Thus, a richer knowledge of past brinkmanship events may contribute to efforts aimed at unravelling the phenomenon of brinkmanship initiation by the weaker side (i.e.
‘asymmetric brinkmanship’). This research also challenges the notion of ‘peace through strength’, the belief that superior military capabilities by itself prevent wars or potential wars in form of brinkmanship crises. In this vein, the thesis may add to the constantly evolving conflict research, while it investigates the understudied issue of asymmetric brinkmanship crisis.

First, the study introduces the two cases with a brief overview of the consequential structural changes that greatly transformed international politics between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The disappearance of the so-called Soviet bloc has not only fundamentally affected United States foreign policy toward certain states, but also changed the external environment for autocrats and their regimes around the globe. At the same time it has also given rise to a central topic of this study, that are, conflicts of asymmetrical nature. Following an overview of the literature on causes of war and decision-making, as well as introducing the main concepts of this research, the North Korean and Iraqi brinkmanship cases will be tested against the hypotheses drawn from the literature (part I) and applied to the theoretical model (part II).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Explanations on the causes of war can roughly be divided into system-level (neoliberalism) and state-societal level (liberalism, Marxism) explanations, and theories focusing on the decision-making process, both at the ‘individual’ and ‘organizational/bureaucratic’ level of analysis. It is contended that system and societal level theories of war cannot account for asymmetric brinkmanship, i.e. an aggressive behaviour by a clearly materially inferior
party of a given conflict relationship. This is not to deny that changes at the system level had a profound impact on the way asymmetric brinkmanship crises were catapulted at the forefront of international conflict in the post-Cold War era. The post-Cold War era has seen the evolvement of a single, most powerful state in the world, a process which was accompanied by a wave of democratization. The post-Cold War order is characterized by a U.S.-led international system, in which unipolar power has been institutionalized through ‘rational-legal authorities’ (e.g. international laws, rules, institutions) in order to lend legitimation to U.S. unipolarity. Yet, despite the rhetoric of an ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy, half of the world’s states continued to be non-democratic, albeit the number of ‘socialist’ states had been reduced to a handful ‘Cold War relicts’. The remaining authoritarian states, which in most cases did not share a common normative understanding of the world with the U.S., did not pose a direct security threat to the ‘winner’ of the Cold War. Nonetheless, their actions have not only become an agenda priority in

9 ‘Power’ is a tricky concept in IR, but this study will use ‘strong’ power for an actor whose relative material power exceeds that of its adversary or adversaries by large ratio. ‘Weak’ and ‘strong’ then only have a meaning in a given dyadic context. Iraq can be classified ‘weak’ vis-à-vis the U.S. in 1990, but at the same time ‘strong’ vis-à-vis smaller states in the region. GNP is often used to reflect ‘material power’; for the purposes of this study, population, size of armed forces and size of territory are added to reflect the power differentials. See Paul, Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 22; Arreguín-Toft, How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2; Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001).


12 Hegel regarded history as a process moving towards a specific condition, that is, the realization of freedom. See Fukuyama, "The End of History?,” in Essential Readings in World Politics, ed. Mingst and Snyder (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 33-34.


14 As one scholar noted, the U.S. found itself in a massively improved security environment in the aftermath of the fall of the Socialist bloc, with the remaining ‘threats’ to Washington “indirect rather than immediate, local not global [and] not to vital material interests of the United States but to moral interests,
Washington, but also they seemingly threatened ‘vital interests’ of the United States. Notions of democracy-promotion, human rights standards, and rule of law became an important part of the ‘liberal internationalist’ agenda of U.S. foreign policy in the immediate post-Cold War period. As a consequence, the United States became the single most militarily active state in the post-Cold War world. A paradoxical development which had partly resulted from Washington’s liberalist policy agenda of democratizing the world, the need to secure vital resources and its supply routes, and the desire to manage the hegemonic project of a vastly transformed post-Cold War world order. System-level theories would assume that states flock with the weaker side to restore the balance of power. This has clearly not happened in the post-Cold War era, in which the international community stands relatively united against a few minor powers – ‘outsiders’ – most of the time. Against this backdrop it appears even more puzzling why some states have been intransigent in regard to the realities of the new world order. Some countries appeared increasingly at odds with the realities of this new order. Some of these states, all of them endowed with not even close the capabilities of the United States, were soon on a confrontational trajectory with Washington, whereby power asymmetries have become a constant feature in Washington’s conflicts with these opponents. Hence, this study

or the interests of other countries’ citizens”; see Betts, “From Cold War to Hot Peace: The Habit of American Force,” Political Science Quarterly 127, no. 3 (2012): 335.

15 Spanier and Hook, American Foreign Policy since World War Two (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2010).
17 There is no consensus on the structural debate in international relations theory. The majority of theorists however argue that unipolar (one great power) or bipolar (two great powers) are more prone to stability than multipolarity (more than three powers). See inter alia, Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading (MA): Addison-Wesley, 1979); Wohlforth, ”The Stability of a Unipolar World,” International Security 24, no. 1 (1999).
18 Other powers, most notably the other four permanent UN Security Council (UN SC) members and nuclear powers, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom (UK), have been classified as ‘major powers’. According to Monteiro, major powers are states that have sufficient power to deter any state in the system from being attacked, but its power projection capabilities do often not expand further than its own region. See Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful,” ibid.36, no. 3 (2011): 15.
approaches the anomalies of asymmetric inter-state conflict in the post-Cold War era through the concept of ‘brinkmanship’.

War, as the eminent strategy scholar Thomas C. Schelling noted, do not result from deliberate yes or no decisions, but are usually much more the result of a “dynamic process in which both sides get more and more deeply involved, more and more expectant, more and more concerned not be a slow second in case war starts”. Thus, the road to war is not a straight line but usually involves various junctions and possible alternative routes. International crises have frequently been triggered by so-called brinkmanship behavior of one side between two conflicting parties. The term achieved some attention during the Cuban Missile Crisis and was first coined by then U.S. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Brinkmanship may be defined as “pushing a dangerous situation to the brink of disaster (to the limits of safety) in order to achieve the most advantageous outcome by forcing the opposition to make concessions”. Schelling described brinkmanship as a “technique of compellence” that creates risk (usually shared risk), a “competition in risk-taking”. This practice involves starting an “activity that may get out of hand, initiating a process that carries some risk of unintended disaster”. Economists have modelled brinkmanship as an observable action that with “some probability ends [the game] with payoffs that are undesirable for both sides”. While brinkmanship behavior may lead to “war

20 Crises are well defined by Schelling who defines it as a situation in which “the participants are not fully in control of events, they take steps and make decisions that raise or lower the danger, but in a realm of risk and uncertainty”. *See* ibid., 97.
21 Dulles served as U.S. Secretary of State between 1953 and 1959 under the Eisenhower administration.
23 Schelling’s understanding of brinkmanship was primarily formulated to explain possible ‘risk-manipulating strategies’ adapted by one of the great powers in the Cold War context; *see* Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword*, 90-91.
or some other mutually undesirable outcome”, it may “allow the potential aggressor to extract the whole surplus from the victim”. Thus, brinkmanship can lead to disastrous results for both initiator and the targeted state. While the risk itself is calculated by the initiator to gain something (e.g. advantageous negotiation position, international attention), the potential disaster (war, destruction) is an unintended outcome in brinkmanship crises. Crises triggered by brinkmanship may develop when a state “knowingly challenges an important commitment of another state in the hope of compelling its adversary to back away from his commitment”. Thus, the objective of brinkmanship is to challenge an important commitment of an adversary or to force a trade-off, that is, to get concessions in another policy area.

2.1. Causes of War

The study of causes of war is as old as war itself. Kenneth Waltz wrote in his seminal book, ‘Man, the State, and War’ (2001; [1959]) of three ‘images’ which can account for the causes of war. The ‘first image’ corresponds most closely with classic realism, the nature and behavior of ‘man’; the ‘second image’ locates the conditions and processes within states and societies; and the ‘third image’ views structural factors – the anarchical system of international politics – as imminent causes of war. Waltz contends that “the vogue of an

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26 Ibid., 58.
27 See for example the ‘History of the Peloponnesian War’.
image varies with time and place, but no single image is ever adequate”.

Twenty years later he would revolutionize the study of international relations with his parsimonious theory of ‘structural realism’, thus, locating the ‘third image’ as the most pervasive explanatory level of war. Yet, exactly systemic theories seem to offer few explanations how asymmetric conflicts come into being. Systemic theories focus on great power politics, and are difficult to apply to asymmetric power relationships. For example, power transition theorists argue that power preponderance deters war. In other words, peace is maintained when satisfied great powers are in preponderance, while war is likely when dissatisfied rising powers approach power parity with the preponderant power. Thus, second and first image explanations of seem more useful for the purpose of explaining such ‘anomalies’ like asymmetric brinkmanship and war in international relations.

At the individual decision-making level, rational models of decision-making have been at the forefront in providing explanations of war. While there is no overreaching single conception of rationality in the field, rationality is mostly conceived in terms of the “maximization of values under constraints”, in other words, the selection of means that will maximize determined goals. However, in international politics, decision-makers – even under the assumption of rational choice – are thought to calculate probabilistically rather than deterministically. There are too many uncertainties in regard to the consequences of their actions. Thus, rational choice models take mostly the form of probability

29 Ibid., 225.
30 Theory of International Politics.
31 Neorealist theories have certainly an advantageous point in offering parsimonious and rather simple explanations of war. Yet, their propositions are somewhat difficult to test empirically, as they allow for an “unacceptably wide range of conceptual and operational meaning”; see Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,” International Organization 48, no. 2 (1994).
33 Levy and Thompson, Causes of War (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 130.
In regard to decision-making itself, a rational actor would take a decision based on an expected utility calculation. To choose among different policy alternatives, an actor identifies each possible alternative, assesses the probabilities of the occurrence of each possible outcome, and calculates the ‘utility’, that is, benefits minus costs, of each possible outcome. Then a rational decision-maker weights the utility of these outcomes by its probability of occurrence, and calculates the weighted sum, which is the expected utility of a chosen policy. Clearly it would be a challenge to explain aggressive actions of a weaker power vis-à-vis a much stronger power (that has the ability to destroy the former) with an expected utility model. For proponents of rational explanations of war, war itself is an undesirable because too costly bargaining outcome. War may occur because the contending parties are unable to locate a “mutually preferable negotiated settlement” due to private information about relative capabilities, or there are incentives to misrepresent such information (e.g. about their actual military capability) to get a better deal. Sometimes, communication fails and leader cannot clarify relative power or their resolve without generating a real risk of war. In other situations, parties to the conflict may be unable to arrange a settlement that both would prefer to war due to commitment problems, situations in which mutually preferable bargains are unattainable because one or more states would have an incentive to renege on the terms. These assumptions challenge expected utility theorists who argue that war can rationally occur if both sides have a positive expected utility.

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34 i.e. policy x should lead to outcome y, with the probability p, etc.
35 Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, 132.
37 Another problem in locating a negotiated settlement to any given conflict may stem from the fact of ‘issue indivisibility’; e.g. the possession of a strategically favourable territory, which cannot be easily divided and thus negotiated.
utility for fighting. The ‘rational theory’ of war as presented by Fearon is neat and straightforward, but the empirical record suggests that wars broke out in spite of the fact that the conflicting parties were well aware of each other’s capability, resolve, and costs involved. The rational models of war have been criticized by the cognitive school which focus on the content of individuals’ belief systems about world politics, the psychological processes through which they acquire information and make decisions, as well as personalities and emotional states of leaders.

Without denying the fundamental importance of an assessment of relative military capabilities for leaders before they engage in war games and war planning, Blainey stresses other, ‘softer’ factors which often factor into calculations of leaders who consider war as a continuation of politics by other means. An examination of four hundred years of warfare leads him to conclude that overly optimistic assessments of expected war outcome have been a central cause of war. “It is doubtful if there was any war”, writes Blainey, “in which initial hopes were low on both sides”. At least, a state would expect that a defeat could be avoided, and mostly, leaders expect a swift and relatively easy victory. This optimism however, does not solely arise from mathematical calculations of costs, relative capabilities, and probabilities of winning – as the rational choice would suggest – but is often influenced

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38 Fearon only provides one caveat: the rise of nationalism may have made it more difficult to find a “negotiated bargain in every issue”; see Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” 389-90. For the most powerful assessment of expected utility theory, see Bueno de Mesquita, Principles of International Politics (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2010).

39 Lebow and Stein, among the strongest critiques of rational choice models of decision-making, contend that neither deterrence theory nor rational choice inform about the “all-important preferences that shape leader’s calculations”, since these theories assume exogenously given preferences and choice options and thus neglect how preferences come into being; see Lebow and Stein, “Rational Deterrence Theory: I Think, Therefore I Deter,” World Politics 41, no. 2 (1989): 214.


41 Ibid., 53.
by relative assessments of other abilities, conditions, qualities, or past behaviour. Certain “moods”; often based on national mythology, ideology or nationalism, may cause optimism and thus permeate “what appear to be rational assessments of the relative military strength of two contending parties”. This triggers a process in which states evade reality.

War is essentially a ‘deterrence failure’. Studies on deterrence have often applied rational, game-theoretical models. Deterrence theories may be categorized into two separate bodies of theories, one being the structural deterrence theories and the other being the decision-theoretic deterrence theories (rational deterrence theory). Central to deterrence is the credibility of threats. Yet, threats are believable, and thus credible, only when they are rational to carry out. Thus, threat credibility depends upon each side’s “perception of the likelihood that the other side is Hard”, that is, prefers to execute a threat. If the defender prefers concession over conflict, and this is known to the challenger, defender’s threats become non-credible (and thus useless). Conversely, if the defender prefers conflict over concession, and that is known to the challenger, the defender’s threat becomes credible to the challenger and the status quo would be the rational outcome of such game. Schwarz and Sonin contend that the bargaining power of the aggressor is markedly enhanced if he can make divisible threats, that are, observable actions “that lead[s] to war with positive probability” which is obviously not the case with nuclear weapons, were threats cannot be

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42 In particular, he emphasises that decisions to wage war are not solely based on mathematical assessments of relative capabilities and probabilities, but also influenced by relative assessments of other factors, such as ability to attract allies, finance a war, internal stability and national morale, qualities of the leadership or performance in previous wars; see ibid.

43 Ibid., 54.

44 These theories are closely aligned with realist theories described above. Power symmetries bring peace, because both states, equal in power, are mutually deterred. Nuclear deterrence is seen as most stable, as long second-strike capability is ensured, which increases the costs of a nuclear war to a level that renders war as a policy option irrational.

In other words, bargaining power increases with the ability to inflict arbitrary small amounts of harm to the opposing side. Moreover, their brinkmanship bargaining model reveals that bargaining power of the aggressor (challenger) not only increases with the nature of threats (divisible vs. indivisible) but also when he is able to communicate probabilistic threats as opposed to the dichotomous war/no war choice.

Game-theoretical models of deterrence make somewhat flawed assumptions about their actors and the environment in which they are operating in. Firstly, the literature too often ‘fixes’ the role of the defender and the challenger, whereby the defender is always the materially inferior side (which may well not be the case in the empirical world). What if the defender and the challenger change position and hence, the weaker state is suddenly aiming to change the status quo? Furthermore, game-theoretic approaches to deterrence leave only two decisions to each actor at each node. However in reality states may choose from a much broader set of possible policy options. Moreover, most studies assume a challenger which is a risk-prone gain-maximizer. Such studies struggle to account for the fluidity, processes that shape and affect perceptions of the other. Furthermore it is often unclear who the challenger and who the defender is in a specific crisis confrontation. Deterrence theory assumes a clear analytical distinction between the two, whereas in reality it is often impossible to determine which side is actually challenging the status quo at first. What most deterrence models have in common is the fact that conflict (war) is always regarded as the most undesirable outcome, especially in a situation of nuclear deterrence (which could

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practically mean mutual obliteration). Yet in reality, leaders may have other reasons to wage war, reasons which may not be obvious materially.

Another theory that provides a convincing critique to rational choice theories of war initiation has been put forward by the so-called ‘prospect theory’. Concerned with the ‘intellectual limitations’ of decision-makers, especially under stress, the theory shows why leaders frequently make decisions that yield (from a rational choice view) suboptimal outcomes. As individuals usually evaluate outcomes with respect to deviations from a ‘reference point’ – as opposed to ‘net asset levels’ (as assumed under rational theorization) – identification of point to which leaders refer (usually, but not necessarily the status quo) becomes a critical variable in decision-making. The theory posits that leaders are generally risk-averse with respect to gains and risk-acceptant with respect to losses. Thus, the ‘framing’ of a situation can dramatically affect choice. As Janice Stein puts it, an identical outcome is viewed entirely different depending on whether it is framed as loss or as gain. However, it is difficult to establish whether a risk-acceptant leadership sees war in the domain of possible losses or the alternative strategy, doing nothing, as more risky. Thus, it is important to establish some baseline factors which produce a situation in which certain choices become less risky from the perspective of an even risk-acceptant leadership.

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2.2. Power Asymmetries and War

Even though asymmetric wars are the most common form of interstate war in the post-Cold War era, there is only scant research on the topic. Mack’s seminal paper predominantly dealt with the anti-colonial wars and how seemingly inferior forces were able to successfully fight powerful ‘imperial powers’. By looking at the societal level, he argues that the ‘willingness to suffer’ is much higher in peripheral countries fighting for their very existence than in metropolitan powers whose survival is not at stake in the conflict. While such asymmetric conflict strengthens the national cohesion of the weaker side, mounting casualties lead to an increasing pressure on policy-makers in the imperial state to quit the war.\(^{52}\) Thus, in spite of a gross power asymmetry between the peripheral society and the ‘empire’, the former may win a war in the end. While his study focuses on guerilla wars and wars of liberation, Paul’s more recent study looks at factors that may trigger a weaker state to wage war with a more powerful adversary.\(^{53}\) Empirical evidence shows that in asymmetric relationships, weaker states with long-standing disputes, exploit some crisis situations by initiating wars, while ignoring others. Thus, the question why during some specific times, the relatively weaker state initiated war is central to his study. Similarly to brinkmanship, asymmetric war initiations are often “attempts at bargaining through coercive means”.\(^{54}\) Paul process traces causes of war initiation by the weaker side such as domestic changes in the leadership, acquisition of offensive weaponry, chances of a \textit{fait accompli} victory, etc. Paul contends that decision-makers make their decisions based on cost/benefit calculations prior to launching a war, yet actors’ decisions are based on a

\(^{52}\) In other words, stronger powers have a lower interest in a fight’s outcome because their survival is not at stake; see Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," \textit{World Politics} 27, no. 2 (1975).

\(^{53}\) Paul, \textit{Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers}.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 18.
subjective rationality with values, beliefs, and expectations as important factors determining the decision-maker’s “probabilistic assessment before he undertakes a course of action”.  

55 Arreguín-Toft, following the footsteps of Mack, is more interested in the outcome of asymmetric conflicts (i.e. ‘how the weak win wars’), rather than the causes thereof. Hence, he argues that ‘strategic interaction’, i.e. the strategy choices of both weaker and stronger party to the war, explain asymmetric war outcomes.  

56 Paul defines ‘asymmetric conflict’ as a conflict “involving two states with unequal overall military and economic power resources”. As he is more interested in conflicts between ‘relatively unequal’ states, he chose a power discrepancy of 2:1 between the ‘initiator’ and the ‘defender’.  

57 Power asymmetries are usually based on the ‘3:1 rule’ in conventional military balance. This rule posits, according to Mearsheimer, that an attacker needs a local advantage of at least 3:1 in combat power to break through a defender’s front at a specific point.  

58 Furthermore, the quality of combat forces should also be taken into account. The quality of both weapons and manpower should be measured by assessing their ability to generate “firepower, protection, and mobility”.  

59 The study is interested in highly unequal power asymmetries and conflict, and thus, adopts the 3:1 minimum rule of thumb.  

Theoretically, realism (and its neo-variants) has been at the forefront of explaining war in international relations theory. Yet, realist theory is hard pressed to explain the occurrence
of asymmetric war. Weaker states have very limited policy options to begin with; they may opt to bandwagon a (or the) great power(s), or they engage in external balancing with other (great) power(s) to counter a more powerful opponent.\textsuperscript{60} In an unipolar world, balancing strategies are even limited for great powers, as they at most engage in ‘soft’ balancing strategies.\textsuperscript{61} Elman showed that contrary to structural realist expectations, small states’ foreign policy is not primarily driven by systemic-level forces, but shaped to a considerable extent by domestic political influences.\textsuperscript{62} Generally the problem with realism, as Lebow has rightly observed, is the very fact that the paradigm consists of a “fundamental axiom” which claims that the pursuit of power is the principal objective of states. A “collection of loose propositions and underspecified theories” attempt to apply this maxim which makes it difficult for realists to predict anything before something actually happens, and still permits to explain anything once it has occurred.\textsuperscript{63} Neorealism’s emphasis on the international structure which conditions the behaviour of its units, the states, assumes the structure rewards certain adaptations in behaviour and punishes others. To explain \textit{ex post} behaviour of ‘small’ states under such broad structural parameters appears too simplistic. Rather, critical junctures in decision-making could have produced vastly different outcomes as will be seen in the two cases examined in this study.

\textsuperscript{63} Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,” 263.
2.3. Theoretical Framework

The study applies a theoretical framework to explain asymmetric brinkmanship crises which consists of an explanation of several underlying factors which induce a weaker side into intransigent behaviour in the first place, as well as a poliheuristic decision-making model which can account for decisions taken during the crisis. One of the underlying conditions that may propel weaker states to initiate an international crisis vis-à-vis a stronger state is the existence of serious domestic and/or international threats that a successful challenge of an adversary’s commitment promises to overcome. The most important external threat is the expectation by policy-makers (in the weaker state) of a dramatic impending shift in the balance of power to the adversary’s favour.64 Internally, brinkmanship may be motivated by the inherent weakness of the initiator’s political system. One strategy a regime can employ is to resort to the time-honoured practice of attempting to offset discontent at home by diplomatic success abroad. In even more extreme cases, the whole political system of the state may face a considerable instability.65 A third motivation for brinkmanship stems from the political vulnerability of a leader himself of the respective ruling government.66 In such situations, leaders may be tempted to seek political success abroad in order to buttress their position at home. Incentives for brinkmanship may also be associated with an intra-elite competition for power.67 In such situations decision-making is simply an outcome of political struggles within an organization (e.g. decision-making group) or government. The second important underlying condition for initiating

64 Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis, 62.
66 Lebow, Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis, 63.
67 Ibid., 70.
brinkmanship is the perception by the initiator’s policy-makers that the adversary in question is likely to back away from his commitment when challenged. As the initiator of brinkmanship expects to achieve its objectives short of war, the initiator assumes that the adversary is more likely to back down than to fight. It follows logically, that rightly or wrongly, “initiators do not perceive the commitments they challenge to be credible”. For example, a defender’s deterrence is not perceived as credible by the brinkmanship initiator. In Lebow’s words brinkmanship may be interpreted as failure of challenged states to “make their commitments sufficiently explicit or credible”; in other words, to deter an adversary sufficiently. Lebow concludes that brinkmanship presupposes both incentives and opportunity. While incentives encourage policy-makers to assume the risk inherent in any brinkmanship; opportunities, in form of “a vulnerable commitment”, work to minimize the extent of those risks. The following table briefly shows the relationship and the direction thereof of the underlying factors associated with an initiation of a brinkmanship crisis. The empirical review will test whether these factors, drawn from the literature on brinkmanship and asymmetric war, have been in place in the two cases (Iraq and North Korea) prior and during the respective brinkmanship crisis.

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68 Ibid., 83.
69 Ibid., 154; Levy and Thompson, Causes of War.
Table 1: Theoretical Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>factors</th>
<th>variance</th>
<th>magnifying effect</th>
<th>‘outcome’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>external and/or internal threats to the state/regime</td>
<td>threats existing/non-existing, magnitude of threat(s)</td>
<td>$\rightarrow$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>policy-makers expectations of adversary’s behaviour</td>
<td>defender is expected to back down, expected to resist</td>
<td>$\rightarrow$ brinkmanship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>perceived ability to defend attack</td>
<td>perceived degree of capability to defend the state/regime in a war with the defender in case crisis escalates</td>
<td>$\rightarrow$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.4. Methodology

Given the small number of cases that fit into the scope conditions, which are, asymmetric cases of brinkmanship, qualitative methods using historical data seem an appropriate way to approach this research. As Robert Jervis puts it: “The choice between the deductive approach and one that builds on case studies involves a trade-off between rigor and richness. A deductive theory must miss many facets of any individual case”. And as Ragin noted, case oriented inquiry has often a theory-generating nature. Small-$N$ comparisons are usually seen as useful for generating new ideas and answering questions, but the selection of cases for analysis is deemed very important in order to avoid a distortion of results. What is known as selection bias in social science must be avoided under any circumstances. Therefore the study provides a detailed justification for the case selection. Such small-N comparisons are regarded as appropriate way to test theory. Case

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selection occurs on the basis of their similarity in certain characteristics and difference in other.

The study can be regarded as “heuristic” since ‘outlier’ cases will be examined and with it, outcomes which are not what traditional theories would anticipate (e.g. neorealism, expected utility, rational theories of war, etc.). As noted above, a comparative study applying the most similar system design approach with only two cases allows some descriptive depth while using the process tracing method. In political science “process tracing” has become a widely used method for such historical analysis of causalities. David Collier defines the process tracing method as a “systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator”. Due to limitations in regard to the volume of the present study, process tracing is ‘shortened’ in the sense that not every little event of both crises will be retold.

While using the insights provided by existing studies which used process-tracing, this study will adopt the method of “structured, focused comparison”, a method devised to study historical experience in ways that can generate “useful generic knowledge of important foreign policy problems”. Structured, as it asks a set of standardized, general questions of

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76 George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. 67
each case; focused, as it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined. The questions asked to each case are as follows and correspond with the hypotheses put forward in this study:  

- Did the regime face an imminent external and/or internal threat? Did this threat endanger regime survival? (H1)
- What kind of reaction to a commitment challenge did the leadership expect from the adversary? Was the regime aware of challenging an important commitment? (H2)
- What kind of worst case scenario did the regime possibly envision? How did the regime evaluate its chances of survival in case this worst case scenario would materialize? (H3)

George and Bennett have devised three criteria for studies applying the method of ‘structured, focused’ comparison: Firstly, the ‘universe’, or in other words, the ‘class’ or ‘subclass’ of events from which a single case or a group of cases is part of, should be identified. In the present study these are cases of ‘asymmetric brinkmanship’. Secondly, a well-defined research objective and appropriate research strategy to achieve that objective should guide the selection and analysis of the cases within the class or subclass of the phenomenon under investigation. The study will explain the processes and mechanisms that cause a weaker power to challenge a central commitment of a stronger power, thereby risking war. Lastly, cases should employ variables of “theoretical interest for purposes of explanation” and policy-makers should also be able to influence these variables to some extent. As will be shown, policy-makers could have (Saddam Hussein) or have (Kim Il Sung) changed the course of action. George and Bennett argue that this kind of research method minimizes the tendency of elaborated case studies which could not contribute much

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77 See 2.3. Theoretical Framework.
to theory development due to their lack of a clearly defined and common focus. The present study is a “paired comparison”. While often employed in practice in the social sciences\textsuperscript{78}, this strategy of political analysis has been “widely used but seldom theorized”.\textsuperscript{79} Moreover, the research design resembles a ‘most similar systems design’ approach, as the choice of cases is based on two countries that share many (theoretically) important characteristics, but differ in some crucial respects. The shared characteristics act as controls, and the differences between the cases may be associated with the variation in outcome.\textsuperscript{80}

Moreover it should be noted that ‘asymmetric brinkmanship’ is a novel phenomenon as it has never been systematically examined. The method allows evaluating prior explanatory hypotheses, generate new hypotheses, and assess causal claims thereof. Some prior hypotheses are deductively taken from previous research on “asymmetric war initiation” and the crisis bargaining literature (see above; ‘underlying factors’). Other hypotheses are ‘inductively’ formulated on the prior knowledge of the cases in question (‘poliheuristic decision-making modelling’). Thirdly, a research can gain insight into causal mechanism. What was the causal mechanism that led a weaker state to challenge a commitment of a much stronger state? And lastly, it provides an alternative way to statistical regression for addressing common challenges in social science research such as spuriousness, selection bias or reciprocal causation.\textsuperscript{81} The method of “structured, focused comparison”, a method

\textsuperscript{78} For example Alexis de Tocqueville used this method implicitly across his two most famous books \textit{Democracy in America} and \textit{the Old Regime and the French Revolution}, other authors as different as Valerie Bunce, Peter Hall, Peter Katzenstein, Seymour Martin Lipset or Robert Putnam also implicitly used the method of ‘paired comparison’.


\textsuperscript{80} A good strategy for case selection while simultaneously avoiding selection bias is to select cases according to their characteristics on the independent variable and not on the dependent variable; see Halperin and Heath, \textit{Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills}, 214.

\textsuperscript{81} Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing,” 824.
devised to study historical experience in ways that can generate “useful generic knowledge of important foreign policy problems”. Structured, as it asks a set of standardized, general questions of each case; focused, as it deals only with certain aspects of the historical cases examined. Answering these questions will allow establishing the underlying factors that condition asymmetric brinkmanship in each case.

After having established the underlying factors which condition asymmetric brinkmanship behaviour, in a second stage, a poliheuristic explanation of decision-making accounts for the specific decisions taken by the leaders in the weaker countries during the crisis. In poliheuristic decision-making models, the decision-rule is non-compensatory, which means that “no other dimension of the do-nothing strategy can compensate the leader for the domestic political cost of that strategic option”. The non-compensatory view contends that compensation may not be a viable option for political leaders, thus, eliminating certain choice alternatives which would have looked ‘most’ rational, i.e. eliminates the alternative with the highest net payoff, if they score low on the ‘political dimension’. The non-compensatory principle draws its theoretical underpinning from the same findings from social psychology as prospect theory, while adding a dimensional view. Non-compensatory

82 George and Bennett, Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences. 67
83 The questions asked to each case are: Did the regime face an imminent external and/or internal threat? Did this threat endanger regime survival? (H1) What kind of reaction to a commitment challenge did the leadership expect from the adversary? Was the regime aware of challenging an important commitment? (H2) What kind of worst case scenario did the regime possibly envision? How did the regime evaluate its chances of survival in case this worst case scenario would materialize? (H3).
84 Non-compensatory decision-making is contrary to compensatory processes, prevalent in most decision-making theories. The latter operates with cost-benefit rationalities which imply that the choices of political leaders among alternatives yielding a high value on one dimension (e.g. the military balance of force) can compensate for a low value on another dimension (e.g. political) for the same decision alternative. This is not possible in the non-compensatory model, in which unacceptable domestic costs (e.g. political dimension) cannot be compensated in another dimension. The term “poliheuristic” stems from the assumption that decision-makers use many (poly) heuristics in order to “simplify complex foreign policy decisions”; see Mintz, Geva and DeRouen, “Mathematical Models of Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Compensatory Vs. Noncompensatory,” Synthese 100, no. 3 (1994): 448.
85 Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, 154.
decision-making may express loss avoidance on a dimension most central to the decision-maker. In other words, according to this principal, foreign policy makers will not choose a foreign policy decision that will hurt them politically. This may preclude decision-makers to adopt rational-analytical decision-making at the beginning of a crisis.\textsuperscript{86} Moreover, poliheuristic theory proposes a two-staged decision-making process, whereby decision-makers switch from dimension-based (e.g. economic, political, military, and diplomatic dimensions) analysis in the first stage, to alternative-based calculations in the second stage of the process.\textsuperscript{87} The first phase of the decision-making involves the elimination of certain alternatives from the choice set, and then second phase consists of an “analytic process of choosing an alternative that minimizes risks and guarantees rewards”.\textsuperscript{88} The first phase of the decision-making process typically involves a “nonholistic”, non-exhaustive search, to select a subset of alternatives using simplifying heuristics.\textsuperscript{89} In other words, in step one (the non-compensatory stage), decision-makers ‘simplify’ the decision-making process by “eliminating or adapting alternatives on the basis of satisfying a dominant goal”.\textsuperscript{90} At heart of this decision-making model is the basic assumption that politicians are highly concerned with their prospects of political survival (thus, the ordering of dimensions, with the political dimension crucial in selecting a succeeding subset of policy alternatives). In personalist regimes the desire of political survival may even be amplified, as political and physical survival of the leader in such non-democratic regimes tends to be highly correlated.

\textsuperscript{87} Mintz, "Foreign Policy Decision Making in Familiar and Unfamiliar Settings: An Experimental Study of High-Ranking Military Officers," \textit{The Journal of Conflict Resolution} 48, no. 1 (2004): 94.
\textsuperscript{90} DeRouen and Sprecher, "Initial Crisis Reaction and Poliheuristic Theory," ibid.48, no. 1 (2004): 57.
second phase involves a maximizing strategy to select an alternative from the remaining subset of alternatives. While selecting from the remaining policy alternatives, decision-makers can use a more rational approach in the second stage of the decision-making process, as they have fulfilled the basic condition in the first stage. Outcomes in this process are more aligned to the rational choice model of decision-making, i.e. it captures outcomes based on gain maximization and risk minimization. Hence, the poliheuristic reasoning has clear advantages over the rational choice model which assumes deterministic processes, and is very linear in its approach to political decision-making. 91 The poliheuristic model acknowledges limitations of rationality of the cognitive critiques by putting forward a two-staged decision-making process, with the first stage clearly taking into consideration the boundaries of rationality. The second stage on the other hand involves a payoff maximization process more akin to the ones postulated by rational choice. Goertz argued that the poliheuristic decision-making theory allows the possibility that decision-makers have multiple goals: “A core part of the theory is how leaders evaluate different alternatives in light of their multiple and often conflicting aims”. 92 

Before moving to the case section of the study, a word to the scope of the present research is warranted: the study is limited to cases of ‘asymmetric’ brinkmanship as defined above. An irrelevant case would for example be Saudi Arabia and Kuwait or Canada and the United States. While both would fall into the scope of power asymmetries, there is a clear absence of historical events that would constitute relevant cases of brinkmanship, i.e. they

92 This is a substantial difference to expected utility theories of decision-making in which the researcher often assumes all the key goal conflicts a decision-maker may face can be ‘magically’ resolved. See Goertz, "Constraints, Compromises, and Decision Making," The Journal of Conflict Resolution 48, no. 1 (2004): 15.
are, negative, but politically irrelevant cases. Conversely, Hitler Germany challenged the commitment of the United States (thus, politically relevant), but it is difficult to maintain that a sufficient power asymmetry existed in 1941 (thus, outside of scope condition). According to the possibility principle, negative cases should be chosen if the outcome of interest is possible in a given case. Rule of inclusion posits that negative cases are relevant if at least one independent variable is positively related to the outcome of interest. Under the condition that war or no-war is treated as the outcome, North Korea 1993/94 would constitute a relevant negative case and Iraq 1990/91 a relevant positive case. Moreover, selected negative cases should resemble positive cases in as many ways possible, a condition that would be fulfilled. By comparing Iraq and North Korea the problem of “illusory commonality” could arise. This describes a methodological problem in comparative studies in the social sciences whenever cases may appear to share certain features but in fact, these “apparently common features differ dramatically in causal significance”. As the observed outcomes of the two cases are different, any kind of perhaps unobserved variable could have caused the different outcome. Moreover, maybe a certain feature, a commonality, is causally relevant in one setting and not in another because its “causal significance is altered by the presence of other features (that is, its effect is altered by context). Thus, it is important to examine differences and similarities in context in order to “determine how different combinations of conditions have the same causal significance and how similar causal factors can operate in opposite directions”. Yet, case oriented approach is many advantages as noted above, such as richness in description.

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95 *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, 48.
96 Ibid., 49.
and historical contextualization. Large N-studies also often face a coding problem, as it is almost impossible for example to code a discrete diplomatic event divorced from its historical context.97

**CASES**

The study considers two units of analysis, the ‘state’ and the policy-making leadership thereof, which are both seen as important constituents of foreign policy making. Units, like nation-states, possess over certain ‘structural features’ which John Stuart Mill called ‘permanent causes’. They interact in the “sense that changes in some features produces changes in other features” but they can be viewed as more or less “permanent attributes” because they are considered as changing very slowly.98 The two units of analysis are very much intertwined, especially in highly centralized political systems such as North Korea and Iraq, the two cases examined for the purpose of this research. For example, domestic considerations are a widely cited factor that influences a state’s decision-making group to resort to the use of force abroad. A study of the use of force by the United States during the Cold War shows that American presidents highly affected in their decision to use force by domestic political considerations, especially reputation. Although the degree of influence of domestic conditions on decisions for the use of force in foreign policy is disputed, and whether they can be put on a similar pedestal than international factors, i.e. ‘national security’ considerations (as realist would argue), domestic factors are widely seen as crucial

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98 Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, 55.
when it comes to policy decisions concerning the use of force.\textsuperscript{99} The choice of the stronger side in each of the two conflict dyads as well as the temporal choice of the cases allows holding important variables constant. For example, the unipolar structure of the international environment but also the democratic institutions of the United States help to show that neither regime type nor a consistent tendency within American foreign policy fully determines the choice of behaviour during each brinkmanship crisis. Ole Holsti argued in favour of individual level approaches, seeing such particularly promising and relevant when “decisions [are] made at the pinnacle of the government hierarchy by leaders who are relatively free from organizational and other constraints – or who may at least define their roles in ways that enhance their latitude for choice”.\textsuperscript{100} This condition does neatly apply to totalitarian regimes, in which the ultimate decision-unit is the leader.

3.1. North Korea and Iraq: Ideal-Typical ‘Rogue States’

In December 1991, the Soviet Union, the only great power that had ideologically challenged the United States (U.S.) for almost five decades following the end of the Second World War, ceased to exist. By that time, a process of revolutions and break-ups from the so-called ‘Socialist bloc’ had already greatly diminished the standing and power of Washington’s former rival. Those developments marked what is commonly known as the end of the Cold War, which led many belief Francis Fukuyama’s ‘Hegelian’ prophecy that the “ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy” would eventually result in “the end of

\textsuperscript{99} Meernik’s research on U.S. presidential decisions regarding the use of force during the Cold War argues that international conditions are much more important than domestic political conditions. See Meernik, “Presidential Decision Making and the Political Use of Military Force,” International Studies Quarterly 38, no. 1 (1994).

history as such”. However, half of the world’s states continued to be non-democratic, albeit the number of ‘socialist’ states has been reduced to handful ‘Cold War relicts’. Yet, none of these authoritarian states would pose a direct threat to the ‘winner’ of the Cold War, the United States. In fact, the U.S. evolved as the “single most powerful country” in the post-Cold War era. While it not only possessed the largest economy in the world throughout the 1990s, Washington largely retained its Cold War military forces, giving it a clear superiority in military capabilities over all other states in the international system. Logically, the U.S. would find itself exclusively embroiled in ‘asymmetric conflicts’, i.e. only facing militarily inferior foes, in the post-Cold War era. Many international relations (IR) theorists explained the absence of great power military conflict during the Cold War (1945-1991) between the Soviet Union and the United States, despite their conflicting interests on almost all issues in world politics, as a result from power symmetries between the two antagonists. In the bipolar system of the Cold War an effective ‘balance of power’ (BoP) was restored – a distribution of power seen as conducive to great power stability. One of the leading school of thought in international relations (IR) theory, realism and its structural version, neorealism, almost exclusively deal with the emergence and the workings of systems dominated by great powers and conflict between these powers. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union only the United States remained – under materialist

101 Hegel regarded history as a process moving towards a specific condition, that is, the realization of freedom. See Fukuyama, "The End of History?,” 33-34.
102 Peceny, Beer, and Shannon, "Dictatorial Peace?."
105 There is no consensus on the structural debate in international relations theory. The majority of theorists however argue that unipolar (one great power) or bipolar (two great powers) are more prone to stability than multipolarity (more than three powers), See inter alia, Waltz, Theory of International Politics; Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World."
considerations – the only great power (often referred as ‘superpower’) in the international system. In other words, the end of the Cold War saw a change in the forces of power that resulted in a world in which no other state was able to threaten the survival of the United States. Even though the security situation had improved compared to the time when thousands of Soviet nuclear warheads were targeting the American continent, the U.S. became the militarily most active state in the post-Cold War international system, a paradox that resulted partly from Washington’s liberalist policy agenda of democratizing the world, the need to secure vital resources and its supply routes, and the desire to manage the hegemonic project of a vastly transformed post-Cold War world order. Some countries appeared increasingly at odds with the realities of this new order. As Bruce Cumings provocingly noted, the “whole Third World must behave and police itself or suffer the consequences from an omniscient, omnipresent, technologically omnipotent America”.

The U.S. had inaugurated a ‘new world order’ in which some, non-democratic, militaristic and revolutionary states were soon at the centre of disputes with Washington,

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106 Other powers, most notably the other four permanent UN Security Council (UN SC) members and nuclear powers, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom (UK), have been classified as ‘major powers’. According to Monteiro, major powers are states that have sufficient power to deter any state in the system from being attacked, but its power projection capabilities do often not expand further than its own region (see footnote 5). See Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful,” ibid.36, no. 3 (2011): 15.

107 As a matter of fact, the U.S. found itself in a massively improved security environment, with threats against Washington “indirect rather than immediate, local not global [and] not to vital material interests of the United States but to moral interests, or the interests of other countries’ citizens”. See Betts, “From Cold War to Hot Peace: The Habit of American Force,” 335.

108 Downes, Targeting Civilians in War, 8.


110 George H.W. Bush explicitly used the term “new world order” in 1991, announcing the war against Iraq. He said: “What is at stake is more than one small country; it is a big idea: a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind – peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law”; see Bush, “Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union (January 29, 1991),” (1991), http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19253.
whereby power asymmetries would become a constant feature in Washington’s conflicts with these ‘new’ opponents.\textsuperscript{111}

The “relicts of the Cold War”, in other words, those autocratic regimes which remained in power without having introduced comprehensive political or at least economic reforms (towards a free market economy) despite the dramatic transformations that occurred between 1988 and 1991 in their surroundings, continued to be viewed through a Cold War securitization perspective by (mainly U.S.) research and policy circles. The link between distant regimes like North Korea and Iraq was quickly established, as the following excerpt from a U.S.-based think tank highlights:

“The North Korean nuclear and missile programs represent a direct challenge to United States’ efforts to control through diplomatic means the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their associated delivery systems and are as worrisome as Saddam Hussein’s efforts to stymie the international community’s attempts to control Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction”\textsuperscript{112}

The linkage of Iraq and North Korea and the corresponding framing of them as a security problem for the United States – by now the preponderant power in the world, especially in the military sphere – have not been limited to non-governmental voices. From newspapers, films, to official government documents, Iraq and North Korea were increasingly portrayed as ‘public enemies’ of the United States in the early 1990s. Historian Bruce Cumings aptly summarized common representations of North Korea and its leaders by major media outlets and U.S. government officials in the first decade after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc: Kim Jong Il has been described as a ‘drunk, a womanizer, a playboy, Stalinist fanatic, state

\textsuperscript{111} This is not to deny that North Korea had not been an U.S. enemy ever since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. But chiefly because North Korea was regarded as a mere satellite of other greater adversaries (China and the Soviet Union) of the United States during the Cold War, North Korea ranked comparatively low on Washington’s agenda throughout the Cold War, although Pyongyang seemed more aggressive towards both South Korea and the United States during certain periods than in the post-Cold War period.

terrorist, unstable, psychotic, another David Koresh, Jim Jones, or Charles Manson, while his father did not enjoy a much better reputation, and North Korea as a country with ‘mad-dog reputation’. Iraq’s leader, Saddam Hussein – notably following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 – was labelled ‘Hitler’ in U.S. media, and U.S. president Bush senior and other high-ranking policy makers often made analogies to Nazi Germany’s aggressive actions prior to World War II. Similarly to the North Korean leadership, Saddam Hussein has been widely characterized as ‘the madman of the Middle East’. Furthermore, ‘rogue states’ foreign policy actions were often labelled as out of touch with reality. The last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, commented Iraq’s action in the crisis leading to the Gulf war as one of an “adventurer or a person who did not have a sense of reality”. It is thus not surprising that many scholars and commentators called openly for the removal of official governments by the brute force of the United States as ‘rogues’ were considered as “unappeasable”. Three years before the actual removal of Saddam Hussein as the president of Iraq, Kagan and Kristol wrote in their book introduction:

“[…] the most effective form of non-proliferation when it comes to regimes such as those in North Korea and Iraq is not a continuing effort to bribe them into adhering to international arms control agreements, but an effort to bring about the demise of the regimes themselves.”

113 Koresh and Jones were both religious fanatics who became known for staging mass suicide. Manson was a criminal who was found guilty of mass murder.
116 Gorbachev, “Oral History: Mikhail Gorbachev,” (Frontline/BBC).
Ronald Bleiker suggests that so-called rogue states have become central threat-images that ‘serve to demarcate the line between good and evil’. As following excerpts of white papers and national security reports from the early 1990s show, U.S. security and foreign policy has consistently depicted North Korea and Iraq as main threats to U.S. national security. The U.S. Department of Defense “Bottom Up Review” in 1993 linked the end of the ‘evil empire’, Soviet Union, with the emergence (or survival) of second-ranked ‘demons’ such as North Korea and Iraq:

“The Soviet Empire has now been replaced by something quite different – an Iraq, a North Korea […] demons and dangers that come along of a regional nature. They are no longer linked, but they are nevertheless, the source of potential conflict, places where the United States armed forces might have to go and fight and win.”

As can easily be seen, Iraq and North Korea quickly acquired the reputation of irrational outcasts. Such images mislead and distort the view, as they convey a notion that the leadership of Iraq or North Korea was unpredictable and erratic. Kang wrote that by “resorting to an irrational demagogue as an explanatory variable”, any action by North Korea could be “post-dictively supported” and used to describe North Korea as a “nation of ‘paranoid survivalists’ and ‘a renegade state’”. Yet, the record of Saddam Hussein’s and Kim Il Sung’s leadership over their countries reveal that both were judicious political calculators and by no means ‘irrational’.

120 Emphasis added by author. See DoD, “Report on the Bottom-up Review.”
3.2. Power Asymmetry

These developments run parallel to Washington’s ability to wage war in ways not seen before. The so-called “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) envisions that the United States will have the ability to wage war “fully automated and increasingly soldier-less” with most of the fighting expected to take place “high above the battlefields using unmanned fighters, bombers, and missiles” and military commanders who can watch the action on video in real time and in safe distance, ”pressing buttons to destroy the targets that appear on their screens”.\(^{123}\) Initially, these technological quantum leaps have for obvious reasons been limited to the United States military. In fact, many technologies that fall under RMA were used for the first time in the war against Iraq in 1991. In the post-Cold War era American military strategy aimed at developing capabilities to fight two adversaries at the same time in two different regions:

“[…] essential element of our national military strategy is the ability to rapidly assemble the forces needed to win – the concept of applying decisive force to overwhelm our adversaries thereby terminate conflicts swiftly with a minimum loss of life.”\(^{124}\)

Hence, additional military capabilities generated through these vast technological changes in the military realm have further aggravated already existing power asymmetries between the U.S. and its relatively weak foes. Interstate conflicts in the first two decades of the post-Cold War world would be characterized by one great power confronting a few, non-aligned minor powers. The rough power asymmetries between the United States and the two brinkmanship initiating contenders, North Korea and Iraq are shown in the tables below. Except for the ratio between active armed forces, which is 2:1 (Iraq) and 1.5:1 (North


Korea), all power indicators show wide margins. In both cases it should be noted that the United States could count on military powerful allies\textsuperscript{125} whose support widens the power gap even more. In the era of ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA), with the Gulf War being the first war in which one side (U.S. and allies) could count on superior technologies (GPS, precision-guided bombs, stealth technology, etc.), ‘qualitative’ indicators (directly reflected in weaponry inventory and indirectly in defence expenditures) have gained more importance over ‘quantitative’ indicators (i.e. numbers of tanks, artillery pieces, soldiers, etc.), thus, widening the gap in terms of firepower between the two brinkmanship initiators and the United States even more.\textsuperscript{126} To illustrate the ‘hard power’ asymmetry between the contending dyads (i.e. Iraq vs. United States and North Korea vs. United States), a few commonly used indicators which may be translated into military power over short\textsuperscript{127} or long\textsuperscript{128} term, are used.

\textsuperscript{125} South Korea for example fielded 633,000 active troops in 1993, equipped with qualitatively much better weaponry. Kang argues that South Korean military spending has consistently surpassed the North’s in absolute terms since the early 1980s. See IISS, \textit{The Military Balance 1993-1994} (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1994); Hamm, \textit{Arming the Two Koreas: State, Capital and Military Power} (London: Routledge, 1999); Kang, "Rethinking North Korea," 261.


\textsuperscript{127} Best reflected in armed forces, number of tanks and aircrafts; defense expenditures give an idea about the state of the armed forces, modernity of weaponry deployed, etc.

\textsuperscript{128} Here some standard indicators are size of economy, population size, and territorial area, which conveys absence or existence of certain strategic depth. The indicators used here follow common typologies in IR literature. See Mearsheimer, \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}; Paul, "Why Has the India-Pakistan Rivalry Been So Enduring? Power Asymmetry and an Intractable Conflict," \textit{Security Studies} 15, no. 4 (2006).
Table 2: North Korea and the United States (1993-94)\textsuperscript{129}

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>257.14 mn</td>
<td>9,826,675</td>
<td>$5.945 bn</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>$282.13 bn</td>
<td>1,729,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>22.72 mn</td>
<td>120,540</td>
<td>$21.10 bn</td>
<td>-6.7%</td>
<td>$5.54 bn</td>
<td>1,127,000</td>
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Table 3: Iraq and the United States (1989-90)\textsuperscript{130}

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>248.855 mn</td>
<td>9,826,675</td>
<td>$5,198.8 bn</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>$294.9 bn</td>
<td>2,117,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>19.08 mn</td>
<td>438,317</td>
<td>$58.54 bn</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>$12.87 bn</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
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</tbody>
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As one can easily see, despite the fact that North Korea and Iraq possessed over very large armed forces given their population size, the power asymmetries are formidable. Nonetheless these power asymmetries, there are reasons to believe that both leaderships assumed that they possessed over enough capabilities to minimize the chances of an armed attack by the United States.

3.3. The Workings Totalitarian Systems

Unlike authoritarian rule, totalitarian rule distinctively emphasizes the role of ideology, mass movements, and the role a leader in a totalitarian society assumes who consciously

manipulates a “prophetic image”. Hanna Arendt, a very prolific writer on the subject, refers to this mysticism as propaganda lies typical to totalitarian regimes. These lies are then “woven around a central fiction” and translated into a “functioning reality”. No matter how absurd these propaganda lies may be (to people outside of the totalitarian state), they are integrated into a “living organization” of the totalitarian state and cannot be “safely eliminated without wrecking the whole [totalitarian] structure”. These lies are a key component of the totalitarian regime’s ideology, which in turn penetrate “into the deepest reaches of societal structure and the totalitarian government seeks to completely control the thoughts and actions of its citizens”. Two early writers on the subject Carl J. Friedrich’s and Z. Brzezinski’s (1956), characterized ‘totalitarian regimes’ according to following criteria:

- official ideology to which everyone is supposed to adhere
- a hierarchically single mass party which is either superior or intertwined with the state bureaucracy, usually led by one man
- technically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control by the party and bureaucracy
- near-complete monopoly similarly exercised over all means of effective mass communication
- a system of physical or psychological terroristic police control
- central control and direction of the entire economy

It should also be noted that by using the concept of totalitarianism Friedrich and Brzezinski as well as Arendt linked the pre-Cold War evil regime of Nazi Germany with the Cold War

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133 Ibid., 362.
adversary of the West, Soviet Union. Arendt argues that up to the point she was writing her book, there were only two “authentic forms of totalitarian domination”, the Nazi dictatorship (1938-1945), and the dictatorship under Stalin in the Soviet Union from 1930 to 1953. Space limitation does not allow discussing the peculiar characteristics of each case regarding their internal composition as a regime. While it could be argued that North Korea fits more neatly the totalitarian type than Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Yet, Hussein’s regime diverged also considerably from Juan Linz’ defining elements of authoritarian regimes. The Iraqi Baath Party was instrumental in taking over the control of the country in 1968, and expanded its influence into every sphere of life of ordinary Iraqis. After Hussein took over the leadership, he not only encouraged Iraqis to join the ranks of the party, but also made the party to his own instrument of personal rule, similarly to what Kim Il Sung did with the Worker’s Party of Korea (KWP). Baathist ideology strives for the assimilation of heterogeneous religious and ethnic communities, with the aim that everybody conforms to the ideology’s “militant nationalist requirements”. This in turn, is a “recipe for the establishment of authoritarian rule under control of a totalitarian party”. The Hussein regime dealt ruthlessly with friends and foes, until the party’s reign was

136 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 419.
137 Authoritarian regimes are defined according to the following criteria: 1) the presence of some limited political pluralism, 2) the absence of an ideology that is elaborate and/or used to guide the regime, and 3) the absence of intensive or extensive political mobilization. See Linz, “An Authoritarian Regime: Spain,” in Mass Politics, ed. Rokkan (New York: Free Press, 1970).
138 By 1980 an estimate ten percent of Iraqi’s population managed to acquire party membership which was not very easy to attain. Saddam Hussein (born in 1936) assumed the position of presidency on July 16, 1979. Long before he had been serving as President al-Bakr’s deputy and he throughout the 1970s he nurtured and built up his own power base. Heine, Schauplatz Irak: Hintergründe Eines Weltkonflikts [The Iraqi Theater: Backgrounds of a World Conflict] (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 86; Brooker, "Authoritarian Regimes,” in Comparative Politics, ed. Caramani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 151.
“supreme and [Hussein’s] control was total”. Kelidar argues that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was more Stalinist, and the Iraqi branch of the Baath party began to apply methods for a totalitarian control of every aspect of life in Iraq’s society. Thus it can be clearly said that an important similarity between North Korea and Iraq under Saddam Hussein is the unitary nature of the decision-making. Max Weber would have characterized these regimes as ‘personalist’, others locate a ‘predominant leader’ as the ultimate decision unit. Saddam Hussein once said “Saddam is Iraq, Iraq is Saddam”, which essentially highlights that no important decisions can be taken without the leaders approval. As seen above, in regard to other institutional and ideological features, both regimes were approximating the ‘totalitarian state’, which includes the a monopoly over means of communication, mass party and official state-ideology, system of physical and psychological control of population, control over the economy, and a pervasive cult of personality of the leader. While the leaders cannot control the whole system but must rely on a power base (‘elites’, institutions like the party, armed forces, family ties, security apparatus, etc.), regime survival is tightly knotted to the well-being and well-functioning of these key institutions. Even personalist regimes are not immune to ‘audience costs’, i.e. the domestic punishment that leaders incur for backing down from public threats. In other words, autocratic leaders may be relatively more secure from the public (which is repressed

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140 One of the most famous incidents in which Saddam Hussein demonstrated his resolve to eliminate anyone who disagreed with his policies or constituted a potential long-term threat to his rule occurred in the aftermath of a Baath party conference in 1979, in which twenty-one senior civilian and military officials were executed on Hussein’s demands. See ibid., 785.
141 Ibid., 783.
143 Friedrich and Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy.
by coercive means and unlike in democratic systems in which unpopular leaders get deselected in elections, but instead, as they depend on a power base, these elites can constitute a threat to the leader if they become disenchanted with the course of action. Both regimes were led by a paramount leader for many decades, installed family members in important positions of power, and used a small group of key advisors who had access to the leader. In both countries, military and party (Korean Worker Party and the Baath Party) enjoyed primacy over any other institution, including the formal executive branch, the cabinet. The information flow operates in both regimes similarly and can be described ‘Kim-centric’ or ‘Hussein-centric’: all significant orders and directions are issued at the very top, and the information flow is vertical. Unlike in democratic states, in which information flows up and down and horizontally at each level, information (especially in the security services) only flows up and only commands flow down. Horizontal information sharing is strictly limited which serves as a precaution of potential coup d’etats by military units.

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145 Saddam Hussein was the de facto number two in Iraq from 1968 until the mid-1970s and assumed formal presidency in 1979. Kim Il Sung was the leader of North Korea since 1948.
146 Kim Jong Il was groomed to be his father’s successor since the 1970s and assumed official state titles in the 1980s. Hussein’s son Quasay was appointed heir apparent in 2000.
147 Besides official institutional bodies, such as the Central People’s Committee (CPC) in North Korea or the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) in Iraq, decisions are also taken in more informal settings with the presence of a selected group of close advisors.
3.4. The Gulf War (Iraq)

For most time of the Cold War, Iraq and the U.S. did not enjoy good relations. Following the U.S. backing for Israel during the Six-Days-War (April 1967), most Arab countries, including Iraq, severed relations with Washington. The United States and Iraq did not resume full diplomatic relations until November 26, 1984, on the height of the Iran-Iraq War. In spite of restoration of diplomatic ties between the two countries mainly a consequence of Iraq’s need of arms, credits, and any kind of support it could get in its war with Iran, and Washington’s fear of Iranian dominance of the region, Iraq remained sceptical in its dealings with the United States. The Iraqis did not forget that over decades the U.S. supported Kurdish separatists and the Shah regime in Iran.

As a result of the Iranian threat, the U.S. passed military intelligence to the Iraqis and encouraged European countries to sell high-tech weaponry to Hussein. While the Reagan administration did its best to silence critics in the U.S. congress who were appalled by Iraq’s frequent usage of chemical weapons against both Iranian ‘human waves’ and the Kurdish minorities living in northern Iraq, the Iran-Contra affair brought almost an end to the short Iraqi-U.S. ‘honeymoon’. Throughout the period of off and on cooperation, there was however a constant mutual suspicion. Despite the fact that Iraq became the single largest importer of U.S. agricultural products by 1989, valued one billion US-dollars a year, neither the Reagan nor the Bush G.W. administrations could fully reconcile their relations.

151 The Iranian regime which seized power in a revolution in 1979 was not only openly Islamic but also anti-Western, anti-Israel and anti-Baathist (Iraq). The spiritual leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, called America the ‘Great Satan’. The so-called ‘Iran hostage crisis’ preoccupied Washington’s policies from 1979 to 1981 and not only led to the ‘Iran-Contra’ affair, which seriously worsened relations with Bagdad, but also to a view in Washington to see the Iraqi regime under Hussein as a ‘moderate’ force in the Middle East; see Spanier and Hook, American Foreign Policy since World War Two, 127-28.
152 Iran used ‘human wave’ tactics, i.e. waves of mostly very young conscripts to overcome the defensive lines of the Iraqis.
with Bagdad. Hussein refused the U.S. peace process between the Arabs and Israel, and encouraged Palestinian uprising (intifada) that had erupted in 1987. Furthermore, Iraq’s alleged WMD development program made it increasingly into the headlines and anti-Israel posture constituted another difficult issue between Washington and Bagdad. Bagdad did not trust Washington, and the disclosure of the U.S. arms deal with Iran only reinforced such long-held distrust among the Iraqi leadership. U.S. officials on the other hand had no illusions of the Baathist regime – which, in addition to its constant human rights abuses, had a history of state-sponsored terrorism (e.g. ‘Abu Nidal’), and Hussein frequently employed strongly anti-Israeli rhetoric. As one U.S. government official put it: “I don’t think it’s in anybody’s interest, any country in the world, to have either side [in the Iraq-Iran War] win”. On December 15, 1990, while the pressure of the international community on the Iraqi regime was steadily growing, Hussein and his advisors discussed how the ‘Iran-Contra’ affair affected the decision to attack Kuwait. Saddam Hussein elaborated that

“[the U.S.-led war against Iraq] officially started in the 1986 meeting […] exposed under the title ‘Irangate’, which included Iran, Israel, and America, and some regional countries […] August the second [the day of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait] was an attack and a defense both at the same time, because we were unable to keep a base taken from Iraq and yet we accepted this face, hoping they [Kuwaiti people] would be our virtuous brothers while [Kuwait] turned into a base for villainous people to conspire against us.”

154 In an angry speech on April 2, 1990 – which was officially condemned by the White House – Hussein vowed that Iraq would “make fire eat up half of Israel” if it attacked Iraq. Israel had actually attacked the country in 1981, when the Israeli air force raided an Iraqi nuclear site at Osiraq.
156 Hussein, Saddam and His Senior Advisors Discussing Iraq’s Historical Rights to Kuwait and the Us Position, (1990), SH-SHTP-D-000-557.
Since the very beginning of the affair, Iraqi top decision-makers were unison in their belief that Iraq was confronted with an Israeli-American conspiracy. Hussein told his advisors on November 15, 1986:

“Our fear is that Americans in particular, and with their allies, conspire at the expense of Iraq. I mean, they will pay for the Iranian stubbornness at the cost of Iraq’s sovereignty, and this has always been on my mind since the war started and up to this day.” 157

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, which neither side won, the oil price hit a bottom, thus, exacerbating the economic difficulties of the Iraqis. Iraq put much of the blame on its small neighbour Kuwait, one of the most powerful OPEC members. The Iraqi government tried to increase the oil prices by pressuring Kuwait and other OPEC members, especially Saudi Arabia. In addition to the low prices for gasoline, the Gulf countries which had financed the Iraqi war efforts against the perceived ‘Iranian threat’ to a large extent now demanded that these loans were paid back. 158 Iraq on the other hand had an understanding that these payments did not constitute loans but fraternal aid for the cause of preventing a ‘Persian onslaught’ of the Arabs. After negotiations with the Kuwaitis failed to achieve the results the Iraqis had envisioned, the Iraqi army carried out a blitzkrieg operation on August 2, 1990, defeating the small Kuwaiti defence force within hours, and occupying the whole country. As seen above, while somewhat paradoxically Iraq was on a course of confrontation with the United States well before the invasion of Kuwait, 159 Bagdad


158 Iran became a threat to the Gulf countries as the Iranian revolution propagated the overthrow of monarchist regimes in the Middle East. Iran posed a threat not only through its revolutionary ideology, but also through the mobilization of the Shia against their predominantly Sunni rulers in these countries. The Sunni-Shia divide has continued to fracture the Middle East to this day, explaining at least in part the ongoing civil wars in Iraq and Syria.

159 To mention are the death sentence to British journalist Farzad Bazoft, the so-called ‘super gun’ episode, and Iraq’s increasingly obvious nuclear proliferation which had led to a series of actions by Western
believed that it had stabilized relations with the West, and in particular with Washington, enough to make a bold military move against Kuwait without getting punished. The United States’ response was quick and resolute. First it assembled a 200,000 strong force in Saudi Arabia (Operation Desert Shield), and after it had successfully built up an international coalition against Iraq, it carried out a military offensive (Operation Desert Storm) from January 17 to February 28, 1991, ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait and with it, restoring the status quo ante bellum. To many, Iraqi’s behaviour – its brinkmanship – looked overtly irrational. The National Security Advisor to U.S. president Bush, Brent Scowcroft, one of the earliest advocates in favour of military action against Iraq, later stated in an interview that Hussein was a mystery to him, someone who made “inexplicable” decisions which “didn’t look very smart”. Iraq had fought a costly war for eight years against Iran without gaining anything substantial, i.e. territory. Then it moved against a much weaker state (Kuwait), but quickly realized that it had alienated the international community, first and foremost, the most powerful power on the international scene, the United States. Nonetheless it did not withdraw until the very end, when it was virtually pushed out of Kuwait by force. After the U.S. and its allies had inflicted a heavy damage on Iraqi infrastructure and troops through sustained air attacks over five weeks, the embattled Iraqis finally accepted to withdraw from Kuwait. Their only demand was to do so over an extended time period, citing logistical difficulties in bringing out their troops in a short time.

government against Iraqi property. Moreover, Iraq began to threaten the existence of the state of Israel which was responded with angry reactions from Washington. 160 This prevalent view on pre-Gulf War U.S.-Iraqi relations has recently been challenged by new data. Privately, Iraqi leaders had long been disenchanted with the U.S. government and thought that Washington’s real objective was to undermine and destabilize the Baath regime. See Brands, "Inside the Iraqi State Records: Saddam Hussein,‘Irangate’, and the United States," The Journal of Strategic Studies 34, no. 1 (2011). 161 Scowcroft, "Oral History: Scowcroft Brent," in Frontline/BBC.
On February 22, 1991, the Iraqi foreign minister Aziz announced that his country would agree to a cease-fire and withdrawal from Kuwait over a three-week period if the international community would lift the sanctions within forty-eight hours.  

The U.S. government refused this offer as they thought Iraq was acting in bad faith. Referring to the reported destruction of Kuwait’s oil installation by the Iraqi occupation army, U.S. president Bush told his French counterpart Mitterrand that he was surprised that “this man [Hussein] can continue to talk peace through the Soviets, and still be taking these of actions”. Thus, the United States in the end achieved its declared aim to compel Iraq to withdraw unconditionally from the country it had invaded. The following sub-chapters shed some light on the fateful Iraqi decision-making and the environment in which it executed these decisions.

3.4.1. Internal and External Threats (Iraq)

What were the external and/or internal threats the Baathist regime was facing before it embarked on its brinkmanship policy vis-à-vis the United States? Did those threats constitute a direct threat to the very survival of the regime?

Between the country’s independence (from Ottoman and then British rule) in 1936 and the coups d’état that brought the Baathist party to power on July 30, 1968, Iraq experienced no less than nine palace coups. The Baathist were the first who managed to bring the army under the control of the rulers, and thus, managed to impose some sort of political stability

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on the country. Yet, a cursory overview of Iraq’s relative young history shows a series of external and internal threats which confronted any government in power in Bagdad. Unlike North Korea Iraq is a very heterogeneous societal ‘construct’ which has made it challenging for any Iraqi government to instil a sense of political community into the Iraqi society: “Muslims, Sunnis and Shias, Arabs, Kurds and Turcomans, Christians and Jews entertained divergent political ends”, noted one area specialist. As a consequence, Iraqi politics has not been characterized by compromise or peaceful political bargains, but by coercion in the settlement of political disputes. The subsequent governments were not able to establish an institutional framework based on power-sharing mechanisms which perhaps could have accommodated and united the different ethnicities, tribes, and religions under one political umbrella. “multi-layered divisions”, wrote one regional expert, have historically created the need for “the emergence of a strong state whose immediate and continuous task was primarily the building of social cohesion”.

The Baathist party which would emerge as the sole political organization in the country acknowledged this, at least in the beginning of their four decades long rule (1968-2003). They postulated a secular, pan-Arabic ideology, with strong nationalist ‘Iraqi’ connotations (especially after the feud with the Syrian sister-party in the 1970s). Externally, Iraq was encroached between the superpowers, lived next to the most powerful state and U.S. ally Iran, and saw itself on a constant war-footing with Israel, as well as later with Syria. The Kurds in the northern part of the country demanded autonomy from the central government, often with force and received support from

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165 The north is Kurd-dominated; the central part of Iraq is mainly populated by Arab Sunnis, while the southern part is inhabited by Arab Shiites.
167 Modern-day Iraq was made up of three former Ottoman provinces, namely, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, which shared no common political aspiration.
Teheran. In the south, the regime feared that the Sunni Iraqis could undermine the regime with Iranian encouragement. Thus, Iraqi governments – both Baathist and non-Baathist – faced a difficult task of forming national cohesion and literally, build a nation-state. The lack of a unifying national identity, or in Benedict Anderson’s words, the absence of an ‘imagined community’ in Iraq\(^\text{169}\), constituted a tremendous challenge for the Iraqi government. While nominally Iraqi citizens, considerable parts of the population did not feel represented by the governmental authorities in Bagdad. Mahamedou argues that Iraq, as an artificial construct of imperial powers, a multi-ethnic state, religiously divided, geographically constraint entity, while simultaneously adjunct to the region’s most powerful state (Iran) have driven successive Iraqi regimes to build a strong Iraqi nationalism and state, i.e. a nation-state. Thus, from 1968 to 1980 (the start of the Iran-Iraq War), national development or what calls ‘state building’ were the central objective of the Baath Party and its leaders. Largely thanks to high oil revenues, the Baathist were able to introduce compulsory education, improve the health system, and build up the industry sector of the economy. For the Baathist’, state building and regime security were inherently linked. Iraqi leaders, but especially the Baathist under Hussein, attempted to install a strong regime that could carry out state-building activities deemed crucial for the country’s territorial integrity and regime survival.\(^\text{170}\) The pre-war state-building efforts enhanced the popularity and legitimacy of Hussein’s rule considerably. Yet, the Iranian threat to the regime following the Islamic Revolution in 1979 undermined these efforts. The Iranian ‘spiritual’ leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, called openly for the overthrow of Saddam


Hussein.\textsuperscript{171} Iran, in breach of the 1975 Algiers Agreement\textsuperscript{172}, the Iranians began to support Kurdish separatists in the North and Shiite Islamists in the South, with the declared aim to topple the Baathist government and replace it with a theocratic Islamic, pro-Iranian regime. As Iran constituted a real threat to the survival of the Baathist regime\textsuperscript{173}, the military offensive in 1980 was simply the logical extension of Hussein’s desire to remain in power. Iraq gambled that a ‘\textit{limited aims strategy}’, by quickly seizing parts of Iran’s territory and therefore be in a position to force the Iranian leadership to accept Iraqi demands for non-interference into their domestic affairs, could avert a perceived encroachment by Iran.\textsuperscript{174} At the same time they were facing a rapidly closing ‘window of opportunity’ during which Iraq could possibly inflict enough damages on a weakened post-revolution Iranian army to bring about such results on the battlefield and in the political negotiations afterwards. Thus, the ensuing eight years long war was never desired nor intended by Iraq, and devastated the Iraqi society.\textsuperscript{175} The attrition war between Iran and Iraq resembled the trench war that characterized the First World War, and therefore Iraq (and Iran) paid with enormous human costs. Besides incurring hundred thousands of casualties, Iraq spent all its currency reserves to maintain a ‘peace’ economy throughout the war.\textsuperscript{176} Roughly 1.5 million foreign workers,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item To which the Shah, Iran’s leader at that time, forced Hussein to accede to in return for a promise not to mingle into domestic Iraqi affairs, i.e. supporting Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq.
  \item Iranian supported Shia militia (Darwa Party) attacked and assassinated high Baath party leaders in the late 1970s, including an attempt on foreign minister Tariq Aziz’ life.
  \item Paul, \textit{Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers}.
  \item The Hussein regime expected a quick victory, executing a \textit{limited aims strategy} which aimed at bringing the disputed Shat-al-Arab under its control, and perhaps make some territorial gains in the dominantly Arabic inhabited part of Iran, Khuzestan; see Johnson, \textit{The Iran-Iraq War} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Karsh, \textit{The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988} (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002).
  \item This was a precaution of the regime which feared that the Iraqi population would eventually become impatient and dangerous to the regime. Thus, the regime tried its best spare the population from the side-effects of the war. The Iraqi economy was heavily subsidized and the government imported commercial commodities in large quantities; see Kelidar, “The Wars of Saddam Hussein.”; Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq}, 2nd ed. (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 251.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
or 40 percent of the total workforce, replaced the young Iraqis who were sent to the war front. In order to make up for the quantitative advantages of Iran, Iraq spent heavily to equip its armed forces with modern weaponry. During whole period of hostilities with Iran, Iraq spent on average 57 percent of its GNP for defence expenditures.\(^{177}\) Even though Iraq was among the top oil exporting countries in the world, the country did not make enough to cover its incredibly high expenditures. Thus, Iraq resorted to take up loans on the international credit market. Until the end of the war, these loans amounted to 90 billion US-dollars.\(^{178}\) Iraq received most of those credits and loans from the oil-rich ‘rentier states’ in the Gulf. It received around ten billion US-dollars alone from Kuwait, Iraq’s small neighbour to the South. The Gulf States were eager to finance Hussein’s war against Teheran, as the ‘Islamic Revolution’ in 1979 threatened those monarchies. The revolutionaries in Iran openly called for the overthrowing of the dynastic regimes in the Gulf as well as the secular Baathist regime in Iraq, thus, constituting a threat to these Arab regimes.\(^{179}\) This would later become one of the grievances the Iraqi government regularly cited as a reason to invade Kuwait. From the Iraqi perspective, Iraqi paid with many lives and money to fend off the ‘Persian’ threat from Arab lands. The rich Gulf States on the other hand, would only provide limited support, mostly in monetary form. The Iraqi economy was wrecked. Economic estimates put the cost of reconstruction at $US 230 billion.\(^{180}\) Even if one adopts the most optimistic (and highly unrealistic) assumption that every dollar of oil revenues would be directed to the reconstruction effort, it would have

\(^{177}\) Johnson, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 9.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., 10.


required nearly two decades to repair the total damage.\textsuperscript{181} Reportedly, Iraq’s annual oil revenues after the war did not even suffice to cover on-going expenses. Ten billion US-dollars would have been needed to balance the deficit and thus, be able to start the reconstruction of the country.

Yet, the interests the country had to pay on the debts amounted to six to eight billion US-dollars annually alone. Economic privatization and liberalization did not bring the relief for the Iraqi government hoped to achieve.\textsuperscript{182} Inflation, on average at 30 percent annually between 1980 and 1990 impeded any such move and troubled the economy even more, forcing the regime to introduce price controls.\textsuperscript{183} Furthermore, the Iraq-Iran war, despite official insistence of the Iraqi government that it had achieved a ‘great victory’ over the Islamic Republic of Iran, even over two years after the cessation of hostilities, the armistice had still not been replaced with a peace treaty. Thus, Iraq had to keep the armed forces – the fourth largest in the world at that time – mobilized, which became increasingly a problem for the regime. Partial demobilization in 1989 backfired, as huge numbers of young Iraqi men could not be absorbed by the war-stricken Iraqi economy.\textsuperscript{184} Besides the huge debt the Iraqi had accumulated as a consequence of the war with Iran, at least as troublesome was the free fall of the price for oil. Within one year the price decreased from 20.50 US-dollars per barrel to 13 US-dollars (1990), whereby one US-dollar price

\textsuperscript{181} Karsh and Rautsi, “Why Saddam Hussein Invaded Kuwait,” 19.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} Karsh, \textit{The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988}. 
difference meant one billion US-dollars less revenue for Iraq. To make matters worse for Iraq, considerable parts of the Iraqi oil infrastructure was destroyed during the war. Moreover, as Iraq only has a very narrow access to the sea and the only port of the country was also destructed, Iraq could only export a small part of the oil that it used to sell before 1980. Thus, partly because of declining oil prices on the world market, partly due to the destruction of oil facilities Iraq’s annual oil avenue had declined to mere 13 billion US-dollars. A regional economist summarized the Iraqi dilemma pointedly in a sentence: “In short, by 1990 the Iraqi economy reached a dead end from which there was no prospect for recovery.” Undoubtedly, an invasion of Kuwait would have also addressed such geopolitical constraints. Yet, Iraqi leadership discussions reveal that the debt factor was clearly the most important determinant of invading Kuwait. As a consequence the Iraqis displayed internally and externally the anger they felt towards the Kuwaitis, which refused to waive the war debts of Iraq. In May 1990, Iraq began to assert that OPEC states would artificially keep the oil price low in order to sabotage Iraq. Iraq began to pressure Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to reduce their oil drilling with a view to stabilize the prices. Both countries (and UAE) were asked to renounce their loan claims from the war with Iran and instead to invest in the reconstruction of Iraq. Iraq began to claim that Kuwait had ‘stolen’ Iraqi oil worth 2.4 billion US-dollars by “setting up oil installations in the southern section

186 Only 24 km in breadth with two Kuwaiti islands located directly in front of Iraq’s coast (Warba and Bubiyan).
189 Within OPEC, Iraq belonged to those who could be classified as ‘price maximizers’, while UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were interested in higher drilling quotas; see Alnasrawi, “Iraq: Economic Consequences of the 1991 Gulf War and Future Outlook,” 340.
190 Stein, “Deterrence and Compellence in the Gulf, 1990-91: A Failed or Impossible Task?,” 149.
of the Iraqi al-Rumaila oil field and extracted oil from it.\textsuperscript{191} Kuwait’s intransigence on the questions of the oil price, moratorium of debt payment, and refusal to acknowledge Iraqi accusations of theft, increasingly led to desperation on the Iraqi side.\textsuperscript{192}

Domestically, the Iraqi decision-makers were very sensitive to the perceived mood in the country and the people’s views on the government’s policies. In countless of meetings they refer to their ‘position in front of our people’ and the in front of the ‘Arab people’.\textsuperscript{193} Evidently economic factors weighted heavily in these deliberations, but also whether the Iraqi regime could fulfil the promises it made. Hussein argued that he “defended the Iraqis” when he “invaded Kuwait”.\textsuperscript{194} In other words, he saw himself in a position to fulfil the promises to bring wealth and prosperity to the Iraqi people. Promises he made during the war with Iran, but was in no position to deliver once the war ended. In the end, the defiant position of Kuwait, which included insults hurting Iraqi national pride, amounted to a declaration of war from Bagdad’s perspective.\textsuperscript{195} However, Iraq’s decision to invade Kuwait came after long and intensive deliberations and weighing of alternative options.\textsuperscript{196}

Yet, Iraq’s decision-makers certainly miscalculated their move into Kuwait due to serious misperceptions of the political environment in the post-Cold War era. Hussein had undoubtedly an intimate knowledge of his own country, but his views on the United States were heavily biased.

\textsuperscript{191} Karsh and Rautsi, “Why Saddam Hussein Invaded Kuwait,” 25.
\textsuperscript{192} Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq}, 252.
\textsuperscript{193} There are numerous accounts in which Saddam and his closest advisors were directly referring to the interaction of government actions and people’s reactions to it. See Hussein, \textit{Saddam and Military Officials Discussing the Iran-Iraq War and the Al-Qadisiyyah Battle}, (1988), SH-SHTP-V-000-589.
\textsuperscript{194} \textit{Iraqi Officials Discussing the Occupation of Kuwait}, (1990), SH-SHTP-A-001-232.
Popular morale was bad, and Hussein’s popularity low, even military veterans expressed their discontent with the regime.\textsuperscript{197} After eight years of wasteful conflict with Iran, rather than enjoying the ‘fruits of victory’ as proclaimed by the Iraqi leadership, the population was disillusioned and disoriented, the country hopelessly indebted, and the government unable to pay for the hundreds of thousands widows\textsuperscript{198} and war invalids. The stalemate outcome of the war with Iran carried an expensive price tag, approximating 532 billion US-dollars. The American historian Peter L. Hahn suggests that Hussein eventually reinstated his domestic power by “embracing tribalism and Islam, keeping his military on a war footing, and distracting his people by pursuing an assertive foreign policy”.\textsuperscript{199} The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is thus a textbook case of the ‘diversionary war’ theory.\textsuperscript{200} Through an invasion of Kuwait, Hussein expected to gain access to Kuwaiti oil fields, control oil production levels, and influence OPEC prices while also compelling Kuwait to cancel debts and pressuring Saudi Arabia to change its oil production levels.

Last, but not the least, the Iraqi President aimed to reinforce his political position at home by projecting the image of a strong leader who brought benefits to his people. Moreover, as Kuwait was seen by most Iraqis as inherent part of the country, ‘unifying’ Kuwait with the ‘motherland’ would constitute a huge political victory for the Baathist regime. Thus, the benefits of invading Kuwait seemed to clearly outweigh the costs of such an undertaking. Views of U.S. policymakers calling Iraq’s aggression ‘irrational’ and ‘crazy’ did simply not understand the embattled realities of Iraq between 1988 and 1990 and the underlying worldview of the Iraqi regime. After Iraq had been defeated by the U.S.-led coalition the Iraqi regime termed the invasion of Kuwait as a “starvation war”.\textsuperscript{201} Former Iraqi Foreign

\textsuperscript{197} Hahn, \textit{Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I}, 89.
\textsuperscript{198} Estimates of the number of direct combat casualties ranged from 250,000 to 500,000 men.
\textsuperscript{199} Hahn, \textit{Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I}, 89.
\textsuperscript{200} Levy, “The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique.”
\textsuperscript{201} Words of former Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz; see Stein, “Deterrence and Compellence in the Gulf, 1990-91: A Failed or Impossible Task?”
Minister Tariq Aziz summarized Iraq’s reasons for invading Kuwait in August 1990 as follows:

“we were facing two options, either to stop servicing our debts and then being declared bankrupt in the international arena, by our debtors, or we were to stop living well... we were not in an extravagant mood you see, but country needs several billion dollars a year to buy food, medicine, spare parts, and to take into consideration that after 8 years of war, the people wanted a better living. So this was a real conspiracy against Iraq, a deliberate threat to the security and status of Iraq in the region and in the world.” 202

This view gives a slightly distorted impression: Iraq’s regime did not care much for the well-being of its population, but it certainly placed its utmost attention to regime security. The highly dissatisfying outcome in its war with Iran, an economy at the bottom and an increasingly unhappy one million strong army, the Iraqi regime urgently needed a success story, a diversion of the daily problems the people encountered, and an activity for the oversized armed forces.

Saddam Hussein refused to withdraw under duress. Basically he was willing to “withdraw voluntarily and in a manner that would preserve his dignity”. 203 Hence, Shlaim provides convincing evidence that Iraq was initially willing to pull out from Kuwait. However, certain demands of Bagdad had to be met. Firstly, Bagdad asked for a guarantee that negotiations over the conflicting issues (oil price, oil drilling, border demarcation) between Kuwait and Iraq would ensue once Iraq had pulled back its forces. Moreover, the regime stressed that it wished the conflict would remain limited to an inter-Arab dispute. In other words, outside powers should not be involved into solving the crisis. In fact, the Iraqi government announced its intention to start withdrawing troops from Kuwait on 7 pm on August 5, 1990, on the very same day as Iraq was prepared to attend a mini-summit in

Jeddah, which King Hussein jointly organized with other Arab leaders. King Hussein was given forty-eight hours to work out an Arab solution to the crisis, which meant to find a “face-saving formula” for Iraq to pull out. Upon his return in Amman, the Jordan monarch called the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, and found out that he and King Fahd had changed their minds. Both leaders suddenly rejected the term Hussein had secured and demanded an immediate restoration of the Kuwaiti ruling family. \(^{204}\) To do even more damage, the Egyptian president pressed for an Arab League resolution condemning Iraq, a development Saddam Hussein had explicitly warned from happening. The resolution led not only to a hardening of the Iraqi position, but also to the internationalization of the crisis. Mubarak’s U-turn might be explained with his country’s dependency on Washington. Indeed, Mubarak was pressured by Bush who was wary of an “Arab solution” to the crisis, fearing that it might end up in a compromise with Saddam Hussein. Also, intra-Arab dynamics played a role – neither King Fahd nor Hosni Mubarak wanted to give credit to King Hussein for resolving the crisis. \(^{205}\) Since the time of the popular pan-Arab leader Nasser, politics in the Middle East were not only dominated by the Israel-Palestine question, but also by Arab disunity and mutual misgivings. The Arab’s leaders U-turn – whether pressured into this by the U.S. or motivated by other factors – had irreversible consequences for the development of events:

“Overnight an Arab-Arab dispute was transformed into a major international crisis pitting America and its allies against Iraq. Suddenly, Saddam had to ‘lose face’, and conciliation was replaced by confrontation.”\(^{206}\)

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\(^{204}\) Ibid., 481.
\(^{205}\) Ibid.
\(^{206}\) Ibid., 483.
This made an Iraqi withdrawal without concessions extremely difficult, as Hussein either looked weak vis-à-vis his people, the wider Arab public, or at least in front of his military, which would have had to withdraw unconditionally from a piece of land it had just won.

3.4.2. Commitment Challenge (Iraq)

Officially, the United States and Iraq enjoyed stable and relatively good relations prior to Iraq’s invasion on August 2, 1990. As a consequence of Iraq’s war with Iran, Washington and Baghdad were able to resolve some of their contending issues that had troubled their relations in the past. For the U.S. and for Iraq, Iran posed a much greater threat, and thus, cooperation was relatively easy to facilitate. Yet, as described above (see 3.4.), U.S.-Iraqi relations were based on rather deep-seated, mutual suspicions. Shortly before the invasion of Kuwait, on July 15, 1990, the vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, told high-ranking members of the Baath party that Kuwait was part of a “Zionist-led conspiracy to destroy Iraq”. Accordingly he opined that Iraq should show the world that Iraq was “aware of this Zionist-Imperialist-Kuwaiti conspiracy”. In fact, the Iraqi top-leadership felt to such large extent unfairly treated by Kuwaiti actions that it felt obliged to act with force if necessary. The ‘imperialists’ were no other than the United States. Iraqi leaders repeatedly complained between 1989 and 1990 that the U.S. was trying to create an anti-Iraqi (or Hussein) coalition in the Gulf. It is difficult to understand the scope of the Iraqi leaders’ conspiracy theories about Western intentions and the supposedly U.S.-Israel supported Kuwait. Discussions among the Iraqi decision-makers suggest however that they were generally more preoccupied with the

207 High-ranking Iraqi officials used the term ‘Zionism’ to describe anything related with Israel.

opinions and expected reactions to an invasion of Kuwait of other Arab countries. They felt confident enough to act swiftly as they had prepared the ground diplomatically. Iraq created the ‘Arab Cooperation Council’ (ACC) with (North) Yemen, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt; chiefly those Arab countries which were not part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The ACC was created with the objective to build up a pro-Iraqi coalition. Iraq thought that such a coalition would suffice to bolster its aggression against Kuwait, a small monarchy that traditionally had few friends in the Arab world. Iraq believed that it had the historical right over the Kuwaiti territory. In fact, Iraqi-Kuwaiti conflicts first emerged after Kuwait’s independence from the United Kingdom in the 1960s. Shortly after the Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty of 1899 was terminated in June 1969, essentially ending the British protectorate over Kuwait, Iraq’s then-prime minister, Qassim, announced that Kuwait was an integral part of Iraqi proper and subsequently offered to ‘liberate’ the inhabitants of the oil-rich, but very small country. However, Britain and the United States strongly backed Kuwait’s independence, which made Iraq’s plan to swallow Kuwaiti territory not feasible. Ironically, as a result of the quarrel over Kuwait’s status, the Iraqi government recalled its ambassador in Washington and ordered the U.S. ambassador to leave the country on June 2, 1962, and with it, closing almost all official communication channels to Washington for over two decades. Undoubtedly, Iraq underestimated the tremendous interest of the United States in the region, and especially its inherent interest in a secure and stable flow of oil. A U.S. national security directive in 1989 read as follows:

209 See for example Hussein, Saddam and Iraqi Officials Discussing the State of the Country and Sending a Diplomatic Letter to the League of Arab States, (1990), SH-SHTP-A-000-894.

210 North Yemen, officially the “Yemen Arab Republic”, merged with the “People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen” (South Yemen) on May 22, 1990, becoming a united country, the Republic of Yemen.

211 Karsh and Rautsi, “Why Saddam Hussein Invaded Kuwait.”


213 Ibid., 46.
“Access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area are vital to U.S. national security. The United States remains committed to defend its vital interests in the region, if necessary […] through the use of U.S. military force, against […] any […] regional power with interests inimical to our own.”

While this document was not accessible to Iraqi leaders, they could have read U.S. foreign policy history. The so-called ‘Eisenhower Doctrine’ of 1957 was based on an U.S. commitment to support “without any reservation the full sovereignty and independence of each and every nation of the Middle East”. While those commitment had been made under the shadow of the Cold War, the Iraqis drew (if any) wrong conclusions from the end of the superpower confrontation. Instead of choosing to neglect the region, the U.S. gained considerable freedom in its actions in the Middle East due to the diminished Soviet presence in the region. As Iraq was selling 25 percent of its oil to the U.S. prior to the invasion of Kuwait, it should have been clear about Washington’s stake in the region. The first meeting with key advisers of U.S. president Bush just one day after the fateful invasion had taken place on August 3, 1990; revealed with considerable clarity the U.S. priorities in the region. While Iraq’s violation of the sovereignty of Kuwait clearly transgressed international law, lending the U.S. administration the option of legitimizing the military option a “firm legal foundation”, “the moving force behind the American decision to act was a concern about the fate of the region’s oil”.

The Bush administration feared that Saddam Hussein would be able to control approximately 17 percent of the

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216 These figures were discussed by U.S. decision-makers during the NSC meeting on August 3, 1990; see NSC, “Meeting of the Nsc Meeting (August 3, 1990),” ed. Council (Washington D.C.1990).
world’s total oil.218 In addition, Iraq would have been in a position to threaten Saudi Arabia and the other smaller but oil-rich Gulf countries, and perhaps even manipulate their oil policy.219 Thus, from the American point of view the 1991 Gulf conflict was, at its heart, a war to defend Saudi oil. President Bush’s main concern at the first National Security Council meeting (August 3, 1990) following the invasion of Kuwait was the potential increase in Iraq’s economic leverage and its likely influence on an “already gloomy” American economy.220 One scholar wrote a bit sarcastically but not without making a valid argument that “if Kuwait had produced carrots rather than oil, it is most unlikely that a great coalition would have been assembled to reverse Iraqi aggression”.221 The Saudi’s, staunch supporter of the Kuwaiti monarchy and advocates of a military solution to the crisis, promised to keep the oil price steady throughout the crisis that the invasion of Kuwait triggered. Moreover they provided a base from which the U.S. could mount its attack on Iraq, provided troops, and contributed some 60 billion US-dollars to the cost of the war.222 Both Washington and Bagdad failed to understand each other’s signal prior to the invasion. On July 21, 1990, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported Iraqi troop concentrations along the Kuwaiti border, but those were ignored by the acting administration.223 Two days later, a Pentagon spokesperson reiterated the U.S. is committed to the individual and collective self-defence of the Gulf countries, but at the same time

219 NSC, “Meeting of the Nsc Meeting (August 3, 1990),”
223 On July 17, the Iraqi regime sent two ‘Republican Guard’ divisions to the border with Kuwait, and thus, had 100,000 troops and hundreds of tanks in southern Iraq by late July. See Sperandei, "Bridging Deterrence and Compellence: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Coercive Diplomacy," International Studies Review 8, no. 2 (2006): 271; Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 92.
declined to answer whether the U.S. would protect Kuwait if it was attacked. On the same
day, a U.S. State Department spokesperson echoed this statement but also emphasized the
absence of defence treaties and formal security commitments of the U.S. in the region. In
the Glaspie-Hussein meeting (see above) on July 25, the American ambassador stressed the
Bush administration’s desire to maintain friendly relations with Iraq. One author suggested
that Glaspie was trapped by the U.S. State Department policy aimed at improving relations
with Hussein who had been regarded as ‘moderating force’ in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{224} Glaspie
failed to grasp Hussein’s seriousness and intentions, while Hussein misread Glaspie’s
repeated U.S. interest for a ‘peaceful solution’ to any disputes in the region. The U.S.
ambassador was heavily criticized in Washington for having failed to send Hussein the
right ‘signals’. A brief excerpt from their discussion reveals that the Iraqi leader tried to
warn the United States:

“[…] Iraq suffered 100,000's of casualties and is now so poor that war orphan pensions will soon
be cut, yet rich Kuwait will not even accept OPEC discipline. Iraq is sick of war, but Kuwait has
ignored diplomacy. U.S. manoeuvres with the U.A.E. [United Arab Emirates] will encourage the
U.A.E. and Kuwait to ignore conventional diplomacy. If Iraq is publicly humiliated by the U.S.G.
[U.S. government], it will have no choice but to ‘respond’, however illogical and self-destructive
that would prove.”\textsuperscript{225}

These lines not only provide evidence that Hussein warned the U.S. of Iraqi resolve, but
also is interesting as it acknowledges the ‘illogical’ and ‘self-destructive’ acts Hussein was

\textsuperscript{224} Glaspie, "Cable: Saddam's Message of Friendship to President Bush," ed. Department (Bagdad: U.S.
Embassy Bagdad, 1990); Sperandei, "Bridging Deterrence and Compellence: An Alternative Approach to
the Study of Coercive Diplomacy." 272.
and-american-ambassador.html}. For the full set of diplomatic messages concerning the exchange between
Ambassador Glaspie and Hussein that were sent from the U.S. embassy in Bagdad to the U.S. State
Department, see the corresponding Wikileaks cable from July 25, 1990: “Saddam's Message of Friendship
to President Bush”, online accessible: \url{https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/90BAGHDAD4237_a.html}
[retrieved on October 24, 2014].
willing to initiate in order to protect his country from ‘humiliation’. The first part of the excerpts is more revealing as it highlights the desperate state of the Iraqi economy, and the inability of the Iraqi government to provide for even the most vulnerable parts of the population. Kuwait is framed as both cause and solution to Iraq’s current problems. For Hussein the Kuwaiti intransigence on the oil price regulations by the OPEC hindered Iraq to earn enough via oil exports to rebuild its shattered post-war economy. On the other hand, Hussein saw in the U.S. military and political backing of Kuwait and UAE a major contribution to the Gulf countries’ intransigence in the oil price negotiations. Much latter, in U.S. captivity, he would even go further, describing the Iraqi invasion as a pre-emptive strike against a ‘Zionist-Kuwaiti-U.S.’ invasion plan of Iraq.

As Hussein showed signs of increasing aggressivity towards Kuwait, both rhetorically and by actions (i.e. troop deployments), the U.S. administration was too slow in changing its policy towards Iraq from accommodation to deterrence. The U.S. took some limited steps to deter a possible Iraqi aggression by deploying additional navy ships into the Gulf and conducting joint exercises with the UAE navy. While these steps were registered in Bagdad, but the rhetoric of the U.S. government appeared too benevolent to translate those measures into a clear signal of resolve to the Iraqi leadership.

226 Glaspie replied that the U.S. could “never excuse settlement of disputes by other than peaceful means”, but at the same time she said – regarding the long-standing Kuwaiti-Iraqi border dispute – that the U.S. government takes “no position on these [intra-]Arab affairs”; see Glaspie, “Cable: Saddam’s Message of Friendship to President Bush.”

227 The ‘Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries’, in short OPEC; is an economic cartel whose mission has been to coordinate the policies of the oil-producing countries.


229 Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 93.
Within one week, Iraq had occupied Kuwait and Hussein believed that he had created a *fait accompli* which would eventually be accepted by the international community. However, the international reaction was harsh. The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was on a visit to the United States during the attack, and apparently convinced U.S. president Bush not to accept the Iraqi aggression. A few days after the invasion, Dick Cheney, the U.S. Secretary of Defence at that time, convinced King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, that the Iraqi challenge needed a multilateral, swift and strong military response. Fahd subsequently agreed to the hosting of hundreds of thousands of American troops, setting the stage for Operation *Desert Shield* which would later turn into Operation *Desert Storm*.

One historian aptly described the dilemmatic situation in which Iraq and the U.S. would remain interlocked in their negotiations over the course of the next six months. Iraq’s leader’s stubborn insistence on “keeping the spoils of his military advance and President Bush’s equally stubborn refusal to accede to such an outcome place the United States and Iraq on a collision course that would result in the first war between their two countries”. The episode reveals how misperceptions can fail to communicate a ‘commitment’. Communication is central to the shaping of perceptions. In the complex environment of international politics, states send “each other signals as to their thinking and likely behaviour both intentionally and unwittingly”. At the same time they receive signals and attempt to make sense of them. Because international politics does not only involve one communication dyad, but multiple ones, it becomes overwhelmingly difficult for decision-

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231 Hahn, *Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I*, 94.
makers to evaluate received signals in real time. Perception is not a passive process of receiving signals (information), but an active process of *constructing* reality. Individuals recognize and categorize incoming information based on their existing beliefs and hypotheses concerning the nature of the world surrounding them and the characteristics of actors operating in it. However, information that accords to existing beliefs (hypotheses, theories) crosses a slower threshold and is thus easier to attract attention of the decision-maker unlike information that is dissonant with existing beliefs. The most basic cause of misperception is that decision-makers simply tend to see what they expect to see and ignore signals that do not correspond with their internal worldview. U.S. decision-makers thought Hussein would move into Saudi Arabia and put even more territory under his control. This thinking was solely based on the fact that it would have been a relatively easy for the Iraqi army to execute such an undertaking, while simply neglecting the fact that Iraq never had a grand strategy to conquer the Middle East by military force. Moreover, perceptual theories provide ‘ready-made maps’ that can be accessed whenever a situation is at hand in which an action-script (which is based on existing knowledge) becomes available. Furthermore, cognitive systems are biased in the sense that they defend existing beliefs to be disconfirmed. Hence, to operate in a complex world, decision-makers can call upon ready-made maps, that are, images of another state’s nature, goals, and capabilities. Bush and Thatcher were quick in making analogies with the Munich crisis of 1938, during which

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233 Ibid., 77.

234 U.S. policy makers speculated that Hussein could seize oilfields in northern Saudi Arabia or even the entire kingdom, and then control 70 percent of the Gulf’s oil reserves. Some even suggested that Iraq could also occupy the UAE, and then control 90-95 percent of the world’s oil. The discussions of the Iraqi leadership reveal that such missions or plans were never even in theory outlined. See Hahn, *Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I*, 94; Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis (MD): Naval Institute Press, 2008).

235 Duelfer and Dyson, “Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience,” 78.
Chamberlain’s appeasement policy towards Hitler Germany turned out to be a wrong and costly policy choice. In a joint-conference, Margaret Thatcher told the press that “aggressors must never be appeased”. These ‘images’ then act as filters through which new information concerning a given state must pass, which allows to “fill the blanks about the state”. Saddam Hussein misapprehended the regional implications of the structural transformations that took place in the late 1980s with the fall of the Soviet Empire. He failed to grasp for example that U.S. military forces were not any longer tied down in Europe to deter the Soviet Union (which now had disappeared). Moreover, the disappearance of the Soviet Union also gave the U.S. a new freedom in its actions in the Middle East. However, Hussein read the transformations in Eastern Europe from a different perspective. He saw the toppling of many authoritarian regimes in a short time, and thus, was more interested what those changes meant for other authoritarian regimes, like his own. Hussein’s misperception of the world surrounding him let him believe that he could invade Kuwait in August 1990 without a strong U.S. reaction. Moreover the U.S. government failed to effectively signal its strict commitment to a peaceful and stable region, although the administration reinstated this frequently, it was often done in quite an ambiguous fashion. For instance, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq told Hussein only days before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait that the U.S. never interfered in Arab-Arab disputes.

Hussein overestimated shared U.S. and Iraqi interests prior to the Gulf War. From Hussein’s perspective, Iraq was a strong, secular, and westward-leaning country that not

236 Thatcher and Bush, “Joint Press Conference with President Bush (Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait).”
237 Duelfer and Dyson, “Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience,” 78.
238 Ibid., 81.
only possessed over vast energy resources but could also serve as a regional balancer to the radical Islamist government of Iran.\textsuperscript{240} He also believed that Iraq had a leading role in the Arab world as a counterweight to Shia radicalism, “a role that logically would make Baghdad Washington’s best ally in the region”.\textsuperscript{241} Hussein’s major misperception prior to his invasion of Kuwait was deduced from this view. He thought that the U.S. would be at worst neutral and at best give its tacit support of Iraq’s aggression. Furthermore, he did not perceive the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction development as contrary to international rules and norms, but saw it instead as part of a “normal process of modernization” (confirming Mahamedou’s claim about the importance of state-building).\textsuperscript{242}

The relative close relations between the U.S. and Iraq during the 1980s remained a strong memory among the Iraqi leadership, and made them fail to comprehend the changed images U.S. policy circles held for Saddam Hussein who had by then long become a persona non grata.\textsuperscript{243}

After the invasion Iraq quickly realized that it had misperceived U.S. interests, but with the resolute response of Washington, conspiracy theories of a ‘Zionist-Kuwaiti-American’ plot to liquidate the Hussein regime which lingered in the background of their decision-making.

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\textsuperscript{240} In fact, during the eight years Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), Iraq received increasing assistance by the U.S. which feared that an Iranian victory would be detriment to U.S. interests in the region. See Karsh, The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988.
\textsuperscript{241} Duelfer and Dyson, "Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience," 84.
\textsuperscript{242} This proliferation motive corresponds with Scott Sagan’s view that states may develop nuclear weapons because they can serve important functions as they may reflect “leader’s perceptions of appropriate and modern behaviour”, even though they do not necessarily play any significant military-strategic role or are not cost-effective means of strengthening nation’s defence; see Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," ibid.23, no. 3 (1997): 75.
\end{flushright}
for a long time were certainly fuelled. Their refusal to withdraw from the region unconditionally equalled a continuation of asymmetric brinkmanship. Before American military might was fully installed in the region, Arab leaders, especially King Hussein of Jordan, sought a diplomatic solution to the crisis. One month after the invasion, in September 1990, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria launched a “Maghrebi peace initiative” which also called for Iraqi withdrawal. Iraq did not respond to the call but reaffirmed its willingness to accept one of two solutions to the crisis: an Arab solution along the lines originally proposed by King Hussein on August 3 (i.e. withdrawal and negotiations), or Iraq’s proposal that linked the Israeli-Arab question with the Iraqi-Kuwait question of August 12. The first proposal was rejected by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, while the latter was rebuffed by America and Britain. King Hussein of Jordan was the first foreign leader to meet Saddam Hussein after he had invaded Kuwait. On August 3, Saddam Hussein promised to Hussein that he would pull out but only if the “Arab League abstained from condemning Iraq” for its actions. Before King Hussein arrived in Bagdad for talks with Saddam Hussein, he contacted President Hosni Mubarak from Egypt, President Bush, and King Fahd from Saudi Arabia. Implicitly (Bush) or explicitly (Mubarak and Fahd) endorsed King Hussein’s plan to find an Arab solution to the problem as soon as possible. Not without great political costs, the Jordan monarch placed himself into the delicate position as a broker between the conflicting sides, working “indefatigably to keep the dispute within the Arab family and promote an Arab solution to the crisis”. As the crisis unfolded, King

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246 Ibid., 479. During the brinkmanship crisis in the Gulf, King Hussein made trips to about 20 countries, including three to Bagdad, in an effort to avert a military confrontation between the country of his friend, 76
Hussein’s efforts were clearly fruitless and his monarchy was branded as a betrayer by his traditional Western allies, and became an international outcast for some time. Yet, Jordanian archives give some credibility to theories arguing that the West and some of its Arab allies were from the beginning little interested in a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Earlier, on August 12, Saddam Hussein announced that Iraq might withdraw from Kuwait if Israel withdrew from all occupied Arab territory and Syria withdrew from Lebanon. Offering to withdraw from Kuwait on terms consistent with the “historic rights of Iraq to its territory and the choice of the people of Kuwait” if Israel and Syria withdrew their troops from Palestinian land and Lebanon respectively, was intended to illicit Arab support. He also demanded U.S withdrawal from Saudi Arabia and cancellation of economic sanctions against his country. This political master-stroke introduced for the first time the concept of ‘linkage’ into Middle Eastern politics. It did not miss to create the desired reactions in the Middle East: “overnight Saddam became the hero of the Arab masses and the saviour of the Palestinians.” While his credibility was constantly deteriorating in Western capitals and the palaces of the Gulf States, he gained a certain level of ‘street popularity’ in the Middle East.

Hussein consistently overestimated the power of friendly countries like China, the Soviet Union, or France on constraining U.S. actions. Hussein also used analogies with other states as guide in judging U.S. behaviour, especially Qaddafi’s Libya whose regime was never directly threatened by the U.S. (until the Arab Spring and after Hussein’s death). He frequently misinterpreted U.S. signals, even very obvious ones (for example the ‘axis of

Saddam Hussein, and some of his closest allies, especially the United States and the United Kingdom. See ibid., 505.

247 Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 97.

248 Shlaim, Lion of Jordan: The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace, 486.
evil’ speech of Bush jr.). Such misinterpretations on behalf of Hussein were reinforced by an almost complete absence of realistic feedback to Hussein from his top aides, who were too scared to deliver bad news to the leader (see 3. 7. Findings).

Conversely, the U.S. administration’s dealing with Hussein’s Iraq failed to appreciate Hussein’s worldview which was characterized by his long-term view that placed Hussein as a historical leader on par with Saladin or Babylonian leaders. Hussein thought not in terms of presidential terms (as any U.S. president) but in terms of decades or even centuries. This may explain why near-term costs (like a military defeat) or generally people’s lives weighted much less in his calculations (viewed as irrational in Washington).

Similarly, he emphasized the “character of the struggle and endurance” as opposed to measurable results as he saw himself in the line of successive great Arab leaders in their historic struggle against the Persians. Thus, for Hussein both the war against Iran (1980-88) and the U.S. (1991) were victories as they represent a continuation of the historic struggle. For Hussein’s regime Iran always constituted the most direct threat to the rule of Iraq. Conversely, Hussein did not perceive the U.S. as an existential military threat – something Washington failed to grasp. Moreover, the U.S. did not understand Iraq’s grievances. In the aftermath of the long and costly war with Iran, Iraq was economically ruined and felt betrayed by the fellow Arab oil-producing countries as they were driving down oil prices, worsening Iraq’s dire economic situation. Thus, in the view of Iraq, the Gulf countries were deliberately waging some kind of economic war in order to constrain Iraqi power in the long-term. Hussein believed that Iraq saved the Arab world from Persian dominance.

249 Duelfer and Dyson, "Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience," 92.
250 Ibid., 93.
251 Heine, *Schauplatz Irak: Hintergründe Eines Weltkonflikts*.
252 Duelfer and Dyson, "Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience," 94.
Hence, when Hussein addressed the Arab leaders on May 28, 1990, he demanded that war time debts were forgiven and that the wealthy Gulf countries would contribute to restoring Iraq to its economic situation it had prior to the war with Iran. Yet, the U.S. never perceived Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait as a legitimate claim or compensation, but solely as brutal aggression.

Most importantly, the 1990-91 confrontation with Iraq was crucial in the formation of an enemy image of Iraq, “organized around an inherent bad-faith interpretation of Iraqi actions”. Image-consistent information that reaffirms Iraq’s evilness crosses a much lower perceptual threshold than signals that could potentially disconfirm the image. Over time, the image becomes more and more ingrained, making reversion difficult. All behaviour of Iraq was treated as having a malign intent. In such situations, cooperative-seeming behaviour becomes judged as deception, temporary weakness by the adversary, or retreat in the face of firmness of the perceiving state. This can lead to a vicious interaction process in which each state ends up perceiving the other as hostile and only “responsive to firmness from the other side”. In other words, intended defensive action by one side is perceived as an offensive action by the other side, “leading to a feedback loop of escalatory behaviour”. Rationalistic theories of learning expect that repeated interactions reveal consistent preferences and additional information that advances both sides toward “mutually agreeable outcomes”, or at least toward a more accurate understanding of where

253 Ibid., 95.
254 Ibid., 96.
255 Ibid.
precisely they differ. Yet, the discrepancies between the American and Iraqi views of reality, however, grew more, not less, divergent over time.

3.4.3. Evaluating Chances of Survival (Iraq)

Prior to the actual military confrontation, Iraq and his by then infamous dictator, Saddam Hussein, were given an ultimatum by the UNSC on the 29th of November 1990, which requested the Iraqis to withdraw from Kuwaiti territory until the 15th of January, 1991. Only five days after Iraq completed its total occupation of Kuwait, the first U.S. forces (troops and aircraft) were sent to Saudi Arabia in an operation which was called ‘Desert Shield’, intended to protect Saudi Arabia and stop any further expansionist adventures by Iraq. Accordingly, millions of tons of military equipment and personnel were shipped to Saudi Arabia, to create, in the words of one historian, “one of the most powerful conventional forces in history”. Within a few months, the United States assembled a broad coalition of allied forces, combining both its traditional allies (e.g. the United Kingdom, Italy, or France) as well as disparate states such as Syria, Poland, or Niger, assembling a multinational force consisting of 800,000 troops in Saudi Arabia, just across the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. Despite the fact that Iraq possessed over a formidable fighting force vis-à-vis some of its Arab neighbours, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, in terms of morale, equipment, and number of troops, Iraq soon found itself in a clearly inferior position. Yet notwithstanding this massive deployment of material, personnel, and intelligence against Iraq between August 7 (start of operation ‘Desert Shield’) and January 16, when the ultimatum expired and the allied forces began their devastating military

256 Ibid., 99.
259 Ibid., 20.
assault against Iraq (start of operation ‘Desert Storm’), Iraq refused to back down. To the contrary, as will be discussed in detail below, between the first day of invading Kuwait until the first hours after the UNSC sponsored ultimatum expired on January 15, 1991, Iraq further provoked a military assault on itself with additional brinkmanship behaviour. Before the invasion had taken place, a range of UN-sponsored resolutions were adopted, aimed at forcing Iraq to pull out from Kuwait by peaceful countermeasures. Immediately after the invasion, on August 2, an urgent UN Security Council meeting determined the invasion as a “breach of international peace and security” and demanded Iraq to immediately withdraw its forces from Kuwaiti territory.\(^{260}\) This would be the first of a series of total fourteen UN SC resolution concerning the situation between Iraq and Kuwait until the fateful UN SC resolution 678 on November 29, 1990, which authorized member states of the United Nations to use “all necessary means to uphold an implement resolution 660” and the subsequent thirteen resolution to restore international peace and security in the region.\(^{261}\)

It is unclear whether Hussein believed that the U.S. would go to war against Iraq over Kuwait. Some of his advisers appear to have warned him about the prospects of such a scenario, but he must have calculated that the chances were relatively low and that the possible repercussions for the regime, if it did not act, were much more costly. Hussein told U.S. ambassador Glaspie shortly before the invasion of Kuwait:


\(^{261}\) “Resolution 678.”
“Iraq will have to respond if the U.S. uses these methods. Iraq knows the U.S.G. can send planes and rockets and hurt Iraq deeply. Saddam asks that the U.S.G. not force Iraq to the point of humiliation at which logic must be disregarded.”  

Speaking about the fateful weeks prior to the invasion of Kuwait, former Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz told the *Guardian*:

“When the decision [to invade Kuwait] was taken, I said to [Hussein], this is going to lead to war with the US and it is not in our interests to wage war against the US. But the decision was taken. I was the foreign minister of the country and I had to defend the country and do everything possible to explain our position. I stayed on the side of right.”

The Iraqi Head of Military Intelligence, General Wafic Al Samarrai, confirmed Aziz’s statements, stating that Hussein “never thought that the allies will strike against him though we tried very hard to convince him of this”. However, he contends that the Iraqi intelligence was surprised about the harsh stance the Saudi leadership took following the invasion. Diplomatically, Iraq had prepared the invasion by forming the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) with Jordan, Yemen and Egypt in 1989. He felt betrayed by the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak who quickly condemned the Iraqi invasion and eventually sided with Washington, even providing ground troops. After it became clear that the U.S. was bent on forcing Iraq out of Kuwait, he tried his best to dissuade such efforts and break the international coalition Washington was building up. Hussein possessed over a few trump cards. Firstly, the Iraqi effectively kept foreigners as hostages in their country after the invasion of Kuwait. Deliberating about possible U.S. actions, Hussein concluded

262 Emphasis added by the author. *See* Glaspie, “Cable: Saddam's Message of Friendship to President Bush.”


that America was “a very complicated country”. The Iraqis intensively studied the
domestic political landscape of the United States and concluded that the U.S. president
could not wage war against Iraq without authorization of the U.S. Congress. The primacy
of domestic politics so evident in Hussein’s way of ruling Iraq shaped Iraqi expectations
about U.S. behaviour. However, the Bush administration would most likely have attacked
Iraq even without congressional authorization. Bent Scowcroft ruled out an
‘accommodation’ option from day one after the invasion. He argued that Iraqi control of
Kuwait would threaten vital interests of the United States in the region. He stated that
Iraq’s takeover of Kuwait would enable Bagdad to dominate Arab politics, oil prices, and
threaten Israel “to the detriment of the United States, and the great stakes we have in the
Middle East and Israel”. Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney was another proponent of
the use of force from the beginning: “I was not as prepared to let sanctions work, didn't
have as much confidence in sanctions as [Colin Powell] did.”

Moreover, once the congress authorized the president to take forcible actions against Iraq in
the Gulf, Hussein, still unwilling to yield without at least some U.S. concessions, believed
that his armed forces were able to hurt the U.S. coalition sufficiently to force them on the
negotiation table. Hussein reasoned that “the USA had very poor economic state and that
they would not be able to sustain the war for too long”. Furthermore he strongly believed
that the U.S. would eventually suffer from the ‘Vietnam syndrome’. He expected that due

265 Hussein, *Saddam and His Senior Advisors Discussing Iraq’s Historical Rights to Kuwait and the Us
Position*.
266 The outcome of the congressional decision was unclear till the end. In the end Bush secured approval
from the Congress for the authorization of the use of force against Iraq, by margins of 250-183 in the
House and 52-47 in the Senate. See Hahn, *Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since
World War I*, 99.
267 NSC, “Meeting of the Nsc Meeting (August 3, 1990).”
to Iraq’s higher casualty tolerance, i.e. a higher ‘willingness to suffer’ Iraq would eventually overcome an American-led onslaught. Why did Saddam Hussein make the fateful decision to annex Kuwait and with it, make a negotiated settlement almost impossible? Saddam Hussein told Jordan’s leader King Hussein later that at some point when he “realized that the Americans were determined to go to war [against Iraq]” he decided to act mainly for military-tactical purposes. He felt that if Kuwait was not part of Iraq, the Iraqi armed forces would not be strongly motivated to defend it. For Saddam Hussein there was obviously a link between his expectations of a coming war against the United States’, Iraqi troop morale, and the ability of the latter to eject an U.S.-led invading force. Saddam Hussein reiterated this reason for Kuwait’s annexation in interviews with FBI agents in 2004. He stated that he made the decision to annex Kuwait after he came to believe that the U.S. had already decided to wage war against Iraq. Iraqi troops would not “have taken care of Kuwait” were it not annexed and made part of Iraq. The U.S. actions, so Hussein, “forced our hand.” On December 4, 1990, a last mini-summit took place in Bagdad which was attended by Iraq’s last friends in the region (and the world for that matter), Jordan, the Palestinians under Arafat (PLO), and Yemen. The leaders of these three countries pleaded Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, and to pull back from the brink of war, but with no avail. Saddam Hussein “could not be moved”: the Jordanian delegation to the summit got the impression that the Iraqis were confident to have the strength to repel an attack by the multinational force that had been assembled in the region by then.

270 Rosen was the first who introduced the concept of “willingness to suffer”. For Mack the willingness to absorb costs against all odds would increase “the certainty of eventual victory”; see Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” 178.
271 Shlaim, Lion of Jordan: The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace, 483-84.
272 Hussein, “Interview Session Number 10.”
“Saddam and his key advisers were nowhere near as worried by the prospect of war as they should have been. Their understanding of the outside world was very limited. They had no idea about America’s military capability or of the way its political system worked. They said that Americans were cowards; they would suffer casualties and withdraw.”

Furthermore, Iraq detained 2,000 Americans and 4,000 British civilians caught in Kuwait and Iraq. Finally, Hussein agreed to release them, as he wanted to make a conciliatory move towards the Americans. However, this strategy proved to be futile since the U.S. administration did not respond with accommodative policies. At the same Hussein lost an effective deterrent of possible U.S. military action. While some hawks within the U.S. administration instantly pressed for U.S. military actions against Iraq, others were more cautious. General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and in this capacity the principle military advisor to the U.S. president, assessed the situation immediately after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait had taken place as follows:

“[…] to deploy U.S. forces against Iraqi forces […] is harder than Panama and Libya. This would be the NFL, not a scrimmage. It would mean a major confrontation. Most U.S. forces would have to be committed to sustain, not just for one or two days. He [Hussein] is a professional and megalomaniac. But the ratio is weighted in his favour. They also are experienced from eight years of war.”

The Iraqis recognized the superiority of military forces, but still thought that they could inflict enough damage on the Americans and their allies to reach a favourable stalemate. Saddam told the U.S. chargé d’affaires Wilson shortly after the invasion that his government was aware of the American ability to inflict “great damage to us”, but added that Iraq “will never capitulate”. This point was reinstated by foreign minister Aziz in the

273 Shlaim, Lion of Jordan: The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace, 494.
274 Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 97.
275 Emphasis added by the author. See NSC, “Meeting of the Nsc Meeting (August 3, 1990).”
Geneva meeting with U.S. secretary of state James Baker on January 9, 1990. But nonetheless, there was a underlying conviction among the Iraqis that they possessed a higher casualty tolerance than the United States, as tragically evinced during the war with Iran. Hussein expected that the U.S. public aversion of military casualties – termed as ‘Vietnam syndrome’ – would force the U.S. government to quit the war quickly.

Moreover, both the Iraqis and the U.S. overestimated Iraq’s fighting power. As it would turn out, the Iraqi armed forces were no match for the U.S.-led coalition. The U.S.-led coalition attacked Iraq in two stages, with a sustained ‘aerial blitz’ campaign first, followed by a massive land invasion both from the south (into Kuwait) and west (into Iraqi proper). After a sustained bombing campaign (over 100,000 sorties between January 17, 1991 and February 23, 1991), which destroyed most of Iraq’s command, control and communication facilities and antiaircraft installations in both Iraq and occupied Kuwait, the air campaign eventually turned against Iraqi ground troops in Kuwait. The U.S. exploited its “overwhelming technological superiority in airpower against a large ground army with antiquated equipment positioned in a desert environment with few hiding places”.

The air attacks devastated entire Iraqi brigades deployed, and had a huge psychological impact on the Iraqi army. As a result of complete air supremacy, but also because of more sophisticated land-based weaponry, the land battle lasted no more than 100 hours. However before the war, the U.S. was wary of a confrontation with Iraq. The Pentagon expected huge U.S. casualties for a ground war against Iraq, including the prospect of facing Iraqi chemical weapons as well as a political fallout from attacking an Arab state. As foreign

277 Iraq incurred between 100,000 to 375,000 battle deaths during the conflict from 1980 to 1988; see Johnson, The Iran-Iraq War.
279 Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 100.
minister Aziz warned U.S. secretary of state Baker in their last meeting before the war in Geneva:

“But when a war breaks out between an Arab and Muslim country on the one hand, and foreign powers such as the United States, Britain, and other foreign nations, on the other, combatants will not keep in mind that they will be fighting to vindicate UN resolutions.... The soldier in our region does not fight only when ordered to do so. Indeed he fights out of convictions.... Against the backdrop of your ties with Israel, I would like to tell you in all sincerity that if you initiate military action against an Arab country, you will be faced with hostile sentiment in the region, and in many Muslim states as well.”

Nonetheless, the U.S. government decided to act, because it feared that otherwise Iraq would “remain a menace to its neighbours far into the future”. Despite the acknowledged advantage of U.S. military superiority, only five days after the invasion, on August 7, 1990, Saddam Hussein told his closest advisors that Iraq “was not like Panama” and that Iraq would “give [the Americans] hell”. Yet, the Iraqis, although not formally allied with any other power, placed considerable hope in international support to diffuse the crisis and the pressure emanating from the United States. First of all, the leadership was optimistic to receive considerable support from the ‘Arab masses’, which would pressure the leaders of the Arab coalition forces into eventually abandoning the U.S.-led coalition. Hussein was certain that a protracted conflict with the United States would unite the Arabs into an anti-American coalition. In Kuwait and along the Saudi-Iraqi border, Iraq prepared extensive earthworks and deployed naval mines to deter any attack. Iraq hoped that its large army could be a formidable resistance to the U.S.-led invasion force. Iraq had

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281 Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 102.
282 The U.S. invaded Panama in 1989 and easily toppled the regime of General Noriega.
284 Ibid.
developed its own armament industry during the war with Iran. In April 1989 it revealed advanced weaponry such as the so-called ‘Super Gun’ that could launch heavy 1,000 pound bombs, with both conventional and unconventional payloads, more than 600 miles. By 1990, it was also increasingly evident that Iraq had stockpiled Soviet-made Scud missiles with which it could threaten Israel. Yet when the actual ground offensive commenced in February 1991, Iraq’s army proved incapable of offering significant resistance to the onslaught of the U.S. and its allies. The Iraqi military was founded on an institutional weakness as its officer corps was Sunni-dominated whilst the conscripts were mostly Shiites. Moreover, the state security apparatus’ intrusions into the army’s command structure had eroded “the competence of the officer corps and morale and cohesion across all ranks”. There was also little coordination between air and ground units. Also the Iraqis failed to realized that the U.S. military had become a professional force since the 1970s. Their perceptions of U.S. military performance were largely based on the Vietnam War in which conscripted soldiers were fighting a guerrilla army. The Iraqis expected that its Scud missile attacks against Israel and would trigger an Israeli response in kind (which did not happen) which would have had chances to break the Arab alliance. Furthermore, the implicit threat of nuclear retaliation convinced Hussein to refrain from using its chemical stockpiles against U.S. or allied forces, thus, neutralizing one his most

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286 Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 90.
288 Obviously they did not read Mack’s seminal article on asymmetric warfare. He argued that weaker powers have a chance to defeat stronger powers if they adopted a completely different military strategy and way of fighting. The Iraqis responded in kind (i.e. with conventional means), however, and thus, were brutally defeated. See Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict.”
effective weapons.\textsuperscript{290} Furthermore, Iraq had withdrawn most of its best-trained and best-equipped troops, the ‘Republican Guard’ division, from Kuwait prior to the ground war. The regime wanted to ‘save’ its most valuable troops. Here again, the domestic primacy came to the fore: Hussein was expecting a rough time politically for the time after the war against the U.S., and thus prepared for contingencies for the post-war period. As it would turn out, his elite troops were able to efficiently defeat Kurdish and Shia insurgencies in the aftermath of the Gulf War, killing some 350,000 Shiites and Kurds in a few months and displacing millions.\textsuperscript{291} Yet, the Hussein regime remained in power for another decade, and was in many ways even stronger and more stable than it had been between 1988 and 1990.

3.5. The First Nuclear Crisis (North Korea)
North Korea’s brinkmanship began with its declaration of ‘semi-war’ on March 8, 1993, which was followed by the announcement to withdraw from the NPT four days later, as a reaction to further and more intrusive IAEA inspections of North Korean nuclear sites\textsuperscript{292} and the announcement of the South Korean and U.S. governments to hold a joint military exercise, ‘Team Spirit’, in 1993. Hectic negotiations ensued, and on June 11, a first DRPK-U.S. joint statement was drafted which included “assurances against the threat and use of force, including nuclear weapons”, the “impartial application of full-scope safeguards”, and an agreement to continue bilateral talks and dialogue, while North Korea pledged in turn

\textsuperscript{290} Hahn, Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I, 101.
\textsuperscript{291} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{292} The North Korean government claimed that if it “submissively accept[ed] an unjust inspection by the IAEA, it would legitimize the espionage acts by the United States, a belligerent party […] and set the beginning of the full exposure of all our military installations […] our entire nation would be driven into confrontation and war”; see Mazarr, North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation (Houndsmill: MacMillan, 1995), 104.
suspend its withdrawal from the NTP. While the joint statement was of high symbolic value for the North Koreans, the U.S. government aimed at bringing North Korea back to the NPT and IAEA inspections “without making any substantive concessions”. Deep seated mutual suspicions made it nonetheless difficult to reach a solution despite the fact that during the talks both sides acknowledged the possibility of a negotiated resolution of the crisis. The negotiators ability to formulate a policy response based on reassurance was simply hampered by continued mutual suspicion. During a visit to South Korea, U.S. president Clinton stated that the U.S. was prepared to take any appropriate measures against North Korea if Pyongyang developed nuclear weapons. The continued mutual suspicions led to renewed hostility in 1994, this time arguably bringing the U.S. and North Korea close to war. In January 1994, North Korean negotiators attempted to delay the implementation of IAEA inspections. Faced with this stalemate, there was growing pressure on the Clinton Administration from Republican critics for an assertive political and military response. Since November 1993, General Gary Luck, then commander of the U.S. Forces in Korea, had urged the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Shalikashvili, to approve the deployment of Patriot missiles to South Korea. Luck saw the possibility that the crisis would get out of control and end up in a full-scale conflict that no

294 Ibid., 55.
295 Clinton’s remarks were commented by the North Korean head of delegation Kang as “inflammatory remarks by ‘high-ranking Americans’”; see ibid., 70. Clinton’s visit to South Korea from July 10 to 11, during which he warned North Korea that nuclear proliferation meant the end of their country, see Sanger, “Clinton, in Seoul, Tells North Korea to Drop Arms Plan,” The New York Times, July 11, 1993; Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History, 286.
296 IAEA and North Korea disagreed on the definition of ‘ad hoc’ inspections and North Korea refused allowing IAEA inspectors to make sampling or gamma mapping which were seen as crucial in determining the nuclear history of North Korea; see Litwack, Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 211; Michishita, North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008, 98.
one intended. For the U.S. government the deployment of Patriot missiles was seen as a defensive step and not intended to provoke the North Koreans. However, the deployment of Patriot missiles may have been interpreted as provocative by Pyongyang. As Pyongyang had intensively studied the 1991 Gulf War, and concluded that Iraq lost the conflict primarily because the Iraqi army had given the U.S.-led coalition six months to build up their ground forces, the deployment of first reinforcements of the U.S. troops stationed in South Korea could have been a provocative signal. Clearly, given North Korea’s long-held views of the United States as an aggressor, the deployment of such a ‘defensive’ weapon as the Patriot missile certainly complicated Pyongyang’s capacity to clearly distinguish the U.S. military posture in Northeast Asia as being offensive or defensive.

Although the Clinton administration was first hesitant to deploy the Patriot missiles, pressures from the Congress and a perceived need to reassure its South Korean ally, it approved the deployment in January 1994. It also announced that ‘Team Spirit’ resumption for 1994 was depending on North Korea’s stance towards inspections. As a reaction, Pyongyang threatened to ‘suspend its suspension’ and ultimately withdraw from the NPT, and placed its military on a heightened alert. Nonetheless, Pyongyang adopted a slight conciliatory posture between 15 and 21 February by accepting IAEA demands for comprehensive inspections and the possibility of repeated IAEA inspections at Yongbyon. Yet, the North Koreans continued to refuse IAEA inspectors to access the two suspected nuclear waste sites. Furthermore, Pyongyang basically repeated its earlier policy of insisting on cancellation of Team Spirit as a precondition for any further IAEA access to

North Korea.301 The spiral of escalation continued, as the South Korean government was pressing for resumption of ‘Team Spirit’ unless North Korea provided IAEA access to the waste sites. However, Pyongyang barred IAEA inspectors from taking samples at Yongbyon, which lead to a further round of escalation when on March 15, 1994, the IAEA, having lost its patience, withdrew its inspectors from North Korea on the grounds that their work has been extensively hindered by North Korean authorities.302 In the last week of March, the U.S. and South Korean governments increased their threats to North Korea. The U.S. called for sanctions and announced the resumption of the ‘Team Spirit’ exercise, and confirmed the deployment of Patriot missiles on March 21, 1994. One day before, the South Korean defence minister Lee Pyong Tae informed parliamentarians OPLAN-5027, the U.S.-ROK war plan for a second Korean War.303 The plan places a heavy emphasis on military steps to be taken by the U.S. and South Korea in the ‘pre-hostility’ phase leading up to a potential outbreak of war.304 At the same time, reports of an imminent North Korean attack due to the massive forward deployment of its forces were circulated in the media and policy circles.305 With both sides believing that they had to hedge against a strategic challenge posed by the other side, it became increasingly evident that both Washington and Pyongyang had adopted worst-case thinking in formulating their policy and responses thereof. Somehow they seem to share the belief that national security interests commanded

301 Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis, 134-36.
303 The Combined Forces Command’s Operation Plan (OPlan) 5027 outlined U.S.-ROK joint military actions in case of a military contingency on the peninsula, and envisions to permanently eliminating the DPRK if it ever attacked its Southern neighbor. The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History, 312.
304 Ibid.Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas, p.312.
305 North Korea reportedly increased its forward-deployed forces by 40 percent (ground forces), 15 percent (navy), and 30 percent (air force) while the number of exercises increased by 80 percent for the ground forces and 50 percent for the air force in compare to the previous year; see Gordon and Sanger, "North Korea’s Huge Military Spurs New Strategy in South," The New York Times, February 6 1994; Michishita, North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008, 100.
them to adopt a more belligerent rhetoric and stronger military postures to demonstrate resolve and force the other side to back down. The ultimate asymmetric brinkmanship level was reached on April 19, when Pyongyang its decision to unload its 8,000 nuclear fuel rods from the Yongbyon reactor.\textsuperscript{306} The U.S. negotiators had repeatedly declared to the North Koreans that refueling without proper IAEA supervision constituted a “red line” for the U.S. government.\textsuperscript{307} The North Koreans calculated (correctly!) that they could “force the adversary to react and increase Pyongyang’s bargaining leverage by presenting a \textit{fait accompli} that the other side would need to pay a higher diplomatic price to reverse”, and thus forcing the U.S. government into making concessions to North Korea.\textsuperscript{308} On April 30, the North Koreans conducted a surprise exercise of the air force, in which the majority of North Korean planes were in the air at one time.\textsuperscript{309} Secretary of Defense William Perry advised Clinton to deploy further attack helicopters and mechanized infantry in order to increase the offensive capabilities of U.S. forces in South Korea.\textsuperscript{310} Furthermore, the Patriot missiles had become operational and two air craft carrier groups were deployed into the vicinity of the Korean peninsula.\textsuperscript{311} On 12 May, Pyongyang announced that it had begun unloading its reactor, which was confirmed by IAEA on May 19.\textsuperscript{312} On the same day, Perry referred to the “increasingly obnoxious” rhetoric from North Korea.\textsuperscript{313} On 3 June, the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{306}] Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, \textit{Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis}, 170.
\item[\textsuperscript{307}] Ibid., 170-71.
\item[\textsuperscript{308}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{309}] Michishita, \textit{North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008}, 100.
\item[\textsuperscript{310}] A battalion of Apache helicopters, M-2 infantry fighting vehicles, advanced counter-battery radar tracking systems, and about 1,000 additional troops were deployed to South Korea; see Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, \textit{Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis}, 176; Michishita, \textit{North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008}, 101-02.
\item[\textsuperscript{311}] The USS Independence and USS Kitty Hawk supported by an array of accompanying ships.
\item[\textsuperscript{313}] Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, \textit{Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis}, 179.
\end{itemize}
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Clinton Administration began planning for the imposition of sanctions.\textsuperscript{314} On 8 June, Pyongyang reinstated vice-minister Kang’s earlier statement that it regarded sanctions as a declaration of war, and that “there is no mercy in war”.\textsuperscript{315} Two days later the U.S. government began planning for the deployment of substantial military reinforcements to South Korea.\textsuperscript{316} In the meantime North Korea had announced its withdrawal from the IAEA\textsuperscript{317}, heightening the fears of the U.S. that North Korea had now made a significant step towards nuclear weapons acquisition. Washington began to contemplate “the Osiraq option”, i.e. a pre-emptive air-strike to destroy the Yongbyon reactor and surrounding nuclear facilities.\textsuperscript{318} Robert Jervis’ point on mutual misperceptions in crisis and conflict help to explain the brinkmanship crisis and the escalation thereof between 1993 and 1994:

“[…] states are inclined to do a poor job of updating, with a bias toward exaggerating the hostility of others. When they suffer from these biases, states will act as though the security dilemma is more severe than it actually is.”\textsuperscript{319}

The security dilemma became more pronounced when North Korea continued to obstruct IAEA inspections and decided to unload fuel rods from the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. The U.S. government concluded that Pyongyang was determined to develop a nuclear weapons capability. Under these circumstances, threats of sanctions and the use of force were seen as necessary in order to demonstrate resolve against North Korea’s attempt to develop nuclear weapons. Similarly, given the looming threat of sanctions, the resumption of ‘Team Spirit’

\textsuperscript{314} Sigal, \textit{Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea}, 118-19.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 205.
\textsuperscript{317} This was a distinct step from pulling out of the NPT as North Korea was still required to undergo IAEA inspections as part of its treaty obligations. IAEA contended that North Korea was also still bound to the safeguard agreements it had ratified in 1992. North Korea ceased to participate in IAEA functions as a member state; see Michishita, \textit{North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008}, 100.
and the deployment of Patriot missiles increased the fears the North Korean regime had held for long. By April 1994, Pyongyang may have decided that it was facing a strategic challenge from the U.S.-ROK coalition. The threat to unload its research reactor at Yongbyon may have been a deliberate attempt to show resolve with a view of forcing Washington and Seoul to concede. Both sides were caught in a dilemma, in which neither side could fully grasp how its own action had contributed to the other's side fear. To sum up, the policies adopted by each side appeared threatening to the other side and thus, drove the escalating spiral of mutual hostility to the brink of war. While both side were aware of the destructive costs such war would bring, they appeared to have moved from a view in which both sides acknowledged the need for a peaceful settlement on a negotiated basis, to a view in which Pyongyang was convinced that the U.S. was seeking to bring about its collapse, whilst Washington became convinced that Pyongyang was determined of building nuclear weapons. The officially sanctioned but not endorsed visit of former U.S. president Jimmy Carter to meet the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung between June 15 and June 18, 1994, brought an end to the crisis and led to a peaceful resolution culminating in the ‘Agreed Framework’ as a result of final negotiations that took place in Geneva from August 5 to October 21, 1994. Upon his arrival in Pyongyang, Carter was treated “with great deference” by the North Korean president Kim Il Sung. Carter received a commitment from Kim Il Sung that IAEA inspectors would be allowed to remain in North Korea. He also received the pledge that the North Korean leader would meet his counterpart in the South, Kim Young Sam.\footnote{The inter-Korean summit was announced to take place from July 25 to July 27, but due to Kim Il Sung’s sudden death on July 9, 1994, this meeting would never take place.} Jimmy Carter’s visit to Pyongyang took place just as plans for the deployment of US reinforcements to South Korea were being finalized in
Washington.\textsuperscript{321} If this deployment\textsuperscript{322} had been publicly announced or taken place before Carter’s surprise visit to North Korea, North Korean decision-makers would have been faced with strong enough U.S. military presence in South Korea that possibly would have allowed an invasion of the country. Under such circumstances, North Korea’s decision-makers would possibly have opted for \textit{blitzkrieg} attack on South Korea, or at least hoped for a \textit{limited aims strategy}, i.e. capture Seoul first and then push (and hope) for a negotiated solution. The North Korean military would not have repeated the alleged mistake of the Iraqi army to wait until a massive expeditionary force would have been assembled. Although war would still have been a suboptimal choice for North Korea, a pre-emptive attack would have become the least among bad alternatives for Pyongyang, as it could hope by striking first to inflict heavy South Korean and American casualties and to disrupt the flow of U.S. reinforcements into the Korean theater of war.\textsuperscript{323}

3.5.1. \textit{Internal and External Threats (North Korea)}

Did the regime in Pyongyang face an imminent external and/or internal threat which could have increased the incentives for provocative behaviour against all odds? Were those threats as momentous that they endangered the survival of the whole system? As following pages demonstrate, North Korea was in a state of emergency. The North Korean regime, ruling the country without interruption since 1948, was facing a serious internal and external crisis – tantamount to the question of regime survival. Realizing the scope, nature and seriousness of the threat to the regime, help to understand why the North Korean leadership appeared to have acted more risk-acceptant in the months leading to an almost

\textsuperscript{321} Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, \textit{Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis}, 220.
\textsuperscript{322} See discussion under H3.
shooting war on the Korean peninsula. Thus it seems wrong to describe North Korea as an ‘impossible state’ \(^{324}\) or as an irrational state, but a much more apt description would be an ‘alienated state’. \(^{325}\)

North Korea had certainly never been a ‘rich’ country. Yet it was able to feed its population and provide adequate compulsory education, housing, and a comparatively modern health sector. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the state of the North Korean economy had considerably worsened. Limited reforms, a re-emphasis of light industry over heavy industry, as proposed by Kim Il Sung in early 1990, could not avert a deepening economic crisis. Statistical figures are hard to come by, but North Korea had already struggled to meet the economic targets envisioned for the 1971-76 ‘Six-Year Economic Plan’ which had to be extended for one year as a consequence. The next ‘Seven-Year Plan’, launched in 1978 and concluded in 1984 could not meet its targets either. \(^{326}\) By the early 1980s, the economic gap – once favouring the North – began clearly tilting towards the South. As early as 1969, South Korea surpassed the North in per capita GNP terms, and by the mid-1980s, the per capita income of South Koreans was on average two and a half times higher than that of North Koreans. By 1992, the Southern economy exceeded North Korean GNP by more than a factor of ten, a gap that widened even further until 1997. \(^{327}\) Natural disasters (heavy rainfall) certainly exacerbated the crisis, destroying harvests and industrial infrastructure. \(^{328}\) Economic decline was a common feature across all socialist states (with the exception of China and Vietnam which adopted far reaching economic reform policies)

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\(^{326}\) The plan was not declared complete until 1985, a year behind projected completion, and a further year was set aside to prepare the next plan. See Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950–1992* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2013), 233; 53.

\(^{327}\) Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, 4-5.

throughout the 1980s. Yet, unlike other socialist countries, North Korea did not collapse in the fateful years between 1989 and 1990. However, the collapse of the socialist bloc and the reversal of Soviet foreign policy had dramatic impact on an already declining North Korean economy. The abrupt termination of the heavily subsidized Soviet-North Korean trade relationship, accounting for approximately sixty percent of North Korea’s total foreign trade in the late 1980s,\(^\text{329}\) turned a declining economy into a collapsing economy. While Soviet-DPRK relations had for long been more like a ‘marriage of convenience’ for ideological and strategic reasons, it had been a burden for the declining Soviet economy.\(^\text{330}\) In the end, a reformist Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership, preferred to establish relations with Seoul and its prospering economy and with it, implicitly accepting the strategic loss by abandoning North Korea.

The balance of forces on the Korean peninsula had dramatically changed between 1970 and 1990. From the 1980s onwards, North Korea’s standing vis-à-vis South Korea deteriorated with increasing pace. South Korea’s state-led industrialization coupled with an aggressive export promotion resulted in an annual economic growth of 9.55 percent between 1963 and 1979 (during Park Chung Hee’s reign) alone.\(^\text{331}\) It is probably no exaggeration to compare the fall of Pyongyang in the winter of 1950, when the city was taken by combined South Korean and UN forces, with the events that unfolded from the late 1980s onwards in regard to the degree of imminent threat to regime survival in North Korea. Western Germany’s


\(^{330}\) Ibid., 262.

absorption of East Germany – while never an official policy of South Korea – became a probable and openly discussed alternative for South Korea.\textsuperscript{332}

One of the few positive things the leadership could claim on January 1, 1990, was the very fact that the political system was still existent. Apart from that, from Pyongyang’s perspective, the year 1990 marked the beginning of a new era full of uncertainty, emergency and crisis. North Korea, once self-proclaimed champion of the Third World, had never been isolated more than in the first few years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{333} To make things worse, South Korea had never been more internationally present and accepted than from the late 1980s onwards. Fundamental internal changes (transition to democratic rule) were accompanied with external breakthroughs in form of a series of establishments of diplomatic relations with former socialist countries and traditional North Korean allies. From the perspective of North Korea, its own economic stagnation and political isolation was compounded by South Korea’s simultaneous economic miracle.\textsuperscript{334} The export-driven economic growth in the South brought the commodity trade alone to $118.2 billion alone, while North Korea’s pre-Soviet collapse trade in 1989 stood at mere $4.8 billion – twenty-four times lower.\textsuperscript{335} So-called ‘speed battles’ often applied in the past, i.e. large mobilization campaigns, did not achieve the anticipated productivity or much needed qualitative increases of the economy. To make

\textsuperscript{332} Hamm, \textit{Arming the Two Koreas: State, Capital and Military Power}, 86-87.
\textsuperscript{333} Although it quickly established relations with the former Soviet republics – a measure that the North Koreans had threatened to implement in case the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Seoul. In the 2000s, North Korea was able to establish relations with a few European countries.
\textsuperscript{334} The economic growth of South Korea had a tremendous impact on the balance of power on the peninsula: while the GNP per capita of South and North Korea equalled by 1975, South Korea’s lead in GNP by 1995 was over 14:1 and in per capita terms 7:1. In 1996, the defence expenditures of South Korea had even exceeded the GNP of North Korea; see Hamm, \textit{Arming the Two Koreas: State, Capital and Military Power}, 130; 32.
matters worse North Korea was basically cut off from global financial markets since Pyongyang had failed to pay back its credits, further limiting the scope of flexibility the North Korean leadership possessed to address these disadvantageous circumstances. 

Pyongyang had already defaulted on Western credits in the mid-1980s, and was thus unable to follow the Soviet example of lending billions from mostly Western countries. Without the prospect of capital investment and technological improvements, the North Korean economy seemed destined to meet the fate of other socialist countries that had collapsed between 1989 and 1991. The few, scare resources the regime possessed had literally been wasted on projects aimed at keeping up the inter-Korean ideological struggle in the late 1980s. For example, as a reaction to the hugely successful Seoul Olympics (1988), the North Korean regime hosted 22,000 participants from 177 countries on the occasion of the ‘13th World Festival of Youth and Students’ in July 1989, which had reportedly cost four billion US-dollars. Writing of the final days of Romania under Ceausescu – a close friend and admirer of Kim Il Sung – one scholar noted that Romania was “politically, economically, and morally bankrupt”. This was the case in most socialist countries by the late 1980s, and the situation in North Korea was not much different. The extent of North Korea’s dramatic economic situation would only become fully apparent after the first nuclear crisis was resolved. The country was hit with a full-blown famine, killing

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337 Martin, Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 342-44.


339 The regime was so hard-pressed during the famine that the lack of food was officially acknowledged. The famine became known as ‘arduous march’ in North Korean vocabulary.
hundreds of thousands if not millions of mostly civilians. Yet as early as 1990, the signs were alarming: in 1990 alone, the GNP shrunk by almost four percent, foodstuff production decreased by twelve percent and domestic energy production reduced by fifty percent. Due to the energy shortages, only forty percent of the factories were operating by 1991, accelerating a vicious cycle of economic decline. Import of crude oil, contributing a tenth to North Korea’s energy, had been drastically reduced since the worsening of relations and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. Cessation of energy aid from the Soviet Union put North Korea into a very difficult situation, as the country was dependent on oil-based fertilizers to sustain some level of food production. Reduced energy aid meant less food production, and by turning to forests for providing heating fuel, a vicious cycle was set off that resulted in soil erosion, which would eventually lead to the famine that would cost the life hundreds of thousands North Koreans. Why did the economy collapse in the 1990s and not earlier? Most socialist ‘fraternal’ countries benefited from heavily subsidized trade which was underpinned by an ideology of international socialist solidarity. North Korea’s strategic location and the Sino-Soviet split made it a target of both Chinese and Soviet aid throughout the Cold War. With the breakdown of the Soviet Union, North Korea lost much of its strategic importance to China, and thus, friendship prices were increasingly changed to ‘world market prices’ which Pyongyang simply could not afford to pay. The trade

340 The famine was most severe between 1994 and 1998.
342 The North Korean economy had annually imported 3.3 million tons of oil since 1986, mostly from the Soviet Union and China. In 1991 it could only import one million from China and mere 41,000 tons from the Soviet Union. See ibid.
343 Reportedly, floods had also reduced the coal mining output in the years preceding the nuclear crisis, further exacerbating the energy problem. Koo, "North Korea Close to the Brink," 103.
volume with the Soviet Union, North Korea’s main trading partner throughout the 1980s, had fallen within one year from $887 million (1990) to eleven million US-dollars in 1991. \(^{346}\) To make matters worse, North Korea not only lost economic support, but also enormous political clout. As briefly mentioned above, South Korea’s ‘northern policy’ (Nordpolitik), a new foreign policy outlook that aimed at establishing ties with traditional North Korean allies in order to bring the North Koreans to the negotiation table (but as it would turn out also to isolate the latter), was partly driven by economic considerations but mostly by national security thinking. The rationale behind this proactive foreign policy could be summarized in a sentence as “to make friends with your worst enemy can only enhance your country’s security”, and that is exactly what Seoul successfully did. While the North Korean leadership had long refused ‘cross-recognition’ across allies of each ‘bloc’, and thus blocked attempts of its socialist allies to establish ties with South Korea in exchange for establishing official ties with Japan and the U.S., it was suddenly confronted with a situation in which its (now former) allies, but also China, established ties with Seoul, while Pyongyang lacked any substantial contacts with South Korea’s great power ally, the United States as well as Japan. Pyongyang was finally forced to accept the the double admission to the United Nations, constituting a full reversal of a dearly held policy of resisting dual membership. \(^{347}\) The sudden halt of economic and military assistance from the socialist fraternal countries, but especially the Soviet Union, had an extremely negative impact on the North Korean economy which had suffered for a long time on a badly balanced emphasis on heavy industries and a general preference of quantity over quality in

\(^{346}\) Rhee, “North Korea in 1991: Struggle to Save Chuch’e Amid Signs of Change,” 59.

the few commodities it produced. Conversely, South Korea’s dynamic economy was appealing to the socialist bloc and its countries which had suffered from many decades of unbalanced emphasis on heavy industries to the detriment of the light industry. South Korean consumer goods, particularly textiles, electronic devices and cars, were qualitatively and quantitatively superior to the one’s produced in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1989, Hungary was the first socialist country to establish full diplomatic relations with Seoul. Poland and Yugoslavia joined in the same year.348 Pyongyang reacted angrily and downgraded its relations with the concerned states. However, this was only the beginning of a series of diplomatic breakthroughs that Seoul achieved much to the detriment of North Korea’s standing in the socialist world. Moscow made a full turn in its foreign policy when it established diplomatic relations with South Korea on September 30, 1990.349 The Soviet Union was primarily motivated by the economic gains it promised from deepened ties with the South, while North Korea had long been more of an economic burden than an asset to Moscow. The North Koreans were as furious as desperate. Their founding sponsor, prime economic supporter, and main source of military assistance, as well as security guarantor (under the 1961 treaty) had reversed a long standing policy of recognizing North Korea as the sole legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula. The Soviet foreign minister at that time, Eduard Shevardnadze, who was tasked with delivering the unpleasant news to Pyongyang, was met with bitterness and anger. The North Koreans threatened not only to recognize ‘Soviet republics’ such as Kazakhstan, but also to develop

348 Rhee, "North Korea in 1990: Lonesome Struggle to Keep Chuch’e,” 72.
“any weapons it desired” since recognizing South Korea was tantamount to the abrogation of the 1961 security treaty with Moscow. 350

To sum up, North Korea was cornered in every possible aspect: Militarily, a widening gap in military capabilities vis-à-vis its southern neighbor and the United States due to an army largely equipped with outdated material and without viable import sources or hard currency to finance much needed refurbishments. The absence of military assistance meant that the North Korean armed forces were deprived of advanced weaponry it traditionally received from Moscow, thus, increasingly widening the capability gap between itself and South Korea. Economically, a growing domestic economic crisis – not because of some periodic recession – but due to system-inherent structural problems that could only be addressed with large capital inputs and wide-ranging economic reforms, with the first, being politically unfeasible (bad relations with capital-rich countries), and the second, politically impossible (economic reforms would potentially undermine the totalitarian state). These problems were further aggravated with an energy crisis, stemming from the drastically decreased fuel deliveries from the Soviet Union. Politically, the country was isolated and driven to accept a double-admission to the United Nations as both the Soviet Union and China indicated that they would not veto a South Korean application to the UN. In September 1991, North Korea was practically forced to agree to a double-entry. 351 Moreover it lost most of its traditional allies in Eastern Europe to popular revolutions and internal reform, indicating that the days of authoritarian one-party regimes were counted. The failed Soviet attempt of wide-ranging internal reform and to simultaneously keep the

350 Ibid., 216.
351 Alternatively, starting from 1973 when South Korea’s president Park suggested dual entry, Kim Il sung suggested a single entry as a confederation. See Koh, “North Korea’s Policy toward the United Nations,” 33.
socialist state structure provided a warning to the North Korean elites to refrain from such experiments. Strategically, the North Korea’s mutual security treaty with the Soviet Union had de facto ceased to exist and with China-ROK relations massively improving, the value of the 1961 security alliance with China had certainly lost some credibility. Internally, the North Korean leadership became increasingly unable to feed its own people and retain the food distribution system, thus, undermining the central claim of the regime’s ideology, self-reliance. Externally, relations with the United States had practically not moved forward: a long-held position of opposing ‘cross-recognition’ was given up in practice\textsuperscript{352}, but North Korea struggled to establish relations with both Japan and the United States due to Pyongyang’s insistence on nuclear development and the simultaneous rejection of extensive international inspections.

The dire state of the economy, the loss of its superpower protector, and the simultaneous diplomatic coups of Seoul led North Korea to discard its self-imposed isolation. But the country’s nuclear program, detected for the first time by U.S. satellites in 1982, turned out – at first – to be a major stumbling block to improvements and the cause for a dangerous crisis on the Peninsula, and provided at last, an effective way for Pyongyang to receive Washington’s attention and a certain level of previously absent recognition. It was under those conditions of a combination of domestic and external threats in which North Korea initiated nuclear brinkmanship vis-à-vis the United States.

\textsuperscript{352} North Korea had refused cross-recognition because in Kim II Sung’s words, it “would fix the present state of division of the two Koreas”; see Kim and Solarz, “Records of Conversation between Congressman Stephen J. Solarz and Kim II Sung and Kim Yong-Nam,” (1980), 17.
3.5.2. Commitment Challenge (North Korea)

What was the nature of the American commitment North Korea challenged with its brinkmanship behaviour? What kind of reaction could Pyongyang expect when it challenged this U.S. commitment? And was the regime aware that it was challenging an important commitment of the United States? Primarily, the issue at stake was the U.S. commitment to uphold the Non-Proliferation regime which it had formally established in 1970 with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and thus, keep North Korea nuclear-free. With the fall of the Soviet Union, and much uncertainty regarding the fate of the huge Soviet nuclear arsenal as well as a general expectation of nuclear proliferation among major powers in a unilateral world, the United States declared the non-proliferation regime as a top priority of U.S foreign policy. As early as November 1991 the U.S. secretary of state, James Baker, referred to the suspected North Korean nuclear program as a “matter of urgency” and “of global concern”. The U.S. intelligence community had been watching the North Korean nuclear developments closely since 1982, when American spy satellites detected a small Soviet-made research reactor (5MW) at Yongbyon, a site north of Pyongyang. For the U.S. intelligence community the existence of a heavy-water reactor without adjoining commercial reactor, but a fuel

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353 As the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) writes on their website, the NPT “represents the only binding commitment in a multilateral treaty to the goal of disarmament by the nuclear-weapon States”. The treaty entered into force in 1970 and was extended indefinitely in May 1995. A total of 190 parties have joined the NPT, including all permanent members of the UN Security Council. “More countries have ratified the NPT than any other arms limitation and disarmament agreement, a testament to the Treaty's significance”; see ‘The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”, online accessible: [http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPT.shtml](http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPT.shtml) [accessed on November 24, 2014].


355 "U.S. Calls North Korea Atom Plan a Global Concern.”
reprocessing facility under construction nearby, looked highly suspicious. Thus, some within the U.S. policy circles expected that North Korea could develop nuclear weapons by 1995.  

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In 1985, North Korea had finally signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Pyongyang’s admission to the treaty had become a Soviet precondition for further nuclear cooperation, which the North Koreans had persistently been seeking throughout the 1980s.  

357 The North Koreans had been pressing for nuclear power plants from the Soviet Union since the mid-1980s.  

358 A Hungarian report of the visit from a GOSPLAN delegation, the Soviet National Planning Office, to North Korea in February 1985 cites North Korean statements that indicate the request for additional (light-water) reactors from the Soviet Union on economic and political grounds. The report states that

“[the North Koreans] would like to offset the fact that a nuclear power plant is already in operation in South Korea; on the other hand, [the project] is to enhance the DPRK’s economic prestige in foreign eyes.”

Although eventually the Soviet-North Korean nuclear cooperation broke down before the construction of the LWRs was terminated, North Korea readily agreed on putting their reactors under an international inspection regime.  

361 Oberdorfer writes that it is “unlikely

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356 Martin, Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty, 441.

357 North Korea joined the NPT in 1985, but it took the regime until April 9, 1992, when its rubber-stamp Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) finally ratified the IAEA safeguard agreement.


359 Somewhat ironically, the type of reactor which would later be provided by an international consortium (KEDO) and which was regarded as a much safer nuclear reactor type than the graphite-moderated reactors North Korea already possessed.


361 Their Soviet-made research reactor at Yongbyon had been under IAEA inspections since 1977 on Soviet insistence as well, despite the fact that North Korea had then not been party to the NPT.
that [the North Koreans] understood the pressures that would eventually be brought to bear as a result of their adherence [to the NPT]].

However, Pyongyang signed the treaty and it could not know that the inspecting agency, the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would implement much stricter rules and regulations concerning the inspections with potential deviators following the revelations of the Iraqi nuclear program in the aftermath of the Gulf War. However, the North Korean accession to the non-proliferation regime did not signal an end of American concerns over North Korea’s nuclear activities. Because of some procedural mistakes, the IAEA safeguard agreement was not ratified and thus implemented until 1992, and more extensive inspections did not take place until mid-May 1992. It should be noted here that the U.S. government announced in September 1991 the unilateral withdrawal of all its ground-based tactical nuclear weapons abroad. This news was among the few positive developments the end of the Cold War brought for the regime in Pyongyang. In December 1991, South and North Korea signed a largely symbolic, but important treaty, the ‘1991 Basic Agreement’. For the first time the mutual agreement of each other’s system was formally spelled out and it was pledged to end interference into each other’s internal

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364 The IAEA safeguards agreement was ratified by the SPA in April 1992 and first IAEA inspections under the agreement was conducted in a two weeks inspection in June 1992.
365 The North Koreans acceded to the safeguards agreement after the first high-level meeting between U.S. and North Korean officials on January 21, 1992 in New York ("Kanter-Kim meeting"). Nothing substantial emerged from the meeting. The U.S. side tried its best not to make the meeting appear as an upgrade to the ‘Beijing channel’ through which Pyongyang and Washington had exchanged messages since the mid-1980s. The Americans refused North Korean requests in September 1992 and November 1992 for another meeting between Kim Yong Sun and Under Secretary Kanter. See Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, 12; 14; 16.
366 Ibid., 10.
affairs. This step also helped to facilitate the ‘double-entry’ of both South and North Korea into the United Nations. These encouraging signs of improved North-South relations were followed with a North Korean agreement for a bilateral nuclear accord with South Korea which entered into force on February 19, 1992. The two sides promised to refrain from testing, manufacturing, receiving, or deploying nuclear weapons and abstain from reprocessing and uranium enrichment. A joint commission was intended to be established in order to regularly inspect each other’s nuclear installations. In addition to these anti-proliferation moves by Pyongyang, the regime finally agreed to sign the IAEA safeguard agreement in December 1991, and ratify it by its rubber-stamp parliament in April 1992.

While inter-Korean talks were forthcoming they were essentially unable to overcome the inherent and diametrically opposed visions of a unified state. Despite the dramatic changes in the international environment outlined above, the North Koreans did not fundamentally change their vision of a unified Korea. Often repeated calls for reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula simply meant U.S. troop withdrawal and calls for the improvement of the international environment South Korea’s abstention of establishing further diplomatic ties with North Korea’s allies. Suh writes that Kim Il Sung had never abandoned his ‘hard-line policy’ concerning the question of re-unification with South Korea. Yet, he changed the means on how to achieve it, away from the use of military means (especially 1965-69).

367 In 1972, largely as a reaction to warming of ties between China and the U.S., the two Koreas agreed for the first and hitherto only time on certain key points with the view of achieving unification peacefully. See ‘July 4th North-South Joint Statement’, online accessible: http://www2.law.columbia.edu/course_00S_L9436_001/North%20Korea%20materials/74js-en.htm [accessed on November 4, 2014].
369 Rhee, "North Korea in 1990: Lonesome Struggle to Keep Chuch’e,” 77-78.
to revolutionary uprising in the South (1970s), to the idea of a ‘one state, two systems’
confederation type (1980s), and towards the end of his life, he may have completely given
up on it.\textsuperscript{370} Perhaps realizing that they could not gain as much as they hoped by engaging
South Korea, which had by now not only become much richer, stronger, but also more
legitimate.\textsuperscript{371} Thus, North Korea’s leadership appeared to have invested at least as much
commitment in improving ties with its other two declared archenemies, Japan and the
United States. In fact, facing dramatic international pressures (as described above), the
North Korean leadership perhaps more reluctantly than willingly a more ‘realist’ or
‘pragmatic’ course of action. The development of such a new foreign policy can be seen
with Pyongyang’s reaction to the establishment of diplomatic relations of its traditional
allies with South Korea. When Hungary and South Korea added to their burgeoning
economic relations of the past a political dimension by establishing ties on February 1,
1989, North Korea recalled his ambassador. The same reaction was forthcoming in the case
of Poland (November 1989). However, when the Ceausescu regime was ousted (notably
one of the closest allies and admirers of the North Korean system), Pyongyang was quick to
acknowledge the post-Ceausescu government in Bucharest.\textsuperscript{372} Nonetheless, the Soviet
Union’s decision to set up formal relations with Seoul was not taken lightly in Pyongyang
and thus openly condemned as treason. At the same time, North Korea desperately tried to
maintain and enhance relations with Beijing.\textsuperscript{373} Simultaneously, the North Korean
leadership hoped to finally establish ties with Tokyo, which not only promised to offset at
least some of the resulting loss of face that the Moscow-Seoul rapprochement had elicited.

\textsuperscript{370} Suh, \textit{Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader}.
\textsuperscript{371} The first free direct presidential election in South Korea took place in December 1987, and was won by
Roh Tae-woo.
\textsuperscript{372} Rhee, "North Korea in 1990: Lonesome Struggle to Keep Chuch’e," 74.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., 75.
The visit of Kanemaru Shin of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in September 1990 promised to facilitate not only diplomatic relations, but also generous credits and compensation for the colonial occupation. In many ways, North Korea opted to counterbalance South Korea’s successful Nordpolitik by developing ties with Japan and the United States. It appears as the North Korean leadership embarked on a two-fold strategy which coupled efforts to ‘copy’ South Korea’s diplomatic offensive by implementing its own ‘Südpolitik’ while simultaneously use the nuclear program as a potential and ambiguous deterrent and increasingly as a bargaining chip. Much to the dismay of the United States, Japan had earlier indicated that IAEA inspections until the end of 1992 would lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations. As the United States were committed not only to a resolution of the nuclear issue but also to peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and the position of their key ally, South Korea, Washington had long conditioned an improvement of its relation with North Korea on a simultaneous or even prior improvement of Pyongyang-Seoul ties. Nonetheless, councillor-level meetings between North Korea and the U.S. began in 1988 (through the so-called ‘Beijing

374 South Korea established relations with Japan in 1965 and received credits which are said to have set the starting point of South Korea’s economic miracle.

375 It cannot be verified whether the nuclear program was civilian or military, but most likely it was a fusion of both. In 1981, North Korean officials reportedly told East German party functionaries that North Korea needed a nuclear weapon. Similarly, the North Koreans threatened the Soviets to seek nuclear weapons in case Moscow established relations with Seoul. Oberdorfer believes that North Korea’s decision to seek nuclear weapons was taken in 1979. In the 1970s, the South Korean regime actively sought a nuclear weapon. Nonetheless, North Korean quest for more nuclear reactors (Soviet LWRs) in throughout the 1980s could be more easily associated with energy needs. See Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 216; 52; Hong, “The Search for Deterrence: Park's Nuclear Option,” in *The Park Chung Hee Era*, ed. Kim and Vogel (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

376 Rhee, “North Korea in 1991: Struggle to Save Chuch'e Amid Signs of Change,” 61; Koo, "North Korea Close to the Brink," 108. The Japanese were pressed by the U.S. government to do so. Wit et al. write that the U.S. administration under Bush senior asked the Japanese to condition diplomatic normalization on Pyongyang’s verified abandonment of nuclear reprocessing. Ironically, this is not a requirement of the NPT and Japan has long been reprocessing its spent fuel from commercial nuclear plants. See Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, 8.
channel’). But the North Koreans evidently wanted more than low-key talks of little substantive value. Developments between 1992 and 1993 quickly destroyed early hopes for a rapid and peaceful integration of North Korea into the international community. The visit of Hans Blix, the former Swedish foreign minister and head of the IAEA, and subsequent inspections of his agency as agreed under safeguard agreement, hardened suspicions regarding the unfaithfulness of North Korea’s nuclear intentions that the U.S. government had harboured since the 1980s. Scientific findings from the IAEA inspections hinted at the possibility that North Korea had diverted more plutonium as previously acknowledged, that is, 90 grams reportedly for ‘scientific tests’. This increased the tensions between the IAEA and Pyongyang, with the latter accusing the former of violating its mandated impartiality. To make matters worse, the sample the IAEA inspectors took indicated that the North Koreans had lied about the extent of plutonium it had diverted. Consequently, the IAEA demanded inspections of two nuclear waste sites close to the reactor in Yongbyon on January 23, 1993, a request the North Koreans repeatedly denied, and become one of the central issues of the U.S.-North Korean confrontation over the next two years. On February 25, 1993, after the Board of Governors had denounced North Korea’s stubbornness and announced inspections of the waste sites to be conducted on March 16, one month after ‘Team Spirit’ would have been ended. North Korea reacted swiftly and announced to withdraw from the NPT on March 12, referring to Article X of the treaty which allows signatory states to leave in case “extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country”. Three months ‘cool off’

377 Between December 1988 and September 1993 thirty-four, officially authorized DPRK-U.S. mid-level meetings had taken place in Beijing. These talks were more for “communication than negotiation”, and the U.S. often reiterated nuclear inspections as precondition for any further deepening of relations. See Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History, 196.

period were left for the international community to induce or compel North Korea to stay in the non-proliferation regime. Faced with the prospect of Pyongyang developing nuclear weapons in defiance of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, Washington responded with a combination of deterrence and negotiation. The June 1993 talks between North Korea and the United States were crucial in averting Pyongyang’s withdrawal from the NPT. The negotiations were difficult, as both sides feared that cooperation would not be reciprocated. The head of the North Korean delegation, Kang Sok Ju, claimed that North Korea had been “as humble or obedient as sheep […] [but] we got no benefits”. Moreover the North Korean delegation insisted that the resumption of ‘Team Spirit’ was pursued with a view to see “North Korea to die”. Kang promised that North Korea would commit itself not to manufacture nuclear weapons if the United States stopped threatening North Korea. The U.S. side insisted however on Pyongyang’s acceptance of IAEA monitoring of the Yongbyon reactor. The Clinton administration warned the North Koreans a withdrawal from the non-proliferation regime would lead to international sanctions, thus, clearly defining a commitment. The North Korean head of delegation to the talks in New York responded to this by stating that sanctions would amount to “a declaration of war”. The North Korean had crossed the ‘red line’ that the U.S. government had drawn at the onset of the crisis in May 1994, when Pyongyang ordered to remove spent fuel rods from its research reactor in Yongbyon. As a consequence the Clinton administration accelerated its preparations for UN-sponsored sanctions and thus heightened its diplomatic efforts for this ends. Simultaneously preparations were made to deploy additional military forces to South

379 Ibid., 53.
380 Ibid.
381 Ibid.
382 Ibid., 55-56.
Korea. The impasse was overcome by former U.S. president’s Jimmy Carter’s visit to North Korea. North Korea had clearly challenged a commitment of the U.S., and they did so knowingly. Yet, their steps were quite cautious, and they always left a room for a negotiated solution. When the crisis escalated rapidly, the Carter visit allowed the North Koreans to step back. At the same time, the U.S. government realized that it had to offer something in return, and the LWRs issue – a long-held issue for Pyongyang – received renewed attention and was finally included in the official resolution to the crisis.

3.5.3. Evaluating Chances of Survival (North Korea)

What could have been the worst case scenario Pyongyang imagined as a consequence of the brinkmanship it initiated? How did the regime evaluate its chances of survival in case such a scenario would have materialized?

What could have been the worst case scenario Pyongyang imagined as a consequence of the brinkmanship it initiated? How did the regime evaluate its chances of survival in case such a scenario would have materialized? The North Koreans as well as the U.S.-ROK axis was well aware of the fact that they could inflict massive damage on each other. North Korea possesses over ‘non-conventional’ (esp. chemical weapons) and conventional deterrents\(^{383}\), directed at the metropolitan area of Seoul, not only South Korea’s most vibrant and economically active region, but also densely populated (including hundred thousands of American ‘expats’). Thus, Hamm referred to an ‘asymmetric military balance’ on the Korean Peninsula, which is reflected in South Korea’s conventional superiority and North Korea’s non-conventional and conventional deterrence capabilities. Writing before

\(^{383}\) Long-range artillery (e.g. the 170mm ‘juche’ gun) and rockets (240mm multiple rocket launchers).
North Korea’s first nuclear test, he contended that “it does not matter who will win in the end, since both will lose”, as the two Korea’s are basically interlocked in a situation of ‘mutually assured destruction’. This corresponds with General Luck’s assessment when he told former U.S. president Carter before the latter’s his visit to North Korea that a war “was very possible” and that more than “a million people would be killed” with more than 50,000 of those casualties being Americans. It was estimated that even though the United States would likely win an all-out war, the damage to South Korea would have been tremendous and U.S. forces would have sustained large casualties. Another U.S. military estimate suggested that U.S. and South Korean military forces might suffer 300,000 to 500,000 casualties within the first 90 days of fighting alone, in addition to hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. Thus, without significant redeployments from the U.S., it would have been difficult for joint U.S.-South Korean forces to neutralize the North Korean artillery north of the DMZ before Seoul had been devastated. A war would thus have been an unacceptably costly option for the U.S. and South Korea. Conversely, Pyongyang was almost certainly aware that it could not hope to prevail in a conflict where its past benefactor-states could not be relied on for support, thus restraining their actions to a certain point.

The U.S. contingency planning in June 1994 for military options against North Korea outlined three possible scenarios: firstly, the dispatch of 2,000 non-combat military personnel which would be needed to prepare for a large-scale deployment. Secondly, an

384 Hamm, Arming the Two Koreas: State, Capital and Military Power, 89.
385 Carter, "Interview: Jimmy Carter," in Frontline/PBS.
387 Sigal, Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea, 76.
388 For example, when Pyongyang announced to unload the fuel rods, thus, stepping over the declared ‘red line’ of the U.S., they did not allow simultaneous IAEA inspections of the process, but allowed inspectors at least to be present at the site.
immediate deployment of 10,000 troops and another carrier group for the region. The third option would have envisioned the deployment of an additional 50,000 troops, four hundred aircrafts, multiple rocket launchers, more Patriot missiles, and an additional aircraft carrier group. In case of military strategies against the North Korean nuclear program, three options were discussed: either a limited strike against the processing facility only or a more comprehensive strike against all nuclear facilities including spent fuel storage pool. The third option would have included strikes against other military assets of North Korea with a view to degrade Pyongyang’s ability to retaliate and inflict damage on South Korea.389

In fact, in the early 1990s, North Korea enjoyed a quantitative edge in some areas, including ground troops, self-propelled artillery, and submarines. Usually it is assumed that one needs a three-to-one superiority in forces to break through an enemy’s defending lines.390 Even though South Korea and the U.S. array a substantive qualitative advantage due to much larger defence spending and sophisticated (in the U.S. case, the world-leading) armament industries, the terrain on the Korean Peninsula tends to favour a defender and cannot be compared to the geographic conditions in the Iraqi desert. Taken together, while U.S.-ROK forces certainly enjoyed conventional superiority over the DPRK forces, the gap was not sufficient to eliminate the North Korean state without incurring huge and ultimately as it turned out, unacceptable costs. While there is no question that the U.S. would have responded with great force to any North Korean military aggression, the Clinton administration was very reluctant to approve the ‘Osiraq’ solution to the nuclear crisis. At a summit with his South Korean counterpart Kim Young Sam in July 1993, Bill Clinton warned that the U.S. would resort to “appropriate countermeasures” if North Korea

390 Mearsheimer, ”Assessing the Conventional Balance: The 3:1 Rule and Its Critics.”
did not comply with its nuclear safeguard obligations. He indicated that the U.S. would use all weapons at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, if North Korea crossed a ‘red line’. This turned out to be more of a bluff and intended as a reassurance to the South Koreans, who were getting increasingly worried about the possibility that the U.S. would accept a North Korean proliferation. Yet, the U.S. government calculated high risks and relatively low success chances for a military solution to the crisis. Asked about the likelihood of an U.S. air strike on North Korea’s nuclear facilities, one American official pessimistically replied that “even if we wiped out everything we saw, we would never know if we got it all”. 391

One factor that could have slightly contributed to Pyongyang’s risk-acceptance during the crisis might have been based on calculations that Beijing would be the ultimate security provider in case the crisis would have gotten out of control. Yet, this kind of ‘great power defensive support’ was all but certain. Neither Beijing nor Moscow had officially confirmed that they would provide a nuclear umbrella extending to the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. 392 Certainly, the defence treaty with Beijing could instil a certain level of confidence and reassurances to Pyongyang, but it is questionable how China would have reacted to an armed aggression on the Korean peninsula. However, this uncertainty may be regarded as more useful than the possible ‘certainty’ of no security commitment at all (as in the case with Russia after 1991). Scholars have usually asserted that China’s need for a North Korean buffer state would lead Beijing to intervene militarily on behalf of North Korea in case of a renewed war on the Korean peninsula. Yet, the demise of the Cold War, and a certain cooling off of relations between North Korea and China, as the latter has

391 Sanger, "Clinton, in Seoul, Tells North Korea to Drop Arms Plan."
392 Hamm, Arming the Two Koreas: State, Capital and Military Power, 88.
pursued strong relations with Seoul, cast doubt about the argument that China would rush again to defend North Korea as it did in 1950.\textsuperscript{393}

The worst case for Pyongyang, the execution of a ROK-U.S. ‘Air-Land Battle’ scenario, or OPLAN 5027, would have amounted to the virtual elimination of the North Korean regime. Although it has been reported that the North Korean leadership spent months deep inside bunkers somewhere around Pyongyang throughout the crisis\textsuperscript{394}, this could have been a precautionary measure as the North Koreans may have expected a ‘decapitation strike’. Whenever the U.S. assumed a strong posture, the North Korean responded with an equally strong response. As a reaction to the 1993 ‘Team Spirit’ announcement, the regime gave out “Order No. 0034 of the Supreme Military Commander [Kim Jong Il]”, denouncing ‘Team Spirit’ as a “nuclear war game preliminary of North Korea” and ordered the people to prepare for a state of “semi-war” and to be fully prepared for battle.\textsuperscript{395} It is unclear whether such aggressive countermeasures and rhetoric were aimed at deterring a perceived imminent U.S. attack or because the North Korean leaders thought to rally support among the population during a period of extreme economic hardship.\textsuperscript{396}

Another important aspect that probably factored into the deliberations of decision-makers in both Pyongyang and Washington was the potential ‘equalizer’ North Korea already possessed. Western intelligence as well as the IAEA Board of Governors could not conclude that North Korea had not already diverted enough plutonium to produce a nuclear

\textsuperscript{394} Bermudez, “Information and the Dprk’s Military and Power-Holding Elite.”
\textsuperscript{396} Martin, \textit{Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty}, 486.
Throughout the crisis there was still a certain level of ambiguity on the question relating to North Korea’s ‘nuclear history’. An ‘ambiguous’ nuclear weapon capability is quite a powerful deterrent threat. On June 2, 1993, during negotiations with the Americans, the North Korean head of delegation Kang revealed to the Americans that Pyongyang already possessed over the ‘ability’ to build nuclear weapons. In January 1994, the CIA reported that North Korea might have produced one or two nuclear bombs. Yet, this has never been pointed out in the literature on North Korea’s nuclear weapon capability which mostly starts with Pyongyang’s first official nuclear test in October 2006. Often it is assumed that North Korea has intentionally built up a nuclear program to use it as a ‘bargaining chip’; but an analysis of the nuclear crisis in the early 1990s suggests that the leadership in Pyongyang rather realized that the North Korean version of ‘neither confirm nor deny’ policy was one of the last trump cards it could play in the midst of all the odds the regime was facing during the ‘end of history’-post-Cold War era. In fact, the topic of North Korea’s nuclear past was a thorny issue throughout the crisis. The North Korean leadership did not want to give up their main instrument of leverage, i.e. the uncertain status of its nuclear material, without receiving a substantial reward in return. As it would turn out in the end, North Korea was able to maintain a certain level of ambiguity concerning its nuclear development, while the U.S. was appeased by the fact that North Korea would remain within the NPT and inspection regime. ‘Roll back’ was not achieved, and North Korea ultimately retained its nuclear deterrent based on ambiguity.

397 On April 1, 1993, the IAEA Board of Governors declared to the UN Security Council that it could not "verify that there has been no diversion of nuclear material [to] nuclear weapons"; see Michishita, North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008, 209-10.
Furthermore it should be noted that North Korea’s past behaviour evidenced rational and even cautious behaviour, with the famous exception of the Korean War, in which Kim Il Sung thought that the U.S. would not intervene. North Korea did not take advantage of domestic turbulences in the South on at least three occasions that can be regarded as potential ‘windows of opportunity’. Kim Il Sung told an American congressman that North Korea consciously refrained from intervening in each domestic crisis in South Korea, stressing that fears of a North Korean invasion threat were unfounded. 400 Neither did they explore favourable international occasions, such as the U.S. entanglement in Vietnam. 401

After the Korean War, North Korea’s windows of opportunity for reunification by force had increasingly narrowed. From the 1970s onwards, it became more and more evident that only a domestic change in South Korea might bring the revolutionary-style reunification the North Korean leadership had long hoped for. 402 The North Koreans shifted their military emphasis on firepower, building up a massive artillery force along the DMZ. The North Korean built hardened artillery positions to upset for the lack of air superiority in a conflict with South Korean and American forces. While North Korean artillery cannot fire from hardened position, it can also not move southwards. This indicates the (defensive) deterrent function these artillery pieces assume in North Korea’s military planning. In deterrence, intentions give capabilities meanings as threats to hurt an adversary and thus, disproportionally increasing the cost of war for the latter.

401 1963 coup d’état by mid-ranking military officers surrounding Park Chung Hee, 1980 in the midst of the Gwanju uprising, or 1987, when massive demonstrations led to the downfall of the Chun Doo-Hwan government.
402 Kim Il Sung constantly overestimated his appeal in the South Korean masses, equating anti-government actions by South Korean civilians with pro-North Korean sentiments. Interestingly, both the right-wing South Korean government and the North Korean government operated with the very same assumptions, much to the dismay of the South Korean democracy activists.
Moreover, the example of Iraq “loomed large in the minds of North Korea’s leaders”, wrote Wit and his colleagues. The leadership not only studied the military operations of “Desert Storm” but also the “broader political implications of the Gulf War”, leaving an embattled Iraqi regime internationally isolated and economically more devastated than ever before.\textsuperscript{403} The weak performance of Iraq’s Soviet-made military equipment during the Gulf War coupled with South Korea’s continued military build-up with advanced U.S.-military hardware, did certainly not increase North Korea’s confidence. Yet, testimonies of KPA defectors suggest that North Korea regards itself of more capable than Iraq to fend off a possible American attack.

A North Korean KPA defector, speaking after the successful ‘regime change’ operation in 2003 which had toppled the Hussein regime within weeks, concluded that the U.S.-Iraq War was a “child’s play”, and North Korea would thus be able to defend itself more successfully in case it was attacked by the United States due to North Korea’s “symmetry in conventional and high-tech weapons” and Pyongyang’s confidence in its “electronic warfare” capabilities.\textsuperscript{404} It is fair to say then, that the regime could have been even more confident in the early 1990s, after it had spent decades of building up its armed forces, and only recently (since roughly 1988) experienced a dramatic decrease in weapons supply by its traditional allies, Soviet Union and China. David Kang has long argued that due to America’s successful deterrence threat on the peninsula, North Korea never contemplated a large-scale invasion of South Korea throughout the Cold War.\textsuperscript{405} While there is convincing evidence that North Korea had been deterred from taking offensive action against the South

\textsuperscript{403} Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, \textit{Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis}, 35.


\textsuperscript{405} Kang, “Rethinking North Korea,” 132.
due to the “U.S. tripwire”, that is, quick and rapid reaction of the most powerful armed forces of the world in case of an North Korean attack, it can also be said that the North Korean leadership must at least had enough confidence in their ability to repel an armed attack. Furthermore, throughout the crisis, part of the brinkmanship consisted of a certain level of ambiguity on the question whether North Korea already had developed a few nuclear weapons, U.S. intelligence reports in the early 1990s suspected.  

Moreover, throughout the crisis North Korea repeatedly showed its ability to inflict damage (possibly by striking with WMDs), pointed at its most powerful deterrent tools (artillery in the vicinity of Seoul), and displayed defensive weapons which could complicate logistical operations for the U.S. navy. Scud missiles and No-Dong missile tests (May 29-30, 1993), a statement that threatened to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire” (March 21, 1994), or the test-firing of ‘silkworm’ anti-ship missiles in the East Sea (Sea of Japan) between May 31 and June 2, 1994, were actions clearly intended to bolster its deterrence posture while simultaneously signaling to Washington and Seoul to refrain from the use of force.

Evidence suggests that the North Korean leadership assumed as a worst case scenario an ‘Osiraq’ operation by the United States. While this is not a direct threat to the regime, it could have been very embarrassing and would have required a massive response in order to maintain credibility and legitimacy. Nonetheless, the regime was aware that it possessed over certain advantages (geography, weapons deployed, CWs) that would have made an

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406 For example the North Koreans did not bother to hide their nuclear facilities from spy satellites, unlike the Iraqis, who learnt from their 1981 Osiraq experience and thus started to dig in their nuclear facilities. Also, North Korean officials told the Soviets in 1989 that North Korea would consider creating any weapons it desired if the Soviet Union established relations with South Korea. Moreover, CIA reports, notoriously being pessimistic, estimated that the North Koreans either already diverted enough plutonium for one or two bombs, or were a few months away of acquiring them. See Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History, 216.

all-out attack of joint U.S.-ROK forces too costly to pursue, albeit such a scenario would have certainly meant an end to the regime. Thus, the North Korean leadership was more than pleased to find a relatively honorable way out of the crisis after the Carter visit.

3.6. Poliheuristic Decision-Making Model

After having established the underlying factors which condition asymmetric brinkmanship behaviour, in a second stage, a poliheuristic explanation of decision-making accounts for the specific decisions taken by the leaders in the weaker countries during the crisis. In poliheuristic decision-making models, the decision-rule is non-compensatory, which means that “no other dimension of the do-nothing strategy can compensate the leader for the domestic political cost of that strategic option”. The non-compensatory view contends that compensation may not be a viable option for political leaders, thus, eliminating certain choice alternatives which would have looked ‘most’ rational, i.e. eliminates the alternative with the highest net payoff, if they score low on the ‘political dimension’. In other words, according to this principal, foreign policy makers will not choose a foreign policy decision that will hurt them politically. Moreover, poliheuristic theory proposes a two-staged decision-making process, whereby decision-makers switch from dimension-based (economic, political, military, and diplomatic dimensions) analysis

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408 Non-compensatory decision-making is contrary to compensatory processes, prevalent in most decision-making theories. The latter operates with cost-benefit rationalities which imply that the choices of political leaders among alternatives yielding a high value on one dimension (e.g. the military balance of force) can compensate for a low value on another dimension (e.g. political) for the same decision alternative. This is not possible in the non-compensatory model, in which unacceptable domestic costs (e.g. political dimension) cannot be compensated in another dimension. The term “poliheuristic” stems from the assumption that decision-makers use many (poly) heuristics in order to “simplify complex foreign policy decisions”; see Mintz, Geva, and DeRouen, "Mathematical Models of Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Compensatory Vs. Noncompensatory,” 448.

409 Levy and Thompson, Causes of War, 154.
in the first stage, to alternative-based calculations in the second stage of the process.\textsuperscript{410} The first phase of the decision-making involves the elimination of certain alternatives from the choice set, and then second phase consists of an “analytic process of choosing an alternative that minimizes risks and guarantees rewards”.\textsuperscript{411} The first phase of the decision-making process typically involves a “nonholistic”, non-exhaustive search, to select a subset of alternatives using simplifying heuristics.\textsuperscript{412} With a relatively narrow choice set of alternatives, a decision-making group may suddenly experience to be ‘locked-in’, resembling notions of path dependency. The second phase involves a maximizing strategy to select an alternative from the remaining subset of alternatives. In other words, the decision-maker can make the best out of the chosen strategy in the first phase, but are unable to reverse their initial choices. At heart of this decision-making model is the basic assumption that politicians are highly concerned with their prospects of political survival (thus, the ordering of dimensions, with the political dimension crucial in selecting a succeeding subset of policy alternatives). In personalist regimes the desire of political survival may even be amplified, as political and physical survival of the leader in such non-democratic regimes tends to be highly correlated. Hence, the poliheuristic reasoning has clear advantages over the rational choice model which assumes deterministic processes, and is very linear in its approach to political decision-making.\textsuperscript{413} The poliheuristic model acknowledges limitations of rationality of the cognitive critiques by putting forward a two-staged decision-making process, with the first stage clearly taking into consideration the

\textsuperscript{410} Mintz, "Foreign Policy Decision Making in Familiar and Unfamiliar Settings: An Experimental Study of High-Ranking Military Officers," 94.
\textsuperscript{411} Mintz and Geva, \textit{Decision-Making on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate}, 82.
\textsuperscript{412} Mintz, "The Decision to Attack Iraq: A Noncompensatory Theory of Decision Making."
\textsuperscript{413} Tchantouridze, "Integrating Cognitive and Rational Theories of Foreign Policy Decision Making by Alex Mintz," 257.
boundaries of rationality. The second-stage on the other hand involves a payoff maximization process more akin to the ones postulated by rational choice.

The first decision-making phase in the Iraqi case highlights the dilemma the leadership faced and why it decided to choose a policy option that look ‘suboptimal’ from the outside. As the poliheuristic model operates with a clear preference order, with “political factors” (PF) as the overriding decision factor, the Iraqi leadership was left to choose between a ‘soft’ defence of Kuwait (the option they ended up pursuing) (PF payoff 4) and withdrawal only if some minor, face-saving concessions are granted (PF payoff 5). The poliheuristic decision-making process shows that the Iraqi leadership had a choice between ‘withdrawal with concessions’ and, even though a worse option, a ‘soft’ defence of Kuwait. As can be seen in the table below, the best option would have been an unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait at the earliest possible date (3.75). Despite formidable diplomatic and economic reasons to do so, this option was too costly from a political point of view. A withdrawal would have put enormous pressure on the Saddam regime, as it was still suffering from the war with Iran. Economic factors were important in the regime’s calculus to invade and annex Kuwait, but they were important because they were directly related to the political aspect of regime survival. In the 1990/91 Gulf crisis, the regime’s situation worsened from an economic aspect, as UN-sponsored economic sanctions were directed against Iraq. Yet, by defying U.S. pressures, the Iraqi leadership managed to rally public support behind the regime. If Iraq had given in to U.S. pressures without receiving anything in return, the Saddam regime would have had enormous difficulties to survive. At the same time, Iraqi actions on the ground clearly indicate that it was not prepared to defend Kuwait seriously. Iraq had withdrawn most of its best troops (Republican Guards) prior to the land offensive
of the coalition forces. Hundreds of Iraqi military jets left the country (mostly to Iran) and never saw any combat with coalition air forces which would dominate the Iraqi airspace for the whole military conflict. It also refrained from using its WMDs, which would have immensely complicated the offensive of the U.S-led coalition. The Iraqi regime correctly calculated that it could not win a military confrontation but at the same time, pursued the century old dictum of ‘war as continuation of politics by other means’. The conflict is a paradigmatic case of a regime-survival war as opposed to ‘state-survival’ war in which a state would mobilize all its available resources. For the purpose of regime survival, political factors weigh much more heavily.

Since it is not possible to know the leadership deliberations prior and during the nuclear crisis, we can only infer North Korean decision-making from observed behaviour. The crisis started during a time when the regime faced an existential threat to its survival. The state of the economy was severely bad and the country was increasingly isolated from the outside world, with the loss of Soviet military and economy support being the most severe changes in the early 1990s. The nuclear option promised certain economic payoffs (energy security) as well as a possible military payoff (deterrent or quasi-deterrent). Although a full-inspection regime could have brought North Korea diplomatic relations with Japan (and with it, credits, loans and possibly billions of ‘compensation’ for the colonial period) and perhaps also with the United States, politically such moves would not have been as desirable as the ‘brinkmanship’ posture which yielded a ‘latent deterrent’ (history of North Korea’s nuclear program was never fully unveiled) and thus, satisfied more hawkish elements in the North Korean leadership, especially the military and the party. A full inspection regime which would have included ‘sensitive’ military installations, would not

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only have been a face-loss, but perhaps even more obviously highlighted the vulnerability and weakness of the regime. Politically, developing nuclear weapons or hoping to gain as much out of the nuclear program as possible were the only valid options even though they did not yield the highest overall choice payoff. This highlights that a regime may make a decision which does not seem ‘rational’ in the sense of cost-benefit calculations.
Table 4: Iraqi Decision Process (Phase I) during Brinkmanship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iraqi Decision Process (Phase I) during Brinkmanship</th>
<th>Set of Alternatives</th>
<th>Expected outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defend Kuwait with all possible means (including WMDs) if no concessions are forthcoming</td>
<td>At worst possible destruction of Iraq and ousting of Baath regime; at best, considerable weakening of security apparatus, but hope for concessions from the U.S.; likelihood of long-term economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Pretend’ to defend Kuwait if no concessions are forthcoming</td>
<td>Retain some pride and honour of regime and military, but incur considerable weakening of the security apparatus and long-term economic sanctions and isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withdraw from Kuwait unconditionally</td>
<td>Hope of regaining diplomatic position before the war in the medium-term, but diminishing chances of regaining regional power-status; face-loss for regime and military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withdraw from Kuwait if minor concessions are granted</td>
<td>Regaining diplomatic position; face-saving for regime, face-loss for military; depending on content of concessions, status enhancement in the Middle East</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First phase of decision process (non-exhaustive search) and corresponding dimensions (payoffs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PF: Political power base strengthening or weakening of Baathist rule</th>
<th>DF: Diplomatic consequences (isolationism/re-joining int’l community)</th>
<th>MF: Military interests (incur heavy losses/retain dignity/no losses but moral defeat)</th>
<th>EF: Economic interests (end of blockade [sanctions], return to world economy)</th>
<th>Surviving dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>very low (1)</td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>very low (1)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>moderate (4)</td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>moderate (6)</td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>moderate (5)</td>
<td>low (3)</td>
<td>low (2)</td>
<td>low (3)</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: North Korean Decision Process (Phase I) during Brinkmanship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set of Alternatives</th>
<th>Develop nuclear weapons (no inspections)</th>
<th>Give up nuclear program</th>
<th>Limited inspections, ‘latent’ capability</th>
<th>Full inspection regime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected outcome</td>
<td>Economic and diplomatic isolationism (sanctions), long-term deterrence maximization but short-term security exacerbation (possible military strikes)</td>
<td>Short-term diplomatic and economic gains, long-term negative economic effects (energy security), diplomatic negligence in the long-term, long-term security jeopardized</td>
<td>Crisis-prone, high external pressures, diplomatic and economic sanctions, isolation</td>
<td>Long-term economic gains and short-term diplomatic gains, long-term security possibly jeopardized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First phase of decision process (non-exhaustive search) and corresponding dimensions (payoffs)

| Political (party): strengthening or weakening juche ideology | moderate (5) | very low (2) | moderate (5) | Low (4) |
| Diplomatic consequences (isolationism/joining int’l community) | Very low (1) | high (7) | Low (3) | High (7) |
| Military interests (deterrence/revealing military secrets) | Moderate (6) | Very Low (2) | Moderate (6) | Low (4) |
| Economic interests (energy production, potential international aid & credits) | Low (2) | low (3) | Low (3) | Moderate (5) |

Surviving dimension 3.5 3 4.25 5

3.7. Findings

Leaders in totalitarian regimes often suffer from being surrounded by ‘sycophants’. The lack of critical review and give advice, checks and balances more democratic regimes know, may seriously impede the decision-making quality of a regime. It is difficult to evaluate how well leaders like Saddam Hussein or Kim Il Sung were aware of the fact that they were
surrounded by people who tend to agree rather than disagree with their opinions. Saddam Hussein was certainly aware that his subordinates did not provide him with all information, especially negative ones. The system of fear that his regime installed had reached the highest echelons of power. Almost desperately he told his advisors in July 1984, when the Iranians had staged a successful counterattack into Iraqi territory: “The front must report even the painful issues to me, so that I can evaluate the situation and know the factors that caused this pain and make a right decision”. The quality of decision-making can be significantly impeded by leaders who do not wish to hear the opinions of their advisers and experts. Saddam Hussein is a case in point, as he saw himself as analyst. Hence, he told his intelligence services to provide him only with ‘raw data’, while he would make his own conclusions thereof. After the Gulf War, his son-in-law (who defected in 1995), Hussein Kamil, admitted that he and other advisers did not provide Hussein with a true picture of the situation at hand [during the U.S.-led attack on Iraq] out of “fear or giving the impression that we had been shaken or because it is normal to be cautious”. A scholar who wrote a book about the personalities of leaders described Hussein as “astute, calculating tactician who outmanoeuvred his rivals for power and dominated Iraq for decades”. At the same time, he was also “the brutal, delusional tyrant whose perceptions were fundamentally distorted by Ba’athist ideology, the sycophancy and nepotism that characterized the regime, and his own parochialism, paranoia, narcissism, and megalomania”. Similarly, Kim Il Sung wanted to hear “nothing but good news from his

417 Post, Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior.
minions”. For example, Suh noted that Choe Hyeon, a former partisan and comrade-in-arms of Kim Il Sung, who died in April 1982, was said to be the “only person who could speak freely to Kim [Il Sung] in private”. Later in his life, including the time of the first nuclear crisis and North Korea’s brinkmanship vis-à-vis the U.S., Kim who “bathed in constant praise” had “come to believe his sycophants”, while anything short of praise could not satisfy him anymore. Leaders, as psychiatrist researchers have found out, often get “isolated and lonely”, as they are “surrounded by an aura of [their] own importance, sagacity and omnipotence which is reflected by those about him”. They are often surrounded by uncritical admirers which can exacerbate expectations based on highly optimistic outcomes.

High-level defections, such as those of Hussein’s son-in-law and cousin of Saddam Hussein, Hussein Kamil (who had served as Minister of Industries, heading the Military Industrialisation Commission) in 1995 and Hwang Jang Yop (the ‘father’ of North Korea’s juche ideology) in 1997, illustrate the limits of internal criticism within totalitarian systems. Yet, the defections are likely to have exacerbated the leadership’s paranoia and sense of insecurity.

Totalitarian leaders are very conscious about their role in ‘history’. There have been hundreds of books produced about the heroic life of Kim Il Sung, while he is said to have

418 Martin, Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty, 439.
420 Ibid., 322.
421 Quoted from Lester Grinspoon, in Blainey, The Causes of War, 55.
he spent his last days of his life writing his memoirs. Kim Il Sung did not become the leader of the fading Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) nor could he boast any other foreign policy success. His life ‘achievements’ seemed somehow diminished with the external changes in the late 1980s, and thus, he may have seen a certain merit for his historical role in dealing with high U.S. statesmen and a meeting with the South Korean leader. More evidently, Saddam Hussein appeared almost obsessed with his role in history. Even after he was captured and interrogated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) he still maintained that it was important to him what people would think of him in five hundred to one thousand years in the future. Hussein told his American interrogator in 2004 that he will be known for fairness and as having “faced oppression”. After the U.S. demanded the unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait, Saddam Hussein responded with an “open letter” to U.S. president Bush, published on August 17, 1990. The wording suggests that Hussein did not believe in restoration of good relations with the U.S., regardless of the outcome of the crisis. The choice of his words reflects on one hand his Baathist ideology, but on the hand try to convey a message of ‘historical importance’: a leader of a small Arab country defying the world’s most powerful nation.

“[...] your contempt and disregard for the Arab mentality and Arab popular and official feelings, I could see how shallow you [President Bush] are” He warned against the use of force by the U.S. on ‘holy’ Arab lands, while reinstating his position not to withdraw from Kuwait:

423 Martin, Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty.

“There is no possibility of the backward oil emirs, who distorted the Arab image, returning to the throne.”  

Saddam Hussein’s goals were not limited to building a strong Iraq. He sought to replace Gamal Abdel Nasser’s image among the Arabs as their leader. His campaign against Iran (1980-88) was at least partly aimed at making himself and Iraq the “voice of the Arabs in regional and global affairs.” While the Kuwaiti episode destroyed this dream, he could still claim that he survived the attack of a multilateral military force led by the United States military might, thus, creating an image of an undefeatable Arab leader.

Yet in the two crises, in which both regimes engaged in brinkmanship behaviour against a much stronger adversary, each regime did not behave recklessly as it appears on the onset. Nonetheless, in any bargaining crisis decisions and corresponding actions of both sides need to be taken into account. In the Iraqi case, the U.S. government was not willing to give in an inch. In fact, the position of the U.S. government was taken in a NSC meeting just after the invasion took place and certainly to a great extent shaped by British prime minister’s Margaret Thatcher anti-Saddam Hussein view. Although Iraq’s “transgression” of appropriate state behaviour may even have been greater than that of North Korea’s nuclear development and its posture towards the IAEA and the NPT regime in general. On the other hand, Iraq had been a quasi-ally of the United States in the six years preceding the crisis while North Korea had practically been an enemy of Washington since its inception as a state. U.S. concerns over nuclear proliferation became only a serious issue after the Gulf War in regard to both alleged Iraqi and North Korean programs. Even though Iraq

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427 Thatcher and Bush, “Joint Press Conference with President Bush (Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait).”
obviously possessed chemical and biological weapons, having deployed the former on various occasions against Kurds and Iranians, the U.S. government tried to dissuade the Congress of taking negative sanctions against Bagdad. Even though the U.S. Department of Energy had enough clues that Bagdad was seeking nuclear weapons capability, concerns within the administration were mostly discounted.\footnote{Hurst, \textit{The United States and Iraq since 1979: Hegemony, Oil and War} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 74.} Iraqi’s brinkmanship in the Gulf 1990-91 changed all this. At the same time the Iraqi government viewed Washington as threat to its survival since the mid-1980s, despite good relations on the surface. After the Iran-Contra affair, during which the Reagan administration funnelled weapons to Iraq’s arch enemy Iran in order to finance Contra rebels in Nicaragua, Iraqi perceptions of the U.S. turned sour. The Iraqi regime believed that they were encircled by a conspiracy between the U.S., Israel and the oil-rich Gulf states to topple the regime and replace it with a less “revolutionary” government. The conversations prior, during and after the crisis among Iraq’s top leadership reveal such thought. Jack Snyder has called this “self-delusion”. Such situations happen when the regime comes to believe their own nationalistic propaganda. Snyder wrote this in conjunction with the ‘imperial myths’, but both the North Korean and Iraqi regime have an extreme world view which views the outside world, but in particular the United States, as a threat to national survival, but above all, regime survival.\footnote{See Snyder, \textit{Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition} (Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1991), 41.} Ever since their confrontation with the world’s most powerful state has begun, Iraq and North Korea have been described as ‘garrison state’.\footnote{Kelidar, "The Wars of Saddam Hussein," 784.} To mobilize the whole population for defending the ‘motherland’ serves not only the purpose to deter an outside invasion, but also helps to divert attention and rally support behind the regime. It was Hannah Arendt
who said that totalitarian regimes always needed ‘moving’ societies to stay in power, while ‘stability’ is their worst enemy. Arendt underlines the importance of war for the development of the totalitarian project, arguing that war “enabled [the totalitarian leader] to accelerate the development in a manner that would have been unthinkable in peacetime”. If totalitarian regimes manage to mobilize national resources for state building, the totalitarian project may yield some positive overall effects (e.g. the ‘economic miracle’ of Stalinist Soviet Union in the 1930s; North Korea’s reconstruction 1950-70; Iraq’s Baathist state-building 1968-1980). Yet, they plunge their countries occasionally into destructive wars, some of them could have been averted if diplomatic standing had been ranked higher in the regime’s preference order than ‘power base’ satisfaction, i.e. the domestic ‘political factors’.

**CONCLUSION**

War, or more precisely the total mobilization of society to wage war, can serve as means to consolidate power and control over a state. War, or an international crisis at the brink to one, can divert attention of a country’s public and its elites away from internal problems a state is facing. This study has found a certain pattern that condition asymmetric brinkmanship crisis. A regime faces an internally or/and externally induced crisis which threatens regime security. The state is not equal the regime, but if a regime faces a serious threat, the state might be threatened too, but not necessarily. Thus, the limited congruence between state and regime interests highlights the shortcomings of the neorealist unitary state actor assumption. As the poliheuristic decision-making model has shown, from the

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state’s perspective cost-benefit calculations could have led to radically different decisions than taken by the regime. Iraq would have withdrawn unconditionally given the military might of the U.S.-led coalition. From a state perspective, North Korea would have either “gone nuclear” (full deterrence but adverse economic and diplomatic effects) or allowed full inspections (i.e. joining the ‘international community’). Yet, regime considerations necessitated certain compromises from the stronger side, and finally led to a negotiated settlement which allowed the regime to retain a certain level of independence and ‘diplomatic coup’, but at the same time, did not amount to embarrassing and full-scope concessions. In both cases, ‘brinkmanship’ was not initiated by the weaker side consciously in the beginning. Iraq and North Korea knowingly challenged a commitment of the United States, but they underestimated the reactions thereof. Both regimes believed that the United States would eventually back down and that it would not risk a war over the challenged commitment. This is a confirmation of the second hypothesis proposed in this study. The actions taken by each regime (nuclear development and invasion of Kuwait) were both aimed at stabilizing the respective regime, but they were not initiated with the motivation to provoke the United States. But as it would turn out, the actions taken by Bagdad and Pyongyang led to international crises with the world’s strongest power. The ‘brinkmanship’ behaviour of North Korea and Iraq respectively that is, not giving in to the demands of the stronger power, which ultimately escalated each crisis. Given the extremely difficult time both regimes were facing internally and externally, their brinkmanship behaviour was considered as the ‘only’ viable option. Political factors conditioned this behaviour while it extremely limited the scope for concessions or alternative actions. The brinkmanship behaviour was not simply reckless and irrational. It was also grounded in a belief that the
United States would eventually back off, or at least, offer a face-saving compromise solution to the crisis. There was also a certain confidence in their conventional and non-conventional military deterrence strength. The Iraqi leadership reassured the American counterparts that they were aware about the great power asymmetries, but internal policy discussions reveal certain confidence to repeal a military attack on Kuwait. The Iraqis believed that they could not ‘defeat’ the United States on the battlefield, but politically, by causing enough harm (i.e. U.S. casualties) to force the U.S. to seek negotiations. The greater ‘willingness to suffer’ has for long been an important feature of asymmetric warfare. The Iraqis thought that they could inflict enough losses to the U.S.-led coalition so that a face-saving compromise could be found even after the war had started. While the third hypothesis, the weaker side’s belief that it could survive a worst-case scenario, is confirmed, this does not preclude the possibility that Bagdad or Pyongyang miscalculated. Yet, the RMA of military technology had not been evident in 1991, as prior short wars (e.g. Panama 1982) did not fully disclose America’s war-making potential. There were reasons for the Hussein regime to believe that it could inflict sufficient damage to the Americans, which then would have triggered serious domestic pressures to end the conflict as soon as possible. The ‘Vietnam syndrome’ was often mentioned during Iraqi leadership discussions prior to the war. Reports that Kim Jong Il spent months in a bunker in Pyongyang during the height of crisis when North Korea withdraw from the NPT indicate that the North Korean regime expected a military strike, or at least, saw the possibility of a war on the peninsula. While the North Koreans often use martial rhetoric, the ‘semi-war’ state declaration coupled with the withdrawal from the NPT as a reaction to the ‘Team Spirit’ resumption was a bold move and brought the situation to the ‘brink’. The removal of the spent fuel rods was
another peak of North Korea’s brinkmanship behaviour during the crisis, and this time, military options were most intensively considered. Asymmetric brinkmanship can lead to two possible outcomes: if no alternative option is provided by the stronger side and deterrence fails to make a sufficient impression on the stronger side, the crisis leads to war. If an alternative is provided, i.e. a face-saving concession or another form of acknowledging the aggrieved situation of the weaker side, and if deterrence makes a strong enough impression on the stronger side, the chances are good that a military conflict can be avoided. Stephen Walt has termed regimes like North Korea and Iraq under Saddam Hussein “revolutionary regimes”, which are characterized by their inherent insecurity and fear of a conservative backlash from within and without. They stress their strength and boldness vis-à-vis the outside world, which is largely a calculated attempt to repress domestic dissent, deter would-be attackers, and attract international recognition.\textsuperscript{432} Another important aspect is that even totalitarian regimes may take economic problems serious enough as they could undermine regime stability. There is a law-like thesis in comparative politics that democratic regimes are highly vulnerable to economic crisis and thus, may use external crisis to divert the attention or rally around the flag. “It’s the economy, stupid!” was the slogan of the Clinton during his successful 1992 presidential campaign against the man who had defeated Hussein’s Iraq one year earlier.\textsuperscript{433} Economic downturns can also threaten totalitarian regimes, and thus, they primarily seek policies which may satisfy important segments of the population (‘power base’) which could be hurt by a worsened economy. In small totalitarian regimes the “home front” is the “main battleground” of


political survival. An escalation of an international crisis through brinkmanship may be costly and risky as rational choice theorists contend, but it can also be an appealing or at least only available policy choice for leaders facing difficult external and internal environments. Unlike leaders of democratic states, this seems especially the case for leaders who do not need to confront periodic elections. Autocratic leaders do not depend solely on popular support, but their political and physical survival is ultimately conditioned by more complex interaction of legitimacy, control, and ability to coerce.

Foreign policy may be utilized to increase popular support and more generally, to improve the chances of regime survival. But foreign policy ultimately serves and is subordinated to objectives concerning regime stability and much less ‘national interests’ at large. The North Korean case is illustrative. What may be good for the ‘state’ is bad for the regime and vice versa. The North Korean leadership faces a trade-off between opening the North Korean state and economy which would inevitably lead to an increased exposure of the North Korean society to the outside world, and continuing its isolated ‘pariah’ existence and with it, risking possible system breakdown. For the North Korean leadership, as the ‘Arduous March’ – the widespread famine that hit North Korea in the mid-1990s – showed, is prepared to accept great sacrifices to the detriment of its population as long as it prolongs the survival of the regime. A ‘soft landing’ for the North Korean society would probably be tantamount to a ‘hard landing’ for the North Korean regime – an outcome Pyongyang wants to avoid under any circumstances.

After the two crises examined in the present study, North Korea and Iraq failed to improve relations with Washington substantially. Whenever the two ‘rogue states’ as they would

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become known took conciliatory gestures or tried to engage and improve relations with Washington, the U.S. government did not respond positively. In fact, Washington has been operating along the lines of an “inherent bad faith model” of the adversary since the 1990s (in Iraq’s case) and much earlier (in North Korea’s case). For any U.S. administration, both Pyongyang and Bagdad (until the fall of the Hussein regime in 2003) have been inherently hostile, yet at the same time responsive to its coercive (in Iraq’s case) and a mix of coercive and accommodative (in North Korea’s case) foreign policies. Ironically, North Korea has become a self-declared nuclear weapon state, while the removal of Saddam Hussein showed that Iraq had already given up its WMD program by the mid-1990s.

Nisbett and Ross’ ‘fundamental attribution theorem’ fits also well in an analysis of U.S. foreign policy towards the two regimes. The theory, which essentially relates to the way people explain the behaviour of others, explains the tendency of decision-making groups to attribute undesirable behaviour of the adversary to dispositional rather than situational factors. In the Iraqi case this has been evident from the first NSC meeting on August 3, 1990: Iraq’s acts of aggression were almost solely attributed to Hussein’s ‘evil intentions’, rather than to the threats his regimes was facing and the grievances it had communicated to the outside world prior to the invasion. The theory would have more difficulties in

\[435\] For this approach to belief systems and its causal impact on decision-making, see Ole Holsti’s article on ‘operational code’, Holsti, “The ‘Operational Code’ Approach to the Study of Political Leaders: John Foster Dulles’ Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs,” Canadian Journal of Political Science 3, no. 01 (1970).

\[436\] North Korea tested its first nuclear device on October 9, 2006 – almost exactly ten years after the signing of the Agreed Framework. Since then, it has tested two more bombs, in 2009 and 2013 (under Kim Jong Un) respectively.

\[437\] Much of the WMD program was destroyed and only few chemical stockpiles were found by the coalition forces invading Iraq in 2003. See Keller, "What We Didn't Learn from the Hunt for Iraq's Phantom Arsenal," (2007), http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/07/AR2007120701619_pf.html.

explaining the policy reversal in Washington during 1993-1994. At least tacitly\textsuperscript{439}, the U.S. government seemed to have acknowledged the energy shortages and economic problems the regime faced and provided a compromise to Pyongyang that both sides found acceptable enough to proceed with. One former brigadier general of the North Korean Ministry of Public Security, Kim Jong-min, noted that “if you keep forcing [the regime] into a corner, it’s 90 percent sure there will be a war”\textsuperscript{440}. While this study did not attempt to make an overall judgement of the most effective strategy in dealing with Pyongyang, the comparison of two crises triggered by two similar regimes suggests that a policy of engagement is less costly in the long-term – assuming that a military confrontation would be the most costly outcome of any crisis. Finally, it does not really matter whether North Korea really wants to join the international community (it probably does not) or whether it only wants to gain some economic benefits and international recognition to bolster its legitimacy domestically. History taught that totalitarian regimes will eventually fade, and engaging with North Korea in as many ways as possible is likely to fasten this process.

North Korea’s ethnic homogeneity, a common heritage of Confucianism with its hierarchical modes of social interaction and family-centrism, as well as some legitimate claims by the leadership of having fought against Japanese imperialism, certainly worked in favour for the North Korean regime. Although the coercive powers of Hussein’s Iraq were similar to the ones of North Korea, and despite the fact that Iraq’s security and propaganda services worked as hard as their North Korean equivalent to bolster the regime’s legitimacy and acceptance, the conditions in Iraq in the late 1980s demanded more extremist policies

\textsuperscript{439} Or strategically: since U.S. policy circles expected collapse of the regime soon, the accommodation in 1994 may have been a way to “buy time”. The Clinton administration would struggle to muster enough support in the Republican-dominated U.S. Congress to fulfil its part of the Agreed Framework.

\textsuperscript{440} Martin, \textit{Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty}, 457.
from the Baathist rulers than the status quo prone North Koreans. Thus, the initial policy options set may have been narrower in the Iraqi case after it realized that the U.S. would not stand idle and watch how Iraq dismantled and occupied Kuwait. Kenneth N. Waltz rightly noted that “weak states” are operating “on narrow margins”, thus “inopportune acts, flawed policies, and mistimed moves may have fatal results”. Contrariwise, strong states can afford to be inattentive, not to learn and in fact, “can do the same dumb things over again”. 441

Although policy-makers in countries facing a weaker but supposedly risk-acceptant and ‘aggressive’ adversary may not be able to directly manipulate the underlying variables that condition the weaker side’s behaviour, the present theory of asymmetric brinkmanship can provide useful information as well as caveats. The present study shows that leaders in non-democratic regimes tend to prioritize addressing domestic threats, even though this may be done to the detriment of overall national security. Decision-makers of non-democratic states are not be elected by the public, but they base their power on institutions and elite groups. Furthermore they are highly conscious about their ‘image’ at home and abroad and their historical legacy. Simplified pictures of an adversary, no matter how weak he may be, are dangerous and a recipe for war. War on the Korean peninsula was avoided by a semi-official visit of an elder statesman, while not even conceding to the otherwise typical diplomatic language in a letter may have destroyed the last chance to avert one in the Gulf. 442 Middle-range theories, like the one presented here, often sacrifice parsimony and generality and they tend to produce contingent generalizations of the form, “if you do X,

441 Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 195.
442 In the last meeting before the war began, on January 9, 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker presented a letter from president Bush to the Iraqi foreign minister, which the latter refused to receive because the language used in the letter was far from ‘diplomatic’ nor cordial.
then Y will occur, assuming conditions a, b, c, and q all hold, and assuming you do X in just the right way." This is clearly a shortcoming of the present study which examined only two cases in depth and two particular crises thereof. Future studies may build up on this work by examining other regimes and other asymmetric brinkmanship crisis. Answers to the fundamental question why sometimes much weaker states dare to provoke much stronger states may also translated into non-military conflict situations, such as trade disputes, or disputes over other issues (e.g. environment, emissions). Finally, to fully understand North Korea’s decision-making rationale, access to the state archives of North Korea is needed. The sheer amount of documents that have been retrieved from the Iraqi state archives demonstrate that it will take years if not decades for social scientists and historians to fully ‘uncover’ the inner workings of Baathist Iraq. A view also shared by author of this study is that the raw data from the archives of such modern totalitarian regimes could enormously contribute to the understanding of totalitarianism in general, and with a view to the field of IR to their foreign policy behaviour in particular. This study has been only a very modest attempt to contribute to this endeavour.

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