

## **Reputation Matters: Evidence From the Korean War\***

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*Both sides in the Korean War calculated their adversary's military power and diplomatic resolve by studying their enemy's past behavior in addition to their enemy's current military posture and diplomatic actions. Past decisions to yield provided adversaries with private information about how leaders perceived their own state's military power and resolve. Enemies judged a state that recently yielded as militarily weak or diplomatically indifferent. The preponderance of evidence suggests that leaders should protect their reputation.*

**Keywords:** *Reputation, Military Assessment, Perceptions, Korean War*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Believers and non-believers in reputation can agree on only one position: diplomats and leaders focus intently on protecting their state's reputation. Their world-views then diverge dramatically. Non-believers deride the other side as engaged in a "cult of reputation" (Tang, 2006). Leaders disagree. They are convinced of the connection between their current actions and their future credibility. George H.W. Bush, for instance, thought that a decision to forego restoring Kuwait's independence "would be a signal to actual and potential despots around the world (New York Times, 1990). Are leaders "needlessly worrying" about their reputation? (Mercer, 2013) Or are they rightfully protecting a crucial diplomatic asset?

This paper argues that leaders are right to give weight to the effect of current decisions on their state's reputation—their actions in previous crises and wars.<sup>1</sup> Adversaries learn about another state's military strength and diplomatic resolve by observing past behavior. Historical evidence from the Korean War demonstrates that Kim Il-Sung, Joseph Stalin, and Harry Truman each believed that their adversary's past actions revealed private information about their enemies' military prowess and diplomatic interests. Only Mao Zedong did not use past American actions in his pre-war assessment of U.S. power and stakes. Leaders interpreted past instances of inaction as evidence of military weakness or diplomatic indifference.

The rest of this paper proceeds in five sections. The first section explains the traditional importance attached to reputation and the modern, scholarly skepticism. The second section summarizes an emerging literature that challenges the academic skeptics, details theoretical and methodological objections to the skeptics' research, advances a theory of reputation that identifies past actions as a source of private information, and explains my methodology. The third is the empirical section which focuses on the decision-making processes of the North Korean, Soviet, Chinese, and American leaders before and during the Korean War. The

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<sup>1</sup> I define reputation as actions by a state in a previous war or crisis.

fourth addresses counter-arguments. The fifth summarizes the evidence and offers advice to modern makers of strategy.

## 2. THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND ITS SKEPTICS

That statesmen should protect their country's reputation has been conventional wisdom since Thucydides penned *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Writing about the events of fifth century B.C., Thucydides recounts how Athens, concerned with its reputation, dealt with the small island-state of Melos. Athens had requested that Melos pay tribute and submit to Athenian rule. When Melos proposed neutrality instead, the Athenians refused. Melian neutrality, the Athenian envoy explained, "will be argument to our subjects of our weakness" (Thucydides, Strassley, and Crawley, 1996: 352).

Modern scholars and policy analysts also believe in importance of reputation. Schelling's game-theoretic work set the terms of the modern debate over reputation, establishing its theoretical importance and influencing many future scholars and analysts (Schelling, 1960: 29-30, 36-37, 40). For instance, those who believe in the strategic importance of Taiwan to the United States often rest their argument on the significance of Taiwan to America's reputation. These strategists claim that enemies and allies would downgrade America's credibility if the U.S. military did not intervene while China attacked Taiwan (Art, 2008: 276-276; Gons, 2011: 192-193; Rigger, 2011: 191; Rehman, 2013).

Though my paper's theoretical argument and empirical evidence will eventually corroborate this conventional wisdom, I must admit that there has been a fly in the reputation ointment. Two book-length, qualitative treatments of reputation and international security, published by different authors and analyzing different cases, find little support for the conventional belief that reputation plays a role in how leaders assess credibility.

Mercer focuses on a series of pre-World War I crises involving repeated interactions between England, France, Russia, Germany, and Austria over nearly identical issues. Mercer argues that these cases constitute an "easy test" for any theory of deterrence that emphasizes reputation; leaders are most likely to assess credibility based on an enemy's past actions when confronting past enemies over old issues (Mercer, 1996: 11). His search, however, bears no evidence that leaders assess credibility based on past actions. Mercer's findings support his theoretical claim that leaders will attribute an enemy's past decision to back down to "situational" factors and not a state's "disposition." He therefore claims that adversaries who back down do not gain a reputation (Mercer, 1996: 67).

Press, a self-professed one-time "reputation believer" turned skeptic, scours the records of pre-World War II German assessments of French and English credibility, American and British assessments of the Soviets during the Berlin crisis, and American assessments of the Soviets during the Cuban missile crisis only to come to a surprising conclusion: leaders do not calculate their adversary's credibility by extrapolating past actions into the future (Press, 2005: vii). Press reasons that leaders "abandon simple heuristics," e.g. another state's past actions, when "faced with momentous decisions" (Press, 2004: 139). Instead, Press argues for "current calculus" theory: decision-makers judge the credibility of an enemy's threat by assessing the balance of power and the interests at stake in a given crisis (Press, 2004: 138).

### 3. A CRITIQUE OF THE SKEPTICS AND A NEW APPROACH

Was Thucydides wrong? I argue no. And others agree. In fact, there is a small body of work that seeks to restore, at least partially, the previous importance attached to reputation (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015; Henry, 2014). Yarhi-Milo and Weisiger use the Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset to test a reputation-based theory of deterrence. Their central finding is striking: a state that has yielded in a dispute in the previous year is 2.5 times more likely to be challenged in the future than is a country that has not yielded in the past ten years, even after controlling for military capabilities, regime type, alliances, and other relevant covariates (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015: 22). Furthermore, even states not involved in the original conflict in which one state backed down become more likely to challenge a state that has recently yielded (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015: 26). Finally, their findings also suggest that states that yield in regards to a given issue, e.g. territorial disputes, are more likely to experience future challenges on that same type of issue (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015: 26-27).

#### **3.1 Methodological and Theoretical Limitations of Previous Research**

This small resurgence relies on three critiques of the skeptics' research agenda. Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo identified the first and second (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015). First, previous research on reputation implicitly assumes that leaders ignore past actions when assessing the military power or foreign policy interests of an enemy (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015: 8). But why would an adversary choose to ignore this disclosure of private information? Yielding in an international crisis provides information to adversaries and allies about a state's self-assessment of military power and the strength of its interests engaged.

Second, researchers have tended to focus on "crisis" deterrence, the period of elevated tensions between two states before or during a larger conflict, neglecting cases where an adversary has yet to initiate a crisis. This latter type of case, "general" deterrence, promises to be more fruitful in a search for qualitative evidence of reputation's effect. This is because leaders have likely already factored a state's past actions, or "reputation," into its assessment of that state's credibility during a crisis (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015: 478). Dafoe, Renshon and Huth agree that the problem of "unspoken assumptions" complicates a researcher's hunt for evidence of reputation. They argue that "common knowledge" and "shared beliefs...are rarely stated outright," that "the reputation and status of a state are likely to be commonly known at the beginning of the crisis," and that therefore evidence in favor of reputation's importance will be slighted in the historical record (Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, 2014: 385). This insight suggests that a researcher should examine the period before a crisis when leaders are openly debating the credibility of an adversary.

Third, there are weaknesses in the theoretical explanations that Mercer and Press offer to explain their counter-intuitive findings. Mercer theorizes that enemies cannot gain a reputation for irresolution because leaders attribute an enemy's backing down to "situational" factors. This logic overlooks that a "situation" might, in the realm of international politics, span the months of a tense crisis or the entirety of a simmering international rivalry, times in which credibility is paramount. That leaders attribute backing down to "situational" factors should therefore provide cold comfort (Press, 2007). Press takes a different theoretical tack. He argues that leaders abandon "simple heuristics" like a state's past actions when

calculating the credibility of an enemy during a crisis. He fails to explain, though, why a state's past actions are a "simple" heuristic. Neither do the two psychology studies he relies on to bolster this theoretical inference explain why past actions can be categorized as simple information (Chaiken, 1980; Schwarz, 2002). Without this explanation the "simple heuristics" theory cannot explain his findings.

Yarhi-Milo and Weisiger's research also contains a noticeable shortcoming: no qualitative evidence about causal mechanisms. Despite robust statistical findings, these researchers do not present historical evidence of a leader considering an adversary's past actions when calculating credibility. An in-depth, historical case would shed light on the "black box" of their statistical findings and potentially bolster the case for reputation's importance. This paper aims to do just that.

### 3.2 A Private Information Theory of Past Actions and Reputation

Press holds that leaders assess their enemy's military power and diplomatic resolve by solely evaluating their enemy's military forces and the diplomatic behavior of their adversary. He contends that leaders therefore do not rely on their enemy's past actions when estimating their adversary's military power and resolve.<sup>2</sup> These methods, though, are less-than-satisfying to foreign policy leaders. Estimating another state's military power is fraught with uncertainty. Because there are many factors that determine combat outcomes and because combat is a relatively rare phenomenon, leaders are likely to believe that military assessments that focus on the so-called military balance actually provide precious little information about the likely outcome of a crisis or war (Marshall, 1966). Similarly, another state's recent diplomatic behavior will similarly prove frustrating to leaders engaged in determining the resolve of an enemy. This is because leaders will view much of their adversary's diplomacy as "cheap talk"—claims that are not costly to the enemy and therefore lack credibility. Statesmen will worry, in other words, that their enemies have incentives to lie (Fearon, 1995). Diplomatic behavior could therefore be not only uninformative but deceptive.

The inadequacy of these methods forces leaders to turn to past behavior to gauge their enemy. An enemy's past actions in crises and wars reveal private information about how the adversary views its own military power and diplomatic stakes.<sup>3</sup> To borrow an analogy from poker, past actions are "tells," indicators of the strength of one's hand, which here translates to a self-assessment of military power and resolve. Leaders are interested in how enemies perceive themselves; enemies presumably have some self-knowledge, potentially hidden from outsiders, and use this private information to make decisions about initiating risky international behavior. Leaders can therefore make inferences about an enemy using its past behavior, updating their prior beliefs about the might of an enemy's military forces or the extent to which a competitor views an issue as vital. Leaders will therefore revise their beliefs about a state that has yielded in a previous crisis, inferring that the yielding state's leaders either believe their military inadequate or the stakes too marginal to justify action.

This "private information" theory and Press's current calculus theory generate four hypotheses about the method by which leaders assess their enemy's military power and diplomatic resolve. The first two hypotheses, borrowed from current calculus theory, place

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<sup>2</sup> Resolve refers to the stakes involved in a given crisis or war. A highly resolved state perceives its stakes in a given crisis as significant.

<sup>3</sup> This proposed theory is inspired by the scholarship of Yarhi-Milo and Weisiger.

primary importance on the contemporaneous information leaders can gather on the other state's military and diplomatic positions. The military calculations hypothesis predicts that a leader trying to estimate an enemy's military power will focus on current factors: counts of troops and weapons, the technical proficiency of the enemy's weapons, the level of training, and the geography over which operations would unfold. The strength of interest hypothesis predicts that leaders will focus on current diplomatic behavior and statements to estimate the enemy's diplomatic resolve, that is, the perceived stakes involved. Press's current calculus theory claims that these two variables wholly explain how states predict adversary behavior; leaders should use only arguments about a state's *current* military power and diplomatic resolve when evaluating their enemy (Press, 2005).

The next two hypotheses integrate past actions with the previous two hypotheses; these hypotheses are the novel contribution of Yarhi-Milo and Weisiger's research and contradict the theoretical claims of Press's current calculus theory (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015). These hypotheses highlight the role that past actions play in providing private information to adversaries. The reputation for weakness and reputation for indifference hypotheses posit that a state's past actions—its behavior in past crises and wars—will influence how a leader estimates an adversary's military power and level of commitment. The reputation for weakness hypothesis focuses on past actions revealing information about *military capabilities*; the reputation for indifference hypothesis emphasizes past actions revealing information about a state's diplomatic resolve, i.e. its perceived level of interest in a given situation. Of course, distinguishing between statements that support the reputation for weakness and the reputation for indifference hypotheses could be impossible; a leader might cite an enemy's past actions when predicting future behavior but fail to specify whether that past action indicates military weakness or diplomatic fecklessness.

Current calculus theory predicts that only the military calculations and strength of interest hypothesis will find support. The private information theory of reputation holds that the reputation for weakness and reputation for indifference hypotheses will find support.

My methodology is straightforward. Each case study tries to answer the question of what factors leaders consider when measuring the military power and diplomatic resolve of their enemies. In each case I group the type of evidence by hypothesis, linking particular statements to the hypotheses examined in this paper. This research strategy therefore capitalizes on the comparative advantage of historical case studies in assessing causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2004: 348-9). While some readers might view this method as too simple for a modern social science paper, the method fits the task: assessing whether leaders rely on their adversaries reputation when estimating their enemy's military power and resolve. Because reputation skeptics believe that leaders never consider a state's past actions (i.e. its reputation), providing archival evidence that leaders did in fact consider an enemy's past action is sufficient to cast doubt on the central claim of reputation skeptics (Gerring, 2004: 349).

This article tests these hypotheses with four cases from the Korean War. There are three case devoted to the pre-war period in which Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il-Sung considered the American response to an invasion of South Korea. The fourth case study examines U.S. policymakers as they consider the Chinese response to America's crossing of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The Korean War stands out not only for the richness of the historical record but because Jonathan Mercer has recently applied his argument to the Korean War, arguing that reputation played little role in that conflict (Mercer, 2013). I meet this argument on historical ground chosen by a skeptic of reputation to demonstrate the strength of the reputation for weakness and reputation for indifference hypotheses. The three pre-war case

studies also overcome the unspoken assumptions problem by investigating the perceptions of Kim Il-Sung, Stalin, and Mao (and their advisers) before their attitudes had crystallized into shared beliefs. This case intentionally tests the prediction by Yarhi-Milo and Weisiger and Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth that qualitative evidence for reputation will be more easily discoverable before a crisis starts (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015: 478; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, 2014: 385). Because Kim Il-Sung, Stalin, and Mao initiated a surprise attack on South Korea, there was never a “crisis” before the invasion. The pre-war cases are therefore methodologically ideal to test for qualitative evidence of reputation.

#### 4. HISTORICAL CASE STUDIES

##### 4.1 Case One: Kim Il Sung and The Invasion of South Korea

The leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Kim Il-Sung, desired, above all else, the unification of Korea in 1949-50. He spent these two years in a type of shuttle diplomacy, brokering not peace, but war, to be fought over control of the Korean peninsula. In these negotiations he revealed his views on American military power and resolve. As it turns out, Kim Il-Sung and other high-level North Korean officials did not fear American intervention, because, in their worldview, a mere “civil war” could not lead to armed conflict with the United States.

Kim Il-Sung, inscrutable to American leaders in 1950, appears less so in retrospect, at least when examining the narrow question of what he believed about America’s military strength and diplomatic interests and the likely American response to a unification attempt. USSR diplomatic telegrams report that in the summer of 1949 the North Koreans argued to their communist allies that in the case of “a civil war in Korea” the United States would decline to intervene (Shen, 2013: 122). North Koreans not only viewed American intervention as improbable but actually thought “that Syngman Rhee would capitulate.” A North Korean People’s Army General from the period, Chung Sang Chin, when interviewed, claimed that he and others strongly believed “the Americans would not intervene” (Goncharov, Lewis, and Litai, 1993: 155). The North Koreans, this section argues, believed in U.S. passivity because of military-operational reasons and perceived fecklessness and apathy. This first case study contradicts Press’s current calculus theory; North Korean leaders cite past American actions when estimating U.S. military strength and foreign policy interests. North Korean leaders also relied on assessments of America’s contemporaneous military posture and diplomatic interests.

##### 4.1.1 Past U.S. Actions in the Chinese Civil War

Reputation mattered, as archival evidence attests, since Kim and other North Korean elites based their estimates of U.S. interests on past U.S. actions, specifically its lackluster support for the Chinese Nationalists in the late 1940’s. The record overflows with Chinese, Soviet, and Korean references to U.S. inactivity in the Chinese Civil War. The evidence links North Korean calculations to the reputation for indifference hypothesis.

An NKPA General explains the reasoning that was prevalent before the invasion:

“the Americans would never participate in the war. We were absolutely sure in this... The argument was the following: the Americans had not participated in the civil war in China. America was losing the giant, China, but still had not intervened. America would not

participate in such a *small war* on the Korean peninsula” [Emphasis added] (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 141).

The general clearly points to past U.S. inaction—that the United States “had not participated in the civil war in China”—in order to estimate American resolve. America, according to this logic, showed so little interest in the Chinese Civil War that it could only be expected to show even less interest in this “small war.” A Soviet diplomat who was close to Soviet-North Korean talks claims, “After October 1949, the Koreans were inspired by the Chinese victory and by the fact that the Americans had fled from mainland China completely” (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 138). Kim himself is paraphrased as saying, “They [the United States] left China without fighting; the same approach can be expected in Korea” (Weathersby, 2002). These remarks support the reputation for indifference hypothesis, demonstrating that past U.S. inaction informed North Korean estimates of American resolve in a future conflict.

#### 4.1.2 *The Role of Military Calculations*

Kim Il-Sung amassed his military power over the 1949-50 period, gladly receiving weapons shipments from Stalin and welcoming home tens of thousands of battle-hardened Koreans who had fought in Mao’s army during the Chinese Civil War. In comparison to the poorly trained and ill-equipped army of Syngman Rhee, the president of South Korea, the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) was an impressive war machine. Kim even thought it unnecessary to wait for U.S. troops to leave South Korea before beginning an invasion, believing that North Korea, with the aid of Stalin, could overcome whatever the resistance of the capitalist world (Stueck, 2004: 70). Once the United States did withdraw its troops in summer 1949, Kim Il-Sung likely appraised the military balance as even more tilted in the NKPA’s favor, suggesting to Stalin that he share this favorable assessment in the wake of U.S. withdrawal (Stueck, 2004: 70). Kim Il-Sung also counted among North Korea’s advantages a strong guerilla presence in the South, which would erupt into a “major uprising” if he invaded South Korea (Weathersby, 2002). He calculated, “200,000 South Korean communist party members would join the fight and South Korean partisans would aid the People’s Army” (Shen, 2013: 122). Additionally, Kim also likely counted on the deterrent effect of the Soviet-Chinese alliance to hold the Americans at bay (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 142).

Kim, after tabulating these advantages, arrived at a conclusion that would eventually produce an invasion: a North Korean attack would result in “victory within days” (Shen, 2013: 122). Kim predicted that the aggregate advantages of the North would allow a lightning victory, a Korean *blitzkrieg*, and the United States had no part in this calculation. According to Kim Il-Sung’s interpreter, who was present in Spring 1950 when Kim met with Stalin, Kim justified his belief in U.S. inaction by positing, “the United States would have no time to prepare” (Shen, 2013: 122). Kim, then, rested his argument largely on a military assessment: North Korean forces were strong; Southern supporters would rise up in rebellion against the Rhee government; and the Americans, even if they desired to intervene, faced a *fait accompli*. The weight of available historical evidence therefore suggests that military calculations loomed large in Kim Il-Sung’s calculus when evaluating possible American military intervention.

This section warrants a small, but important, cautionary note. The reader should know that the mass of evidence presented above can be traced to the many conversations and telegrams between Stalin and Kim from Spring 1949 to Summer 1950. These interactions

were part of the shuttle diplomacy in which Kim tried to convince Stalin of the merits of invading South Korea, which suggests to the author that Kim likely crafted his arguments for Stalin's consumption, proposing rationales for war that would appease Stalin's skepticism. Given that Kim Il-Sung might only have advanced these arguments to convince Stalin, the actual importance of military calculations to Kim Il-Sung is open to question. Without the opening of the North Korean archives, we must rely on Chinese and Russian sources, which will inevitably reflect North Korean preferences through the prism of these countries' relationships with North Korea.

#### *4.1.3 Strength of Interest Hypothesis*

The evidence provides only a modicum of support for the "strength of interest" hypothesis—that the United States insufficiently demarcated the true extent of its national interests. A single confirming statement from a then-senior North Korea official provides the sole piece of evidence. He recalls that after the infamous Truman and Acheson speeches of January 1950, Kim "was convinced that the U.S. would not enter the Korean war" (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 142). Despite the plausibility of this claim, we should be skeptical of memories recollected forty years after the fact, especially memories that are consistent with popular narratives that could have seeped into the unconscious of first-hand observers (Loftus, 2005: 361-366).

#### *4.1.4 Case One Summary*

Press's current calculus theory takes its first blow in this section. Current calculus theory predicts that leaders will never use their enemy's past actions when calculating their enemy's military power and diplomatic resolve. The private information theory of reputation, however, predicts that leaders will indeed use their enemy's past action when assessing their enemy. North Korean leaders clearly did use American inaction in the Chinese civil war to gauge American diplomatic interests in the international politics of East Asia, lending support to the reputation for indifference hypothesis. Of course, current calculus theory correctly predicted that North Korean leaders would also assess the contemporary military balance and the diplomatic actions of the United States.

## **4.2 Case Two: Stalin Ponders War**

Joseph Stalin, in the setting of early Cold War Asian politics, played the role of the Communist godfather, in contrast to Kim Il-Sung, who occupied the position of supplicant. No matter how determined Kim was to reunite the Koreas, because of North Korean dependence on Soviet aid, both economic and military, the ultimate decision rested on Stalin, and also Mao, who will be covered in the next section. Stalin coolly calculated the balance sheet for war, at first cautioning Kim against any rash action, but, eventually, supplying the war matériel and the approval necessary for an invasion. The eventual endorsement of Kim's plan was, at least partially, predicated on Stalin's views about the likelihood of American intervention. Stalin gradually altered his expectations from definite American entrance to unlikely but possible entrance.

Shen Zhihua argues, "If Stalin had thought the Soviet decision would lead to U.S. intervention in Korea, things likely would have turned out completely differently" (Shen, 2013: 121). In the spring of 1950, available evidence illuminates a change in Stalin's thinking; "a changed international situation," in Stalin's cryptic words, now allowed for a

North Korean invasion, and presumably a changed view of American involvement underpinned this new “international situation” (Shen, 2013: 121). But before this transformation, Stalin and his subordinates had consistently displayed extreme caution in predicting the American response. Terentii Shtykov, the Soviet Ambassador to North Korea, worried that the United States “might use the occasion of a major North Korean offensive to launch a major international campaign against the USSR” (Christensen, 2011: 49). Lee Jang Jo, then the North Korean Ambassador to the Soviet Union, has also revealed that Stalin worried about American intervention (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 139). Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Defense Minister Nikolai Bulganin also fretted that America, to borrow Khrushchev’s phrase, might “jump in,” writing that “the Americans will certainly move their troops into South Korea” (Stueck, 2004: 36; Weathersby, 2002: 15). What explains Stalin’s calculations, both in his pre-January 1950 cautious phase and his later more risk-acceptant phase? His explanation of American behavior rested largely on the military balance. Contrary to current calculus theory, however, Stalin also employed arguments about American resolve and about how America’s past actions indicated future weakness. Stalin clearly viewed past American actions as revelations of private information about American military weakness.

#### *4.2.1 Stalin’s Military Calculations*

That military calculations can explain both Stalin’s early caution and his 1950 approval of Kim’s attack suggests the centrality of military considerations in Stalin’s thinking. His initial reticence can be traced to the continued presence of American troops in South Korea, while his later warming to Kim’s invasion plan can be attributed to a heady assessment of the invasion’s prospects and a belief in the deterrent effects of atomic weapons.

When Kim first tried to sell Stalin on Korean unification in the spring of 1949, Stalin balked, citing, among other reasons, the presence of American troops in the South (Weathersby, 2002). Even the withdrawal of American troops did not fully alleviate Soviet concerns about American intervention; Shtykov, in fall of 1949, warned Stalin that a North Korean strike might result in American interference, “not only by supplying the South with weapons and ammunition, but also by sending Japanese troops to its [South Korea’s] support” (Weathersby, 2002: 6-7). The Politburo, the central governing body of the Soviet Union, also called for caution in response to Kim’s request for assistance. Fearful that an invasion might stall and provide an opportunity for the United States to enter the conflict, the Politburo cautioned against military action by the North (Weathersby, 1995: 8). The Soviet government, additionally, did not share, at least in 1949, Kim’s assessment of the potential for a lightning-fast victory; Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Defense Minister Nikolai Bulganin, in a memo to Stalin about Kim’s unification proposals, flatly declared that Kim Il- Sung “cannot even defeat the South Korean arm” (Weathersby, 2002: 7-8). Despite the widespread Soviet caution seen in 1949, a host of developments altered Stalin’s calculations over the winter of 1949-50, culminating in Stalin’s late January 1950 approval of Kim’s plan to reunify Korea.

What tipped the scales in Kim’s favor? While we cannot place exact weights on each component of the decision, we can surmise that a quick victory mindset and the Soviet’s atomic breakout, among other factors, contributed to Stalin’s approval. Sergei Goncharov *et al.* seize on a key Soviet decision that provides evidence of this belief in the possibility of a lightning victory by Kim. The invasion battle plan, which was initially drafted by the Soviet military, foresaw the occupation of Seoul within four days of combat, a widespread uprising

in the South, and a total victory within a month (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 152). In the mind of Stalin, this plan survived contact with the enemy by avoiding contact in the first place. Victory had to be swift, so that, in Stalin's own words, the Americans lacked "time to put up a strong resistance and to mobilize international support" (Stueck, 2004: 74).

The end of the American nuclear monopoly also freed Stalin's hand. Stalin viewed the United States as "more hesitant to challenge the Communists in Asia" after the USSR acquired the nuclear bomb in late 1949 (Weathersby, 2002: 11). This American hesitancy, according to Stalin, was only compounded by the Sino-Soviet Treaty, recently signed, which demonstrated the strength of the Communist bloc, thereby deterring the United States from interference in mainland affairs (Weathersby, 2002: 11). Stalin gambled on military grounds that the United States would avoid a fight in a South Korea, but his calculations were not solely military.

#### *4.2.2 America's Damaged Reputation*

Stalin, like Kim Il-Sung, also viewed America's response to the Chinese Civil War as evidence of American weakness. That Stalin used America's reputation to predict the American response to a North Korean unification attempt hangs on a key quotation—Stalin proclaiming that the Chinese Civil War "has proved the strength of Asian revolutionaries, and shown the weakness of Asian reactionaries and their mentors in the West, in America. Americans left China and did not dare to challenge the new Chinese authorities militarily" (Weathersby, 2002: 11). Stalin references a past U.S. action, the United States "leaving" China, and then claims that such inaction demonstrates the "weakness" of America. Stalin finally claims that such American inaction is "psychologically important," all in the context of a spring 1950 conversation with Kim-Il Sung in which Kim and Stalin are consummating the decision to invade South Korea (Stueck, 2004: 73). That Stalin used American past actions to estimate America's military power, given the evidence above, appears undeniable.

#### *4.2.3 America Sends Mixed Signals*

Before the U.S. troop withdrawal and prior to the infamous Acheson and Truman speeches of January 1950, Stalin consistently cautioned Kim against unification because of clear American signals—a U.S. troop presence and the perceived sanctity of the 38th parallel suggested a strong American interest in the status quo. After the withdrawal and the Truman and Acheson speeches, though, Stalin changed his opinion and began to doubt America's commitment to South Korea.

The U.S. presence in South Korea originally functioned as a trip-wire, signaling to friend and foe alike a tangible commitment to South Korea. Stalin explicitly recognized that American troops nearly guaranteed American "interference" in the case of conflict (Stueck, 2004: 112). Shtykov, the Soviet Ambassador to North Korea, also focused on American signaling, stating, that because "South Korea has been recognized by the USA and other countries," the United States would not sit idly by in the face of North Korean aggression (Weathersby, 2002: 6-7). Stalin, according to William Stueck, further feared that the *de facto* agreement between the USSR and the United States on the 38th parallel meant that any North Korean violation of that boundary would provoke an American response, since Americans would view a breach of the parallel as evidence of Soviet perfidy (Stueck, 2004: 70).

Stalin then dramatically switched his view on America's commitment when U.S. signaling changed. After Truman's Taiwan speech and especially after Acheson's defense peri-

meter speech, which drew an East Asian defense perimeter that left the Korean peninsula *outside* the perimeter, Stalin no longer saw evidence of clear American signaling, but, instead, saw evidence that America had signaled a notable lack of interest in Korean affairs (Shen, 2013: 122). To prove that Stalin perceived a switch in American signaling, scholars refer to Stalin's oft-quoted April 1950 remark that "the prevailing [American] mood is not to interfere," which he attributed to unspecified "information coming from the United States" (Stueck, 2004: 73). While what "information" Stalin was referring to remains unclear, circumstantial evidence permits informed speculation that Stalin had listened to the Truman speech with keen interest and had obtained a copy of NSC-48, a closely held American document that had excluded Korea from the American defense perimeter (Shen, 2013: 122; Weathersby, 2002: 1). American signaling therefore both deterred Stalin, protecting South Korea, and, eventually, encouraged Stalin, when American pronouncements signaled a lack of U.S. interest in the fate of Korea.

#### 4.2.4 Case Two Summary

Press's current calculus again mis-predicts a key aspect of this case. Stalin singled out past American actions when appraising American military power. In accordance with the logic of the reputation for weakness hypothesis, past American actions provided private information to Stalin about America's martial strength and diplomatic interests. Military calculations and diplomatic actions nonetheless also figured prominently in Stalin's thinking, which bolsters current calculus theory's emphasis on military power and diplomatic resolve.

### 4.3 Case Three: Mao, The United States, and a "Small Piece of Territory"

The People's Republic of China (PRC), which features prominently in the combat history of the Korean War, until recently occupied a peripheral role in the lead-up to the Korean War. Conventional historiography describes Mao as an accomplice who was dragged into the Korean War upon America's counterattack. Mao, in this narrative, gave his approval to Kim Il-Sung for Kim's invasion of South Korea, but the approval was given unwillingly, since Mao viewed Kim's "request" as a *fait accompli*. Recent research, however, has recast Mao as a key figure in the pre-Korean War buildup, wielding veto power over Kim's bellicose plans (Christensen, 2011). From this research, we can glean that Mao actually shared a key assumption with Kim and Stalin—that the United States was unlikely to intervene—and that the Chinese perception of American indifference and weakness can account for Mao's endorsement of Kim's plan. Current calculus theory outperforms its competitor in this case.

#### 4.3.1 Limited American Interests

The paper trail from early 1950 indicates that Mao Zedong believed American interests too insignificant to justify an American intervention. When discussing a possible invasion with Kim, Mao reportedly said that United States would not "launch World War III over such a small piece of territory" (Christensen, 2011: 58). Even though this statement should be treated with caution, since it was reported by North Korean diplomats seeking to downplay any Chinese concerns to the Soviets, the "small piece of territory" addendum bears repeating, especially since this statement by Mao dovetails with another: "the USA, perhaps, would not be involved, because this was an internal question that would be solved by the Korean people themselves" (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 143). The scope of the conflict in

Korea therefore, according to Mao, would not concern Americans. American non-intervention, then, was assured, on the grounds that the U.S. stakes were too small.

#### *4.3.2 Chinese Views of America's Military*

Mao believed a theory of warfare that denigrated America's military, which explains his belief that North Korea (and later China) could defeat the American superpower. In particular, Mao believed that a determined army of men could defeat even the most technologically advanced enemy (Twomey, 2010). One scholar has called this system of beliefs "military romanticism (Zhang, 1995). This belief stemmed from the long Communist fight against both the Nationalists and Japan. The Communist success convinced Mao that an audacious weaker power could defeat materially powerful enemies, even the United States (Kennedy, 2013: 17). "We [the Chinese] have experienced decades of war," Mao once boasted "Didn't we beat enemies with superior equipment in all of them" (Kennedy, 2013: 34).

#### *4.3.3 Case Three Summary*

This case conforms to the predictions of current calculus theory. Mao did factor in current military and diplomatic calculations. There is no historical evidence that he focused on past U.S. actions.

### **4.4 Case Four: The Truman Administration Eyes China**

From June 25<sup>th</sup> 1950, the day North Korean tanks first rumbled across the 38th parallel, to the Chinese counter-intervention of the late fall, the Truman administration vigorously debated possible Chinese reactions to U.S. fighting. The administration, relying on assessments of a favorable military balance and China's non-response to American actions, eventually decided that China would sit the Korean War out. In this section I document American calculations about Chinese military power and resolve. Current calculus theory fails its fourth test in a row. American decision-makers incorporated recent Chinese actions into their assessments of Chinese power and interests.

#### *4.4.1 Will China Pull Others' Chestnuts Out of the Fire?*

Opinions on how China would react to the U.S. crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel varied widely within the administration. Both John Foster Dulles and Dean Acheson erred on the side of caution, warning against facile claims of Chinese indifference. Acheson claimed the United States would be "lucky" if the Chinese did not intervene (FRUS, Fourth Meeting: 746). Dulles echoed this worry in a September memo and also even included the Soviets as potential combatants, writing:

"We cannot know whether it will be possible to unify Korea by United Nations action localized to Korea. That would involve an extension the Soviet Union would regard as US influence...into areas very close to Port Arthur and Vladivostok...Any effort which seemed to imply this result might be met by Chinese Communist and Soviet force" (FRUS, Dulles: 751; Zhang, 1992: 81).

Not all voices counseled caution. A September 1950 National Security Council report about the course of the war concluded that China would not enter the fight (Goncharov *et al.*, 1993: 169). The U.S. Ambassador to India concurred, citing information from K.M. Pannikar,

the Indian Ambassador to Beijing (FRUS, Henderson: 742). The U.S. General Consul to Hong Kong felt similarly, since he had intelligence that Zhou Enlai, Beijing's Minister of Foreign Affairs, had stated that China would not intervene unless attacked (FRUS, Wilkinson: 765). While these diplomats expressed skepticism towards a direct Chinese response, MacArthur, then the Commander of United Nations forces, expressly rejected the possibility of Chinese intervention (Stueck, 2004: 112). When the Western forces eventually crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the dominant perspective on Chinese reactions was closer to that of MacArthur's than Dulles's.

#### *4.4.2 Why Chinese Weakness Precluded Chinese Involvement*

MacArthur also thought, however, that even if China did intervene, American forces would trounce their ill-equipped foes, owing in large part to American airpower (Stueck, 2004: 112). Such a calculation, largely military in nature, accounts for much, though not all, of the force behind the American conviction that China would not intervene. To American observers, China's technological inferiority and its apparent lack of military preparations ineluctably led to the conclusion that Chinese intervention would be "sheer madness" (Zhang, 1992: 84).

The Americans and Chinese saw military power through wildly different lenses, which lulled the Americans into a false sense of security (Twomey, 2010). American policymakers belittled the Chinese military, as seen in an American intelligence report that "Communist Chinese forces had been primarily based on hit-and-run guerilla tactics, and that their soldiers had never met with a well-trained force with high morale equipped with modern weapons" (Zhang, 1992: 85). Hong Kong Consul General James Wilkinson seconded such an assessment. The Chinese, Wilkinson argued, will be "unable to cope with UN airpower" (Zhang, 1992: 86). In short, Americans believed Chinese military weakness precluded Chinese entrance into the war (Christensen, 1996: 151).

Furthermore, American policymakers viewed the perceived lack of Chinese military preparation as evidence that China would not intervene. The American Ambassador to India reported that the Chinese were not even preparing air defenses over the capital city, Beijing, let alone other military measures that would necessarily foreshadow a Chinese entrance into the Korean War (FRUS, Henderson: 742). Another high level American meeting also noted the lack of civilian precaution in major Chinese cities, interpreting such inaction as revealing of benign Chinese intentions (FRUS, Austin: 760). Military calculations therefore led the United States policymakers to predict Chinese acquiescence.

#### *4.4.3 Limited Chinese Interests*

American policymakers viewed Mao's China as not only militarily frail but as strategically disinclined to intervene. Dean Acheson, James Wilkinson, and other government figures believed many countervailing forces discouraged Chinese intervention. An ailing economy, a rivalry with the Soviets, and limited defensive objectives would, according to American thinking, keep the People's Liberation Army at bay and out of the Korean conflict.

Wilkinson cabled Washington with a report that the Chinese focus on reconstruction in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War meant Mao would avoid a fight in Korea (FRUS, Wilkinson: 765). A CIA analysis concurred, pointing to both domestic strains on the economy that war would impose but also the threat of internal problems should a Chinese intervention fail (Zhang, 1992: 84-85). Dean Acheson also speculated that Chinese interests might not be sufficient to justify an intervention, since "their [the Chinese] great problem is

with Soviet domination along their northern border” (Zhang, 1992: 84). George Kennan agreed with Acheson, but emphasized not rivalry, but lack of cooperation. Since there existed no evidence that Mao and Stalin had concluded an agreement on Korea, Kennan believed Mao would be loath to commit troops against American forces (Zhang, 1992: 84). Finally, Chinese objectives were limited, even if their interests were broader—the Joint Chiefs of Staff determined that Chinese objectives were the safeguarding of the Chinese border and guarding of nearby power complexes (Cohen and Gooch, 2006: 170). Chinese intervention, therefore, was extremely unlikely given the limited stakes that American officials believed China had in a Korean conflict.

#### *4.4.4 Military Signaling and Reputation*

The American calculation that the PRC would not intervene flowed from one last American perception: that the prime chance for Chinese intervention had passed, which indicated that China had declined to intervene, which signaled that Mao either thought China too weak or Korea too insignificant to justify a Chinese intervention (Christensen, 2011: 21). The lack of Chinese response both during the American intervention and operations at Pusan and after the American landing at Inchon indicated to American policymakers that China would not intervene. Therefore, as predicted by the logic of past actions theory, previous Chinese decisions revealed private information to the Americans—that China either lacked sufficient military power or a large enough national interest.

A report from MacArthur’s intelligence officer offers strong affirmative evidence. The intelligence officer wrote, “The auspicious time for [Chinese] intervention has long since passed” (Twomey, 2010: 109). Similarly a report from John P. Davies of the Policy Planning Staff states that the Chinese had “declined to snatch the chestnut from the fire.” (FRUS, Davies: 753) American officials watched Chinese actions closely after American intervention and when no military significant Chinese reaction occurred, U.S. officials deduced that China would not intervene (Christensen, 2011: 21). What the American policymakers failed to realize was that the uncoordinated Communist alliance and the plodding nature of military preparation meant that China *intended* to intervene, but had not sufficiently laid the groundwork for intervention (Cohen and Gooch, 2006: 171; Christensen, 2011: 28-109) Once again, the evidence does not allow one to adjudicate between the reputation for weakness and reputation for indifference hypotheses.

#### *4.4.5 Case Four Summary*

Current calculus theory receives its final blow here. It mis-predicts the absence of evidence for the importance of past actions, though it correctly identifies current military and diplomatic factors as salient in American decision-making. The competitor theory that conceptualizes past actions as private information, however, correctly predicts that American leaders would interpret a Chinese decision to not intervene as evidence of Chinese military weakness or diplomatic indifference.

## 5. ADDRESSING COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

There are several reasonable objections to this project’s methodology. This section tries to allay these concerns.

First, some readers might worry about a “degrees of freedom” problem: that this project

tests four hypotheses on four cases. This methodological flaw would preclude the project from drawing valid inferences. My intent, however, was not to perform the qualitative equivalent of a regression, determining the independent effect of each independent variable on the outcome. This project's goal was simpler: to answer the question of what factors leaders consider when measuring the military power and diplomatic resolve of their enemies. This approach was meant to test whether the theoretical causal mechanisms of current calculus theory and private information theory are operating as predicted. Reputation skeptics hold an absolutist view that under no circumstances do leaders consider another state's past actions. All my project had to do was enumerate the types of arguments used by leaders during the Korean War when sizing up their enemy. I found evidence that leaders considered military calculations, recent diplomatic behavior, and a state's past actions. This paper's evidence for that last factor, a state's past actions, undermines the claim that leaders do not ever consider an enemy's past actions. That there were four separate hypotheses and only four cases is therefore unimportant.

Second, a critic might also worry about the conceptualization of the dependent variable. My study's outcome was the factors leader consider when measuring the military power and diplomatic resolve of their enemy. Others can rightfully ask why I did not focus on arguably more "important" outcomes such as what sort of behavior a leader predicts of its enemy or breakdowns in deterrence, that is, an actual outcome of international politics. These other outcomes are interesting and worthwhile, but I leave them to other studies. I wanted to test a core element of the reputation skeptics' theoretical chain of logic. Press and Mercer theorize that enemies cannot gain a bad reputation, which means that deterrence will never break down for reasons of reputation, that leaders will not predict an enemy's future behavior on the basis of past actions, and, importantly, that leaders will not use past actions to assess their enemy's military power and resolve. I decided to focus on this last implication because it must theoretically precede the others. If the historical record shows even some consideration of past actions when a leader is calculating an enemy's credibility, then the current calculus theory fails a basic test. After such a failure, and this project tried to demonstrate several, there is no need to move onto other, more "real-world" outcomes.

Third, some readers could believe that this article presents too broad a conception of "past actions." Past research often narrowly defines past actions as explicit threats that a leader then either fulfills or neglects. This paper broadens the definition. I defined past actions as all behavior by a given state in past crises and wars, including decisions to avoid entering a crisis or war. Leaders need not issue explicit threats to gain a reputation in this article's framework. Critics might therefore contend that my argument is tangential to the traditional reputation debate because of the supposedly over-broad definition. These critics miss that my definition actually includes explicit threats, though my cases did not focus on them. Explicit threats, whether unfulfilled or not, are one example of a past action. Furthermore, that the Korean War cases do not define past actions as explicit threats yet still find evidence for reputation suggests that explicit yet unfulfilled threats are even more likely to damage a state's reputation. For instance, the Chinese inaction after U.N. forces crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel would have done even more damage to China's reputation if Mao had previously issued an explicit threat that China would certainly intervene if U.N. forces crossed into North Korea. That China's reputation was damaged anyway suggests the influence of all past actions, whether an explicit threat was issued or not.

Fourth, even a reader who concedes that I present evidence of leaders employing an enemy's past actions to judge credibility might dispute my proposed causal mechanism. I

suggest that leaders view past actions as a source of “private information,” information previously known only by the enemy that then provides a valuable window into how the enemy perceives its own military power and how the enemy assesses the extent of its diplomatic interests. Leaders then fold this no-longer-private information into their estimate of the enemy. This reader would correctly point out that this process is mostly unobservable. My defense is two-fold. First, the Truman case study does show leaders in real-time updating their beliefs about Chinese power and resolve as China appeared to decline to intervene after U.N. forces crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. This is exactly my theoretical claim. The other cases, though, provide little direct insight into this causal logic. Second, a theory with “unobservables” is nearly a redundant phrasing. Most grand theories of international relations have unobservables. My more modest theory is no exception. In principle, I support developing theories that can be falsified, including by attempting to observe the implications of a theory. Some implications are difficult to discern, however. Leaders updating their beliefs when they acquire private information is such an implication. Future case study researchers should scrutinize their cases for this logic.

Fifth, a reader might wonder how strong a theory of reputation my cases and evidence support. Past scholars have sought to debunk “strong” theories of reputation—that past irresolution in one region with a particular set of actors will lead different actors in a different region to doubt that same state’s future credibility. This paper took the opposite approach. I have argued for a “weak” theory of reputation. The case studies from the Korean War all involve the same actors in the same geographic region interacting over a short time period. Reputation matters, but this evidence from the Korean War can only attest to past actions mattering within a short time-frame over similar issues in the same region. Leaders should worry about their reputation, but they need not hyperventilate.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Despite these caveats, the argument within still mounts a challenge to the policy prescriptions of reputation skeptics, who maintain that a leader need only to amass military strength and demarcate clear, credible red lines in order to issue credible threats. The evidence from the Korean War, summarized in table 2, supports Mercer’s emphasis on military power and resolve, but reveals a missing element: past actions. Standing firm in past crises can signal the strength of a state’s military and the importance of a particular commitment, revealing otherwise private information. The skeptics therefore underestimate the costs of backing down in past crises.

Past researchers failed to find evidence in support of reputation because they focused their analytical gaze solely on crises, falling into the “unspoken assumptions” trap. In a crisis leaders have likely already calculated in another state’s past actions into their estimates of that state’s military strength and resolve. This paper therefore selected three pre-crisis cases and a fourth crisis case, the Truman Administration’s assessment of China. Two of the three pre-crisis cases contained evidence that leaders use past actions to assess their enemy. The crisis case, surprisingly, also revealed evidence of leaders linking past actions to current estimates of the enemy.

Future researchers have many more cases to unpack, theories to design, and policy problems to attack. Those interested in additional historical case studies should head for the archives. Historical research with primary sources can help shed light on the causal

**Table 2.** Summary of Results from Case Studies

Theories	Current Calculus Theory		Past Actions as Private Information	
	<i>Military Calculations</i>	<i>Strength of Interest</i>	<i>Reputation for Weakness</i>	<i>Reputation for Indifference</i>
Case 1: Kim Il-Sung	×	×		×
Case 2: Stalin	×	×	×	
Case 3: Mao	×	×		
Case 4: Truman	×	×		×*

\* Indicates that the evidence could not differentiate between two hypotheses.

mechanisms underlying the theory presented in this article. Saddam Hussein's decision-making before the First Gulf War, for instance, could be a potential case study for the enterprising researcher willing to examine the records of the Conflict Records Research Center, a U.S. National Defense University archival project that maintains documents captured during the Second Gulf War. Recent research reveals that Saddam Hussein delivered a speech prior to invading Kuwait in which he said, "we saw that the United States, as a superpower, departed Lebanon immediately when some Marines were killed" (Woods, 2008: 52). This quotation is suggestive but requires further investigation.

Scholars must also begin theorizing about reputation in a more detailed way. Does a state, a regime, or a leader gain a reputation? How long does a reputation last? Does a reputation gained on one issue carry over to vastly different issues? Can a state repair a damaged reputation?

Finally, researchers engaged in reputation research owe it to diplomats and strategists to incorporate their findings into advice on the conduct of foreign affairs. For example, my findings suggest that a state's past actions do inform the decision-making of adversaries, revealing private information about a state's military strength and foreign policy interests. The implication, to take one example, is that U.S. diplomats should therefore calculate this cost into any deliberation over U.S. policy towards Taiwan. An American decision to stay neutral in a China-Taiwan conflict could damage America's reputation in the eyes of China's leadership. Chinese leaders could interpret such a decision as evidence that either the American military has become too weak to defend what were previously U.S. interests in the Pacific or that U.S. diplomatic priorities have changed. Chinese leaders might become less deterred by U.S. security guarantees to Japan or the Philippines and more willing to assert Chinese interests. In short, reputation matters.

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