Information Structures and Balancing Avoidance in Limited Warfare

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The propensity for states to "balance" is a central dynamic in international relations and is perhaps the most intensely studied phenomenon in IR theory.[1] Despite the attention that balancing has received in the literature however, there remains a significant lacunae requiring investigation: the recurrent attempts by states to *avoid* balancing by others in the international system. This omission in the literature is surprising as most scholars agree that when balanced against, a state suffers a decrease in relative power, and as a result, is less able to ensure its security and attain critical foreign policy objectives. Simply put, just as it is in the interests of states to balance against current or future opponents, so too is it in the interests of states to avoid balancing by others.

When attempting to understand patterns of behavior that have received only cursory attention by the field, it is useful to focus on their extreme manifestations, where challenges to national security are immediate and calculations on the use of force are most evident. As such, this paper examines the ability of states to avoid hostile military balancing in the domain of limited warfare. In the Crimean and Korean wars, for example, neither Russia nor the United States desired military intervention by other great powers as they waged war against their respective targets. Yet, neither was able to attain this objective and suffered greatly as a consequence.[2] Alternatively, the two wars of German Unification, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, and the Vietnam War are examples of limited wars wherein the attacker, posing a manifest

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[1] On balances of power see, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5th ed., (New York: Knopf, 1973). On balances of threat, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). On balances of interest, see Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, 19, 1 (Summer 1994).

[2] References to the Korean Ware are noted below. On the Crimean War, see Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), ch. 7; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), ch. 3; David Wetzel, *The Crimean War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

threat to other states in the system, intentionally attempted to prevent hostile balancing by key great powers, and succeeded.[3] These cases demonstrate the while avoiding hostile balancing is an important objective in a limited war, not all attackers have been able to achieve this end. How can states prevent others from balancing against them when they engage in inherently threatening military actions? Specifically, when a state initiates a limited war against a target, how can that state prevent others from intervening militarily against it?

To the extent that avoiding extreme balancing is an objective of an attacking state's strategy, an adequate explanation must incorporate factors related to the outcomes of state interaction and of foreign policy decision making. I make this connection arguing, first, that a state will be able to prevent extreme balancing in a limited war when its military and diplomatic strategies reduce the *intensity* of threat perceived by potential balancers. Limited war strategies are most likely to be effective when they are explicitly designed to defeat the target in a manner that simultaneously reduces the level of threat to relevant international powers. Second, I argue that because a state has to acquire and manage a massive amount of information pertaining to the target and to potential balancers as it crafts and executes its limited war strategy, the strength of an attacking state's *information management capabilities* is critical to producing high quality strategies. This paper introduces a decision making framework focusing on the ability of states to design and implement intricate strategies in a highly competitive environment where information overload is a persistent problem.

[3] References to the Vietnam War are noted below. On the Russo-Turkish war, see William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1992, 295-327; John S. Bushnell, "Miliutin and the Balkan War: Military Reform vs. Military Performance," in *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855-1881*, Ben Eklof, John Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); and George L. Yaney, *The Systematization of Russian Government: Social Evolution in the Domestic Administration of Imperial Russia, 1711-1905* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973). On the Wars of German Unification, see: Smoke, chs. 5-6; David Wetzel, *A Duel of Giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Taylor, *passim*.

Limited war strategies are complex and demanding security policies. They are complex insofar as they require delicate diplomacy, precise military operations, and exact intelligence. They are demanding because concerted and efficient action is required by all of the multiple agencies tasked with implementing specific aspects of the overall effort. The acquisition and dissemination of high quality information among national security agencies is crucial to the prevention of extreme balancing in limited wars. This paper explores the effects of the information management capabilities of states on their ability to implement such thorny security policies. I contend that states with robust information management capabilities will be better able to prevent third party intervention in limited wars, than will states with meager information management capabilities. As will be discussed in depth below, a state with robust information management capabilities is one where top policy makers receive information from a number of different sources, and where information flows relatively freely among national security agencies. In sum, this paper seeks to shed new light on the origins of balancing in limited wars and on the ability of states to achieve security under the yoke of information overload.

Despite the importance of these issues, the extant literature does not provide an adequate explanation for why some states are able to avoid balancing in the context of limited wars. Arguably the most applicable approach to understanding balancing dynamics is "balance of threat theory." Stephen Walt argues that whether a state is perceived as a threat and is balanced against is determined by its aggregate power, perceived intentions, and the nature of the offense-defense balance. A state will see another as a threat the more powerful it is, the more it is perceived to have offensive intentions, and the more effective offensive actions are over defensive actions.[4] Walt's framework, however, provides little analytical leverage when applied to the problem of balancing in limited warfare because an attacker will score highly on all three measures. If the attacker is a great power, then others will have reason for concern simply because great powers tend to have power in reserve to engage multiple adversaries. Because limited wars are wars of power projection, others will likely feel threatened as an attacker's forces used in one theater may be extended to another.[5] Finally, because the attacker is already engaging in hostilities with the target, it is very difficult for the attacker to credibly commit to others its benign intentions. Even if it is possible to convince other powers that its aims are limited in the present, the aims of the attacker may not remain stable especially if significant battlefield opportunities open up in the future.[6] In short, any attacking state is likely to be seen as threat to others in the system; yet, not all attackers pose a threat of sufficient magnitude to induce hostile balancing.

A second approach to understanding balancing dynamics is offered by security dilemma theorists. The critical insight provided by this school is that a state initiating inappropriate or misapplied military policies can induce undesired reactions by an opponent that ultimately reduce the state's security.[7] As Charles Glaser notes, inappropriately applied military strategies ". . . can alter the adversary's need to pursue security by changing the threat to the adversary's

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[4] In his *Origins of Alliances*, Walt argues that threat consists of: aggregate power, perceived intentions, geographic proximity, and offensive capability (pp. 21-26). In *Revolution and War*, Walt combines proximity and offensive capability into the offense-defense balance (ch. 2)—a move consistent with the development of the literature.
[5] This factor will be modified by the nature the offense-defense balance. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), ch. 6; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies*, 4, 4 (Summer 1995); Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, 30, 2 (January 1978); and Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?" *International Security* 22, 4 (Spring 1998).
[6] On the expansion of war aims, see Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies*, 6, 4 (Summer 1997).
[7] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma"; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), ch. 3.

military capability and/or by changing the adversary's understanding of the defender's goals."[8] Thus, security dilemma theorists emphasize the importance of tailoring military and diplomatic policies to appropriately fit the nature and capabilities of a particular opponent.[9] Prior knowledge about the opponent is critical to the chances of success. Knowing whether a state is greedy or not, secure or not, and/or suffering from misperceptions will go a long way towards ensuring that an appropriate strategy is correctly designed and implemented.

The problem, of course, is that determining the intentions and capabilities of an opponent is a particularly difficult undertaking, and states frequently get it wrong. Decades-long debates persist as to whether the Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany were states ideologically driven toward expansion, or whether they were "normal" great powers responding rationally to the dictates of the international system.[10] Additionally, while security dilemma theorists are correct to note the implications of the opponent's type and the degree to which it perceives the world accurately, little attention has been devoted to understanding when the first state itself is likely to have the right information *and how that information influences the strategies that are ultimately adopted.*[11] Finally, although many of the prescriptions offered by security dilemma theorists are

[8] Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics* 44, 4 (July 1992), 498.

[9] Jervis argues that spiral model prescriptions should be implemented if conflict erupts among status quo states, while deterrence model prescriptions should be followed in conflicts where the opponent is an aggressor. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 100-02.

[10] For a pithy discussion of the debate between the "appeasers" and "anti-appeasers" in Britain before World War II, see Ernest R. May, "Conclusion: Capabilities and Proclivities," in *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, Ernest R. May, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 520-21. On the contours of the Cold War debate, see Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 146-47.

[11] Although the issue of accurately determining the intentions and capabilities of others has long been a subject in the literature, far less attention has been devoted to the connection between assessment and strategy design. On accurately determining the intentions of others see the seminal treatment by Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970)**.** Among the most important works in the vast political psychology literature are: Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, 20, 3 (April 1968); Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*; Deborah Welch Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); *Psychology and Deterrence*, Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, eds., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University

well-suited to general questions of foreign military policy, their guidance looses efficacy when applied to intra-war dynamics. In other words, while spiral modelers argue that defensive or cooperative strategies are more likely to lead to favorable outcomes when confronting a status quo state, they are hard pressed to explain how a state might be able to achieve similar results while engaging in hard line strategies.[12]

This paper proceeds in three parts. In the first part, I examine the problem of preventing extreme balancing by states under threat. I argue that in the context of limited warfare, an attacking state that is able to design and implement a strategy that seeks to defeat the target while taking steps to reduce the perceived intensity of threat by other states, will reduce its chances of others intervening against it. In the second part, I sketch out my "information structure" framework and suggest how it may be employed usefully as an analytical tool in cross-case comparisons. In the third section, I compare American decision making prior to and during the Korean and Vietnam wars by utilizing the insights drawn form the information structure framework. In the conclusion, I specify how my approach contributes to both IR theory and sheds light on important policy concerns.

The Problem: Preventing Hostile Balancing in Limited Wars

The argument developed in this paper pertains to the ability of the attacking state to design limited war strategies that accommodate a potential balancer's security interests. As such, it is necessary to understand the conditions under which states engage in increasingly

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Press, 1985). On accurately determining the capabilities of others, see May, *Knowing One's Enemies*; Thomas G. Mahnken, *Uncovering Ways of War: U.S. Intelligence and Foreign Military Innovation, 1918-1941*(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[12] The opposite holds as well, although it is not the subject of this paper. While deterrence modelers argue that offensive or conflictual strategies are more likely to lead to favorable outcomes when confronting an aggressor, they are hard pressed to explain how a state might be able to achieve similar results while engaging in soft line strategies.

hostile balancing behavior. In this section, I focus on how potential balancers are likely to react to others that pose threats of differing intensity. In the following sections, I focus on attacking states and their ability to design limited war strategies that moderate the intensity of threat they pose to others in the system.

Limited wars are outcomes produced by the interaction of three states: the target of aggression, the attacker, and a potential balancer (also referred to as a "defender") that has the means and, potentially, the intention to intervene in the war—the latter two actors being analytically salient. A defining feature of a limited war is the commonality of preferences held by the defender and the attacker to the extent that neither state holds a top preference of direct conflict with the other. In limited wars, the ability for both to realize its top preference is difficult, however, because in addition to the aim of avoiding intervention by the defender, the attacker holds the objective of defeating the target of its aggression. An attacker's limited war strategy will thus entail the military and diplomatic means of achieving both of its objectives. Critical consideration must be given by the attacker to how the means employed in achieving the objective of defeating the target affect the strategic decisions made by the defender. Although a defender would prefer not to intervene in an ongoing limited war, it may become motivated to enter into the conflict if the scale of warfare or the war aims sought by the attacker crosses the defender's level of threat tolerance. For the attacker, in sum, ascertaining the defender's level of threat tolerance is a critical prerequisite to determining how the war against the target should be prosecuted.[13] A failure to account for the defender's sensitivity to threat can induce its intervention and subsequently diminish the attacker's ability to defeat the target.

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[13] The idea that a limited war is a product of strategic interaction is most clearly presented in Smoke, 8-18. 241-45. The notion of firebreaks, or "saliences," and their relationship to the bargaining process was introduced by Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), ch. 3; and *Arms and*

When confronted by a state that initiates a limited war, how will other states select among the various balancing options available? To answer this question, it is necessary to modify Walt's treatment of "threat." I argue that while Walt is correct in his specification of the constituent components of threat, an additional perceptual factor—the "intensity" of threat—needs to be incorporated in order to understand how states assess threat levels over time. A state will assess the intensity of a given threat in terms of its "severity" and its "immediacy." Severity is a function of the ability of an opponent to attack and the likelihood that defeat will result, given attack. For example, as an opponent's aggregate military power grows, so too does its ability to attack. Similarly, the more the opponent's offensive capabilities increase, so too does the opponent's ability to carry the war into different theaters. Furthermore, if the opponent's aggregate power and/or offensive advantage is much higher, the state's ability to prevail in a conflict declines. Immediacy is a function of the perceived time frame under which a given threat is manifest. This time frame is determined, primarily, by the level of hostility of an opponent's intentions. If a state perceives that its opponent is very hostile and is likely to attack in the short run, the immediacy of the threat posed by the opponent increases. Other factors contribute to the immediacy of threat as well. If the state is currently suffering from a window of vulnerability due to an unfavorable balance of aggregate power, or due to the opponent's military strategy and doctrine, then the likelihood of the opponent attacking in the short run increases.[14] In sum, although an attacker will likely be perceived as a threat to a defender when it initiates a limited war, it is the perceived intensity of that threat that will provide the motivation for adopting one balancing strategy over another.

Influence (New Have, Yale University Press, 1966), 131-41, 68. See also Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968).

[14] On window logic, see Van Evera, ch. 4. On connection between quick victory and strategy, see John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 29-30.

Yet, intensity of threat is only one part of the defender's strategic equation. Dale Copeland has argued that, "[f]or any given level of [international] tension at any point in time, leaders will be reluctant to move to harder-line policies."[15] In other words, states are wary of adopting increasingly hostile balancing strategies without undue cause. On the one hand, increasingly hostile balancing—ranging from internal, to external, to the initiation of war—entail increased costs born by the defender. For example, the potential costs of intervening militarily against an attacker in a limited war outstrip the potential costs of forming an alliance with another state. In alliances, states face the possibility that they will lose their autonomy and become entrapped, or forced into undesired conflicts, by more reckless or threatened partners. Alternatively, due to the persistent incentive to buck pass, alliance partners fear abandonment by allies who may be loathe to pay their fair share in confronting an opponent.[16] The potential costs associated with war initiation, on the other hand, include: a defeat in war, a Pyrrhic victory, the loss of relative power vis-à-vis a third state, and the likelihood that through war the state appears threatening to other states. Of course, these potential costs must be evaluated by the likelihood of success of each strategy. Nevertheless, as a state considers moving beyond internal to external to war initiation, it must face the rising costs that each strategy potentially entails.

A second factor inducing reluctance on the part of a defender to adopt increasingly hostile balancing strategies concerns the increasing risk of inducing an undesired war. The risk of war associated with internal balancing is best measured by the security dilemma. If a state elects to bolster its security by further arming itself, it runs the risk of provoking another state into taking the same action. Spirals of hostility can result from the security dilemma, with the end result being a net decrease in security for the state. The security dilemma is also operative

[15] Copeland, 41.
[16] Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, 44, 2 (Spring 1990).

when a state seeks to balance externally. As Glenn Snyder argues, if a state in an alliance confronting another state in an alliance opts to "stand firm" in the face of a threat posed by the other, the result can be a tightening of the opponents alliance and an increase in tension between the alliance blocs.[17] If a state adopts this position *and* increases its own arms, then the state runs the risk of dramatically increasing the probability of war above the level that would result from internal and external balancing alone. Finally, the probability of war is 100 percent for the final balancing strategy. A state adopting war initiation as its balancing option will likely perceive itself to be in an intractable strategic situation.

In order to avoid running the undue risks and paying excessive costs associated with increasingly hostile balancing strategies, a state will prefer to adopt only the balancing strategy that matches the intensity of threat that it is currently facing.[18] Specifically, if a state perceives the intensity of threat to be low—that is, less severe and with a longer time frame—then it will likely adopt only an internal balancing strategy.[19] If the intensity of the threat is moderate—either: longer time frame and severe or shorter time frame and less severe—then the state will balance externally. If the intensity of threat is high—short time frame and a severe threat—then the state will be induced to balance through war initiation. It is possible, of course, for a state to adopt a mixed strategy, but the conditions that permit this are more restrictive than the literature assumes. Mixed strategies are likely only if the threat develops in intensity steadily overtime. If an intense threat emerges as a "bolt from the blue," then we should expect that a state will

[17] Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 198. Snyder refers to this as an "integrative spiral."
[18] John A. Conybeare, "Arms versus Allies: The Capital Structure of Military Enterprise," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 38, 2, (June 1994); James D. Morrow, "Arms versus Allies," *International Organization* 47, 2 (Spring 1993), 208; One of the key motivations for preemptive war is that the perceived time frame for action is dramatically reduced. See Jack Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, 40, 1 (October 1987), 90-92; and Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 188-89.
[19] Under these conditions, the state will still balance because it still faces a threat. It will adopt the least hard line form of balancing, however, because it is not confronted with a particularly high level of intensity.

quickly consider war initiation, even before it has given further internal and external balancing a chance. And, if the threat remains at a low level of intensity, we can expect a state to only balance internally in order to avoid the costs and risks associated with other balancing strategies.

The Limited War Information Burden

The above analysis suggests that the extent to which an attacker can avoid a defender's intervention depends on the quality of its limited war strategy, specifically its ability to design and implement strategies that refrain from posing a highly intensive threat to others in the system. High quality limited war strategies are unavoidably complex and nuanced. They are dedicated to achieving two objectives which can easily become mutually exclusive: defeat of the target and avoidance of intervention by the defender. When combating a target, military strategists prefer operations that stand the greatest chance of defeating the opponent in detail, in the shortest amount of time.[20] In order to avoid intervention by the defender, however, an attacker will likely have to scale back its ultimate war aims, the level at which it prosecutes its military operations, or both, so as to ensure that the defender's level of threat tolerance is not crossed. Thus, high quality limited war strategies are born out of information pertaining not only to the target's military capabilities, but also to the defender's current and possible future intentions.

The problem here is that accurate information about another state's intentions is difficult to come by. The familiar issue of "signals versus noise" in international relations is the primary obstacle facing an attacker in this regard. Typically, critical information about the defender's interests and intentions is buried underneath a mountain of superfluous and misleading

[20] See Jack L. Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). A recent example of this tendency is found in the so-called "Powell Doctrine." See Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 184-88.

information. There are two primary causes of information overload. First, the defender has an incentive to hide from the attacker information pertaining to its interests and capabilities. A defender can obscure this information by withholding what is important, and by issuing misleading signals designed to deceive the attacker.[21] While strategic deception is certainly a problem, it is not necessary to create the problem of information overload. Despite the attention that an attacker is likely to devote to a specific strategic setting when contemplating a limited war, information related to a defender's interests and intentions may arise from other theaters.[22] Moreover, if the attacker is attempting to acquire pertinent information by examining the defender's domestic situation, then it will likely be swamped by irrelevant information intended only for domestic consumption.[23] Finally, as Ernest May notes, the increase in size and function of governments overtime has resulted in a concomitant increase in difficulty of states to accurately assess the intentions of others. Even strictly in the military sphere, the ability to conduct accurate net assessments has become more difficult as states develop more and more independent military services.[24]

The most effective means of reducing the uncertainty associated with a defender's intentions is the diversification of the measures employed by the attacker. David Edelstein has recently suggested that diversified "intelligence portfolios," or the reliance on many possible

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[21] On the issue of private information and the incentives to misrepresent, see James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International* Organization, 49, 3, (Summer, 1993). On the issue of "strategic denial and deception, " see Abram Shulsky, "Elements of Strategic Denial and Deception," and the commentaries by Richards J. Heuer Jr. and Nina Stewart, in *Strategic Denial and Deception: The Twenty-First Century Challenge*, Roy Godson and James J. Wirtz, eds., (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002); and Michael I. Handel, "Intelligence and the Problem of Strategic Surprise," in *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence: Essays in Honor of Michael I. Handel*, Richard K. Betts and Thomas G. Mahnken, eds., (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 9.

[22] Cf. the problem that analysts faced prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. "In 1941, for example, he [the American analyst] was confronted by trumpetings of danger from the Panama Canal and from San Diego, San Francisco, Vancouver, South America, the Caribbean, and the Philippines, to say nothing of a tremendous bulk of danger signals from the Atlantic and European areas." Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 3.

[23] Bernard I. Finel and Kristin M. Lord, "The Surprising Logic of Transparency," *International Studies Quarterly* 43, 2 (June 1999), 320.

[24] May, 527.

sources of information, enable a state to more effectively determine the intentions of an opponent than it would be able to achieve if it relied on only a few such indicators.[25] While consistent portfolios are likely to be rare, the mere fact that a state has diversified its sources of information pertaining to another's intentions will allow the state to reduce the chances that it has drawn incorrect conclusions about its opponent. The bottom line is that while an attacker can never be 100 percent certain how a defender will act in the future (especially the distant future[26]), it is possible for an attacker to reduce the uncertainty in which it operates in the near term. Moreover, the incentives for an attacker to employ multiple sources of information about a defender are strong: knowing that its pre-existing beliefs might be incorrect, and knowing that the stakes are high if it acts on mistaken beliefs, an attacker will be induced to hedge its bets by seeking as much information as possible about the defender.

I have made two primary claims in this section. First, in order to prevent extreme balancing in limited wars, an attacker must convince a defender through its limited war strategy that it does not pose an "intense" threat to the defender's security and interests. Limited war strategies that are well tailored to a defender's intentions and capabilities have a greater chance of preventing hostile balancing. Second, the information burden inherent to limited wars is particularly high, and as such, the ability for an attacker to design and implement high quality limited war will depend on the extent to which an attacker is able to obtain accurate information pertaining to the defender's level of threat tolerance. While an attacker has an incentive to acquire as complete a picture of its potential opponent, its ability to do so, I argue, depends on the strength of its information management capabilities.

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[25] David M. Edelstein, "Managing Uncertainty: Beliefs About Intentions and the Rise of Great Powers," *Security Studies*, 12, 1 (Autumn 2002), 11-12.
[26] May, 535-36.

The Argument: Information Structures and Limited War Strategies

In this section, I argue that an attacker's ability to effectively manage the limited war information burden, and to devise limited war strategies that avoid extreme balancing, is strongly affected by the strength of its information acquisition and management system. Building upon recent advances in the literatures of network analysis, industrial organization, and public policy—a group of scholarship that I label the "information structure framework"—I contend that an attacker will be able to devise effective limited war strategies when its information structure is "robust." Conversely, when its information structure is "truncated," I argue that an attacker will lack the ability to design and implement effective limited war strategies.

An information structure is defined as, "interconnected communications channels for receiving information from the environment, for processing that information to serve specific objectives, and for sending internal and external messages."[27] The function of an information structure is information management—the selection and collection of essential data to provide the information which government agencies need to perform their missions. To a certain extent, a state's information structure (also referred to as a network) is amenable to intentional manipulation. Once created, however, information structures tend to resist significant change. Part of the reason for this rigidity is captured by the familiar saying, "Information is power." A given individual's position of power in an organization is a function of the access she has to information about her own and other agencies. As such, political pressures will be brought to bear whenever information structure design comes under scrutiny.[28] As a result of this

[27] Doris A. Graber, *The Power of Communication: Managing Information in Public Organizations* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2003), 5.

[28] Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: the Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). For a fascinating discussion of the role of the "information arsenal" in Nazi Germany, see Zachary Shore, *What Hitler Knew: The Battle for Information in Nazi Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also, C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

stickiness, at any particular time communication channels, information flows, and inter-agency connections function as structures that will resist substantial alteration in the short-run.

Two dominant features of information structures in the state context deserve attention: hierarchy and division of labor. First in terms of vertical relationships, the higher an individual is in an organization, the more her information demands become diverse, externally oriented, and strategic in nature. The lower an individual is in the hierarchy, information demands become more specific, internally (or task) oriented, and operational or tactical in nature. In functional terms, as an individual moves up in the hierarchy, the more she adopts the role of information processor and disseminator. As opposed to those who are "productive" in the economic sense, higher-ups serve as coordinators of activity at lower levels. Finally, as an individual moves up the hierarchy, the types of uncertainties that she confronts changes. At lower levels, the greatest obstacle to effective performance is "task uncertainty," or the vagaries associated with completing specific jobs under internally derived constraints. At higher levels, task uncertainty is replaced with "environmental uncertainty," or the difficulties in determining how the organization's objectives are being affected by outside actors and influences.[29]

Second, different agencies within a state are tasked with distinct functions and, as such, have unique information demands and processes for satisfying those demands. For example, the basic function of militaries is combat.[30] At any given time, the military confronts a discrete set of opponents on a well-delineated battlefield. While the uncertainties in combat are typically high, they are contained to that environment. The methods and procedures for dealing with the uncertainties inherent to combat are developed strictly by the organization and are modified

[29] On the difference between environmental and task ambiguity, see Duncan J. Watts, *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 268-69; for a related discussion, see William Lazonic, *Business Organization and the Myth of the Market Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 199-200.
[30] See Huntington, Samuel P., *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 11-16.

internally.[31] Thus, when militaries are performing their function, information from other state organs becomes less essential to the completion of their task, defeating the enemy. In other words, militaries are organizations that respond to "local knowledge" and are characterized by closed circles of communication. As Arthur Stinchcombe argues, such organizations tend to develop specific sub-cultures that separate them from the broader organization.[32] While the armed forces confront unique uncertainties through internally derived standard operating procedures, diplomatic organs confront uncertainty of a different type and respond to it in very different ways. The sources of uncertainty for diplomats are far more diffused than they are for the military. Diplomatic organizations are tasked with a myriad of problems of different types, including but not limited to the physical security of the state. Because these uncertainties stem from a number of different sources, diplomatic organizations depend on information from other agencies in order to fulfill their function effectively.

The key point is that the types of uncertainty and information requirements that an individual confronts varies according to her position in the hierarchy and to the specific agency in which she is embedded. Not only will superiors and subordinates conflict over information supply and demand,[33] but so too will the broader agencies comprising the state. For example, the more that the military is separated from the other organizations of the state—as a result of closed communication circles around localized informational bases—the more likely it will be that the military and diplomatic functions of the state will be uncoordinated. Yet, national security organizations operate in an environment of bureaucratic interconnectedness. As Amy Zegart

[31] When they are engaged in combat, militaries prefer that their war plans entail the defeat of the enemy. The reason for this stems from the desire to decrease uncertainties (the future reaction of the enemy) and physical threats that are likely to be manifest in the future. This preference is an important source of conflict between the armed forces and their civilian masters, who may prefer not to defeat the enemy if the means of doing so entail some other political cost. On uncertainty reduction and military doctrine and war plans, see Jack Snyder, 26-30.
[32] Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Information and Organizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 78-81.
[33] Graber, 54, 76-79; Robert E. O'Conner and Larry D. Spence, "Communication Disturbances in a Welfare Bureaucracy: A Case for Self-Management," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 4, (1976).

explains, national security institutions cannot and do not function in isolation; their activities and jurisdictions overlap significantly. Foreign policy bureaucracies exhibit a high degree of "asset co-specialization," where "the value of one agency's work hinges, at least in part, on the work of another." The upshot is that bureaucratic interconnectedness frequently leads to information "holdup problems," situations where one agency imposes demands or restrictions on another agency leading to suboptimal performance.[34] When attempting to implement complex policies (such as limited war strategies), the ability for top decision makers to effectively acquire and manage information is at a premium. Only "knowledgeable" leaders can properly determine a state's objectives and control the activities of subordinate agencies.[35] What characteristics of a state's information structure will allow top decision makers to effectively manage information for the purposes of accurately designing strategy and ensuring coordinated implementation?

A state's information structure is considered "robust" when the information flows connecting top decision makers to subordinate agencies exhibit three characteristics: when those flows are bi-directional, when they are multi-sourced, and when they are supported by dense lateral channels. In any hierarchy, top decision makers are responsible for strategic design and implementation. This is particularly the case in the context of the state where ultimate power and authority is held by national leaders. Although it is the state's leaders who must determine foreign military policy, the information upon which decisions are based comes from lower levels in the state hierarchy. Organs within the military, diplomatic corps, and specialized intelligence agencies deliver vital information to state leaders so that these leaders will have an understanding of the risks and opportunities in the international system. By necessity, these agencies will

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[34] Zegart, 37.; Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 282. See also, Hugh Helco, *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1977).
[35] Graber, 25.

possess more information than a state's leaders require at any given time, and leaders must have a means of calling forth only strategically-relevant information from their agencies. This poses a potential problem: those most in need of information will not know what specific pieces of information are required at any given time, and the suppliers of that information will not know which among the myriad of data available to deliver. The first characteristic of a "robust" information structure is the bi-directionality of information flows connecting state leaders to their subordinate agencies. Downward flows take the form of specific information requests and of orders to perform specific functions. Upward flows supply information requested prior to any action being taken, and provides feedback from those agencies after orders have been accomplished.[36] Bi-directional information flows allow top decision makers to continually monitor and respond to new developments during wartime.[37] If either of the directional flows is blocked, the state's leaders are unlikely to receive accurate information about the strategic environment, and will be unable to determine if subordinate agencies are responding in an appropriate fashion.

Information supplied by any one agency will pertain primarily to that agency's function. Because state leaders and subordinate agencies are hierarchically related, the type of uncertainty to which each responds differs substantially: state leaders must be concerned with the overall performance of the state, while particular agencies will be dedicated to their functional performance. As such, information derived from a given agency will not provide state leaders with a complete picture of the external environment. Furthermore, there is a tendency for the information supplied by any single agency to be biased. Biased information can result from a

[36] Daniel Katz & Robert L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1966), ch. 9.
[37] The ability to acquire strategically relevant information and to adapt behavior based on new information is discussed in Stinchcombe, 9-17, ch. 4; Masahiko Aoki, *Information, Incentives and Bargaining in the Japanese Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11-20. See also, Aoki, "Horizontal vs. Vertical Information Structures of the Firm," *The American Economic Review*, 76, 5, (December 1986).

number of causes: the functional orientation of the agency, entrenched parochialism, and competition among agencies for greater bureaucratic resources and responsibility.[38] Thus, if state leaders rely too extensively on a single agency for strategic information, there is a strong possibility that decisions will be based on incomplete, inaccurate, and/or out of date information. A characteristic of a robust information structure is the ability for top decision makers to obtain information from multiple sources.[39] By breaking through the bureaucratic obstacles to efficient information transmission, multi-sourced information flows permit top decision makers to obtain a far more complete picture of the international environment.[40] Further, multi-sourced information flows are a means of providing state leaders information about the coordination of their subordinate agencies. If, on the other hand, state leaders are forced to rely on a single-source information supply, then they will likely base their decisions on a biased interpretation of the strategic environment, and further, their capacity to ensure coordination among the relevant agencies will be significantly diminished.[41]

Significantly, the existence of multi-sourced information pathways is a resource for *leaders* to prevent poor information transmission. While this is a potentially powerful tool for

[38] Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999), 298-99.
[39] Harold L. Wilensky, *Organizational Intelligence: Knowledge and Policy in Government and Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), ix-x.
[40] For an extended discussion of the importance of multi-sourced information channels in the context of presidential decision making, see Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1990), ch. 7. Martin van Creveld argues that the most successful military commanders have been those who have operated in a multi-sourced information structure. Importantly, in none of the cases Van Creveld examines did a commander have complete or perfect information. Nevertheless, because the information that flowed from the battlefield to the commander was constantly augmented and vetted by information provided by secondary pathways, successful commanders could out perform their opponents. The information that these commanders *did* possess was of higher quality and was achieved at a faster pace. Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 268-75.
[41] Integration between grand strategy and military doctrine is discussed in Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 24-25. In the economic sphere, the pioneer of integration among units in a multidivisional firm is Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. See his *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962); *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); and *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

state leaders, it does come at a price: information overload. When designing and executing complex strategies, state leaders cannot be overburdened with an excessive amount of information, and the sole reliance upon multi-sourced information pathways will almost certainly result in this outcome. Because the information processing capabilities of leaders is limited, the continuous flow of dynamic communications from all of the relevant agencies will quickly swamp top decision makers' facilities. As such, information vetting processes must be in place at lower levels in the administrative hierarchy.

New research in the fields of network analysis and industrial organization demonstrates the power that lateral connections among interdependent but functionally distinct organs can bring to bear on the information overload problem.[42] Information structures characterized by dense lateral connections among agencies have the ability to "handle large volumes of information efficiently and without overloading any *individual* processors."[43] In this sense, a key characteristic of a robust information structure is the ability to redistribute the burden of information processing, while maintaining the necessary hierarchical configuration needed for maintaining control over the broader organization, or state.[44] Locally connected information pathways, or connections among subordinate agencies, allow for this critical redistribution of information processing. Specifically, when subordinate agencies are laterally connected, the ability for top decision makers to receive properly vetted information in a timely fashion

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[42] The theoretical foundations for this proposition (that lateral connections in hierarchies reduce the information overload problem) are discussed in Watts, 277-84. For the argument that a small number of random connections reduce congestion in a system, see D. J. Watts, *Small Worlds: The Dynamics of Networks Between Order and Randomness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); D. J. Watts and S. H. Strogatz, "Collective Dynamics of 'Small-World' Networks," *Nature*, 393, (1998). Random connectivity slights the realities (and purpose) of hierarchies. My argument relies on the notion that additional connections between/among independent units are beneficial, while accounting for the limitations of information processing in hierarchies.

[43] Watts, 273.

[44] These ideas were first developed in P. S. Dodds, D. J. Watts, and C. F. Sabel, "The Structure of Optimal Redistribution Networks," Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, Working Paper, (Columbia University, 2002).

increases substantially.[45] As new information enters the information system, it can be scrutinized by a number of different individuals—each of whom will interpret that information from a different perspective. While consensus on interpretation in not guaranteed, the ability to distinguish signals from noise will be enhanced through continuous debate and discussion at lower levels. Further, if the interpretation of a particular piece of information remains in dispute after this process, the ambiguity of that information may be reduced significantly thereby allowing top decision makers to assess the situation with greater speed and accuracy.[46] Finally, dense lateral connections have the ability to overcome the hold-up problems associated with state bureaucracies. As subordinate agencies interact, they are able to press their opposite numbers to provide critical information without having to force top decision makers to expend time and political capital in resolving bureaucratic disputes. In other words, coordination among subordinate agencies is significantly bolstered by the existence of dense lateral connections at lower levels.[47] A dearth of lateral connections among subordinate agencies (a phenomenon known as "stove-piping"), on the other hand, will likely lead to information overload at the top, the result of which will be faulty strategic assessments. Further, as the density of lateral connections decreases, coordination among agencies will likely decrease due the overburdening of top decision makers with excessive information.

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[45] Laurence J. O'Toole, Jr., "Interorganizational Communication: Opportunities and Challenges for Public Administration," *Handbook of Administrative Communication*, James L. Garnett and Alexander Kouzmin, eds. (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1997).

[46] Lazonick argues that one of the critical institutional features of the Japanese automobile industry that enabled it to achieve sustainable productivity advantages over its American counterpart is the *ringi* system of consensual decision making. Characteristic of the *ringi* system is the employment of lateral information flows throughout the corporate hierarchy. Through consensual decision-making, Japanese firms have been able to design and implement superior investment strategies because of the close cooperation between managers and their corporate bosses—cooperation that ensures that high quality information will be available not only to enterprise strategists, but also to those who implement those strategies. Lazonic, 39-40.

[47] George discusses the potential integrating effects of lateral connections. Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 145-47.

A potential objection might arise to the argument that greater lateral connections provide better information to state leaders and can facilitate agency integration. Won't the widespread sharing of information among lower level agencies result in collusion against the state's leaders? There are two reasons for rejecting this skepticism. First, as more and more individuals and agencies become connected, a collective action problem emerges. To the extent that collusion can produce material gains, and to the extent that those gains must be distributed widely, the incentive for any one individual or agency to risk detection and punishment decreases.[48] Second, lateral connections do not completely eradicate parochialism from the system. This residual parochialism can serve as a critical "whistle-blowing" mechanism whereby state leaders can become aware of potential colluders before the damage has been done. In sum, while lateral connections do not guarantee completely bias-free information transmissions and agency integration, the probability of error is significantly reduced. Furthermore, when combined with multi-sourced information pathways, the ability of a state to design and implement complex strategies increases dramatically.

When functioning, a robust information structure will efficiently provide decision makers with accurate and timely information. Essential information will neither be hoarded at lower levels in the hierarchy, nor will leaders be provided with information in such a quantity that precludes high quality assessment. Robust information structures, in short, overcome the twin problems of information overload and of information scarcity. Truncated information structures, on the other hand are susceptible to these two information processing pathologies. At first cut, any case of strategic failure will be caused by a malfunction in the first characteristic—the ability of top decision makers to effectively send and receive information from lower in the hierarchy.

[48] In the terminology of principle-agent theory, lateral connections decrease the oversight burdens of state leaders and decrease the likelihood that subordinate agencies will "shirk" their responsibilities. Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

There are two possible types of failure: either information is too scarce (i.e., information is not being transmitted to the top), or it is too abundant (i.e., information is overrunning the facilities of state leaders). The cause of each type of failure, in turn, should be found in dysfunctions in the second and third characteristic, respectively. If information is too scarce, then the likely culprit will be the lack of alternative pathways from which state leaders can obtain critical information. In this instance, the strategically relevant information that leaders receive will come from one or a very few sources, and not from all of the implicated agencies. In this instance, truncation magnifies the effects of errors made by individuals. If information is too abundant, on the other hand, then the likely culprit is the lack of dense lateral connections at lower levels in the hierarchy that can reduce the information processing burden on top decision makers. In this case, leaders will be connected to a number of agencies who continually feed information up the line without the benefit of interagency vetting. The key analytic point is: the truncation of an information structure will most likely be found at multiple points, and not just in a single characteristic.[49]

No state can be accurately described as possessing either a completely robust or a totally truncated information structure. These two categories are intended to serve as ideal-types which can be employed as analytical tools of comparison. As a state's information structure begins to approximate robustness, however, it should become apparent that its information acquisition and management capacities markedly increase. As those capacities increase, the ability of the state to design and implement complex strategies should similarly increase. Through the use of these two ideal types, a more precise and systematic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the state's information management capabilities can be achieved. Because no state will approach

[49] When attempting to ascertain the cause of any particular strategic failure, it will be critical first to determine the kind of information processing breakdown (information scarcity or overload), and then second to understand which characteristic of the information structure was most likely the source of that breakdown.

the ideal extreme, it is possible to explain both areas of strength and weakness within any particular state's information structure.

The initiation of limited wars is a dangerous business. In addition to the costs and risks associated with combat against a target state, an attacker faces the possibility that a defender will adopt an extreme balancing strategy in the form of military intervention. In order to prevent such deleterious outcomes, an attacker must adopt a strategy that does not run roughshod over a defender's level of threat tolerance. Resolving this dilemma is tricky because it requires that the attacker acquire and manage a dizzying array of information related to the defender's intentions and capabilities. I argue that states with strong information management capabilities stand a far greater chance of adopting appropriate military and diplomatic limited war strategies than those with weak or dysfunctional information management capabilities.[50] In the next section, I will employ the information structure framework to analyze the process of strategic design and implementation in two Cold War cases: the American limited wars in Korean and Vietnam.

The Evidence

In the pages that follow, I employ the information structure framework to analyze the manner in which the American limited war strategies in the Korean and Vietnam wars were developed and implemented. In the Korean War, I focus on the period of June 25-November 27, 1950. During this timeframe the US adopted, first, the objective of restoring the status quo ante, and then expanded its objective to rolling back communism on the Korean peninsula by crossing the 38th parallel into North Korean territory. I argue that the interposition of the 7th Fleet into the Taiwan Strait combined with the crossing of the 38th parallel induced the Chinese to intervene in

[50] In other words, my argument is probabilistic and not deterministic. Because I examine my argument in only two cases, we should remain skeptical of its generalizability. Further research into additional cases is required to bolster confidence in the argument's external validity.

the war against the US because it perceived the US to be a highly intensive threat. In the Vietnam War, I focus on the period August 1964-December 1965. It was during this time that the American limited war strategy for the war was developed and the general pattern of war fighting was established.[51] Despite the fact that American actions in Southeast Asia were threatening and although China engaged in a number of military actions that would enable it to intervene if necessary, the strategy of graduated pressure in the air against North Vietnam did not pose an intensive threat to the Chinese and as such avoided hostile balancing by the PRC.

In both cases, I isolate a few critical decisions and examine them through the lens of the framework adopted in this paper. In each case, I offer a brief description of the strategy adopted and compare that to the actions of the defender over time. I then assess whether the information structure at the time was robust or truncated. Finally, I examine how the nature of the attacker's information structure affected strategy design and implementation. My main objective is to provide a means of interpreting the manner in which American decisions were made and how each war was prosecuted so that previously unconnected events can be assessed in a more comprehensive fashion. Thus, I do not set out to "test" my arguments against alternatives. It is my intention in this paper to provide a foundation for a larger research program that explores the ability of states to avoid hostile balancing in limited wars.[52]

The Korean War

Although China preferred not to intervene in the Korean War against the United States in the fall of 1950, the PRC nevertheless took that fateful step because it perceived the US to be a

[51] On the consistency of the American strategy in Vietnam, see George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill1996), *passim*. On the post-July 1965 pattern of Sino-American interaction, see Michael Lumbers, "The Irony of Vietnam: The Johnson Administration's Tentative Bridge Building to China, 1965-1966," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 6, 3 (Summer 2004).
[52] Spencer D. Bakich, "Information, Diplomacy, and Strategy: Avoiding Hostile Balancing in Limited Wars," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, in progress.

highly intensive threat.[53] In addition to its military campaign in South Korea, the US interposed the 7th Fleet in the Taiwan Strait on June 27. With this latter action, the Chinese perception of threat increased dramatically as the US demonstrated its willingness to become directly involved in the Chinese Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists. The conjunction of the 7th Fleet decision with the American crossing of the 38th parallel into North Korea on October 7 was viewed as a clear indication that the Americans were intent on waging, at minimum, a protracted campaign against the new regime in Beijing.[54] Finally, after initial clashes between Chinese and US/UN forces had occurred and as the US continued its advance to the Yalu River, the PRC feared that the industrial heartland of Manchuria was subject to immediate American military harassment.[55] In short, China's intervention in the Korean War was driven by the perceived escalating threat posed by the United States' limited war strategy.[56]

While the American 7th Fleet decision and crossing of the North-South border induced China's intervention, the PRC had taken a number of steps well before mid-October that clearly indicated Chinese intentions to intervene if provoked. Earlier in the spring, the Chinese codified an alliance with the Soviet Union, the terms of which weighed heavily in the Soviets favor and which was signed despite a long history of animosity between the two communist nations.[57]

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[53] On the PRC's domestic social and economic challenges see Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) 15-22; William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 45-46. For an ideologically based explanation for Chinese entry, see Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
[54] Sergei N Goncharov, John W Lewis, Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 157; Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 65-66; Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 162-63.
[55] On the importance of Manchuria to the PRC's security, see Chen, 106-113.
[56] That is, and not by Soviet diktat. The PRC decided on intervention independent of the Kremlin and despite the Soviets parsimony in terms of military assistance. Christensen, 157-63; Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995) , 83-84.
[57] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Patterns in the Dust: Chinese-American Relations and the Recognition Controversy, 1949-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 28-29.

China, it appeared, was willing bear some cost to bolster its security.[58] Immediately after the US 7th Fleet decision was announced, Mao publicly declared the rationale for possible intervention:

> The U.S. invasion of Asia can only touch off the broad and resolute opposition of Asian people. On January 5, Truman said in an announcement that the United States would not intervene in Taiwan. Now his conduct proves that what he said was false. Moreover, he shredded all international agreements related to the American commitment not to intervene in China's internal affairs. The United States thus reveals its imperialist nature in its true colors. . . . People throughout the nation and the world, unite and make full preparations for frustrating any provocation of American imperialism.

In other words, Mao considered the 7th Fleet decision to be a declaration of war.[59] On July 7, Mao ordered the creation of the North East Border Defense Army (NEBDA) and began sending the PLA's best units to the Sino-Korean border. At the same time, Chinese forces that were tasked with preparing for the invasion of Taiwan were ordered to stand down and were subsequently redeployed to the northeast. By mid-September, the PRC had transferred over 300,000 of the best PLA troops to the border (with another 400,000 serving as a reserve), provided the logistical requirements of the intervention force, launched a vitriolic diplomatic offensive threatening a military response if the US crossed the North Korean border, and initiated a domestic political mobilization campaign that would be essential to fighting war in a foreign country. All of these actions were known to administration officials and occurred *prior* to the US landing at the port of Inchon, when the reversal of US/UN fortunes on the southern battlefield was complete. Finally, as the US stood poised to cross into North Korea, the Chinese

[58] David Allan Mayers, *Cracking the Monolith: U.S. Policy Against the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949-1955* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1986), 65-68; Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: US Relations with China Since 1949* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), ch. 5; Indeed, the administration was aware of the costs that China paid by signing the alliance, although it did not consider China's threat perception as a cause of the alliance. *The China White Paper, August 1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), xvi. Alternatively see, Goncharov et al., 121.

[59] Quoted in Goncharov et al., 157. Mao's speech was published on June 29 in *Renmin Ribao* and was intended for an audience in Washington. See also Zhou Enlai's speech to the United Nations, discussed in Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, "China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited," *The China Quarterly* 121, (March 1990).

sent a message to Washington via the Indian Ambassador to Beijing that China would intervene if the US moved into North Korea.[60]

The Chinese launched their major offensive against US/UN forces on November 25, yet prior to that, the Chinese did reveal that they were in North Korea in force. To be sure, the CPV were able to cross the Yalu with 260,000 troops undetected in mid-October. Yet, from October 25-November 8, the PRC waged what is known as the First Phase Offensive, the objectives of which were to test the strengths and weaknesses of its American and Korean opponents, and to lure them in deeper into the northern reaches of the peninsula.[61] While Korean and American military forces came in contact with Chinese forces from a number of different armies, US military commanders nevertheless believed that these troops to be isolated volunteers supporting the remnants of the North Korean Army. By November 25, seventeen days after making their last contact with the Chinese, the US faced roughly 380,000 CPV in close proximity. But no one, especially those most in need of this information in Washington, had any idea.[62]

The US limited war strategy in Korea held two objectives: the defeat of the North Korean Army, and the avoidance of hostile balancing by either the Soviet Union or the PRC. The decision to expand US war aims from the restoration of the status quo ante to rolling back communism on the Korean peninsula was predicated on the belief that neither state would intervene militarily in response. At worst, American officials assumed, the Chinese might release a few volunteers to fight along side the North Koreans—a negligible commitment from the American perspective. The primary reason for this presumed reluctance was the belief that

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[60] Zhang, 58-63; Chen, 144-45, 157. China's diplomatic warnings see, Whiting, *passim*; Christensen, 151-53; and Kuo-kang Shao, *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martins, 1996), 182.
[61] Shu Guang Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontation, 1949-1958* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 100-01; Roy E. Appleman, *Disaster in Korea: The Chinese Confront MacArthur* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press), 19-22.
[62] Patrick Roe, *The Dragon Strikes: China & the Korean War, June-December 1950* (Novato: Presidio, 2000), ch. 10.

the Soviets had no stomach for risking a wider war with the US. This rationale was extended to the Chinese: because the PRC was subservient to the Kremlin's desires, no major commitment of Chinese forces would be in the offing.[63] Further, because the Chinese Communists were in the process of consolidating their power on the mainland, US officials reasoned that they would be unwilling to participate in yet another conflict. Finally, the PLA was seen as being ill-prepared for waging an industrialized, high-technology war.[64] In short, the PRC was viewed as having neither the intentions nor the capabilities for a major clash with the US.

Officials in Tokyo and Washington were wrong in these assessments. Not only did the PRC respond to American provocations without Soviet influence, but it threw a substantial force at the US, prompting the largest retreat in American military history. By all accounts, the Chinese provided a number of indicators that should have made clear to the US that they intended to intervene and that they had the ability to do so. How did the US get it so wrong?

Truncated American Information Structure

I argue that these strategic errors were born out of the truncated American information structure at the time. In terms of the analysis in the previous section, two features of information management are of critical importance: the extent to which information reaching top decision makers was obtained from multiple sources, and the degree to which the various agencies tasked with designing and executing the limited war shared vital information in their possession. In both ways, the US information structure was ill-designed and had little capacity to effectively manage the information burden prior to and during the Korean War.

[63] Stueck, *The Korean War*, 90-91; William W. Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy Toward China and Korea, 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 228-31; CIA, "Possible Chinese Intervention in Korea," 20 September 1950, in *Assessing the Soviet Threat: The Early Cold War Years* Woodrow J. Kuhns, ed. (Washington, DC: CIA, 1997), 443.
[64] Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 176-82; Eliot A. Cohen, "'Only Half the Battle': American Intelligence and the Chinese Intervention in Korea, 1950," *Intelligence and National Security*, 5, 1 (January 1990).

In order to avoid hostile balancing, it is essential for decision makers to have an accurate understanding of the capabilities of potential balancers when strategy is designed and implemented. Leaders' access to information from multiple sources is critical to producing as clear a picture of the defender as possible. MacArthur's dominance in Far East intelligence precluded such an understanding. MacArthur and his intelligence chief, Major General Charles Willoughby, had a long history of excluding other intelligence agencies from their domain, the CIA in particular. Since the end of the Second World War, MacArthur effectively barred the CIA and its predecessor, the OSS, from carrying out critical intelligence operations and from obtaining access to information gathered by the Far East Command's (FEC) intelligence branch.[65] And, MacArthur's authority over intelligence production expanded dramatically with the outbreak of the Korean War.[66] Further, Willoughby was known to frequently skew his reporting to fit what he knew MacArthur wanted to hear, and MacArthur's reporting to Washington was often contradictory. As one observer of Willoughby noted, "MacArthur did not *want* the Chinese to enter the war in Korea. Anything MacArthur wanted, Willoughby produced intelligence for. . . . In this case, Willoughby falsified the intelligence reports. . . . He should have gone to jail."[67] The major point is not to isolate Willoughby as the sole obstacle to the effective functioning of the information system. Rather, it was the exclusion of other agencies from the intelligence process in the Far East that enabled Willoughby to matter as disastrously as he did. Without information derived from alternative sources pertaining to the Chinese military

[65] D. Clayton James, *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Free Press, 1993), ch. 3.
[66] D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur, Vol. III: Triumph and Disaster, 1945-1964* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 436-41.
[67] This statement was made by Jack Chiles, General Almond's G-3 (chief of operations). Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 377.

capabilities, administration officials did not have the ability to question the veracity of MacArthur's reporting, nor were they able to exert moderating influence on military operations.

Ascertaining an accurate picture of a defender's capabilities overtime is only one part of the assessment problem. Understanding a defender's intentions, how it plans to act under different conditions, is just as fundamental. Determining an opponent's intentions is ultimately a "dot-connecting" exercise wherein relevant political and military information is examined and compared. In short, information must be effectively shared among departmental intelligence services in order to accurately estimate the defender's objectives. Prior to and during the war, however, little information sharing occurred within the Truman administration. Although the CIA was originally designed to serve as the critical information clearinghouse that could produce this type of intelligence and direct the activities of the various intelligence bureaus, from 1946-1950 the CIA was incapable of doing either.[68]

Throughout its early history, the CIA had a very weak hand vis-à-vis the existing military intelligence organs, and as such, the Director of Central Intelligence was unable to breakthrough the rigid bureaucratic barriers between intelligence organs. Although the CIA's Interdepartmental Coordinating and Planning Staff (ICAPS) was given the mission of coordinating the intelligence collection activities of the community so that broad-based assessments of national security challenges could be conducted, the individual services fought tooth and nail to prevent ICAPS from exercising any authority. Rather than coordinating activities across the intelligence community, ICAPS reverted to studying the activity of the

[68] In addition to sources cited below, see: Ludwell Lee Montague, *General Walter Bedell Smith as Director of Central Intelligence, October 1950-February 1953* (University Park: Penn State University, 1992); Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA & American Democracy* 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Zegart, *Flawed By Design*; Ray S. Cline, *The CIA Under Reagan, Bush, & Casey* (Washington: Acropolis Books, 1981); and Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

departments *within* the *CIA*.[69] The failure to coordinate intelligence activities was not the CIA's only problem, however. Additionally, the CIA was unable to obtain information from the individual services to produce forward-looking national intelligence estimates that are vital to the success of complex foreign policies, such as limited war strategies. The Office of Reports and Estimates (ORE) was created to review the raw intelligence produced by the various service and civilian intelligence departments and to transform this information into objective estimates as an aid to determining future foreign military policy. From its inception through 1950, however, ORE performed poorly in this task. Two problems confronted the ORE. The first is the familiar issue of bureaucratic intransigence: the service departments refused to provide the ORE not only information related to the strengths and weaknesses of foreign forces, but they also failed to detail the capabilities and programs of *American* armed forces. As one ORE official lamented,

> The service agencies have always made a rigid distinction between operational and intelligence materials and have freely given CIA what they regard as intelligence materials but have refused to give CIA operational materials. Under this guise, they have withheld from CIA such sensitive materials as General MacArthur's reports from Tokyo, General Clay's reports from Berlin, Admiral Struble's reports from the Seventh Fleet, Admiral Badger's reports from Tsingtao, General Van Fleet's reports from Athens, etc. CIA does not receive reports made to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, many of which must, because of their origin and their subject, be worthy of the President's attention.[70]

The second problem was that in addition to producing national estimates, the ORE was given the job of preparing the President's daily digest. Because President Truman valued this product very highly, most of ORE's efforts were dedicated to it; national estimates assumed an "also ran" status. To his anger and dismay, when Walter Beddel Smith assumed the post of Director of

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[69] Arthur B. Darling, *The Central Intelligence Agency: An Instrument of Government, to 1950* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990), 205, 209.
[70] R. Jack Smith to Theodore Babbitt, "Contents of the CIA Daily Summary," 21 September 1950, in *The CIA Under Harry Truman*, Michael Warner, ed., (Washington, DC: CIA, 1994), 337.

Central Intelligence on October 7, 1950, he discovered that even after months of fighting no current coordinated estimate of the situation in the Far East had been produced.[71]

In sum, the US suffered from a truncated information structure prior to the Chinese intervention in the Korean War. Based on his intelligence monopoly in the Far East, MacArthur was the sole source of information pertaining to Chinese capabilities—both in China and eventually in Korea. Any errors or biases contained in MacArthur's reports stood little chance of being corrected. Because the CIA had was unable to serve as the vital information clearinghouse from which broad-based and properly vetted strategic information could be obtained, top decision makers confronted a massive information overload problem as they endeavored to design strategy. The dysfunctional state of the administration's information management system decreased the likelihood that a high quality limited war strategy could have been produced.

The Effects of Truncation on American Strategy

The debate over whether the US should expand its war aims to rolling back communism in Korea began merely three weeks after the US made its initial commitment to defend South Korea. It is important to note that many people form different departments within the administration voiced opinions on the matter, and that there was a disagreement among these participants. Most, however, came to the conclusion that a failure to cross the parallel would restore the inherent instability of the status quo ante, prevent the US from punishing the aggressors, and lose an opportunity to dislodge one state from the Soviet orbit. Militarily, most thought that the best opportunity for the Chinese to intervene would have been when the US was embattled in the Pusan Perimeter, rather than when it was advancing in strength and had

[71] Anne Karalekas, "History of the Central Intelligence Agency," in *The Central Intelligence Agency: History and Documents*, William M. Leary, ed., (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 29.

complete command of the air. Finally, because the Soviets were perceived as not desiring a wider war, the Chinese would refrain from engaging in hostile balancing.[72]

Critically, the information upon which those opinions were based, and on which the final decision was made, was fragmentary and biased. No broad assessment of past Chinese military and diplomatic behavior in light of previous US actions was conducted that would have given the participants a better understanding of their future opponent.[73] As a result, every new piece of evidence related to Chinese intentions was considered in isolation, and not as part of a broader pattern. In particular, no consideration was given to how China would interpret US actions in light of past public declarations: the US 7th Fleet deployment was carried out despite Truman and Acheson's declarations in January that the US had no intention of meddling in the Chinese Civil War, and the US was currently planning on extending the war to North Korea despite having declared at the UN that American intentions were merely to defend the South Korean regime.[74] How would the Chinese interpret future promises not to attack Manchuria? Further, although the military firmly believed in its superiority over the PLA, it appears that no study was conducted that looked into the strengths of the Chinese Communist forces, namely their strict discipline, excellent close-order combat, and ability to withstand tremendous deprivations in wartime—strengths that could only be employed as the US approached further north.[75]

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[72] Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, 203-04; Stueck, *The Korean War*, 61; Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume II: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 709-10.
[73] This conclusion is tentative pending further examination of the activities of John Allison's working group established on 17 July, 1950. Cumings, 710.
[74] "United States Policy Toward Formosa: Statement by President Truman," *Department of State Bulletin*, (16 January 1950), 79; "United States Policy Toward Formosa: Extemporaneous Remarks by Secretary Acheson," *Department of State Bulletin*, (16 January 1950), 81; See statements by Ernest A Gross, June 25, Truman, June 27, and Warren R. Austin, June 27 calling for the North Koreans to withdraw north of the 38th parallel and for all nations to support the UN resolution to that effect. All in *Department of State Bulletin* 23, 574 (3 July 1950), 3-8.
[75] Cohen, 144-45; Paul A. Varg, *The Closing of the Door: Sino-American Relations, 1936-1946* (Michigan State University Press, 1973), 121-28.

An alternative understanding of China's intentions in the late-summer 1950 was possible to achieve. Such an estimate would have required that information pertaining to the PRC's diplomatic and military situation overtime be examined with particular attention being paid to its fit with American military and diplomatic behavior. Further, while the administration believed that China did not intend to intervene, preferring instead to consolidate its victory in the Civil War, the massive redeployment of the PLA to northeast China did not induce second thoughts in Washington. This redeployment was a clear signal that the new regime was willing to forgo consolidation in the short run in order to prepare for war in the near future. Moreover, information from individuals who had direct contacts with the Chinese Communists in the past, who had witnessed first hand the CCP's ability to act independently of the Soviet Union, was never taken into account.[76] At that time, however, the ability for the administration to conduct such estimates was limited due to the structural impediments to effective information sharing among national security agencies.

After American forces crossed into North Korea, accurate reporting on the status of the Chinese forces was stymied by a lack of alternative sources of information reaching top decision makers in Washington. A clearer picture of the disposition of Chinese forces was critical because it could have prompted Washington to look favorably on a plan of establishing a strong defensive position at the "narrow neck" of the peninsula—an idea strongly detested by MacArthur.[77]

On October 15, Truman flew to Wake Island to briefly confer with MacArthur on the status of the war effort. When Truman queried MacArthur on the chances for Soviet or Chinese intervention, the General replied:

[76] Carolle J. Carter, *Mission to Yenan: American Liaison with the Chinese Communists, 1944-1947* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).
[77] NIE-2, "Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," 8 November 1950. DDRS: CK3100398564; Blair, 400-01.

> Very little. Had they interfered in the first or second months it would have been decisive. We are no longer fearful of their intervention. . . . The Chinese have 300,000 men in Manchuria. Of these probably not more than 100/125,000 are distributed along the Yalu River. Only 50/60,000 could be gotten across the Yalu River. They have no Air Force. Now that we have bases for our Air Force in Korea, if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter.[78]

This assessment was familiar to officials in Washington who had been receiving intelligence from the FEC that corroborated MacArthur's numbers and judgment of possible Chinese reactions.[79] In the midst of the First Phase Offensive roughly two weeks later, MacArthur explained the presence of the Chinese in North Korea in the most benign terms possible: China was attempting to provide covert assistance to the North in order to "salvage something from the wreckage." Only days later, in response to Truman's cancellation of MacArthur's order to bomb the Yalu bridges, however, the General's reporting changed dramatically,

> Men and materiel in large force are pouring across all bridges over Yalu from Manchuria. This movement not only jeopardizes but threatens the ultimate destruction of the forces under my command. . . . The only way to stop this reinforcement. . . . is the destruction of these bridges. . . Every hour that this is postponed will be paid for dearly in American and other United Nations blood. . . .[80]

Yet, the CINCUN had no further evidence that the Chinese had intervened in force. At no time before China's major offensive on November 24 did MacArthur have a clear idea of the number of Chinese forces in North Korea. Willoughby's theater intelligence estimates are largely to blame for this. During November, Willoughby continually received reports from both 8th Army and X Corp that indicated the Chinese were crossing the Yalu with full divisions. Because the FEC intelligence chief failed to accurately compare the evidence from the two sources, however, he stubbornly retained belief that American forces faced only individual "units." Although his

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78 Quoted in James, *Years of MacArthur*, 507-08.
79 Ibid., 508. See also Stueck, *Road*, 238-39
80 Quoted in Blair, 391, 395.

reports to MacArthur did show a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese troops in the North overtime, Willoughby's wild estimates were completely off the mark.[81]

The absence of alternative sources of information from the theater prevented Washington from obtaining an accurate depiction of Chinese behavior during this critical phase of the war. Yet, a far more accurate understating of the PRC's capabilities and intentions was possible to achieve. By examining the information available to Willoughby at the time, historian Patrick Roe was able to arrive at a figure that more accurately depicted China's strength opposite the Americans in North Korea. During October and November 1950, however, Willoughby was the only person privy to these reports. Had others in addition to the FEC G-2 been given access to this information, it is reasonable to conclude that a more accurate understanding of China's order of battle could have been achieved. Given the truncated information structure in which the administration operated, alternative analyses were simply not available.

The Vietnam War

From January 1964-December 1965, the United States waged its limited war in Vietnam in four discernable phases. First, upon reaffirming the existing objectives in the war, the Johnson administration stepped up the number and tempo of its operations in Southeast Asia in the first half of 1964.[82] OPLAN 34A raids along the coast of North Vietnam, covert operations into North Vietnam, and expanded intelligence over flights demonstrated to Hanoi and Beijing that the US was committed to preventing the fall of South Vietnam to communism.[83] Second, in response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Lyndon Johnson ordered retaliatory strikes against

[81] Roe, ch. 10.
[82] NSAM 273, 26 November 1963, http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/NSAMs/nsam273.asp
[83] William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part II: 1961-1964 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 212; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 110.

targets in the North and shortly thereafter, bolstered American air power in South Vietnam.[84] Third, after the Vietcong launched a massive mortar attack on the US airfield and advisory compound and Pleiku, Washington responded again with sharp retaliatory strikes against the DRV, followed soon after by the prolonged bombing campaign known as “Rolling Thunder.” It was at this point that the initial deployment of American combat forces entered South Vietnam with the objective of providing airfield security.[85] Finally, on July 28, Johnson announced that the US would commit 125,000 troops to South Vietnam in 1965 (at the time, an increase of 55,000), while continuing to prosecute the air war against North Vietnam.[86]

Throughout this period, the United States appeared to leaders in Beijing as threat of increasing magnitude to China’s physical security. In response, the Chinese undertook a number of actions that were intended, first, to deter the US from escalating the war beyond a critical point, and second, that enabled China to intervene in the war in force if it deemed it necessary. In particular, Chinese threat perception increased significantly in the aftermath of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. At this point, Mao could no longer consider his southern border to be secure as the US had significantly increased its power projection capability to strike from the air into the heart of China.[87] In response, Beijing began a crash program of military mobilization in southern China, committed MIG fighters to the DRV, increased its diplomatic attacks against “American imperialism,” began a domestic mobilization campaign that would prepare the

[84] David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000), 330-36; Logevall, 197-205.
[85] Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 78-79; George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved In Vietnam* (New York: Anchor, 1987), 307.
[86] Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) offers an extended discussion of this decision. No mention of Rolling Thunder was made by Johnson, as there was no change in air war strategy. Kaiser, 478.
[87] Qiang Zhai, “Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1965,” *CWIHP Bulletin*, 6-7, (Winter 1995/1996), 237; Zhai, *China & the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 140-41.

Chinese people for war, and undertook a massive industrial relocation program that transferred a significant amount of China's economic assets from the outskirts to the interior of the PRC.[88]

While the US engaged only in retaliatory strikes against the DRV following the Tokin incident, Washington's initiation of Rolling Thunder presented China with a significant security challenge. In response, China warned the US both publicly and through private intermediaries that the DRV was critical to Chinese security and that China would enter the war if the US bombed Chinese territory.[89] From April to June 1965, the PRC and DRV reached a number of agreements detailing the nature of Chinese commitment to North Vietnam. Beginning on 7 June, the PRC began sending anti-aircraft artillery, railroad, engineering, minesweeping, and logistic units across the border into North Vietnam. This was the beginning of a three-year period of extensive military support for the DRV, during which time the PRC deployed over 320,000 troops to its southern neighbor.[90] This level of military support to the DRV, along with the mobilization and redeployment of ground, air, and naval forces in the vicinity of Vietnam, and the anti-American diplomatic campaign provided the Chinese with a credible deterrent to excessive US hostility outside of South Vietnam.

The objectives of the American limited war strategy in Vietnam were the defeat of the communist insurgents in South Vietnam, and the avoidance of military intervention by the

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[88] Chen Jian, *Mao's China & the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 212-15; Xiaoming Zhang, "The Vietnam War: A Chinese Perspective," *The Journal of Military History*, (October, 1996), 734; Allen S. Whiting, *Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 175; John W. Garver, "The Chinese Threat in the Vietnam War," *Parameters* (Spring, 1992), 79-81.
[89] Qiang Zhai, "Reassessing China's Role in the Vietnam War: Some Mysteries Explored," in *China and the United States: A New Cold War History*, Hongshan Li and Xiaobing Li Xiaobing, eds. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 103. See also, Robert K. Brigham, "Three Alternative U.S. Strategies in Vietnam: A Reexamination Based on New Chinese and Vietnamese Sources," in *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy*, Robert S. McNamara, et al., eds. (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999), 410. Robert Shulzinger, "The Johnson Administration, China, and the Vietnam War," *Reexamining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973,* Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin, eds., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 250.
[90] For a detailed examination of the nature of the PRC's material and manpower support from 1965-69, see Chen, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War," *The China Quarterly*, (June 1995), 371-80; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 136.

Chinese. In attempting to achieve both of these objectives, however, American strategists faced a dilemma: in order to defeat the Vietcong in the South, pressure had to be placed on the northern regime in the form of interdiction from the air. In this connection lie the possibilities for Chinese intervention. As American pressure on the DRV mounted, the perceived viability of the Hanoi regime would be increasingly in doubt. Alternatively, and more directly, as the Chinese became increasingly committed to the DRV in the form of air defense, the possibility of the US attacking Chinese bases similarly increased. These two scenarios—the loss of North Vietnam as a viable buffer, or direct American attacks on Chinese territory—constituted actions that would have led the Chinese to intervene in the Vietnam War.

In contrast to how the US limited war strategy in Korea, American strategy in Vietnam was designed and implemented based on the available indicators of Chinese intentions and capabilities. In both cases, the PRC provided sufficient information to draw relatively accurate conclusions of Chinese intentions. How was the US able to get it right in Vietnam where it failed in Korea?

An Increasingly Robust Information Structure

Following the Chinese intervention in Korea, the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations undertook a number of reforms that significantly strengthened the information management capacities of the United States. The Johnson administration benefited from these reforms in a number of ways. The information structure from which the limited war strategy in Vietnam emerged was characterized by a relatively dense pattern of lateral connections that enabled a greater degree of information sharing among agencies. Additionally, as a result of these reforms, top policy makers were able to receive critical strategic information from a number of different sources.

Under Eisenhower and Kennedy, the locus of foreign policy making gradually moved away from individual agencies to the White House. Two features specifically enabled each president to obtain a greater degree of control over this process. The first was the institutionalization and expansion of the National Security Council system. Eisenhower bolstered this system, first, by creating the post of National Security Adviser, a position that allowed the president a greater degree of influence over the nature and content of US foreign policy. Second, the National Security Council staff acquired for the first time analytic capabilities that made available analysis and estimates free of departmental bias. Under Kennedy, the National Security Adviser grew in power as the specific responsibility of managing the interdepartmental policy making process was added to his (McGeorge Bundy's) portfolio. Further, the NSC staff was transformed from a more technical analytic unit to one that was charged with developing policy and advising the president. Finally, following the Bay of Pigs disaster, Bundy's office was moved to the White House and the Situation Room was created, the latter allowing Kennedy and his top advisers direct access to communications from various departments and postings around the world almost as soon as they were sent.[91]

The second feature was an outgrowth of the first. Because the National Security Adviser and the NSC staff were responsible to the president and charged with managing the foreign policy process, an expansion of communications channels among the various agencies emerged at lower levels in the bureaucracy. The increase in lateral connections was a crucial development because it fostered the continued sharing of information even when departmental principals lost a measure of influence with the president himself. For example, following John McCone's role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy granted the DCI a significant role in the policy making

[91] Zegart, 78-85; See also, I. M. Destler, Leslie H. Gelb, and Anthony Lake, *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Unmaking of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); John Prados, *Keeper of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

process. Johnson, on the other hand, afforded McCone far less influence and relied on the DCI much less than Kennedy had for information.[92] Nevertheless, because CIA intelligence and analysis was available to others at lower levels throughout the administration, the CIA was never marginalized.

Johnson inherited these structural reforms and they strongly affected the manner in which the overall strategy in Vietnam was designed and implemented. Two examples of interagency collaboration during this period were the SIGMA II war game conducted in early September and the November working group of 1964. These two forums allowed individuals from all of the relevant agencies to meet together to compare information on a number of different aspects of the war and to determine how the Chinese and DRV would react to different American strategies. SIGMA II's objectives were, first, to test the idea that graduated military pressures would induce the DRV to cease supporting the insurgency in the south, and second, to predict the likely changes of the PRC's strategy as the war escalated. While the conclusions of the war game will be discussed in the next section, it is important to note here that because the participants came from the military and civilian offices in the Pentagon, State Department, and the intelligence community, the views and experiences of the players represented the entire range of institutions that had a role in determining and implementing policy in the war.[93]

In November, William Bundy was designated to lead an interagency working group that would systematically review the administration's Vietnam policy and draft a complete strategy for escalating the war in the North. The importance of the group's deliberations and policy

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[92] William M. Leary, *The Central Intelligence Agency: History and Documents*, 77-78.

[93] Senior participants included: McGeorge and William Bundy, John McCone, John McNaughton, Cyrus Vance, and the JCS. McNamara, Rusk, Ball and Rostow either participated as observers and/or were briefed on the game's outcomes. See, Joint War Games Agency, JCS, "Final Report: SIGMA II-64," 5 October 1964 DDRS CK3100220846; H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 156; Schulzinger, 243.

recommendations are significant for three reasons. First, the group was structured so that all of the relevant agencies and top policy makers had influence on the policy that was ultimately put forward. Second, the group was afforded all of the relevant information pertaining to past and present actions of the PRC and DRV alike. In fact, most of the members of the working group were involved in the SIGMA II war game and were familiar with its implications. Finally, the single recommended strategy that was produced was the one implemented in February 1965.[94]

SIGMA II and the November 1964 working group are examples of how information was managed during the critical phase of strategy development during the Vietnam War.[95] Policy makers received information pertaining to the PRC from a number of sources, and information and assessments were vetted via an interagency process. Washington attempted to design and implement a limited war strategy that avoided hostile balancing by the PRC. As I will argue below, the relatively robust information structure facilitated this outcome.

Effects of the Robust Information Structure

The strategy for waging the Vietnam War was the product of this relatively robust information structure. Because information was shared among agencies to a significant extent, administration officials were able to decrease the information overload problem inherent to limited warfare. Further, in determining which courses of action to take, top policy makers were not forced to rely solely on the military for vital strategic information; alternative assessments were conducted by other individuals with alternative interests and perspectives. These features of the American information structure were essential because at critical times, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other prominent officials forcefully advocated potentially dangerous

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[94] For an extended discussion of the November working group, see Kaiser, *passim*.
[95] Cf. the "groupthink" hypothesis in Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascos*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982). See, David M. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisers* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993); David Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the White House: A Preliminary Assessment," *Diplomatic History* 8, 4 (Winter 1984).

strategies.[96] For example, Generals Curtis LeMay and Wallace Greene consistently pushed for massive attacks on the DRV with the intention of denying Hanoi the ability to support insurgents in the South. As the Chairman of the JCS Earl Wheeler noted on August 16, the Chiefs desired, " . . .course[s] of action, to include attack of targets in the [DRV], as necessary, *with the objective of destroying the DRV will and capabilities* to continue support of insurgent forces in Laos and the Republic of Vietnam."[97] As LeMay was the Air Force Chief of Staff, his opinion mattered and had to be taken into account. The problem was that attacks on this scale dramatically increased the chances of Chinese intervention in the war.

The PRC would eventually warn the US that it would enter the war either if the viability of the Hanoi regime was in doubt, or if the US bombed bases on mainland China. The burden of figuring out *how* to wage an effective air campaign against North Vietnam while simultaneously avoiding hostile balancing remained with American strategists—a task for which the "lessons of Korea" provided only marginal guidance.[98] The SIGMA II war game allowed policy makers to understand exactly how LeMay's preferred course of action could trigger Chinese intervention. The crucial insights of this exercise dealt specifically with how the process of waging an escalating air war against the DRV could spiral out of control and lead to a direct Sino-American confrontation. To the extent that the US air war threatened the existence of the DRV, or induced the Chinese to provide air defense from bases in China (an action that would force consideration of bombing those Chinese bases), then Chinese intervention was extremely likely.[99] As SIGMA II was an interagency exercise, officials from the military and civilian departments were afforded the opportunity to discuss future war plans and assess their likely implications before their actual

[96] It should be noted that Walt Rostow advocated a ground invasion of North Vietnam. Kahin, 338.
[97] FRUS, vol. 1 Vietnam 1964, #s 343, 316 (emphasis added).
[98] At most, the Korean War convinced the US that it had to be sensitive to Chinese threat perception. Yet, the experience of the Korean War was not necessary to achieve this understanding.
[99] JCS, "Final Report," D-16.

implementation. LeMay's recommendations were rejected because they ran a significant risk of hostile balancing.

Moreover, the manner in which the escalation strategy was developed ensured that SIGMA II's "lessons learned" would not be forgotten.[100] As the November working group comprised many individuals who had participated in SIGMA II, the focus on avoiding escalation spirals was retained. This is not to say that advocates of harsher measures against the North were ignored; their advice was sought at critical points during and after the drafting process. Rather, their advice was balanced by those who urged greater caution in prosecuting the war. In fact, the working group was structured in a way that took into consideration scenarios ranging from maintaining the status quo, progressively squeezing, and hitting the DRV with a "hard knock" from the air. In short, the graduated pressure strategy that was adopted in December[101] was not the product of a single agency's preferences and information. Multiple interests and a broad range of information pertaining to the PRC were considered. Although the strategy did contain flaws that would plague the US for years,[102] it did succeed in achieving one of its objectives: avoiding hostile balancing by China.

The second characteristic of the US information structure—the ability of top policy makers to receive information from a number of sources—allowed Washington to receive vital feedback as the war progressed. During the Korean War, it was MacArthur's FEC that provided the bulk of information pertaining to the actions of the Chinese. During the Vietnam War,

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[100] Top policy makers at the time and in retrospect have noted the importance of SIGMA II on their understanding of how the war should be conducted. George Ball, "The Prophecy the President Rejected," *Atlantic Magazine* (July 1972); and Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 153.

[101] Recent scholarship on the US decision to escalate reveals that it was during the November-December period that the strategy was developed. The period December 1964-July 1965 was one of strategic implementation and refinement. See, Kaiser and Logevall cited above.

[102] The primary flaw was that American officials assumed that the DRV would be willing to cease its support for the insurgents in the south under any circumstances.

information was received from a number of different agencies, the effect of which was that an increasingly accurate picture of Chinese intentions emerged over time. In addition to the CIA and military sources, key observers from the diplomatic corps provided a wide range of information pertaining to both the political and military disposition of the PRC. For example, in June 1965, as the Chinese began sending troops into North Vietnam, the US Consul General in Hong Kong Edward Rice provided valuable information on Chinese activities. Rice's reports were significant insofar as they accurately depicted the extent to which China had mobilized both its military and populace for a potential war with the United States. From his unique position in Hong Kong, Rice was also able to provide assessments of how the Chinese might react to increased US pressure on the DRV in light of the Soviet's new found interest in supporting the DRV. On June 6, Rice reported,

> . . . . increased Chinese Communist sensitivity and preparedness to react might prompt their entanglement were we . . . to attack Hanoi-Haiphong targets or northern areas of DRV. CHICOMS might feel they had to react against attacks so close to home or they might misjudge out intentions and order their planes into engagement as defensive measure. . . . Prospect of such occurrences seems likely become greater to extent Chinese believe we will extend air war toward North and as Soviets compete with them by providing more and more modern equipment for air defense and IL-28s—hardly weapons of passive defense.[103]

In short, the Johnson administration was not forced to rely on a single source of information related to the capabilities and intentions of the Chinese, as was the Truman administration in Korea.

The graduated pressure strategy that took shape between February-July 1965 was a complex undertaking, one that required the effective management of new information related to the actions of the PRC in response to American escalation. Because communications channels at levels below top policy makers linked the relevant agencies tasked with implementing this

[103] Rice to Rusk, 6 June 1965, DDRS CK3100360291. See also, Rice to Rusk, 5 June 1965, DDRS CK3100016735.

strategy, the information overload problem was mitigated to a significant degree. New information was shared, its implications debated, and proposed courses of action assessed widely. As a result, the administration was able to wage the war against North Vietnam in a manner that reduced the chances of hostile balancing. As Lyndon Johnson explained,

> By keeping a lid on all the designated targets [in North Vietnam], I knew I could keep the control of the war in my own hands. If China reacted to our slow escalation by threatening to retaliate, we'd have plenty of time to ease off the bombing. But this control—so essential for preventing World War III—would be lost the moment we unleashed a total assault on the North—for that would be rape rather than seduction—and then there would be no turning back. The Chinese reactions would be instant and total.[104]

I argued above that it is highly unlikely that a state could possess a completely robust information structure, and this is certainly true for the United States in the ground war in South Vietnam. As Andrew Krepinevich and others have noted, the most bedeviling problems for leaders in Washington was the inability to know with a high degree of accuracy the effects of the ground war on the Vietcong. To a great degree, the US Army retained a monopoly on information pertaining to the target of the US ground war in South Vietnam. As a result, "Feedback to the brass indicating that MACV's methods were working [against the Vietcong] was eagerly accepted; reports portraying a picture of failure were, for the most part, ignored."[105] Simply put, the limited war strategy in Vietnam was both a success and a failure, and the strategic information structure approach adopted here has the ability to explain both in a single framework.

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[104] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Saint Martin's Griffin, 1991), 264-65.

[105] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), esp. 56-57; See also, Andrew, 328.

Conclusion

When waging a limited war, an attacking state faces a potential trade-off that must be squarely confronted: the means by which an attacker attempts to defeat a target can induce hostile military balancing by another state that perceives the attacker to be a significant threat. In order to avoid extreme balancing, an attacker must design its strategy in a manner that avoids crossing over the defender's level of threat tolerance. The ability to craft and execute such complex strategies depends on the strengths of the attacking state's information management capabilities. To the extent that an attacker's information structure is robust, the likelihood that an attacker's strategy will achieve both of its objectives in a limited war increases dramatically. An attacker saddled with a truncated information structure will likely design and implement an inappropriate limited war strategy with disastrous results.

In the two Cold War cases examined above, I employed the "information structure framework" in order to shed light on the relationship between information management, strategy design and implementation, and the likelihood of hostile military balancing. Prior to and during the Korean War, the United States possessed an information structure that was clearly truncated. Not only did Truman and his top advisers have to rely primarily on a single, biased source of information for knowledge about the PRC's capabilities and intentions, but there was also a marked inability for the different agencies tasked with implementing aspects of the strategy to receive information vital to their respective tasks. Because top policy makers had an incomplete picture of the potential balancer, and because they possessed no means of reducing the information burden inherent to limited wars, the chances were good that significant errors would be made. The result was a limited war strategy that was inappropriate to the strategic context:

through its actions, the US convinced the Chinese that it posed a highly intensive threat and in turn, the Chinese intervened in the war with a devastating effect.

By contrast, the American information structure during the Vietnam War was relatively robust. Information was widely shared among relevant agencies, and Johnson and his advisers were able to receive information pertaining to the PRC's capabilities and intentions from a number of sources. LBJ and his advisers had a far more complete picture of the potential balancer and were able to redistribute the limited war information burden among their subordinates as strategy was designed and as feedback was received. As a result, the broader strategy adopted, and specifically the air war against North Vietnam, was carefully crafted and implemented so as not to pose a highly intensive threat to China. Still, American actions in Vietnam were threatening to the Chinese and they responded by increasing their support for the Hanoi regime. Although this complicated US actions, it was a far cry from the worst-case scenario of all-out military intervention.

In addition to providing analytical leverage over the specific problem of avoiding extreme balancing in limited wars, the information structure framework introduced in this paper has implications for both IR theory and current policy concerns. The issue of *uncertainty* is featured prominently in nearly all of the broader approaches to the study of international politics. At the heart of realism is the inability to know the present and future intentions of other states (an indelible consequence of anarchy). Where offensive realists are largely pessimistic about the ability for states to obtain a clear picture of their opponents' intentions, defensive realists allow credible commitments to play an important role in dampening down international conflict.[106]

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[106] Dale C. Copeland, "The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism," *International Security* 25, 2 (Fall 2000). On the offensive vs. defensive realism debate see, Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, 3 (winter 1994/95); Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security

Similarly, in most of the rational choice theoretic treatments of the causes of war, it is the extent to which a state is uncertain about another's willingness to except a specific bargain ex ante that can lead the two states to war. If one state is able to credibly commit its benign intentions to another, however, the two states have a better chance of achieving more peaceful relations. [107] In short, each of these approaches concurs on the critical issue that uncertainty can lead to conflict, and each stipulates (except for offensive realism) that states can reach some form of accommodation through the process of effective signaling.

The analysis in this paper offers a note of caution related to these conclusions. Irrespective of how clear and how credible an opponent's signaling may be, the ability of the receiver to accurately interpret those signals, and base its strategy upon those signals in a consistent manner, is critical to the prospects of cooperation. On the one hand, signals intended to portray benign intentions must compete with those that signal resolve should the receiver fail to respond appropriately. Furthermore, international politics is rarely a domain of dyadic interactions; a state will frequently be forced to send different types of signals to different states. As such, the ability for a receiver to parse out what is and is not relevant and to discern "carrots" from "sticks" should never be taken for granted. In short, the strength of a receiver's information management capacities will play a significant role in its ability to understand what an opponent is offering, and to respond in a consistent and appropriate fashion.

These two issues, information processing and foreign policy implementation, have a rich tradition in IR theorizing. Political psychologists have long warned against optimistic

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Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other," *Security Studies,* 7, 1 (7, 1 (autumn 1997); Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security*, 25, 3 (winter 2000/01).

[107] Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War"; James D. Morrow, "Capabilities, Uncertainty, and Resolve: A Limited Information Model of Crisis Bargaining," *American Journal of Political Science*, 33, 4, (November 1989). Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands vs. Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 41 (February, 1997).

expectations when it comes to issues such as crisis management and effective policy design under stress. Further, students of foreign policy bureaucracies have consistently struck a cautionary tone when state security is predicated on devising and executing nuanced foreign policies. While their counsel is important, it must be placed in context. Whether they are cognitive or affective in nature, psychological barriers to efficient information processing adequately explain political outcomes when the responsibility for decision making resides with an individual, or a small group of individuals. As the analysis of decision making in the Vietnam War demonstrates, however, certain patterns of information management can redistribute the burden of decision making among a relatively large number of actors, the effect of which is to reduce the likelihood that any one person's psychological limits will have a significant impact on political outcomes. Additionally, by virtue of the fact that a number of people are brought into the decision making process, the ability to overcome psychological barriers is increased dramatically.

Bureaucratic rigidities to information sharing are a staple of IR theory. Graham Allison's bureaucratic politics model (Model III) is perhaps the most forceful articulation of how parochialism can preclude efficient inter-agency responses to complex international problems. Yet again, the broader governmental context matters a great deal in determining whether parochialism plays a determinative role in foreign policy. If top policy makers have the ability to receive information pertaining to the actions of subordinate agencies, then the "normal" tendencies of bureaucracy can be ameliorated. While bureaucracies *tend* toward internal information segregation, that outcome is not preordained. The information structure framework offers a means of explaining when state leaders will be captured by bureaucratic biases, and when they will have the ability to push agencies and departments to act according to their will.

The issue of information management in American national security policy is currently the most pressing matter confronting leaders in Washington and the nation as a whole. As of this writing two prominent reports, one offered by the 9/11 Commission and one issued by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,[108] discuss how pathologies in information management have either directly harmed the national security of the US, or have led to a number of mistaken assumptions upon which decisions for war were based. The analysis in this paper suggests that these issues are neither new, nor *sui generis* in the post-Cold War era. Achieving a deeper understanding of how information management has affected past foreign policy outcomes is vital if the US is to be able to meet future security threats more effectively. Furthermore, the information structure framework offered here illuminates the processes and mechanisms that are required for more effective information management in the realm of national security. The ability for top policy makers to receive information from a number of sources about particular threats, and the ability to redistribute the information processing burden inherent to complex and dynamic environments is critical to crafting and implementing effective foreign policy.

[108] *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Authorized Edition (New York: Norton, 2004); Select Committee on Intelligence, "Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq," http://intelligence.senate.gov/iraqreport2.pdf