

## The Return of Crisis Diplomacy: Ukraine, Taiwan and Beyond

Ron Gurantz

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# The Return of Crisis Diplomacy: Ukraine, Taiwan and Beyond

On December 17, 2021, Russia sent the United States and NATO a pair of draft treaties proposing sweeping changes to European security. They included demands that NATO refuse any new members and that NATO forces not be deployed in most of Eastern Europe. These demands were immediately dismissed as non-starters. Many observers suspected that Putin intended his demands to be rejected so that he would have an excuse to stop negotiating and resort to force.<sup>1</sup> NATO countries still attempted negotiations but couldn't avert war.

The draft treaties were one of many tactics Putin used to create a pretext for war in the lead-up to the invasion of Ukraine. Major wars are often preceded by periods of acute crisis, which involve military preparations, diplomacy, and no small amount of political theater. Justifying military action to domestic or international audiences may be the main goal of one or both sides. Deceptive tactics are common: governments may broadcast boatloads of propaganda and make wild accusations, sabotage diplomacy so they can blame their opponent, and provoke military incidents or stir up political unrest to create an excuse for military action.

Governments usually seek justification at the outset of war. Public and allied support is vital for successfully prosecuting wars, and how the war begins can affect that support. Public opinion studies have shown that support for military action is higher when it is to restrain aggression and that dramatic events like being attacked can increase support for the government in a "rally around the

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Ron Gurantz is a Research Professor of National Security Affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute. He can be reached at [ron.gurantz.civ@armywarcollege.edu](mailto:ron.gurantz.civ@armywarcollege.edu). The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government, the Department of Defense, or the United States Army.

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flag” effect.<sup>2</sup> The question of which side started the war is often critical to wartime narratives. Governments are sensitive to these concerns, often manipu-

## How a war begins can affect public and allied support

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lating events to produce pretexts and in some cases forgoing preemptive strikes or delaying war for lack of justification or fear of political backlash.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration aggressively pushed back on Putin’s tactics. It publi-

cized the Russian military buildup and refuted Moscow’s attempts to blame NATO or Ukraine for the crisis. It released intelligence on Russian war plans, deployments, and efforts to fabricate incidents. It avoided provocative military deployments and asked Ukraine to exercise restraint. It negotiated throughout the crisis, attempting to meet Russia’s security concerns.

This appears to have been the right approach for the circumstances. The United States decided early in the crisis that it would support Ukraine but not intervene with its own military forces. Its response to invasion would be a combination of multilateral sanctions and military assistance, so allied support would be necessary. The administration’s strategy helped secure that support. Putin’s excuses for war fell flat in part because of US strategy, and the invasion of Ukraine came to be viewed as an act of unprovoked, unjustified and naked aggression in both Europe and the United States. That perception eliminated any moral ambiguity that Russia could have exploited and transformed European attitudes toward defense. In the nearly two years since, NATO has remained largely united in support of Ukraine.

Is this approach appropriate for future crises? As competition continues to intensify between the United States and great power rivals like China and Russia, crisis diplomacy will likely reemerge as a major concern. Taiwan in particular is the flashpoint that could bring nuclear-armed adversaries to the verge of war. If war does occur, the events of the crisis could determine whether allies and the public support military action. In a crisis, China would probably make efforts to justify its military actions to build domestic support and undermine its opponents’ will to fight. The United States will want to remember the lessons of the Ukraine crisis and be prepared to compete with China to control the narrative, through actions as much as words.

However, a crisis in the Taiwan Strait is likely to look more like the Cuban Missile Crisis than the Ukraine crisis. American military intervention will be on the table, and world peace may hinge on successfully navigating a confrontation. The priority would be deterring aggression and managing escalation rather than shifting blame, and the United States would have to prioritize military preparations and direct negotiations. Still, if the Cuban Missile Crisis is any lesson,

American leaders will not be able to make decisions based solely on military or diplomatic needs and completely ignore the image they portray to the world. The US will just have to strike a different balance between its objectives.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I closely analyze American strategy during the pre-invasion crisis in Ukraine to understand its lessons, particularly regarding its response to Russian deception. Next, I argue that a crisis in the Taiwan Strait could present the United States with similar challenges. I then apply the lessons of the Ukraine crisis to a potential Taiwan Strait crisis. I argue that US strategy will differ because of the possibility of direct American intervention, but that allied and public opinion will still be a central concern. I conclude with an evaluation of the importance of narrative in crisis strategy.

## **The Return of Crisis Diplomacy in 2021**

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During the Cold War, crisis diplomacy was a major concern for policymakers and the subject of intensive study. The existence of nuclear weapons meant that avoiding war was more important than winning it. Leaders had to steer their countries to peaceful settlements or at least avoid escalation in confrontations that might previously have warranted the use of force. At the same time, leaders were not willing to achieve peace at any price. Allowing an aggressor to take advantage of one's own fear of nuclear war could quickly lead to a series of surrenders, so they had to be prepared to stand up to aggression.

One result was increased attention to and refinement of certain strategic concepts throughout this period. Brinkmanship, deterrence, signaling, escalation and crisis management entered the vocabulary of international politics. These developments seemed to suggest a new era of international relations based on threats rather than war. Alongside the proxy wars and covert operations that characterized the Cold War, international crises would shape world politics in the shadow of nuclear war.

Crisis diplomacy certainly didn't disappear when the Berlin Wall fell. The United States has faced both acute and long-term crises over nuclear proliferation with North Korea, Iran and others in the post-Cold War era. It has seen repeated crises with China, such as the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the 1999 embassy bombing in Belgrade, and the 2001 aircraft collision near Hainan Island. However, the former crises involved relatively minor powers, and the latter crises never seemed to carry a serious possibility of armed conflict.

The study of crisis diplomacy didn't disappear either, though scholarly focus on the topic declined. Proliferation replaced deterrence as the principal issue regarding nuclear weapons. Researchers also shifted focus to civil wars, insurgency and terrorism, where "crisis" usually implied intervention or occupation in weak and

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failing states rather than conventional military confrontation between great powers. Although some did continue to study crises, high-stakes confrontations

between nuclear-armed powers seemed theoretical and interest understandably waned.

High-stakes crisis diplomacy is likely to return to center stage as China and Russia increasingly seek to challenge American power. Many have labeled the emerging competition as a new Cold War. The current rivalry has many differences, to be sure, but there are clear similarities—not just in the rivals themselves, but in the United States’

goal of deterring aggression while avoiding escalation to nuclear war. The experiences of Cold War crises like the Cuban Missile Crisis can provide important touchstones.

Like previous crises, the war in Ukraine will also cast a long shadow over the future of US national security policy, and not just in terms of US-Russia relations or the alliance with Europe. The war will carry important lessons for proxy warfare, economic sanctions, and alliance management. The Biden administration’s pre-war crisis diplomacy may also influence future strategy. A great deal of commentary has analyzed its failure to deter invasion and may provide important lessons. Its successes have lessons too. In particular, its strategy seemed to facilitate the sustained and united response to the invasion that followed.

Russia’s attempts to shift blame for the war by lying about its intentions, sabotaging diplomacy, and staging military incidents have many historical antecedents.<sup>4</sup> Wars are frequently preceded by this kind of maneuvering as states attempt to shift blame. Though not entirely without antecedents itself, the Biden administration’s strategy was unique in its approach to intelligence and information.<sup>5</sup> The United States deployed certain innovative tactics that seemed to successfully thwart Russia’s attempt to justify its aggression, which helped to build domestic and allied support for helping Ukraine resist the invasion.

### **Information Operations**

The attempt to influence perceptions during war has taken the name “information operations” in current military doctrine. However, propaganda and deception are as old as international relations itself. Russia’s success in the invasion of Crimea—deceiving the international community by disguising soldiers, denying the invasion, and gaining support within Crimea using proxies and

propaganda—demonstrated how important it is to win the informational battle.<sup>6</sup> When the Biden administration detected Russia’s military buildup in the fall of 2021, it was prepared to confront similar Russian efforts.<sup>7</sup>

The most notable feature of the Biden Administration’s information strategy was its use of declassified intelligence to debunk Russian deception—what some have called “name and shame,” “prebuttal,” or “pre-bunking.”<sup>8</sup> To counter Russia’s denials that it was preparing for war, the United States released intelligence about Russian war plans and satellite photos showing a military buildup.<sup>9</sup> To keep attention on the threat, the United States publicly predicted Russia’s timetables for military action and challenged Russia’s claims that it was demobilizing.<sup>10</sup> Allies got involved, too. In January 2022, the United Kingdom revealed that it had discovered a plot to install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv.<sup>11</sup>

Most strikingly, the United States and its allies sought to preempt Russian attempts to provoke or stage incidents as a pretext for military action. American officials repeatedly warned of these “false flag” operations and on multiple occasions released intelligence to expose them. In January 2022, the United States accused Russia of infiltrating saboteurs into eastern Ukraine to stage an incident, and it later announced that it had discovered a plan to film a staged Ukrainian attack.<sup>12</sup> In the final days before the invasion, President Biden, then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg all claimed that Russia was staging “false flag” attacks to justify war.<sup>13</sup>

The approach was not without risks. In the past, intelligence agencies had resisted divulging classified information for fear of revealing sources and methods. Though the United States limited the amount of detail in its revelations, there were still worries about operational security.<sup>14</sup> There were also concerns about American credibility if intelligence was proven wrong, and Ukrainian officials worried that the constant drumbeat of warnings could create panic.<sup>15</sup> Other risks included causing alarm and overreaction among allies, or appearing to Russia or the international community as an American attempt to create a pretext for war.

Nevertheless, pre-bunking was an innovative solution to Russian information operations, enabled by an impressive awareness of Russian plans. While the United States couldn’t match Russian deception, it could expose it. Commercial satellite imagery and online videos added to the claims’ credibility.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the risks to intelligence sources, revealing information for political effect can be even more impactful than concealing it for military advantage. American revelations undermined Russia’s attempts to

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portray its military actions as anything other than naked aggression. Pre-bunking has shown particular promise as a strategy against disinformation and conspiracy theories, with prior “inoculation” appearing to be more effective than after-the-fact debunking.<sup>17</sup>

While pre-bunking was the most noteworthy part of the American strategy, its entire informational approach seemed geared toward denying Putin an excuse to invade Ukraine. Administration officials aggressively refuted Russian propaganda. Biden authorized intelligence sharing with allies to convince skeptical governments of the threat.<sup>18</sup> Diplomacy was part of the effort, too. Russian demands focused on the supposed threat posed by NATO, so the United States offered to discuss limits on missile and conventional force deployments and military exercises.<sup>19</sup> Biden even voiced his belief that Ukraine would not join NATO for a long time.<sup>20</sup>

The administration walked a difficult line. Governments often want to show that they made a reasonable effort to avoid war, but being too accommodating could reward aggression or alarm allies. The United States mostly avoided this pitfall. The concessions offered by the United States reflected arrangements it had already agreed to, and they were combined with a refusal to rule out NATO expansion, strong statements of support for Ukrainian sovereignty, demands for Russian demobilization, and threats of serious consequences for Russia in the event of war. They also appear to have been coordinated with allies to avoid any divisions in the coalition.

### **No Excuses**

The administration’s military and economic policies also seemed to support the goal of denying Putin an excuse to start a war. The administration avoided provocative actions or the appearance of aggression. President Biden clearly signaled that he wouldn’t introduce American military forces into Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> He waited until late January to begin shipments of extra military equipment and waited until the invasion itself in February to impose sanctions. Secretary of State Antony Blinken asked Ukraine to practice restraint along the Russian border, which it did even as Russia attempted to provoke military clashes.<sup>22</sup> American officials apparently even worried that providing advanced military systems and intelligence could cause Ukraine to attack preemptively.<sup>23</sup>

This caution seems to have been driven primarily by the desire to avoid direct conflict with Russia and by skepticism from allies about the seriousness of the threat. However, it almost certainly helped to deny Putin an excuse for invading Ukraine. Any American action that didn’t look like a response to Russian threats

or appeared disproportionate to the Russian build-up would have surely been seized upon for propaganda purposes. Russia would have argued that NATO actions were not “defensive” but were preparations for aggression that used Russia’s “military exercises” as a pretext. Of course, any preemptive attack by Ukraine would be seized on as an excuse for war. While Russia tried to make those types of arguments anyway, they were unconvincing in light of NATO’s restraint.

American foreign policy is often criticized as being reactive instead of proactive, and proportional responses have been criticized as being insufficient for deterring aggression. However, being reactive and proportional in a crisis does allow the United States to make clear to the world which side is the aggressor. Waiting to be attacked is, of course, both extremely dangerous and exceptionally frustrating to those on the front line. But the public and the world care a great deal about “who started it.” Being able to blame an enemy for making the first move or firing the first shot can provide a major political advantage. Today, the United States and its allies can credibly describe Russian aggression as unprovoked.

The administration’s military and economic restraint may have been the most controversial element of its strategy. Members of Congress, outside analysts, and Ukrainian officials demanded more weapons, quicker sanctions, and even direct intervention. And to be sure, the strategy did fall short in important ways. Putin was not deterred from attacking Ukraine, and it may have been left more vulnerable than necessary in the crucial and uncertain early days of the war. Of course, any conclusion about the strategy’s impact must remain somewhat speculative, as Russia’s aggression might have created a similar backlash regardless of the administration’s approach. Moreover, Russia’s global isolation is far from complete. Perhaps the Biden administration was unnecessarily cautious, and perhaps it continues to be.

Still, it is hard to argue that the administration has not been successful in its public messaging and diplomacy. The nakedness of Putin’s aggression, which the administration helped to expose, shocked Europe. The coalition has held together for almost two years of war. Changes in European security like Sweden and Finland applying to NATO as well as German reversals on defense and energy policy may turn out to be critical in supporting Ukraine and deterring further Russian aggression.<sup>24</sup> Most strikingly, even opponents of supporting Ukraine do not hang their arguments on provocative American or European actions in the opening days of the war. Many American critics would have almost certainly hidden behind Russia’s lies had Russia succeeded in making a credible case to the American audience. Instead, even critics begin their arguments with perfunctory condemnations of Russian aggression, reflecting the nearly universal acknowledgement that Russia started the present war.



## The Taiwan Strait

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**The US must anticipate that China too might seek pretext for any potential aggression in Taiwan**

Does the apparent success of the administration's approach mean that the United States should adopt a similar strategy in future crises? The contingency the

United States seems most worried about is a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. A great deal of effort has gone into examining possible scenarios for crisis or conflict over Taiwan, but pretexts for war have played little role in them.<sup>25</sup>

This is in notable contrast to scenarios for Russian aggression, which are often expected to be justified as attempts to protect Russian minorities outside its borders.<sup>26</sup> However, the United States must anticipate that China too might seek pretexts for aggression.

The deceptive practices used by Russia have not historically been part of China's playbook. Instead, China has regularly "seized the initiative" through offensive military operations, and many analysts believe that China would want to start an invasion of Taiwan with as little warning as possible.<sup>27</sup> However, that does not mean that these tactics are out of the question. China is not bound by previous practice any more than any other country. It has always sought moral grounds for its actions during crises.<sup>28</sup> Military preparations may also be difficult to hide, so it might end up having to explain its actions as it readies for war.<sup>29</sup>

Most importantly, China will want to influence countries in the region. While some close American allies could be expected to provide support in the event of war, other countries have attempted to avoid choosing sides. China has recognized this trepidation and tried to convince regional powers to remain outside of competing blocs, characterizing American-led alliances as attempts to "create division in the region, stoke confrontation and undermine peace."<sup>30</sup> If the United States or Taiwan are seen as dragging regional countries into war, it would confirm China's contention that neutrality is safer than alignment. If China could convince others that it is simply trying to defend the status quo, it would lend credibility to claims that it doesn't pose a threat to the region.

What could Chinese pretexts look like in the event of a Taiwan Strait crisis? The most common justification for war is self-defense. Governments frequently exploit or fabricate incidents so they can justify military action as self-defense. China may have an advantage in that it can create situations, like blockades and seizures of offshore islands, where the United States or Taiwan may have to fire the first shot to reverse the status quo. With frequent patrols and military

exercises in the region, accidents could also be seized on as pretexts for military action. Even without an incident, China could accuse the United States of arming Taiwan to prepare for an attack. The United States should be ready to debunk these claims and respond carefully to provocations.

Self-defense aside, China would certainly claim that military action was necessary to prevent Taiwan's independence, and it may truly believe that. China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law specifies that force can be used if independence is imminent or peaceful unification impossible.<sup>31</sup> China may seize upon provocative actions or statements, and may even attempt to encourage or amplify Taiwanese calls for independence in the run-up to a war. China could make demands for reassurances on the issue of Taiwan's independence so excessive that the United States and Taiwan would be unwilling to give them.<sup>32</sup> As part of its crisis diplomacy, the United States would want to refute China's narrative, reaffirm its commitment to a peaceful resolution, offer reassurances, highlight China's provocative actions, and even make the case that China's threats endanger unification by alienating Taiwan.

The bigger picture from these maneuvers will be the debate over what is at stake in the crisis. If China can convince people that the crisis was sparked by Taiwanese or American provocations, its claims to have limited ambitions and to be interested only in defending sovereignty or the status quo will gain credibility. On the other hand, if China appears as the aggressor, then observers may believe that regional security or the global order are at stake. These perceptions could influence whether the American people and regional states are willing to fight to defend Taiwan or participate in sanctioning China, and which side is expected to make concessions to reestablish peace. It may even make it harder for China's potential allies like Russia to offer support. Analyst Oriana Skylar Mastro, for instance, has argued that China has been cautious to support Russia over Ukraine to avoid the appearance that an "axis of autocrats" is threatening global peace and democracy.<sup>33</sup>

## How Taiwan Differs from Ukraine

The lessons of previous crises often inform crisis decision-making. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy administration officials remarked upon several historical lessons, including the danger of losing control of events highlighted by the outbreak of World War I and the bankruptcy of appeasing aggressors revealed by the Munich Agreement. It is important to get those lessons right, and scholars still debate whether the conventional interpretations of these events are correct.<sup>34</sup> Biden administration officials, for their part, drew parallels between the intelligence revelations of the Cuban Missile Crisis and those in Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> In turn, the lessons of Ukraine will surely influence future crises.

**The key difference between Ukraine and Taiwan is the possibility of direct US military intervention**

In applying lessons, it is also important to note the differences between scenarios so that policy can be tailored to the circumstances. The key difference

between the lead-up to the Ukraine War and a potential Taiwan Strait Crisis is the possibility of direct US military intervention. The United States was able to exercise restraint before the invasion of Ukraine because it didn't expect a direct fight with Russia in Ukraine. The forces the United States sent to Eastern Europe may have reassured allies of an American commitment to their defense, but they probably wouldn't have done much on their own if faced with a full-scale Russian military offensive.

In a Taiwan crisis, the United States may not have the luxury of condemning aggression from afar while avoiding direct combat. The United States and China would be, in the famous phrase from the Cuban Missile Crisis, “eyeball to eyeball.”<sup>36</sup> American intervention would be far from certain, and it is unclear what an American war plan for Taiwan would entail, but mobilizing and deploying forces to the region quickly may be deemed necessary to resist a military offensive. Even if war doesn't begin immediately, the United States may want to put its foot down early in a crisis to prevent China from making piecemeal military and political gains that could provide advantage in a later conflict.

Many of the insights from the literature on deterrence suggest that “more is better.” Demonstrating the capability to resist a rapid conquest of Taiwan may convince Beijing to think twice about attacking. Mobilizing and deploying forces can show a willingness to pay high costs and take major risks for the defense of Taiwan. There are limits to “more is better,” of course, such as the dangers of provocation or leaving forces exposed to attack. But, given the demands of preparing for direct conflict, it will be far more difficult for the United States to guarantee that all escalatory actions would be China's alone.

The higher stakes of such a crisis may also create different incentives for diplomacy and information operations as the United States seeks to prevent escalation and negotiate a peaceful settlement. Justification may not be the only priority. Both Ukraine and Russia viewed American warnings as provocative, and the United States may prefer to lower public tensions in a Taiwan crisis. Secrecy may facilitate face-saving diplomacy, as it did with the agreement to remove missiles from Turkey that ended the Cuban Missile Crisis. Different judgements may be made about the value of keeping intelligence secret given the prospect of military conflict. As the Ukraine crisis showed, refuting propaganda alone is probably not a reliable method of deterrence.

Nevertheless, even in crises where the stakes are at their highest, political theater matters. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy administration carefully crafted its speeches for domestic and international audiences, emphasizing Soviet hostility and duplicity while announcing its willingness to take whatever measures were necessary for peace. It rallied allied support in Latin America and Europe, fearing that countries would exit the alliance rather than be dragged into war unwillingly.<sup>37</sup> The United States took its case to the United Nations, and some of the most dramatic moments of the crisis involved UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson revealing intelligence photos of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Administration officials very much viewed their domestic and international efforts as related, with allied support and international law an important part of justifying the US' actions to its public.<sup>38</sup>

These concerns even seemed to influence military strategy. Administration officials repeatedly voiced worries that launching a surprise attack against Cuba to destroy the missiles would be seen as immoral or unjustified at home and abroad.<sup>39</sup> RFK mused aloud about staging an attack as an excuse to take military action: “sink the *Maine* again or something.”<sup>40</sup> Kennedy himself appeared to worry about maintaining popular support during war if it was revealed that the United States refused to make concessions that could have averted conflict.<sup>41</sup> Some of the very same issues that were highlighted in the lead-up to the Ukraine War were also considered as administration officials navigated the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War.

It is impossible to predict exactly what a crisis over Taiwan would look like and what tradeoffs would have to be made. The Taiwan Strait has seen crises between the United States and China in 1954-1955, 1958, 1995-1996, and—according to some—2022.<sup>42</sup> These crises have involved military exercises and threats of invasion as well as blockades, bombardment, and seizures of offshore islands. They have seen the United States restrain Taiwanese attacks but also make threats of nuclear war.<sup>43</sup> Still, it is worth keeping in mind how Eisenhower explained his rejection of Taiwan's requests to authorize preemptive action against a Chinese airbase buildup in the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954-1955. According to Dulles, Eisenhower told him that “it is oftentimes necessary to take heavy liabilities from a purely military standpoint in order to avoid being in the position of being an aggressor and the initiator of war. This is a price which often has to be paid and which may have to be paid in this case.”<sup>44</sup>

## The Importance of Narrative

Focusing too much on narrative can come with hazards. Attempting to seize the moral high ground can make the United States vulnerable to less scrupulous actors. The need for unambiguous evidence of aggression before acting could leave the United States and its allies exposed to persistent, covert, low-level

aggression like cyberattacks and paramilitary activity. It can also lead the US government itself to resort to deception. In fact, the United States has repeatedly used dishonest tactics to justify war, from seizing on reports of a naval incident in the Gulf of Tonkin—which it may have tried to provoke and which probably never occurred—to gain Congressional authorization for war in Vietnam, to making misleading claims about weapons of mass destruction to justify the Iraq War.<sup>45</sup>

Many would also say that a good narrative is no substitute for military power. Winning an argument doesn't mean much without guns, and losing an argument is something you can shoot your way out of. Moreover, the morality of "good guys" and "bad guys" in international politics can be baffling and frustrating. A Ukrainian soldier who had been shot at by Russian-backed forces for seven years would likely resent that he still had to hold his fire to prove Russia's guilt to the world. A favorable narrative is also rarely sufficient for deterrence. Governments often generate laughably unconvincing justifications for war, but that doesn't stop them from attacking. Instead, deterring war usually requires convincing an adversary that it will be punished or defeated. Military power remains the "final argument."

Still, it does matter who gets labeled the "bad guy." Moral victories can help build the will to respond. Portraying an attack as unjustified and unprovoked can give people a reason to align against an aggressor. For the bad guy, this can be fatal. Outrageous acts like the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor have shocked entire countries into mobilizing for war. They can also mobilize alliances—and it is hard to take on the entire world. Nor can the United States take for granted that even its allies will trust its judgment or good intentions, or support its foreign policy choices. While military power is still the final argument in international affairs, the United States cannot ignore the image it projects and the story it tells in those critical moments when it finds itself on the verge of war.

The pre-invasion crisis over Ukraine demonstrated how a focus on narrative during crisis can rally allied and domestic support in the ensuing conflict. The strategy of pursuing diplomacy and avoiding provocation, along with the tactic

**Leaders cannot  
ignore the question  
of how war begins**

of intelligence disclosures to highlight Russian aggression and deception, ensured that Russia's responsibility for war was clear for all to see. This playbook may not be directly applicable to future crises. The same level of caution and transparency may not be appropriate when military intervention is on

the table. Nevertheless, leaders cannot ignore the question of how war begins. Despite the potential military risks, the United States will want to avoid blame for starting a war or failing to fully pursue negotiated solutions. Allies and the public will want to be confident that war was truly the last resort.

It is impossible to predict where the next major crisis will be. The United States believed Berlin to be the most dangerous flashpoint in the early Cold War, but American-Soviet competition unexpectedly came to a head in Cuba. Still, growing tensions with China and Russia suggest that confrontations with nuclear-armed adversaries may be more frequent in the future. The United States needs to be prepared for situations like the crisis in Ukraine and those where direct intervention would be possible, like Taiwan. The lessons of previous crises can be a useful guide, but they must always be adapted to the circumstances.

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