Strategy, Reputation, and Fighting in the Periphery

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To my beloved family

Abstract

Why do great powers engage in conflicts in regions of limited intrinsic and strategic importance, often at the expense of their vital interests? This dissertation develops a strategic reputational theory to explain why great powers fight in the periphery. The central argument is that great powers anticipating particularly high costs of war – or having what I call cost-absorbent strategic thinking – experience heightened reputational concerns and are therefore more likely to engage in peripheral conflicts. The theory offers a new conceptualization of reputational motives grounded in strategic logic rather than cultural norms or irrational fears of credibility loss. To test the argument, I examine two pivotal cases of twentieth-century great power peripheral belligerence – the United States' intervention in Vietnam (1965) and Japan's invasion of China (1937). Despite occurring in vastly different historical contexts, both cases reveal that decision-makers operated under a common strategic environment characterized by cost-absorbent strategic thinking vis-à-vis their primary adversary. This condition intensified reputational concerns and drove the decision to fight in the periphery. Conversely, when such thinking was absent, reputational concerns were less pronounced and restraint prevailed. This dissertation contributes to broader theoretical debates in international relations on military strategy, technology, reputation, and great power competition. It also engages enduring foreign policy discourses on credibility, strategic restraint, and deterrence.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

Why do great powers fight in the periphery? The United States decided to fight in Vietnam in 1965, even though it understood Indochina's lack of strategic value in its competition with the Soviet Union. Japan started a large war in China in 1937 while envisioning and preparing for a more important war with the Soviet Union. Why did these wars occur when the target countries were believed to have little impact on great power competition? The minimal significance of peripheral countries makes the phenomenon of great power peripheral belligerence puzzling. This dissertation builds and tests a strategic reputational theory that explains twentieth-century peripheral belligerence by great powers.

1.1. What is peripheral belligerence?

This dissertation seeks to explain great powers' wars in the periphery in the 1919-1991 period.[1] Great powers' fighting in the periphery, in short, peripheral belligerence, occurs

[1] The period of analysis starts in 1919 to focus on modern peripheral belligerence rather than colonial wars of the preceding era. The period ends in 1991, as the dissolution of the Soviet Union temporarily marked the end of great power competition, a key scope condition for the theory developed here. For the purpose of this study, great powers are defined as states that are reasonably capable of avoiding defeat in an all-out defensive war against the most powerful state in the system and has the military capability to pursue interests beyond their borders. By this definition, the United States and the Soviet Union are considered great powers throughout the period (1919-1991), whereas major European powers and Japan qualify as great powers only until 1945. For various definitions of great power, all of which emphasize military power, see A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918* (Oxford University Press, 1971), xxiv; Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (Viking, 1971), 254; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International*

when a great power commits a large-scale military force (1,000 ground troops or more) to a combat mission in a country that is considered peripheral to its geopolitical interests.[2] The question of what constitutes the periphery is challenging to answer. For example, Vietnam in 1965 was considered peripheral to the security interests of the United States by most but not all. The periphery is defined here as the group of countries that have minimal impact on a great power's ability to compete with other great powers. Then, when does a country have minimal impact on great power competition?

While a great power might have something to gain in or from a periphery country, such gains are seldom crucial for great power competition and rarely provide a sufficient reason to use force. And, since all countries hold at least some value, there are always disagreements on whether, and to what extent, a particular country is peripheral. As political scientist James Rosenau noted, "All situations – or none – can be viewed as

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Politics (Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979), 131; Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 10–19; Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1987); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 5; Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 42–44; Oriana Skylar Mastro, *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

[2] Deployment of 1,000 or more troops in a distant foreign country does not always mean peripheral belligerence. For example, when the purpose of the use of force is clearly non-combatant (e.g., humanitarian, rescue, stabilization, or peacekeeping), it is not considered peripheral belligerence. On humanitarian intervention, see Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs About the Use of Force*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

inescapable and posing threats to security, depending on how the world is viewed and what is meant by security… What is vital for one observer is peripheral for another."[3] In addition, policymakers often have incentives to exaggerate the value of the target country, making it difficult to rely on their rhetoric to determine a country's peripheral-ness. A leader believing that a distant country is peripheral may be motivated to publicly highlight its significance after having decided to militarily intervene in it. In order to address these difficulties and minimize potential controversy, I use specific criteria to determine the operating concept of the periphery.[4]

To be specific, countries lacking both productive capacity and strategic value should be most obviously peripheral to great powers. I consider three criteria. First, countries that lack productive capacity to significantly tip the balance of power between great powers are considered peripheral because military strength, the most critical factor in a great power's ability to compete, primarily stems from the productive capacity that

[3] James N. Rosenau, "Intervention as a Scientific Concept," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 13, no. 2 (June 1969), 158.

[4] The main task of this dissertation is not to establish a perfect definition of the periphery that can be universally accepted. Admittedly, there could be additional criteria for distinguishing peripheral and non-peripheral parts of the world. And other criteria may be more appropriate for different topics. However, the criteria used here are considered reasonably necessary and sufficient for identifying peripheral countries in great power competition. While applying different criteria might slightly alter the classification of a few countries, the general distinction between the periphery and the non-periphery should remain largely constant.

it can mobilize.[5] Adopting George Kennan's selection,[6] I consider Britain, Germany, Russia, Japan and the United States as the industrial cores to remain the most productive areas throughout most of the twentieth century, which is the temporal scope of this study.[7]

Second, countries whose location is less relevant to the security of the world's industrial cores are considered peripheral.[8] While countries with limited productive

[5] Scholars of international affairs agree on productive capacity being the primary factor in great power competition. See, for example, Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904), 421–44; Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Klaus Knorr, *The War Potential of Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1956); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to the Present*; Stephen Van Evera, "Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn't: American Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13, no. 2 (1990), 1–51; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

[6] John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (The Penguin Press, 2011), 331–32; George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Little, Brown, 1967), 359. While countries with less productive capacity may still hold some value due to factors such as population size or natural resources, they do not contribute to a great power's competing ability as much as extensive productive capacity. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 112–14.

[7] These countries can "directly determine the world balance of power" can be considered "intrinsically valuable." See Michael C. Desch, *When the Third World Matters : Latin America and United States Grand Strategy* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 10.

[8] According to Desch, there are regions in a great power's grand strategy that are "outside the homeland that have little intrinsic value, but are nonetheless strategically vital because they contribute to the defense of the homeland or of other intrinsically valuable areas," indirectly affecting the balance of power. These areas have what he calls extrinsic value. See Desch, *When the Third World Matters*, 10. Strategic value, according to Jervis, "represents the degree to which a retreat would endanger the state's position on other issues." See Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (January 1979), 314.

capacity are generally less crucial in great power competition, some are strategically valuable because of their proximity to the core industrial countries of the world. For example, from the U.S. perspective, many NATO countries during the Cold War were important to defend and worth stationing troops not because of the impact they could exert on the U.S.-Soviet balance of power but because of their strategic value in helping defend the core industrial countries including West Germany. [9] Securing these strategically located countries and denying them to adversaries help a great power acquire or defend the world's intrinsically most valuable areas.

Third, countries outside a great power's clear and immediate sphere of influence are considered peripheral. Countries near a great power's homeland are also strategically important as they can have an important impact on its security and its capacity to project military force. [10] While the entire Western Hemisphere is quite important for the United States strategic interests, the countries adjacent to the Caribbean Sea, considered as mare nostrum, including Colombia and Venezuela, should be considered to be most

[9] South Korea in the early Cold War period is another example. The country was deemed "an area of great importance" by Secretary of State Dean Acheson in June 1950, primarily due to its proximity to Japan and its implications "to the security of American-occupied Japan." See Dean Acheson, *The Korean War* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), 20.

[10] For example, President Reagan said in a 1983 speech that Central America is "too close" to the U.S. to be ignored. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Washington Conference of the American Legion," February 22, 1983, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-washington-conference-american-legion.

strategically important. For this reason, the U.S. has always been more prone to intervene in Central America than in South America.[11] Russia has had a similar status and interest in Eastern Europe and thus considered the consolidation of a buffer zone in Europe as its primary foreign policy objective.[12] Countries in other regions including Central Asia, for example, lack strategic importance of this significance for Moscow.[13]

This definition of the periphery provides a more concrete framework compared to previous works. For example, Charles Kupchan defines the periphery as "regions separated by a considerable distance from the metropole that do not have immediate and direct bearing on the security of the homeland."[14] Similarly, Jeffrey Taliaferro considers it

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[11] Edy Kaufman, *The Superpowers and Their Spheres of Influence: The United States and the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (St. Martin's Press, 1976), 27.

[12] Kaufman, 172; Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 195. Because of this reason, the Soviet invasions of East Poland in 1939 and the Baltic countries in 1940 or the post-war interventions in Czechoslovakia and Hungary are not particularly puzzling. For example, when the Hungarian uprising happened in October 1956, Khrushchev said "we have no other choice" but to intervene and Marshal Zhukov said that the Soviets "had no reason to leave." Similarly, the location of Czechoslovakia in 1968, being a "dagger in the heart of Europe" in the heart of Eastern Europe, was strategically important enough to merit the use of force. See Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 195; Alex P. Schmid and Ellen Berends, *Soviet Military Interventions since 1945* (Transaction Books, 1985), 30.

[13] This explains why international opprobrium to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and domestic dissatisfaction within the Soviet Union were significant. See Schmid and Berends, *Soviet Military Interventions since 1945*, 131. For the subjective nature of spheres of influence, see Paul Keal, "Contemporary Understanding about Spheres of Influence," *Review of International Studies* 9, no. 3 (1983), 155–72.

[14] Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Cornell University Press, 1994), 4.

as "geographic areas where actual conflict or the likely conflict cannot threaten the security of a great power's homeland."[15] These earlier definitions primarily emphasize geographic distance and direct security significance, which, while important, do not fully capture the strategic calculus of great powers. Assessing whether a target country is peripheral requires a broader perspective, one that considers not only distance but also productive capacity and strategic relevance. The minimal intrinsic and strategic benefits these countries offer make them largely unworthy of the costs associated with military action.

While military interventions by great powers are numerous, those that meet the criteria for peripheral belligerence remain relatively few.[16] Table 1.1. lists the entire universe of cases of U.S. military intervention in foreign countries with at least 1,000 ground troops during the period of 1919 to 1991 and shows that only two cases – the

[15] Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[16] I cross-referenced the following sources to rigorously establish the universe of cases. Patricia L. Sullivan and Michael T. Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945—2003," *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 5 (September 2009), 707–18; Sarkees Meredith Reid and Frank Wayman, *Resort to War: 1816-2007* (CQ Press, 2010); Barbara Salazar Torreon and Sofia Plagakis, "Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2020" (Congressional Research Service, July 2020); Sidita Kushi and Monica Duffy Toft, "Introducing the Military Intervention Project: A New Dataset on US Military Interventions, 1776–2019," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67, no. 4 (2023), 752–79.

Vietnam War (1965) and the Gulf War (1991) – qualify as peripheral belligerence.[17] Instances of peripheral belligerence by other great powers are Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (1935), Japan's invasion of China (1937), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979).[18] Altogether, great power peripheral belligerence occurred a total of five times between 1919 and 1991. Despite its rarity, peripheral belligerence has frequently marked pivotal turning points in twentieth-century history, significantly influence the course of international politics.

1.2. The puzzle

Great power peripheral belligerence is relatively rare. The reasons why it is puzzling should partly explain why it is not a policy frequently chosen by great powers. First, great power interests in the periphery are generally not worth the costs and risks of using

[17] The U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970 meets the criteria but is not considered as an independent case of peripheral belligerence as it was an extension of the ongoing Vietnam War. The U.S. intervention in Russia 1918-1920 is not considered because it began before 1919. While the Gulf War (Kuwait) of 1991 presents a borderline case due to Kuwait's oil reserves and its strategic location adjacent to the Persian Gulf, it still qualifies as peripheral belligerence based on a strict application of my criteria. Many Cold War-era interventions do not qualify either because of Central American and Caribbean countries being located within the U.S. sphere of influence or because of the non-combat nature of force deployments.

[18] Soviet interventions in former Russian colonies (e.g., Turkestan 1920) or Soviet republics (e.g., Azerbaijan 1990), Mongolia (1932) and Eastern Europe (e.g., Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) do not qualify as peripheral belligerence because they were not peripheral to Soviet strategic interests. Peripheral conflicts by Britain and France are not considered as they were no longer great powers following the end of World War II.

military force. If a great power had unlimited resources, it may resort to force for virtually all interests, regardless of their importance. Since that is not the case, however, military force should be reserved for defending and promoting only the more crucial national interests. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger famously stated in 1984, "the United States should not commit forces to combat overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies."[19] Interests in peripheral regions are rarely vital. A great power considering the use of force in or over a peripheral country should recognize that such actions have minimal impact on great power competition. In short, the added value of a peripheral country is unlikely to affect the overall balance in great power competition, leading many to view peripheral belligerence as a suboptimal policy.

Second, peripheral belligerence often diverts critical resources away from the core arenas of great power competition, weakening a state's ability to pursue higher-priority strategic objectives. In an international system characterized by anarchy and uncertainty, even states with vast military and economic capabilities must be cautious about committing resources to conflicts of marginal importance. As Robert Art observes, "Except in those situations in which a nation (great and small alike) is fighting for its very

[19] Casper Weinberger, "The Uses Of Military Force - 'the Uses Of Military Power' | Give War A Chance | FRONTLINE | PBS," November 28, 1984, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/force/weinberger.html.

existence, there are always good reasons for limiting the amount of force actually applied to achieve a given goal."[20] Similarly, Michael Desch warns that focusing on low-priority areas "will waste large amounts of military resources and thereby reduce [the U.S.] ability to secure more valuable objectives."[21] Jerome Slater reinforces this logic, arguing that "everything that one desires, or even to one degree or another is important, is not necessarily vital; nations, like individuals, must recognize the limits of their power and establish priorities."[22] Leaders recognize the risk of diverting resources in the periphery. For example, in August 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden said, "Our true strategic competitors – China and Russia – would love nothing more than the United States to continue to funnel billions of dollars in resources and attention into stabilizing Afghanistan indefinitely."[23] While peripheral conflicts may not carry the existential risks of direct great power military confrontation, their cumulative costs can erode a state's long-term strategic position, ultimately making peripheral belligerence a self-defeating policy.

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[20] Robert J. Art, "To What Ends Military Power?," *International Security* 4, no. 4 (1980), 25–26.

[21] Desch, *When the Third World Matters*, 12.

[22] Jerome Slater, "Dominos in Central America: Will They Fall? Does It Matter?," *International Security* 12, no. 2 (1987), 118.

[23] David E. Sanger, *New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West* (Crown, 2024), 169.

Third, peripheral belligerence can signal overly aggressive intentions, potentially leading to unintended negative consequences. Use of force in low-stake peripheral areas may be interpreted by other great powers and regional states as a sign of expansionist or irrationally hostile ambitions. This may drive cause others to perceive heightened threats, adopt hardline stances, engage in self-armament, or form coalitions against the belligerent power.[24] Such dynamics could lead to an unnecessary escalation of tensions and possibly trigger an inadvertent great power conflict.[25] Furthermore, regional states may become less prone to cooperating with the belligerent power and potentially align with its adversary, weakening its influence in the region and potentially beyond. In short, peripheral belligerence may accompany significant negative side effects.

As the three reasons outlined above clarify, peripheral belligerence does not appear to be a sound policy for great powers in general. Using force over peripheral stakes can be suboptimal at best and self-defeating at worst. This should perhaps explain the rarity of peripheral belligerence by great powers in the twentieth century. Despite its rarity, however, peripheral belligerence does takes place, often with a significant impact on great power politics and the international order. This fact highlights the importance

[24] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987).

[25] Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and the Spiral Model," in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 1976.

of the question asked here – when and why do great powers engage in peripheral belligerence?

1.3. The Argument in Brief

In this dissertation, I make two propositions. First, great powers often fight in the periphery to build reputation. Second, military-strategic considerations have a strong impact on great powers' reputational concerns about their perceived resolve. Taken together, the likelihood of great powers' fighting for reputation in the periphery is highly dependent on strategic thinking.

Resolve in security is essentially the extent to which a state is willing to tolerate the costs of fighting. The more resolved a state is, the greater its willingness to use military force despite all types of costs – human, material, and political.[26] Then, reputation for

[26] The concept of resolve would not exist in the first place without the expected costs of the action in question. And, in international politics, resolve of a state can be considered its willingness to resort to violence despite the costs of it. This cost aspect in reputation for resolve is made explicit by many scholars. For example, see Todd S. Sechser, "Winning without a Fight: Power, Reputation, and Compellent Threats in International Crises" (Stanford University, 2007); Kathryn McNabb Cochran, "Strong Horse or Paper Tiger?: Assessing the Reputational Effects of War Fighting" (Duke University, 2011); Dianne Pfundstein Chamberlain, *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States* (Georgetown University Press, 2016); Joshua Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2016); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal Determination in International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

resolve is what others believe as a state's willingness to fight while tolerating the costs of fighting. A state having a strong reputation for resolve means that what others believe as its tolerable level of the costs of fighting is high. Then, what is believed to be the level of the costs of fighting should affect the level of reputation for resolve that is demanded. For example, a state expecting higher costs of fighting should have a greater need to make others believe that it is tolerant to those costs. In other words, it should value its reputation for resolve more highly.

Reputation for resolve is an important asset in international politics, as Thomas Schelling regarded it as "one of the few things worth fighting over."[27] Yet, its value varies across time and space. States strongly believing that a reputation for resolve leads to better security should care more about it, while states believing that security can be achieved without a particularly strong reputation should care less about it.[28] One important determinant of the place of reputation in foreign policy is military strategic thinking. Strategic thinking best explains a state's expected costs of fighting and thus the centrality of reputation for resolve in its foreign policy. A state's expected level of the costs of fighting cannot be sufficiently understood without considering its strategic

[27] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 124.

[28] Private actors should behave similarly. See Paul Milgrom and John Roberts, "Predation, Reputation, and Entry Deterrence," *Journal of Economic Theory* 27, no. 2 (1982), 280–312; David M. Kreps and Robert Wilson, "Reputation and Imperfect Information," *Journal of Economic Theory* 27, no. 2 (1982), 253–79.

conditions and plans. While there are many approaches to thinking about war and conflict, this dissertation focuses on its cost aspect. Military-strategic considerations that lead to the anticipation of the direct absorption of particularly high costs of war demands a greater need for a state to appear resolute.

This idea on strategic thinking driving reputational concerns, which I call strategic reputational theory, provides an explanation on when and why great powers are willing to fight in the periphery. Its efforts to signal resolve when the need arises in time of crisis or war, however, are unlikely to be successful precisely because the need is so obvious to all audiences.[29] Aware of this difficulty, the state is motivated to cultivate its reputation for resolve today so that it can harvest it tomorrow. Reputation for resolve is earned by demonstrating resolve – tolerance to the costs of fighting – and a good way to do it is to fight *despite* the costs.

Thus, when a great power is expected to absorb especially high costs of war, it has a greater need to fight for reputation. For great powers with a strategic need to build reputation, fighting in the periphery has two major advantages. First, it has a greater updating effect on a great power's reputation. Fighting where the stakes are high is of course important but contributes less to a state's reputation for resolve because all states should be willing to fight in this case regardless of their military resoluteness. Even the

[29] James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995), 379–414.

most irresolute state would be sufficiently willing to use its military to defend its core interests, such as defending its territory. On the contrary, fighting for peripheral interests provides new information about a state's level of resolve, since only the most resolute are expected to fight for the such interests.

Second, fighting in the periphery is also less risky. A great power that needs to build a strong reputation for resolve because of its strategic need can choose to do so by acting more assertively against the major adversary. However, this is not ideal as it increases the chances of military escalations at the end of which the great power might suffer the especially high costs of war expected in the first place. Given that the great power's present priority is to build a reputation that it can use tomorrow, a major conflict today should be avoided if possible. Instead, fighting where stakes are lower is less likely to provoke escalatory responses by hostile great powers because it rarely poses a direct threat to their core interests. Thus, peripheral belligerence is often the best form of reputational fighting for great powers with significant reputational concerns.

1.4. Contributions

By offering a novel explanation for modern great power peripheral belligerence, this dissertation contributes to the field of international relations in several important ways. First, it contributes to the study of great power foreign policy in the periphery by addressing a gap in existing scholarship. While prior research acknowledges that

reputational concerns matter for great power policy in the periphery, it often falls short of making explicit claims regarding their causal role.[30] The strategic reputational theory presents the first explanation for great powers' peripheral wars and interventions that is exclusively based on a reputation-building logic.[31] Additionally, based on testable and falsifiable claims, I make explicit predictions on the likelihood of peripheral belligerence.

Second, my theory contributes to the literature on the consequences of technology and strategy in international relations. Military strategy is undeniably an important factor in international relations and especially in security studies, as it determines how a state's military force should be deployed to maximize its security. While politics is generally believed to affect military policy and strategy, the reverse is often true. This relationship is underscored by an established body of literature that highlights the significant political outcomes influenced by military strategy. For example, some scholars explain the outbreak of war by analyzing the type of military strategy adopted by aggressor states.[32]

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[30] Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*; Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks*.

[31] My theory shares similarities with the arguments made by Kupchan and Taliaferro in that leaders' considerations about the situation in the core (strategically vital areas) play an important role in their decision-making about the periphery. Importantly, however, I focus on great powers' military-strategic considerations in the core, whereas previous research highlights the role of perceived insecurity or relative decline in the core.

[32] John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Cornell University Press, 1983); Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Cornell University Press, 1999); Dong Sun Lee, *Power Shifts, Strategy and War: Declining States and International Conflict* (Routledge, 2007).

Others use military strategy as a variable for explaining war durations and outcomes.[33] Since military strategy concerns how a state plans to fight a war, it undoubtedly shapes a state's expectations of how a war will unfold. Fighting with a military strategy not very suitable for the given war or the given adversary should lead to longer and often unsuccessful wars. Then, it is not surprising that military strategy is found by many scholars as an important determinant for outcomes related to war.

My theory suggests a counterintuitive yet strong causal relationship between military strategy and great power foreign policy. The outcome of my interest, peripheral belligerence, relates to the likelihood of using military force. However, my argument differs from previous scholarship, which typically asserts that the type of military strategy that a state adopts vis-à-vis its adversary affects its decisions about war or the outcomes of war against the same adversary. The strategic reputational theory posits that the military strategy or, more broadly, military strategic thinking, that a great power has in relation to its major adversary influences its foreign policy behavior in peripheral areas.[34] This theory suggests that military strategy may shape foreign policy in a more direct way than it had been previously understood.

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[33] Allan C. Stam, *Win, Lose, or Draw: Domestic Politics and the Crucible of War* (University of Michigan Press, 1996); D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, "The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816–1985," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (1996), 239–57; Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[34] An argument sharing this insight has been made to suggest that a doctrine heavily reliant on the potential use of nuclear weapons compels policymakers to adopt a more escalatory approach

In addition, this dissertation contributes to the study on military strategy in international relations by suggesting a new way of thinking about military strategy, distinct from how previous scholarship classifies military strategy.[35] I suggest that focusing on the cost aspect of a great power's military strategy helps us understand its level of reputational concern and its likelihood of peripheral belligerence. It is possible that the cost-absorption level of military strategy may have causal impacts on other aspects of foreign policy. Also, it is possible that different ways of thinking about military strategy can broaden our understanding on its impact on politics.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to the study on reputation in international relations. First, it advances the debate on when states fight for reputation. Currently, two schools of thought are identified in this debate. One school stresses the role played by the perceived shadow of the future.[36] And the second school stresses the impact of individual

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to prove the "plausibility of the nuclear threat." See H. W. Brands, Jr., "Testing Massive Retaliation: Credibility and Crisis Management in the Taiwan Strait," *International Security* 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), 124–51. This argument, however, does not address the cost implications of different military strategies, which are central to the strategic reputational theory.

[35] For the offensive-defensive classification, see Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*; Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*; Kier, *Imagining War*. For the maneuver-attrition classification, see Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*; Bennett and Stam, "The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816–1985"; Reiter and Meek, "Determinants of Military Strategy, 1903–1994"; Malkasian, *A History of Modern Wars of Attrition*; Lee, *Power Shifts, Strategy and War*. For the direct-indirect classification, see Liddell Hart, *Strategy*; Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*; Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*.

[36] See Barbara F. Walter, "Building Reputation: Why Governments Fight Some Separatists but Not Others," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2006), 313–30; Barbara F. Walter, *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts Are so Violent* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Todd S.

leaders' reputational concerns on the likelihood of their states fighting for reputation.[37] The strategic reputational theory offers an explanation distinct from these two schools, as it posits that the value of reputation depends on a state's military strategic thinking rather than future expectations or individual leader features. Second, this dissertation has an implication for the debate on the justifiability of fighting for reputation and credibility. Reputation has traditionally been considered an important asset in many domains in international relations.[38] However, there is a clear disagreement among scholars today

Sechser, "Winning without a Fight: Power, Reputation, and Compellent Threats in International Crises" (Stanford University, 2007); Todd S. Sechser, "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power," *International Organization* 64, no. 4 (October 2010), 627–60. For experimental findings in support of this school of thought, see Dustin H. Tingley and Barbara F. Walter, "The Effect of Repeated Play on Reputation Building: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (2011), 343–65. For the effect of the audience size on the reputational motivation in international conflicts, see Joe Clare and Vesna Danilovic, "Multiple Audiences and Reputation Building in International Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 6 (December 1, 2010): 860–82. The role of the shadow of the future or the expectations of future challenges in increasing the reputational motivation has also been noted by economists. See, for example, Milgrom and Roberts, "Predation, Reputation, and Entry Deterrence"; Kreps and Wilson, "Reputation and Imperfect Information."

[37] Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, "Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation," *World Politics* 68, no. 2 (April 2016): 341–81; Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation*.

[38] On reputation in international law and organizations, see George W. Downs and Michael A. Jones, "Reputation, Compliance, and International Law," *The Journal of Legal Studies* 31, no. S1 (2002): S95–114; Beth A. Simmons, "International Law and State Behavior: Commitment and Compliance in International Monetary Affairs," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 4 (2000): 819–35. On reputation in alliance politics, see Douglas M. Gibler, "The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (2008): 426–54; Mark JC Crescenzi et al., "Reliability, Reputation, and Alliance Formation," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2012): 259–74; Gregory D. Miller, *The Shadow of the Past: The Influence of Reputation on Alliance Choices* (Cornell University Press, 2012). On international finance, see

on whether fighting for reputation is a wise policy.[39] According to the strategic reputational theory, there is no answer that is always right or wrong in this debate, as fighting for reputation can be considered a wiser policy when military-strategic considerations ask for it. Schelling's statement that reputation is "one of the few things worth fighting for" is then truer under the right strategic conditions.

1.5. Overview

This dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 elaborates the logic behind the strategic reputational theory of peripheral belligerence, discusses alternative explanations, and describes the empirical strategy for testing the theory. Chapter 3 applies the strategic reputational theory to explain the U.S. decision to intervene in Vietnam in 1965. Chapter 4 tests the theory against the case of Japan's decision to invade China in 1937. Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by summarizing key findings, discussing theoretical and policy implications, and suggesting avenues for future research.

Michael Tomz, *Reputation and International Cooperation: Sovereign Debt across Three Centuries* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

[39] For reputation critics, see Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1996); Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Cornell University Press, 2005); For a recent response from reputation advocates, see Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015), 473–95.

Chapter 2. Explaining Peripheral Belligerence

This chapter presents a new theory to explain modern great power peripheral belligerence, proceeding in three parts. First, I develop the strategic reputational theory by articulating its underlying logic and operationalizing its explanatory variable, and then explain how it accounts for peripheral belligerence. Second, I discuss alternative explanations for peripheral belligerence, explicitly outlining their empirical predictions. Finally, I describe the empirical strategy used to evaluate the explanatory power of the strategic reputational theory.

2.1. Strategy, reputation and peripheral belligerence

Like most phenomena studied in international relations, peripheral belligerence can result from multiple factors. And this dissertation specifically highlights reputational motivations as a key driver. In this section, I first explain how certain military-strategic considerations combine to form what I call cost-absorbent strategic thinking, heightening great powers' concerns about their perceived resolve. Then, I detail why peripheral belligerence often becomes an expected outcome when great powers face these intensified reputational pressures.

2.1.1. The logic of strategic reputational theory

If reputation is a key driver of peripheral belligerence by modern great powers, explaining peripheral belligerence requires understanding when reputation building emerges as an especially important policy goal.[40] According to the strategic reputational theory, the value that a great power places on its reputation for resolve – and thus its incentive to fight for it – is primarily shaped by military-strategic considerations related to the anticipated costs of future conflict.[41] When military-strategic considerations lead

[40] I define reputation for resolve as a reputation for bearing – or willingness to bear – the costs associated with fighting. The concept of resolve inherently depends on the expected costs of a given action. For example, in security and military affairs, a state's resolve is typically understood as its willingness to use force despite potential costs. Resolve matters precisely because action entails significant costs. Therefore, a state's reputation for resolve in international politics is essentially others' perceptions of its willingness to tolerate the costs of war. For examples of international relations scholarship adopting this view, see Robert H. Johnson, "Exaggerating America's Stakes in Third World Conflicts," *International Security* 10, no. 3 (1985), 42; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995), 379–414; Todd S. Sechser, "Winning without a Fight: Power, Reputation, and Compellent Threats in International Crises" (Stanford University, 2007); Kathryn McNabb Cochran, "Strong Horse or Paper Tiger?: Assessing the Reputational Effects of War Fighting" (Duke University, 2011); Dianne Pfundstein Chamberlain, *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States* (Georgetown University Press, 2016); Joshua Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2016); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal Determination in International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

[41] While states incur various kinds of costs such as economic and political when fighting, I specifically focus on human costs, which represent the ultimate price that states pay in wars. Also, human costs are the most direct consequence of actual military confrontation, making them intrinsically tied to military-strategic considerations, which form the core logic of my theory.

states to anticipate directly absorbing unusually high costs in future conflict, cost-absorbent strategic thinking emerges, intensifying the strategic imperative to demonstrate resolve.[42]

Although it is intuitive to think that military-strategic considerations affect war costs, no existing analytical framework highlights the costs belligerences expect to incur.[43] Existing frameworks (e.g., offensive-defensive, maneuver-attritional, direct-indirect) are useful in other contexts but fail to adequately capture the specific cost dynamics great powers face in different strategic situations. For example, knowing that a state employs an offensive doctrine alone does not clarify whether it will incur relatively higher or lower costs during conflict. Similarly, great powers adopting attritional strategies might not always expect especially high costs if certain non-doctrinal factors such as technological superiority are present.

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[42] To some, military-strategic considerations here would be equivalent to military strategy, as they concern a set of factors that are considered most central in shaping a state's expected costs of war: strategic objectives as the "ends," doctrine as the "ways," and military technology as the "means. On this view on military strategy, see, for example, Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2013); M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Jeremy Black, *Military Strategy* (Yale University Press, 2020). On the definitions of military strategy focusing more on the "ways, " see, for example, Liddell Hart, *Strategy*; Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*; Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 28; Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, 13; Kier, *Imagining War*; Stam, *Win, Lose, or Draw*; Reiter and Meek, "Determinants of Military Strategy, 1903–1994"; Malkasian, *A History of Modern Wars of Attrition*; Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*; Lee, *Power Shifts, Strategy and War*.

Great powers anticipating higher costs in a major war based on military-strategic considerations have greater incentives to cultivate a strong reputation for resolve. Failure to appear resolute in general can invite challenges in peacetime and embolden resistance during wartime, underscoring the strategic value of a reputation for resolve in international relations. For example, great powers generally believe that they can issue more credible threats when others adversaries believe they are willing to tolerate the costs of conflict.[44] However, the expected consequences of peacetime challenges and wartime resistance are particularly severe for states anticipating their major war to be particularly costly. Thus, for these states, the strategic benefit of having a strong reputation for resolve for deterring challenges and weakening hostile resistance is especially significant. While all states would prefer a stronger reputation for resolve, those with cost-absorbent strategic thinking have the strongest motivation to build and maintain such a reputation. As a result, for these states, reputation building becomes a central priority in foreign policy. The logic is illustrated in Figure 2.1. below.

[44] Understanding this, leaders always care about reputation and are, to some extent, motivated to fight for reputation. See James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995), 400. While some scholars argue that reputation (or a state's past record) does not significantly influence future interactions, it is an entirely different matter whether leaders themselves subscribe to this view and act accordingly. Moreover, the recent criticisms of reputational building have gained attention precisely because they challenge the conventional wisdom shared among leaders that reputation matters. Notable critics include Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990* (University of Michigan Press, 1994); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1996); Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

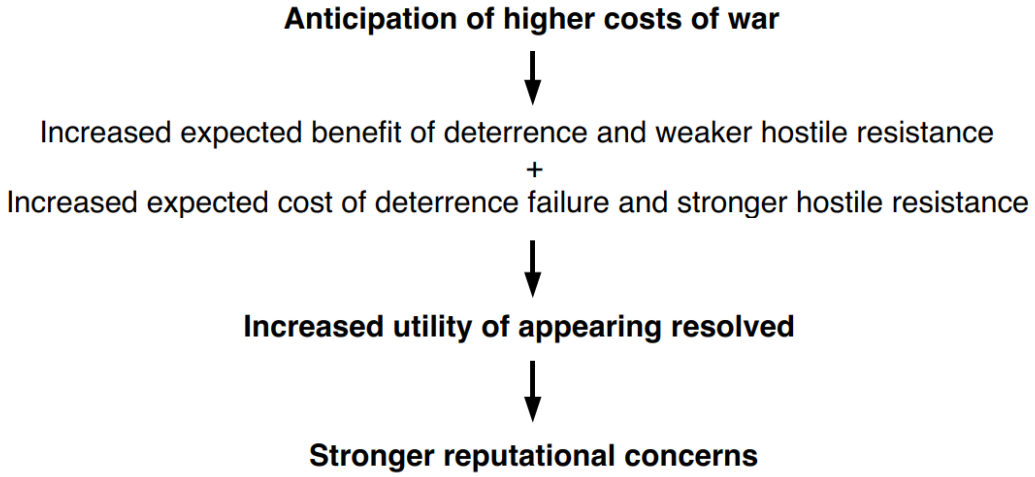

Figure 2.1. The logic of the strategic reputational theory

This logic shares an important element with previous scholarly works highlighting the relationship between the strategic environment and the utility of reputation building. Scholars have traditionally focused on the impact of expectations of a repeated game on the strength of the reputational motivation. Economists suggest that firms engage in reputation building especially in the circumstances under which they expect to "deal with each other repeatedly in related circumstances."[45] This insight is embraced by political scientists who argue that expectations of the repeated games drive state behavior

[45] Paul Milgrom and John Roberts, "Predation, Reputation, and Entry Deterrence," *Journal of Economic Theory* 27, no. 2 (1982), 280–312; David M. Kreps and Robert Wilson, "Reputation and Imperfect Information," *Journal of Economic Theory* 27, no. 2 (1982), 253–79.

and choices within a range of contexts involving the use of force.[46] The common assumption here is that reputation-building policy choices are considered more attractive and rational when the expected cost of a weak reputation is greater. The strategic reputational theory shares this assumption. The difference is that, for the strategic reputational theory, the expected cost of a weak reputation stems from current military-strategic conditions and choices rather than from expectations of repeated future interactions.

The logic of the strategic reputational theory is not only sound in deductive reasoning but also observable in the real world. For example, the strategic value of reptation became significantly more important as the costs of conflict rose dramatically with the advent of nuclear weapons.[47] Armies trained to fight in line formation directly absorbed the costs of battle, making their image more valuable compared to the modern ones that engage under concealment and cover. One can also consider hypothetical examples. Had Austro-Hungarians before the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 better

[46] Sechser, "Winning without a Fight: Power, Reputation, and Compellent Threats in International Crises"; Barbara F. Walter, *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts Are so Violent* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Joe Clare and Vesna Danilovic, "Multiple Audiences and Reputation Building in International Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 6 (December 1, 2010), 860–82; Dustin H. Tingley and Barbara F. Walter, "The Effect of Repeated Play on Reputation Building: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (2011), 343–65; Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019), 117–59.

[47] Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton University Press, 1998).

understood the cost implications of the Dreyse needle rifle, which allowed Prussian soldiers to reload in a prone position, they might have more actively sought ways to build a reputation to offset their qualitative inferiority on the battlefield. Similarly, if more British in the 1930s had agreed with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's belief that "the bomber will always get through" and had fully grasped the exceptionally high costs of the impending war with Germany, in which London would be heavily bombed by the Nazis, they likely would have placed greater emphasis on reputation well in advance of the war.[48]

How does this logic operate in the real world? To be clear, I do not expect cost-absorbent strategic thinking to function as a direct rationale or a direct line of reasoning that leaders articulate. Rather, I expect it to operate as an underlying structural environment shaping leaders' deliberations and decisions. Individual decision-makers may not always consciously recognize or explicitly articulate the implications of cost-absorbent strategic thinking, yet their choices and judgments are nonetheless systematically influenced – often subconsciously – by the strategic environment.[49] Often,

[48] The positive relationship between higher costs and the value of a resolute image is evident beyond politics. In sports or business negotiations that are particularly time-consuming and physically demanding, participants may be inclined to take actions that signal their toughness and resilience.

[49] This creates a problem for empirical analysis, which I address in the section on the empirical strategy.

it is also the case that policymakers often do not explicitly talk about, and attribute their decisions to, environmental forces that are so obvious.[50] Phenomena of this nature are not uncommon in politics or, indeed, human affairs more broadly. For example, scholars argue that democratic states internalize norms favoring the peaceful resolution of disputes, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflict among democracies. Yet leaders would rarely cite or acknowledge this mechanism as explicit influencing their decision-making, as it serves as a broader environmental context that subtly shapes their decisions.

The logic holds regardless of the foreign policy goals of the great power in question. Great powers with any set of foreign policy objectives have more to gain from having a stronger reputation for resolve when their next major war is expected to be particularly costly. On one hand, the expected benefit of having a strong reputation is greater for status-quo powers with cost-absorbent strategic thinking. All else being equal, great powers anticipating higher costs in a major war have stronger incentives to avoid such conflicts. These powers are more likely to be wary of challenges that could escalate into a major war. As a result, they have a significant interest in deterring such challenges from arising in the first place. Since a great power is more likely to succeed in deterrence when

[50] For example, President John F. Kennedy and his advisors rarely discussed broader nuclear strategic debates during the Cuban missile crisis, not because they ignored them, but because they were already "steeped" in those debates that subtly but profoundly shaped their perception of the situation in Cuba. See Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 15.

it is known for its willingness to bear the costs of fighting, a strong reputation for resolve helps these powers avoid war by increasing the likelihood that their adversaries will be dissuaded from initiating conflict.

Similarly, revisionist great powers dissatisfied with the status quo also stand to benefit more from a strong reputation when they have cost-absorbent strategic thinking. These powers can issue more credible coercive threats with a stronger reputation, which is especially valuable when the costs of war in the event of coercion failure, are higher. A strong reputation allows a great power to issue more effective threats to its adversaries without resorting to violence, which it believes to be particularly costly. Finally, revisionist great powers desiring to challenge the status quo through a major war should also be strongly motivated to cultivate a reputation for resolve when they have cost-absorbent strategic thinking. If they understand that victory in the upcoming war is likely to go to the side more capable of enduring the costs of fighting, the value of a strong reputation becomes even greater. A robust reputation signals to adversaries that they are willing to bear the costs of war. Conversely, when the expected costs of war are relatively low, great powers are less likely to prioritize reputation-building, as a cheaper or quicker war may not require the image of high resolve.[51] The value of reputation in a great

[51] In this case, fighting in the periphery becomes less desirable. When a revisionist great power believes that it can achieve victory while avoiding high war costs, it is likely to act more aggressively toward its adversary. This aligns with the argument that war is more likely when a

power's foreign policy and its likelihood of fighting for it is then a direct consequence of its expected costs of war against its great power adversary.[52] Great powers expected to directly absorb particularly high costs of great power war (in other words, possessing cost-absorbent strategic thinking) should care more about reputation and thus are more likely to search for ways to demonstrate resolve.

2.1.2. Operationalizing cost-absorbent strategic thinking

Above, I explained how a great power's cost-absorbent strategic thinking should heighten its concerns about how its resolve is perceived by its adversary. This raises an important question: when does a great power anticipate directly absorbing particularly high costs of war against its major adversary? Since cost-absorbent strategic thinking is an abstract concept that cannot be directly observed, it is crucial to identify concrete indicators of its presence. To achieve this, we must deductively determine the characteristics of great powers that expect to directly bear exceptionally high war costs and thus exhibit cost-absorbent strategic thinking.[53] Below, I operationalize the

potential aggressor anticipates an easier and quicker victory. See, for example, Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*; Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

[52] Whether the information about a great power's expected costs of war is known to external actors is not important, as it does not change the value of this reputation.

[53] In the real world, the expected costs of war would exist on a continuous scale and vary across different contexts. And the intensity of reputational concerns for a state would also be on a continuous scale. However, for the purposes here, great powers are coded as having or lacking cost-absorbent strategic thinking in a binary manner.

explanatory variable of my strategic reputational theory through its two main components: the expectations of high costs and direct absorption of those costs.

When are the expected costs of war particularly high?

I expect expectations of particularly high war costs to emerge when military-strategic considerations lead to at least one of the following conclusions: high battlefield vulnerability and high homeland vulnerability. While other factors may contribute to cost expectations, these two conditions are likely the most evident, realistic and generalizable. Great powers facing at least one of these strategic vulnerabilities are expected to bear significantly higher costs in a major war compared to those that do not. As I discuss below, military technology plays a crucial role in shaping how great powers assess their battlefield and homeland vulnerabilities.

First, a country's battlefield vulnerability is largely determined by technology which shapes the qualitative balance of opposing forces on the battlefield.[54] Military forces rely on weapons that reflect the technological capabilities of the state that equip

[54] Numerical balances between opposing forces should have limited impact on a state's perceived vulnerability on the battlefield. While a side with overwhelming numerical superiority may hope to reduce its own losses by quickly overpowering its opponent, such conditions are rare between great power that, by definition, possess the capability to avoid defeat in an all-out defensive war even against the system's most powerful state. A great power would typically have the resources to field forces that are not decisively outnumbered in the main theater of war. Moreover, numerical superiority does not guarantee lower costs and numerical inferiority does not always mean higher costs; a qualitatively inferior force may still suffer disproportionately high losses despite having more troops.

them. Asymmetrical advancements in weaponry that enhance an adversary's destructive power inherently increase the costs of warfare.[55] For example, facing an adversary whose army is significantly more mechanized or lacking the means to counter hostile air forces that can provide, for example, close air support to enemy ground troops should create a clear perception of battlefield vulnerability. Another example of high battlefield vulnerability is nuclear imbalance. Confronting an adversary with nuclear capabilities should be considered highly costly for a great power without such capabilities, as the possibility of battlefield or strategic nuclear use can never be entirely ruled out. These logics led a Chinese general, before China's decision to intervene in Korea in October 1950, to warn, "The United States is highly modernized. In addition, it possesses the atomic bomb. I have no certainty of success. The central leadership should consider this issue with great care."[56] While it is difficult to predict a priori which weapon technology

[55] The extent of a state's technological disadvantage relative to its enemy is generally positively correlated with the level of costs it would incur in conflict. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "The Costs of War: A Rational Expectations Approach," *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 2 (1983), 350; Valentino, Huth, and Croco, "Bear Any Burden?," 533.

[56] Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Litai Xue, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 167. On the contrary, the U.S. believed China to be technologically inferior and thus expected fighting against it relatively cheap. See Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 82–84.

will dominate the thinking on war costs in a given case, it is clear that it must play a central role.

The balance of weaponry, which enhances destructive power and protects friendly forces, ultimately determines whether a clear battlefield vulnerability exists. Importantly, geography decides the types of weaponry that matter in leaders' perception of the qualitative force balances. If the expected main theater of war between two great powers is on land, the balance of armored vehicles, especially tanks, should be the primary technological consideration during much of the twentieth century. For example, a great power anticipating a land war with its principal adversary would perceive clear battlefield vulnerability if it possesses overwhelmingly fewer tanks available for deployment in the main theater of operations. Conversely, if the primary battles are expected to take place at sea because of the geographical locations of the great powers in question, the qualitative force balance on land would become less relevant. Instead, the balance in the most advanced naval vessels of the time or asymmetrical capabilities (submarine forces) may become the key technological concern, while. As such, the geography of the anticipated conflict determines which military capabilities should be considered when analyzing historical evidence.[57]

[57] Aggregate numerical military balance, at least between great powers, is considered less important in determining the relative costs of war. Great powers are assumed to possess sufficient resources to mobilize for war once hostilities begin, making any conflict between them costly for both sides. While numerical balance may influence combat outcomes at the tactical and operational levels, it should be less decisive in shaping the overall costs of war. Carl von

Second, the vulnerability of a great power's homeland in future major conflict is also largely shaped by technological factors. Historically, a state's homeland security depended largely on its geographic position in relation to anticipated theaters of war. Eighteenth-century German states, for example, were encircled by great powers capable of offensive operations, which in turn raised their anticipated costs of war. In contrast, natural obstacles such as large bodies of water provided critical protection, allowing insular countries like Britain to worry less about homeland security. As Mearsheimer observed, "large bodies of water profoundly limit the power-projection capabilities of land forces," despite modern technological advances, launching a large-scale amphibious invasion remains a "formidable task."[58] Consequently, expectations about the next war, including its human cost, could not be fully understood without considering geography. To paraphrase Napoleon, "the expected costs of war for all powers were embedded in their geography."[59] Importantly, the twentieth century, which is my temporal scope of analysis, witnessed a shift in this thinking with advances in aircraft and missile

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Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1976), 195; John J. Mearsheimer, "Assessing the Conventional Balance: The 3: 1 Rule and Its Critics," *International Security* 13, no. 4 (1989), 54–89.

[58] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 83, 116.

[59] Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 41.

technologies, diminishing the dominant role that geography once played in determining homeland vulnerability.

When the adversary acquires technologies that allow it to inflict significant damage on a state's society without having to defeat its military, its expected costs of war should rise considerably. The longer-ranged and the more penetrating the enemy's new weapon is, the more obvious it would be that home territory is vulnerable. A very good example of such a weapon is intercontinental ballistic missiles that came into place roughly a decade after the beginning of the Cold War. A great power would anticipate higher costs in a conflict with an opponent armed with missiles capable of reaching its major cities. As I discuss in Chapter 3, this happened to the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s as Soviet acquisition of ICBMs compelled U.S. planners to rapidly update the potential costs of war against the Communist bloc. Before the missile age, bombers were the most effective weapon to inflict damage on the enemy society.[60]

In order to determine the existence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking in historical cases, I qualitatively examine how leaders perceived their country's qualitative military balance or homeland vulnerability. I consider a quantitative approach inadequate for determining the value of my explanatory variable for two reasons. First, it is difficult to establish a fixed casualty threshold for cost-absorbent strategic thinking. For instance, if

[60] Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

1,000 casualties were set as the benchmark for such thinking, should a great power expecting 990 casualties be considered as lacking it? Also, the cost implications of a given casualty level should vary among states and leaders. While some may view 1,000 casualties as prohibitive, others might not. The perspective can vary due to many reasons including the country's population size, regime types or individual leader beliefs.[61] Second, even when objective technological indicators suggest that cost-absorbent strategic thinking should be in place, it may not emerge if leaders fail to perceive them. In such cases, relying solely on fixed numerical metrics risks misjudging the true value of the explanatory variable.

When determines direct cost absorption?

If an analysis determines that a great power anticipated either clear battlefield vulnerability or high homeland vulnerability, the next step is to assess the likelihood of these vulnerabilities materializing. The perceived costs of war shaped by technological considerations always remain *potential* unless the probability of their occurrence is

[61] For example, democracies in general may be more casualty-sensitive. Bruce Bueno De Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4 (1995), 841–55; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (1998), 259–77; Joseph Paul Vasquez, "Shouldering the Soldiering: Democracy, Conscription, and Military Casualties," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 6 (2005), 849–73; Jonathan D. Caverley, "The Myth of Military Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2010), 119–57.

evaluated. Even when the expected costs of war are high, a great power does not necessarily exhibit cost-absorbent strategic thinking if it has means with which to reasonably evade or mitigate those costs. The extent to which a great power must directly absorb the human costs of war is primarily determined by the anticipated intensity of a next war, which is conditioned by its strategic objectives and doctrine.

A great power anticipates the direct absorption of war costs only when it possesses ambitious strategic objectives and a direct military doctrine. Conversely, if a great power pursues limited strategic objectives or adopts an indirect military doctrine, it is not considered to have cost-absorbent strategic thinking. This raises two key questions. What strategic objectives are considered ambitious rather than limited? And what doctrines are considered direct rather than indirect? First, strategic objectives are considered ambitious when at least one side in a great power rivalry seeks to significantly alter the status quo.[62]

[62] When the adversary is perceived to have ambitious aims, the great power must expect higher costs of war against it. For example, NATO's strategic objectives during the Cold War were ambitious because it believed that Moscow aimed to conquer all of Europe, not because it pursued aggressive objectives of its own. Therefore, even states with defensive and limited objectives can face high war costs due to their adversary's ambitions, potentially leading to a cost-absorbent strategy. When identifying cost-absorbent strategic thinking, whether a state's objectives are primarily offensive or defensive matters little. It is easy to think that, especially at the tactical level, the side with offensive objectives should expect heavier costs of fighting. For example, Clausewitz noted that "defense is easier than attack," because time is on the defendant's side and the defensing state can occupy more advantageous positions (Clausewitz, *On War*, 357–58). However, at the higher strategic level, the scale of strategic objectives possessed by the offensive side should determine the level of costs for both sides.

These objectives may include, but are not limited to, changing an adversary's leadership, conquering large areas of land, or forcing a major policy change. In contrast, a great power is considered to have limited strategic objectives when both it and its primary adversary are largely satisfied with the status quo and have minimal interest in modifying it. Figure 2.2. below illustrates how high expected costs of war (driven by technological developments) and the anticipation of directly absorbing these costs (shaped by strategic objectives and military doctrines) jointly produce cost-absorbent strategic thinking and thus should be considered.

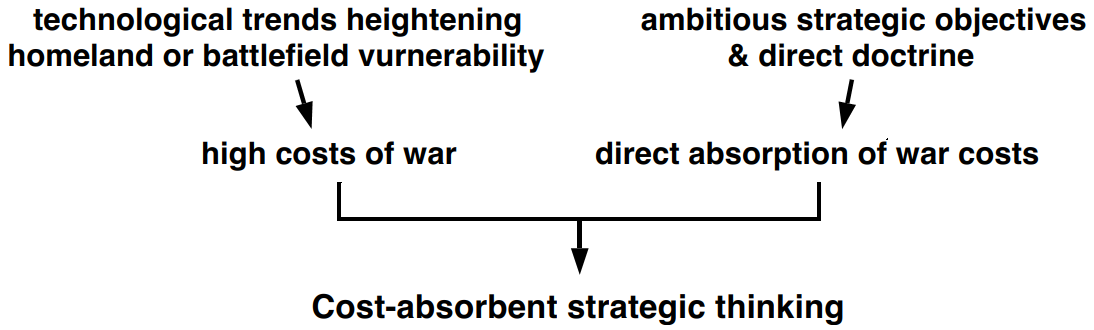

Figure 2.2. Operationalization of cost-absorbent strategic thinking

First, ambitious strategic objectives make the direct absorption of war costs more likely as they force the opponent to resist more fiercely, escalating the intensity of conflict. Ambitious objectives require active, larger-scale uses of military force and thus directly expose military forces to high battlefield vulnerability. For example, Nazi Germany

invading the Soviet Union in 1941 or Wilhelmine Germany with a naval strategy to coerce Britain into changing policy (risk fleet strategy) are considered to have ambitious strategic objectives. Ambitious strategic objectives also lead to the direct absorption of war costs in case of high homeland vulnerability as they are more likely to lead to an intense, highly escalatory war, increasing the likelihood of the homeland becoming a direct target of enemy attacks. In contrast, a great power with limited strategic objectives is much less likely to directly absorb the costs of war, anticipating the war to be limited in scale and intensity.

Second, a direct military doctrine is a doctrine that necessitates direct military engagement in the battlefield or that increases the likelihood of direct targeting of the homeland by the enemy state. In contrast, indirect doctrines enable indirect or minimum engagement or prevents the homeland from becoming a target, allowing the state to avoid cost-absorbent strategic thinking even when technology disfavors it. For example, military plans that seek to achieve quick victory through maneuver are meant to minimize direct cost absorption could be considered indirect doctrines for states with offensive aims. The absence of an indirect doctrine forces the state into attritional warfare, where direct and often prolonged engagement inevitably requires direct cost absorption. As Mearsheimer observes, "the attrition strategy, even when it proves ultimately successful, entails high costs.… Success will demand considerable casualties and

significant losses of equipment."[63] For states with defensive aims, a purely defensive doctrine relying on geographical obstacles or fortified positions serves as a good example of an indirect doctrine. For example, France in the interwar period adopted an indirect doctrine of defensive warfare, constructing the Maginot Line, a fortified barrier along the German border, to deter and repel an invasion without immediate large-scale engagement.

When technological conditions lead to high battlefield vulnerability, strategic objectives and doctrine determine the degree of cost absorption by determining the intensity of direct engagement between opposing militaries. When a great power perceives a clear battlefield vulnerability and, based on its objectives and doctrine, expects its forces to confront a superior adversary head-on, it is coded as having cost-absorbent strategic thinking. On the other hand, when technological conditions lead to high homeland vulnerability, strategic objectives and doctrine determine the degree of cost absorption by shaping the likelihood of the homeland becoming a direct target. If technological considerations place the great power homeland at significant risk, and if its strategic objectives and doctrine increase the likelihood of it becoming a target, it is coded as having cost-absorbent strategic thinking.

[63] Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 34.

2.1.3. Peripheral belligerence for reputation building

Above, I explained why great powers with cost-absorbent strategic thinking should have a greater interest in building a reputation for resolve as well as when they are likely to have such thinking. Now, I explain why peripheral belligerence is often an optimal policy choice for great powers seeking to build reputation.[64]

First, peripheral belligerence allows great powers to maximize reputational benefits. For illustration, consider three options available to a great power with cost-absorbent strategic thinking – first, do nothing; second, escalate against a great power adversary; third, fight in the periphery. The first option of doing nothing is not useful as it does not build reputation, as there is no risk and cost involved. The second and third options should strengthen a reputation for resolve. Especially, the third option of fighting in the periphery sends a strong signal regarding a great power's type as the intrinsic and strategic benefits of fighting there are small.[65] Only the toughest and most resolute powers would be willing to engage in conflicts where stakes are low. Relatedly, "surprising or unexpected circumstances" can be particularly useful for "leading

[64] Importantly, I do not claim that peripheral belligerence is always driven by reputational concerns and thus should always be explained by the strategic reputational theory. The theory would, however, provide a satisfying explanation particularly for great power peripheral conflicts driven by reputational concerns.

[65] Threats of force in the periphery may not be as effective as actual use of force in updating the actor's resolve. It could still be considered a rational choice for reputation-seeking great powers, however, as they increase the chances of actual conflicts that will generate costs. To paraphrase Schelling, assertive behavior "starts rocking the boat." See Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 105.

observers to draw new or updated inferences."[66] Regarding this logic, the following observation by Glenn Snyder is worth quoting in full:

> A determined and costly response to an attack on an objective which the enemy thinks means little to us in strategic and intrinsic terms is likely to give him greater pause with respect to his future aggressive intentions. Thus, if the objective is to "draw a line" to deter future aggression, perhaps the best place to draw it is precisely at places like Quemoy and Matsu. The enemy would reason that if the United Staes were willing to fight for a place of such trivial intrinsic and strategic value to itself, it must surely be willing to fight for other places of greater value.[67]

Snyder also considers it "desirable to fight on longer and in the face of a higher cost expectancy" if the goal is to "assure the enemy of our willingness to suffer costs in future contingencies."[68] Thus, a great power fighting in the periphery can lead observers to more

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[66] Don Casler and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Signaling, Resolve, and Reputation in International Politics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Reputation building is also one reason why economic sanctions are considered useful even when they do not seem to work. See Timothy M. Peterson, "Sending a Message: The Reputation Effect of US Sanction Threat Behavior," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2013): 672–82; Nicholas L. Miller, "The Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions," *International Organization* 68, no. 4 (2014), 913–44.

[67] Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, 36–38.

[68] Snyder, 38.

readily update their beliefs about its character and type regarding its resolve. The more clearly the target country or stake is peripheral, the clearer will the indicator be concerning the belligerent's character or type. And the clearer it is, the more effective would the updating of the beliefs be. In addition, the belligerent's likelihood of fighting in the non-periphery increases because the perceived value of the non-periphery as assessed by the adversary is now greater when a country in the the periphery was valuable enough to use force for. For example, if the values of Vietnam and Western Europe perceived by the Soviets in the 1960s were respectively 10 and 100, America's intervention in Vietnam should have increased what the Soviets believed the value of Vietnam to the U.S., say, from 10 to 20, and this should also have increased what was believed by them to be the value of Western Europe to the U.S., say from 100 to 110. This helps strengthen deterrence of aggression against Western Europe by reducing required credibility and strengthening actual credibility of the U.S. commitment.[69]

Now, consider the second option – escalating against a great power adversary. Compared to peripheral belligerence, it is less likely to send a strong signal of resolve. It typically occurs in non-peripheral regions, where well-established strategic interests such

[69] This logic is also reflected in Snyder's discussion of deterrence. See Snyder, 23. Notably, successful outcomes of peripheral belligerence are not necessary for reputation-seeking great powers. It is the deeds, rather than the outcomes, that matter in demonstrating resolve. As Schelling put it, resolve is "communicated by some performance." Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 3.

as the defense of the sphere of influence or the protection of key allies are already at stake. In these contexts, all great powers are expected to fight regardless of their inherent resolve. As Schelling noted, "military forces are commonly expected to defend their homelands, even to die gloriously in a futile effort at defense."[70] Since this willingness is assumed, escalation in the core yields relatively little new information and therefore leads to weaker updating of others' beliefs about the great power's resolve.[71]

One might ask whether escalation in the core should, in fact, be a more effective way to signal resolve, given that wars between great powers are generally more costly than peripheral conflicts. It is true that a war with a primary adversary would, in most cases, impose greater costs on a great power operating under cost-absorbent strategic thinking. Peripheral belligerence, by contrast, generally involves lower absolute costs and may appear less effective in demonstrating a willingness to bear the burdens of costly, major war. Importantly, however, the relevant comparison is not absolute cost but proportional cost. Although peripheral conflicts are less costly in absolute terms, the limited value of the periphery makes any incurred costs relatively more significant. It is

[70] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 35.

[71] Critics of deterrence theory may disagree with this. According to Hopf, for example, "it is hard to imagine why the leaders of any country would pay more attention to the behavior of their main adversary in unimportant areas of the globe than in areas and on issues that are absolutely vital to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and physical security of their country." Hopf, *Peripheral Visions*, 245–46.

this disproportionality that makes peripheral belligerence a particularly effective signal of resolve. Leaders do not expect that paying the costs of fighting in the periphery will convince others of their willingness to absorb the full costs of a great power war. Rather, they believe that it signals a general willingness to accept costly commitments even in places of marginal importance, thereby shaping perceptions of national resolve more broadly.

Second, peripheral belligerence is attractive for reputation-seeking great powers because it represents a relatively safer form of military engagement, allowing them to project resolve with lower risks. While peripheral belligerence does involve costs (it would not effectively build a reputation if the costs were negligible), its ultimate, absolute costs are lower than those of what might happen as a result of the second option of escalation against a great power adversary. Additionally, peripheral belligerence carries lower risks of escalation to a major great power war, compared to escalation in non-peripheral regions. The problem with such a war is that it would be too costly for the great power that is primarily interested in strengthening its reputation for the future. Thus, engaging in a major war especially for reputational purposes could defeat the original purpose.[72] For this reason, Snyder considered peripheral places "where it is least

[72] If the main purpose is to show risk acceptance, a great power may benefit more from threatening to fight in the non-periphery. However, peripheral belligerence will be more desirable for the purpose of proving willingness to withstand the costs of fighting.

likely that the war will spiral to all-out dimensions" as ideal when a great power needs to "fight a certain amount of war, or risk a certain amount of war, to convince the other side of our willingness to fight."[73] It would be preferable to avoid direct confrontation with a great power adversary today, at least until a reputation is sufficiently built. In short, peripheral belligerence serves as a better tool for signaling resolve while minimizing immediate risks.

My discussion above explains why great powers experiencing cost-absorbent strategic thinking should have stronger reputational motivations to engage in peripheral belligerence. Importantly, however, peripheral belligerence is one policy choice for great power leaders with heightened reputational concerns and does not always occur when there exists cost-absorbent strategic thinking. Then, when is peripheral belligerence more likely to be pursued as a result of cost-absorbent strategic thinking? There are several conditions that should make it especially likely. First, great powers with cost-absorbent strategic thinking should be more likely to engage in peripheral belligerence sooner rather than later. The strategic need to demonstrate resolve should be greatest and most urgent as soon as cost-absorbent strategic thinking gains dominance. In addition, great powers with cost-absorbent strategic thinking are not expected to endlessly persist in peripheral belligerence because it does not take perpetual fighting to build reputation

[73] Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, 37.

and it is difficult for even the most powerful countries to continue to fight wars especially in regions of marginal importance.

Second, peripheral belligerence is more likely to occur as a result of cost-absorbent strategic thinking when a suitable target country is available. The strategic reputational theory posits that cost-absorbent strategic thinking strengthen reputational concerns, one policy outcome of which is peripheral belligerence. However, even when reputational concerns are strong, peripheral belligerence cannot materialize without a viable opportunity. Great powers cannot simply initiate military action in the periphery without a plausible pretext or justification, even if doing so would serve reputational objectives. And, in some cases, great powers' strategic reputational concerns may be addressed in different forms, such as confrontational policy toward other great powers. That said, it is generally not difficult for great powers to identify potential targets for peripheral belligerence. By definition, great powers are capable of militarily pursuing interests beyond their borders. And they frequently seek to influence events in peripheral regions where their prior commitments, short of the use of force, may create momentum that makes further escalation more tempting.

Third, peripheral belligerence is more likely when great powers have strategic room for maneuver. A great power would have a greater opportunity for peripheral belligerence when, for example, its primary adversary is not expected to start aggression in the near future and the use of force in the periphery is not expected to significantly

weaken its military preparedness for a potential great power war. For these reasons, great powers with strong allies or those protected by geographical obstacles would have greater strategic room for engaging in peripheral belligerence than those without them. It is not entirely coincidental that the U.S., as a sea power, was more prone to interventions beyond its immediate sphere of influence during the Cold War than its land power rival, the Soviet Union.[74] If a great power initiates a peripheral war to build reputation despite knowing that a great power conflict will occur soon or a diversion of forces would invite a major aggression, peripheral belligerence would be a self-defeating policy.

2.1.4. Summary and Potential Critiques

To summarize, peripheral belligerence is often an optimal policy for great powers experiencing cost-absorbent strategic thinking. Great powers anticipating the direct absorption of particularly high war costs – due to high homeland vulnerability or high battlefield vulnerability – are highly likely to experience the reputational imperative to demonstrate resolve in general. And peripheral belligerence can be considered an effective but relatively safe policy for these powers with significant reputational concerns.

[74] Donald E. Nuechterlein, "National Interests and Foreign Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Analysis and Decision-Making," *Review of International Studies* 2, no. 3 (1976), 260.

It would be more likely when conditions leading to cost-absorbent strategic thinking are relatively new and when an opportunity to use force in the periphery exists.

Two potential critiques for the strategic reputational theory for peripheral belligerence are addressed here. First, questions may be raised over the rationality of peripheral belligerence for great powers experiencing severe vulnerability and thus anticipating especially high war costs. Why do great powers not address the situation so that they can escape from cost-absorbent strategic thinking? By doing so, they may not have to fight in the periphery. If technological trends are too difficult to reverse, why not simply modify strategic objectives or establish a new doctrine that could allow avoiding direct absorption of war costs and mitigate cost-absorbent strategic thinking? While it is possible, great powers often lack the freedom for adjusting or abandoning existing strategic objectives as well as the ability to acquire a new doctrine. Strategic objectives tend to be a natural extension of broader foreign policy goals and modifying the former would require a major adjustment of the latter, something that great powers would be reluctant to do. For example, the fact that the United States confronted a highly revisionist adversary in Europe that it intended to deter without maintaining a large military did not convince Washington to modify its strategic objectives in any meaningful way.

Second, questions may be raised over the validity of the causal relationships specified here. For example, is it possible that the emergence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking and stronger reputational concerns are simultaneously caused by a third factor?

Similarly, is it possible that the emergence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking and the occurrence of great power peripheral belligerence is caused by a common third factor? To answer these questions, it is deductively difficult to identify a plausible third factor or confounding variable that would allow one to answer in the affirmative to the questions above and cast doubt on the causal relationships that I propose. Any lingering concerns about spurious correlations can be addressed through empirical analysis showing robust covariation regardless of the presence of tertiary factors. The risk of reverse causation is also very low. It is difficult to imagine how a great power's policy in the periphery might affect the intensity of its reputational concerns. It is also unlikely that a great power's reputational concerns influence its thinking on the costs of future conflict. For example, America's reputational concerns and policy on Vietnam during the Cold War hardly affected its strategic thinking in the European theater.

2.2. Alternative Explanations

This section introduces alternative explanations for peripheral belligerence and explicitly outlines their empirical predictions. Drawing from international relations scholarship on war, foreign intervention, and overexpansion, I identify three major alternative explanations to my strategic reputational theory – overvaluation, resources, and domestic politics.

2.2.1. Overvaluation

The first alternative explanation for peripheral belligerence suggests that great powers may overvalue the strategic or intrinsic importance of the target country when deciding to militarily intervene. If a decision to use force is driven by reasons other than the criteria outlined in the introductory chapter for distinguishing the periphery from the non-periphery, it is considered that overvaluation of the target country played a strong causal role.

There can be numerous reasons why great powers might exaggerate or inflate the true value of regions that are largely peripheral to great power competition and justify the use of force. First, a peripheral country's material value, however minimal, may still serve as a justification for intervention. As discussed earlier, while all countries possess some intrinsic worth, only a select few are valuable enough to warrant the use of force. Second, a peripheral country's strategic significance may be overstated due to its geographical location relative to other countries. Despite lacking proximity to a great power's homeland or other countries of core importance, a country may still be perceived strategically somewhat relevant. For example, a country that is largely peripheral could be considered a starting block that can trigger other dominoes to fall in a region.[75]

[75] Robert Jervis, "Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior," in *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 31.

Although the domino theory itself has good logics, it is often said that it frequently misled the U.S. government to be wrongly obsessed with the affairs and events in the Third World. One can say, for example, that, while Vietnam was quite clearly considered a peripheral part by most Americans, key U.S. decision-makers overvalued it, portraying it as strategically important and therefore concluding that fighting in it should serve significant strategic interests in the long term, if not immediately.

Furthermore, a peripheral country may be overvalued as a potential rear area in an anticipated conflict. A great power might attack an otherwise peripheral country out of fear that, in a future war against a major adversary, the country could become a security liability in the rear. Fearing this possibility, a great power may find it reasonable to preventively neutralize the threat by attacking the peripheral country in advance. While such concerns appear to have existed in some instances of peripheral belligerence, it is necessary to assess the extent to which they genuinely shaped decisions to use force. Overvaluation of a peripheral country's significance in great power competition can stem from various sources, including individual leader factors.[76] And justifications may be

[76] For recent scholarly works highlighting the role of individual leaders, see, for example, Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Cornell University Press, 2011); Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization* 68, no. 3 (2014), 527–59; Matthew Fuhrmann and Michael C. Horowitz, "When Leaders Matter: Rebel Experience and Nuclear Proliferation," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 1 (January 2015), 72–87; Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation*; Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, "Nuclear Beliefs: A Leader-Focused Theory of Counter-Proliferation," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (October 2, 2017), 545–74; Allan Dafoe and Devin

advanced by leaders who genuinely hold these beliefs or those who invoke them strategically without truly subscribing to them.

When does the overvaluation explanation gain or lose support? The overvaluation explanation posits that great power intervention in the periphery is driven by decision-makers' belief that a peripheral country possesses strategic value worth defending or seizing through military force. It gains support if evidence shows that such a belief was widespread among those in the top leadership and also actively influenced the decision to intervene. Importantly, the mere presence of an overvaluation belief does not confirm the explanation. It is disconfirmed if evidence indicates that leaders inflated the country's value merely to justify intervention while concealing their true motivations. Likewise, if the overvaluation belief, even if present, played little or no role in the actual decision-making process, it would weaken the validity of this explanation.

2.2.2. Resources

The second alternative explanation for great power intervention in the periphery highlights the motivation for securing natural resources. This explanation is a derivative of a broader school of thought that finds an important source of foreign policy in economic reasons. Scholars have for long suspected economic reasons as a driver of great

Caughey, "Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation," *World Politics* 68, no. 2 (April 2016), 341–81.

powers' use of force (aggression, expansion or intervention).[77] While it is often argued that great powers of the nineteenth century expanded overseas for various economic reasons including access to new markets,[78] the argument makes much less sense for twentieth century great power use of force in the periphery after the age of imperialism and colonialism. One economic reason for peripheral intervention that remained still quite strong in the twentieth century is the great power interest in natural resources. Some predict resources to be an even more significant reason for which great powers may want to fight in the future. According to Klare, for example, the military plays "a key role in protecting resource supplies" and predict the resource-rich regions (e.g., the Caspian

[77] Harry Magdoff, *The Age of Imperialism: The Economics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Monthly Review, 1968); Gabriel Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Power and Purpose* (Beacon Press, 1969); Heather Dean, "Scarce Resources: The Dynamics of American Imperialism," in *Readings in U.S. Imperialism* (Porter Sargent Publisher, 1971); Theodore H. Moran, "Foreign Expansion as an 'Institutional Necessity' for US Corporate Capitalism: The Search for a Radical Model," *World Politics* 25, no. 3 (1973): 369–86; James William Morley, *The Fateful Choice: Japan's Negotiations with the United States* (Columbia University Press, 1980); Bruce Cumings, "The Origins and Development of the Northeast Asian Political Economy: Industrial Sectors, Product Cycles, and Political Consequences," *International Organization* 38, no. 1 (1984): 1–40; Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Cornell University Press, 1987); Joel Hayward, "Hitler's Quest for Oil: The Impact of Economic Considerations on Military Strategy, 1941–42," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 1995): 94–135; Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (Metropolitan Books, 2001).

[78] Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*. Some recent scholars claim that state foreign policies are often driven by private and corporate economic interests. See, for example, Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Power and Purpose*; Moran, "Foreign Expansion as an 'Institutional Necessity' for US Corporate Capitalism."

basin and the South China Sea) to gain greater strategic importance.[79] Drawing from this scholarship, I consider the pursuit of natural resources as an important competing explanation to my theory.

Previous studies have investigated the relationship between natural resources and intervention by analyzing particular great powers and particular historical periods. For example, many suggest that Japan's expansionist policy leading to the Pacific War was driven by its pursuit of resources.[80] Some claim that Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 because of his desire to secure oil.[81] Nevertheless, quantitative studies of great power interventions, especially, in the postwar era generally find the claim that great powers intervene in less developed foreign countries for natural resources largely unconvincing.[82] Since the question is not entirely settled, it is essential to empirically test the resources explanation in case studies of great power intervention in the modern era.

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[79] Klare, *Resource Wars*, 9, 214.

[80] Morley, *The Fateful Choice: Japan's Negotiations with the United States*; Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*.

[81] Hayward, "Hitler's Quest for Oil."

[82] Mats Hammarstrom, "Securing Resources by Force: The Need for Raw Materials and Military Intervention by Major Powers in Less Developed Countries" (PhD dissertation, Uppsala University, 1986); Ronnie Dan Lipschutz, "Ore Wars: Access to Strategic Materials, International Conflict, and the Foreign Policies of States" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1987); Mats Hammarstrom, "Military Conflict and Mineral Supplies: Results Relevant to Wider Resource Issues," in *Conflict and the Environment* (Springer-Science+Business Media, B.V, 1997), 127–36; Mi Yung Yoon, "Explaining U.S. Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945-1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 4 (August 1997), 580–602.

When does the resources explanation gain or lose support? It gains support if evidence indicates that resource concerns played a central role in the decision-making for intervention. It is further reinforced if military forces were primarily deployed to resource-rich regions rather than to relatively resource-poor areas and if leaders perceived the use of force as essential for resource extraction. Conversely, the resources explanation loses support if there is no substantial evidence that resources concerns influenced decision-makers. It is further weakened if military forces were deployed equally to resource-poor regions or if the belief that force was necessary for resources extraction was not dominant.

2.2.3. Domestic politics

A significant body of research in international relations attribute great power foreign policy choices to domestic political motivations.[83] According to the domestic politics school, peripheral intervention, while it may not serve the broader interests of a great power, can be a useful tool for political leaders, policymakers, or influential interest

[83] For examples, see Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958*, vol. 179 (Princeton University Press, 1996); Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role*, vol. 82 (Princeton University Press, 1999). For an introduction to neoclassical realism, Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

groups seeking to achieve domestic objectives. Leaders may choose to engage in conflicts in the periphery based on the belief that doing so will enhance their domestic political standing, mobilizing public support, reinforcing their legitimacy, or diverting domestic dissatisfaction outward.[84] Leaders may also initiate or join peripheral conflicts as an opportunity with which to mobilize the public and state resources in pursuit of other policy goals that would otherwise face domestic resistance.[85] Additionally, powerful domestic groups can hijack state decision-making, leading their country to peripheral conflicts to advance their narrow economic, ideological or organizational interests.[86]

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[84] Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*, 80–82. On various domestic reasons related to the diversionary motive, see Charles W. Ostrom Jr and Brian L. Job, "The President and the Political Use of Force," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 2 (1986), 541–66; T. Clifton Morgan and Kenneth N. Bickers, "Domestic Discontent and the External Use of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 1 (March 1992), 25–52; Benjamin Fordham, "Partisanship, Macroeconomic Policy, and U.S. Uses of Force, 1949-1994," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 4 (August 1998), 418–39; Amy Oakes, "Diversionary War and Argentina's Invasion of the Falkland Islands," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (September 2006), 431–63; Jiyoung Ko, *Popular Nationalism and War* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

[85] Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*; Francis M. Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (June 2008); Alexander B. Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War," *International Security* 33, no. 4 (Spring 2009).

[86] For example, Jack Snyder argues that logrolling between powerful elites with the goal of promoting their parochial interests is often a major driver of overexpansion. See Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1991). Some argue that considerations of domestic interests can also drive retrenchment. See, for example, Mark Randal Brawley, *Afterglow or Adjustment?: Domestic Institutions and Responses to Overstretch* (Columbia University Press, 1999); Steven E. Lobell, *The Challenge of Hegemony: Grand Strategy, Trade, and Domestic Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

From this perspective, two key explanations emerge for why great powers might intervene in the periphery due to domestic political considerations. The first explanation posits that great power decision-makers intervene in the periphery based on the expectation that using force will be domestically popular and help sustain or enhance their political standing. This expectation can be linked to various objectives: bolstering regime legitimacy, securing support for other policy objectives, or simply diverting public dissatisfaction away from domestic issues. The common assumption underlying all these motivations is that domestic audiences will receive intervention as legitimate or be in favor of it. This explanation gains support if historical evidence demonstrates that decision-makers strongly believed military intervention would be popular and politically advantageous. The explanation loses support if evidence shows that decision-makers doubted the popularity of peripheral intervention or that domestic considerations played little to no role in the decision.

The second domestic explanation centers around the role of sub-state actors in pushing for peripheral intervention to serve their own agendas. This perspective suggests that such groups can wield enough power to override broader strategic interests and drive the great power into conflict for their narrow interests. The explanation is validated if historical evidence shows that influential domestic groups actively pushed for intervention to serve their own interests and outweighed opposition from other actors within the decision-making process. It loses support if evidence shows that the

intervention was the result of a broad consensus among decision-makers, even if reluctant, and not driven by the parochial interests of particular groups.

2.3. Empirical Strategy

I use the qualitative approach to evaluate the explanatory power of the strategic reputational theory for peripheral belligerence. Qualitative methods offer two main advantages for my research purpose. First, the primary variables of interest – strategic thinking and reputational motivations behind peripheral belligerence – can be more accurately identified and measured through in-depth case studies. Second, only detailed case studies can effectively test the causal logic connecting cost-absorbent strategic thinking, the perceived value of reputation and decisions for peripheral belligerence.

2.3.1. Observable implications

As discussed earlier, it is difficult to expect that policymakers have consistently left explicit evidence indicating that reputational motivations drove their decision to use force in the periphery. Explicitly stating reputation building as a motive for the use of force would risk undermining the very purpose of reputation building itself. Moreover, if the strategic reputational logic behind peripheral belligerence appears obvious to policymakers, they may not feel compelled to openly justify their decisions in its terms, thus leaving researchers with limited direct evidence. To address this methodological difficulty, it is useful to consider what should be the case if a great power decided to fight

in the periphery because of reputational concerns. With observable implications that would be true if reputational concerns were an important driver of the use of force, my strategic reputational theory for peripheral belligerence can be tested even in the absence of explicit, direct evidence.[87]

The first such observable implication is the lack of clear strategic objectives to be achieved through the use of force. A great power that involves itself militarily in the periphery because of reputational reasons should be less interested in pursuing clearly defined military objectives that could lead to a prompt termination of war. For this great power, the act of fighting itself serves the purpose of reputation building and establishment of clear strategic objectives, with which military success can be measured, is unnecessary and often undesirable. It is unnecessary because the main purpose of fighting is to build reputation rather than achieving material gains. It is undesirable because the war in the periphery might prematurely end before a signal about the great power's type is clearly sent.

The second observable implication is the lack of interest in tangible, present-value gains. Great power leaders who are driven by reputational concerns should be less

[87] Circumstantial evidence often provides sufficient evidence for theory testing. For example, a pistol does not have be witnessed to be fired or even be smoking for one to believe that it has been used; a pistol and an empty shell on the ground can be considered strong enough evidence. Similarly, an investigator could tell whether a person felt hot or cold by looking at a thermometer without asking directly. The analogy is from Rose McDermott, "Prospect Theory in International Relations: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission," *Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1992), 237–63.

interested in pursuing current tangible gains. By deciding to fight in the periphery, leaders already demonstrate to some degree that they are not highly keen to current cost-benefit calculations. When they show a lack of interest in pursuing tangible, present-value gains through the use of force, one would gain additional confidence that reputation building was a primary motivation for the fighting in the first place.[88]

These two observable implications represent empirical patterns that should be found if my theory is correct and alternative explanations are not. Specifically, great powers engaging in peripheral belligerence due to overvaluation of peripheral regions are expected to demonstrate strong interest in tangible, immediate gains and pursue clearly defined strategic objectives. Similarly, those motivated by resources needs would prioritize tangible resources of present value, resulting in specific objectives aimed at securing those resources. Finally, those driven by domestic political motivations would seek tangible, short-term gains that might make peripheral conflicts domestically popular and also would pursue clear strategic objectives intended to bolster domestic political support.

[88] Scholars who study reputational motivations in different contexts adopt similar approaches. See, for example, Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*, 150.

2.3.2. Longitudinal observation

The second empirical strategy is to conduct before-and-after comparisons of sub-cases for which most factors other than strategic thinking are held relatively constant. This allows for the method of difference which can offer greater confidence in the causal role of cost-absorbent strategic thinking.[89]

It is challenging to prove the causal relationship proposed by the strategic reputational theory by observing only the cases where there exist cost-absorbent strategic thinking and significant reputational concerns. The first challenge is that, without a reference point for comparison, one cannot be certain whether reputational concerns being observed are indeed stronger with cost-absorbent strategic thinking than without. This is especially problematic as it is well known that all states care about their reputations for resolve to some degree.

Second, one cannot be entirely confident that strong reputational concerns observed are the outcome of cost-absorbent strategic thinking by examining only positive cases. Despite good reasons to have confidence in the causal logic of strategic reputation theory, leaders may not explicitly attribute the source of their reputational concerns to

[89] John Stuart Mill, "Two Methods of Comparison," in *Comparative Perspectives: Theories and Methods* (Little, Brown and Company, 1970); Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *The American Political Science Review* 65, no. 3 (1971): 682–93; Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press, 2005).

strategic thinking. As I elaborated earlier, cost-absorbent strategic thinking shapes an environment where reputational concerns are considered more important and decisions are often not explicitly attributed to environmental forces. Then, it would be difficult to find evidence of leaders stating that "we are strongly concerned about our reputation because of our cost-absorbent strategic thinking."

For these reasons, proving that cost-absorbent strategic thinking and strong reputational concerns coexisted may not be sufficient to test the strategic reputational theory. Longitudinal comparisons will provide greater confidence in theory as they make it possible to observe covariations. Evidence showing that the absence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking is associated with the great power's weaker reputational concerns in the periphery would provide additional support for the strategic reputational theory.

2.3.3. Case selection

I analyze the U.S. decision for the Vietnam War in 1965 and Japan's decision to invade China in 1937 as in-depth cases to test the strategic reputational theory. In addition to being data-rich, these cases offer several advantages. First, they allow for examining the effect of cost-absorbent strategic thinking in different contexts – homeland vulnerability and battlefield vulnerability – and also in different domains – nuclear and land. Successfully passing these tests, then, should increase confidence in the external validity of my theory. Second, these cases allow for longitudinal before-and-after observations as

the value of the strategic thinking variable significantly varies within them while other factors are held relatively constant across time. This makes possible the method of difference which can offer greater confidence in the internal validity of my theory.[90]

Third, these cases had been selected on the explanatory variable of the theory. While it is already well known the U.S. and Japan fought in Vietnam and China respectively, they are two prominent examples of great powers with cost-absorbent strategic thinking. By selecting cases with strong values on the explanatory variable rather than the outcome of interest, I avoid the problem of selection bias.[91] Fourth, both cases are considered least-likely cases for my theory because they took place during historical periods when the great power rivalry was very intense and thus the systemic pressures demanding a stronger reputation for resolve was significant. Evidence showing that peripheral belligerence did not occur in negative sub-cases when the strategic need for reputation building was weaker would provide greater confidence in my theory. Passing the tests offered by these cases would imply its wider applicability to further cases.

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[90] Mill, "Two Methods of Comparison"; Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method"; George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*.

[91] Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton university press, 1994), 128–38; Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), chap. 3.

In studying each case, I ask the following set of questions in order conduct a structured and focused comparison.[92] First, I ask how decision-makers considered their state's technological conditions, strategic objectives and doctrine in order to measure the value of the explanatory variable. Second, I ask how the presence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking affected reputational concerns of decision-makers and to what extent the reputational motivation drove peripheral belligerence. Third, I ask why cost-absorbent strategic thinking was absent in a different period and what role did its absence play in the decision not to fight in the periphery. These questions are "standardized, general questions" that need to be answered in order for the cases to be "undertaken with [the] specific research objective" of this dissertation.[93] In answering each question, I closely examine internal communications and policy deliberations found in both primary and secondary sources. This allows for demonstrating causal connections and addressing potential issues of causality even though the strict use of the process-tracing method may not be ideal for the theory tested here.

[92] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, chap. 3.

[93] George and Bennett, 70.

Chapter 3. The Vietnam War, 1965

3.1. Introduction

The Vietnam War stands as one of the most significant and controversial conflicts of the Cold War era. In the spring of 1965, the United States made a series of monumental decisions to start a peripheral war in Indochina. Following the failures of aerial bombing efforts, the first U.S. marines landed at Da Nang on March 8, followed by additional battalions deployed on April 1. A turning point came with National Security Action Memorandum 328 (April 6), which shifted the role of the troops in Vietnam from base security to active combat. This marked the initial phase of American peripheral belligerence in Vietnam.[94]

Once ground forces were committed, further escalation became difficult to reverse and troop deployments multiplied in response to battlefield demands. By the end of May 1965, the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam had surpassed 50,000. That number more than doubled within a month and continued expansion over the following years pushed the U.S. military presence to its peak of about 600,000 troops. By the time the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam seven years later, more than three million Americans in total had been

[94] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume II* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), document 242. On the significance of the NSAM 328, see, for example, Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 107–9 and Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (Times Books, 2008), 169.

deployed, more than 58,000 of whom losing their lives, and the war cost an estimated $150 billion in total. Why did the United States choose to fight a costly war in the periphery despite Vietnam's little value in its Cold War competition with the Soviet Union? How well does my strategic reputational theory explain this case ?

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, it highlights the puzzling nature of the 1965 U.S. military intervention in Vietnam and outlines the need for a new explanation centered on reputational motivations. Second, it applies my strategic reputational theory to the case, demonstrating how strategic reputational concerns influenced the decision for peripheral belligerence. Third, it critically evaluates alternative explanations. Finally, the chapter concludes with key findings and responses to potential critiques.

3.2. The need for a new reputational explanation

Did the U.S. intervene in Vietnam to pursue important national interests? By all means, Vietnam in 1965 was considered peripheral to the U.S. engaging in great power competition. It lacked productive capacity as well as strategic location to contribute to the U.S. ability to compete with the other superpower, the Soviet Union. There were no significant U.S. economic interests in Vietnam, direct or indirect, as well as for capitalist states allied with the United States.[95] Henry Kissinger later wondered, "why America had

[95] Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 324–25.

thought it safe to stand by in 1948, when the communists conquered the huge prize of China, yet identified its national security with a much smaller Asian country."[96]

It was generally accepted in the U.S. in 1965 as in the preceding years that Vietnam was a peripheral region where direct U.S. military involvement would be unnecessary and unwise. This view was widespread both inside and outside the government. To start with, members of the Congress considered Vietnam peripheral. For example, Senator Mike Mansfield asked, after having been informed by President Lyndon Johnson in July 1965 of the administration's decision for escalation, "Even if you win, totally, you still do not come out well. What have you achieved? It is by no means a 'vital' area of U.S. concern."[97] Mansfield said on another occasion few months earlier, "the United States does not have interests on the Southeast Asian mainland to justify the costs in American lives and resources which would be required if we were to attempt to exercise, in effect, primacy over what transpires in that region."[98] Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, agreed as he said, "I personally felt it would be very unwise under any circumstances to put a large land army on the Asian continent."[99]

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[96] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Simon and Schuster, 1994), 621.

[97] Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 179.

[98] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume II*. document 215.

[99] John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics and American Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 82.

Scholars considered Vietnam peripheral as well. For example, in July, 1965, economist John Kenneth Galbraith encouraged President Johnson to instruct his official spokesmen to "stop saying the future of mankind, the United States and human liberty is being decided in Vietnam [because] it was not." Galbraith believed that "no question of high principle is involved [in Vietnam, which was] "of no great intrinsic significance."[100] Political scientist Kenneth Waltz wrote in the late 1970s, "We surely did not fight [in Vietnam] for profit or out of necessity."[101] A former ambassador to the Soviet Union, George Kennan told a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in February 1966 that "[E]ven a situation in which South Vietnam were controlled exclusively by the Viet Cong, while regrettable, and no doubt morally unwarranted, would not, in my opinion, present dangers great enough to justify our direct military intervention."[102]

Most officials in the administration agreed that the country was largely considered peripheral for U.S. interests. For example, in May 1964, President Johnson confessed to McGeorge Bundy, "I don't see what we can ever hope to get out of there with, once we're committed. I don't think it's worth fighting for "[103] Johnson's national security advisor

[100] Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 178.

[101] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 205.

[102] Michael J. Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 313.

[103] Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (Columbia University Press, 1999), 115.

McGeorge Bundy acknowledged the lack of Vietnam's strategic importance when he wrote in his privates notes in March 1965 that South Vietnam falling to the communists would be "marginal, for on a straight military account, the balance [of world power] remains as it was."[104] This is remarkable given that one can imagine how tempting it must have been for the officials to believe and say that Vietnam was important as they were deciding and working on involving the U.S. in that country.

It is also difficult to understand why the U.S. resorted to force as its policy on Vietnam when alternatives seemed viable. For example, political scientist Hans Morgenthau believed that fighting with North Vietnam is not in alignment with the higher U.S. policy of containment, as he wrote on Newsweek in January 1965, "you could make a bilateral deal with North Vietnam to establish a kind of coalition government, which would really be a Ho Chi Minh government with some trimmings. It would be Titoist – that is to say, Communist but not subservient to Peking or Moscow."[105] In June 1965, after the bombing failed to coerce Hanoi, Undersecretary of State George Ball reportedly said, "there is no assurance that we can achieve our objectives by substantially expanding American forces in South Vietnam and committing them to direct combat."[106]

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[104] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 100–102.

[105] Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1999), 406.

[106] Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 176–77.

In October 1964, he also wrote in his memorandum that, far from damaging the country's credibility, "a political settlement would actually enhance it, because the allies, most of whom questioned Vietnam's importance, would "applaud a move on our part to cut our losses." [107]

Many in the Johnson administration did not consider fighting in Vietnam an inevitable choice even after a series of the North Vietnamese attacks and provocations including the incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964. Following the attacks in August 1964, President Johnson himself made speeches in which he promised to Americans that the U.S. will not fight in Vietnam.[108] Bundy's memorandum to Johnson on January 27, 1965, correctly reported the worsening situation in South Vietnam but advised considering policies short of force. It read, "We [Bundy and McNamara] see two alternatives. The first is to use our military power in the Far East and to force a change of Communist policy. The second is to deploy all our resources along a track of negotiation, aimed at salvaging what little can be preserved with no major addition to our present military risks. Bob and I tend to favor the first course, but we believe that both should be carefully studied and that alternative programs should be argued out before you." [109]

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[107] Logevall, *Choosing War*, 244.

[108] Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics and American Democracy*, 71.

[109] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume II*, document 42.

Upon reading this memo, Johnson had Secretary of State Dean Rusk instruct his experts reconsider all possible ways for finding a peaceful solution.[110]

The U.S. decision to send combat forces to Vietnam is even more puzzling, considering its negative repercussions. In addition to being considered unwise, fighting in Vietnam was expected by many to undermine vital U.S. foreign policy goals and interests. Fighting in Vietnam was believed by many to divert U.S. attention and resources from the vital areas in the strategic competition with the Soviet Union. Having become the national security advisor to President Richard Nixon in the midst of the war in Vietnam, Henry Kissinger lamented, "Unfortunately, at the precise moment that our national debate should have concentrated on the implications of this new situation, all our defense programs were coming under increasing attack."[111] And domestic political mobilization for higher foreign policy goals became more difficult as a result of a peripheral war in Vietnam. "Budgetary pressures and anti-military sentiment generated by Vietnam," historian John Lewis Gaddis writes, "made it unfeasible even to suggest major increases in U.S. strategic capabilities in the late 1960s even with Moscow on the verge of parity with the U.S. in land-based ICBMs."[112]

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[110] Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 123.

[111] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 196.

[112] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 265–66.

The situation in South Vietnam in 1965 was difficult but not urgent and the United States could choose not to militarily involve itself in the country. And yet, Washington chose to intervene – why? The existing explanations for the Vietnam War do not provide satisfactory answers. The first explanation is based on the long popular idea that Vietnam was Johnson's war. Recent research points to the individual level to explain the U.S. decision for intervention in Vietnam, arguing that Johnson was a leader who strongly believed in the use of force as a solution to the Vietnam question or that he was a Southern president who cared greatly about his personal reputation.[113] For either leader-level explanation, the implication is that the decision for peripheral belligerence in Vietnam was personally made by President Johnson and the war would not have occurred if it had not been for him.

These arguments, however, are not considered particularly convincing. The evidence strongly hints at the possibility that it was systemic, contextual forces rather than an individual president that drove the decision for intervention in this case.[114] First,

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[113] Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 132–85; Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, "Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation," *World Politics* 68, no. 2 (April 2016), 341–81.

[114] Recent historical analyses show that, had Kennedy survived, he would have eventually made a similar decision on Vietnam as Johnson did. See, for example, Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (Simon and Schuster, 1999); Marc J. Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 2022).

Johnson did not have strongly established beliefs that made him favor the use of force in Vietnam. Johnson, earlier as the Democratic leader in the Senate, was one of the most outspoken opponents of an American intervention in Vietnam.[115] According to Ball, Johnson was "as anxious as Kennedy to avoid an irreversible embroilment." Instead of taking the initiative, as he described, Johnson "moved reluctantly – pushed by events and the well-meant prodding of the same men who counseled President Kennedy" [116]

Second, Johnson was not particularly more concerned about reputation than others, including his predecessor. It is true that Johnson frequently made statements that could be interpreted as a strong concern for face and personal reputation. Some of these include: "If you start running from the Communists, they may chase you right into your own kitchen," "They'd impeach a president that would run," and "[Americans will] forgive you for anything except being weak."[117] While Johnson was clearly a leader who understood the importance of reputation in human affairs, it does not necessarily mean that he was particularly more concerned about it as a Southerner or that his personal reputational concerns led him to fight in Vietnam. Johnson was not unique and the vast

[115] William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 368.

[116] George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 374–75.

[117] *FRUS 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000), document 53; Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (Macmillan, 2007), 221, 224.

majority of U.S. officials agreed that the U.S. must fight in Vietnam in order to build reputation for strategic reasons, not because of individual prestige. When a French diplomat said in July 1964 that the fall of South Vietnam would not be a great loss, Secretary of State Rusk hotly retorted that, if the United States did not protect Vietnam, "our guarantees with regard to Berlin would lose their credibility" because it was all "part of the same struggle."[118] He liked to say that de Gaulle would be the first to say if the U.S. were to leave Vietnam, 'See, I told you one cannot depend on the United States under a security treaty.'[119]

Ample evidence also shows that Kennedy cared about U.S. reputation as deeply as Johnson did. Kennedy himself had joined in the attacks on President Truman for "losing" China in the early stage of the Cold War and was "extremely sensitive to the political damage that could be done by the loss of additional Asian real estate."[120] Kennedy and his advisers were convinced that they must prove their toughness to Khrushchev. "That son of a bitch," the president said during the Berlin crisis, "won't pay any attention to words." To him, every U.S. move would be examined as "a measure of

[118] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* (Temple University Press, 1986), 115.

[119] Logevall, *Choosing War*, 289.

[120] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 75.

the administration's intentions and determinations."[121] According to Ted Sorensen, Kennedy believed that "talk of abandoning so unstable an ally and so costly a commitment 'only makes it easy for the Communists'."[122] If Johnson did not firmly believe in the military intervention as a solution and if he was not particularly more concerned about U.S. reputation, the Johnson presidency does not appear to be a satisfactory explanation for the Vietnam War.

Reputation building was apparently one of the most important motivations driving the U.S. decision to fight in Vietnam. That both Johnson and Kennedy, along with many officials, saw the Vietnam problem through the reputational lens indicates that U.S. reputational concerns were significant in the first half of the 1960s. While reputation building may not be the only reason, overwhelming evidence indicates that it was a major driving force in the decision for fighting in Vietnam.

Johnson frequently invoked U.S. reputation as a major reason for his decisions on Vietnam. In his address to Johns Hopkins University April 7, 1965, Johnson warned, "To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next."[123] When Johnson met all of his major national security aides on July 21 in order to discuss the expansion of U.S.

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[121] Herring, 82.

[122] Ted Sorensen, *Kennedy* (Harper & Row, 1965), 660–61.

[123] "Address at Johns Hopkins University," April 7, 1965, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-7-1965-address-johns-hopkins-university.

military efforts in Vietnam, he said, "I feel it would be more dangerous for us to lose this now, than endanger a greater number of troops."[124] Similarly, he said a few days later during a press conference, "If we are driven from the field in Viet-Nam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise or in American protection."[125] Johnson recalled in his memoir, "[I]f we did not live up to our commitment in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, [Moscow and Peking] would move to exploit the disarray in the United States and in the alliances of the Free World. They might move independently or they might move together. But move they would."[126]

Key officials in the administration were thinking along the same line. Secretary of State Rusk's January 1967 letter to student leaders justified the Vietnam War as follows: "We know from painful experience that the minimum condition for order on our planet is that aggression must not be permitted to succeed. For when it does succeed, the consequence is not peace, it is the further expansion of aggression."[127] National security advisor Bundy advised Johnson in his memorandum dated February 7, 1965, "Even if it fails, the policy will be worth it. At a minimum, it will damp down the charge that we

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[124] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume III* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), document 71.

[125] "Press Conference," July 28, 1965, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-28-1965-press-conference.

[126] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 152.

[127] Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 362–63.

did not do all we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, including our own."[128] In his private notes in March, Bundy wrote, "America's 'cardinal' objective in Vietnam was 'not to be a Paper Tiger.' … In terms of U.S. politics which is better: to 'lose' now or to 'lose' after committing 100,000 men? Tentative answer: the latter, for if we visibly do enough in the South, any failure will be, in that moment, beyond control."[129] "There had to be a war," he told his brother William Bundy in 1969.[130]

Additional strong evidence comes from Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton. For example, he provided his advice in a memorandum in September 1964, in which he wrote that the U.S. must "emerge from the situation with as good an image as possible in U.S., allied and enemy eyes."[131] Approximately a month after Bundy's memorandum above, McNaughton also reported to Bundy, McNamara and Vance, "It is essential – however badly SEA may go over the next 2-4 years – that US emerge as a 'good doctor.' We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt

[128] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume II*, document 84.

[129] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 100–102; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, 166–67. Bundy sent a memorandum based on these notes to the Secretary of State five days later. William Conrad Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships: July 1965-January 1968* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 179–80.

[130] Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, 246.

[131] Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War* (Racehorse Publishing, 2017), 365-366.

the enemy very badly."[132] McNaughton's rationale remained consistent, as he affirmed in January 1966, "The present U.S. objective in Vietnam is to avoid humiliation.… Why we have not withdrawn is, by all odds, one reason. To preserve our reputation as a guarantor, and thus to preserve our effectiveness in the rest of the world. We have not hung on to save a friend, or to deny the Communists the added acres and heads, or even to prove that 'wars of national liberation' won't work."[133]

In short, it is clear that reputational concerns was a major driving force at the center of the U.S. decision-making on Vietnam in 1965.[134] As Jonathan Schell, a prominent writer on the Cold War, put, "a simple accounting of tangible gains and tangible losses" and "whether or not Vietnam was the wrong country to be fighting" did not matter; "the fact that the United States was fighting there made it the right country."[135] However, the simple claim that reputation motivations caused the Vietnam War is insufficient as it does not answer the question of why reputation was such an important consideration for U.S.

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[132] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume II*, document 193.

[133] Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, 10–11.

[134] A number of analysts later agreed on the central position of reputational concern for the U.S. decision to fight in Vietnam. See, for example, Robert J. McMahon, "Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 4 (1991): 455–72; Hopf, *Peripheral Visions*; Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*.

[135] Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, 362–63.

policymakers when thinking about Vietnam. Thus, I propose a new reputational motivation.

3.3. Strategic reputational explanation

In this section, I apply the strategic reputational theory to explain the U.S. decision for the Vietnam War. The theory predicts that great powers anticipating the direct absorption of particularly high war costs against their primary adversary, due to either high battlefield vulnerability or high homeland vulnerability, will experience stronger reputational concerns, potentially driving them toward peripheral belligerence. My analysis confirms the theory, showing that U.S. cost-absorbent strategic thinking, driven by a perception of high homeland vulnerability, shaped a policy environment in the 1960s that made intervention in Vietnam justifiable on strategic reputational grounds, which had not been viable in the preceding period.

3.3.1. Cost-absorbent strategic thinking

Evidence suggests that the United States developed a clear expectation of directly absorbing particularly high war costs in the early 1960s as it increasingly recognized its high homeland vulnerability due to the increasing Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile threat. To begin with, the Soviet Union was undoubtedly the primary adversary of the United States during this period of the Cold War. And thinking about a major war with the Soviet Union, especially in the European theater, the United States in the 1960s clearly

expected much higher costs of war than in the preceding period and also did not have much confidence in avoiding direct absorption of those costs.

Cost-absorbent strategic thinking began to emerge in the minds of American strategic thinkers and policymakers as the U.S. homeland became increasingly vulnerable in a potential war with the Soviet Union due to Soviet advances in intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) technology beginning in the late 1950s. Throughout much of the 1950s, Washington could rely on the threat of massive retaliation without seriously concern about severe Soviet retaliation against the continental United States. However, that sense of strategic superiority eroded as the Soviet intercontinental nuclear threat became increasingly real, especially after the successful launch of Sputnik in October 1957, which symbolized a new era of Soviet missile capability. If the Soviets could put Sputnik into space, their ability to launch missiles capable of reaching was not far behind. A 1959 National Intelligence Estimate expected the Soviet Union to be able to deploy 400 to 500 ICBMs by mid-1961.[136]

The U.S. concern about increasingly high costs of war with the Soviets in the late 1950s is well represented in former Chief of Staff of the Army Maxwell Taylor's 1959 book. Taylor, who would soon be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, wrote, "We have ample evidence that the Soviet Union went into high

[136] *FRUS 1958-1960, Volume III, National Security Policy, Arms Control and Disarmament, Microfiche Supplement* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1998), document 224.

gear in the development of medium- and long-range missiles well before the United States. They saved their money on bombers and spent it on missiles." He continued, "My personal conclusion is that until about 1964 the United States is likely to be at a significant disadvantage against the Russians in terms of numbers and effectiveness of long-range missiles… the superior Soviet missile force and the nonexistent ballistic missile defense of the United States, combined to put our country in a very dangerous position in the mid-term future… in the midrange future, we have seen that our protection against deliberately initiated general atomic war will tend to decline. Under the changing conditions, the USSR might feel a considerably greater temptation to resort to a surprise attack, to which they might in the end succumb."[137]

This concern, which was shared by many, further grew in the early 1960s as the Soviet ICBM capabilities grew. In early 1960, Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates testified that the Soviet Union could have 150 ICBMs operational by mid-1961, outnumbering American ICBMS by a ratio of three to one.[138] President Kennedy acknowledged that "Soviet nuclear strength is developing," although "as of now, the credibility of our nuclear deterrent is sufficient to hold our present positions throughout the world."[139] In an outline for a National Security Council meeting in January 1962, McGeorge Bundy

[137] Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (Harper & Brothers, 1959), 131-32,135.

[138] Peter J. Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap* (Cornell University Press, 1995), 138.

[139] *FRUS 1961–1963, Volume VIII, National Security Policy*, document 69.

assessed that the U.S. was "headed for a nuclear stalemate."[140] The Joint Chiefs of Staff judged in July 1964 that "the relative strategic balance of forces is in favor of the West" but warned that there is "good evidence that the Soviets, in recognition of this imbalance, are striving for weapon systems which could, in the future, enhance their capabilities relative to the West."[141]

As it got closer to the mid-1960s, military and intelligence elites in Washington issued clearer warnings about the Soviet Union's improving capabilities to target the continental United States. For example, the National Intelligence Estimate dated October 8, 1964 reported, "By the end of the decade, Soviet intercontinental attack capabilities will rest primarily upon an ICBM force of some hundreds of launchers, supplemented by a sizable missile-submarine fleet and a large but reduced bomber force. These forces will represent a marked improvement in Soviet retaliatory capability and a considerable strengthening of the Soviet deterrent."[142] These expectations turned out to be true as, for example, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer testified in 1970, "we do think today, now that we have the situation of approximate parity, that a mutual

[140] Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 296.

[141] *FRUS 1964-1968, Volume X, National Security Policy* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), document 43.

[142] *FRUS 1964-1968, Volume X, National Security Policy*, document 55.

deterrent exists."[143] Secretary of State McNamara agreed, as he publicly acknowledged in 1967 that the Soviet Union possessed an "actual and credible second-strike capability."[144] According to Heny Kissinger, "Our defense strategies formed in the period of our superiority had to be reexamined in the harsh light of the new realities. Before too long an all-out nuclear exchange could inflict casualties on the United States amounting to tens of millions"[145]

There was a disagreement in the U.S. as to the extent to which it should publicly accept the idea of mutual assured destruction (MAD) with the Soviet Union. For example, those against accepting the MAD idea believed that admitting it would be self-defeating even if it was a fact.[146] However, there was almost no disagreement that the continental United States was now highly vulnerable to Soviet nuclear capabilities, raising Washington's expected costs of war against the Soviet Union.

The U.S. strategic objectives and military doctrine against the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, particularly concerning the defense of Europe, indicate that Washington

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[143] Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of US Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1995), 22.

[144] Robert S. McNamara, "Speech before United Press International Editors and Publishers in San Francisco" (San Francisco, California, September 18, 1967).

[145] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 198.

[146] Thomas M. Nichols, *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 29.

clearly anticipated a highly intense next war and thus expected to directly absorb exceptional war costs discussed above. First, strategic objectives that the United States was pursuing in Europe were clearly ambitious, making a full-scale war in the event of a Soviet invasion high and increasing the likelihood of the continental U.S. becoming the target of Soviet missile attacks. Since the very early years of the Cold War, the U.S. strongly believed that the Soviet Union had revisionist aims with a strong desire to invade and conquer Western Europe. For example, NSC-68 of April 1950 viewed the ultimate Soviet goal as "the elimination of resistance to its will and the extension of its influence and control" in regions not under its control, based on the assumption that the Kremlin "cannot tolerate the existence of free societies."[147] In response to this Soviet threat, a major U.S. strategic objective was to deter Soviet aggression with threats to employ nuclear weapons, both tactical and strategic.

U.S. heavy reliance on nuclear weapons was clear since the Eisenhower administration. For example, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said during a closed ministerial meeting in Paris for the North Atlantic Council on April 23, 1954, "Current NATO force programs fall short of providing the conventional forces estimated to be required to defend the NATO area against a full-scale Soviet Bloc attack."[148] Recognizing

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[147] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, Volume I* (Government Printing Office, 1977), document 85.

[148] *FRUS 1952-1954, Western European Security, Volume V, Part 1*, document 264.

the lack of the deterrent value of conventional forces, Dulles emphasized the importance of relying on nuclear weapons. In the same meeting, he continued, "it should be our agreed policy, in case of either general war or local war, to use atomic weapons as conventional weapons against the military assets of the enemy whenever and wherever it would be of advantage to do so."[149] During a press conference in December 1954, Dulles warned, "If Europe depends for its defense wholly upon conventional weapons, then according to the military people, it would not be defensible."[150] Heavy reliance on nuclear weapons itself contributed to a significant credibility question in Washington. In March 1955, Dulles, for example, said "We must, if occasion offers, make it clear that we are prepared to stand firm and, if necessary, meet hostile forces with the greater forces that we possess."[151]

This objective to deter the Soviets with nuclear threats was ambitious because it not only raised the expected intensity of a war that would start with Soviet aggression but also increased, beginning in the late 1950s, the likelihood of the continental United States becoming a direct target of Soviet missile attacks. The idea that the ambitious U.S. strategic objective strengthened American expectations of the direct absorption of the costs of war became additionally evident when Soviet general and military theorist Vasily

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[149] *FRUS 1952-1954, Western European Security, Volume V, Part 1*, document 512.

[150] *FRUS 1952-1954, Western European Security, Volume V, Part 1*, document 286.

[151] Paul Peeters, *Massive Retaliation: The Policy and Its Critics* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1959), 282.

Sokolovsky's work on Soviet military thinking became available in 1963. As he wrote, "Both sides will undoubtedly use these [nuclear] weapons" in a massive way, Sokolovsky saw nuclear escalation very much likely in a war involving both superpowers.[152] He added that the use of nuclear weapons "cannot be made directly dependent upon the course of the battle between adversaries in direct contact on the ground front."[153]

Sokolovsky's publication underscored the Soviet Union's capability and intent to target the U.S. homeland in the event of nuclear escalation, which effectively made the U.S. objective to deter the Kremlin with threats of nuclear escalation very ambitious. Confidently, Sokolovsky wrote, "The Soviet Union has strategic missiles in such quantity and of such quality that it can simultaneously destroy the required number of the aggressor's targets in the most distant regions of the globe and eliminate entire countries from the war by massive missile attacks."[154] Sokolovsky also emphasized that the primary battleground in a nuclear conflict would shift directly to the continental United States. "The center of gravity of the entire armed struggle," Sokolovsky wrote, "will be transferred immediately to the territory of the United States of America."[155] To dispel any

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[152] V. D. Sokolovskii, *Soviet Military Strategy*, trans. H. Dinerstein, L. Goure, and T. Wolfe (The RAND Corporation, 1963), 297-298.

[153] Sokolovskii, 306.

[154] Sokolovskii, 298.

[155] Sokolovskii, 299, 313.

doubts about Soviet willingness to launch ICBMs, he warned, "In the very first minutes of the war, the belligerents may use up their stockpiles of nuclear weapons in order to destroy and devastate the enemy's most important targets throughout his entire territory," leaving little room for limited or gradual escalation.[156] In short, the Russians refused to agree with Secretary of State McNamara's stance in the early 1960s on not targeting enemy cities.

When the deterrence of Soviet aggression heavily relied on nuclear weapons, the U.S. doctrine necessitated an early introduction of nuclear weapons in the battlefield. And the emerging Soviet ICBM capability now made the U.S. homeland highly vulnerable, ensured the U.S. direct absorption of war costs. Partly in order to address this problem, the Kennedy administration has made efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. military strategy against the Soviet Union. For example, Secretary of State McNamara called for "improved non-nuclear forces" for the NATO, as he did in his well-known 1962 speech in Ann Arbor.[157] However, the general belief that relying on nuclear weapons is the inevitably least bad way of deterring the revisionist Communists in Moscow remained unchanged.[158] During a National Security Council meeting in

[156] Sokolovskii, 308.

[157] Robert S. McNamara, "No Cities" (Ann Arbor, Michigan, June 9, 1962).

[158] Some even consider the doctrine of flexible response a myth. See Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 30–56.

January 1962, for example, President Kennedy said, "We rely on our nuclear deterrent. There are a number of places where our strength on the ground does not match what the Communists can bring to bear, but they hold back because they think we might use the bomb if they pushed us hard enough."[159] In August, he said, "I suppose if we get involved in a war in Europe, we will have no choice but to use nuclear weapons."[160] During a National Security Council meeting in September, Kennedy repeated, "If I ever released a nuclear weapon on the battlefield I should start a pre-emptive attack on the Soviet Union as the use of nuclear weapons was bound to escalate and we might as well get the advantage by going first."[161]

This doctrinal understanding was shared by military officers. For example, NATO Commander Lauris Norstad made it clear that nuclear deterrence was the heart of western strategy when he remarked, "Once major forces were engaged, the United States must be in a position to use whatever forces were necessary.… when you have started a

[159] *FRUS 1961–1963, Volume VIII, National Security Policy* (Government Printing Office, 1996), document 69.

[160] Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*, 292.

[161] Trachtenberg, 292. Heavy reliance on nuclear weapons was present outside the European theater as well. During a conversation in September 1963 on U.S. strategy in the Far East, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor said "we would not be prepared to hold them back by conventional methods if they [the Chinese] came en masse." Secretary of Defense McNamara agreed, saying, "In the long run, [lowering the nuclear threshold] would greatly reduce our military assistance program … which wouldn't be required if we understood that we could use nuclear weapons." See Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age*, 45.

serious ground action, you cannot afford to get thrown back."[162] This view is supported by allied officers including Bernard Montgomery, deputy Supreme Allied Commander, who reportedly said in 1954, "I want to make it absolutely clear that we are basing all our planning on using atomic and thermonuclear weapons in our defense. With us it is no longer 'They may possibly be used.' It is very definitely 'They will be used, if we are attacked.'"[163]

Those outside the government also recognized that U.S. strategic objectives and military doctrine against the USSR would necessitate the direct absorption of war costs by making the U.S. homeland a likely target. Even before the Soviet ICBM threat grew mature, Kissinger warned that "every move on [the Soviet] part will then pose the appalling dilemma of whether we are willing to commit suicide to prevent encroachments, no one of which seems to threaten our existence directly but which may be a step on the road to our ultimate destruction."[164] According to Jonathan Schell, a renowned public writer for the New Yorker, "A nuclear power was stuck on the level of show. When nuclear powers confronted one another over an important issue, major use of force was ruled out, since the unrestrained use of force could lead to national "suicide," and even to human extinction… The question of "will," which in former times was a

[162] Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*, 290.

[163] Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (St. Martin's Press, 1981), 84.

[164] Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (Harper & Row, 1957), 11.

question of a nation's capacity for making great sacrifices in order to protect itself, now became a question of a nation's willingness to approach the point of suicide."[165] Thomas Schelling also understood the broader strategic consequence of an early introduction of nuclear weapons in the battlefield by the U.S., as he wrote, "Limited and localized nuclear war is not a tactical war [because] the consequences of [tactical nuclear use] will not be tactical."[166]

It is also obvious that the United States did not have a doctrine to disarm the Soviet Union in an early stage of a war or defend against potential Soviet ICBM attacks. First, the technology of the time did not allow such doctrines. Missiles were not accurate enough to carry out precise strike needed to destroy hostile forces almost instantly. There was no reliable missile defense technology to defend against even a smallest nuclear-armed state. Second, as experts and policymakers publicly acknowledged, the size of Soviet arsenal, through redundancy, reached a level for which a successful disarming first strike became virtually impossible. In his 1961 book, for example, Glenn Snyder correctly examined the source of reduced U.S. credibility when he wrote that the "Russian advances in missilry since 1957 have tended to reduce the plausible scope of our threat of a 'first strike'."[167] In his 1967 speech, Secretary of Defense McNamara reminded his

[165] Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, 366.

[166] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 111.

[167] Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, 46.

audience that the United States does "not possess first-strike capability against the Soviet Union" despite "a clear superiority over the Soviet Union."[168]

In summary, the United States developed cost-absorbent strategic thinking that emerged in the late 1950s and matured in the early 1960s. The U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons first in the battlefield did not previously lead to cost-absorbent strategic thinking in Washington mainly because, despite its ambitious strategic objective and direct doctrine, the Soviets did not have the capability to make the U.S. homeland vulnerable. The emerging Soviet ICBM capability, however, now increased the likelihood of the continental United States becoming a direct target of Soviet missile attacks. With the U.S. homeland as a highly likely, if not primary, target of Soviet missile attacks in the event of a war, American planners were forced to prepare for the direct absorption of nuclear conflict costs.

3.3.2. Strategic reputational motivation

The strategic reputational theory expects American cost-absorbent strategic thinking firmly established in the first years of the 1960s to have greatly strengthened U.S. reputational concerns. As the Soviet Union's expanding nuclear capability made the U.S. homeland increasingly vulnerable, Washington grew more anxious about appearing sensitive to the rising expected costs of war and thus irresolute to defend its commitments.

[168] McNamara, "Speech before United Press International Editors and Publishers in San Francisco."

As such, the heightened sense of vulnerability and cost-absorbent strategic thinking intensified the U.S. motivation to demonstrate its type. I argue that these reputational concerns, rooted in strategic thinking, significantly contributed to the U.S. decision to intervene in Vietnam by making peripheral belligerence strategically justifiable – just twelve years after the end of the Korea War.

Evidence indicates that Washington's strong reputational concerns were largely derived from the clear understanding of the strategic balance. When cost-absorbent strategic thinking was emerging in the U.S., many Americans including future ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor already realized the growing reputational concerns as one of its consequences. "In a period of mutual deterrence" where the U.S. would anticipate absorbing much greater costs of war in the event of a war with the Soviets, he wrote, the Soviets would "indulge in a rising level of provocations." This prediction was based on a logic in alignment with the strategic reputational theory. According to Taylor, "As the Soviets become more assured of their superiority in general-war weapons, particularly in intercontinental ballistic missiles, and if they sense American timidity,… they will not believe, nor will our friends, that we will use our massive retaliatory forces for any purpose other than our own survival."[169] He stressed, "Under the conditions which we must anticipate in the coming years, it is incredible to

[169] Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, 136.

ourselves, to our allies, and to our enemies that we would use [atomic retaliatory] forces for any purpose other than to assure our national survival."[170]

As the conditions that concerned Taylor and others became more pronounced, U.S. policymakers grew increasingly willing to accept the idea that even a disastrous peripheral war was preferable to no war effort at all because it would, as Bundy later admitted, "demonstrate" the essential "willingness" to use force and absorb the costs of conflict.[171] Although he had not served in the Johnson administration, Henry Kissinger later wrote, "The credibility of American pledges to risk Armageddon in defense of allies was bound to come into question."[172] For him, the increasing vulnerability of the U.S. homeland fundamentally called U.S. resolve in question. He wrote, "how would we deal with Soviet conventional forces once the Soviets believed that we meant what we said about basing strategy on the extermination of civilians?"[173] These reputational concerns, rooted in the evolving strategic context, were shared by key decision-makers, including President Johnson, who appears to have reasoned in line with the strategic reputational explanation. He believed that fighting a small, limited war now would be less costly than

[170] Taylor, 145.

[171] Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, 365.

[172] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 198.

[173] Kissinger, 216.

having to fight a larger, more dangerous conflict in the future, one potentially triggered by the perception of American irresoluteness.[174]

Importantly, observers outside the government also interpreted the situation in similar terms. For example, Glenn Snyder highlighted the influence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking on the intensity of U.S. reputational concerns by writing in 1961, "The enemy may very well doubt our will to [retaliate], in the face of his capacity for counterreprisal. In short, the dimension of credibility here becomes crucially important."[175] These reputational concerns, which drove the decision to intervene in Vietnam, would not dissipate as long as cost-absorbent strategic thinking endured along with continued reliance on nuclear weapons as a central element of its strategy against the Kremlin. As Jonathan Schell observed, "The whole aim of having a nuclear retaliatory force for deterrence was to create an image of the United States as a nation not to be trifled with, and so to forestall challenges that could lead to a nuclear holocaust. Now a real and bloody war was being fought for precisely the same end."[176] That the emphasis on reputation building within the cost-absorbent strategic context was not confined to government officials with various incentives but was also shared by external observers further strengthens confidence in the logic of the strategic reputational theory.

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[174] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 152.

[175] Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, 79.

[176] Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, 364.

To what extent were U.S. reputational concerns that stemmed from cost-absorbent strategic thinking responsible for the decision to engage in peripheral belligerence in Vietnam? The circumstantial evidence suggests that these strategic reputational concerns were a principal driver for the U.S. decision to intervene. As discussed earlier in this chapter, much written evidence already indicate that reputational motivations accounted for much of the rationale behind U.S. involvement in Vietnam. However, it remains possible that policymakers invoked reputational justifications to merely mask other underlying motivations. Then, in order to provide greater confidence in the strategic reputational explanation, it is essential to go beyond elite statements by examining whether U.S. behavior in Vietnam aligns with the observable implications of a reputation-driven peripheral belligerence.

The first observable implication of a reputation-driven peripheral intervention is the absence of clear strategic objectives for the great power fighting in the periphery. If the U.S. intervention in Vietnam was truly motivated by reputational concerns, it would have lacked well-defined objectives achievable through military force, as the primary aim was reputation building rather than accomplishing concrete goals. Once initial objectives were met, the rationale for continued fighting would have dissipated, leading to a premature conclusion of hostilities. The evidence confirms that the U.S. indeed lacked clear objectives, providing crucial support for the strategic reputational theory.

As most students of the Vietnam War agree, the U.S. largely lacked clearly defined strategic objectives to be pursued in Vietnam. Some may suggest that coercing North Vietnam to negotiate an enduring political agreement was indeed the U.S. objective in Vietnam. But U.S. policymakers strongly doubted there were realistic strategic objectives to be pursued to accomplish the political objective. This is clearly found in Johnson's thinking. One week before the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder, for example, Johnson told the Secretary of Defense in a telephone conversation, "Now we're off to bombing these people. We're over that hurdle. I don't think anything is going to be as bad as losing, and I don't see any way of winning."[177] After Westmoreland's request for more troops in March 1965, Johnson had a conversation with Senator Russell in which he said that North Vietnam would "get [the marines] in a fight, just sure as well. They're not going to run. Then you're tied down… A man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere. But there ain't no daylight in Vietnam.[178]

Even as the U.S. began sending ground combat troops to Vietnam, Washington was skeptical of the existence of concrete, achievable strategic objectives. In April 1965, Johnson confided, "If I were Ho Chi Minh, I would never negotiate."[179] On June 21, the

[177] Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), 194.

[178] Michael Beschloss, *Presidents of War* (Crown, 2018), 530.

[179] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 123.

president expressed to McNamara, "I'm very depressed about it. Because I see no program from either Defense or State that gives me much hope of doing anything, except just praying and gasping to hold on during monsoon and hope they'll quit. I don't believe they're ever going to quit… I don't see that we have any plan for a victory – militarily or diplomatically."[180] Johnson was not alone in believing in the lack of achievable strategic objectives in Vietnam. For example, national security advisor Bundy wrote in his personal papers, "I deeply believe that peaceful compromise was never available… Better to simply go home [than hoping for the Saigon regime to accept a settlement that would lead to its own dissolution]."[181] McNamara confessed to the British foreign secretary "None of us at the center of things [in U.S. policymaking] talk about winning a victory."[182]

In part because the U.S. did not have clear strategic objectives, American planners were more interested in the timing for an exit rather than establishing active plans. In his conversation with national security advisor Bundy in May 1964, Johnson said that it would be "awfully hard to ever extricate ourselves if you get in" Vietnam.[183] Agreeing on this view, officials were mainly interested in how long the war would be fought rather than what should be accomplished in it. In the memorandum he wrote on February 7,

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[180] Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965*, 365.

[181] Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, 223.

[182] Logevall, *Choosing War*, 368.

[183] McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 115.

1965, for example, Bundy wrote, "At its very best the struggle in Vietnam will be long… There is no short cut to success in South Vietnam."[184] In his memorandum in early July 1965, Under Secretary of State George Ball warned that the war would be "almost certainly a protracted war, mounting U.S. casualties, no assurance of a satisfactory solution, and a serious danger of escalation at the end of the road."[185] Secretary of Defense McNamara was not an exception. He once wrote to Johnson that "it is not obvious how we will be able to disengage our forces from Vietnam"[186]

Furthermore, Washington knew well that the U.S. military is not ready to pursue any concrete strategic objectives in the kind of war to be fought in Vietnam. "Once large numbers of U.S. troops are committed to direct combat," Undersecretary of State George Ball warned in early July 1965, "they will begin to take heavy casualties in a war they are ill-equipped to fight in a non-cooperative if not downright hostile countryside." [187] Johnson also said on one occasion, "We had no intention of committing this many ground troops. We're doing so now, and we know it's going to be bad… I don't know whether those [Pentagon] men have ever [calculated] whether we can win with the kind of

[184] Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969*, 127; *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume II* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), document 84.

[185] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume III*, document 40.

[186] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume III*, document 67.

[187] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume III*.

training we have, the kind of power, and whether we can have a united support at home."[188] Despite knowing that the U.S. military lacked clear strategic objectives to be pursued and accomplished that could be translated into tangible political outcomes, the Johnson administration still decided to expand the war in Vietnam. "Johnson wanted a bureaucratic consensus," an analyst later assessed, "on combat troops relating to a number, not a strategy or use."[189] And it is difficult to conclude that Johnson as a shrewd and experienced politician made the intervention decision without expecting any gains.

The second observable implication of a reputation-driven peripheral belligerence is the great power's lack of interest in securing tangible, present-value gains. If the U.S. intervention was truly motivated by reputational concerns, it would have shown little interest in achieving concrete gains that would enhance its position in the present. And the evidence shows that it actually was the case in Vietnam. While the U.S. intervened in Vietnam with the official purpose of supporting the South Vietnamese regime, the Johnson administration demonstrated lack of interest in strategic payoff in the present.

The low prospect for securing tangible, present-value gains as an outcome of intervention was clearly recognized in internal assessments by key U.S. officials during the lead-up to the Vietnam War. George Ball, for example, wrote in a memorandum to

[188] Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965*, 382.

[189] Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, 221.

President Johnson, "No one can assure you that we can beat the Viet Cong or even force them to the conference table on our terms no matter how many hundred thousand white U.S. troops we deploy."[190] In a report prepared for Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy in August 1964, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy wrote that the U.S. might "lose" in Vietnam. This assessment, however, did not stop him from suggesting that the U.S. "would be much stronger to go down with [its] guns firing."[191] "Similarly, General Westmoreland stated in a June 1965 telegram to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that, "short of decision to introduce nuclear weapons," he saw "no likelihood of achieving a quick, favorable end to the war."[192]

Observers outside the government shared this pessimism and warned the administration. For example, Clark Clifford, Johnson's long-time friend and future Secretary of Defense, wrote to Johnson in May 1965, "I believe our ground forces in South Vietnam should be kept to a minimum… This could be quagmire. It could turn into an open-end commitment on our part that would take more and more ground troops, without a realist hope of ultimate victory."[193] Despite this widespread pessimism in the U.S. about achieving current strategic gains, Washington proceeded with intervention.

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[190] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume III*, document 40.

[191] Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, 13.

[192] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume III*, document 17.

[193] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume II*, document 307.

As historian Logevall writes, the decision for the Vietnam War "came despite deep pessimism among many senior officials that the new measure would succeed in turning the war around."[194] U.S. officials were largely in favor of intervention, while correctly estimating the war to be difficult and costly. Then, it is difficult to explain this decision without U.S. intentions to build reputation.

The U.S. had an opportunity to secure a tangible, present-value gain not long after the ground intervention began but showed little interest in it. According to some analysts, the Johnson administration had an opportunity in late 1965 to leave Vietnam without losing face with "the pain of withdrawal muted and withdrawal appearing as something other than defeat." On multiple occasions, the North Vietnamese leaders conveyed the message that "after U.S. withdrawal, they would not move immediately to conquer South Vietnam by direct military means; elections under a provisional coalition government would be held; South Vietnam would, for a time, be a separate Socialist entity with a neutral foreign policy; unification of North and South Vietnam would occur over time and by means of negotiations; and to mitigate the domino vision, they would not move militarily against Cambodia and Laos."[195] This offer was almost equivalent to the original reason for sending U.S. troops to Vietnam in the first place. The Johnson administration's

[194] Logevall, *Choosing War*, 271.

[195] Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (The Brookings Institution, 1979), 334–35.

acceptance of this offer would have been applauded as a great foreign policy achievement. However, U.S. policy in Vietnam remained unchanged and Washington instead expanded military efforts there in the following period. It is then clear that stopping the spread of Communism and protecting South Vietnam as well as its neighboring countries could not be the true purpose of the U.S. fighting in Indochina. U.S. policy can only be accounted for by the strategic reputational explanation.

The U.S. lack of interest in present-value cost-benefit calculations is also demonstrated by Washington's decision to continue the Vietnam War without a clear strategy even as the situation was deteriorating after 1965. According to Schell, "When the situation had deteriorated to the point where the possible strategic gains were outweighed by the manifold costs of the war effort, a strict accounting logic would have dictated that the United States should cut its losses and leave." However, policymakers clearly understood that the war was being fought for "the psychological objective of maintaining American credibility" and then the deteriorating situation on the ground could not be a good justification for leaving Vietnam.[196] The war was meant to show that America was tough even in the cost-absorbent strategic environment and the benefit of demonstrating resolve in Vietnam was viewed outweighing the mounting costs of the war. At stake in Vietnam was to show resolve than to show military effectiveness. The

[196] Schell, *The Time of Illusion*, 361.

fact that figures who refused to entirely accept the reputational justification for the war, like Ball, were against it should not be a coincidence.

The implications of reputational fighting observed above suggest that the U.S. decision for peripheral belligerence in 1965 was significantly driven by reputational concerns, rooted in its cost-absorbent strategic thinking. It is crucial to note that these reputational concerns was not an outcome of other factors such as local developments or the opinion of allied countries. First, the reputational motivation to fight in Vietnam did not arise from local developments. For example, the North Vietnamese torpedo attacks on the U.S.S. Maddox and the following Gulf of Tonkin Resolution did not create or strengthen U.S. reputational concerns. After the attacks in August 1964, Johnson was making speeches in which he promised he will not send troops to Vietnam. In Oklahoma in September, for example, he said, "We don't want our American boys to do the fighting for Asia boys." In October 1964, Johnson told a university audience, "We are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."[197] If Johnson had believed that U.S. reputation was stake after the attacks, he would not have made such statements as they could be considered as a

[197] Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics and American Democracy*, 71.

sign of weakness. The fighting in Vietnam was almost purely intended to "dramatize the proposition that the U.S. was prepared to pay a real cost in blood and treasure."[198]

Second, U.S. reputational concerns were not as much about what allies believe. U.S. policymakers understood that fighting in Vietnam would not help U.S. credibility among the allies. According to Undersecretary of State Ball, for example, U.S. allies believed that a war in Vietnam would be a fruitless struggle that would lead Washington to lose interest in their own problems. "A general loss of confidence in American judgment that could result," Ball warned in October 1964, "if we pursued a course which many regarded as neither prudent nor necessary." He continued, "What we might gain by establishing the steadfastness of our commitments, we could lose by an erosion of confidence in our judgment."[199] However, a reputation for prudence or good judgment was not what the U.S. sought as it was making a difficult decision to fight in Vietnam. The U.S. desired to build a reputation for resolve in the cost-absorbent strategic context and thus engaged in peripheral belligerence in Vietnam, despite some concerns about the allied opinion.

The influence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking on the U.S. reputational motivation to fight in Vietnam becomes additionally clearer when one considers the fact

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[198] Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, 221.

[199] Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, 382.

that Johnson's successor could not promptly extricate the country from the war as he promised. President Nixon understood as well as his predecessor the implications of cost-absorbent strategic thinking and clearly saw the strong need to build reputation to avoid deterrence failure. Thus, in his first annual report to Congress, Nixon contended that "to allow the Soviet Union to obtain an ascendant strategic position would call into question the reliability of the U.S. strategic deterrent, undermine the confidence of U.S. allies in American security guarantees, and reduce the Soviet Union's incentive for arms control." He continued, "A Soviet posture of strategic superiority might undermine the plausibility of the U.S. pledge to use nuclear weapons in the defense of its allies."[200] Nixon's national security advisor Henry Kissinger have long had held a similar view. According to him, "American policymakers, no longer secure in the belief that U.S. nuclear forces could adequately support foreign policy endeavors, would not have the confidence and thus the resolve to stand up to a belligerent Soviet Union as the United States had done in the past."[201] With this continuing cost-absorbent strategic thinking, the new administration could not just leave Vietnam as Nixon had promised during his campaign. While ending the Vietnam War was important for him, maintaining a strong U.S. reputation for resolve

[200] Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of US Nuclear Strategy*, 24.

[201] Terriff, 56.

especially within the cost-absorbent strategic environment should have been more important.

In summary, both direct and indirect evidence indicate that the U.S. decision for the Vietnam War was largely driven by reputational concerns. And the analysis presented here demonstrates that these reputational concerns stemmed from cost-absorbent strategic thinking rather than Washington's attention to immediate developments in Indochina or pressures from allies. Therefore, the strategic reputational theory offers a compelling explanation for the U.S. decision to engage in peripheral belligerence in 1965.

3.3.3. A longitudinal look

The preceding analysis demonstrates that reputational concerns, largely stemming from U.S. cost-absorbent strategic thinking, were a significant driving force behind the U.S. decision to fight in Vietnam. One may still wonder, however, if reputational concerns were always strong for the U.S. during the Cold War and peripheral belligerence in Vietnam would have taken place anyway without the cost-absorbent strategic thinking that shaped the policy environment in the 1960s. In an effort to address this concern, I examine U.S. policy on Vietnam in 1954 in an attempt to isolate the effect of cost-absorbent strategic thinking on the strength of the reputational motivation for peripheral belligerence. The strategic reputational theory would predict that the lack of cost-absorbent strategic thinking in America in the mid-1950s would make reputational

concerns less salient and thus peripheral belligerence less justifiable. And this theoretical prediction proves to be correct.

The United States did not intervene in Vietnam in 1954 even when there were seemingly good reasons and an opportunity for the use of force, whereas it did a decade later. This discrepancy in policy is best explained by the variation in U.S. strategic thinking regarding the costs of war. While the short time gap between 1954 and 1965 allows for a most-similar comparison, I also show that other suspicious factors, including the leader difference between Eisenhower and Johnson, were not responsible for that variation.

To start with, the U.S. in 1954 did not experience cost-absorbent strategic thinking, as it still enjoyed homeland security from Soviet nuclear threats. Before the late 1950s, the Soviet Union's relied exclusively on bombers to deliver nuclear weapons, which lacked capability to target North American targets. Even the Sputnik tests of 1957 did not immediately provide the Kremlin with the capability to pose a credible missile threat to the continental United States. As historians note, this allowed Washington to "count on devastating the major urban areas and industrial sectors of its enemy without fear of reprisal."[202] It is true that the Eisenhower administration in its last years grew increasingly concerned about the Soviet ICBM capability. This concern, however, was more about the

[202] Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History*, 285.

weakening U.S. retaliatory capability rather than the U.S. homeland directly vulnerable in the event of war.[203] And U.S. homeland vulnerability was clearly absent in 1954.

Without cost-absorbent strategic thinking, the Eisenhower administration lacked reputational concerns that could justify peripheral belligerence in Vietnam. As early as in January 1954, for example, President Eisenhower told the attendees of a national security council meeting that he "simply could not imagine the United States putting ground forces anywhere in Southeast Asia." "There was just no sense," he continued, "in even talking about United States forces replacing the French in Indochina."[204] When asked by its treasury secretary in private whether the United States should intervene in case the French were to give up and turn entire Vietnam over to the Communists, Eisenhower confirmed, "No, we would not intervene."[205]

Moreover, the administration publicly communicated its unwillingness to intervene in Vietnam. In a press conference on February 10, 1954, Eisenhower said, "No one could be more bitterly oppose to ever getting the United States involved in a hot war in that region than I am; consequently, every move that I authorize is calculated, as far as

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[203] Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap*.

[204] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Indochina, Volume XIII, Part 1* (Government Printing Office, 1982), 1952–55, document 499.

[205] *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol XIII, Part 1*, document 499.

humans can do it, to make certain that that does not happen." He continued, "I cannot conceive of a greater tragedy for America than to get heavily involved now in an all-out war in any of those regions, particularly with large units."[206] During a news conference on March 31, he also said, "I can conceive of no greater disadvantage to America than to be employing its own ground forces, and any other kind of forces, in great numbers around the world, meeting each little situation as it arises."[207] A president under the influence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking and thus experiencing significant reputational concerns would not have been wise to make these statements publicly. Moreover, Eisenhower was not a president who generally underestimated the importance of reputation. In fact, he and his officials were substantially interested in bolstering the U.S. credibility by setting the right record, as seen in the policy during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954.[208]

The U.S. lack of reputational concerns in 1954 is made additionally clear in its preference for coalitional intervention. A government highly interested in reputation building would have a seized an opportunity in Vietnam and intervened. On the contrary, the Eisenhower administration refused to intervene without joint action by Britain. For

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[206] *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol XIII, Part 1*, 13, document 552.

[207] William I. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (Simon and Schuster, 2018), 191.

[208] H. W. Brands, Jr., "Testing Massive Retaliation: Credibility and Crisis Management in the Taiwan Strait," *International Security* 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), 124–51.

example, in March 1954, Secretary Dulles said that the communist threat to Southeast Asia "should be met by united action."[209] On April 4, Eisenhower met Dulles and Radford and agreed on a joint action with Britain being the strict condition for American intervention in Vietnam.[210] During the critical NSC meeting of April 6, 1954, President Eisenhower said, "If we can secure this regional grouping for the defense of Indochina, the battle is two-thirds won. This grouping would give us the needed popular support of domestic opinion and of allied governments, and we might thereafter not be required to contemplate a unilateral American intervention in Indochina." [211] The British were not interested in intervention in Vietnam and Prime Minister Winston Churchill warned of a "war on the fringes"[212] Britain's refusal to act together was critical in restraining the U.S. from intervention.[213] If the U.S. had a strong reputational motivation in 1954, it would have intervened in Vietnam, regardless of the availability of coalitional support. As Henry Kissinger later wrote, "Though collective action was preferable, it was surely not

[209] *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol XIII, Part 1*, document 656.

[210] *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol XIII, Part 1*, document 690.

[211] *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol XIII, Part 1*, document 705.

[212] Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (Herny Holt and Company, 1991), 925.

[213] Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2008).

a precondition to the defense of the global balance, if that was indeed what was at stake."[214]

The absence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking in 1954, with the resultant lack of strategic reputational concerns, provides a compelling explanation for Eisenhower's decision not to engage in peripheral belligerence in Vietnam. Other potential explanations for the non-intervention decision in 1954 do not stand against evidence. First, one may claim that the Eisenhower administration simply lacked an opportunity to intervene. This claim is weak as ample evidence shows that the choice of military intervention in Vietnam was certainly on the table and was arduously discussed over among key members in the Eisenhower administration in the period leading up to the fall of Dien Bien Phu. The local situation in the spring of 1954 presented a good opportunity to Washington for demonstrating U.S. resolve by resorting to force. While the lack of intrinsic and strategic value of Vietnam meant that material considerations did not provide a good reason to intervene in Vietnam, it was surely a good place to fight for a show of resolve.

In addition, the burden of proof for the need to use military force did not hinder Washington in 1954 and the U.S. could have made decision to use force based on the French request. This was an opportunity that a U.S. administration with significant

[214] Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 634.

reputational concerns would have certainly seized. General Paul Ély, the French Chief of Staff, even flew to Washington at the invitation of Admiral Radford to brief on the military situation in Indochina and probe the possibility of U.S. military intervention. His visit did not succeed in drawing a decision by Washington to intervene at once in Vietnam but was effective in encouraging it to seriously consider more action in the help of the French. In fact, Radford wrote to Eisenhower before Ély left, "I am gravely fearful that the measures being taken by the French will prove to be inadequate and initiated too late to prevent a progressive deterioration of the situation. The consequences can well lead to the loss of all of Southeast Asia to Communist domination. If this is to be avoided, I consider that the U.S. must be prepared to act promptly and in force possibly to a frantic and belated request by the French for U.S. intervention."[215] This favorable environment in 1954 that provided a good opportunity intervention did not convince the Eisenhower administration to intervene.

Second, one may claim that domestic political obstacles constrained the U.S. from peripheral belligerence in 1954. According to this claim, the Eisenhower administration needed undoubtable support from Congress before it could confidently decide to intervene in Vietnam and the lack of it was the cause for Washington's reluctance to intervene. Some officials believed that it was not wise to rely on military action so soon

[215] Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (Columbia University Press, 1988), 48.

after U.S. extrication from the Korean War. For example, the State Department's director of policy planning Robert Bowie advised that the American people were not ready for another war and thus it would be more realistic to accept a compromise settlement in Vietnam.[216] Evidence suggests, however, that Congress would have been likely to support the administration's decision to intervene if had made one. For example, in April 1954, President Eisenhower was confident in drawing a congressional resolution that would authorize him to "employ the Naval and Air Forces to assist the forces which are resisting aggression in Southeast Asia."[217]

In short, the absence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking in 1954 led to the lack of strong reputational concerns and thus played an important role in the U.S. decision not to intervene in Vietnam in 1954.

3.4. Alternative explanations

Thie section critically evaluates alternatives explanations for the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Rather than reputation motivations, they argue that the U.S. decision for peripheral belligerence was driven by overvaluation of Vietnam, its natural resources, or domestic political incentives. The table below outlines the logic behind each explanation,

[216] Billings-Yun, 63–64.

[217] *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol XIII, Part 1*, document 677.

along with the types of evidence that would support or weaken them, enabling a comparative assessment of their explanator power.

	Logic	Supporting evidence	Contradictory Evidence
Overvaluation	Great powers may be motivated to fight in the periphery if they overestimate its strategic or material importance.	i. U.S. policymakers assessed South Vietnam as having strategic or material value, leading to the decision to use force.	i. U.S. policymakers did not genuinely consider Vietnam strategically or materially important. ii. Overvaluation of Vietnam was not directly responsible for the decision to intervene.
Resources	Great powers may be motivated to fight in the periphery if it contains valuable resources that can be seized through force.	i. The U.S. resource needs drove the decision to intervene. ii. U.S. allies' resources needs drove the U.S. decision to intervene.	i. The U.S. resources needs did not affect the decision to intervene. ii. U.S. allies did not strongly rely on resources of Vietnam.
Domestic	Great powers may be motivated to fight in the periphery if it is expected to garner popular support or serve domestic political interests.	i. U.S. policymakers believed that the intervention in Vietnam would be domestically popular. ii. Influential domestic groups actively pushed for intervention to promote their domestic interests.	i. U.S. policymakers did not believe that the intervention in Vietnam would be domestically popular. ii. There was broad elite consensus on intervention, with no particular group driving the decision.

Table 3.1. Alternative explanations for the Vietnam War

3.4.1. Overvaluation

The first alternative explanation to the strategic reputational theory of peripheral belligerence highlights the possibility of overvaluation. While Vietnam should have been

objectively considered peripheral to U.S. interests, the overvaluation explanation suggests that key decisionmakers in 1965 may have come to overestimate the strategic or material value of Vietnam in the broader Cold War competition. The domino theory account, which holds that the U.S. fought in Vietnam because of the fear that the fall of Vietnam would trigger a chain reaction in the region, represents a classic expression of the overvaluation logic.[218] Central to this theory is the assumption that Vietnam carried sufficient strategic weight such that its loss would jeopardize the security of neighboring countries and, by extension, the global balance of power. In this view, Vietnam was considered as a linchpin with disproportionate consequences for U.S. interests in the Cold War. Did U.S. policymakers believe this?

To be clear, the domino theory was discussed among policymakers in Washington. The memorandum from the Board of National Estimates to the Director of Central Intelligence in June 1964 clarified the domino logic. It read, "the 'domino effect' appears to mean that when one nation falls to communism the impact is such as to weaken the resistance of other countries and facilitate, if not cause, their fall to communism. Most literally taken, it would imply the successive and speedy collapse of neighboring countries, as a row of dominoes falls when the first is toppled… Most specifically it means that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would lead almost inevitably to the

[218] I focus on the physical/territorial mechanism of the domino theory. For a review of the logic of falling dominoes, see, for example, Jervis, "Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior."

communization of other states in the area, and perhaps beyond the area."[219] The logic is also very well described in Secretary of Defense McNamara's memorandum to President Johnson, dated March 16, 1964, which read:

> Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely then to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold for a period with our help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India to the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased… the impact of a Communist South Vietnam not only in Asia.[220]

[219] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume I*, document 209.

[220] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume I*, document 84.

This domino theory clearly gained traction among key policymakers.[221] President Johnson recalled in his autobiography that "the decisions we were making would determine not merely the fate of Vietnam but also the shape of Asia for many years to come."[222] In a meeting with the president at the White House in July 1965, Speaker of the House of Representatives John McCormack stated, "Our military men tell us we need more men and we should send them. The lesson of Hitler and Mussolini is clear. I can see, five years from now, a chain of events far more dangerous to our country if we don't."[223]

While there is ample evidence that many U.S. officials accepted – or at least claimed to accept – the domino theory, this alone is insufficient for concluding that it successfully explains the Vietnam War. First, it is possible that the domino theory was

[221] NSC 64 of February 1950, for example, concluded that neighboring countries "could be expected" to fall under Communist domination as a result of the fall of Indochina. See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI* (Government Printing Office, 1976), document 480. NSC 68 of April 1950 suggests that "any substantial further extension of the area under the domination of Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled." See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, Volume I* (Government Printing Office, 1977), document 85. NSC 124/2 of June 1952 predicts that "the loss of any single country would probably lead to relatively swift submission to or an alignment with communism by the remaining countries of [Southeast Asia]," eventually endangering "the stability and security of Europe." See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume XII, Part 1* (Government Printing Office, 1984), document 36.

[222] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 136.

[223] Johnson, 150.

publicly embraced to frame the war as serving broader, higher goals, thereby mobilizing political and public support. Second, even if decision-makers sincerely believed in the domino logic, they may not have considered Vietnam itself important enough to trigger a genuine domino effect, in which case the domino belief may not have been decisive in shaping policy. To properly assess the explanatory power of the domino theory and the overvaluation explanation, therefore, one must ask whether Washington truly believed in Vietnam's strategic significance and, more critically, how much causal weight the domino belief actually carried in the decision-making process.

First, available evidence suggests that Vietnam was not widely regarded by U.S. officials as carrying sufficient strategic weight to trigger a broader domino effect beyond its borders. Few believed that the loss of Vietnam would critically undermine the resolve of other regional governments or fundamentally destabilize the regional balance of power. This contrasts with how other countries in the region such as Indonesia were perceived. For example, Secretary of Defense McNamara noted that a mass crackdown of Communists in Indonesia in 1965 "significantly altered the regional balance of power and substantially reduces America's real stake in Vietnam." "The largest and most populous nation in Southeast Asia," he continued, "had reversed course and now lay in the hands of independent nationalists."[224] As the Joint Chiefs of Staff also warned in 1961,

[224] McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 120.

"the loss of Indonesia to the communists would gravely undermine the Free World military position in the Western Pacific" by triggering a chain reaction that would "culminate in the eventual relinquishment of the principal U.S. military bases in the Far East." [225] There is simply no evidence that U.S. policymakers made comparable assessments about Vietnam, underscoring its limited perceived strategic value.

Moreover, there is much evidence indicating that the domino theory was not universally accepted in Washington. In fact, it faced strong criticism, making it difficult to believe that it was a major driver for the decision for intervention in 1965. For example, a memorandum from the Board of National Estimates presented to the CIA Director McCone in June 1964 read:

> We do not believe that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos would be followed by the rapid, successive communization of the other states of the Far East. It is likely that no nation in the area (possibly except for Cambodia) would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of communism in the area would not be inexorable and any spread which did occur would take time – time in which the total situation might change in any of a number of ways unfavorable to the Communist cause… the extent to which

[225] McMahon, 120.

> individual countries would move away from the U.S. towards the Communists would be significantly affected by the substance and manner of U.S. policy in the period following the loss of Laos and South Vietnam.[226]

The memorandum concluded by predicting that any unfavorable situation in Vietnam is highly unlikely to affect policy in the Philippines, Taiwan or Japan.[227] Many important officials in the Johnson administration agreed with this assessment.[228] Under Secretary of State Ball, for example, reported to President Johnson that "free Asian reactions to a compromise settlement in South Vietnam would be highly parochial" because each country would interpret the event "in terms of its own immediate interest, its sense of vulnerability to Communist invasion or insurgency, and its confidence in the integrity of our commitment to its own security based on evidence other than that provided by our actions in South Vietnam."[229] The domino theory further lost popularity in late 1965. According to Bundy's personal papers, the largest "domino" in Southeast Asia "fell

[226] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume I*, document 209.

[227] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume I*, document 209.

[228] Britain, an important U.S. ally, has long rejected the domino theory as a reason to fight in Vietnam. See Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 632–33.

[229] *FRUS 1964-1968, Vietnam, Volume III*, document 40.

firmly the other way – against the Communists – late in 1965."[230] This demonstrates that the U.S. decision to fight in Vietnam was not primarily driven by fears of a domino effect.

Finally, while the domino logic was often invoked to justify the decision for the Vietnam War, it is doubtful whether officials were truly motivated by it. For example, Johnson later described his domino fears in his autobiography by saying, "It seemed likely that all of Southeast Asia would pass under Communist control, slowly or quickly, but inevitably, at least down to Singapore but almost certainly to Djakarta…. On both sides of the line between Communist and non-Communist Asia the struggle for Vietnam and Laos was regarded as a struggle for the fate of Southeast Asia."[231] However, when he was making actual decisions in 1965, he questioned the strategic rationale for fighting in Vietnam by asking his advisors whether Vietnam was really "worth all this effort."[232]

Officials failed to explain when they were pressed to answer how specifically the rise of one Communist Vietnam would cause falling dominoes in the region. As it is noted, "Even the most thorough and most secret internal documents" failed to be precise about "how many dominoes would fall or what would push them."[233] Noam Chomsky

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[230] Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, 222–23.

[231] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 151.

[232] Johnson, 120.

[233] Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 321–22.

observed in 1972 that U.S. policymakers were "generally so vague and imprecise about the mechanism by which the rot will spread in the wake of a communist victory in Vietnam." They advocated for the domino theory "in loose and almost mystical terms."[234]

In sum, the claim that the United States intervened in Vietnam in 1965 due to overvaluation is considered unconvincing. Vietnam was not widely considered as carrying enough strategic significance to trigger a domino effect, suggesting that the domino theory was not a particularly strong driver for the intervention decision. Many officials did not fully embrace the domino theory and even those who did were unclear about why and how dominoes would fall in the absence of U.S. intervention. Thus, the overvaluation explanation can be reasonably ruled out.

3.4.2. Resources

The second alternative explanation for peripheral belligerence emphasizes the potential role of great powers' desire to secure natural resources in the periphery. According to this view, the U.S. decision in Vietnam was primarily motivated by the goal of gaining access to, or protecting, natural resources deemed valuable to the United States or its

[234] Noam Chomsky et al., *Spheres of Influence in the Age of Imperialism* (Spokesman Books, 1972), 8–9.

allies. Some scholars have expressed sympathy with this interpretation.[235] However, the resources explanation is generally considered unconvincing.

Apparently, Vietnam was not seen as particularly rich in natural resources vital to the U.S. economy, such as oil or rare minerals, weakening any argument that the U.S. had immediate resources interests in the country.[236] Vietnam was also largely an unimportant country for broader U.S. economic interests. For example, U.S. direct investment in the country in the early 1960s, for example, was around one percent of that in Cuba as of 1959.[237]

A more plausible story suggests that the U.S. decided to fight in Vietnam in order to save South Vietnam which was supplying important natural resources for Japanese economy.[238] It is true that Washington considered Indochina's resources highly valuable for the recovery of Japan in the late 1940s and early 1950s. For example, officials during the Truman administration predicted that the fall of Indochina would mean "the loss to

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[235] Richard J. Barnet, *Roots of War* (Penguin Books, 1973); Bruce Cumings, "The Origins and Development of the Northeast Asian Political Economy: Industrial Sectors, Product Cycles, and Political Consequences," *International Organization* 38, no. 1 (1984), 1–40.

[236] Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 324–25.

[237] Krasner, 276–77.

[238] Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: The Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Cornell University Press, 1987); Dale C. Copeland, *A World Safe for Commerce: American Foreign Policy from the Revolution to the Rise of China* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

us of 70% of the world's natural rubber and 50% of the world's tin."[239] And the resources explanation would have gained greater support if U.S. intervention had been decided during this period. However, by the late 1950s, it became already clear by the late 1950s that Indochina as a whole was not important for the recovery and security of Japan. Japan had already entered into a period of high-level sustained growth, achieving more than a 12 percent increase in its Gross National Product in the final years of the Eisenhower administration. And, importantly, this economic growth was fueled by trade with the U.S., having very little to do with Southeast Asia markets and resources.[240]

In sum, there is little evidence in U.S. decision-making in 1965 to support the claim that the United States intervened in Vietnam due to resources needs – whether for itself or its allies. And there is no indication that the U.S. military planning prioritized the protection or acquisition of natural resources in Vietnam. Even resource security had been a concern, most of the resources found in Vietnam were available elsewhere in the world and could have been secured without military intervention. Thus, the resources explanation can be reasonably ruled out.

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[239] Lipschutz, "Ore Wars: Access to Strategic Materials, International Conflict, and the Foreign Policies of States," 237–38.

[240] McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 106.

3.4.3. Domestic politics

The final major alternative explanation emphasizes the potential role of domestic political incentives in the decision for peripheral belligerence. According to this view, the Johnson administration chose to intervene in Vietnam mainly because it believed the war would serve domestic political interests – either by boosting public support or preserving momentum on other domestic initiatives. However, based on the available evidence, this explanation is not particularly convincing.

First, the decision to deploy U.S. combat troops to Vietnam in 1965 was not made with the expectation that it would be popular with domestic audiences. On the contrary, there was widespread concern within the Johnson administration that escalation would be politically costly. This becomes especially evident when examining the critical months of 1965, during which internal deliberations revealed a strong awareness of political risks associated with deeper military involvement in Vietnam. President Johnson's conversations with his two predecessors in early 1965, for example, suggest that he was more concerned about the domestic consequences of escalating in Vietnam than hopeful about its reception. Late night on February 15, Johnson called Eisenhower and invited him to the White House for advice, saying, "It's deep enough that I want to talk to you. I think that probably you could be more comforting to me now than anybody I know."[241]

[241] Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965*, 178.

Immediately following his conversation with Eisenhower, Johnson called Truman and confessed, "I got a little bit [of trouble] with Indochina. I just thought I'd call you and try to get a little advice and a little inspiration. I've been reading history and saw how much hell you had, and you handled it pretty good, I just thought maybe I could learn something from you."[242]

Johnson also shared his pessimistic view of the domestic consequences of escalating in Vietnam with his own officials. In July 1965, he told McNamara in a telephone conversation, "We had no intention of committing this many ground troops…. We know it's going to be bad."[243] This is obviously not the attitude of a president leading his country to a wide war in the periphery based on his domestic political calculations. Furthermore, the escalation of the war was carried out quietly and discreetly, in a manner inconsistent with what would be expected of a popular war. Had Johnson and his officials believed that U.S. involvement in Vietnam would be well received by domestic audiences, they would have publicly announced their decision to send troops. Johnson was clearly troubled by his decision to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a state of mind rarely seen in leaders who expect widespread domestic approval of their choices.[244]

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[242] Beschloss, 180.

[243] Beschloss, 381–82.

[244] Johnson was hardly an exception, as all presidents should know military intervention overseas is potentially risky and costly and is not particularly popular with the public. See Colin Dueck, "Neoclassical Realism and the National Interest: Presidents, Domestic Politics, and Major Military

A president who expected to gain popular support from peripheral military action would likely have taken the initiative in escalating the conflict in order to later claim full credit. Circumstantial evidence, however, indicates that this was not the case in Vietnam. Rather than leading the push for escalation, Johnson often appeared reluctant, and it was frequently military elites who pressed for an expanded U.S. commitment. For example, McNamara told Johnson on June 10, following General Westmoreland's request for an immediate deployment of 41,000 additional combat troops, "We're talking about the difference of twenty thousand people [between Westmoreland's request and McNamara's own recommendation]. But they're all combat people. And it's quite a difference in risk…. I have a very definite limitation on commitment [on U.S. ground troops] in mind. I don't think the Chiefs do. In fact, I know they don't."[245] As such, the president and key civilian officials did not actively seek to expand the war in Vietnam, but instead passively approved a series of troop increase requests made from the military.

Second, the version of the domestic politics argument that claims that the decision for intervention in Vietnam was intended to preserve political momentum for the administration's domestic initiatives does not receive full support from the historical record. According to this view, President Johnson feared the broader political

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Interventions," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 144.

[245] Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965*, 349–50.

repercussions of losing Vietnam on his domestic policies including the Great Society programs, which pressured the U.S. into fighting.[246] At first glance, this claim appears to be supported by the evidence. In an interview with his biographer, Johnson claimed, "If I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam … that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration and damage our democracy."[247] Johnson also wrote, "[I]f we walked away from Vietnam and let Southeast Asia fall, … [a] divisive debate about 'who lost Vietnam' would be, in my judgment, even more destructive to our national life than the argument over China had been."[248] However, it is not entirely certain that the U.S. decision for intervention was actually driven by Johnson's domestic considerations.

While Johnson did worry about the potential political consequences of appearing weak on communism, the extent to which this fear directly influenced the decision to escalate in 1965 remains unclear. The evidence cited by proponents of this domestic politics interpretation primarily comes from sources produced after Johnson's presidency,

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[246] Francis M. Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (June 2008); Alexander B. Downes, "How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War," *International Security* 33, no. 4 (Spring 2009).

[247] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (St. Martin's Press, 1976), 251–52.

[248] Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 151–52. This fear was largely shared by Johnson's predecessor. Kennedy reportedly said, "I can't give up a piece of territory like that to the Communists and get the American people to reelect me." See McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 106.

making it difficult to conclude that the fear of losing domestic support in the even of the loss of Vietnam was a central motivation at the time key decisions were being made in 1965. The closest piece of evidence linking Johnson's Vietnam policy to his domestic agenda *during* his presidency, rather than after, is a telephone conversation he had with his senior aide for congressional relations on the day of the Tonkin Gulf retaliation in 1964. In this conversation, Johnson asked, "What effect [will] our asking Congress for a resolution to support us … and bombing the hell out of the Vietnamese tonight have on this [the poverty] bill? Will it kill it or help us?"[249] Even in this instance, Johnson does not appear to have a clear sense of which course of action in Vietnam would cost him fewer votes and thus be the best for his domestic standing.

This uncertainty faced by Johnson is understandable, especially considering that many today still believe he could have pursued his domestic policies without difficulty even without escalating in Vietnam. According to Logevall, for example, Johnson could have "convince[d] many skeptical Dixiecrats and moderate Republicans to go along"

[249] Bator, "No Good Choices," 325. One could find the reason for the lack of evidence in the position of the president. For example, Bator argues that Johnson could not "comfortably acknowledge, even to his advisers, that he intends to mislead the country about going to war to protect Medicare and fair housing." See Bator, "No Good Choices," 322. This possibility, however, cannot explain why most foreign policy advisers and officials, not just Johnson himself, supported the decision to escalate in Vietnam.

with a policy of withdrawal and also "sold the general public" on it.[250] If one accepts this assessment, it becomes obvious that, for the Johnson administration, "the domestic context mattered much less than the international one."[251] While it is possible that President Johnson's decision to escalate in 1965 was influenced by his concerns over his Great Society programs, there is little evidence from the moments of decision-making to support that interpretation. Moreover, it is equally plausible that Johnson feared losing support and political momentum because of his decision for peripheral belligerence, as Johnson should have been able to anticipate it to grow quickly unpopular among domestic audiences.

Importantly, future research that supports the domestic politics explanation – particularly through new evidence suggesting that Johnson escalated the war to protect his Great Society initiatives – would not necessarily weaken the validity of my theory. If Johnson genuinely believed that intervention in Vietnam was necessary to sustain domestic political support for his domestic programs, the more important question becomes: what led him to hold that belief? On this question, the domestic politics school offers no clear answer. In contrast, my strategic reputational theory provides a deeper explanation, arguing that Johnson's perception of the domestic need to demonstrate U.S.

[250] Logevall, *Choosing War*, 407.

[251] Logevall, 289.

resolve was rooted in widespread reputational concerns shaped by the military-strategic context. From this perspective, reputation was not just a justification for intervention – it was the lens through which the administration understood the political stakes of peripheral belligerence. And any president in the cost-absorbent strategic context would have expected a loss of domestic support if the U.S. appeared irresolute by failing to use force in the periphery. Then, it is doubtful whether Johnson would have feared political backlash had it not been for the prevailing cost-absorbent strategic thinking of that time.

In short, the claim that the United States intervened in Vietnam in 1965 primarily due to domestic political considerations is unconvincing. There is little evidence that decision-makers expected to gain politically from a peripheral conflict or that such expectations, even if they existed, played any significant role in shaping the actual decision for intervention. The empirical link between Johnson's desire to sustain support for his domestic initiatives and his decision on Vietnam remains tenuous as well. Thus, the domestic politics explanation can be reasonably ruled out.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter explained the United States' decision to intervene in Vietnam in 1965 with the strategic reputational theory. In summary, U.S. peripheral belligerence in Vietnam was largely driven by reputational concerns, which intensified with the rise of cost-absorbent strategic thinking – emerging in the late 1950s and becoming central in the

1960s. As the Soviet Union developed the capability to directly threaten the U.S. homeland, U.S. strategy in Europe compelled Washington to cultivate an exceptionally strong reputation for resolve – one that would persuade the Communist bloc of America's unwavering commitment to defend overseas interests even under conditions of heightened homeland vulnerability.

To be clear, policymakers in Washington neither intended nor hoped that the costly fighting in Vietnam would assure the Kremlin of America's willingness to sacrifice its own cities in defense of its allies. As this chapter demonstrated, however, growing vulnerability of the American homeland and the resulting cost-absorbent strategic thinking changed the way policymakers viewed crises and conflicts, including those in the periphery, compelling them to more seriously consider the reputational consequences of their policy choices. Although fighting in Vietnam was less costly than a potential full-scale war with the Soviet Union, its limited value as a peripheral country made it a disproportionately costly commitment, serving as a strong signal of resolve. In this context, U.S. peripheral belligerence did not have to occur in Vietnam, but the developments unfolding in Indochina during the 1960s offered a timely and convenient arena for fighting for reputation. This stands in sharp contrast to U.S. policy on Vietnam a decade earlier, when the reputational motivation for peripheral belligerence was far less pronounced in the absence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking.

It is true that reputational concerns may not have been the only reason for U.S. peripheral belligerence in Vietnam. However, as the analysis presented here demonstrates, other plausible explanations for the Vietnam War such as the domino theory or domestic political motivations lack the explanatory power provided by the strategic reputational theory. Although other factors may have contributed to increasing the likelihood of U.S. intervention, none of them independently had sufficient driving force to make it a viable policy on their own. Evidence drawn from U.S. policymakers' reasoning and military behavior in Vietnam indicates that reputational concerns played a more decisive role for the decision for peripheral belligerence in 1965. Furthermore, my theory offers an improved reputational explanation of the Vietnam War compared to traditional credibility accounts by clearly specifying the origins of strong U.S. reputational motivations during this period.

Finally, two questions may be raised regarding the causal connection between cost-absorbent strategic thinking and U.S. policy in the periphery during the Cold War. First, if U.S. cost-absorbent strategic thinking genuinely drove the intervention in Vietnam, why did Washington not engage in more peripheral conflicts after Vietnam, given that the U.S. homeland remained consistently vulnerable throughout the remainder of the Cold War? Second, as the U.S. homeland became increasingly vulnerable in the early 1960s, why did the U.S. opt to fight a distant peripheral war that could potentially further reduce its security? Regarding the first question, as outlined in

the theory chapter, great powers are expected to respond sooner than later to developments that foster cost-absorbent strategic thinking. Thus, the strategic imperative for reputation building was significantly more pressing in the 1960s than in later stages of the Cold War. Furthermore, the experience of Vietnam alleviated U.S. reputational concerns to an extent, rendering additional peripheral wars potentially counterproductive. To address the second question, America's peripheral belligerence in Vietnam did not materially impair NATO's military preparedness and was an effective means of reputation building, especially given that no realistic solution existed to meaningfully reduce the U.S. homeland vulnerability.

Chapter 4. Japan's Invasion of China, 1937

4.1. Introduction

The Second Sino-Japanese War, which began with Japan's invasion of China in 1937, is one of the most significant historical events in the twentieth century and a crucial case of great power peripheral belligerence. After a Japanese soldier went missing near the Marco Polo Bridge, southwest of Beijing, on July 7, the Japanese instigated skirmishes, which eventually escalated into a full-scale war with Tokyo's authorization. Soon after, Japan's newly created North China Army had 200,000 troops in the field.[252] Following the rapid capture of Beijing and Tianjin in August, Japanese forces pushed south. The bombing of Nanjing and Shanghai began on August 15, marking the start of a full-scale war across an area roughly equivalent to the United States east of the Mississippi River.[253]

The war proved immensely costly for Japan. Japan suffered more than 40,000 casualties in the four-month battle of Shanghai alone and more than 100,000 casualties in total by the end of 1937.[254] Within a year, there were approximately 1.5 million Japanese

[252] W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 203.

[253] Ikuhiko Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," in *The China Quagmire: Japan's Expansion on the Asian Continent 1933-1941* (Columbia University Press, 1983), 268.

[254] Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (University Press of Kansas, 2009), 196.

troops stationed in China, with the war costing Japan more than $5 million per day.[255] By June 1941, Japanese losses exceeded 100,000 men killed, while more than 3 million Chinese troops had perished. Many Japanese considered the war in China a "difficult and embarrassing war." [256] Why did Japan choose to bear such a heavy burden in the periphery despite China's little value in its broader great power competition? How well does my strategic reputational theory explain this case ?

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, it highlights the puzzling nature of the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 and outlines the need for a new explanation centered on reputational motivation. Second, it applies my strategic reputational theory to the case, demonstrating how strategic reputational concerns influenced the decision for peripheral belligerence. Third, it critically evaluates alternative explanations. Finally, the chapter concludes with key findings and responses to potential critiques.

4.2. The need for a new reputational explanation

Did Japan invade China to pursue any important national interests? One might claim that China in the 1930s, although backward and underdeveloped, was not peripheral for the Japanese Empire because of its population, natural resources, and its being located as the

[255] H. P. Willmott, *Empires in the balance: Japanese and Allied pacific strategies, to April 1942* (Naval Institute Press, 2008), 55.

[256] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 1948, 741, 759.

next colonial prize for Tokyo. Based on my criteria, however, it was peripheral to Japan, given how it was situated in great power competition. China lacked productive capacity as well as strategic location to contribute to Japan's ability to compete with other great powers.[257] In 1937, Japan was confronting the Soviet Union, more directly so after Manchuria came under its influence. Starting a war in China proper was not considered to be in service of Japan's vital security interests. For Japan, as historian Beasley notes, "It was the north that mattered most."[258]

Protecting Japanese civilians and their property in China was not a primary reason for the use of force. Although the use of force was then at least partly justified with such reason, it is difficult to view this concern as a primary reason. There was no imminent threat to the Japanese reported in the summer of 1937, and the scale of Japan's military action was not proportional to the rationale of protecting civilians. According to a historian, "A government sincerely desirous of limiting the scope of hostilities could at least have protected its nationals, and possibly its property as well, by means other than

[257] In contrast, Manchuria could be considered non-peripheral to Japan then. It would have served as a strategic buffer to Korea. For example, the Japanese considered Manchuria as a "vital strategic barrier blocking the southward expansion of Soviet influence." See Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*; Peattie, "The Dragon's Seed: Origins of the War," 66. In addition, there were also more abundant resources that Japan could exploit in Manchuria than most parts of China. See, for example, Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks*, 109.

[258] Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945*, 207.

those employed… or [promptly withdrawn] troops once their specific mission of saving lives had been accomplished."[259]

Japan's decision to start a war in China in 1937 is even more puzzling, considering its other negative repercussions. First, it was expected to be a vast waste of national resources in what was largely considered the periphery for Japanese interests. For example, In the summer of 1937, Ishiwara Kanji warned it to be "what Spain was for Napoleon… an endless bog"[260] and Horiba Kazuo of the war guidance section of the army general staff warned that "if additional troops were sent, it would be the start of an unlimited commitment to fight in the vast heartland of China."[261] During an Army General Staff meeting on July 12, 1937, it was claimed that "If several divisions were dispatched to North China, Japan could institute a military administration in North China. But the troops would then be tied down there, and the situation … demand a large expenditure of funds, and we would be in no position to take action if difficulties should develop elsewhere."[262] Officers expected that fighting in China would "merely drain

[259] Robert J. C. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War* (Princeton University Press, 1961), 98.

[260] Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 89.

[261] Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945: A Critical Perspective on Japan's Role in World War II* (Pantheon Books, 1978), 71.

[262] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 255.

resources needed to fight the Soviets, brand Japan an aggressor in world opinion, and likely lead Japan into full-scale war against an allied coalition."[263]

Once the war was in full swing, previous warnings quickly proved accurate and many Japanese soon began anticipating a prolonged, costly war. Marquis Kido calculated in May 1938 that the cost of the war would be over 800 million yen over the next three years.[264] The Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Marquis Kido wrote on December 3, 1940, "the United States and Soviet Russia will be the only nations unhurt after the present struggle, while the rest of the countries will no doubt all be exhausted. If so, Japan being placed between these two powers, will suffer extremely."[265] When the opportunity to attack the Soviet Union came with the Nazi invasion in June 1941, all Japan's military power was concentrated in China and then soon against the United States and Britain.

Japan's war in China also worsened its diplomatic position. As early as 1933, Obata Hideyoshi in the War Ministry thought that fighting in China would "brand Japan an aggressor in world opinion, and likely lead Japan into full-scale war against an allied coalition," in addition to draining resources needed to fight the Soviets.[266] In August 1937,

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[263] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 177.

[264] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 710–13; Koichi Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido, 1931-1945* (University Publications of America, 1984), 190.

[265] Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido, 1931-1945*, 260.

[266] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 177.

angered by the bombing of Nanking, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt declared in a speech, "It would seem to be unfortunately true that the epidemic of world lawlessness is spreading. When an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread the community approves and joins in a quarantine of the patients in order to protect the community against the spread of disease.[267] And, in September, Stanley Hornbeck of the Far Easter Division in the U.S. State Department, "Japan had to be stopped, and as that could be done only by force, the United States must build more battleships and strengthen its naval power in the western Pacific. Diplomatic note writing unsupported by a determination to use force would accomplish nothing."[268] A study by the U.S. State Department in 1940 called for a trade ban with Japan, stating that "practically everything which Japan buys in this country are, strictly speaking, munitions of war destined to further Japan's military activities in China."[269] If Japan had not invaded China in 1937, its relations with the United States might have not deteriorated as they actually did. And without U.S. diplomatic pressures and oil embargos, the Japanese would not have actively considered launching an attack on Hawaii in 1941. Then, it may be arguably said that Japan's decision

[267] Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 123.

[268] Jonathan G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937-1941* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 8–9.

[269] Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 182.

for peripheral belligerence 1937 was also largely responsible for the outbreak of the Pacific War.

To what extent was the war an outcome of the military being a powerful domestic group in Japan? This question is worth exploring especially considering the way Manchuria was annexed several years beforehand.[270] Available evidence indicates that the 1937 decision to invade China, staring the second Sino-Japanese War, was directly made by the central leadership in Tokyo. The decision for action was not pursued by local military commanders but the General Staff in Tokyo, which in turn was promptly approved by civilian leaders. Without the Army General Staff strongly in favor of a war with China, the first outbreak of fighting quickly assuming "the proportions of a full-scale offensive" would not have been possible.[271] And the Konoe Cabinet approved on July 10 the General Staff's request to send reinforcements to North China and authorized on July 20 the mobilization of three divisions for North China.[272] Then, on August 15, soon after hostilities started in Shanghai, the cabinet also announced its decision to send two divisions from Japan, clearly abandoning the policy of localization.[273] The fact that army

[270] For a recent analysis of Japan's unintentional expansion into Manchuria, see Nicholas D. Anderson, "Push and Pull on the Periphery: Inadvertent Expansion in World Politics," *International Security* 47, no. 3 (2022): 136–73.

[271] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 184–85.

[272] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 686.

[273] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 698, 205.

officers, who would have expected to gain most by a war in China, were not the protagonists in the decision-making leads us to also doubt the idea that Japanese foreign policy in this period was driven by the military.[274]

Other important works on Japanese policy in this period also fail to provide satisfactory answers. For example, Jeffrey Taliaferro merely describes the onset and costs of the war rather than explaining Japan's war decision with his "balance-of-risk" theory.[275] Charles Kupchan, while noting that most Japanese leaders sought to avoid involvement in China for strategic reasons, argues that Japan found itself in a war for China "essentially by accident."[276]

The puzzling nature of Japan's 1937 decision to fight in China and the inadequacy of existing explanations lead us to consider reputational motivations as a possible cause. Is there direct evidence indicating that reputational concerns played a role in Japan's decision to invade China in 1937? The straightforward answer to this is no, which makes this case a hard test for my strategic reputational theory. Limited scholarly interest in Japan's reputational motivations in 1937 itself makes this case a particularly difficult test

[274] Snyder, *Myths of Empire*. Jack Snyder identifies 1931 as the crucial year in which imperial "overexpansion" began in a broad sense and does not specifically apply his theory to explain Japan's 1937 decision. See ibid., 115.

[275] Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks*, 100–102.

[276] Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*, 324.

for the strategic reputational theory. And the theory's successful explanation should add additional credit to its external validity.

At least two aspects in Tokyo's decision-making in 1937 suggest that reputational concerns may have influenced Japanese leaders. On one hand, despite recognizing China's peripheral position, many initially displayed strong reluctance to invade but eventually moved toward agreement on the use of force. This shift implies significant underlying pressures shaping the decision-making environment. For example, when War Minister Sugiyama Gen requested to send three divisions to China soon after the Marco Polo incident, Prime Minister Konoe warned, "For Japan to send a large force to China now is of grave international import. From the standpoint of national policy, to deploy such forces because of such a question may not meet with the people's sanction.… I am absolutely against deploying the troops." And the Minister of Home Affairs, the Navy Minister and the Foreign Minister all agreed with him.[277] Officers who were sent from Tokyo to observe the local situation reported, upon their return on July 21, that the local situation did "not warrant the dispatch of troops."[278] And the Army General Staff itself "showed much reluctance in dispatching troops" to Shanghai in mid-August,

[277] Kumao Harada and Kinmochi Saionji, *The Saionji-Harada Memoirs, 1931-1940* (University Publications of America, 1978), 1819.

[278] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 259.

1937.[279] The fact that Japan eventually proceeded with steps to a full-scale war in China despite this pronounced initial hesitation raises the question of whether reputational concerns played a significant role.

On the other hand, the Japanese government and military failed to articulate clear reasons for invading China, implying that significant non-material factors such as reputational concerns may have influenced their decision. In his speech to the Diet in September 1937, the foreign minister said that Japan is "determined to deal a decisive blow to [China] so that it may reflect upon the error of its ways."[280] The Imperial Edict in September declared the objective of the war in China as to "urge grave self-reflection upon China."[281] Based on such statements, historians generally agree that Japan, from the very beginning of the war, was not able to "reveal any clearcut notion of where the war was heading."[282] Importantly, if reputational concerns were shaping Japanese policy on China in 1937, they were not about how the Chinese would remember Japan. For example, on July 18, 1937, Prime Minister Konoe stated that Japan should make it clear to China that it "entertains no wild territorial ambitions" and that it "has no desire for the use of

[279] Hata, 267.

[280] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 701.

[281] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 700–701.

[282] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 269.

wanton military power."[283] In July, there was even an opinion within the government calling for sending Foreign Minister Hirota to Nanking to improve relations with China.[284]

Herein lies the need for a new reputational motivation. Japan's decision for peripheral belligerence in China constitutes a least-likely case for my strategic reputational theory – and indeed for any reputational explanation. Existing scholarship on the Second Sino-Japanese War has traditionally not attributed Japan's motivations to reputation building, largely due to the scarcity of direct evidence supporting such claims. During the 1930s, concepts of reputation or resolve were not explicitly theorized and Japan, lacking allies to whom it had defensive commitments, had fewer reasons to prioritize reputation compared to what became commonplace during the Cold War. Naturally, other seemingly powerful drivers (e.g., desire for economic autarchy, militarism) have received extensive scholarly attention. Then, demonstrating that strategic reputational concerns significantly influenced Japan's decision in this challenging case would substantially enhance confidence in my strategic reputational theory.

[283] Harada and Saionji, *The Saionji-Harada Memoirs, 1931-1940*, 1831, 1837.

[284] Harada and Saionji, 1823.

4.3. Strategic reputational explanation

In this section, I apply the strategic reputational theory to explain Japan's invasion of China in 1937. As elaborated in the theory chapter, the theory predicts that great powers anticipating the direct absorption of particularly high war costs against their primary adversary, due to either high battlefield vulnerability or high homeland vulnerability, will experience stronger reputational concerns, driving them toward peripheral belligerence. My analysis confirms the theory, showing that Japanese cost-absorbent strategic thinking, driven by a perceived high battlefield vulnerability, shaped a policy environment in the mid-1930s that made a China war justifiable on strategic reputational grounds, which had not been viable in the preceding period.

4.3.1. Cost-absorbent strategic thinking

Evidence suggests that Japan developed a clear expectation of directly absorbing particularly high war costs in the mid-1930s as it increasingly recognized its high battlefield vulnerability against the Soviet army in Asia. To begin with, the Soviet Union remained the greatest threat and the major great power adversary for Japan throughout the 1930s. In July 1932, the Japanese military attaché in Moscow reported that the "greatest stress must be laid upon preparation for war with the Soviet Union, as such a war was inevitable."[285] In a meeting attended by influential statesmen including future

[285] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 100.

Prime Minister Konoe in April 1933, Suzuki Teiichi who would later become a member of the cabinet, said, "There are absolute enemies and relative enemies. A country like the USSR, which will attempt to destroy our national polity, is an absolute enemy."[286] "The major ground enemy was always assumed to be Russia," while "the study of military operations against China itself was neglected."[287]

The image of the Soviet Union as Japan's greatest enemy became increasingly clearer. Starting from around 1935, the Soviet Union shifted to an aggressive policy of checking Japan in the Far East. Japan was publicly branded as an enemy at the Comintern Congress in July-August of 1935. The cabinet ministerial conference held in Tokyo on August 7, 1936 adopted a "Fundamentals of National Policy," which emphasized coping with "the threat from the Soviet Union in the north in order to assure healthy development in Manchukuo and Japan-Manchukuo defense" and asked the army to "aim at dealing with the forces which Soviet Russia can deploy in the far east."[288] The "Foreign Policy of Imperial Japan" reaffirmed that that "the primary aim [of Japanese policy] is to frustrate the Soviet Union's aggressive plan in East Asia."[289] Japan soon concluded the

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[286] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 75.

[287] Ikuhiko Hata, "The Japanese-Soviet Confrontation, 1935-1939," in *Deterrent Diplomacy* (Columbia University Press, 1976), 130.

[288] Ian Nish, *Japanese Foreign Policy 1869-1942: Kasumigaseki to Miyakezaka* (Routledge, 1977), 302.

[289] Toshihiko Shimada, "Designs on North China," in *The China Quagmire* (Columbia University Press, 1983), 198.

Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany on November 25, 1936. In fact, almost two years into the war in China, the Japanese War Minister still considered Russia, not China, as the "first" enemy for Japan.[290]

The idea that the Soviet Union was Japan's opponent in the next war was not limited to those in the Japanese government. The public in Japan agreed with the elites that the Soviet Union posed the greatest threat to Japan. For example, a renowned writer wrote in 1933, "The USSR is Japan's mortal enemy…Friendly relations with it are impossible."[291] Foreign observers were also clearly aware of the reality. "There can be no doubt," wrote American authors in 1936, for example, "that at present the center of gravity of Japanese foreign policy is preparation for a war against the Soviet Union."[292] Historians agree on this. For example, according to Japanese historian Hata, Russia constituted the "primary hypothetical enemy of the Japanese army" since the Russo-Japanese War.[293] According to Peattie, "In Japanese army writings from 1931 to 1937, there was virtual unanimity on the inevitability of conflict with the Red Army. The real controversies that developed within the army's upper circles were those over the timing

[290] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 736.

[291] O. Tanin and E. Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War* (The Vanguard Press, 1936), 49.

[292] Tanin and Tanin, 19.

[293] Hata, "The Japanese-Soviet Confrontation, 1935-1939," 129.

of such a collision and the best means to prepare for it."[294] According to Ienaga, "The army had long wanted to attack the Soviet Union"[295] Shimada also agreed that Japan's basic policy then was "seen as centering around relations with the Soviet Union."[296]

Against the Soviet Union, Japan gradually developed a sense of its battlefield vulnerability in mainland Asia, leading to higher expected costs of war against its primary enemy. While the Soviet Union pushed for industrialization of the military sector, Japan could not. Under the First Five-Year Plan started by Josef Stalin, new industries became established and influenced the armaments industry, fueled by Russia's rich resources. A Japanese Colonel in the War Ministry wrote in 1934, "Up to now, [Russia's] center of the heavy industries has been the valley of the river Don; now, however, with the aid of iron from the Urals and coal from Kuznetsk, an output of 2,500,000 tons of pig-iron is planned. This alone is twice as much as the total output of pig-iron in Japan."[297] Historian Williamson Murray find the reason for the Soviet victory in the European theater of World War II in Russia's industrialization efforts of this period, "the eventual success of the Red Army in World War II rested on the industrialization of the late 1920s and 1930s. Not only did the Five-Year Plans allow the Soviets to create an impressive

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[294] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 186.

[295] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 81.

[296] Shimada, "Designs on North China," 199.

[297] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 41.

inventory of weapons but they provided the cushion that allowed the regime to survive the onslaught of 1941."[298]

Specifically, the Soviet Union made a significant leap in its heavy tractor industry and began producing significantly more tanks than Japan. In the final version of the First Five-Year Plan, confirmed in May 1929, the number of tanks of all types targeted for equipping the Red Army was set for 3,500 (more than three times that planned the previous year).[299] In July 1929, the highest ranks of the Red Army and the armaments industry passed a special directive covering the production of tanks and approved the "Program for Armoured-Automobile Supply to the Red Army" which emphasized the requirement for creating mechanized units as well as the total mechanization of the Armed Forces. Most importantly, each infantry division was intended to have an armored car company.[300] The main targets in the technical reconstruction of the Soviet armed forces included: the motorization and reorganization of the old arms (infantry, artillery and cavalry) in conformity with modern military requirements as well as the

[298] Williamson Murray, *The Dark Path: The Structure of War and the Rise of the West* (Yale University Press, 2024), 193.

[299] John Milsom, *Russian Tanks, 1990-1970: The Complete Illustrated History of Soviet Armored Theory and Design* (Stackpole Books, 1970), 31.

[300] Milsom, 31–32.

modernization and fundamental improvement of obsolete equipment still in use with the Red Army.[301]

In 1934, the Soviet Union deployed 650 tanks in the Far East, the number that increased to 800 to 900 by the end of the following year. By 1936, Soviet tanks in the Far East numbered 1,200.[302] As historian Coox notes, the Russians were proud of the progress achieved in the Far East due to the five-year plans. For example, the deputy commander of the Special Far Eastern Army reportedly said in 1936 that it took the Soviets three years to accomplish things that would have taken eighteen years in the tsarist period.[303] In stark contrast, as of 1933, only 380 tanks were produced in Japan and the general outlook for the rest of the 1930s was not very optimistic for the Japanese automobile and tank industry and it was expected that Japan may have to import roughly a half of the tanks it will demand in a future major war.[304] Table 4.1. summarizes the shifting balance in the number of tanks between Japan and the Soviet Union in the Far East.

[301] Milsom, 31.

[302] Alvin D. Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939* (Stanford University Press, 1985), 78–84.

[303] Coox, 83.

[304] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 183–86.

Year	Japanese tanks	Soviet tanks	Force ratio
1932	50	250	1:5
1934	120	650	1:55
1936	150	1,200	1:8
1937	150	1,500	1:10

Table 4.1. Armored balance between Japan and the USSR in the Far East theater[305]

The rapid mechanization of the Soviet military began to concern Japan, starting from the early 1930s and peaking in the mid-1930s. Although the first mechanized brigade was founded in the Soviet Union in 1930, no reasonable quantity of tanks was supplied to the Red Army until 1931. The efforts of the First Five-Year Plan did not bear fruit yet.[306] Major Horike Kazumaro, who spent the year of 1930 in Russia, already predicted the difficulty of dealing with the Soviet predominance in tanks and aircraft. He believed that a vast Japanese program of military modernization and industrialization was imperative.[307] Similarly, General Itagaki Seishiro, who would become war minister in 1938, viewed the Soviet armaments in Siberia, "overwhelmingly superior, threatening the Japanese rear gate."[308] Kwantung Army' briefing given by army staff officers to 3rd

[305] Milsom, *Russian Tanks, 1990-1970: The Complete Illustrated History of Soviet Armored Theory and Design*; Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939*.

[306] Milsom, *Russian Tanks, 1990-1970: The Complete Illustrated History of Soviet Armored Theory and Design*, 34–35.

[307] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 187.

[308] Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939*, 85.

Fleet Commander Oikawa in 1936 confesses the army's inferiority in air power and armaments. It also proposed that forces in Japan should be reduced to the absolute minimum so as to concentrate the largest force available in Manchuria.[309] Summarizing the grim situation in 1935, an officer in the Army's Operations Section reported, "Although the military power of the Soviet Union in the Far East was originally in a state of balance, only four short years after the Manchurian Incident, Japanese troop strength in Manchuria is only a fraction of the Soviet forces, and in aircraft and tanks particularly, there is no comparison."[310]

The emerging battlefield vulnerability of the Japanese army in mainland Asia was also publicly recognized. An expert opinion was published in a newspaper in 1934: "the military forces of the USSR greatly exceed the forces of the Japanese army at the present time. It is particularly important to bear in mind that modern warfare is scientific warfare… To count on victory in a hand-to-hand struggle against excellent airplanes, tanks, machine guns, etc., would be too much to expect of soldiers, however brave they may be."[311] A renowned Japanese civilian observer of military affairs warned in 1934, "The forces of the Far Eastern Red Army are now 100,000 strong, and they have air forces,

[309] Shimada, "Designs on North China," 197–98.

[310] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 198.

[311] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 42.

tanks, cavalry, mechanized units, and fast units. If they have able commanders, I think it will not be impossible for them to penetrate deeply into Manchuria."[312]

Japan's concern over its military's battlefield vulnerability against the Soviet army was proven valid in small conflicts between the two powers. For example, in the Battle of Nomonhan in 1939, Soviet tanks easily overran Japanese artillery batteries because artillerymen had no antitank or antiaircraft weapons for self-defense.[313] Japan had only two tank regiments and no armored divisions and therefore employed tanks in a very passive manner. It was reported that many Japanese infantrymen and artillerists never saw a friendly tank in action at Nomonhan.[314] After the war, Zhukov reported to Stalin that, while Japanese troops were well trained and disciplined, Japanese armament including tanks was obsolete.[315] Following the battles in Nomonhan, it was warned that Japanese troops are at risk of annihilation by the Soviet army without sufficient antitank weapons.[316] According to the most authoritative data, the Japanese army lost 20,000 men out of 60,000 troops committed, recording a much higher casualty rate than Japan's

[312] Tanin and Tanin, 50.

[313] Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 3–8.

[314] Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939*, 375.

[315] Coox, 1000.

[316] Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*, 5.

previous wars including the Russo-Japanese War or the recent battle at Changkufeng.[317] According to historian Coox, the Battle of Nomonhan was the Soviet Union's first real test of war with tanks, artillery, and aircraft used on a large scale and it revealed important Soviet developments and innovations.[318]

Japan's strategic objectives and military doctrine against the Soviet Union in the 1930s, particularly concerning the anticipated battlefield in mainland Asia, assured that Tokyo clearly anticipated a highly intense next war and thus expected to directly absorb exceptional war costs discussed above. First, strategic objectives that Japan would pursue in a military struggle with the Soviet Union were clearly ambitious, necessitating direct engagement between the armies of the two sides. The Japanese strongly believed that the Soviet Union was a dissatisfied power in the Far East with a strong desire to change the status quo.

The Soviet Union was considered by many not just an adversary whose stance may change depending on circumstances but an "absolute enemy."[319] The army regarded war with the Soviet Union as inevitable, and the Kwantung Army's preparations for the eventual hostilities involved concentration of its main forces along the eastern border of

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[317] Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939*, 914–18. In contrast, the Soviet Union lost only about 9,000 troops at Nomonhan.

[318] Coox, 997.

[319] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 75; Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido, 1931-1945*, 68.

Manchukuo and seizing Vladivostok while advancing motorized units toward Ulan Bator in Outer Mongolia to threaten the Trans-Siberian Railway near Lake Baikal against an enemy of 250,000 Soviet troops.[320] In fact, it had been believed since the 1920s that, while a short war might be possible against China, a conflict with the Soviets in the Far East would "necessarily be a drawn-out total affair."[321] Beginning in 1932, the Soviets began to funnel an ever-increasing stream of men and material into their Asian defense. "Between 1931 and 1935 Soviet forces in the area tripled in strength and tensions rose accordingly along the Soviet-Manchurian border.[322] Between 1932 and 1935, the number of Soviet divisions in East Asia increased from eight to fourteen and Japan's military now comprised of only 36 percent of Soviet strength.[323]

In face of the revisionist Soviet Union, however, Japan had no intention to scale back its own ambitions in continental northeast Asia. Foreign Minister Hirota publicly announced in 1933 Japan's ultimate goal of Japan's policy toward the Soviet Union as "the withdrawal of all Soviet military contingents from the Far East, and particularly from the frontiers of Manchuria." [324] In the mid-1930s, the semi-official Japanese

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[320] Shimada, "Designs on North China," 197–98.

[321] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 153.

[322] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 186.

[323] Peattie, 198.

[324] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 28.

newspaper The Harbin Shimbun, mouthpiece of the General Staff of the Kwantung Army, declared Japan's policy as to "eliminate Red Russia from Asia and to clear Asiatic territory of the adventures of Red Russia."[325] A well-known Japanese writer on military affairs, wrote in 1933, "Whether the General Staffs like it or not, the war will be a prolonged one, the fronts will stretch out, the requirements of the armies will grow with progressive rapidity, losses will continuously be multiplied and the war will assume a very prolonged character."[326]

This position did not change during the war in China. For example, at the Imperial Conference on July 2, 1941, Hara Yoshimichi, president of the Privy Council said, "The Soviet Union is spreading communism throughout the world, so it must be attacked sooner or later. Some people say that because of the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact, to attack the Soviet Union would be an act of treachery, but the USSR is habitually treacherous. No one will accuse us of bad faith for attacking the Russians… The Soviet Union should be destroyed. Thus, I hope the preparations will be made to hasten the commencement of hostilities."[327]

An examination of the Japanese army's doctrine during this period, both in general and specifically in relation to the Soviet army, suggests that Japan adhered to what could

[325] Tanin and Tanin, 8.

[326] Tanin and Tanin, 59.

[327] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 83.

be considered a direct military doctrine in a future war against the USSR. There is no evidence that the Japanese army possessed an indirect doctrine, offensive or defensive, designed to avoid or minimize direct absorption of the costs of fighting.

While acknowledging the implications of "the recent great advances in material warfare, the 1921 *Principles of Command* maintained that victory in battle ultimately still "depended on intangibles like devotion to duty, patriotism, and willingness to sacrifice oneself to achieve objectives."[328] The Japanese army's training emphasized the unique role of the infantryman, who was expected to be tough and resolute and to fight without elaborate combined arms support.[329] Under Araki Sadao's leadership in the War Ministry, the wearing of Japanese-style swords by company-grade officers, which had been prohibited by the Meiji government 1876, was reintroduced in 1934.[330] Noticing this trend, historian Peattie writes, "Partly because their emphasis on morale and tradition dimmed [Japanese officer's] ability to see the crucial importance of mechanization."[331]

Japan attempted to address its increasing battlefield vulnerability, but these efforts ultimately failed to produce tangible results. For example, in his "Request Concerning the Development of Industries in Preparation for War" prepared for the Army Ministry

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[328] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 156.

[329] Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*, 64.

[330] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 176.

[331] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 199.

in July 1936, Ishiwara Kanji argued, "In order to prepare for war with the Soviet Union, by 1941 industries essential to the waging of war must be fully developed in Japan, Manchukuo, and North China. We demand that these industries be developed rapidly, especially in Manchukuo.[332] In his "Policy for War Preparations Planning," he also called for a "rapid increase in aircraft production and the establishment of a munitions industry in Manchuria."[333] However, Japan's efforts largely failed. The chief of the War Ministry's Military Affairs Bureau, whose job was to develop a long-range program of military reorganization, faced strong resistance and was eventually assassinated in August 1935. With his assassination, the army was now robbed of the architect and engineer of the whole concept of national defense mobilization.[334] By early 1936, the Japanese military, as an army general put it, "exhausted its wits in thinking out countermeasures" against the Soviet army in the Far East increasing becoming superior.[335]

The first obstacle to the full-scale mechanization of the Japanese army was the bushido culture that was not in alignment with mechanization. Already in the early 1920s, high-ranking officers were unimpressed with the argument for for modernization because it was believed that "reliance on new weaponry and technology superiority was

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[332] Shimada, "Designs on North China," 198–99.

[333] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 202.

[334] Peattie, 197.

[335] Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939*, 85.

a European and American conceit."[336] Chief of the Military Technical Board stated in his 1932 radio broadcast, "all previous victories achieved by the Japanese army were achieved primarily by the moral strength of our spirit, our loyalty to the emperor, our patriotism and our high discipline, despite the fact that we, unfortunately, were not supplied with excellent weapons."[337] This message clearly shows how technology was subordinated to human factors in Japanese military thinking, as the purpose of this broadcast was to publicize the necessity of increasing the technical development of the army. According to historian Willmott, "Japan relied primarily on human resources to make up for her material weakness."[338]

Young staff officers believed that Japan "could not win a technological race against any of the great powers" and thus turned to "a restoration of the Japanese fighting spirit."[339] And those who raised questions were marginalized. For example, a lieutenant colonel who insisted upon the need to equip the army with equal or superior weaponry to fight against enemies other than China was ignored by a major general on the army

[336] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 147–48.

[337] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*.

[338] Zack Cooper, "Tides of Fortune: The Rise and Decline of Great Militaries" (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2016), 308.

[339] Peattie, "The Dragon's Seed: Origins of the War," 54.

general staff who considered such a recommendation as an insult to the Imperial Army.[340] Foreign observers expected that the Japanese loss of army officers will be especially high given the deep-rooted tradition embodied in the Army Regulations that officers must inspire the soldiers by their demonstration of "courage and coolness under a rain of bullets and shells."[341]

There were other constraints for the Japanese military's mechanization. For one, the armaments industry in Japan was not adequate for producing large numbers of armored vehicles that could match the Soviets. The Japanese army gradually modernized its weapons and equipment in the 1930s but it could not match the level and pace of the Soviet modernization and mechanization. Japan's industrial base was incapable of manufacturing large quantities of heavy artillery. For example, it took eighteen months to produce one 240mm howitzer. As of 1933, Japan was producing fewer than 1,000 automobiles. As late as 1939, Japanese factories were manufacturing an average of twenty-eight tanks of all models per month.[342] Foreign observers considered the low degree of concentration (dispersed and smaller enterprises rather than concentrated and bigger enterprises) present "additional difficulties not only in developing new industries

[340] Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*, 13.

[341] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 69–70.

[342] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 188.

such as tank and airplane construction, but even the manufacture of artillery."[343] Unlike the Soviet Union, it was not endowed with abundant natural resources necessary for further industrialization.

Clearly recognizing the limitation, an army lieutenant-general publicly wrote in 1934, "Japan has too few plants for the manufacture of machines and tools required by industry in general… As soon as the demand rises above the ordinary peace time level, the inadequacy of the industrial equipment of our factories will become revealed. This was already shown by the experience of 1932 when the revival in the armament industries created a shortage of machines and tools… The state of this branch of industry is disturbing."[344] This view was shared by those outside the government. One of Japan's major economic magazines, for example, wrote in 1933, "Japanese industry has been developing in a distorted way, only in the sphere of light industry, while the heavy industries have been in a wretched state. From the military point of view, a situation more dangerous than this cannot be imagined. According to a historian of the Japanese army, "the Japanese military machine lacked the industrial base and natural resources to convert an infantry force into a motorized one while engaged in a full-scale war."[345]

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[343] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 123.

[344] Tanin and Tanin, 187.

[345] Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*, 12.

The armaments industry of Japan on mainland Asia was also not adequate for producing armored vehicles that would reduce the Japanese army's high vulnerability to the much more highly mechanized Soviet army. In addition, there were other logistical issues. For example, it was also considered that Japan's newly acquired territories on mainland Asia were not suitable to transport armored vehicles even if they were shipped from the Japanese home islands. According to Drea, "the nation's narrow-gauge railroads made it difficult to move [tanks]. To support the army's forward operating strategy, tanks would have to be shipped from Japan to the continent. Size and weight then had to be considered in relation to a transport's loading and off-loading capacity." Japan had already been aware of this issue and the Army Technical Headquarters Weapons Research and Policy Board had long considered the transportation infrastructure of northeast Asia "primitive."[346]

As such, cost-absorbent strategic thinking was not a choice made by the Japanese but rather was largely forced upon them by asymmetrical progress to military modernization between Japan and the Soviet Union. The Japanese efforts to modernize the army to match the Red Army that continued until the mid-1930s partly explain why Japan did not engage in peripheral belligerence until the mid-1930s. When it became clear that the Japanese army would not be able to reduce its battlefield vulnerability in future

[346] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 148–49.

conflict in mainland Asia, Tokyo's reputational concerns became stronger. The analysis below shows that the strategic reputational motivation indeed played a significant role in Japan's decision for war in China.

4.3.2. Strategic reputational motivation

The strategic reputational theory expects Japan's cost-absorbent strategic thinking firmly established in the mid-1930s to have greatly strengthened its reputational concerns. As Japan's battlefield vulnerability in the Northeast Asian landmass became clearer, it became increasingly fearful of appearing sensitive to the rising costs of war and Soviet underestimation of its resolve. Tokyo now was more strongly compelled to demonstrate its type. I argue that these reputational concerns, rooted in strategic thinking, helped drive Japan's decision to start a full-scale war in China by making peripheral intervention strategically more attractive.

Demonstrating the explanatory power of the strategic reputational theory is not an easy task. Mainly due to the lack of direct evidence on reputational motivations on the Japanese side, the literature on the Second Sino-Japanese War has traditionally not attributed Japan's motivation to reputation. The lack of direct evidence is not surprising for several reasons. For example, leaders always have incentives not to publicize reputational motivations when they are fighting for those motivations and, often, it is not necessary to actively invoke the reputational justification for war when the rational is

highly obvious among decision-makers. It is not difficult to imagine these possibilities operating in Japan 1937. Therefore, the observable implications established in the theory chapter are particularly useful in testing the strategic reputational theory against this case. Careful use of indirect evidence allows analysis of Japan's strategic reputational motivation for its intervention in China. With these implications observed, one would gain confidence that reputational concerns were a major reason for Japan's intervention in China in 1937.

The first observable implication of a reputation-driven peripheral belligerence is the absence of clear strategic objectives for the great power fighting in the periphery. If Japan's invasion of China was truly motivated by reputational concerns, it would have lacked well-defined objectives achievable through military force, as the primary aim was reputation building rather than accomplishing concrete goals. Once initially stated objectives were met, the rationale for continued fighting would have dissipated, leading to a premature conclusion of hostilities. The evidence confirms that Japan indeed lacked clear objectives, providing crucial support for the strategic reputational theory.

From the outset of the war, Japan's stated objectives in China were vague and ill-defined. In the very early days of the conflict, a Cabinet conference attended by the prime minister, foreign minister as well as army and navy ministers officially declared aims to

"annihilate the enemy" and "achieve an apology by China."[347] On July 27, Prime Minister Konoe announced to the Diet his Cabinet's policy to achieve the "new order" in Asia, refusing to settle existing problems with China locally, while denying the intention for territorial conquest.[348] The Imperial Edict issued on September 4, 1937 stated Japan's goal as to "urge grave self-reflection upon China and to establish peace in the Far East without delay."[349] Similarly, in his September speech to the Diet, Foreign Minister Hirota asserted Japan's determination to "deal a decisive blow to [China] so that it may reflect upon the error of its ways."[350] None of these statements concretely defined the conditions required for Japan to consider the war successfully concluded; rather they were idealistic and abstract. The meaning of terms such as "annihilation," "an apology," "new order" or a "decisive blow" remained ambiguous, leaving the objectives open to interpretation and creating the potential for indefinite fighting.

The manner in which Japanese military operations were conducted also indicate Japan's lack in general of clearly defined objectives in China. For example, the dispatch of troops to Shanghai was carried out in a piecemeal fashion that was strategically inept

[347] Fumimaro Konoe, "The Imperial Sanction Decisions of North China Dispatch of Troops Policy," July 11, 1937, Tokyo, The National Institute for Defense Studies.

[348] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 187.

[349] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 700–701.

[350] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 701.

and resulted in large losses to the Japanese forces.[351] According to historian Drea, "operational guidance and official tactical doctrine were validated but evolved in an ad hoc fashion, lurching from campaign to campaign with little if any linkage toward a strategic military goal, much less an integrated national objective."[352] This was no surprise as another historian assessed that Japan "stumbled into the war in 1937 without serious strategic planning."[353] Japanese historian Hata attribute the acts of plunder and carnage in Nanking committed by Japanese soldiers in December 1937 in part to "the absence of any clearly stated war aim encouraged them to regard the conflict as primarily a war of plunder."[354]

The absence of clear strategic objectives in Japan's war in China was recognized by influential figures in Tokyo. A former diplomat wrote in *Diplomatic Review* (Gaiko Jiho) in November 1937 that the purpose of the war is "obscure and hard to grasp."[355] A year

[351] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 270.

[352] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 195.

[353] Ronald Spector, "The Sino-Japanese War in the Conetxt of World History," in *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945* (Stanford University Press, 2011), 480–81.

[354] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 282. It is difficult to say that the heavy losses suffered by the Japanese army caused the atrocities in Nanking because the division which perpetrated some of the worst atrocities there had suffered relatively light casualties. See Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 197.

[355] Ryoichi Tobe, "How Japanese People Understood the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1941" (The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2019), 14.

later, an editorial writer of the Asahi Shimbun Company wrote in the same journal, "No one had any idea how long the war would last, when everything would be settled, or how the war was going to proceed."[356] Similarly, in October 1938, a Japanese activist and opinion leader wrote in *Central Review* (Chuokoron) "What is Japan going to fight for? ... Japanese people have always wanted to obtain a clear answer from the government, but so far they hadn't received yet."[357] This ambiguity persisted even as the war dragged on. In 1939, Ishiwara Kanji of the army general staff's operations division told Prince Takeda that the war in China was "drift[ing] along without a coherent policy or plans."[358] The Pacific War with the United States did not lead the Japanese to establish clear objectives in China. A 1942 article in the *Shina* journal concluded, "We haven't seen any clues to the solution of the Sino-Japanese War, except for mere abstract ideals. Today we often hear it said, 'the Sino-Japanese War has to be resolved,' but I doubt if there is anyone who can answer what resolving the Sino-Japanese War means."[359] Historian Iriye succinctly summarizes Japan's lack of clear objectives in the China war as follows:

> The Japanese were finding it rather difficult to define clearly their war objectives. They had not actively solicited the war, and their stated objective on the eve of the

[356] Tobe, 23.

[357] Tobe, 24.

[358] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 71.

[359] Tobe, "How Japanese People Understood the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1941," 41.

> war had been the promotion of 'Japanese-Manchukuo-Chinese co-operation' in combating communism and reducing Western influence. But how could such an objective be achieved if the hostilities continued and aroused an intense anti-Japanese feeling among the Chinese people? How could they be persuaded to work with Japan in fighting Soviet and Western influence when they would surely turn to these countries for help?[360]

Importantly, Japan's lack of clearly defined strategic objectives in China did not diminish Tokyo's willingness to continue the war. This suggests that broader, more significant policy goals were driving Japan's intervention beyond the immediate considerations. Seeking to bolster the public determination, in June 1938, War Minister Itagaki stated in a press interview that "the army must be prepared to continue hostilities perhaps for ten more years." He added that Japan would "follow her own policy without fear or hesitation notwithstanding the attitude of third powers." [361] Further demonstrating Japan's commitment to prolonged conflict, the National General Mobilization Law was implemented in May 1938, granting the state control over all human and material

[360] Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (Pearson Education Limited, 1987), 45.

[361] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 724.

resources to sustain the war effort in China.[362] Such measures underscore Japan's firm policy to persist in the fight. It is difficult to understand why Japan continued its military campaign in China despite the absence of clearly defined objectives without considering its reputational motivations. It becomes even more perplexing considering that the Soviet Union, not China, was Japan's primary enemy and that Tokyo's relations with the United States were rapidly deteriorating largely as a result of the war in China. By fully understanding Japan's strategic situation, which compelled it fight for reputation in China, it becomes clear why Japan engaged in a peripheral war without clear objectives.

The second observable implication of a reputation-driven peripheral belligerence is the great power's lack of interest in securing tangible, present-value gains. If Japan's invasion of China was motivated by reputational concerns, it would have shown little interest in achieving concrete gains that would enhance its position in the present. And the evidence shows that it actually was the case. From the very beginning, Japan made explicit its lack of interest in pursuing tangible, present-value gains. In addition to Konoe's July statement on the "new order in Asia" being ambiguous about what exactly Japan pursued in China. [363] The Japanese military was not pursuing tangible, current gains. For example, after capturing Paoting, the capital of Hopei Province, on September

[362] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 723.

[363] Konoe, "The Imperial Sanction Decisions of North China Dispatch of Troops Policy"; International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 186–87.

24, the generals on the field told the foreign press that the military aim of the Japanese army was "not so much the acquisition of territory as the annihilation, smashing, and killing of Chinese Nationalist Armies."[364]

A Japanese government desiring to achieve tangible, present-value gains should have proposed specific peace terms in order to consolidate territorial gains earned through victories on the battlefield. The Konoe cabinet, however, preferred to state terms that are general and vague, which were viewed as unnecessarily aggressive even by army officers.[365] When the Chinese responded on January 14, 1938 through the German ambassador that they desired further details of the peace terms, Foreign Minister Hirota became quickly upset, simply declaring that "China was beaten and must ask for peace." He told the participants in the all-day cabinet meeting that took place the same day that there was "not good faith on the Chinese side" for the peace negotiations and the cabinet decided to no longer negotiate with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Government.[366] Hirota's assertion here was clearly unfounded and the cabinet's decision indicates Japan's willingness to continue to fight when tangible, current gains were in sight and an exit from the war was a real option. This tendency continued later in the war as Foreign

[364] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 701.

[365] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 710–11.

[366] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 712.

Minister Arita reported to the Privy Council in November 1938 of Japan's intention not to seek peace with China.[367]

That Japanese leaders were not driven by concerns of present value is also found in their unwillingness to accept foreign mediation efforts and consolidate their territorial acquisitions in China. If Japan had been more interested in tangible, present-value gains than reputation building, acceptance of good offices would have provided Japan with an opportunity for consolidating the territorial gains. But it did not, demonstrating its lack of interest in gaining in the present. Rather, Japan clarified its position to refuse diplomatic good offices by third powers from the very early phase of the war. On July 29, 1937, for example, Foreign Minister Hirota made a statement that the government "would not hesitate to give a firm refusal" to any proposal by third powers regarding China.[368] U.S. Ambassador Joseph Grew's offer of good offices in August was quickly turned down.[369]

Importantly, this stance continued even after Japan made greater territorial advances deeper into China. In December 1937, Foreign Minister Hirota was informed by the German ambassador of Nanking's intention of reopening peace negotiations on the basis of the Japanese terms. "The differences between [the peace terms of December]

[367] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 734.

[368] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 192.

[369] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 192.

and those of August 1937 which had been communicated to the Chinese government were so great fundamentally." Unwilling to negotiate, however, Japan refused the German offer of good offices, effectively eliminating an opportunity for a graceful exit.[370]

One might argue that Japan was not uninterested in securing tangible, present-value gains but was merely updating its demands as its army achieved decisive victories in the early months of the war. However, this claim is weak for two reasons. First, it fails to account for Japan's broader cost-benefit calculations. Tokyo had to anticipate diplomatic costs when it adamantly rejected mediation efforts from other great powers including Germany. While increasing its demands in response to battlefield successes may have raised Japan's expected gains, it simultaneously heightened the immediate diplomatic costs. Second, the claim overlooks growing concerns in Japan about the war in China becoming protracted. The Army General Staff, whose primary focus was the Soviet Union, increasingly viewed the prolonged conflict in China as a drain on Japanese resources.[371] This suggests that, regardless of how favorable the battlefield situation appeared, Japan should have been eager to conclude the war once it had militarily achieved significant territorial gains by late 1937. The fact that Japan chose to continue

[370] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 709.

[371] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 710.

fighting despite mounting costs indicate that it was driven largely by reputational concerns rather than simply adjusting its terms.

The implications of reputational fighting observed above suggest that Japan's decision to engage in peripheral conflict in 1937 was significantly driven by reputational concerns, which, in turn, stemmed largely from its cost-absorbent strategic thinking. Additional evidence of Japanese leaders emphasizing the importance of demonstrating resolve further supports this interpretation. For example, in his speech to the Diet in September 1937, Foreign Minister Hirota stressed the importance of a "resolute attitude" in China.[372] Similarly, the Japanese General Staff recognized the importance of Japan's perceived resolve, as one colonel noted that the outcome of a coming war with the Soviet Union would be "decided more than ever before by the morale."[373] A prominent Japanese writer on military affairs reinforced this idea, arguing that the scale and expected high losses of a future war with the Soviet Union would create "great fronts… in altogether different spheres, i.e., in the political and economic spheres," suggesting that ultimate victory would depend on political will and resolve.[374]

In summary, the evidence supports the new claim that Japan's decision for the China war was significantly influenced by reputational concerns. And the analysis

[372] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 701.

[373] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 60.

[374] Tanin and Tanin, 59.

presented here suggests that these reputational concerns were rooted in Japanese cost-absorbent strategic thinking. Therefore, the strategic reputational theory offers a compelling explanation for Japan's choice to engage in peripheral belligerence in 1937.

4.3.3. A longitudinal look

The preceding analysis demonstrates that reputational concerns, largely stemming from Tokyo's cost-absorbent strategic thinking, were a significant driving force behind Japan's decision to fight in China. As noted in the theory chapter, cost-absorbent strategic thinking shapes leaders' broader policy environment rather than serving as a direct line of reasoning in their decision-making process. Unsurprisingly, Japanese leaders rarely explicitly attributed their decisions to Japan's battlefield vulnerability vis-à-vis Soviet forces in the Far East. Even if reputational concerns were critical, one might question whether they originated, as argued above, from cost-absorbent strategic thinking rather than other factors. This empirical challenge can be addressed through a longitudinal comparison of Japan's policy in 1937 with its earlier policy when cost-absorbent strategic thinking was absent. Such comparison helps isolate the effect of cost-absorbent strategic thinking on reputational motivations.

In the early 1930s, cost-absorbent strategic thinking had not yet firmly taken root in Japan, despite its relative inferiority in tanks compared to Soviet forces in the Far East.

During this period, the Soviet Union was still undergoing military modernization with successive five-year plans and Japan's territorial holdings before the annexation of Manchuria provided conditions that reduce the risk of direct engagement with Soviet forces. Cost-absorbent strategic thinking began to emerge after 1933, as the open terrain of Manchuria now became a likely theater of war and the Soviets increased their mechanized military capabilities. It would not fully solidify until 1935 as some Japanese still had believed that their country still could match Soviet military mechanization through concerted domestic efforts, a belief largely abandoned by 1936.

Given the absence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking before 1935, Japan's policy following the 1931 Manchurian Incident provides insight into how reputational concerns played an insignificant role in Japanese decision-making. Although Manchuria is considered less peripheral due to its resource wealth and especially proximity to Korea, Tokyo's policy could have been more aggressive had reputational motivations been strong.

First, the government in Tokyo generally opposed using force in Manchuria and only reluctantly accepted the Kwantung Army's fait accompli in 1932. Instead, Tokyo pursued a rather conciliatory diplomatic stance toward China, notably under Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijuro. Prime Minister Wakatsuki Reijiro's government in early 1931 demonstrated flexibility on the extraterritoriality question and also offered concessions

allowing Chinese railway construction in Manchuria.[375] Despite domestic pressures calling for a stronger stance toward China, key decision-makers resisted adopting a confrontational policy, which could have demonstrated Japan's toughness. According to historian Akira Iriye, the government in Tokyo, only if it were stronger, "might have restrained army action in Manchuria and postponed a showdown with China."[376]

Further evidence shows Tokyo's limited interest in projecting an image of a resolved state. Central army authorities, for example, were concerned that the League of Nations would impose sanctions on Japan if force were used in Manchuria[377] Civilian leaders openly disapproved of the Kwantung Army's unauthorized use of force in Manchuria. For example, Marquis Kido privately stated in his conversation with the finance minister in November 1931, "The army has educated and trained soldiers to accomplish its policy. Hence, it is necessary to establish a Cabinet with a definite national policy… It is necessary to check the activities of the army."[378] The Kwantung Army's actions did not cease in 1932 with the capture of the entirety of Manchuria. In early 1933, Kwantung Army extremists' appetite for more territory and desire to secure the southern

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[375] Akira Iriye, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East 1921-1931* (Harvard University Press, 1965), 289–90.

[376] Iriye, 295.

[377] Ikuhiko Hata and Alvin D. Coox, "Continental Expansion, 1905-1941," in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol 6: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 293.

[378] Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido, 1931-1945*, 15.

borders of Manchuria led to small, sharp battles along the Great Wall. However, his time, Tokyo was more successful in restraining the belligerent operations of the field army.[379] Had reputation building driven Tokyo's policy, the government likely would have encouraged rather than restrained army actions in China.

Soon after the Lytton Commission, entrusted by the League of Nations, officially condemned Japan's seizure of Manchuria, the Kwantung Army advanced southward in May 1933 and broke through Chinses defenses on a broad front. Fearing a Japanese full-scale attack south of the Great Wall and lacking power to stop it, Chiang Kai-shek sought a truce and Japanese officers agreed to negotiate. A truce was signed in Tanggu, Tianjin in the same month, recognizing Manchukuo under the control of the Japanese army as well as creating a 5,000-square-mile demilitarized zone. Clearly, this ceasefire agreement was not an outcome of international pressures on Japan as Tokyo withdrew from the League of Nations following the Lytton Commission's report. Despite opportunities to escalate conflict and demonstrate resolve, Tokyo firmly pressed the Kwantung Army to halt further hostilities, reflecting a lack of reputational concerns.

In sum, Japan's policy in mainland Asia in the early 1930s lacked reputational motivation due to the absence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking. While the Kwantung Army sought material, territorial gains in Manchuria, Tokyo consistently assessed the

[379] Peattie, "The Dragon's Seed: Origins of the War," 69.

immediate costs and benefits, opposing unauthorized military action. This picture contrasts starkly with Japan's reputation-driven policy of 1937. The relative ease in restraining the Kwantung Army after achieving its original objective, the seizure of Manchuria, in 1932 further indicates that reputational concerns were not significant among its officers.

4.4. Alternative explanations

This section critically evaluates alternative explanations for Japan's invasion of China in 1937. Rather than reputational motivation, they argue that Japan's decision to peripheral belligerence was driven by overvaluation of China, its natural resources or domestic political incentives. The table below outlines the logic behind each explanation, along with the types of evidence that would support or weaken them, enabling a comparative assessment of their explanatory power.

	Logic	Supporting evidence	Contradictory Evidence
Overvaluation	Great powers may be motivated to fight in the periphery if they overestimate its strategic or material importance.	i. Japanese leaders assessed China as having strategic or material value, leading to the decision to use force.	i. Japanese leaders did not genuinely consider China strategically or materially important. ii. Overvaluation of China was not directly responsible for the decision to invade.
Resources	Great powers may be motivated to fight in the periphery if it contains valuable resources that can be seized through force.	i. Japan's resource needs drove its invasion decision . ii. The invasion targeted resource-rich regions and helped extraction of resources from China.	i. Invasion of China drained Japan's resources rather than securing them. ii. Japan fought in less resource-rich regions. iii. Japan's invasion did not help increase resource extraction.
Domestic	Great powers may be motivated to fight in the periphery if it is expected to garner popular support or serve domestic political interests.	i. Japanese leaders believed that the invasion of China would be domestically popular. ii. Influential domestic groups actively pushed for invasion to promote their domestic interests.	i. Japanese leaders did not believe that the invasion of China would be domestically popular. ii. There was broad elite consensus on intervention, with no particular group driving the decision.

Table 4.2. Alternative explanations for Japan's invasion of China in 1937

4.4.1. Overvaluation

The first alternative explanation to my theory for peripheral belligerence is the overvaluation explanation. While China should have been objectively considered peripheral to Japan's interests, the overvaluation explanation suggests that key decisionmakers in 1937 may have come to overestimate the strategic or material value of China for Japan in its competition with other great powers. Were there any compelling

reasons for overvaluation of China? And if so, to what extent did such overvaluation drive the decision for invasion?

The only possible reason for China to be considered strategically valuable was its location in the rear of the expected battlefield between Japan and the Soviet Union. China was not important for Japan's homeland security nor was it proximate to any other industrial cores of the world then. In fact, it is true that some Japanese officers thought that it was a serious danger that needs to be addressed. For example, in March 1936, the Kwantung Army Chief of Staff told Japanese ambassador to China Arita Hachiro in March 1936, "Japan is destined sooner or later to clash with the Soviet Union, and the attitude of China at that time will gravely influence [Japan's] operations."[380] Some army leaders felt that it was necessary to "create one independent government (separate form Chiang Kai-shek) in the region north of the Yellow River" in order to cut the communications lines of rebellious elements in Manchukuo and to prevent an attack from the rear by the Soviet Union."[381]

In 1937, it was Tojo Hideki that raised the leading voice on the strategic importance of China as the rear and the need to militarily solve the problem. As the Kwantung Army Chief of Staff, Tojo sent a secret telegram on June 9 to the vice-chief of the general staff

[380] Shimada, "Designs on North China," 196.

[381] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 69.

and the vice-minister of war in Tokyo in order to recommend a policy of "delivering a blow against the Nanking 'regime' so as to eliminate the Chinese 'menace' that would otherwise threaten Japan's rear."[382] Tojo reasoned that "security in the rear would be all the greater" when a pro-Japan regime is established, replacing Chiang, and "Japan would be free to concentrate on the "problem" to the north."[383] While Tojo's concern was not new and shared by some in Tokyo, there are reasons to doubt that China being located in the rear was the main reason for Japan to decide on war in 1937.

First, a war on China was not considered necessary by most Japanese for solving the question of the China risk in the strategic rear. Japan had largely two alternatives. One was to prepare a two-front war, which was feasible given the material and military inferiority of China. Even Tojo believed it was possible and desirable as publicly called for the "material and spiritual preparations that would permit Japan to fight China and the Soviet Union concurrently" after returning to Tokyo in 1938 to become vice-minister of war.[384] The other option was to build friendlier relations with the Chinese. As historian Hata notes, it was not entirely impossible to build more friendly relations with China to reduce the risk of China as a rear threat. Japan's preparations for war against the Soviet

[382] Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 91.

[383] Butow, 91–92; International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 170, 184.

[384] Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 117.

Union "necessitated cooperation with China and the Western nations."[385] Although it would have been difficult due to high anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese, it was a strong and attractive alternative to a prolonged war in the rear. Ishiwara recommended to the war ministry that Japan "withdraw its forces from the Peiping-Tientsin area to the Manchurian border."[386]

Second, Japan's military policy in China implies that Japan was less interested in solving the question of the China risk in the rear. If the decision to fight in China was driven by the perception of China as the strategic rear in consideration of a war with the Soviet Union, it should have been accompanied by military plans seeking quick and decisive results. In fact, General Tojo, a major believer in this idea, assumed the conquest of China would be a "minor affair, incidental to the coming trial of strength" with the Soviet Union. And Foreign Minister Hirota was also speaking, early in the China war, in terms of a "quick punitive blow" against the nationalist armies.[387] However, the actual military operations were very extensive and did not reflect this rhetoric. Rather they were executed in the exactly opposite manner, indecisive and prolonged, indicating that elimination of the strategic rear risk was not a major reason that compelled Japan to start the fight.

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[385] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 244.

[386] Hata, 258.

[387] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 188.

Furthermore, Japan showed little interest in the rear risk itself by establishing the Imperial General Headquarters, which is needed only in time of a serious war, in November 1937 and also implementing the National General Mobilization Law in May 1938.[388] If the fighting in China was meant to significantly weaken China in order to reduce the concern over the strategic rear, Japan could have chosen to limit the war in the fall of 1937, as its initial military advances already crippled the Nationalist regime. A high-ranking army officer in the Army General Staff later confessed that he desired to "wrap up the China Incident" and "even before it was settled, assign most of our strength to Manchuria."[389] And, even as early as mid-August 1937, War Minister Sugiyama was expressing concern about expanding the conflict in China and sending forces to Nanking, based on Japan's current lack of military preparedness against the Soviet Union.[390] The Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal agreed and said, "We must not neglect our preparations against Soviet Russia and that is a grave matter. We must bomb the Chinese military preparations by air as soon as possible, withdraw the troops and provide for the future."[391] When, in July, the emperor asked what Japan should do if the USSR "starts

[388] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 208–9, 723.

[389] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 266.

[390] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 267.

[391] Harada and Saionji, *The Saionji-Harada Memoirs, 1931-1940*, 1863.

something," the Chief of the General Staff could not provide a satisfactory answer.[392] In fact, after Tojo Hideki launched a successful maneuver operation against Chinese troops approaching Peking in the early stage of the China Incident, he had to promptly fly back to Manchuria to prepare operations against the Soviet Union which was believed to attack at any moment.[393] If Tokyo had started the fight in China truly in order to eliminate it as the strategic rear, it would not have considered taking measures to prolong and intensify the war from late 1937 to early 1938.

Third, Japan's war in China was expected to waste important national resources and it turned out to be true. Many officers emphasized the need to build up the military against the Soviet Union along with the industrial development of Manchuria. For example, in his conversation with Chief of the Naval General Staff, Ishiwara said, "I believe that over the next decade we must not expend our national effort on anything outside Manchuria." He continued, "the advance to the south must be deferred until after [the completion of our Manchurian policy]."[394] Especially, the year of 1937 was the year when the Japanese army implemented a new planning in Manchuria as well as in Japan that was modeled after the Soviet Union's Five-Year Plans in order to meet the material

[392] Harada and Saionji, 1819–20.

[393] Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 103–4.

[394] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 204.

requirements in confrontation with the Soviet Union.[395] In March 1937, another five-year plan was implemented within Japan with the goal of increasing the indigenous production of finished steel.[396] The Five-Year Plan for Important Industries, adopted by the Kwantung Army on May 29, 1937 provided designs to develop industries including those of iron, coal as well as agricultural products needed for military purposes and supply materials to Japan.[397] General Sato Kenryo of the War Ministry's Military Affairs Bureau publicly wrote in March 1942 for a newspaper, "In 1936, the army felt keenly the necessity of expanding armaments and productive power in order to secure and develop the results of the Manchurian Incident." He continued, "Considering it necessary to complete by every means possible the expansion of our armaments and productive power by 1942, we decided to effect a great expansion by means of a six-year armament plan for the period 1937 to 1942, and a five-year production expansion plan for the period 1937 to 1941."[398] Sato also expressed his fear that the war in China "might cause the breakdown" of the industrial and armament expansion plans.[399] Despite the clear need to concentrate efforts on the recent planning, Japan and its army sacrificed crucial time and

[395] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 168–69, 178–79.

[396] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 181.

[397] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 165.

[398] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 176.

[399] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 206.

manpower that could have been invested in the new planning recently implemented in Manchuria.[400]

Japanese army officers started to expect a prolongation of the war immediately following the early stage of the war and Marqis Kido calculated, in May 1938, the cost of the war to be over 800 million yen over the next three years.[401] As historian Butow analyzes, a full-scale war in China meant "delaying – perhaps indefinitely postponing – any army plans for launching an attack in [Manchuria]." It also meant for the navy "commitment of forces along the China coast as well as consumption – primarily by the army – of the economic resources which might otherwise flow into navy coffers for the expansion of the fleet" which could "seriously impair the navy's effectiveness vis-à-vis the American 'enemy.'"[402] It is difficult to think that Japan risked its own position against the Soviet Union just in order to eliminate a potential future rear risk. If securing the strategic rear had been the true objective, this excessive diversion of resources would not have taken place.

As discussed above, it is difficult to conclude that China's location as Japan's strategic rear to Manchuria played an important role for the decision for war in 1937.

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[400] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 181–83.

[401] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 710–13; Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido, 1931-1945*, 190.

[402] Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 96t–97.

Then, was there any overvaluation of China's potential material contribution to Japan in great power competition? This question is worth exploring since it is very much plausible that Japan in this period may have thought conquering China, backward but big, would be an important addition to its material power and to the building of what was called the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity." Historical evidence leads us to largely dismiss this possibility.

On one hand, Japan was still in the stage of developing its most recent territorial prize, Manchuria, for maximum exploitation. And starting a potentially prolonged war in a large landmass was not considered to serve this policy. For many army officers, Japan's first priority should be "to develop Manchukuo and to strengthen its defenses against the Soviet Union." Even Ishiwara Kanji, a leading figure in the seizure of Manchuria, who was now leading the operations division in the army general staff, was largely skeptical of the war in China.[403] Many were against expansion in China proper and "were obsessed with the need to develop Manchukuo as a forward base against the USSR."[404] Clearly realizing that the Soviet Union was the immediate strategic problem for Japan, Ishiwara of the Operations Section advised General Kawabe Masakazu, before he took up his post as brigade commander outside Peking, to "strenuously avoid the

[403] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 71.

[404] Ienaga, 72.

possibility of any collision with Chinese forces."[405] Prime Minister Hirota also agreed that Japan must avoid military entanglements in order to prepare for a showdown with the Soviets, implying that China's material contribution would not help Japan much in its struggle with the USSR.[406] For this reason, the army, and especially the General Staff, was traditionally little interested in central and South China, and largely maintained the same position in the summer of 1937.[407]

In sum, the claim that Japan intervened in China in 1937 due to overvaluation is considered unconvincing. Evidence clearly shows that Tokyo did not engage in systematic overestimation of China's importance while making the decision to use force as well as while fighting in China. Thus, the overvaluation explanation can be reasonably ruled out.

4.4.2. Resources

The second alternative explanation for peripheral belligerence emphasizes the potential role of great powers' desire to secure natural resources in the periphery. According to this view, Japan heavily relied on foreign supply of natural resources and its appetite for resources motivated the decision to invade China. To what extent did the resources need

[405] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 274–75.

[406] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 190.

[407] Hata, "The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, 1937," 267.

play in the decision-making for intervention in 1937? Evidence shows that, while Japan was interested in China's resources, its intervention decision had little to do with it.

Much evidence indicates that Japanese leaders were indeed interested in China's resources. Representing the prevailing view of the Japanese ruling elite, Prime Minister Konoe said in July 1937, "I think North China is vital, particularly for our economic development."[408] Ishiwara wrote, while still in Manchuria, "in order to prepare for world conflict the Japanese people will also eventually have to obtain coal from Shansi, the iron of Hopei, and the cotton of Honan and Shantung." Ishiwara's view that North China's resources are important for Japan's security continued after he returned to Japan and began serving in the General Staff.[409] Itagaki, Chief of Staff of the Kwantung Army, reportedly remarked in 1935, "Though we have obtained Manchuria, the natural resources there are nothing compared to those in North China." Japan should, he continued, take any opportunity to get "North China into [its] hands."[410] Although the Army and Navy disagreed on many issues, both "believed that the resources of north China and Manchukuo were essential to Japan's defense and must be developed under Japanese supervision."[411] Both the Hirota Cabinet on August 11, 1936 and the succeeding

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[408] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 69.

[409] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 268.

[410] Peattie, 268.

[411] Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945*, 201.

Hayashi Cabinet on February 20 of the following year proclaimed one of principal aims of Japan's policy in China is to secure materials for defense in North China. [412] Importantly, however, there is no indication that Japan's decision for war was driven by these resource concerns.

First, Japanese invasion forced did not primarily target regions that are richer in resources. If the main reason for intervention was resources, Japan should have primarily targeted regions that are richer in resources, such as the provinces in North China. North China alone was estimated to have approximately two hundred million tons of iron ore, which was more than half of China's estimated iron ore deposits. North China was also rich with coal deposits, accounting for more than half of the deposits in the whole of China.[413] Largely because of North China's resources, the Kwantung Army desired to establish friendly administrations there soon after the acquisition of Manchuria. According to Kwantung Army, "The natural resources of Manchuria are far exceeded by those in North China. There are limitless deposits of iron and coal in Shansi province. If we are careless, these resources will end up in English or American hands." From this perspective, North China was "vital to Japan."[414] The "Outline of Measures for the China

[412] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 762.

[413] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 767–68.

[414] Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, 68.

Incident" adopted by the Konoe Cabinet in December 1937 stressed the need for the economic development of North China rather than the whole of China.[415]

Japan did not limit its military operations to the north but expanded into central and southern China. After rapidly taking Beijing and Tianjin in August, the Japanese army pushed forward toward Wuhan and Nanjing and hostilities were initiated in Shanghai. Japan continued to advance deep into central China captured modern-day Wuhan in November. In short, Japan sent large forces even to parts of China that were not resource-rich. When Tsinan, the capital of Shantung Province, was captured in December, practically all the key points in North China came under Japan's military occupation.[416] Japan, however, continued the war. This lack of concentration on the resource-rich region shows that Japan did not invade China for resources. If resources was the reason for intervention, Japan would not have escalated beyond North China and continued fighting after the capture of entire North China.[417]

Second, the Japanese did not strongly believe that a full-scale invasion of China was necessary to extract Chinese resources. Many Japanese elites believed that fighting

[415] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 763.

[416] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 702.

[417] Furthermore, if oil was the most desired resource, Japan should not have intervened in China after all as the Dutch East Indies was a better target that would provide more oil as well as other resources. As Beasley notes, Japan's requirements for petroleum could just not be met within Northeast Asia as a whole. See Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945*, 212.

in China was not a good policy even when considering the resources that China could offer. "Fundamentals of National Policy" adopted in August 1936 stressed "gradual peaceful means" in Japan's initiative for economic exploitation of China.[418] Peaceful exploitation of resources in China, especially the resource-rich north, was considered feasible. In the mid-1930s, Japanese capital was already in control of two-thirds of the iron mines in China and it was considered that the Japanese capital was not sufficiently mobilized to develop Manchuria's natural resources following its capture.[419] Japan made significant investments to increase production and extract resources peacefully. With companies newly created between 1935 and 1938, coal produced in North China and Inner Mongolia increased twofold, for example.[420] And many, including Ishiwara, actually believed that Chinese nationalism might well become an asset, rather than an obstacle, to Japanese plans on the continent.[421] It was also thought that North China might follow suit and be influenced by virtuous example if Japan consolidated and managed Manchukuo well.[422] Historian Peattie agrees that "means other than Japan's direct

[418] Joyce Lebra, *Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in World War II: Selected Readings and Documents* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 62–63.

[419] Tanin and Tanin, *When Japan Goes to War*, 22, 45.

[420] Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945*, 218.

[421] Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West*, 275.

[422] Peattie, 273–74. Ishiwara said, "It is stupid to carry on petty plots in North China and to stick our fingers in the Mongolian pot."

penetration of North China and her consequent involvement in a quicksand war" would have made possible better exploitation of Chinese resources.[423]

In addition, a war to acquire resources did not make much economic sense. Expansion into China, Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo warned the military in 1935, "will cause bad inflation and that trust will collapse."[424] In January 1936, he also commented, "If a country increases its empire and pours money into it, how big a profit is it going to have? Until the profits come in, the home country has to carry [the colony]."[425] In July 1937, a conversation between former Foreign Minister Arita and Harada, "To make war preparations when the people are already frightened by a tremendous budget will render it almost impossible for Japan to carry her public debt…. We must take extreme precautions not to expand the issue nor to make any blunders"[426] Foreign Minister Arita's report to the Privy Council dated November 29 1938 states one of chief objectives of the fighting in China to be the control of the "development of natural resources for national defense."[427] The concerns that a war in China would bring about negative economic consequences turned out to be true. The army's demand for

[423] Peattie, 268.

[424] S. C. M. Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 42.

[425] Paine, 42.

[426] Harada and Saionji, *The Saionji-Harada Memoirs, 1931-1940*, 1824.

[427] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 735.

manpower and materials following the Konoe Cabinet's decision to continue the war in January 1938 absorbed both the products of Japanese industry and the men who produced them. Japan experienced great difficulty in acquiring foreign exchange with which to finance the imports that it demanded. Securing and developing the natural resources of the occupied areas of China did not significantly alleviate Japan's dependence upon importation and in turn increased expenditures.[428] Although Japanese economy continued to grow from 1931 and 1936, it plateaued in 1937 and started declining afterwards. Territorial expansion no longer seemed to benefit the economy and only worsened food shortages.[429]

Furthermore, the war in China made Japan consume more resources and become even more dependent on the resources found outside Japan. Japan did not begin to fight in China because of the demand for resources; the demand for resources was intensified as a result of the fighting in China. The war in China forced Japan to use more oil and also become more dependent on imports of oil. Whereas Japan had imported 67 percent of its oil in 1935, this grew to 74 percent in 1937 and 90 percent in 1939.[430] According to Paine, because of the war in China, Japanese military's consumption of imported

[428] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 233.

[429] Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949*, 137–38.

[430] Paine, 169.

resources skyrocketed and Japan became more dependent. [431] According to historian Iriye, "What was the point of fighting China if it drained resources away from military preparedness against other countries, the goal that Japan's strategists had emphasized, particularly since 1936?"[432]

In sum, the claim that Japan invaded China in 1937 primarily due to its interest in China's resources is weak. While Tokyo valued China's resources, evidence clearly shows that Japan neither saw force as necessary to access them nor conducted its military campaign in a way dictated by resources needs. Thus, the resources explanation can be reasonably ruled out.

4.4.3. Domestic politics

The final major alternative explanation for Japan's war in China emphasizes domestic political motivations. This perspective argues that the invasion was attractive because it was expected to garner popular support within Japan. Alternatively, it suggests that powerful domestic groups, such as the army, pursued the war to advance their own parochial interests. To what extent did these domestic political factors influence Japan's decision to intervene in China? Evidence shows that they played little role in leading Japan to go to war in 1937.

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[431] Paine, 169.

[432] Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, 45.

First, Japanese elites did not believe a war in China to serve their domestic interests as they did not expect it to be popular. On one hand, there is little evidence that those in charge of Japan's foreign policy spoke about the political benefit of using force in the periphery in the 1930s. For example, according to Prime Minister Konoe, his ministers "concentrate[d] solely on their respective problems" and, regarding the China question, "there was no one who would become the propelling force in this discussion."[433] If a China war was expected to be popular, there would have been active discussion on it inside the cabinet. On occasions, civilian leaders expressed concerns that refraining from the use of force might be politically risky. For example, in July 1937, Konoe said, "I do not wish to expand the issue but it may be better to deploy troops according to necessity. He continued, "If we oppose the deployment of troops at this time,… the Cabinet will have to resign."[434] This statement actually does not contradict my explanation for Japan's decision for war, as it implies that Konoe was concerned about potential domestic costs of appearing irresolute in China. In addition, Konoe's later behavior and rhetoric indicates that he actually was in favor of the fight in China himself. An official top-secret statement was issued following the Cabinet conference on July 11, 1937 which resolved to "take all necessary measures for dispatching troops to North China" in order to seek

[433] Harada and Saionji, *The Saionji-Harada Memoirs, 1931-1940*, 1837.

[434] Harada and Saionji, 1820.

the enemy's "annihilation and apology." And, on July 27, the day after fighting started at Peking, Konoe promptly proclaimed at the Diet his policy to achieve the "new order in Asia."[435] That Japan continued the fight after experiencing significant casualties also contradicts the claim that Tokyo went to war believing in its popularity. After Japan lost more than 40,000 troops from the four months of fighting in Shanghai in 1937, the Japanese public became upset and the Tokyo police had to be called to disperse demonstrators.[436] The war was not suspended but rather was escalated.

On the other hand, the government in Tokyo was increasingly concerned about domestic dissatisfaction about Japan's expansion in mainland Asia and therefore strengthened censorship measured to silence opposing voices. Soon after the war in China began, already existing censorship procedures by the ministry for home affairs were intensified and schools stressed uniformity of thought and the glorification of death on the battlefield.[437] Censorship became greatly intensified and expression of opposition to the war in China was absolutely forbidden. And schools and universities were no exception.[438] Leaders who believed that the war in China would be popular would not

[435] Konoe, "The Imperial Sanction Decisions of North China Dispatch of Troops Policy"; International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 186–87.

[436] Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 196.

[437] Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 110.

[438] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 211–12.

have taken these measures. Rather, it can be said that they decided on the war despite the belief that it will be unpopular. The domestic consideration actually appears to have influenced Japan's later policy on Indochina, as Kido reports in July 1940 that Konoe "seems to be trying to diver the discontent of the people over the failure of the China Incident toward southern operations."[439]

Second, evidence contradicts the claim that the war decision was driven by the parochial interests of certain domestic groups. Rather, it suggests that there existed a broad consensus among all decision-makers. Civilian and military elites agreed as the Konoe Cabinet, without significant hesitation, authorized the military's requests to use force, starting with the mobilization of three divisions on July 20, 1937. There was greater collaboration between the civilians and the military in 1937 than in 1931.[440] The central military leadership in Tokyo also did not disagree with local commanders in China. For example, the request made by the commander of Japan's garrison forces in the last week of July to use force was approved by the central military authorities in Tokyo "without any recorded objection or even questioning on the part of the cabinet."[441]

It is also important to note that the Japan's civilian leaders were often more eager for fighting in China than their military counterparts. While there was a concern about

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[439] Kido, *The Diary of Marquis Kido, 1931-1945*, 250.

[440] Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 98.

[441] Butow, 98.

the war in China being protracted and a voice for negotiated peace with the Chinese Nationalist Government in late 1937 and early 1938, the cabinet maintained a firm commitment to continued fighting without a clear timeframe or specific objectives.[442] It was also the civilian prime minister who further escalated the war to basically an endless war, as in January 1938, Konoe made it clear that Japan's political objective had become regime change, announcing, "The Imperial Government will hereafter have no dealings with the Nationalist Government and will await the formation of a new Chinese Government that will cooperate sincerely with the Japanese Empire."[443]

It is a myth that army leaders believed the war in China to serve their organizational interests because it would have justified the army's request for more resources. According to Butow, a full-scale war throughout China would complicate the army's problem of maintaining adequate forces in Manchuria against a possible Soviet attack. It would also mean delaying – perhaps indefinitely postponing – any army plans for launching an attack in that area. From the navy point of view, war in China would require commitment of forces along the China coast as well as consumption – primarily by the army – of the economic resources which might otherwise flow into navy coffers for the expansion of the fleet. Protracted war on the continent could thus seriously impair

[442] International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 710–13.

[443] Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949*, 160; International Military Tribunal for the Far East, "Judgment," 216–17.

the navy's effectiveness vis-à-vis the American 'enemy.'"[444] The army was not benefiting from the ongoing war in China. For example, Military Affairs Bureau Chief Muto Akira in early 1940, "This year we must solve the China Incident completely, no matter what it takes."[445] It is difficult to believe that the army that did not believe the war in China to serve its interests actively pursued it against opposition of other domestic voices.

In sum, the claim that Japan intervened in China in 1937 primarily due to domestic political motivations is weak. Japanese leaders had good reason to doubt that the war would be widely popular at home, and no domestic group exerted decisive influence over the decision for war. Thus, the domestic politics explanation can be reasonably ruled out.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter explained Japan's decision to invade China in 1937 with the strategic reputational theory. In summary, Japanese peripheral belligerence in China was largely driven by reputational concerns, which intensified with the rise of cost-absorbent strategic thinking in the mid-1930s. Beginning in the early 1930s, the Soviet Union rapidly developed the capability to render the Japanese army highly vulnerable on the battlefield,

[444] Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, 96–97.

[445] Katsumi Usui, "The Politics of War, 1937-1941," in *The China Quagmire* (Columbia University Press, 1983), 406.

an evolving threat for which Japan lacked a direct solution as its ability to modernize the army was constrained by both material limitations and cultural factors. In this context, Japanese strategy in Northeast Asia compelled Tokyo to cultivate a strong reputation for resolve – one that would demonstrate its tolerance of war costs and signal to Moscow its willingness to fight even under conditions of heightened battlefield vulnerability. And strong anti-Japanese sentiment in China, along with a series of local incidents of 1937, provided a timely and convenient arena for fighting for reputation. This stands in sharp contrast to earlier Japanese policy, when the reputational motivation for peripheral belligerence was far less pronounced due to the absence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking.

It is true that reputational concerns were likely not the only reason behind Japan's peripheral belligerence in China. However, as the analysis presented here demonstrates, other plausible explanations for Japan's decision for war such as resources needs or domestic group pressures lack the explanatory power that the strategic reputational theory provides. Alternative factors may have increased the likelihood of the Japanese invasion of China by facilitating the conditions for war or creating a favorable political environment for the use of force. Yet, none of them independently had sufficient impact to make the invasion a viable policy on their own. Evidence drawn from Japanese policymakers' reasoning and, especially, military behavior in China indicates that reputational concerns played an important role in driving the decision for peripheral

belligerence. This finding is particularly striking, as previous accounts rarely attribute the onset of the Second Sino-Japanese War, often considered as the true starting point of World War II, to reputational motivations.

Finally, an important question remains regarding the rationality of Japan's peripheral belligerence in 1937: as the Japanese army became increasingly vulnerable, why did Tokyo opt to fight a large-scale war in the periphery, potentially jeopardizing its security even further? As outlined in the theory chapter, great powers are more likely to engage in peripheral belligerence when they perceive strategic room for maneuver. Despite clearly recognizing Soviet revisionist aims in the Far East, Tokyo could reasonably expect that Moscow, mindful of Nazi Germany and the Anti-Comintern Pact signed by Berlin and Tokyo in late 1936, would refrain from initiating a full-scale conflict that might result in a costly two-front war so soon. It is also worth noting that Joseph Stalin's Great Purge, which began just a year before Japan's decision to invade China, greatly reduced Soviet readiness for a major war. In addition to this strategic opportunity, Japan had no realistic means for meaningfully addressing its battlefield vulnerability against the Red Army to mitigate its cost-absorbent strategic thinking. Thus, peripheral belligerence in China represented a rational, albeit risky, attempt to manage Japan's broader strategic predicament.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary

This dissertation began with a puzzling question: why do great powers often choose to fight in peripheral regions where their interests are marginal? The use of force is inherently costly and the periphery rarely offers material or strategic benefits that justify the costs. Moreover, fighting in the periphery risks diverting critical resources away from the primary theaters of great power competition and may provoke diplomatic backlash both within and beyond the conflict region. For these simple reasons, great power peripheral belligerence represents one of the most perplexing policy choices for great powers of the modern era. It is also consequential – peripheral wars involving great powers have often transformed international political landscapes. Despite its significance, existing international relations scholarship has not adequately explained this phenomenon. Previous studies often conflate great power involvement in the periphery with interventions outside clearly peripheral regions, or fail to focus specifically on the actual use of force. Most importantly, although reputational motivations are frequently acknowledged in individual cases, no systematic reputational theory has been developed to account for peripheral belligerence.

To address this gap, this dissertation developed a strategic reputational theory to explain great power peripheral belligerence in the twentieth century. The theory posits

that great powers are more likely to fight for reputation when they have cost-absorbent strategic thinking – that is, when they anticipate directly absorbing particularly high costs in a future great power war. Such thinking emerges when a state perceives either high battlefield or homeland vulnerability and its military strategy (strategic objectives and doctrine) requires directly facing that vulnerability. In these situations, the expected utility of building a reputation for resolve increases, making peripheral belligerence appear as a relatively effective and lower-risk means of signaling resolve. While not all instances of peripheral belligerence may be primarily driven by reputational concerns, the presence of cost-absorbent strategic thinking significantly increases the likelihood that reputational concerns will play a central role in the decision to fight. Peripheral belligerence is especially likely when the cost-absorbent strategic context is new and salient, when a target country, or opportunity, is available, and when the great power has sufficient strategic room to temporarily divert forces from core regions.

To test the theory, this dissertation analyzed two historically important cases of peripheral belligerence – the U.S. intervention in Vietnam (1965) and Japan's invasion of China (1937). In the U.S.-Vietnam case, policymakers in Washington operated under cost-absorbent strategic thinking, shaped by a heightened sense of homeland vulnerability to Soviet nuclear weapons. As Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities advanced and the prospect of a high-intensity conflict in Europe that could undermine U.S. homeland security loomed, American strategic thinking in the early 1960s increasingly

anticipated high costs in future war. This strategic context elevated the perceived need to demonstrate resolve and the already made commitment and non-combat presence in Vietnam made it an ideal place in the periphery to fight for reputation. While the U.S. could have signaled resolve through different means, the situation in Vietnam of 1965 led the Johnson administration to consider direct military intervention. Once the use of force became a viable option, cost-absorbent strategic thinking compelled Washington to view the reputational costs of non-intervention as strategically unacceptable.

In the Japan-China case, decision-makers in Tokyo were influenced by cost-absorbent strategic thinking, driven by rising battlefield vulnerability in the event of a potential future war with the Soviet Union in mainland Asia. Beginning in the early 1930s, the Soviet Union began to modernize and heavily mechanize its forces including those in the Far East. Unable to match Soviet efforts due to cultural and material limitations, Japan increasingly expected to directly absorb heavy costs in future conflict, especially given its ambitious strategic objectives and lack of an indirect, cost-reducing military doctrine. This strategic context elevated Japan's perceived need to demonstrate resolve. A minor military presence in northern China had already created tensions, and when the Marco Polo Bridge incident escalated into crisis in 1937, the reputational logic of demonstrating resolve through war became salient. Although Tokyo may not have premeditated on a major war in China for reputational reasons, the confluence of opportunity and strategic

reputational concerns made fighting in China appear sensible. This historical record supports this interpretation.

In both cases, longitudinal comparisons strengthened the explanatory power of the strategic reputational theory. When cost-absorbent strategic thinking was absent, reputational concerns were less pronounced, and the likelihood of peripheral belligerence was lower – even when other factors remained relatively constant. With the cases also representing two different manifestations of cost-absorbent strategic thinking – homeland vulnerability in the Vietnam case and battlefield vulnerability in the Japan case – the theory demonstrated significant validity. In addition, both cases serve as least-likely tests (the negative sub-case in Vietnam case and the main case in the Japan case) for different reasons. Yet in both instances, the strategic reputational theory offered a compelling explanation, reinforcing its external validity. Finally, the dissertation is the first to systematically analyze the reputational drivers of two of the most consequential peripheral wars of the twentieth century. Prior work has not adequately explained the roots of the credibility concerns that preoccupied Washington in the 1960s, not has any study examined Japan's fateful decision for war in 1937 – arguably the true start of World War II – as a reputation building choices. This dissertation offers a new theoretical lens through which to understand these pivotal decisions made by great powers of very different types in very different situations.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This dissertation generates important theoretical implications for the study of international relations. First, the causal relationship identified here highlights the need for a more integrated understanding of great power politics – one that considers both the core and the periphery. Many scholars of diplomatic history and international relations emphasize great power interactions in the core arenas as the principal drivers of international political outcomes.[446] This dissertation concurs with the traditional focus yet argues that such a view is incomplete by showing that military-strategic considerations in the core can significantly shape great powers' behavior in the periphery by heightening reputational concerns.

On one hand, this study joins scholarly efforts that explain events and choices in the periphery as extensions of strategic developments in the core.[447] In this view, politics in the periphery is not autonomous or accidental but instead is deeply connected to great power calculations rooted in core strategic arenas. On the other hand, this dissertation also aligns with research emphasizing that actions in the periphery can, in turn, shape

[446] Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918*; Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to the Present*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Cornell University Press, 2001).

[447] Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*; Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

power dynamics in the core.[448] By arguing that great powers often believe their conduct carries significant implications for how their general resolve is perceived by other powers, it suggests that seemingly irrational or strategically marginal behavior can be understood as a rational effort to serve vital core interests, guided by reputational and signaling logic.[449] In short, this dissertation serves as a reminder that efforts to understand great power politics must analyze the core and the periphery in tandem. Only by doing so can scholars fully capture the reciprocal influences between great powers' strategic calculations and behaviors across regions.

Second, this dissertation contributes to the growing body of research that examines non-material state motivations – and specifically, reputation – as important causes for war. It affirms that the desire to build a reputation for resolve remains a key consideration in state decisions to use force, as long suggested by scholars of international relations.[450] By identifying reputation building as a central motive in state behavior, this

[448] Snyder, *Myths of Empire*; Nicholas D. Anderson, *Inadvertent Expansion: How Peripheral Agents Shape World Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2025).

[449] On a recent work on state rationality, see John J. Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato, *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 2023).

[450] McMahon, "Credibility and World Power"; Sechser, "Winning without a Fight: Power, Reputation, and Compellent Threats in International Crises"; Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*; Allan Dafoe, "Resolve, Reputation, and War: Cultures of Honor and Leaders' Time-in-Office" (University of California, Berkeley, 2012); Mahesh Shankar, *The Reputational Imperative: Nehru's India in Territorial Conflict* (Stanford University Press, 2018); Ketian Zhang, *China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

study also advances our broader understanding of the non-material aspirations that shape foreign policy, joining existing scholarship on prestige, honor and status as drivers of conflict.[451]

Importantly, this dissertation deepens our understanding of when and why states fight for reputation, especially in strategically marginal areas. The strategic reputational theory developed here shows that reputational motivations are not constant but are rather changing, shaped by the strategic environment especially regarding the expected costs of future major war. This insight challenges traditional views that treat reputational concerns as omnipresent, and instead aligns with recent work that seeks to identify sources for reputational interests. In particular, the strategic reputational theory offers a new explanation distinct from the two prevailing approaches in the literature: one that emphasizes the expected likelihood of future challenges and another that focuses on individual leaders.[452] This study explains reputational fighting as a strategic response to

[451] On various non-material motivations, see Daniel Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War: Returning to Realism's Roots," *Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (1999): 126–72; Youngho Kim, "Does Prestige Matter in International Politics?," *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 2004, 39–55; Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Joslyn Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa," *Security Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016): 385–419; Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 2019).

[452] For the first group of works highlighting the role of the perceived "shadow of the future," see Barbara F. Walter, "Building Reputation: Why Governments Fight Some Separatists but Not Others," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2006): 313–30; Scott Wolford, "The Turnover

anticipated cost absorption, rooted in the broader strategic context of great power competition. Furthermore, the theory also sheds light on where reputation-seeking behavior is most likely to manifest, as cost-absorbent strategic thinking simultaneously heightens the salience of reputation while discouraging high-stakes escalation.

Third, this dissertation underscores the critical role of technology and military strategy in international relations, particularly through their influence on cost-absorbent strategic thinking. In the field of security studies, military technology is often treated both as an independent variable and as an outcome of interest. For example, scholars emphasize how the emergence of new technologies and leaders' perception of them can alter the strategic calculus between attack and defense.[453] While this dissertation does not directly engage with offense-defense theory, it nonetheless offers important implications

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Trap: New Leaders, Reputation, and International Conflict," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (2007): 772–88; Sechser, "Winning without a Fight: Power, Reputation, and Compellent Threats in International Crises"; Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*; Todd S. Sechser, "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power," *International Organization* 64, no. 4 (October 2010): 627–60; Joe Clare and Vesna Danilovic, "Multiple Audiences and Reputation Building in International Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 6 (December 1, 2010): 860–82. For the second group of works highlighting the role of individual leader perceptions, see Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, "Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation," *World Politics* 68, no. 2 (April 2016): 341–81; Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

[453] George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (John Wiley and Sons, 1977); Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (June 1995): 660–91. For a skeptical view on the role of technology in determining the offense-defense balance, see Keir A. Lieber, "Grasping the Technological Peace: The Offense-Defense Balance and International Security," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 71–104.

for how states understand and respond to technological developments in the context of preparing for future war. This study also contributes to the literature on technological diffusion by illustrating how the adoption of new technologies and weapons systems is shaped by both cultural constraints and material capabilities.[454]

Military strategy, particularly its doctrinal dimension, has long been recognized in international relations as a central factor influencing state behavior. Scholars have shown that military doctrine affects not only the likelihood, duration, and outcome of war,[455] but also how a state's intentions are interpreted by others.[456] By proposing a causal link between military strategy and great power behavior in the periphery, this dissertation joins and extends this body of research. Specifically, it demonstrates that a great power's strategic objectives and doctrine vis-à-vis its main adversary in the core can have far-

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[454] Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

[455] On the impact of strategy on the outbreak of war, see John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Cornell University Press, 1983); Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Cornell University Press, 1999); Dong Sun Lee, *Power Shifts, Strategy and War: Declining States and International Conflict* (Routledge, 2007). On the impact of strategy on the duration or outcome of war, see Allan C. Stam, *Win, Lose, or Draw: Domestic Politics and the Crucible of War* (University of Michigan Press, 1996); Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, "The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816–1985," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (1996): 239–57.

[456] Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics* 44, no. 4 (July 1992): 497–538; Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

reaching effects on its foreign policy decisions elsewhere, including in strategically marginal regions. The findings in this study suggest that military strategy may have an even broader impact on foreign policy than previously appreciated. Furthermore, this dissertation highlights the relatively inertial nature of military strategy by demonstrating that strategic objectives and doctrinal choices are often deeply embedded in a state's broader foreign policy goals and cultural context, making them difficult to alter quickly, even in the face of changing external conditions.[457]

Fourth, and finally, this dissertation engages the broader paradigm debates in international relations, aligning most closely with the realist tradition. On one hand, it shares several core assumptions with structural realism.[458] It recognizes that systemic pressures to fight for reputation in the periphery are significant when great powers face peer competitors. For this reason, the strategic reputational theory developed here is designed to explain peripheral conflicts occurring during the periods of great power competition rather than those in unipolar eras. Also, the theory reflects structural realist insights regarding the importance of power shifts, as it demonstrates how technological

[457] Past works note that military doctrines are not easy to change. See Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*; Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*; Kier, *Imagining War*.

[458] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979). It disagrees with classical realism or the so-called offensive neo-realism that highlight the drive for power rather than security as a motive for state behavior. See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

relative decline can raise the expected costs of future war and thereby influence foreign policy decisions.[459] At the same time, this dissertation draws on key insights from neoclassical realism by emphasizing that reputational concerns are not uniform across states or over time in a similar systemic environment.[460] Instead, they are filtered through each state's strategic thinking, particularly to what extent it expects to directly absorb the costs of war. In this framework, domestic factors, such as doctrinal rigidity or cultural constraints, serve as intervening variables that condition how systemic pressures are interpreted and acted upon. From the neoclassical realist perspective, this helps understand variation in great power responses to challenges and crises in the periphery.

This study departs from other theoretical paradigms. For example, it diverges from liberalism, which emphasizes domestic political structures, regime types and institutional constraints. The findings here suggest that great power peripheral belligerence is not driven by domestic political dynamics, nor does regime type meaningfully shape the expected utility of reputational fighting in cost-absorbent strategic contexts. In both case studies, great powers acted as unitary actors responding

[459] The technological considerations that help determine whether cost-absorbent strategic thinking is present are similar to relative declines in military power. Importantly, however, I focus on changes in the military balance in qualitative terms and thus make quite different predictions from structural realists on the consequences of power shifts.

[460] Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*; Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*.

to strategic considerations, not domestic considerations. While the theory may appear to have constructivist elements – given its attention to ideas and how policymakers interpret their strategic environment – it remains conceptually distinct from constructivism.[461] The key driver in this study is not stable ideas, identities or norms, but rather strategic thinking, which is more context-dependent. Unlike constructivist approaches, this dissertation treats strategic thinking as instrumental, shaping cost-benefit assessments of peripheral belligerence rather than altering value systems or collective identities.

5.3. Policy Implications

This dissertations also carries important implications for ongoing policy debates. First, this dissertation engages the controversy over the justifiability of fighting for reputation and credibility. While scholars broadly agree that reputations matter in various domains,[462] there remains significant disagreement over whether reputation for resolve forms and whether it is wise to use force to protect it.[463] Critics argue that past behavior does not reliably influence future perceptions, citing evidence that leaders rarely

[461] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[462] Tomz, *Reputation and International Cooperation*.

[463] For examples of reputation critics, see Hopf, *Peripheral Visions*; Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*; Press, *Calculating Credibility*; Shiping Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 34–62; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation."

reference other states' prior actions. However, this line of reasoning is inherently limited, as the absence of explicit reference to prior behavior does not necessarily mean that reputation is irrelevant. Moreover, given the potential consequences of a deterrence failure resulting from perceived irresolution, it may be prudent for great powers to continue caring about their reputation for resolve. The case of Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait in 1990, reportedly based on his belief that the United States would not tolerate high casualties, illustrate the potentially grave risks of reputational misperceptions.[464] As Snyder and Diesing famously observed, "the human mind abhors a 'belief vacuum' and when another state's interests in a present crisis cannot be estimated directly, its resolve will be inferred from the only hard evidence available, its behavior in past crises."[465]

According to the strategic reputational theory developed in this dissertation, there is no universal answer to whether fighting for reputation is a wise policy. Rather, the key lies in the strategic context. When a great power has cost-absorbent strategic thinking, the expected reputational benefits of fighting may outweigh its costs. In such cases, fighting

[464] Saddam Hussein is reported to have called the U.S. "a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle." See New York Times, "Excerpts From Iraqi Document on Meeting With U.S. Envoy," September 23, 1990.

[465] Glenn H Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 186.

for reputation, even in the periphery, can be a rational and effective policy choice. On the contrary, for those without cost-absorbent strategic thinking, the logic of reputational fighting may be weaker. Under these conditions, the costs of fighting may exceed any reputational benefits, and restraint may be the more prudent course of action. In this sense, Schelling's famous assertion that reputation is "one of the few things worth fighting for" holds true – but only under the right strategic circumstances.

Second, this dissertation offers implications for policymakers seeking to avoid unnecessary peripheral conflicts and enhance strategic solvency. While fighting in the periphery to build a reputation for resolve can be rational, peripheral belligerence still remains costly with potential risks of unintended consequences. Importantly, this dissertation does not aim to advocate peripheral belligerence as a policy prescription, but rather to clarify the conditions under which great powers rationally choose it. Peripheral belligerence can be particularly difficult to avoid when a great power with cost-absorbent strategic thinking is already somewhat committed in a peripheral state. However, alternatives exist, especially if policymakers can either signal resolve through other means or reduce the strategic conditions that make reputational concerns acute.

One option is for great powers to position themselves in a way that automates escalation in the event of a challenge. Cost-absorbent strategic thinking strengthen fears that adversaries will exploit a state's potential reluctance to escalate due to high expected costs. Measures such as force forward deployments signal that, if provoked, the great

power will not deliberate over costs and benefits but will respond decisively. This logic underpinned U.S. deployments during the Cold War and continues to justify many of its global force postures today. In light of modern threats, such as the development of hypersonic weapons by revisionist powers, Washington may wish to consider reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons in allied territories near adversaries in East Asia and Europe. These steps could reduce the perceived need to fight in peripheral theaters by preemptively satisfying reputational concerns and deterring aggression through credible commitment. Another strategy is to assure allies and partners and warn adversaries directly, thereby reducing the reputational pressure to demonstrate resolve through costly military action. Instead of relying on peripheral shows of force, the United States could bolster credibility through stronger security assistance, institutionalized joint military exercises, and more formal commitments.

Great powers can also mitigate or escape cost-absorbent strategic thinking by investing in capabilities that reduce vulnerability and lower the costs of future war. If homeland vulnerability is the key issue, greater investment in missile defense systems and accurate counterforce capabilities may help. If battlefield vulnerability is the concern, greater investment in cyber, asymmetric, and preemptive capabilities could help shift the balance. At the same time, pursuing less ambitious strategic objectives may help. For example, encouraging U.S. allies to assume a larger share of the defense burden would reduce America's direct exposure to high war costs. In some cases, allies under acute

threat might even be supported in acquiring their own nuclear deterrents, further easing Washington's credibility concerns. In addition, current military doctrines could be reevaluated to emphasize early-stage preemptive actions or non-kinetic approaches in order to limit escalation and minimize the costs of conflict.

Third, the strategic reputational theory developed in this dissertation can help policymakers identify which actors are more likely to use force out of reputational reasons, especially over peripheral interests. In today's geopolitical landscape, the theory is particularly useful for assessing the behavior of U.S. adversaries such as China. It suggests that China may demonstrate a greater inclination to use force over less important issues if its leadership is influenced by cost-absorbent strategic thinking – that is when it expects to directly absorb especially high costs in a future war. Historically, China has perceived itself facing both battlefield and homeland vulnerabilities in a potential war against Russia or the United States.[466] However, until quite recently, Beijing did not have cost-absorbent strategic thinking in the strict sense, as it lacked ambitious strategic objectives that would compel it to absorb extreme costs in a high-intensity conflict. That situation appears to be changing largely due to the dramatic growth of its military power in recent decades. With increased capabilities, the Chinese Communist

[466] Michael Gerson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969" (Defense Threat Reduction Agency, November 2010); Rosemary J. Foot, "Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter /89 1988): 92–112.

Party has become increasingly confident in its ability to pursue what it views as its core national objectives, particularly the reunification – forceful, if necessary – with Taiwan.

As Beijing's intentions regarding Taiwan become clearer and more entrenched, and as the U.S. strengthens its commitments to Taiwan's defense, there is good reason to believe that cost-absorbent strategic thinking may become influential within the Chinese leadership. China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, which aims to rapidly neutralize U.S. assets in nearby waters does not appear to offer an indirect, cost-reducing doctrine, as it paradoxically increases the likelihood of mainland China becoming a direct target of U.S. preemptive strikes.[467] Moreover, the requirement to conduct a large-scale amphibious invasion makes it difficult for China to avoid or minimize direct absorption of the costs of war. While alternatives such as blockades or other coercive measures short of war may are available, they are unlikely to produce the strategic effect necessary to subdue Taiwan. As a result, driven by reputation concerns arising from strategic circumstances, China may in the future display increasingly confrontational behavior both within and beyond the Taiwan Strait even over lower-stake issues. Conversely, a

[467] Eric Heginbotham et al., "The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017" (RAND Corporation, 2015); Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 7–48.

lack of interest in reputation building could signal that Chinese leaders believe that they have a low-cost, surprise military plan with which to rapidly take control of Taiwan.

5.4. Future Research

Finally, several avenues for future research are suggested. First, future research could further refine the strategic reputational theory developed in this dissertation by improving the measurement of its core concepts. One key task is to develop more precise and replicable indicators of cost-absorbent strategic thinking, particularly in the form of structured datasets that capture shifts in vulnerability perceptions and changes in military strategy. Such refinements would allow for comparative studies across a wider range of cases and time periods. Future research could further test the theory with other empirical strategies. In addition to qualitative case studies, for example, experimental methods—such as survey experiments with policymakers or elites—could be used to test whether perceptions of future war costs actually increase the attractiveness of reputational fighting. Similarly, cross-national quantitative analyses could explore correlations between indicators of cost-absorbent strategic thinking and great powers' involvement in crises or conflicts, especially outside core regions. These methods would enhance the theory's generalizability and help identify its boundary conditions.

Second, scholars could examine peripheral conflicts of great powers in periods beyond the temporal scope of analysis here (1919-1991) through the lens of the strategic

reputational theory. This period was selected because it marks the end of the imperial age, when expansion in the periphery was simply more attractive and easier. However, this temporal scope does not imply that the theory necessarily lacks explanatory power for earlier conflicts. The theory would gain particularly strong support if it can successfully explain some of the most significant cases of great power peripheral conflicts before World War I, such as Britain's Boer War (1898-1902), France's intervention in the American War of Independence (1778-1783) or Habsburg Spain's Eighty Years' War (1568-1648). Likewise, as greater evidence becomes available, the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that occurred following the end of the unipolar moment may be examined in light of the strategic reputational theory.

Third, while the strategic reputational theory was developed to explain great power peripheral belligerence, its logic is not confined to large-scale wars by great powers. For instance, it could inform analyses of crisis behavior in peripheral regions that falls outside the scope of this study. A case in point is Germany's decision to initiate the First Moroccan Crisis in 1905 while having cost-absorbent strategic thinking largely due to its risk fleet strategy. The theory could also be extended to specifically explain variation in the duration of military interventions by great powers or why states display different levels of resolve in balancing behavior.

Additionally, the theory may be applied to actors other than traditional great powers. Regional powers, for example, may be influenced by cost-absorbent strategic

thinking and use force over peripheral interests. For example, China's 1979 invasion of Vietnam may have been motivated by a desire to signal resolve to the Soviet Union and the United States during a period of shifting alignments and heightened vulnerability. Applying the theory to such cases could reveal new patterns of reputation building behavior and enhance its external validity. Moreover, the theory's logic could even extend to non-state actors. For example, indiscriminate terrorism by weak militant groups could be interpreted not simply as a tactic of desperation but as a reputational strategy chosen under conditions of limited capacity and anticipated future costs of direct confrontations with stronger actors. These applications would test the theory's versatility and contribute to broader debates in security studies.

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