
**Introduction**

Whether China will rise peacefully is hotly debated in both academic and policy communities. Power transition theory presents the possibility of conflict as largely dependent on relative power, with the most dangerous stage emerging when the rising power is approaching parity with the dominant power. Conflict can erupt then either because the rising power is dissatisfied with the current system and seeks to change it in its image, or because the declining power launches a preventive war as a last-ditch attempt to hold onto its position in the international system (Organski and Kugler 1980, Gilpin 1981, Copeland 2000). Offensive realism focuses on balance of power more broadly, and how increased power—and the expanding military capabilities that tend to accompany it—will inevitably encourage revisionist and expansionist behavior (Mearsheimer 2001). Scholars have tried to understand Chinese behavior through these theoretical lenses, most recently by evaluating the degree to which China harbors revisionist intentions, with a particular focus on its assertiveness in territorial disputes (Johnston 2013, Mastro 2014). Leveraging international relations theory on how crises escalate to war has also been a fruitful avenue for evaluating the likelihood of conflict between China and the United States (Goldstein 2013, Swaine and Zhang 2006).

The heightened possibility of an armed conflict involving China according to international relations theory justifies an examination of Chinese strategic thinking about the onset, conduct and termination of wars. China specialists have contributed greatly to our understanding of the first two components. A comprehensive study of past incidents of Chinese use of force internationally and domestically posits that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has not hesitated to move beyond coercive diplomacy to use force to further its policy goals, though with varying degrees of success (Scobell 2003, 2). Allen Whiting (2001) points out that early warning for deterrence, seizure of the initiative, risk acceptance, and risk management consistently characterize past cases of PLA deployment from 1950 to 1996. Alastair Iain Johnston (1998a) analyzes the Seven Military Classics of Ancient China and concludes that China has a strategic culture that emphasizes offensive action and flexibility, which still
influences China’s use of military force against external threats to this day. Another systematic review of historical cases reveals that China responds with deterrent or coercive strategies primarily when it feels threatened or feels a sense of urgency to resolve a dispute (Godwin and Miller 2013). Thomas Christensen (2006) argues that China may use force even without a clear provocation if its leadership perceives a closing window of opportunity to create favorable long-term strategic trends. When China does respond with the use of force, Chinese leaders tend to rely on surprise attacks, inflicting casualties, creating tensions, and deception to achieve a systematic advantage over its opponents, even those that are more technologically advanced (Burles and Shulsky 2000).

While all these studies contribute to our understanding of contemporary China and the challenges of its rise, none address Chinese war termination thinking and behavior. How has China historically performed when it attempts to engage in conflict resolution? Are historical patterns of war termination behavior likely to manifest themselves in future conflicts, even with all the changes to China’s internal and external environments since its last war in 1979? Such an analysis of Chinese war termination behavior is absent from both academic and policy research.

The broader war termination literature has potential to shed light on this, but in its current form its findings are not easily and directly applicable to the specific processes, strategies and decisions that can facilitate or hinder resolution. Given these gaps and challenges, this article addresses the question of how China ends wars in a three-stage approach. First, I synthesize the central elements of the extensive literature on war termination and conflict resolution. From this review, I derive three independent variables that impact the likelihood of conflict resolution in a given period: states’ approach to wartime diplomacy, views on escalation, and receptiveness to mediation. I then evaluate the values of these three factors in each of the three major wars the PRC has fought since its founding in 1949: the Korean War (1950–1953), the Sino-Indian War (1962), and the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979). Though I use this framework to identify Chinese tendencies, this three-pronged diplomacy, escalation, mediation framework can be applied generally to assess state behavior and the likelihood of war termination in any given period.

There are two reasons these three wars provide insight into Chinese historical war termination behavior. First, the rarity of war allows me to analyze the full population of interstate
wars China has fought since its founding in 1949, dodging issues of selection bias.\(^1\) Second, even though we are limited only to three case studies in the population, these cases exhibit a great deal of variation. The Korean War, Sino-Indian War, and Sino-Vietnamese War were all fought with different motivations—preemption of perceived attack, coercion to reverse negative trends, and to enhance deterrence through punishment, respectively. China was trying to gain territory for itself in the Sino-Indian War, but not in the other two cases. In Korea, China fought a war against a coalition—and initially tried to pursue absolute aims. The latter two were bilateral conflicts in which Chinese aims were always limited. One could argue that China initiated the latter two conflicts, while it intervened in response to others’ actions in Korea. China fought in Korea for over three years while it expended resources only for a few weeks in the Sino-Indian and Sino-Vietnamese Wars. Given these many differences between these three wars, if China’s approach to war termination is still similar across cases, this lends increased confidence in the consistency of Chinese patterns of behavior. Moreover, the span of three decades ensures that the findings do not only capture patterns relevant to Mao Zedong’s tenure, but also those that extended into Deng Xiaoping’s China (Kennedy 2012).

This research relies heavily on original Chinese source material, including documents from the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives and the Wilson Center Digital Archive. Additionally, two-thirds of the Chinese articles and books cited are official or semi-official histories, including the writings of key leaders such as Peng Dehuai, Zhou Enlai, and Mao Zedong.\(^2\) These sources are useful precisely because of their potential bias toward Party

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\(^1\) China has used force on other occasions, including the Taiwan Straits Crises of 1954–55, 1958, and 1995–6, along the Sino-Soviet border in 1969, and naval skirmishes with Vietnam in 1974 and 1988 over island disputes in the South China Sea. These cases have been explored in past research to shed light on when China uses force, crisis management, and escalation dynamics. However, because they did not include multiple clashes between opposing forces at levels of violence necessary to be considered interstate wars, they are not suited to contribute to our understanding of Chinese war termination behavior. The Correlates of War (COW) dataset criteria for an interstate war support my interpretation, with one exception—the 1954–55 and 1958 Taiwan Straits Crises. COW codes these crises as wars mainly because the number of Taiwan deaths that resulted from Chinese bombing exceeded one thousand. I do not include them in this analysis for two reasons. First, the purpose of this study is to understand Chinese strategic thinking, and from that mindset these crises are not considered interstate war, but an extension of the civil war between the communists and nationalists (Johnston 1998b). How China engages in indivisible, winner-take-all type of civil conflict does not necessarily provide insights to how it would approach limited interstate conflict. Additionally, these instances of Chinese use of force are widely understood and evaluated as crises (or incidents) that luckily did not escalate to wars (Christensen 1997, Zhang 1992, Johnston 1998b). In both cases, Chinese authoritative histories also refer to the two incidents as crises, not wars. For an account of these crises from the Chinese perspective, see Mao Nianpu 2002, 263, 274; Jianguo Yilai 2009, 412–15.

\(^2\) Semi-official means that either a Party Press published the source or the author is a high-ranking official in the Party.
thinking—we gain insight into how Chinese elites understand history and, consequently, the likely impact of past experiences on current military strategy. Many of these sources have not been evaluated in the previous studies of Chinese uses of force. Others have been analyzed before, but I exploit them in a new way—to explain how and when China moved to end armed conflict.

I argue that China’s approach to wartime diplomacy, escalation, and mediation hinders timely conflict resolution. Specifically, China tends to be willing to open communication channels in the initial stages of conflict only with weaker parties. Otherwise, China may cut off communications and delay talking until it has demonstrated sufficient toughness through fighting. Second, its leaders demonstrate a unique confidence that they can escalate to rapidly impose peace. Lastly, China’s approach to third parties, specifically to involve them to pressure the adversary on China’s behalf, could bode well for conflict resolution, but only if those countries are willing to go beyond Beijing’s wishes and impose mediation, which is unlikely. Additionally, I find there is convincing evidence from the editions of *The Science of Strategy* (《戰略學》), considered to be the most authoritative work capturing Chinese strategic thinking, that these tendencies continue to be promoted in present day, and therefore are likely to influence Chinese behavior in future conflicts.

These findings contribute to the security studies literature in three critical ways. First, this research operationalizes the war termination literature, which focuses largely on the importance of the causes of war, when talks lead to conflict resolution, and the durability of post-conflict agreements. Unfortunately for policymakers, much of this literature centers on factors impacting war termination that cannot easily be shaped and leveraged. For example, if what is needed to end a conflict is a democratic leader or the removal of a leader, this can be a high bar, and an unrealistic one in the case of hypothetical conflicts involving China. There is still a great theoretical and practical need for research that treats war as a process, not merely the result of bargaining failure. This article derives three factors that political and military elites can realistically shape in strategic interaction with the adversary in order to fight the shortest and lowest-level conflict possible.

Second, scholars concentrate efforts on understanding the strategies and behaviors of major powers given that they have a disproportionate effect on the international system (Rose 2010; Garthoff 1986, 35). Other studies evaluate great power war termination strategies in
particular conflicts—relying on a combination of theoretical and situational factors to explain suboptimal approaches to ending conflicts (Sigal 1988, Tuck 2013). Absent from this literature is a comprehensive study of Chinese war termination strategy, largely because of China’s recent arrival to the major power club.

Third, while additional research should be conducted on the causes of China’s approach to war termination, initial findings suggest dispositional factors are a main driver. China’s tendency to rely on heavy escalation to force peace likely results from its strategic cultural emphasis on the offensive in crisis bargaining and war initiation (Whiting 2001, Johnston 1998a). Also, China’s preference for engaging actively in strategic communication through official media and channels before using force to enhance its deterrence and legitimacy logically impacts its approach to third-party actors during the war (Godwin and Miller 2013). Additionally, China’s approach to mediation and escalation remains constant throughout the conflicts in spite of changes in power, leadership, cause of conflict, and nature of the enemy, further indicating that the influence of Chinese ideas about effectiveness of force and suspicion of third-party involvement in its international affairs. However, while major powers try to consolidate their allies and divide those of the adversary, China is more broadly concerned about shaping the views of even the neutral and aligned powers (Garthoff 1986, 35). This challenges the conventional wisdom among China experts that China prefers to handle issues bilaterally and avoid the internationalization of conflicts it has with other countries (Swaine and Fravel 2011, 14).

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. First, I review the war termination literature and highlight the three most important factors shaping the prospects of war termination. Second, I conduct descriptive inference within three case studies to decipher China’s approach to these three factors. I then review Chinese doctrinal writings to determine the degree to which the historical patterns in war termination have been codified into critical Chinese leadership teaching and training materials.

**War Termination Theory: Applications and Insights**

While scholars have recognized the need to develop theoretical structures that provide comprehensive accounts of all aspects of war, the state of theory on war termination strategies remains relatively weak. Although there are no theories that are specifically designed to explain
how a country’s strategy can prolong or hasten a conflict, I posit that the logic of the information approach and credible commitment approach to war termination point to three factors crucial in impacting conflict resolution: approach to wartime diplomacy, escalation, and third-party actors, or mediation (Reiter 2009, Iklé 1991, Pillar 1983, Goemans 2000). In this section I review the war termination literature and extract the relevant state-level behaviors that impact the likelihood of conflict resolution in an attempt to operationalize the existing theories.

First, the willingness of a country to engage in direct talks at with their adversary at a given point in time, a factor I call diplomatic posture, has a great impact on the ability of states to bring conflicts to a close. A closed diplomatic strategy is one in which a belligerent refuses to engage in direct and unconditional talks with its adversary—it rejects any offers to talk and declines to make any of its own. An open diplomatic strategy is one in which a country allows for talking while fighting—either making offers of its own or by accepting proposals to launch negotiations. For a diplomatic posture to be considered open, a belligerent needs to express both 1) a desire for direct communication and 2) acceptance of engagement without any conditions.

As tensions escalate between states, talks become central to narratives about costly signaling in crisis bargaining (Fearon 2007, Filson and Werner 2004). States often decipher whether their enemy is a weak or strong type from information conveyed through talks, albeit implicitly. States often refuse to engage in talks with their enemies because they seek total victory and unconditional surrender (Weisiger 2013), demand the restoration of their honor first (Dolan 2015), perceive the issue as sacred or indivisible (Goddard 2006, Hassner 2009), or because the act of demonstrating the willingness to talk may convey weakness and encourage the enemy in its war efforts (Mastro 2013). Leaders’ beliefs and domestic political systems may also shape disposition toward wartime diplomacy, with autocratic leaders and regimes expected to prefer closed diplomatic postures (Russett and Maoz 1993, Kennedy 2012).

There is a general consensus in security studies research that an open diplomatic posture is more conducive to conflict resolution than a closed one, though there is some disagreement on

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3 Direct contact is defined as face-to-face interaction between representatives of both sides. The terms “talks” and “negotiations” are used interchangeably and refer to everything from official talks between governments to secret engagements among key individuals condoned by the governments in question negotiation is a formal process that relies on verbal communication.

4 While theoretically states can be communicating their positions without engaging in direct talks with the enemy, the examples and case studies of such work reveal the implicit assumption that talks are indeed ongoing. For example, Sechser 2010 uses the case of the 1939 Russo-Finnish Crisis in Goliath’s curse; Goemans 2002 refers to the Seven Weeks War, in which Bismarck did directly meet with Napolean III.
why and how diplomacy affects outcomes. The information approach argues that wars break out because warring states have incomplete information about the balance of power and resolve, and those wars conclude when learning leads to convergence in beliefs about these two factors (Reiter 2009, 11–13). States may learn through wartime diplomacy, or the making and rejecting of peace proposals (Slantchev 2003, Powell 2004, Filson and Werner 2002). Also, open communication channels can signal conciliatory intentions, while refusal to engage underscores a state’s dedication to a contentious approach (Pruitt and Kim 2004, 214–5). Face-to-face interaction may facilitate agreements by allowing states to demonstrate sincerity and build trust through personal impressions, which decreases uncertainty (Holmes 2013, 829; Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012) and allows state to overcome credibility issues. Many factors impact whether states can reach a war termination agreement, but all else being equal, a closed diplomatic posture would be an impediment to timely resolution.

Second, states’ beliefs about the utility of escalation impact the duration and conclusion of conflict. The relevant issue here is whether de-escalation, coupled with reassurance and concessions, or escalation, possibly with increased demands and threats, is the best path to lasting peace and security. Escalation here refers to the expansion of military effort—it may be degree of force, attacking new targets, including new or more equipment, or expanding where fighting occurs or who is involved (Iklé 1991). When states believe that through escalation they can encourage the enemy to concede to their war aims, they are less dedicated to an immediate negotiated settlement (C. Langlois and J.P. Langlois 2009). This logic finds its extreme in brute-force conflicts when a belligerent is attempting to forcibly attain its war aims. On the other hand, states may choose de-escalation if they realize their goal cannot be achieved “by sheer strength, skill and ingenuity” (Schelling 2008, 64) or in the case of a limited coercive war, when they:

1. Expect the military gains of increased violence would be canceled by the enemy’s counter-escalation or intervention by third parties on the part of the enemy;
2. Fear that an increase in violence will through various mechanisms expand fighting to intolerably destructive and costly levels;
3. Fear that escalation could inflict destruction and death on their own territory;

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5 Pruitt and Kim pose five ways escalation can transform: light to heavy, small to large, specific to general issues, few to many, and doing well to winning to hurting the other. (Pruitt and Kim 2004, 89–90).
4. Wish to avoid internal dissension, so they try to minimize the social and economic cost of warfare;

5. Need to keep some military in reserve for coping with emerging threats (Iklé 1991, 40). The problem for war termination is that “the greater the enemy’s effort and costs in fighting in a war, the more will he become committed to his own conditions for peace,” creating even higher barriers to conflict resolution (Iklé 1991, 42). Moreover, escalation management becomes most difficult with heavy escalation, in which aggression rapidly becomes more intense and lasts longer because it compresses the time frame available for decision-making (Pruitt and Kim 2004, 121–2). Therefore, it is better for war termination if states pursue de-escalatory strategies instead of escalatory ones in their attempts to bring the conflict to a close.

Third, the conflict resolution literature demonstrates that third-party mediation, if accepted by the warring parties, can facilitate the ending of a war. Mediation, which is a “political form of third-party intervention in which the decision-making authority remains in the hands of the warring parties,” has emerged as a critical conflict management tool in post-WWII conflicts (Jonsson 2002, 221). States may have difficulty in ending conflict, even when all sides so desire, because of the inability of states to credibly commit to uphold that agreement (Fearon 1995). Third parties can help engender a peace agreement by stepping in to enforce or verify its terms to reduce the likelihood that signatories will undermine or exploit the terms (Walter 2002). Third parties can also facilitate war termination by modifying the physical and social structure of the conflict and how states view the issue and possible settlement agreements, as well as increasing the warring parties’ motivation to reach an agreement. Mediation can be conducted through impartial international institutions such as the United Nations or by states that have an ongoing relationship with one of the warring parties and have a stake in the outcome (Pruitt and Kim 2004, 232–42). Third parties may also help countries formulate and implement reconciliation events that increase the likelihood of a durable peace (Long and Brecke 2003). While not a panacea, all else being equal, embracing third-party mediators facilitates war termination while refusing hinders it (Bercovitch 1997, 131).

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6 Research suggests that outside mediators are effective at convincing belligerents to abandon armed hostilities, but they may be less effective at transforming the underlying relationship in a way that precludes future conflict. This finding suggests it is better to have third parties facilitate than impose peace, which may have destabilizing consequences in the future (Beardsley 2011).
In sum, three main factors impact the ability of states to move to the war termination stage of conflict: approach to wartime diplomacy, escalation, and mediation. All else being equal, war termination is more likely when states are open to talks, favor de-escalation to bring their enemy to the negotiating table, and are open to third-party mediation. In contrast, the likelihood of ending a war in a given period decreases when a belligerent chooses a closed diplomatic posture, relies on heavy escalation to bring the war to an end, or is reluctant to accede to third-party mediation. When a state approaches war-fighting in this fashion, it erects additional barriers to conflict resolution that make conflicts longer and bloodier than they would be otherwise. To understand Chinese war termination strategy and its implications for timely conflict resolution, the next section evaluates China’s approach to these three factors historically.

China’s Historical Record

The Korean War, 1950–1952

On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel in a blitzkrieg assault. To the surprise of North Korea and its communist allies, the Soviet Union and China, the United States responded quickly to the North Korean invasion. The UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the attack, levied sanctions against the Kim Il Sung’s regime, and authorized the creation of a unified United Nations Command (UNC) directed by an American commander to expel the North Koreans. China joined the fight almost four months later in October, when Chinese “volunteers” crossed over into Korea in secrecy and launched their first campaign against South Korean forces in Unsan, successfully forcing a retreat.

In terms of the first variable of interest, diplomatic posture, Chinese leaders maintained a closed diplomatic posture for the first eight months of the war. Initially, they rejected any offers for talks because they wanted to communicate their pursuit of absolute aims (Niu 2005, 42). The three communist capitals all concurred that the goal should be to drive United Nations (UN) forces completely off the peninsula, but they disagreed on how aggressively to pursue this goal (Christensen 2011, 111; Wilson Digital Archive August 20, 1952). Mao was more hopeful than others in the party that total victory against the United States was possible, though he articulated in a December 3 meeting with Kim that “there exists a possibility of resolving the conflict quickly, but anything unexpected may happen to protract the war” (Zhang 1995, 121). The policy shift towards an open diplomatic posture would occur more than four months into the war.
In terms of the second relevant factor, China demonstrated a reliance on escalation and compellence over de-escalation and assurance to bring the conflict to a close. Deliberations before intervention evince a general agreement that early and rapid escalation would convince the United States that continuing to fighting on South Korea’s behalf would be prohibitively costly, and Washington should bow out (Christensen 2011, 77). After China’s first two offensives in 1950 were extremely successful, a greater consensus emerged that imposing overwhelming costs would successfully compel the United States to abandon the peninsula.\(^7\) Mao ordered the commander of Chinese forces, Peng Dehuai, to launch the third major offensive on December 31, 1950 under the assumption that if the Chinese People’s Volunteers (CPV) seized Seoul, it would “be in a stronger position to compel United States imperialists to withdraw from Korea” (Zhang 1995, 121–2). Mao reiterated the importance of showing strength by relying on sticks instead of carrots, arguing, “if we do not launch this offensive … it would arouse the capitalist countries to speculate a great deal [on our intentions],” and only by “annihilating a few more ROK [Republic of Korea] divisions or America units” would China “enhance the pessimism among them” (Zhang 1995, 129). According to a researcher at Academy of Military Science, a PLA entity, the target for the offensives were largely determined by which part of the UN coalition was more against talks—and then China would direct the majority of its efforts against the reluctant party to facilitate wartime talks (Qi 2010, 275).

A partial basis for this confidence in heavy escalation to bring the war to an end was the belief that the United States was inherently casualty-averse.\(^8\) Both Mao and Peng articulated throughout the war that the United States lacked the resolve to sustain heavy losses. Chinese leaders saw their willingness to absorb costs as the key to defeating a conventionally more powerful adversary. On January 25, 1951, in a meeting of high Chinese and North Korean commanders, Peng Dehuai commented that the CPV had achieved great success to date, but it was still too early to end the war. The United States still believed that its technological superiority would allow it to hold its troops’ position in the south. The way to convince US leaders otherwise, according to Peng, would be to cause the United States to sustain even more casualties (Peng 1988, 364, 384). Beijing abandoned large offensives to adopt a strategy of

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\(^7\) Mao believed when he launched the invasion that if things went well, China could impose high enough costs on the United States to “force the enemy to talks” (Kangmei Yuanchao Zhanzheng 1990, 31–2).

\(^8\) The idea that manpower and morale of the troops could overcome a technologically superior opponent, a tenet central to the People’s War doctrine, also played a role. For a deeper discussion, see Kennedy (2012).
aggressive defense in which the prospects of increasing casualties and costs would hopefully cause the US/UN to agree to its minimum terms while decreasing its own human and material costs.⁹

But China’s fortunes began to turn when General Matthew B. Ridgway took command of UN forces and began retaking territory that had fallen into communist hands. For the first time, UN forces managed to halt a Chinese campaign, the fourth campaign launched on January 25. These setbacks encouraged Mao to reevaluate his thinking about the prospects of reunifying the peninsula under North Korean control through direct achievement. At this point, Mao switched to a limited war strategy of attrition, still believing China could compel a US retreat through increased military pressure (Yang and Wang 2012, 286). However, he refused to offer talks because fearing an open diplomatic posture would project weakness, thereby undermining coercive strategy. In April 1951, under Mao’s direction, Peng Dehuai launched a spring offensive “with the purpose of achieving the final solution of the South Korea issue” (Chen 1995–1996, 90). The campaign was a major failure; the Chinese retreated north of the parallel, allowing the UN forces to regain their position on the Kansas line.

After the failure of the fifth offensive, the CCP convened in May 1951 to discuss the next steps in the war (Shen 2013, 418). Communist leaders began to recognize that they were at a stalemate (Wilson Digital Archive August 20, 1952). According to a prominent Korean War scholar, the majority of participants agreed that the way to end the war on favorable terms was to stop near the thirty-eighth parallel and engaging in talking while fighting (Niu 2012, 286). According to then—chief of staff Nie Rongzhen, at this point Mao supported the idea of negotiation while fighting with the goal of achieving an armistice that would revert Korea to its prewar status (Jiang 2010, 133).

Mao began to consider an open diplomatic posture and placed limitations on the scale of the CPV’s war effort by “preparing for a prolonged war while striving to end the war through peace negotiations” (Chen 2001, 98). But Peng warned the Chinese leadership, including Mao, that launching these talks would not be easy—the Chinese “could encounter many difficulties, even a complicated process and the need to undergo serious military fighting” (Peng 1998, 413–

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⁹ Chen, Mao’s China and the Cold War, 106. In October 1951, the Chinese called off sixth campaign designed to put pressure on the United States by expanding operations because of their logistical vulnerabilities. Chen, Mao’s China and the Cold War, 105.
Moreover, it was important to Mao not to seem anxious for a resolution (Shen 2013, 418). Consequently, Mao requested that the Soviets bring up the possibility of an armistice, and on June 23, 1951, the Soviet representative to the UN did exactly that, calling for “a ceasefire and an armistice providing for the mutual withdrawal of forces from the thirty-eighth parallel” in a radio address (Foot 1990, 37). A Chinese scholar argues that the United States approached the Soviet Union first and declared its desire to end the war—this gave China confidence that this was not a ploy, but a genuine desire to end the war (Niu 2005, 44). Armistice talks began June of that year, though they would not conclude until July 1953 after the death of Stalin.

Even as Mao shifted to an open diplomatic posture, he continued to rely on escalation to bring the conflict to an end. More than ever, he believed that only by “smashing the enemy’s will, persisting in a protracted war, and achieving the mass destruction of the enemy [could] the goal of completely resolving the Korea issue be achieved” (Mao Zedong Nianpu 2002, 299). After agreeing to talks, China prepared for bigger offensives, tripling the number of Chinese troops in Korea from 271,000 in July 1951 to 947,000 in July 1952 and doubling communist fighter strength (Mao Zedong Nianpu 2002, 359–60; Central Intelligence Agency 1953, 2–3). The largest bombing raid of the war, a second strike on Pyongyang, was launched on August 29, 1952, during the second attempt to reach a ceasefire agreement. Due to continued escalation, more than a quarter of the casualties occurred during the last two months of the war, in which the communists launched two major offensives to try to compel President Eisenhower to agree to better terms than his predecessor (Foot 1990, ix; Rose 2010, 156).

During the course of the conflict, Chinese leaders greatly considered the role of third-party actors, the third variable that impacts conflict resolution. Chinese leaders were confident that they would win the sympathy of the global public, which would complicate US war planning. According to an official in the Central Military Commission (CMC), a central component of Mao’s strategy was to cultivate an image of reasonableness to win over the global public (Xiong 1977, 33). Chinese leaders wanted countries to know that the United States, not China, was the obstacle to a peaceful solution on the Korean peninsula (Kangmei Yuanchao Jishi 2008, 84). Official histories articulate the belief at the time that US coalition partners would successfully pressure the United States to compromise on terms favorable to Beijing largely because the US strategic focus was in Europe (Jianguo Yilai 2009, 50–2). This optimism was not completely unwarranted; third parties seemed willing to push the United States on the issue. At
the war’s onset, before Chinese intervention, there were many third party launched peace initiatives designed in part to pressure the United States. Also, during the war, British Prime Minister Atlee had tried to convince President Truman to make an offer to Beijing, such as a seat in the UN and the return of Taiwan, in exchange for a ceasefire (US Department of State 1950, 1451).

Contemporary unofficial coverage argues that Chinese attempts to leverage third parties were partly successful, with China gaining support from socialist countries and “other peace-loving nations” (Wang 2010; Gao and Tian 2010, 31). But China underestimated the degree to which US preferences dominated decisions made by the UNC. For example, during the armistice talks, the formulation and transmission of policy positions occurred through the US government apparatus, not UN channels (Foot 1990, 2). Furthermore, Truman did not believe inviting the PRC into the UN would do any good, and past issues with the Chinese “had not made him have any friendly feelings toward [Beijing]” (US Department of State 1950, 1.453–4). Chinese leaders also considered the position of the Soviet Union, from whom Beijing received military and ideological support in the fight. However, Mao saw himself as Stalin’s equal, and as he was putting more resources on the line in Korea, he was determined to make decisions according to Chinese national interests, not Soviet preferences.¹⁰

This review of Chinese involvement in the Korean War has shown that China was reluctant to open communications channels with the United States for the first eight months of the war. Moreover, Chinese leaders consistently relied on escalatory steps to engender adversary movement toward war termination. Lastly, Chinese leaders repeatedly attempted to leverage third parties to put pressure on the United States to negotiate or come to terms with Beijing, though not as mediators per se.

The Sino-Indian War, 1962

On October 20, 1962, the Chinese launched a surprise attack against an Indian garrison in Namka Chu Valley, which was under dispute between the two countries.¹¹ In a matter of days,

¹⁰ There is no evidence in the transcripts of conversations between Stalin and Mao that the former dictated policy, though Mao often asked for Stalin for advice. For some examples, see Mao Zedong Nianpu 2002, 293–4, 365, 368–9.

¹¹ Both countries claim Aksai Chin in the western sector, which China considers a part of Xinjiang and India a part of Ladakh. In the eastern sector, India claims Arunachal Pradesh—China asserts the territory in question is part of Tibet. For more on the dispute and the leadup to the war, see Mastro 2012.
China controlled all its claimed territory in the western sector and had overrun Indian posts along the McMahon line in the east. By November 20, 1962, China had driven out all organized Indian armed forces from any territory claimed by China in the eastern sector, allowing it to control the whole area between the McMahon Line (India’s recognized boundary line) and the Outer Line. The next day, the Chinese announced a unilateral ceasefire and a withdrawal of troops to twenty kilometers from the line of actual control (LAC) in all sectors.

The Chinese government, through the active efforts of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, maintained an open diplomatic posture throughout the whole conflict. Four days into the war, Zhou put forth a three-point proposal in which the two countries would agree to resolve the issue peacefully, pull back to the LAC, and organize a meeting of the prime ministers. Zhou argued that wartime negotiations would “in no way prejudice the position of either side in maintaining its claims with regard to the boundary” (White Paper 1959–1966). But Nehru refused, holding steadfast to the precondition that the Chinese military withdraw to the pre-September 8th boundary (White Paper 1959–1966). According to a recently declassified CIA report, “the Chinese tried publicly and privately to persuade Nehru to drop his withdrawal precondition and to convince him of their desire to attain an overall settlement” (CIA 1964, v–vi). But Nehru was waiting for “a modest Chinese conciliatory gesture indicating a small degree of willingness to make a concession to the Indian position” (CIA 1964, 41). In China’s view, it had consistently appealed for peace talks during the conflict, while in the Chinese view, Nehru’s government “continue[d] to clamor for war” (“Yinni Gejie Duizhong” 1962, 16). While China’s openness to diplomacy may seem surprisingly conciliatory from a realist perspective, it may instead be the logical result of balance of power considerations; China “was superior, so [it] could afford to be magnanimous” in its promotion of a diplomatic resolution.12

The results are less rosy for the second factor— the role of escalation in one’s war termination strategy. The proposals to launch talks were veiled attempts to compel the Indians through heavy escalation to concede to Chinese demands and admit their Forward Policy, which was designed to enhance India’s presence in disputed areas, was ill-conceived (Shi 1993, 332; Sun and Chen 1991, 219). Chinese historian Xu Yan (1993, 110) notes how Chinese leaders thought demonstrations of military strength would teach “the invaders” that they would not be able to conduct similar “nibbling” in the future without severe costs. According to Mao, what

12 Author’s interview with Indian former ambassador to Russia, New Delhi, August 2012.
China needed was not a local victory but to inflict a defeat so crushing that it would “knock Nehru to the negotiating table” (Zhou 2006, 301). Zhou supported the strategy, affirming, “As I see it, to fight a bit would have advantages. It would cause some people to understand things more clearly” (Shi 1993, 189). Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi articulated, “India cannot completely avoid talks. According to our estimates, currently India will fight for a short period, and in the end it will accept peaceful negotiations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1962). According to an official military history, the CMC’s operational principles were “to teach India a lesson by military punishment. In one word: fight to make talks” (Jiang and Li 1994, 181). Chinese strategists planned to do so by breaking up the campaign into two phases. First, Chinese forces would drive Indian troops out of areas considered to be Chinese territory. Chinese leaders thought India might have been willing to talk at this stage once confronted with Chinese power and resolve. If India still refused to talk, the CMC then would declare a pause in fighting to give India the opportunity to accept peaceful negotiations; “if India refused again to talk, we will again firmly attack the Indian reactionaries to compel them to sit down and talk” (Jiang and Li 1994, 208).

Even though this lull did not engender a change in India’s position, Chinese leaders did not lose faith in the power of heavy escalation to bring about peace. China attacked again before declaring a unilateral ceasefire on November 20, a puzzling move. Many treatments of the war by Indian scholars argue that China withdrew because of difficulties in sustaining operations given logistical challenges, especially with the impending winter (Gopal 1984, 230; Raghavan 2012, 1879; Nanda 2012, 192). But Chinese historical accounts tell a slightly different story, one in which China was not compelled by unforeseen events, but instead had planned this withdrawal as part of its war termination strategy—to launch overwhelming force and then pull back, though not to prewar levels, to seize military gains while also portray oneself as reasonable (“Xin Zhongguo Waijiao” 1990, 74). In the midst of the conflict, Chen Yi indicated that “winning victories [would] put pressure on India” and that to pave the way for talks, China was “willing to concede and disengage” (“Chen Yi discussion” 1962, 6). Ironically, China thought that the most credible way of showing a sincere desire to resolve the border dispute through negotiation would

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13 Hereafter cited as “Chen Yi discussion.”
14 This position was articulated in a document distributed by the CCP Central Committee entitled “The Propaganda Outline Concerning the End of the Sino-Indian Border Conflict and the Issue of Sino-Indian Relations.” See Niu (2011, 30).
be to acquire territory through force and then give it back (Sun and Chen 1991, 451). Therefore the unilateral ceasefire was the result of political imperatives, the need to strike a delicate balance between teaching Nehru a lesson and without going so far as to further provoke Indian aggression (Xu 1993, 188).

Lastly, in terms of the third war termination factor, international engagement was a key component of China’s strategy, though to create pressure on India to enter talks on Chinese terms (Zhou Enlai Nianpu 1997, 512). From the onset of conflict, China’s strategy was “attack, stop, advance, withdraw” to win the hearts of the international community to pressure India to negotiate (Xu 1993, 197). Chinese efforts focused on those states that had the most influence with Nehru, specifically the socialist states and those in the non-aligned movement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1962, 1–3). Zhou Enlai wrote long letters to Asian leaders, promoting the Chinese position on border developments and stressing their active attempts to bring the conflict to an end and the need to influence India to take corresponding measures.15 The Chinese Foreign Ministry provided specific instructions to mobilize public sympathy and support among Latin American socialist countries that are indicative of China’s overall strategy:

Take a serious and proper attitude in receiving visitors and dealing with letters: gratitude should be conveyed to those who indicate their support for us; explanations should be patiently made to those, which ask questions and do not know the truth. With respect to those attacking us, the embassy should clearly explain the situation to them and refute [their views] with our claims, but it is not necessary to tangle with them. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1961, 1)

China’s decision to unilaterally withdraw its forces 20 kilometers from the LAC was first communicated at a meeting between Chinese Vice Minister Zhang Hanfu and ambassadors from fraternal socialist countries (“Conversation between Zhang Hanfu and Ambassadors from Socialist Countries” 1962, 11–4). Zhou Enlai and Huang Zhen met with the Indonesian ambassador to China on November 19 and told him that Chinese leaders wanted President Sukarno to promote Sino-Indian peace talks (Mao Zedong Nianpu, 169). They dispatched their ambassadors again to meet with heads of state to deliver China’s talking points to ensure countries perceived the conflict from China’s point of view (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the

15 For one such example, see “Letter from Premier Zhou Enlai to His Excellency Ne Win” (1962, 14–7).
China also tried to get the leaders of various African and Asian countries to intercede with offers of mediation to India (“Message from Nehru to MacMillan” 1962).

The main goal of these efforts was to enlist the help of other countries in pressuring India to end the conflict on China’s terms. As one Indian editorial wrote of Delhi’s dilemma, if talks succeeded, “China’s prestige and power will be enhanced in the eyes of the smaller Asian countries,” and if not, “India will be held up as unreasonable” (Maxwell 1970, 152). Chen, in his meeting with the Indonesian ambassador, lamented that the big issue was that at Nehru would not reverse course, even though he knew his military could not fight this war (“Chen Yi Discussion”). In Zhou Enlai’s words, “our government’s position is very clear … we have showed the whole world our genuine desire for peaceful negotiations; our side has initiated a ceasefire, withdrawal of troops, returned to India all the ammunition we seized, we have already taken many steps, but Nehru has not taken one step forward” (Beijing Foreign Ministry Archives 1963, 2). In the ceasefire proposal, China “call[ed] upon all Asian and African countries and all peace-loving countries and people to exert efforts to urge the Indian government to take corresponding measures so as to stop the border conflict, reopen peaceful negotiations, and settle the Sino-Indian boundary question” (“Statement Given by the Chinese Government” 1962, 21). If India violated the ceasefire:

China reserves the right to strike back in self-defense, and the Indian Government will be held completely responsible for all the grave consequences arising there from. The people of the world will then see even more clearly who is peace-loving and who is bellicose, who upholds friendship between the Chinese and Indian peoples and Asia-African solidarity and who is undermining them, who is protecting the common interests of the Asia and African peoples in their struggle against imperialism and colonialism and who is violating and damaging these common interests. (“Statement Given by the Chinese Government” 1962, 20)

Chinese official and unofficial histories both suggest this strategy was largely successful, with most African and Asian countries inclined to believe Chinese efforts to settle peacefully were genuine (Shi 1993, 244; Wang 1993, 106).

This analysis of the Sino-Indian War demonstrates that while much had changed over the decade since the Korean War, some patterns in Chinese war termination behavior nonetheless remained the same. At the structural level, while Mao relied more on Stalin’s guidance during
the Korean War, the political and ideological relationship between Soviet Union and China had
deteriorated considerably by 1962, creating a struggle between the two countries for leadership
of the third world. In terms of domestic political dynamics, Nehru was probably correct in his
belief that China was more resource-constrained after the Great Leap Forward, though he was
incorrect in assuming this meant China would not fight at all. In spite of these changes, Chinese
leaders still demonstrated confidence that escalation coupled with third-party pressure would
compel the Indians to negotiate on terms favorable to China. One key difference was in China’s
position on peace talks. China was initially unwilling to offer talks against a more powerful
adversary in the Korean War for fear of projecting weakness; however, Chinese leaders did offer
talks consistently to India to provide the weaker country with a channel through which to
capitulate.

*Sino-Vietnamese War, 1979*

In 1975, the United States withdrew from Vietnam, leaving a power vacuum that both the
Soviets and Chinese were anxious to fill as a part of their ongoing competition with one another.
The Soviet Union quickly convinced Hanoi that it could count on its backing and financial
support in exchange for an anti-China policy. That year, the two countries signed a number of
significant agreements that provided Vietnam with much-needed economic aid to rebuild after
decades of war. Moreover, in June 1978, Vietnam entered into a formal alliance with the Soviet
Union upon joining the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance. In return for the financial
support, Vietnam granted the Soviet Union access to a number of bases in the country, the most
important of which was at Cam Ranh Bay, which enhanced Soviet access to the western strategic
lines of communication (SLOCs) in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean (Thakur and Thayer
1992, 126).

Chinese leaders were concerned by this increasing Soviet influence and possible
“encirclement” of what China considered to be its sphere of influence (Vietnam, Cambodia,
Laos, and Thailand). As tensions mounted, incursions along the Sino-Vietnamese border
increased in frequency (Wilson Digital Archive January 25, 1979). From Beijing’s view, it had
warned Vietnam many times before the war not to establish close relations with Moscow and to
abandon its “expansionist tendencies” (Ross 1988, 224). But in spite of these warnings, Vietnam
increased Soviet ties and launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. China
also accused Vietnam of mistreating ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam and attempting to repatriate many (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1978). The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia provided a *casus belli* that the Chinese leadership needed to finally “settle scores that had been counting up for a decade” (O’Dowd 2007, 39).

In February 1979, after showing “patience and restraint,” Deng Xiaoping launched a one-month invasion of northern Vietnam “to teach Vietnam a lesson” (Ross 1988, 225). Relying solely on its ground forces, China advanced eight kilometers into Vietnamese territory across most of the border. The advance stalled temporarily due to Vietnamese resistance and supply issues but then resumed with Chinese forces capturing the regional hub of Lang Son and Cao Bang in the north. They had planned for “battles of quick decision” but found themselves mired in “slow, indecisive operations” (O’Dowd 2007, 46). But Chinese commanders who found themselves beaten back at the Quang Ninh border just resorted to larger attacks, at the encouragement of the political leadership, which only led to greater casualties. On March 5, China declared that Vietnam had learned its lesson and it would begin a unilateral withdrawal of forces.

China pursued an open diplomatic posture during the conflict, though it was pursued less confidently than against India. Sanguine about its military capabilities, China offered to enter into talks with Vietnam to restore the peace on the border and settle the issues of boundary and territory on the first day of hostilities (“Statement by Xinhua” 1979). But the Chinese quickly realized that the Vietnamese were far stronger militarily and more competent than the Indians had been. The Vietnamese People’s Army had become a large and effective fighting force due to decades of combat experience and equipment from the United States, China, and Russia. Uncertainty about the USSR reaction also complicated the PLA General Staff’s predictions and compelled planners to limit the force used in order to avoid escalating tensions with the Soviet Union (Zhang 2005, 859). However, the Chinese remained optimistic in their calculations, with a correlation of forces of six to one (O’Dowd 2007, 55). During the three-week conflagration, China offered talks three times and made concrete proposals for resolution immediately after the fighting ended. China also offered talks on the day of withdrawal, March 5, 1979. Hanoi

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16 Hanoi denied these accusations (“Four Notes Transmitted by the Republic of Viet Nam” 1978).
17 For more on Deng’s role, see Zhang (2010, 3–29).
18 The offers were made through Xinhua on February 17, March 1, 6, 20, and 27, 1979.
rejected the offer at first as a trick, but then stated that it would be willing to entertain talks once Chinese troops had completely withdrawn from Vietnam (Ray 1983, 109). Hanoi would only come back to the table after the war—in April 1979—for border negotiations.

The Sino-Vietnamese War is the clearest example of a conflict during which the Chinese believed inflicting pain—instead of deescalating and offering assurances—was the best way to motivate the opposing side to move to end war. Chinese leaders thought rapid escalation would elicit a quick capitulation, a strategy China employed against Vietnam to avoid a protracted conflict that could threaten its economic development (Zhang 2010, 7). Additionally, they had hoped that the scale of the invasion—a massive operation involving eleven Chinese armies totaling at least 450,000 troops (O’Dowd 2007, 46), would deal Vietnam a rapid blow, thereby demonstrating Chinese determination on the border issue and convincing the Vietnamese to reconsider their position and come back to the negotiating table more open to China’s position. As a former chief of staff of the Guangzhou military region argues, China believed that the significant vertical escalation was necessary for future rapprochement by eliminating the possibility of future Vietnamese provocations (Zhou 1990, 230). Deng Xiaoping clearly articulated that he decided to fight to a limited degree to punish Vietnam for its arrogance, and that this use of force would coerce Vietnam into negotiations that would create a more stable border situation (“Deng Xiaoping Zai Zhongyue Bianjing Jianghua” 1969). Chinese leaders believed they could achieve these goals by pulling out of Vietnam as soon as it had attacked most of the Vietnamese strategic regions (Junshi Lishi Yanjiubu 2000, 410–11). After its unilateral withdrawal, China attempted to use threats of renewed force in an attempt to convince Vietnam from withdrawing from Cambodia. Hostilities along the border continued for another ten years, though China’s threats of a “second lesson” never materialized.

While still not quite openness to mediation, Chinese leaders did treat international engagement as a central component of their wartime strategy in 1979. According to contemporary reports, China waited to launch an assault partly in hopes that Vietnam would heed its warnings, but mostly to “create public opinion” that could be leveraged against Hanoi during the war (Gilks 1992, 223). Deng Xiaoping, vice-premier at the time, visited the United States in late January 1979. Once there, Deng asked for a special meeting on the Vietnam issue, to the surprise of the Americans, at which he laid out China’s rationale for the future attack against Vietnam. President Carter discouraged the attack, arguing that it may drag China into a
quagmire (Zhang 2010, 23). But because the US side did not publicly disagree with the series of anti-Soviet and anti-Vietnam statements Deng publicly made during his visit, Deng left with the impression that, at the very least, the United States would not outwardly condemn the move and would most likely support China when the time came, as it was a move designed to curb Soviet expansionism. Deng also expressed a confidence that global public opinion would favor China in the long run, even if it were divided in the initial stages of conflict (Brzezinski 1983, 410).

China’s desire to solicit American support for their punitive war largely explains the two-month gap between Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and when China launched its assault (Gilks 1992, 226). After the initial attack, Chinese leaders publicly proclaimed that the war would be limited, short and that China would not escalate further—likely an attempt, according to one researcher, to win greater international sympathy and support (Guo 1992, 180). Deng also tried to reach out to Southeast Asian leaders to solicit strong statements against Vietnam while on tour there in November, though he failed in this attempt. Vietnam complained about these efforts to turn countries, especially those in ASEAN, against Hanoi (Wilson Digital Archive February 10, 1979).

But there was also a new dimension to the international engagement strategy in this case—appealing to the United Nations, to which China had finally gained membership in October 1971 (Wilson Digital Archive February 15 and 16, 1979). China submitted position papers and formal complaints to the international body (Wilson Digital Archive February 15 and 17, 1979). Chinese representatives also met with the Secretary General on a number of occasions to try to gain his support, including one meeting in mid-March when they enlisted his help in convincing Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia (Wilson Digital Archive March 16, 1979). The Foreign Ministry emphasized that Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia was a violation of the UN charter as part of its efforts to present China’s position as legitimate and reasonable. As its spokesman articulated at the time, “we lived up to our promise—we withdrew all of our border defense military forces. In fact, we exposed the Soviet and Vietnamese authorities’ slanderous lie of an ‘encroaching’ and ‘expansionist’ China” (Li 1995, 37). According to the official party history of the war, international public opinion was mostly sympathetic to and beneficial for China’s cause. At a meeting with CCP central leaders, Deng Xiaoping asserted that the

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19 While the United States never formally came out on the side of China in its dispute with Vietnam, US leaders did take steps to give the impression that it sided with China. (Sutter 1986, 81–2).
international community, especially the Europeans, was supportive of China because they hope a stronger China could help contain the Soviet Union (Junshi Lishi Yanjiubu yu Junshi Tushuguan 2000). A Chinese scholarly source more accurately depicts the international environment China faced at the time, with most countries expressing neutrality or condemnation for the Chinese incursion (Guo 1992, 174–80).

The Sino-Vietnamese War, though short and by most accounts a failure, continues to influence Chinese thinking on the use of force and war termination. It was the largest and bloodiest military operation since the Korean War. It was also the last time the Chinese military fought a war, and therefore the only conflict that incumbent high-level members of the current Central Committee experienced. China was confident that it was stronger than Vietnam and therefore offered talks during the armed conflict like they had in 1962. Moreover, Chinese leaders did demonstrate the same tendencies to rely on escalation and leveraging third-party support to push Hanoi to end the war.

However, these policies more clearly failed in 1979 than in previous conflicts. In the end, the assault resulted in a reported 20,000 Chinese casualties and a temporary increase in defense spending at a time when Beijing was focused on revitalizing the civilian economy (Sutter 1986, 87). External observers generally agree that Vietnam performed better on the battlefield, resulting a tactical failure for the Chinese due to poor training and preparation. After decades of fighting, the North Vietnamese had become an adversary that was particularly capable of absorbing punishment, making the coercive effect China sought with rapid escalation much harder to achieve. In spite of this, Deng Xiaoping declared it a military and political victory—a contribution to regional stability and the fight against hegemony (Guo 1992, 181).

A Summation of Chinese Historical Behavior

20 The major exception was the Soviet Union and its satellites. For a breakdown of China’s assessment of each country’s position, see Jin, Zhang, and Zhang 1990, 29–30.
21 The Correlates of War dataset has long coded this war a win for China, though a recent reevaluation determined it to be a draw (Reiter, Stam, Horowitz 2014).
22 Though China portrays itself as victorious, its leadership admitted to some deficiencies and problems and that it was more successful in the second stage of the campaign than in the first stage (Zhang 2015, 115–40).
Three central tendencies emerge from Chinese historical wartime behavior. First, these case studies indicate that Chinese balance of power perceptions likely influence its choice of diplomatic posture. Specifically, China offered direct talks early on in a conflict only when it believed itself to hold a significant military advantage over the adversary, as it did in the case of the Sino-Indian War and Sino-Vietnamese War. In Korea, Mao maintained a closed diplomatic posture for eight months as it fought the United States. Even after Mao accepted that the war would end by negotiated settlement, he refused to offer talks for fear of looking weak and turned instead to the Soviet Union to make the peace talk proposal that would allow for the emergence of negotiations in July 1951.

The second tendency concerns China’s approach to escalation—China consistently exhibited confidence, especially in the initial stages, that heavy escalation would ensure a short conflict that ended on China’s terms. In other words, on the spectrum from low to high confidence in escalation, China falls far to the right—this is potentially the legacy of Mao’s personal belief in the martial effectiveness of the Chinese people and their ability to absorb costs during conflict (Kennedy 2012). In the Korean War, Mao based his attrition strategy on the assumption that the United States would eventually give up in the face of increasing and persistent military pressure. Surprise attacks, articulated in Chinese writings and evident in both wars, resulted from the belief that the psychological components of warfare are equally important to the physical ones in compelling compromise (Burles and Shulsky 2000, 10). In the Sino-Indian War, Mao thought escalation would “compel [the Indians] to negotiate to thoroughly resolve the border issue” (Xu 1993, 111). Even against Vietnam, Chinese leaders never considered de-escalation strategies because they believed inflicting the heavy costs of war would successfully encourage Hanoi to enter into negotiations on terms favorable for Beijing. This strategy can arguably be considered a failure because none of China’s adversaries were compelled to talk—and in the two later cases, India and Vietnam even refused to engage in talks after China reversed this policy with unilateral withdrawals.

Lastly, China falls slightly towards openness in its approach to mediation, though with a caveat; China tended to selectively internationalize the incident in hopes of enlisting and leveraging the support of third parties to influence adversary decision-making—not really to accept them as impartial mediators in the conflict. This selective third party involvement likely stems from China’s suspicion of outside actors because of their role in weakening Chinese
regimes throughout history (Swaine and Tellis 2000). In Korea, China assumed that the United States would eventually cave at different points throughout the war to allied pressure not to expand the war, and later to concede on the POW issue to allow for ceasefire talks to come to an end. In the Sino-Indian War, China made appeals to non-aligned and socialist countries to convince India to negotiate (“Chen Yi discussion” 1962, 3–4). In the Sino-Vietnamese War, Deng Xiaoping himself lobbied governments in Asia and around the world to support China’s position before and during the war. This strategy led to limited dividends—even in the cases where China leaders did raise support, most countries were unwilling to stick their neck out to actively support China. Given that outside intervention is most effective when all parties are seriously committed to mediation, this trend to leverage third parties only to pressure their enemies is potentially problematic (Bercovitch 1997).

Patterns in War Termination in Chinese Military Strategy: Comparing the Past and Present

To what degree have current Chinese military and political leaders absorbed these historical lessons of war termination? The answer to this question is the key to understanding whether these patterns are likely to persist in future conflicts. I analyze four editions of The Science of Military Strategy—released in 1987, 1999, 2001, and 2013—considered to be the most authoritative works on high-level Chinese strategic and doctrinal thinking.23 The 1987 edition was approved by the CMC and distributed to all officers at the division level and above. The 1999 version served as a core teaching text for China’s National Defense University’s strategy course, and members of the general staff department and all service branches participated in drafting. Both texts were published primarily as teaching texts, and the PLA’s senior officer corps has used them extensively (Fravel 2002, 80–81). The Academy of Military Science, which was responsible for war planning for the general staff department, published the 1987 version as well as the 2001 and 2013 versions. The 2001 version was also used to educate senior PLA decision makers, including those on the CMC, and was edited by two major generals considered to have significant ability to shape PLA strategy as advisers to China’s powerful

23A number of publications have relied on these as a reliable source, for example Fravel (2010). I also read through The Science of Campaigns, but there was little relevant information given its focus on operational-level issues (Zhang 2001).
CMC and Politburo Standing Committee (Erickson 2007, 133). Lastly, Major General Shou Xiaosong, the head of the military theory and strategy department, edited the 2013 edition, which was released to show fealty to Xi Jinping. As states in the preface of this edition, the volume “carries out the important instructions of the Party Central Committee, the CMC, and Chairman Xi on Strong Nation and Strong Military” (Science of Military Strategy 2013, 3). Moreover—unlike US strategy and doctrinal documents—all four editions have a specific section dedicated to war termination, which allows for the assessment of contemporary Chinese thinking on the issue as well as its potential evolution.

The content of these volumes reveals a great deal of consistency between the past and present, though with some important differences. Specifically, on the first tendency to be open to diplomacy only with weaker adversaries, all editions seem to codify the lessons of past wars and continue to stress the importance of talking while fighting. However, as Chinese capabilities and potential adversaries evolved over the past thirty years, so too did the focal point of the recommendations. In the 1987 and 1999 editions, China seemed to still be wary of enemy’s intentions in offering talks wartime talks as a tool to support its military efforts (Science of Military Strategy 1987, 303). The editors called on war fighters in this situation to “use ‘fight’ and ‘negotiate’ deftly to struggle with the enemy—while not relaxing on the military front and begin powerful political and diplomatic offensives” (Wang 1999, 231–2). By 2001, the perceived utility of wartime talks shifted, from a strategy to achieve military benefits to something done primarily to end the war once political goals have been achieved. The editors exhort Chinese leaders to “find out the opponent’s intentions and his conditions for ending the war” and decide whether “to conclude the war by political negotiations or by defeating the enemy” (Peng and Yao 2001, 414–5). At this stage, the editors seem confident that China is capable of escalating pressure on the enemy while talking to credibly demonstrate to the enemy that “there are no prospects of gain” in launching further attacks (SMS 2001, 416). By 2013, the section on negotiations assumes China achieves its military goals but warns that even so, China may need to make some concessions to pave the way “for negotiations to eventually end the war smoothly” (SMS 2013, 132). While never explicitly stated, this evolution from perceiving itself

24 Hereafter SMS 2013.
26 Hereafter SMS 1999.
as weak and wary of wartime diplomacy to strong and supportive of direct contacts to end the war is consistent with China’s historical tendency of proposing talks in the initial stage of conflict only when facing a weaker adversary.

Reliance on heavy escalation over conciliatory gestures to bring the enemy to the table also plays a prominent role in *The Science of Military Strategy*, though now China must also be careful to “prevent the enemy from resorting to desperate measures and use nuclear weapons to expand war” (SMS 1987, 302–3; SMS 1999, 233). Using heavy escalation in the early stages of conflict also strengthens China’s strategic deterrent, preventing the outbreak of total war as it did, according to SMS 2013 (141), in the case of the Korean War, Sino-Indian War, and Sino-Vietnamese War. Moreover, this edition argues that China’s experience in those last two wars and the US war in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that “military strike is the only way to achieve political aims” (SMS 2013, 132). This thinking corresponds with a much larger Chinese concept of war control, which puts special emphasis on severe escalation in the early days of conflict. As the 2013 SMS (115–6) advises,

> carefully pick the timing for the start of the war, and ensure we are fully prepared and can achieve victory even before the fighting starts … once fully prepared with certainty, we need to concentrate the best forces and attack speedily, hack open the enemy’s front in a short amount of time. Surprise the enemy, attack where they are least prepared. Seize the battlefield initiative, paralyze the enemy’s war command, and give shock to the enemy’s will. (115–6)

The 2013 edition highlights that it is increasingly critical to rapidly escalate to swiftly conclude a conflict so as to limit the window for possible intervention of a strong enemy (SMS 2013).

Lastly, leveraging third parties is a consistent theme, though the earlier editions focus on individual countries while the latest also addresses the role of international institutions. There is recognition that these actors can influence the course of the war—for better or for worse—so Chinese leaders should closely monitor the supporters of their opponents (SMS 1999, 232).  

Also, a central way to weaken an opponent’s position in political negotiations is to “shape an international environment in favor of oneself” and “isolate the enemy to the greatest possible extent” (SMS 2001, 405). The 2001 version adds to the discussion the critical role of the United

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28 The 1987 version was more optimistic, stating that China will gain the sympathy and support of the world’s people in a conflict because it would only fight anti-aggression and justice wars (SMS 1987, 302).
Nations in contemporary warfare, articulating that it can help the victors “to turn their military victories into fruits with legal validity that the enemy state is force into official recognition” (SMS 2001, 415–6). Interestingly, after the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Jiang Zemin prioritized gaining international support for its outrage, especially the support of developing countries in opposing “hegemonic politics” (“99 Nianzhong shiguan,” 2013). The 2013 SMS edition clearly encourages the third tendency, to rely on outside actors to pressure and influence your opponent, but not necessarily as unbiased mediators:

In a globalized, informatized era, military confrontations and wars are often internationalized. While this complicates the political resolution of the war, it also makes outside intervention an important way to conclude war … To change an unfavorable war situation, we may request a neutral third party’s intervention to end the war. When the war is developing unfavorably, one should seek help from useful international elements to use pressure to end wars on favorable terms (SMS 2013, 133).

Over the course of three decades and four editions of SMS, the focus of Chinese military strategy has evolved—from total war to limited war, from quick wars to concerns about protracted conflicts, from how countries can interfere in internal conflicts to the role of regional institutions in war termination. Even with so much change internally and externally, the patterns found in Chinese historical behavior - openness to diplomacy only with weaker opponents, heavy preference escalation over de-escalation to bring a conflict to an end, and use of third parties as pressure points instead of mediators – were reinforced in China’s most important doctrinal writings, the Science of Strategy. While states do not necessarily fight wars doctrinally, Chinese war-fighting doctrine and practice are closely aligned, and we can therefore expect China’s historical approach to war termination to persist in future conflicts.

This research raises many questions that future research should seek to answer. First, while China’s war termination tendencies are consistent with ideational explanations, a follow-on project could more thoroughly test the degree to which situational or dispositional factors influence Chinese war termination strategies. In other words, much could be gained theoretically and empirically from treating these three independent variables—approach to wartime diplomacy, escalation, or mediation—as dependent variables in future work. Lastly, while this article points out three factors that political and military elites should try to shape to ensure
conflicts end in a timely manner, more work needs to be done to identify the most effective strategies and tactics in doing so.

**Conclusion**

East Asia has been relatively peaceful and stable over the past four decades, but these trends may not be indicative of the future. While many argue that economic integration in particular makes war unthinkable, IR theory warns of the possibility of conflict between China and other regional actors, which creates the scholarly need to expand the debate beyond how to prevent wars to include discussions of de-escalation strategies for those that break out. This is important for regional leaders as well as for the United States, which may get involved directly or indirectly in conflict with China in support of an ally or friend.

Chinese war termination strategies have been an underexplored topic in China security studies. This article attempts to fill the gap by identifying three critical patterns in Chinese historical war termination strategy and leveraging contemporary authoritative strategic writings to show that these patterns have been solidified into China’s strategic doctrine. The findings suggest that in a regional conflict, China is likely to rapidly escalate, refuse to talk in cases where the United States is involved, and be open to ‘mediation’ only in the form of third parties pressuring its adversaries to concede to China’s position. This is not to say that all conflicts involving China will be major, total or protracted—only that China’s approach to wartime diplomacy, escalation, and mediation suggests that any given conflict will be costlier than it would be if China displayed more positive war termination behaviors.

The field of security studies has long called for more research into the process of war, not only its cause and conclusion. This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of the interaction between military strategy, operations, and diplomacy and its impact on war duration, level of violence, and therefore costs incurred, as well as termination. While preventing a regional conflagration through crisis management should be scholars’ and policymakers’ top concern, understanding how to ensure that any conflict is as short and limited as possible is equally important for all affected countries. The three-prolonged framework developed here and the findings of its application to China provide some insights into how this might be achieved.

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29 See Mastro 2014 for an alternative argument on how economic ties are not reducing conflictive tendencies between China and its neighbors.
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