

## **An Eye for an Eye: Signaling Before and During the Korean War of 1950–53**

Ming-Chen Shai\* and Chien-Wei Chen

*Hsuan Chuang University, Hsinchu, Taiwan; National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan*

Although signaling is the essence of diplomacy, it has often been overlooked in previous studies on international crises. In fact, whether states in a dyad escalate disputes to the brink of war or seek conflict resolution, both sides of a crisis use these forms of signaling to convey their intended messages and possible responses. However, in most of these dyadic international conflicts, the patterns of signaling motives are not identified. In this article, it is argued that signaling decisions depend on the interaction of contextual dimensions, perceived threats, and the status disparity facing the states in a dyad. By analyzing both the signaling and the counter-signaling of nations in dyadic interactions, an alternative insight is offered into why the Korean War turned out to be inevitable.

**Keywords:** signaling, the Korean War, international crises, conflict resolution, diplomatic signals

In the theater of international relations, states communicate with their adversaries by diplomatic signals, verbal or nonverbal, to avoid undesirable complications or to make significant commitments. Diplomatic signals not only cast the states' major concerns about the risks of crisis escalation but also reveal their potential responses to the inherent threats. Decision-makers most often believe that they are capable of reflecting their attitudes toward the opponent, by which they would improve their negotiating position in crises. Nevertheless, both sides of a crisis or confrontation are usually troubled with analyzing the rival's sincerity and/or deception. On November 5, 1956, Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin gave several warnings to Western countries, demanding a ceasefire in Egypt and the withdrawal of foreign forces. Did it mean that Bulganin was going to intervene in the crisis? Or perhaps he merely wanted the ultimatum to be read that way. In this respect, diplomatic signaling connotes what Raymond Cohen called "the assumption of intentionality."<sup>1</sup> Even diplomatic actions without aggressive intentions may on occasion be perceived as hostile signals, which might heighten the adversary's sense of imminent threat and provoke unnecessary conflicts.

Although states deliver signals that carry their intentions and possible responses in the face of crises, they often underestimate the strength of the reactions their signaling decisions may incur. For instance, the Truman administration did not expect China

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\*Corresponding author: Email: mshai069@hcu.edu.tw

to react so fiercely to the former's decision to cross the 38th parallel on the Korean peninsula; Nikita Khrushchev did not anticipate that John Kennedy, thought of as weak, would make a bold move to deploy forces during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Decision-makers always have difficulties assessing their counterparts' intentions. Most often, the motives of states for signaling to the adversaries are too implicit and complex, even though both sides in an international relationship might correctly assess each other's military and economic capabilities. Hence, this paper intends to further understand the dyadic interactions in a given crisis by analyzing their initiatives and countermeasures from a signaling perspective. It takes both interactive and dynamic approaches to exploring international conflicts facing two countries. Specifically, it contends that a state is motivated to send signals to the adversary based on the state's appreciation of contingencies specific to dyadic relations. In a sense, the state's desire to challenge the status quo hinges on its assessment of situation-inherent risks or costs.<sup>2</sup>

This study explores the mechanisms through which two states provoke and resolve conflicts. It examines the signaling and counter-signaling behind the scenes of the Korean War. It further attempts to disentangle the complexities of a nation's calculation of and motives for sending diplomatic signals to its counterpart in a dyadic relation. This historic event is too important to be overlooked by scholars of the history of international relations. In particular, on November 23, 2010, North Korea's unprovoked attack on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island,<sup>3</sup> one of the most serious clashes since the Korean War in the 1950s, demonstrates that the Korean peninsula is a powder keg, a possible spark to explode a future war. Decision-makers of the present time deal with new situations by learning from the experience of good and bad decision-making in historical cases, which certainly might be a source of perceptual distortion, as noted by Robert Jervis.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, political leaders tend to rely on historical analogies to diagnose any emergent event.

Indeed, the Korean War is one of a few episodes that turned out to be a clash in which the United States failed to win against an Oriental adversary, whom the U.S. psyche had traditionally considered inferior. Little academic attention has been paid to the impact of diplomatic signaling on Sino-U.S. confrontation in Korea, given a large body of the literature on the Korean War. As a matter of fact, the fear that a clash over the Korean peninsula could lead to a major war in the Far East prevents both Washington and Beijing from any direct conflicts. However, mutual distrust in China and the United States, and misinterpretations of actions eventually paved the way for military escalation in Korea eventually. For example, Dean Acheson's Press Club speech on January 12, 1950 left Korea in an ambiguous position that was interpreted by Kim II Sung as a signal of a green light to invade South Korea;<sup>5</sup> China's troops moving into Manchuria in preparation for intervention in Korea was viewed by Washington as a ploy for bluffing;<sup>6</sup> and Beijing' leaders were not convinced by Washington's reassurance that U.S. troops would not cross the Yalu River.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the war on the Korean peninsula has provided valuable insights into bilateral relationships and international conflict resolution for current and future policy practitioners.

The historical case of the Korean War was selected for a couple of reasons. First, the Korean War represents a critical yet splendid case of an international conflict that led to war anyway because Beijing's various warnings failed to curb U.S. aggression. The crucial question here is why Beijing's repeated threats were interpreted by the Truman administration as a deceptive influence attempt. Second, given a vast body

of studies on the Korean War, existing research seems to focus mainly on the outcome that China's deterrence strategy failed to prevent aggression against U.S. forces crossing the 38th parallel.<sup>8</sup> However, a signaling approach to analyzing the circumstances under which Beijing decided to shift its strategy from deterrence to preemption may help us find the missing piece of the puzzle.

Third, the outbreak of the Korean War not only marked a major turning point in the U.S. global strategy but also created a new security challenge to China. From the perspective of the United States, the Korean War was a communist conspiracy manipulated by the Soviets in response to Truman's policy of containment. In contrast, Beijing perceived both the intervention in the Korean conflict and Truman's policy to neutralize the Taiwan Strait as a strong signal of attack on China. As Zhou Enlai noted, "Truman's statement on June 27 and the American navy's action is an armed invasion into Chinese territory.... The purpose of this action is an excuse to invade Taiwan, (and) Korea..."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, this case study can offer an alternative insight into why the escalation in military hostilities between Beijing and Washington was inevitable.

The findings show that signaling decisions depend on the international context facing the nations in a dyad. Strategies for sending diplomatic signals represent national responses to changes in the contextual factors. The analysis of the Korean War case concludes that perceived threats and status disparity are two salient contingencies governing signaling decisions. It is worth noting that Hew Strachan contends that "conventional strategy was a strategy of action," while "nuclear strategy was a strategy of dissuasion."<sup>10</sup> The former is in line with the view to regard the strategy as a plan. The latter, nevertheless, takes the perspective of deeming strategy as a plot. A plot is to outwit or outmaneuver the rival. A strategy of dissuasion is definitely a plot that seeks the possibility of "breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."<sup>11</sup> To some extent, thus, plots can be executed by the use of signaling.

This paper offers a fresh analysis of the Korean War from an interactive and dynamic signaling perspective. Two research questions are mainly addressed: Why did Beijing, given its military inferiority, involve itself in a military confrontation with the United States? And why did the Truman administration, as a "top-dog" state, dismiss China's clear warnings as deceptive?

## **The Nature of Diplomatic Signaling**

The notion that signaling is the essence of diplomacy in the international arena is anything but new. Research on the phenomenon of diplomatic signaling dates back to Thomas Schelling.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the explanation of international conflicts in the light of diplomatic signaling seems to be overlooked. Earlier studies on the relationship between international crises and war focus on bargaining and negotiation between the states characterized by the relative military power and the willingness to use force.<sup>13</sup> Another research stream analyzes the leaders' perceptions of the adversary, along with their calculation and acceptance of risks, through the lens of the cognitive and psychological approach.<sup>14</sup>

The aforementioned theories share something in common, even though they hold competing arguments for the causes of international crises. The theories posit that diplomatic signaling is the fundamental element of international crises. More-

over, most of them connote the assumptions of rationality, which, to some extent, demonstrates the importance of intentionality in signaling. Nevertheless, the signals issued by a sender may be very misleading as signal receivers have always been confronted with difficulties interpreting the rival's actions.

Diplomatic signals may be manipulated to convey accurate information or misleading messages. Signals carrying specific meanings are issued to influence the adversary's behavior, gain insights from competitive reactions, and thus draw inferences about the opponent's future actions.<sup>15</sup> Signals can be used to convey shared assumptions and sentiments about the sender's intentions and capabilities, particularly regarding crisis initiatives.<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of diplomatic signals depends on an implicit assumption of intentionality. It should be worth noting, however, that signaling does not necessarily imply intentionality. Signals can be intended or unintended. Nonetheless, states seem to have a tendency to interpret their rivals' verbal or nonverbal behavior based on an assumption of deliberation. Particularly, the deployment of military forces that might originally be designed to avoid a crisis turns out to convince the reactor of the actor's hostility. It is therefore important for states to scrutinize their rivals' actions in order to make optimal responses. Nevertheless, the signal receiver may misperceive the signal sender's intention. The sender thus needs to design and deliver diplomatic signals appropriately so as to avoid such misperception or to evoke favorable responses. In any case, the signal sender is also confronted with the difficulty in analyzing how its verbal and nonverbal signals will be read and interpreted by its rivals.

The issue of intentionality is key to diplomatic signaling in the sense that signals become meaningless if the receiver cannot interpret them as intended. Basically, two types of diplomatic signals that connote explicit or implicit intentions are used: verbal and nonverbal. The former refers to words, speeches, etc., while the latter refers to the leader's personal gestures or the demonstration of military forces. Verbal signals issued by one party can precede its action, accordingly making its adversary respond in advance. However, nonverbal signals are more evident and convincing, as opposed to verbal ones, because talk can be cheap.<sup>17</sup> From among a variety of verbal and/or nonverbal diplomatic signals, states adopt the right ones according to their motives for affecting the counterpart's interpretation and decision making.

Ideally, both states in a crisis intend to avoid a direct military confrontation or conflict escalation and simultaneously acquire the most beneficial outcomes. Ironically, each side cannot ascertain what the counterpart really means by its verbal or nonverbal signals. In the face of the uncertainty about attack from rivals, a state may be driven to escalate the crisis to dissuade its rivals from threatening its national security or competing in certain areas. Although both sides can reach an agreement through diplomatic signaling, the states may inevitably be concerned about being deceived or bluffed.<sup>18</sup>

## **Signaling Decisions**

Throughout the course of history, states have paid much attention to the analysis of the context in which leaders make decisions. It should be logical to probe the circumstances under which states decide upon diplomatic signaling. The international context in an emergent crisis constrains and/or shapes a state's perceptions of its adversary and

anticipations of the rival's verbal or nonverbal responses. The fear of attack might lead the state to take aggressive and dangerous actions.<sup>19</sup> As shown in the history of war, an inferior state sometimes declares war against the superior one because the former perceives grave threats and senses unbearable humiliation. We therefore contend that the international contexts specific to signaling decisions should be analyzed in terms of two dimensions: the perceived threats and the status disparity. A state needs to take into consideration both the perceived threats and the status disparity so that it can judge if the current condition is critical enough for it to fight for its vital interests, initiate an attack, or challenge the status quo. The interaction of both contextual dimensions determines diplomatic signaling in a dyadic international relationship.

### ***Perception of Threats***

At what point during the crisis does a state believe that its rival has become aggressive or is about to attack? If the threatened state perceives signal hostility from its rival that is capable of resorting to force, then it will mobilize its resources in defense of its national interests or commitments.<sup>20</sup> A state may feel threatened if it regards its adversary's intent as unpredictable. The crisis often escalates to the extent that the threatened side is uncertain about the actions its rival might take.

There are two types of perceived threat. An intolerable threat arises when the threatened side perceives its rival's actions as an imminent and irreversible attack that poses a serious challenge to survival. In contrast, a tolerable threat surfaces when a state perceives that its opponent, though hostile, poses no clear and present danger to its vital interests.

War is so risky that each side of a conflict may attempt to demonstrate its resolve to take aggressive action with a view to deterring the other from attacking. When perceiving serious threats to their survival, states tend to convey an image of aggressiveness and toughness, which, they seem to believe, will lessen the threats or solicit submission. States may openly express their determination through aggressive signals to either disrupt or defend the status quo. Ironically, history is filled with examples showing that such signals most often fail to end any crisis.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Perception of Status***

The theory of status inconsistency posits that a state may take an aggressive stance toward its opponent to alter the status quo or protect its international prestige.<sup>22</sup> On the basis of this theory, this paper proposes a concept of status disparity to denote discrepant status between a state's self-perceived beliefs and another state's treatment.<sup>23</sup> This concept relates to feelings of humiliation and arrogance. The degree of status disparity can be further categorized into two extremes: humiliation and arrogance. The former concerns the feeling that the opponent looks down upon a state during the crisis or simply ignores the state, which might undermine the state's self-esteem and thus provoke tensions. The latter indicates that a state's feelings of self-satisfaction lead to overconfidence and thus the state has very little respect for its opponent. Under these circumstances, the state might act on the belief that it holds a "top-dog" position. An arrogant state might overestimate its status of accomplishments, placing it in a very fragile position.

## **Revisiting the Korean War**

### ***Event One: The Incheon Landing and its Aftermath***

#### *The Washington Side*

After the successful Incheon landings in 1950, debate erupted in the Truman administration over whether U.S. forces should push north of the 38th parallel. Most U.S. leaders were blind to Douglas MacArthur's stunning victory and overemphasized the advantage of American air power. Washington simply dismissed Beijing's repeated warnings as bluff and ignored Beijing's intentions to enter the Korean War.<sup>24</sup> Acheson viewed Beijing's military deployment of massive new forces near the Korean border as nothing but a dirty trick and thus overlooked Beijing's determination to engage in war. Likewise, MacArthur received a personal telegram from George Marshall stating that "we want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38th parallel."<sup>25</sup> The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) also reported that "The Chinese Communists undoubtedly fear the consequences of war with the United States."<sup>26</sup> On October 1, MacArthur delivered an ultimatum to Kim II Sung demanding unconditional surrender to place more pressure on Beijing. In this regard, the Americans confidently believed that the Chinese stood very little chance of intervening in Korea due to the U.S.-led best equipped forces.

#### *The Beijing Side*

After the Incheon landings in mid-September, Beijing became aware that the deteriorating situation in Korea might endanger China's national security. However, Mao Zedong and other high-ranking Chinese officials still intended to avoid sparking a destabilizing military conflict with U.S. forces. Accordingly, Beijing intended to prevent UN forces from crossing the 38th parallel by sending strong and clear messages, which are overtly noteworthy in the following examples: On September 25, 1950, through Indian Ambassador Kavalam M. Panikkar, Zhou Enlai sent a warning to Washington that the Chinese government would not sit by and "let the Americans come up to the border... American aggression has to be stopped."<sup>27</sup> Five days later, Zhou declared that "The Chinese people absolutely will not tolerate foreign aggression, nor will they stand aside if the territory of their neighbor was invaded wantonly by the imperialists."<sup>28</sup> Zhou's statement referring to "the territory of their neighbor" was added by Mao when he checked Zhou's manuscript of the speech. Mao and Zhou were acutely aware of MacArthur's calling for an extension of the war into China and bringing in Chiang's Nationalist army from Taiwan. To deter "imperialists" from possibly crossing the 38th parallel, Zhou gave Panikkar another warning to pass on to Washington during a midnight meeting on October 3. He stressed that China "will intervene"<sup>29</sup> if U.S. forces invaded northward.

### ***Event Two: Washington's Crossing the 38th Parallel***

#### *The Washington Side*

Washington's original intention was to restore the status quo along the 38th parallel.

After MacArthur's victory in Incheon, however, American policymakers intended to end the Korean problem once and for all. In particular, Truman and Acheson believed that Mao would not dare commit military suicide and even argued that Beijing was not an independent player.<sup>30</sup> The superiority of American technology also enabled MacArthur and Acheson to stick to the policy of unifying Korea and to view Zhou as playing a poker game.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the Truman administration did not take the Chinese ultimatum seriously and thought that a Chinese attack on U.S. forces would be a tolerable threat because of China's vulnerability.

Charles Willoughby, a Far East Command Intelligence Officer, reported a study on the issue of China's intervention and concluded that "recent declarations by CCF (Chinese Communist Forces) leaders, threatening to enter North Korea if American forces were to cross the 38th parallel are probably in a category of diplomatic blackmail."<sup>32</sup> Acheson was also convinced by most analysts in the Truman administration that Zhou's message was simply a bluff. Thus, Truman decided to shift military objectives from restoring the status quo to the unification of Korea, despite his concerns that it might bring Moscow and Beijing into the war. On October 7, the General Assembly authorized the UN forces to cross the parallel into North Korea, and indeed the Americans rushed north toward the Yalu with a view to unifying the country.

### *The Beijing Side*

China's last warning had been regarded as nothing but a bluff, which deeply humiliated Mao and other CCP leaders. Moreover, the crossing of the 38th parallel escalated the level of the perceived threat in Beijing. U.S.-led action demonstrated an irreversibility that would lead to Beijing's retaliation. At that moment, Mao seemed hesitant. He intended to avoid a direct confrontation with U.S. forces, but meanwhile he accelerated military preparations. Moreover, Mao had to deal with a serious debate within the CCP leadership over whether China should intervene. At an expanded meeting of the Politburo on October 4, most CCP leaders opposed actions of intervention.

However, Peng Dehui, later known as the supreme commander of the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPC), concluded that China had no choice but to intervene in the war. In his letter to Mao on October 5, he argued that "it is imperative to send our troops to aid Korea. If America's forces are deployed along the Yalu River and Taiwan, they may initiate an aggressive war against us without any excuse."<sup>33</sup> Peng's argument reflected the CCP leaders' fear of losing an important strategic buffer zone if U.S. forces press on China along the Yalu River. Accordingly, Mao and Zhou realized that it had become imperative for China to enter the War.

### ***Event Three: China's November Disengagement***

#### *The Washington Side*

The Truman administration perceived Beijing's threats as lacking credibility. On November 7, Chinese troops disengaged. China's November disengagement made Washington believe that Beijing's previous warnings were bluffs and MacArthur felt confident of victory in the war before Christmas. In particular, a CIA report of November 3 argued that further intervention by China was unlikely and Beijing's objective was to stop the UN forces at the Yalu River.<sup>34</sup> Thus, they interpreted the

disengagement as Beijing's strategy of deterrence to avoid escalation in waging war. MacArthur convinced Washington of the need to unify Korea particularly after the disengagement. From MacArthur's viewpoint, the disengagement had shown that Communist China feared a confrontation with U.S. forces and thus he commanded the final drive to the Yalu on November 24.

### *The Beijing Side*

For Mao, the military movement of the United States rushing to the border between China and North Korea posed a serious threat to China's national security. Mao accordingly changed his strategy from deterrence to preemptive strike as MacArthur crossed the 38th parallel. Beijing intended to mislead America's troops into taking reckless military action toward ambush positions and inflict a major defeat on them. As Marshall Peng noted, "the Americans' main forces remained intact.... MacArthur definitely would continue to press on with the attack toward the Yalu River.... (Under such conditions, we) should avoid enemy's advantage, feign weakness intentionally, hit and sway, confuse the enemy, and lure it in deep."<sup>35</sup> On October 13 Mao made his final decision to cross the Yalu, even though he felt disappointed at knowing that Stalin had suddenly refused to provide the PLA Volunteers with any air cover. China's November disengagement was a plot of deception that was to lure the American forces into Mao's trap, instead of a deterrence strategy.

## **The Contingency for Making Signaling Decisions**

This paper intends to explain the strategic interactions between the United States and China in the Korean War from signaling and counter-signaling perspectives. It argues that both the status disparity and the perceived threats constitute the contingency for making signaling decisions. This rationale holds true in the sense that specific contingency compelled both sides to consider if it was appropriate to resort to force or threaten military deployments to challenge the other's commitments, given military inferiority or the potential for war. This paper has examined how the receiver and the sender actually interpret diplomatic signals and respond by counter-signals in various contexts shaped by rapidly changing international situations.

### ***Signaling of Beijing: From Deterrence to Preemption***

Before the Incheon landings, Beijing did not view the outbreak of the Korean War as an imminent threat to its national interests. Although Mao was surprised by Kim's military attack, he did not place much emphasis on the war. However, Beijing felt frustrated at Washington's neutralization of Taiwan, which installed the last obstacle to the unity of China. Because Beijing lacked the military capability to challenge U.S. naval power, Mao was aware of being weak and unable to accomplish China's complete unification. Under such circumstances, Beijing, given the underdog status, decided to adopt a deterrent signaling strategy to demonstrate its firm position on unification. In doing so, Beijing attempted to deter U.S. forces from crossing the 38th parallel.

To a large extent, MacArthur's successful Incheon landings made Beijing extremely



cautious about the possibility of the United States crossing the 38th parallel. Beijing believed that crossing the 38th parallel would run the risk of going to war in Korea and would endanger China's national interests. Despite plunging into full military preparations by the end of September, Mao did not want a direct military involvement. Thus, Beijing's deterrence should be viewed as a preventive measure, designed to avoid warring with the Americans.

An interesting question emerges accordingly: Why did Mao believe that military preparations would deter the United States from crossing the 38th parallel rather than incur an opposite result? It is argued here that by deploying several armies along the Yalu River, which Mao had no intention to hide, Mao tried to impart to the United States his irreversible commitment. Mao hoped such nonverbal actions could be correctly and seriously interpreted by the United States. By clearly articulating its position on the Americans' rapid push north and specifying unacceptable actions, Beijing intended to diminish the likelihood of misperception. Mao and other Chinese leaders carried out their military preparations in an open and challenging manner. Beijing wanted these nonverbal signals to be read in the way that Chinese troops were highly likely to enter the war.

Before Washington's crossing of the 38th parallel on October 7, Mao hesitated in making the final decision to enter the war because he was uncertain whether Harry S. Truman and MacArthur would rethink Beijing's clear and serious warnings. However, the crossing of the parallel not only damaged China's self-confidence but also heightened the level of the perceived threat to Beijing. The Truman administration's misperception about Beijing's determination turned into a completely unfavorable contingency for China.

The military action of U.S. forces crossing the 38th parallel on October 7 threatened Beijing's national security. Meanwhile, Mao felt humiliated as Beijing's last warning had been ignored and regarded as pure bluff by Washington.<sup>36</sup> For Beijing, its failure in deterrence suggested that peace could not be preserved even when sending clear and perhaps truthful warnings that indicated strong concern over the developments in Korea and the troops in combat.<sup>37</sup> Under the circumstances, Beijing believed that it was highly possible that the United States eventually would rush north toward the China-North Korea border. China viewed the presence of the U.S. military along China's immediate borders as a serious threat to its northeast land.

Mao decided to intervene in the Korean War on October 13 and thus switched his strategy from open deterrence to preemption. In fact, Mao's caution over American military power caused him to hesitate about entering the war. He was compelled to adopt a more aggressive signaling strategy for preemption in the belief that China was approaching the brink of war. Mao's preemptive signal refers to a military action for luring the American forces into China's trap in response to Mao's fear and the risk of being attacked by the U.S. forces in the near future.

### ***Signaling of Washington:***

#### ***From Restoring the Status quo to Unifying the Peninsula***

North Korea's invasion of the South surprised the United States. Washington believed that the Kremlin waged a proxy war on Korea. This belief convinced the Truman administration to retain the option of preemptive nuclear strike in response to a potential imminent attack from the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the Office of Intelli-

gence Research (OIR) urged President Truman to take quick action to counteract North Korea's provocative moves.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the Truman administration, as a top-dog nation, decided to repel the North Korean invasion by restoring the status quo antebellum at the 38th parallel. The United States quickly defeated the North Korean forces, which made the Americans believe that a quick and decisive victory was under way. A forceful reaction for restoring the status quo seemed to be likely when Washington felt itself in a dominant position and believed that the communists were to challenge U.S. dominance in the region.

However, the question of whether U.S. forces should cross the 38th parallel became a controversial dispute within the State Department. John Foster Dulles argued that "the 38th parallel was never intended to be and never ought to be a political line"<sup>40</sup> and suggested that the North Korean forces be destroyed to prevent a renewal of the aggression. In contrast, the NSC urged that General MacArthur should "not cross the parallel in pursuit if the North Korean forces withdrew to the north of it."<sup>41</sup> MacArthur firmly believed that the Chinese communists had little chance against the U.S.-led best-equipped forces at that time.

Convinced of the inferiority of the Oriental military, MacArthur argued that taking an aggressive action all the way to the Yalu would terrify the Chinese Communists.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Washington justified its dismissal of Beijing's warnings on the grounds that the threats were simply bluffing in an attempt to "blackmail" the UN into saving North Korea.<sup>43</sup> MacArthur's utter contempt for China's military capability led him to misperceive that the Chinese would not dare intervene. Such racial discrimination made the Truman administration disdain China's determination to intervene in the Korean War because of the superiority of America's military and technology. Regarding itself as the top-dog state, the United States was driven by the feeling of arrogance, combined with the perception of tolerable threat, to change its signaling objective from restoring the status quo to unifying the peninsula.

It appears that a deep-seated racial and cultural prejudice lay in the Americans' negative stereotypes of and unfavorable attitudes toward a "backward" China and Beijing's leaders. For example, MacArthur reassured Truman that the Chinese did not have the capability to intervene in the war and even if they did, "there would be the greatest slaughter."<sup>44</sup> Even when Chinese troops actually crossed the border into North Korea, both the Truman administration and MacArthur misjudged the military situation in Korea again. Their ignorance was more than a simple intelligence failure. On October 3, Chinese forces disengaged and fell silent suddenly in mid-November. MacArthur perceived China's disengagement as Red China's fear of confronting the U.S. forces, and thus on November 24 he commanded the final drive to the Yalu to gain total victory in Korea. However, his decision led to "the most infamous retreat in American military history."<sup>45</sup>

### ***The Inevitable War***

This section examines the issue of the interaction between the two nations in order to provide fresh insights into the Korean War. First, some argue that China's threats were timed too late to influence or reverse the American decision to cross the 38th parallel.<sup>46</sup> However, this point of view has been questioned by Chinese sources.<sup>47</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the Incheon landing, Beijing had already sent several strong and clear signals through Ambassador Pannikar to demonstrate its resolve to

enter the Korean War should the United States cross the parallel.

Next, critics contend that Beijing's deterrent threats lacked credibility or direct communications because Washington viewed Panikkar, the messenger, as a gullible communist sympathizer.<sup>48</sup> In other words, if Zhou's warnings had been transmitted by other messengers who were trustworthy, policymakers in Washington would not have dismissed the warnings as blackmail or bluff.<sup>49</sup> This argument, however, cannot offer an appropriate explanation for Acheson's discussion of his mistrust of Zhou Enlai.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, it is an unsatisfactory argument that the lack of direct communications should have played such a crucial role in explaining the failure of Beijing's deterrence. On March 31, 1939, for instance, Neville Chamberlain gave a speech in Parliament to warn Adolf Hitler's Germany that if Poland was attacked, Britain would declare war on Germany. Still, Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, ignoring Chamberlain's clear and serious warnings. This historical analogy shows that even with the formal channel of contact, Chamberlain still failed to deter the German forces from invading Poland, which led to World War II.

Recent findings about the Korean War demonstrate that the reputation for honesty may strengthen a state's credibility, indicating that lying is costly. In her thesis, Anne E. Sartori argues that Washington dismissed China's repeated threats to enter the Korean War as bluff because China had failed to fulfill its constant threats to invade Taiwan.<sup>51</sup> Thus, a state with a good signaling reputation should be reluctant to risk that reputation, given the fragility of reputation. Nevertheless, such arguments seem to be problematic. Declassified documents from China indicate that in June 1949, Mao gave the 3rd Field Army the mission of completing preparation during the autumn and to liberate Taiwan by the end of 1949. On October 25, 1949, the 10th Army Corps division launched the attack on Kinmen (the Battle of Kinmen or of Kuningtou) only to fail for lack of significant air and surface forces. Mao was forced to revise his plan by postponing the planned date of liberating Taiwan.<sup>52</sup> When the Korean War broke out on June 25, 1950, along with Washington's neutralization of the Taiwan Strait, Beijing's leaders decided to postpone the timing for Taiwan liberation and undertook the preparation for confronting U.S. forces as first priority. In this respect, China did carry out its threats against Taiwan when launching the Battle of Kinmen. Thus, it is not a very convincing argument that the reputation of a state declines if its signals go unfulfilled, as Sartori noted. Take Khrushchev's Berlin ultimatum as an example. In November 1958, Khrushchev delivered his ultimatum to the United States, setting a six-month deadline for the status of the divided Germany. As it turned out, Khrushchev repeatedly postponed his deadline over the course of almost four years as the United States formally rejected the ultimatum. Ironically, compared with U.S. attitudes toward China, Khrushchev's reputation for his numerous postponements did not make the United States dismiss the Kremlin's military move in Cuba as a bluff.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Conventional wisdom on the subject of international conflicts that focuses on military confrontation between states has obscured the significant issue: the diplomatic signaling used to influence the adversary's image of the sender plays an important part during the process of reaching a mutual understanding across the nations.<sup>53</sup> Hence, this

paper explains their initiatives and counter-signals in a given crisis by analyzing the dynamics of dyadic interactions of the strategic selection process. Most importantly, it argues that in an emergent crisis, each side's anticipations and inferences of the counterpart's next move depend largely upon its assessment of contingencies specific to dyadic relations. The choice of various diplomatic signaling, thus, is associated with various international contexts facing the nation.

Some of the literature on the causes of crises and conflicts demonstrates that the fear of immediate threats may trigger states to take an aggressive action that might lead to war.<sup>54</sup> Some claim that the power-benefit disparity alone can cause the escalation of conflict.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the above-mentioned approaches are confronted with a puzzle: a state might strike back even when the cost-benefit calculation suggests otherwise. Whether a state initiates signals or reacts to its adversary's moves, these diplomatic gestures, verbal or nonverbal messages, can be analyzed through the lens of diplomatic signaling. Accordingly, as long as both sides in a given crisis engage in actual conflict resolution or escalate the crisis, this study argues that both forms should be regarded as diplomatic signaling through which messages are conveyed to each party. It is argued that states' strategies for undertaking diplomatic signals represent responses to the contingency dimensions, i.e., the perceived threats and status disparity, facing the nations in a dyadic relation. As exemplified in the case of the Korean War, Beijing's and Washington's aggressions were driven not only by the perceived threats but also by their perception of national status.

This paper's findings explain the long-standing missing puzzle with respect to why the Chinese finally decided to enter the war so secretly. Moreover, the investigation into the Korean War also illustrates why Beijing's clear warnings in late September and early October could not persuade the Truman administration to alter its decision to cross the 38th parallel. The contingencies for signaling and counter-signaling can be derived from the case analysis. First, the underdog state tends to employ signaling for deterrence in an effort to discourage an imminent attack or challenge if it feels humiliated by a self-perceived vulnerability, given tolerable threats. As shown in the preliminary stages of the Korean War, China felt particularly humiliated and frustrated by the fact that China was far behind the United States in strategic arsenal. However, Beijing still intended to avoid a direct confrontation with Washington. The U.S. presence was perceived as a tolerable threat since the United States had not yet violated Beijing's national interests. Accordingly, China resorted to deterrent threats to warn the United States not to cross the parallel or China would intervene.

Second, the underdog state prepares to initiate a preemptive war when it perceives the upcoming threats as intolerable and it suffers from humiliation. The state will lure the adversary into developing misperceptions by sending various signals carrying false information. Take China's November disengagement as an example. Beijing perceived the action of the United States of crossing the 38th parallel northward as an intolerable and serious threat. Furthermore, Beijing's leaders were particularly humiliated by Truman's and MacArthur's ignoring of their repeated warnings. In such conditions, Beijing employed a preemptive signaling strategy to carry out its attack. In November 1950, China's military disengagement reinforced the false impression of MacArthur and Truman that China lacked the resolve to fight the United States. Beijing's signals had been deliberately designed to deceive the rival and were correctly read by the United States.

In the American leaders' eyes, the invasion of South Korea occurred because

Moscow intended to expand the sphere of the Communist world. This invasion was viewed as an intolerable threat. Washington was confident, however, that U.S. forces could defeat the North Koreans since the Soviets were not ready for war. It is contended, therefore, that the top-dog state attempts to restore the status quo in the context of intolerable perceived threats intertwined with the feeling of arrogance. In contrast, the top-dog state tends to challenge the status quo when it perceives a tolerable threat and enjoys an arrogant status. For instance, dismissing China's threats as a bluff was unreasonable for decision-makers in Washington especially when the Chinese People's Volunteers Army (PVA) entered North Korea in late October 1950. However, MacArthur's overconfidence in U.S. military power and contempt for China's military strength misled him to convince Truman of the fine chance to unify the peninsula.

From a signaling perspective, China was forced to intervene by the tense international context created by the Truman administration. Indeed, China's deterrent signals eventually failed to prevent the United States from advancing northward. Nevertheless, China's preemptive strategy in late November 1950 made MacArthur's troops suffer the worst ground defeat. Ironically, both the failure of China's deterrence attempt and the November disengagement move signaled the United States, increasing its arrogance and leading it to underestimate China's ability to enter the war.

The inferences of this research also suggest that honesty may not always be the best diplomatic policy for the underdog state, especially when it challenges a much more powerful adversary. This paper contends that the relationships between two states are so changeable that either the underdog state or the top-dog state must alter its signaling approach to contextual adaptation. The motives for conveying specific diplomatic signals depend on a state's perceived threats and status disparity, which are ever-changing. The context of time-sensitive international relations deepens the difficulty in reading the counterpart's diplomatic signals. Nevertheless, a state has no choice but to engage in assessing its potential adversaries' intentions and calculations. The need to evaluate the adversary's diplomatic gestures and actions represents an enduring challenge for any nation's foreign policy.

## Notes

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11. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (El Paso, TX: EL Paso Norte Press, 2009), 8.
12. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960), 117.
13. See Paul K. Huth, “Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War,” *The American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (June 1988): 423–43; and Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3–43.
14. See, Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*; Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia UP, 1974).
15. See, for example, Lawrence Freedman, “Deterrence: A Reply,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no 5 (October 2005): 789–801.
16. See Fearon, “Signaling versus the Balance of Power and Interests,” 249–69; and Cohen, *Theatre of Power*, 20.
17. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 117.
18. See Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1991), 68–71; See also James D. Morrow, “Capabilities, Uncertainty and Resolve,” *American Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 4 (November 1989): 941–72.
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26. Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency, Washington D.C., October 12, 1950, *The Foreign Relations of United States* (FRUS), 7: 933–34.
27. Quoted from Kavalam M. Panikkar, *In Two Chinas: Memoirs of a Diplomat* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1955), 108.
28. Zhou, "The PRC's Foreign Policy," 24.
29. See Pei Jianzhang, *An Epic of New China's Diplomacy* [in Chinese] (Beijing: The World Knowledge Press, 1990), 97.
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36. See, for example, Shen Zhihua, *Mao Zedong, Stalin, and the Korean War* [in Chinese] (Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Press, 2003), 246–51.
37. For example, Acheson was convinced by most analysts in the Truman administration that Zhou's October 3 warnings through Panikkar were simply bluffing. See, for example, Simei Qing, *From Allies to Enemies: Vision of Modernity, Identity, and U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1945–1960* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 162–63.
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39. Intelligence Estimate Prepared by the Estimates Group, Office of Intelligence Research, Department of State, Washington, *The Foreign Relations of United States*, 7 (June 25,

- 1950): 148–54.
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  42. See for example, Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 246–47.
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  47. See, for example, Yang Kuisong, *Mao Zedong and Moscow: Gratitude and Resentment* [in Chinese] (Nanchang: Jiangxi People’s Publishing House, 2005), 365–88.
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  49. See, for example, Christensen, “Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace,” 131.
  50. See Blum, *Drawing the Line*, 61–3.
  51. Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy*, 19–36.
  52. Xiao Jinguang, *Xiao Jinguang’s Memoir* [in Chinese] (Beijing: People’s Liberation Army Press, 1988), 2 and 8.
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  55. Powell, *In the Shadow of Power*, 85–106.

## Notes on Contributors

**Ming-Chen Shai** (Ph.D., University of Warwick, UK) is an assistant professor at the Department of Public Affairs Management, Hsuan Chuang University, Taiwan. He has been teaching international relations-specific courses since 2001. He is the co-author (with Diane Stone) of *The Chinese tradition of policy research institutes* (2004). His research interests mainly include international conflicts, diplomatic signaling behavior, and case research methodology.

**Chien-Wei Chen** (Ph.D., University of Warwick, UK) is an assistant professor at the Department of International Business, National Chengchi University, Taiwan. His research focuses on signaling behaviors, competitive dynamism, and international marketing. He is the author of numerous articles in international journals such as *The Journal of Business Research and Industrial Marketing Management*.