

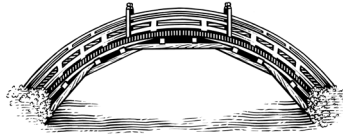
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Oriana Skylar Mastro

*The Costs of Conversation:  
Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime*

New York: Cornell University Press, 2019

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*Dan Reiter*

*Prashanth Parameswaran*

*Patricia M. Kim*

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*Oriana Skylar Mastro*

## Why Negotiating Matters

*Dan Reiter*

Oriana Skylar Mastro's new book *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* is a fresh and welcome addition to political science scholarship on the dynamics of war termination diplomacy. Both scholars and policymakers focused on Asia will be especially intrigued by this book, given its deep, well-researched historical case studies of the Korean War, the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and the Vietnam War. The book will also be of interest to international relations scholars more generally. Indeed, its insights are more important than the modest title might imply and shed light on diplomatic behavior outside as well as during war, negotiations over territorial disputes, weapons of mass destruction programs, and other timely issues.

To frame the book's argument, consider first the conventional political science wisdom that wars end when belligerents negotiate by exchanging what might be called war termination offers. That is, one side might say, "I am willing to end the war if I receive 60% of the disputed territory," and the other side might say, "I am willing to end the war if I receive 70% of the disputed territory." The war ends when the two sides agree on the terms of a deal. If this sounds similar to two people haggling over the price of a used car, it should, as the basic bargaining insights were imported from economics.

Mastro builds on this theoretical framework by importing an insight that leaders, policymakers, and historians have long recognized: that an essential element of war termination policy is not just what offers the belligerents exchange but also whether they negotiate at all. The potential problem is that the very act of offering to negotiate can be perceived as a sign of weakness, and belligerents concerned about conveying weakness might not elect to open peace talks. Adolf Hitler recognized this, for example, when, brushing off suggestions in late 1942 that he open peace talks with the Soviet Union, he remarked that "a moment of weakness [was] not the right time for negotiations with the enemy."<sup>1</sup> This fear of appearing weak

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Stephen G. Fritz, *The First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 265.

helps explain in part Abraham Lincoln's unwillingness to negotiate with the Confederate leadership during much of the Civil War, Winston Churchill's unwillingness to negotiate with Hitler in the dark days of May and June 1940, and Japan's unwillingness to negotiate with the Allies throughout most of World War II.<sup>2</sup> The most recent historiography on the Vietnam War suggests that North Vietnam was also concerned about the possibility that agreeing to peace talks might convey weakness.<sup>3</sup>

An important contribution of *The Costs of Conversation* is its careful unpacking of the logic of why belligerents might hesitate to negotiate—agreement to negotiate being what Mastro refers to as an “open diplomatic posture.” The book goes much further than past works in developing the internal logic of how belligerents think about open and closed diplomatic postures (the latter being a refusal to negotiate or an agreement to negotiate only under certain conditions). It develops specific propositions for the conditions under which belligerents adopt an open versus a closed diplomatic posture.

When reading this book, one cannot help but think about all the contemporary Asian conflicts that the argument speaks to (sometimes directly flagged in the text). Some propose that President Donald Trump's willingness to meet with Kim Jong-un to discuss North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, perhaps a switch to open diplomatic posture, was ill-advised because it conveyed weakness.<sup>4</sup> Iran, modeling a closed posture, may be unwilling to talk with the United States about the many issues on which they disagree because proposing talks while sanctions are crippling the Iranian economy might suggest weakness.<sup>5</sup> The on-and-off-again negotiations between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan have been hampered by similar concerns over diplomatic posture. Indeed, some speculate that the Taliban couples feelers for peace with high-profile attacks to signal that their decision to negotiate emerges from a position of strength rather than weakness, an approach not dissimilar to the Nixon administration's decision to bomb Cambodia and Laos to provide cover

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Jason Le Miere, “Fox News Guest Says Kim Jong Un Thinks Donald Trump Is ‘Weak’ for Traveling Around World for Another Summit,” *Newsweek*, February 28, 2019 ~ <https://www.newsweek.com/fox-news-kim-jong-un-donald-trump-1348498>.

<sup>5</sup> Arshad Mohammed and Lesley Wroughton, “U.S., Iran Policy Depends Not Just on Sanctions but on Flexibility,” Reuters, November 1, 2018 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa/u-s-iran-policy-depends-not-just-on-sanctions-but-on-flexibility-idUSKCN1N6601>.

for peace talks with North Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> The possibility of a resolution to the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan is heavily affected by both sides' fear of appearing weak. Some analysts have even made a "Nixon goes to China" argument that only a hard-liner like Indian prime minister Narendra Modi could open talks over Kashmir without appearing weak.<sup>7</sup> The conflict in the South China Sea might be made less dangerous than other territorial disputes because all sides have an open diplomatic posture, at least in terms of negotiating a code of conduct agreement.<sup>8</sup>

A sign of the significance of any book is whether it opens avenues for new research, and *The Costs of Conversation* does this very well. One important empirical question it raises is whether diplomatic posture affects the duration of a conflict and, more specifically, whether closed diplomatic postures actually prolong wars. Consider that a war might drag on either when the two sides have closed diplomatic postures, such as in World War II, or when both sides have open diplomatic postures but refuse to make the concessions necessary to reach a peace deal, such as in World War I. Wars might endure not because of a willingness or unwillingness to talk but rather because the two sides' negotiating positions—what each side is willing to accept to end the war—are too far apart. That is, the critical decision might not be whether to negotiate but what to give up to end the war. In the context of Asia, we might ask whether China and Taiwan have been unable to agree on Taiwan's political status because at least one side so frequently has assumed a closed diplomatic stance or because their negotiating positions are so far apart. Analyzing this question would likely require follow-up research that carefully parses the comparative effects of diplomatic posture versus actual negotiating positions on the duration of wars.

A second, related task would be to explore whether the fundamental assumption is right—that an agreement to talk might actually convey weakness, aside from the argument that belligerents believe that it might do so. Does agreeing to talk actually convey weakness, or is this the diplomatic equivalent of an urban myth, something that everyone believes but is not

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<sup>6</sup> Husain Haqqani, "Afghanistan's Taliban Is in It to Win It," *Foreign Policy*, December 5, 2018 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/05/afghanistans-taliban-is-in-it-to-win-it>; and John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> "Pakistan Prime Minister Sees Better Chance of Peace Talks with India if Modi's Party Wins Election," Reuters, April 9, 2019 ~ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/10/india-election-pakistan-sees-better-chance-of-peace-if-modi-bjp-wins.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "ASEAN-Beijing South China Sea Talks Set to Start by Late-Feb," *Straits Times*, February 16, 2019 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/asean-beijing-south-china-sea-talks-set-to-start-by-late-feb>.

grounded in reality? Other works have debunked a number of conventional ideas about the role that reputation plays in international bargaining and deterrence.<sup>9</sup> Future research could follow different methodological tracks to test this assumption. Historians, for example, could dive deeply into past conflicts to attempt to understand what inferences belligerents draw when an adversary suggests talks. Do they infer weakness, and if so, under what conditions, and does this inference of weakness affect negotiations? Social scientists could approach this question in a more abstract way using the tools of experimental economics. Experimentalists have frequently taken basic ideas about bargaining behavior, such as that offering to talk might communicate weakness, and tested them in laboratory settings. Future studies could use these approaches to explore the fundamental behavioral foundations of the “costs of conversation” theory.

Another question is the possible role of third parties. If a belligerent is fearful that an open diplomatic position might telegraph weakness, and the absence of talks is in fact prolonging the war, this barrier possibly could be circumvented if a third party (perhaps an ally) requires the belligerent to enter peace talks by threatening sanctions or the withdrawal of support if it does not. Certainly, U.S. pressure was critical in moving both Britain to negotiate an end to the 1956 Suez War and Israel to negotiate an end to the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Broadening the purview a bit, international courts and other multilateral bodies might play a role in providing the cover that warring parties need to negotiate disputes without experiencing heavy political costs.<sup>10</sup>

*The Costs of Conversation* offers important strides forward to understanding war termination, diplomacy, and Asian history and policy. Academics, policymakers, and interested lay readers would all deeply benefit from giving it a close look. 

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<sup>9</sup> Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Kyle Beardsley, *The Mediation Dilemma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 38–40.

## The Dynamics of Conflict and Diplomacy in Asia

*Prashanth Parameswaran*

Though the observation attributed to Winston Churchill that “to jaw-jaw is better than to war-war” is often quoted by officials today to express a preference for peace over war as separate outcomes, the complex interactions between diplomacy and conflict are still far from fully understood.<sup>1</sup> In *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime*, Oriana Skylar Mastro offers an insightful treatment of the important but underexamined question of what drives warring parties to pursue diplomacy. Mastro argues that calculations about strategic costs—specifically, interpretations of weakness on the part of the enemy (“adverse inference”) and how the enemy may change its strategy in response to that interpretation (“strategic capacity”)—drive the extent of willingness on the part of states to talk to the enemy.

Mastro’s original framework for explaining wartime diplomatic posture provides a useful window into how states calculate the costs of conversation during war and generates clear and specific predictions for testing against alternative explanations. The four main cases examined in the book—China in the Korean War, China in the Sino-Indian War, India in the Sino-Indian War, and North Vietnam in the Vietnam War—proceed clearly, with keen attention to various decision points within these conflicts as well as to how they affect the timing and conditions for continuities and changes in diplomatic postures.

The clearly defined case selection criteria Mastro adopts upfront does leave out some episodes of conflict in Asia during the Cold War, including the India-Pakistan conflicts and the Sino-Vietnamese War. But the four episodes examined in the book do nonetheless represent significant and diverse cases, with variation in regime type, relative capabilities,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Langworth’s account, Churchill’s exact quote was likely “Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war” in 1954, with the oft-used formulation attributed to Harold Macmillan’s echoing of Churchill’s words in 1958. Richard M. Langworth, ed., *The Definitive Wit of Winston Churchill* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 37. For a contemporary use of the term, see Ng Eng Hen, “Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen’s Speech at the 8th Beijing Xiangshan Forum’s First Plenary Session,” Ministry of Defense (Singapore), October 25, 2018.

and diplomatic posture while also controlling for regional effects and international conditions by restricting the cases to a twenty-year period (p. 31). The additional explorations of the United States in both the Korean War (pp. 56–60) and the Vietnam War (pp. 122–24) are also useful in extending the argument, even if the level of detail provided is much less than in the four primary case studies.

Overall, the book makes a persuasive and nuanced case for the explanatory power of the costly conversations thesis in these four episodes and three wars. While Mastro's wartime diplomatic posture framework itself initially draws a clear distinction between low and high strategic costs and a dichotomy between open and closed diplomatic postures, the exploration of the cases themselves repeatedly acknowledges the complexity that is evident to those familiar with these dynamics. This includes China's hedging of its bets even as it moved to an open diplomatic posture during the Korean War (pp. 49–51) and the limited openness that India displayed during the Sino-Indian War even as its behavior still fit the definition of a closed diplomatic posture (p. 95).

The book also engages with alternative explanations thoroughly in each of the four cases. As Mastro herself acknowledges, other accounts do place greater weight on the role of rationalist, ideational, domestic, and international factors in aspects of each case, which is no surprise given the involvement of outside powers in all three wars as well as the role of dominant personalities such as Mao Zedong and Jawaharlal Nehru. The book's approach of isolating and then testing alternative explanations against the evidence utilized has value in this respect, even if disagreements are likely to persist over important aspects, such as the extent to which internal politics implicitly shaped Nehru's decision-making during the Sino-Indian War or the inextricable link made in some accounts between domestic and international considerations in Mao's "continuous revolution" during the Korean War.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, Mastro makes a convincing case that these other factors played a supporting but not dominant role in specific decisions that affected continuities and changes in wartime diplomatic posture.

The book also raises questions about how the argument could be further tested. For instance, although the strategic logic of the costly conversations thesis may not be time-bound, more recent cases could help test the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 85–118.

argument in contemporary settings that followed the Cold War. Beyond discerning the impact of regional effects and international conditions that were controlled by the limited time period adopted in the book, the inclusion of more recent cases involving the countries already explored could have shed light on how the wartime diplomacy approaches of China, India, and Vietnam may have evolved due to a range of factors, such as their increasing capabilities (including crossing the nuclear threshold in the cases of China and India) and weakening control on domestic public opinion. With respect to China, for instance, Mastro has separately found that some of these changes have in fact affected its behavior toward war termination.<sup>3</sup>

The book's exploration of wartime diplomatic posture also prompts other thoughts that warrant future study. Some of these emerge from the case studies in the book, such as a more granular exploration of types of diplomatic posture that lie within the open-closed spectrum and the effects of elite and public opinion on the threshold for talks, given that there are subjective determinations to be made in assessing aspects of enemy strength and resilience. Others stem from the evolution of conflict dynamics in Asia, such as the interaction between conflict and diplomacy in crises or intrastate conflicts below the threshold of war, given the general decline of major interstate wars in Asia since 1979. Even though these issues go beyond the initial focus of the costs of conversation thesis, an examination of them would be worthwhile.<sup>4</sup> And as Mastro notes, deeper investigations into the limits of various forms of coercion in influencing state behavior and the link between the decision to talk and weakness could have important practical implications, including for the United States in dealing with North Korea or China (pp. 137–41).

Overall, *The Costs of Conversation* offers a compelling answer to an important question, with significant implications for both theory and practice. Given the stakes for the future of Asia and the world, one hopes that more attention is paid to the complex interactions between jaw-jawing and war-warring in the coming years in order to better understand what drives them and how to shape outcomes in the direction of greater peace and stability. ◆

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<sup>3</sup> See Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China Ends Wars: Implications for East Asian and U.S. Security," *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 45–60.

<sup>4</sup> For a theoretical consideration of Asia's so-called long peace—a period of general peace and stability the region has enjoyed since 1979—see Muthiah Alagappa, *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).



## The Challenges of Getting Adversaries to the Negotiating Table

*Patricia M. Kim*

**O**riana Skylar Mastro's book *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* addresses a critical question all leaders grapple with while engaged in a war that is costing the lives and resources of their citizens: what will it take for their adversary to come to the negotiating table? Her research makes an important contribution to international relations literature by identifying two key factors that warring states take into account when contemplating their willingness to talk: whether entering negotiations will make them look weak and whether their adversary could exploit this perceived weakness to prolong or escalate the conflict. Mastro collectively calls these two factors the "strategic costs of conversation."

The case studies in the book are particularly rich with detail. Mastro draws on a vast array of primary sources, with original archival work at the Johnson Presidential Library, the British National Archives, and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. She also draws on Chinese primary source documents and personal interviews with Vietnamese leaders. This effort shines through in the case study chapters, which features meticulous analysis of the Chinese, U.S., Indian, and North Vietnamese decision-making processes during the Korean, Sino-Indian, and Vietnam Wars.

While the book is limited to actual cases of war, Mastro's theory is quite useful for shedding light on factors that influence leaders' decision-making when considering whether to negotiate in broader conflict situations. Two of the United States' biggest foreign policy challenges at the moment come to mind: the ongoing "trade war" with China and the stalled nuclear negotiations with North Korea. While these examples are outside the scope conditions set in the book, as they fall short of war and the relevant parties are already engaged in various negotiation stages, all the parties involved are just as concerned about the strategic costs of talking. This in turn affects the characteristics and pace of negotiations. Fears of looking weak and thus encouraging an opponent to press harder for its demands are universal concerns, whether in wartime or not.

Washington and Pyongyang's tortuous history of nuclear negotiations in particular is marked with long pauses and provocations by North Korea

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attempting to project strength and communicate that it will not cave to international pressure. While many factors have contributed to the current opening of negotiations, the fact that North Korea tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and Kim Jong-un felt confident enough to declare his nuclear weapons program “complete” undoubtedly played a role in bringing Pyongyang to the table.

Since walking away empty-handed from the Hanoi Summit earlier this year, however, North Korea’s leadership has yet to return to working-level negotiations. In recent months it has engaged in muscle-flexing—firing missiles off its coasts and ramping up its rhetoric against Seoul and Washington, notwithstanding the most recent and brief Trump-Kim encounter at the demilitarized zone. Such behavior is designed to signal that North Korea will not be coerced into an unfavorable deal and is aimed at two audiences: (1) the international community, especially Washington and Seoul, and (2) the North Korean people, especially hard-liner political elites, who are skeptical of Kim Jong-un’s outreach to the United States and his stated shift away from North Korea’s traditional policy of simultaneously pursuing nuclear weapons and economic development to one that focuses only on the latter.

Mastro makes the theoretical case in chapter 1 that strategic costs have the most explanatory power, at least in her four cases studies, while recognizing that domestic factors are important and often part of the story (pp. 29–31). But in the case of the nuclear negotiations with North Korea and in most cases, leaders are always adjusting their policies with one eye on their domestic audience and the other on their foreign counterpart. Regardless of whether leaders can be immediately constrained or punished by their audience, they are undoubtedly thinking about their legacies, election calendars, and reputation among political elites, among other factors, in addition to the strategic realities on the battlefield. As Mastro notes in the concluding chapter, there is much more research to be done on specifying the mechanisms for why some leaders appear to be more sensitive to elite or public opinion or, conversely, when and why strategic concerns might override all other concerns. One possible explanation for the latter is that in some cases, strategic and domestic costs may become one and the same—i.e., a leader believes that if he or she suffers any further losses to an adversary, he or she may lose power at home.

One aspect of the book that a policy-focused audience might find unsatisfactory is that it does not explain at what point leaders will feel secure *enough* to come to the negotiating table. As Mastro notes, she is advancing a

“threshold theory,” which is what many international relations theories are designed to do (pp. 33–34). For instance, deterrence theory asserts that a country must pose “unacceptable” costs to deter an opponent from taking some course of action. While recognizing the reality that the answer to how much is “enough” will always be different depending on the target state, a possible avenue of further research could include delineating how to weight different variables in the strategic equation based on factors such as regime type or leader personality. Another issue that is underexplored in the book is how the variables that factor into an adversary’s calculations might be actively manipulated, short of letting the adversary make battlefield gains at one’s own expense, and whether other positive inducements could be used in an attempt to draw an adversary to the negotiating table.

All in all, Mastro’s book checks all the boxes and more: it advances international relations theory, offers fascinating case studies, and has relevance for policymakers. *The Costs of Conversation* will undoubtedly serve as an excellent resource on both academic bookshelves and in policy circles for years to come. 

## Costly Conversations in South Asia: 1962 and Beyond

*John H. Gill*

The “costly conversations” model that Oriana Skylar Mastro develops in her new book *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* provides a useful new approach for interpreting the 1962 Sino-Indian War. To assess the applicability of this model, Mastro examines the behaviors of the Chinese and Indian governments during this brief but consequential conflict. As a limited interstate war fought in Asia during the first two decades of the Cold War, this conflict makes a good match for the chapters she devotes to China in the Korean War and North Vietnam during the Vietnam War and affords an opportunity to investigate the actions and policies of both belligerents. This essay will review these China and India studies and suggest another South Asian situation that might benefit from analysis through the same theoretical lens.

Mastro defines China’s diplomatic stance in 1962 as “open” both prior to and during the war. That is, Beijing expressed a desire for direct communications with New Delhi without imposing any preconditions. Indeed, it made such offers publicly and repeatedly. New Delhi, on the other hand, insisted throughout the war that it would only engage in talks after Chinese forces had withdrawn to prewar positions. Its diplomatic stance was, therefore, “closed” in terms of the costly conversations model. Mastro then proceeds to apply her approach to explicate why the two sides made these strategic choices by assessing the respective leaderships’ views of the “strategic costs of conversation” through the prism of two factors: (1) “the likelihood that the enemy will interpret an open diplomatic posture as a sign of weakness” (p. 14) and (2) “how the enemy may change its strategy in response to such an interpretation” (p. 7). She posits that a state will only turn to an open posture if it thinks that its own strength and resiliency have been demonstrated and concludes that the enemy lacks the “strategic capacity” to prolong or escalate the war. She looks first at China (chap. 3) and then at India (chap. 4), a division that could cause some confusion of chronology for readers not familiar with the 1962 war. However, this

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**NOTE** ~ The views expressed in this essay are solely those of the author and do not represent the policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the United States government.

structure facilitates the focus on each in sequence and is thus suited to the study's aim of examining each state's diplomatic stance during the conflict.

The 1962 Sino-Indian War resulted from the confluence of multiple developments in the post-World War II era. In part, it was caused by a dispute over the possession of territory encompassing more than 130,000 square kilometers along the 3,500-kilometer border that divides the two countries. Though still unresolved today, this dispute was especially acute at the time because it involved two large, newly independent powers who were proud and highly sensitive to issues of sovereignty as they sought to establish themselves as global leaders in the evolving postwar, postcolonial order.<sup>1</sup> Of particular importance for China was the status of Tibet, which was harshly incorporated into the People's Republic in 1951 and the scene of unrest and rebellion through 1959.<sup>2</sup> India's efforts to assert its claims along the border and to contest what New Delhi saw as illegal occupation of Indian soil thus deepened Beijing's anxieties regarding foreign support for Tibetan separatism.<sup>3</sup> These fears were accentuated in 1961 when India, pursuing Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's ill-conceived "forward policy," advanced small army patrols and outposts into the mountains to counter what Indian leaders saw as Chinese encroachment. There was also an ideological element of the dispute. Mao Zedong and other Chinese leaders viewed "big bourgeoisie India" as part of the "anti-China tide" sponsored by the United States and other capitalist enemies.<sup>4</sup>

Determined to teach India an enduring lesson, China launched a series of well-planned "self-defensive counterattacks"<sup>5</sup> on October 20, 1962, that tore apart India's thin defenses. Chinese forces halted on October 24 to create an opportunity for talks, but India rejected negotiations without a Chinese withdrawal. After waiting three weeks, Chinese forces resumed their offensive on November 16, inflicted further humiliating defeats on

<sup>1</sup> Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "Re-collecting Empire: 'Victimhood' and the 1962 Sino-India War," *Asian Security* 5, no. 3 (2009): 216–41.

<sup>2</sup> Chen Jian, "The Tibetan Rebellion of 1959 and China's Changing Relations with India and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 3 (2006): 87–89.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War with India in 1962," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, ed. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Niu Jun, "1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper, no. 48, October 2005.

<sup>5</sup> This is the term Chinese historians use to describe the 1962 war. See Rong Ying, for example, "The View from Beijing," in "Remembering a War: The 1962 India-China Conflict," Rediff.com, December 20, 2002; and Larry M. Wortzel, "PLA Contingency Planning and the Case of India," in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, ed. Andrew Scobell et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015), 230.

the Indian Army, and declared a unilateral ceasefire on November 20. China, having achieved its goal of punishing India, subsequently withdrew its troops to their prewar positions. The shaken Indian forces gradually resumed their posts along what is now called the Line of Actual Control, and the two sides have occupied more or less their pre-1962 areas ever since.

Applying her thesis on why countries do or do not talk during war, Mastro highlights that China selected an open diplomatic posture because it was confident that its military superiority would allow it to demonstrate sufficient strength to achieve the goal of humbling India and eliminating the presumed threat to Chinese control of Tibet. Indeed, Beijing could appear restrained and magnanimous on the international stage, while its unilateral declaration of a ceasefire made the defeat even more painful for India. At the same time, Mao and his advisers correctly calculated that India lacked the “strategic capacity” to escalate within the time frame of the short, limited conflict they envisaged.


Nehru, on the other hand, steadfastly adhered to a closed posture. The hasty collapse of the Indian Army erased the possibility of displaying strength or resilience, while the rapid Chinese advance clearly showed that Beijing had the strategic capacity to expand and intensify the war should it elect to do so. If India on its own could not demonstrate the requisite resilience and compete with China in terms of strategic capacity, it made sense, as Mastro points out, for Nehru to temporize by refusing to negotiate from a position of indisputable weakness. The strategic costs were too high. Extending the argument, however, it seems likely that he hoped to acquire the necessary strength through outside help, specifically from the United States and Great Britain, and possibly from the Soviet Union as well. Nehru expected a longer, “total” war (hardly surprising in the wake of India’s experiences in the two world wars and the recent lengthy struggle on the Korean Peninsula) and erroneously assumed that China’s war aims were unlimited.<sup>6</sup> He feared that India would be unable to resist should China continue its “invasion of India” (p. 87) and bomb Indian cities. Nehru thus spurned talks with Beijing and turned to Washington in a desperate attempt to acquire the strategic capacity India on its own lacked. Until the extensive assistance he requested in his urgent November 19 letter to

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<sup>6</sup> Yaacov Vertzberger, “India’s Strategic Posture and the Border War Defeat of 1962: A Case Study in Miscalculation,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 5, no. 3 (1982): 375.

President John F. Kennedy materialized, diplomatic resilience would have to substitute for military strength.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond its theoretical merits, *The Costs of Conversation* is noteworthy in several respects. First, it is extraordinarily well researched. Mastro not only has surveyed the available literature on 1962 but has had the benefit of drawing on select Chinese archives before these were closed. She also took advantage of a stint in India to interview participants in the conflict. Though some of her conclusions may generate disagreement, alternative views will have to be grounded in equally formidable research.<sup>8</sup> Second, she has provided a valuable service by calling attention to the contemporary relevance of the 1962 war. Although the war was brief and now lies almost six decades in the past, India and China, particularly the former, continue to perceive their relationship through this lens. The state-controlled Chinese press, for example, made dire references to 1962 during the 2017 Doklam border standoff.<sup>9</sup> It thus serves observers well to be reminded of the importance of history in analyzing contemporary events in South Asia.

Finally, scholars may wish to examine the applicability of Mastro's theoretical approach to other conflict situations in South Asia. India-Pakistan tensions in the 21st century often resemble an interstate conflict. Deadly gunfire across the Line of Control in Kashmir, for example, has become tragically routine, and February 2019 saw a dramatic spike in tensions with the first air-to-air engagement between the two antagonists since 1971. The India-Pakistan rivalry today is different in many ways from the Sino-Indian confrontation of 1962, most notably in the prominent role of militant groups ("nonstate actors") who find harbor in Pakistan. But Mastro's costly conversations model may offer some insight into the two sides' difficulty of "talking while fighting," especially as both often refuse to enter into dialogue for fear that the other will take such a "concession" as a sign of weakness.<sup>10</sup> The theoretical considerations that Mastro presents in her historical case studies may thus be useful in addressing this contemporary problem. 

<sup>7</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, correspondence to John F. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, November 19, 1962 ~ <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF/111/JFKNSF-111-016>.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the book mistakenly places Thag La Ridge (the location of a key incident on September 8, 1962) in Ladakh when it was in the North-East Frontier Agency, which is now Arunachal Pradesh (pp. 66, 79).

<sup>9</sup> "India Will Suffer Worse Losses than 1962 If It Incites Border Clash," *Global Times*, July 4, 2017; Yang Sheng, "India Urged to Drop Delusion of Military Strength," *Global Times*, July 6, 2017; and "Commentary: India Must Understand Borderline Is Bottom Line," *Xinhua*, July 10, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Amir Wasim, "PML-N, PPP Hold Govt Responsible for Diplomatic Debacle with India," *Dawn*, September 23, 2018.

## North Vietnamese Diplomatic Posture during the Vietnam War

Carlyle A. Thayer

According to Oriana Skylar Mastro, her book *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* “is designed to provide the first comprehensive framework for understanding when and how states incorporate talking with the enemy into their war-fighting strategies” (p. 6). The framework of analysis aims to explain “how states calculate the costs of conversation throughout a war” (p. 126). This framework is important, she argues, because the existing theoretical literature does not explain how and why adversaries transition from war or pure fighting to “talking while fighting” (p. 1) and “either ignores or gives a shallow treatment as to how states approach talking to the enemy” (p. 5). As a consequence, “states currently lack a framework for understanding an opponent’s approach to wartime diplomacy and how to best shape it” (p. 1). The book argues that diplomacy and warfighting are integral and interactive parts of a state’s wartime strategy rather than two separate behaviors (p. 3).

Mastro develops several concepts in her analysis—diplomatic posture, strategic costs, and strategic capacity. It is necessary to provide a brief description of each concept in order to fully understand her thesis. Diplomatic posture is defined as a “belligerent’s willingness to engage in direct talks with its enemy at a given point in a war” (p. 6). A state’s diplomatic posture can be “either open or closed with the enemy at a given time” (p. 6) and can shift during war. According to Mastro, “when costs are considered high, [states] will choose a closed diplomatic posture. If a belligerent deems the costs low enough, it will shift to an open diplomatic posture” (p. 14). Strategic cost is defined as “the likelihood an adversary will infer weakness in the form of reduced war aims, degraded ability to fight, or waning resolve from an open diplomatic posture,” and strategic capacity is understood as “the ability of the enemy to respond to such an inference by escalating, intensifying or prolonging the fighting” (p. 126).

Mastro applies her framework to four case studies: Chinese diplomatic posture in the Korean War, Chinese diplomatic posture in the Sino-Indian War, Indian diplomatic posture in the Sino-Indian War, and North Vietnamese diplomatic posture in the Vietnam War. This review focuses

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on the fourth case study, North Vietnamese diplomatic posture in the Vietnam War. This case study is copiously sourced, with reference to over two hundred Vietnamese Communist Party and government documents that the United States captured and translated during the war as well as interviews with party, diplomatic, and military officials in Hanoi (p. 103). These primary sources are supplemented with memoirs and the extant academic literature. The case study is confined to the three-year period from March 1965, when the United States commenced bombing North Vietnam and introduced ground troops in South Vietnam, to April 1968, when North Vietnam responded positively to President Lyndon Johnson's offer to seek a diplomatic solution to the Vietnam War.

Almost immediately after the United States entered the Vietnam War in 1965, it adopted an open diplomatic posture toward North Vietnam. According to Mastro, the United States supported over two thousand attempts to open talks with North Vietnam without preconditions during the three-year period under review (p. 101). Washington adopted this open diplomatic posture because the costs of conversation were low and U.S. strategic capacity was immense. Indeed, the United States increased combat troop levels progressively from several thousand in late 1963 to 400,000 by 1966. It also expanded the air war over North Vietnam, flying over twice as many sorties and dropping more than two-and-half times the ordnance in 1966 than in the previous year. The United States targeted North Vietnam's petroleum, oil, and lubricant storage sites and bombed closer to urban areas than before.

By contrast, throughout the three-year period, North Vietnam adopted a closed diplomatic posture and steadfastly rebuffed all U.S. and third-party efforts to open direct bilateral discussions without preconditions. The country signaled its diplomatic posture when it released its "Four Points" in April 1965 after the deployment of U.S. Marines to South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> During this three-year period, the United States combined offers of talks with a suspension of bombing attacks, but none of these pauses elicited a positive response from Hanoi. Indeed, North Vietnam signaled its resolve by stepping up its infiltration of combat troops. Hanoi insisted on a complete halt of all U.S. bombing and other acts of war against North Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam's preconditions for talks included U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, adherence to the 1954 Geneva Agreements, inclusion of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (commonly referred to as the Viet Cong), and the assurance that the future of Vietnam would be decided by the Vietnamese people without foreign interference.

If there was to be any possible opening for discussions, Hanoi insisted that Washington focus on its preconditions.

Why did North Vietnam adopt a closed diplomatic posture during the three-year period under review? Mastro argues that its leaders feared that Washington would infer that North Vietnam was weak and escalate the U.S. war effort. In order to change its diplomatic posture from closed to open and enter into direct talks, North Vietnam believed that it needed “to demonstrate its ability to resist U.S. coercive efforts” (pp. 107–8). In sum, “the strategic costs of conversation were too high to consider an open diplomatic posture” (p. 110).

North Vietnam decided to lower the costs of conversation by launching a general offensive and uprising (the Tet Offensive) in late January 1968. The Tet Offensive was designed to convey the country’s resilience and strategic capacity, and therefore its ability to frustrate the United States’ strategic aims of coercing North Vietnam to the negotiating table. On January 30, 1968, Communist military forces launched a coordinated series of attacks throughout South Vietnam, including on 36 out of 44 provincial capitals, 5 out of 6 major cities, 64 district capitals, and 50 hamlets (p. 113).


The Tet Offensive was a military disaster for North Vietnam. Most Communist military forces were easily routed, and the so-called Viet Cong infrastructure, or Communist underground, was decimated. But the Tet Offensive was an unexpected political success because of its domestic impact in the United States. On March 31, 1968, President Johnson gave a nationally televised address announcing that he had ordered an immediate end to the bombing of North Vietnam above the twentieth parallel, would seek a diplomatic solution to the war, and would stand down and not seek re-election (p. 102).

North Vietnam responded positively three days later, and discussions on the format and content of the talks commenced immediately. Why did North Vietnam shift its diplomatic posture from closed to open so quickly? Mastro concludes: “Hanoi’s expected costs of agreeing to talks changed from high (before April 1968) to low (after President Johnson’s speech), and these cost valuations were the primary determinant of Hanoi’s diplomatic posture...[A]fter the psychological impact of Tet, Hanoi’s leadership assessed the costs of conversation to be low because Hanoi had credibly demonstrated resiliency and domestic political factors now hampered U.S. strategic capacity” (pp. 103–4).

Mastro ends her analysis of North Vietnam’s diplomatic posture at this point, her self-imposed remit. She does not discuss in detail the five years it

took from the commencement of bilateral talks until the Paris Peace Accords were reached in January 1973.

Mastro, however, tests her costly conversation thesis, as noted above, against four alternate perspectives, and she convincingly demonstrates that these alternate approaches “do not address the conditions under which those talks may come about in the first place.” Her thesis contributes to our understanding of wartime diplomacy by identifying the factors that carry the most weight for leaders when calculating the cost of an open diplomatic posture (pp. 128–29).

Finally, Mastro ends *The Costs of Conversation* with a very well-written summary and set of conclusions. She goes beyond the analysis in her book to discuss the theoretical implications of the costly conversations thesis for other types of conflicts and lays out a future research agenda. 

## Author's Response: The Theoretical and Practical Importance of Understanding Wartime Diplomacy

*Oriana Skylar Mastro*

**A**fter a war breaks out, what factors influence the belligerents' decisions about whether to talk to their enemy, and when may their positions on wartime diplomacy change? How do we get from fighting to also talking?

In *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime*, I argue that states are primarily concerned with the strategic costs of conversation as a barrier to negotiations, and that these costs need to be low before combatants are willing to directly talk with their enemy. Specifically, leaders look to two factors when determining the strategic costs of talking to the enemy: First, will the enemy interpret openness to diplomacy as a sign of weakness? And second, if the enemy does, how will it change its military strategy in response? My research found that a country will only be willing to come to the negotiating table once it is confident that such a move will not convey weakness and that the enemy will not escalate the war in response.

Through four primary case studies—North Vietnamese diplomatic decisions during the Vietnam War, Chinese decision-making in the Korean War and Sino-Indian War, and Indian diplomatic decision-making in the Sino-Indian War—the book demonstrates that the strategic costs of conversation best explain the timing and nature of countries' approaches to wartime talks, and therefore to when peace talks begin. As a result, my findings have significant theoretical and practical implications for war duration and termination, as well as for military strategy, diplomacy, and mediation.

In the book, I strove to provide a comprehensive theory for when leaders are willing to talk to each other during a conflict and why they sometimes refuse, build knowledge about several Asian conflicts that may be understudied compared to their European counterparts, and derive useful policy implications and recommendations from the findings. Thus, I am grateful to have the opportunity to engage with such a wide range of experts with deep theoretical, practical, and historical expertise on conflict and negotiation as well as these specific cases. This provides the opportunity

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to explore a number of issues in more depth, particularly regarding the applicability of my argument to other conflicts and situations.

First, there are a number of theoretical questions that remain to be explored and debated about the role of talking in international conflicts. Dan Reiter rightly derives from the book my argument that “an essential element of war termination policy is not just what offers the belligerents exchange but also whether they negotiate at all.” However, he raises the issue of what factors have the most explanatory power when it comes to conflict duration. Specifically, Reiter reminds us that the negotiating positions of states may leave no room for agreement, and that they may be so far from that outcome that it takes time during the fighting for all sides to decide what to concede to bring the conflict to an end. Reiter rightly calls for additional research, therefore, that “carefully parses the comparative effects of diplomatic posture versus actual negotiating positions on the duration of wars.” This is one of the weaknesses of qualitative historical research; I could not provide exact figures as to how much each variable mattered at a given period of time. But I was able to show that before negotiations began, in high-level internal discussions leaders discussed whether to talk far more often than they discussed what they thought they could get at the negotiating table. This suggested to me that the decision to talk is independent of the decision to settle, and obstacles to opening negotiations can prolong conflict. Since in many historical cases negotiations endured longer than the periods without talking, however, failure to reach a consensus is indeed likely a relatively greater determinant of conflict duration.

A second issue concerns the possible alternative explanations. Here, Prashanth Parameswaran and Patricia Kim bring up the issue of domestic politics, which I address in the book. Parameswaran postulates that as authoritarian countries such as China have less control over domestic public opinion, this may play a greater role in elites’ decisions about whether to talk to the enemy. Even in situations of strict control such as in North Korea today, Kim posits that a refusal to talk may be designed to send a message not only to the international community, especially Washington and Seoul, but also “the North Korean people, especially hard-liner political elites, who are skeptical of Kim Jong-un’s outreach to the United States.” I think this is right—leaders are always considering both domestic and international audiences. While the book only evaluates decision-making in wartime, and shows that in this extreme scenario leaders are the most concerned about how talking will impact the beliefs of their enemy, I would speculate that as the situation moves farther from war on the spectrum toward peace,

domestic politics become increasingly relevant. In his review, John Gill highlighted some additional reasons why image mattered specifically in the case of the Sino-Indian War. In my opinion, this increases the stakes, but the underlying logic that states may not talk for fear of looking weak and emboldening the enemy would still apply.

One thing the book does not address sufficiently that Parameswaran raised was the advent of nuclear weapons and its impact on the dynamics I lay out. In Asia, China became a nuclear weapon state in 1964, India in 1974, and Pakistan in 1998 (and though it is not U.S. policy to acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear weapon state, Pyongyang tested nuclear weapons in 2006). In two related articles on China, I evaluate how changes in other factors like Chinese military modernization, introduction into international institutions, and domestic public opinion may impact how China has ended wars.<sup>1</sup> The impact of nuclear weapons could go a number of ways; it could put a ceiling on escalation, thus making states less fearful of emboldening the enemy and thus allowing for talks early on in a conflict between two nuclear states. One case, highlighted in Carlyle Thayer's review, the Vietnam War, highlights how difficult it is to establish talks when there are great asymmetries of power. If one belligerent possesses nuclear weapons and the other does not, this dynamic could be exacerbated. The leaders of the nuclear state may believe they have escalation dominance, and thus be less concerned about appearing weak and embracing an open diplomatic posture sooner. However, the costs of looking weak skyrocket for the nonnuclear belligerent, making it even more difficult for it to demonstrate enough resiliency to come to the table. The bottom line is that much more research has to be done before definitively stating how nuclear weapons impact the costs of conversation.

Lastly, the reviewers highlighted the policy relevance of the book—how a fear of looking weak may create obstacles to diplomacy. Kim, for example, points out that, even in peacetime, states may be concerned about the strategic costs of conversation, exemplified by the current “trade war” with China and the impasse in nuclear negotiations with North Korea. However, whether in peacetime or wartime, Kim writes that the book does not tell policymakers when leaders will feel secure enough. Furthermore, Kim asks

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<sup>1</sup> See Oriana Skylar Mastro, “The Theory and Practice of War Termination: Assessing Patterns in China’s Historical Behavior,” *International Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2018): 661–84; and Oriana Skylar Mastro, “How China Ends Wars: Implications for United States and East Asian Security,” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 45–60.

how policymakers can effectively manipulate belligerents' calculations in this regard.

These are important questions and unfortunately Kim is correct that the book does not provide clear answers to them. In the concluding chapter, I address what leaders should not do. They should not escalate to bring the other side to the table, as it will have the opposite effect. They should not focus energies on negotiating over preconditions for talks, as these are just stopgap measures; once a state has minimized the strategic costs of conversation, they will be willing to talk even when preconditions have not been met. But I also provide some guidance on how to get belligerents to the negotiating table. For example, we should rethink the role of mediators. Rather than just facilitating information transmission, they could help reduce the costs of conversation, such as by offering positive inducements so that agreeing to talk is not seen as a sign of weakness or by serving as a guarantor that escalation will not occur as a result of an open diplomatic posture. Mediators can also be critical in creating off-ramps from conflict, since I show in my research that these tend to be unsuccessful when offered by one of the belligerents. I also call on the United States to adopt a blanket policy of being open to talks at any stage of a conflict as a way to model severing the connection between the willingness to talk and weakness.

While questions still remain about diplomacy in wartime, I hope *The Costs of Conversation* provides insight into the factors that influence states' decisions about whether to talk to their enemies during conflicts. In addition to this contribution to international relations theory, the book's case studies are based on extensive fieldwork in China, India, and Vietnam that will be of interest to area specialists and military history scholars. In particular, its findings have important implications for defense planners and military strategists that focus on the current challenges posed by the rise of China. 