Main Topic: Explore three cases about war onset, nuclear deterrence theory, and the role of brinkmanship in international politics.

1 Key Terms

- preventive vs preemptive war
- first-strike advantage
- costly peace
- brinkmanship
- mutually-assured destruction (MAD)
- second-strike capabilities
- nuclear proliferation
- nuclear revolution

2 Key Themes/Ideas

Q. What three examples did we use to illustrate the rationalist explanations for war?
Answer: The three examples discussed Lake (2010), FLS, and lecture are (1) World War I, (2) the 1991 Gulf War, and (3) the 2003 Iraq War.

Q. How do commitment problems explain the start of some wars?
Answer: Commitment problems arise if states cannot credibly commit not to use force in the future to revise a negotiated settlement agreed to today. This creates preventive war incentives that raise the risk of conflict.

Q. What is the effect of nuclear weapons on the probability of war?
Answer: Nuclear weapons lower the probability of war because they turn war into a “competition in risk-taking” or game of Chicken according to Fearon, Waltz, and Schelling.

Q. How can nuclear weapons lower the probability of war?
Answer: Mutually-Assured Destruction (MAD), secure second-strike capabilities, and the credible threat of retaliation (brinkmanship) on both sides means conventional fighting is less attractive. States do not want to fight major wars with the potential to escalate to nuclear war.

Q. How does brinkmanship create a risk of nuclear war even if no one wants it? Why is it still dangerous?
Answer: The risk of nuclear war arises according to Professor Sagan and Fearon due to (1) the risk of accidents, (2) desperation, (3) irrationality, and (4) leaders get ’locked in’ by reputational or organizational incentives.

Q. What is the effect of nuclear weapons on offense-defense balance?
Answer: Nuclear weapons are, by themselves, a pure offense weapon, but the nuclear revolution shifted the offense-defense balance towards defense because it raised the costs of conquest.
3  Key Readings

- Sagan and Waltz, Chp 1-2, 4-5

4  Review Questions

Check your understanding of this week’s material and key ideas with the following questions.

- In all three examples, Professor Fearon argues that commitment problems seem prevalent. Does this mean commitment problems are the most common reason for interstate war? Why or why not?

- FLS Chp. 2 introduces the game of “chicken” to introduce the concept of brinkmanship and anti-coordination games. How is the Cuban Missile Crisis an example of this game? Try to write out the strategic interaction problem and identify the equilibria and Pareto efficient outcomes.

- Based on Sagan and Waltz’s arguments, do you predict the next proliferator will follow the slow, transparent or fast, opaque approach? Where do North Korea and Iran fall?

- John Lott argues that by the logic of mutually assured destruction, everyone in the US owning a gun would make the country safer. What is the central problem with this claim?

- What effect will modernizing the nuclear arsenal have on deterrence and the credibility of our nuclear umbrella moving forward?

- Why are arms control treaties like the ABM, SALT I, and New START Treaty difficult to enforce between parties? How do these treaties intend to generate compliance/disarmament, and to what extent do they succeed?

- Does Jervis believe nuclear weapons provide an offensive or defensive advantage to states and why? Does Professor Fearon believe nuclear weapons provide an offensive or defensive advantage and why?

- Professor Sagan has done survey research about public opinion using nuclear weapons and surprisingly finds that 60% of the American public support using nuclear weapons. Why is this finding important to brinkmanship and deterrence? ¹

¹http://www.wsj.com/articles/would-the-u-s-drop-the-bomb-again-1463682867