Crisis Bargaining Project: Working Paper #9

CATACLYSMIC FACTORS IN CRISIS BEHAVIOR

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When we speak of "crisis bargaining" we are implicitly referring to a controlled process in which decisions are made by deliberate reasoned calculation. That is, the parties deliberately choose "moves" which they think will realize their goals, given their current expectations about the adversary's probable response. They may mis-calculate, with unexpected and possibly disastrous results, but at least they calculate, and theoretically, at least, they are in full control of their own behavior.

By "cataclysmic elements" we refer to those elements in a crisis over which the parties have no control or think they have no control. These factors are thus analytically separate from the bargaining process. They do impinge upon and interact with the bargaining process, however, in at least the following possible ways: (1) introducing an extra incentive for caution, (2) providing material for threats and warnings ("Be careful, don't do that, things may get out of hand"), and (3) introducing an extra element of risk in the assessment of bargaining alternatives, apart from risk of what the other party might deliberately do in response. When Schelling refers to "manipulation of risk" as a bargaining tactic, he is essentially referring to raising the cataclysmic risks, the risk that "events will get out of control".* Even if not manipulated, the cataclysmic

*For a discussion of this point, see Working Paper #8.

factor generates a kind of latent, inherent background of autonomous risk which is likely to affect the feelings, calculations and behavior of

the parties.

What we have not yet worked out is exactly what the cataclysmic factor consists of. What do people mean when they refer to "things getting out of hand", "losing control of events", etc.?

At the most general level, there is often a rather vague feeling that crises are just inherently very unpredictable and dangerous affairs. They can blow up at any time for who knows what reason. In the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy spoke often of the danger "of error, of mistake, of miscalculation, or misunderstanding," and these feelings were largely behind the cautious and prudent character of U. S. policy in that crisis.* Kennedy seems to have derived this image very largely by analogy

*Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days. New York, W. W. Norton, 1968, Signet Books, p. 125.

from the outbreak of World War 1, and in particular from his recent reading of Barbara Tuchman's, The Guns of August. Kennedy even believed that wars are "rarely started intentionally." *

*Ibid., p. 105.

Apprehensions of this kind, on the part of Krushchev as well as Kennedy, were chiefly focused on the contingency of the outbreak of violence. They both feared profoundly that once some sort of violence started, things would suddenly get a great deal less predictable and controllable. Krushchev said in one of his messages that "if indeed war should break out, then it would not be in our power to stop it, for such is the logic of war." Kennedy expressed such fears at several points in the crisis when violence seemed imminent: when a Russian submarine appeared, when Russian ships were approaching the blockade line, when a U-2 was shot

down over Cuba. After the latter event, Robert Kennedy reports, "there was the feeling that the noose was tightening on all of us, on Americans, on mankind, and that the bridges to escape were crumbling." * It appears

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*Ibid., p. 97.

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that in a crisis, decision-makers tend to forget everything the "civilian strategists" have taught them about "limited war", "controlled response", "use of force short of war", etc. and regress to more primitive modes of thinking.*

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*Bernard Brodie, Escalation and the Nuclear Option. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966, p. 118.

We can try to make finer distinctions. In what follows, I shall indicate what seem to be four different types of "cataclysmic elements". They overlap somewhat, and undoubtedly we will pick up other types in our cases, but at least it is a start.

1. The "logic of war".

What did Krushchev mean by the statement quoted above? Or Kennedy, after the downing of the U-2, when he said "we are now in an entirely new ball game." * Apparently that once violence breaks out, a whole new set

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*Ibid., p. 98.

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of forces takes over, a new pattern of interaction, with an inner logic of its own which tends to develop to its fullest extent more or less autonomously. The image is like that of a "machine" which, once the starter button is pushed, just keeps going under its own power until it runs down. Here again, despite the writings of the strategists about the "continuum" between peace and war, "force as a rational instrument of policy", etc.,

the statesman tends instinctively to feel otherwise, probably influenced by mankind's centuries-old conditioning to the effect that peace and war _are_ sharply different. The fact that statesmen think this way is probably more important for our analytical purposes than the objective possibility that they may in fact be able to control the violence (Kennedy _was_ able to resist pressures to eliminate the SAM sites after he had himself declared it "an entirely new ball game").

2. _Losing control of the military._

"Events getting out of control" could mean "subordinates getting out of control". Every intelligent statesman knows that he has only limited control of his bureaucracy. When violence starts there is at least the possibility that the military will react more or less automatically according to pre-set plans, the "inherent right of self-defense", etc. A military bureaucracy, in particular, tends to be heavily oriented around "standard operating procedures" which may be autonomously activated by certain events and hard for top decision-makers to stop once activated.*

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*Cf. Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Rational Policy, Organization Process and Bureaucratic Politics," RAND Corp., 1968, p. 3919.

Alternatively, when violence breaks out, military men may think their _raison d'etre_ has arrived, that the right to make decisions has passed from the civilian leadership to them. At this point, in their minds, the idea of "civilian control" may become transformed into "political meddling." Traditions such as the "autonomy of the theater commander" in the United States may further contribute to this possibility.

Despite these considerations, there appear to be very few, if any, cases in modern history where an unauthorized or accidental military

action directly caused an outbreak of war. There have been a few cases of unauthorized violence which contributed to a sequence of political decisions leading to war*, but none that I am aware of where the military forces themselves went "out of control" as a consequence of the violence.

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*An example would be the battle of Navarino Bay, 1827, an unauthorized naval battle which was followed (six months later) by a war between Russia and Turkey.

In the nuclear age, the military in the United States and probably in Russia as well, have been deeply conditioned to and apparently fully accept, the idea of civilian control, and in particular the rule that only the top civilian leadership can make the decision to move from a state of peace to a state of war or from a minor "incident" to major violence.

Nevertheless, in many crises, statesmen seem to have prominently in mind the fear that some "incident" might precipitate uncontrollable violence. Kennédy's and Krushchev's fears in the Cuban crisis have been mentioned. In the Bosnian crisis there were fears that the Austrian military might "take over" following an accidental clash with Serbian troops. The French action in 1914 of pulling their forces back 10 miles from the German border might have reflected similar apprehensions. Fears of accidental clashes were present in both the Berlin crises. Again, for our purposes, the most important fact is that such fears exist, regardless of their "objective" validity.

My guess is that usually at the bottom of anxieties of this kind is not so much the danger of military men taking decisions out of the hands of the political leadership, but the danger that some event, particularly a violent one might set off a train of political forces and emotional pressures on the decision-makers themselves which force them into an

action-reaction process which, in a sense, is "out of control". Thus the following two categories are probably most relevant to the problem.

3. <u>Irresistible military and domestic pressures</u>

In August, 1914, the Czar telegraphed frantically to the Kaiser: "I cannot hold out much longer against the pressures being brought against me." He was referring chiefly to pressures from the military to order general mobilization, which, according to expectations prevailing at the time, would "mean war". The reason the military pressed so hard for general mobilization was that their mobilization and war plans did not include the option of "partial mobilization", and the Russian transportation and military logistical system made it virtually impossible to convert later from an improvised partial mobilization against Austria alone to general mobilization against Germany. Similarly, Germany's Schlieffen Plan precluded the option of "mobilize only" once the Russians started mobilizing, because the success of the plan depended crucially on initiating military action before the Russians had time to complete their mobilization.*

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*I have argued previously that the World War I mobilization race was fuelled by a "prisoner's dilemma" rather than by "cataclysmic" factors. I now see that it was probably a combination of both. Score one for Dennis Yena! But see below on the prisoner's dilemma aspect.

The cataclysmic element here is not that the military "get out of control" by usurping decision-making authority but that they are able to make such a persuasive case based on automatic "necessities" of military plans and arrangements that they can virtually dictate decisions. The statesman technically still has control, but actually he is himself controlled by the imperatives of rigid military plans which preclude all but one option. In effect, once the contingency occurs which activates

the plans, the plans themselves take over and "decisions" are merely formal ratifications of a pre-programmed strategy.

Examples of this phenomenon can be found in the contemporary era. In the Cuban missile crisis it was apparently considered a "military necessity" to follow an air strike with an invasion of Cuba. In the case of a crisis in Central Europe which erupted into conventional warfare, it might be very difficult for the U. S. president to resist military pressures to use tactical nuclear weapons, given the apparently firm assumption in NATO planning that such weapons will be used when necessary.

Civilian control over military plans and operations is a variable rather than an either-or absolute. Conceivably, a very strong-willed Czar or Kaiser could have resisted the pressures of military men and military logic in 1914--in fact, they "lost control" entirely. On the other hand, in the Cuban case, Kennedy and McNamara were able to exert a very considerable control over the detailed implementation of the blockade, over strong Navy resentment and resistance, and they successfully resisted military pressures for an air strike. It is sobering to note, however, that they were only partially successful: The Navy was ordered to pull back the blockade perimeter to give the Soviets more decision time, but didn't do it. If the Air Force had been allowed to carry out an air strike according to their formal plans, it would have been a quite different--more destructive and more provocative--operation than the "surgical" strike which the civilian leadership had in mind.*

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*Graham T. Allison, op. cit.

Pressures on statesman from other domestic political sources, including general public opinion, also logically fall into this category. Public emotions may become so aroused in a crisis that the statesman

feels "compelled" to act in certain ways. In 19th century crises, statesmen often expressed fears of public arousal, and these seem to have been real fears as much as statements made for bargaining effect. The 1870 crisis between France and Germany seems to have erupted into war in good part because of domestic political pressures in France which the French leadership could not resist.

This cataclysmic category is of course only an extreme case of a fairly common phenomenon: The decision-maker is "forced" to deviate from his conception of "rational" action, perhaps in the direction of greater escalation and risk, by pressures in the decision-making apparatus and domestic politics. At the extreme, he "loses control"; in milder variations, he merely deviates marginally from his own preferred course.

4. "Psychological" compulsions: prestige, emotion, absolute imperatives.

Quite often, in crises, statesman are wont to declare that they have "no choice", "no alternative", or are "required" to act in a certain way. Sometimes such statements may be merely ploys designed, consciously or unconsciously, to relieve the mind of the burden of responsibility and doubt, to forestall or meet criticism, or as a bargaining tactic. More often, however, the statesman really does seem to feel a compulsion to act in a certain way, even though he knows the action will be extremely dangerous.

Repeatedly, during the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy expressed the belief that certain violent actions by the United States--sinking a Russian ship, bombing the SAM sites, an air strike against the missile sites--would "require" a violent Russian response. Replying to General LeMay, who argued that the Russians would do nothing after an air strike, Kennedy said: "They, no more than we, can let these things

go by without doing something." * He also felt certain compulsions for

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*Robert F. Kennedy, op. cit., p. 36.

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the United States: if a reconnaissance plane were downed by anti-aircraft fire, we would "have" to take out the SAM sites; if the Russians responded to an air strike on Cuba with a strike at the missiles in Turkey, "all NATO was going to be involved." *

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*Ibid., p. 96.

Robert Kennedy reports the following conversation with his brother: "Neither side wanted war over Cuba, we agreed, but it was possible that either side could take a step that --for reasons of "security" or "pride" or "face"-- would require a response by the other side, which, in turn, for the same reasons of security, pride, or face, would bring about a counter-response and eventually an escalation into armed conflict. . ." We should not "precipitously push our adversaries into a couse of action that was not intended or anticipated." * (emphasis mine)

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*Ibid., pp. 62-63.

Security, pride or face: these were the sources of the "requiredness" which Kennedy had in mind. "Security" presumably can be equated with concern for bargaining reputation and can be set aside as part of the calculated bargaining process, not a cataclysmic element as here defined. "Pride" is equivalent to "self-respect"; "face" to considerations of prestige or status. Both have a high emotional content, are likely not to be subject to reasoned calculation, and can therefore be subsumed under the general category of "emotion" as a cataclysmic element. Simple "rage" leading to a desire to avenge an insult or provocation would be another

element in this category.

U. S. decision-makers in the Cuban crisis seem to have had prominently in mind the notion that nations (i.e. statesmen) are subject to emotional "provocation" which can precipitate irrational, uncontrollable behavior. Kennedy was very concerned about not "affronting" or "humiliating" the Soviets, not "pushing them to the point where they were forces to an irrational, suicidal, spasm response." *

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*Ibid., p. 15.

The process involved here is "cataclysmic" essentially because the parties stop calculating, stop acting deliberately. They simply react emotionally to provocation; emotions take over from reason. There are certain things that no "great nation" can tolerate; it must retaliate more or less without stopping to think, just as the red-blooded American boy cannot possibly take a punch in the nose without striking back, no matter what the possible consequences. Thus, Austria in 1914, as a "Great Power", could not possibly tolerate the assassination and the continued existence of the "Serbian revolutionary nest"; it had to act.

Another kind of compulsion is what Ralph K. White, quoting Anatol Rapoport, has called the "blindness of involvement". The Emperor Franz-Joseph said "We cannot go back now" after Austria had issued her ultimatum; the Austrians seemed to have considered themselves in the grip of a kind of impersonal Fate or Necessity once they had started events moving.*

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*Ralph K. White, Nobody Wanted War. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1968, p. 8.

A German war council on July 27, 1914, decided to "fight the business

through, cost what it might." *

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*B. F. Schmitt, <u>The Coming of the War</u>, Vol. II. New York: Charles Scribner's, 1930, p. 62.

The cataclysmic element here is a felt inability to reverse momentous decisions, once taken. The state simply plows blindly ahead on the course it has chosen, no matter if conditions change, risks greatly increase, etc. Such "blindness of involvement" conceivably stems from several sources. One would be again the prestige element: reversing a course of action is humiliating for a "Great Power". Another might involve bureaucratic and decision-making considerations: it is simply very difficult to get a bureaucracy to change direction radically once that direction has been set. Another might involve psychological elements affecting information-processing: Once a line of action is launched, decision-makers are disposed to accept and search for information confirming the correctness of the action and will screen out information indicating otherwise. Finally, some rational calculation may take place: reversing a decision, especially under duress, is costly in terms of reputation for resolve. Thus Austria feared she would "sink to the status of a second-class power" if she turned back.

As Holsti and North discovered in their study of the World War I crisis, the belief that one's own state has "no choice" is often accompanied by the belief that the adversary has wide freedom of choice. One's own alternatives are seen as extremely restricted; the other party's as wide open. "The decision on war and peace is up to you" is a statement which is frequently found in crises: in the Berlin crises, the Cuban crisis, the World War I crisis, in the various crises of the 1930s, usually uttered by Hitler. In the Cuban missile crisis, this type of perceptual

distortion was largely avoided on the U. S. side by the U. S. administration's extreme sensitivity to the dangers of getting the Russians "boxed in". Even in this case, however, with respect to the ultimate issue--whether the missiles would stay or go--the U. S. saw itself as having "no choice" but to get them out, whatever the consequences, while the Russians were perceived as having at least two options: leaving them in or taking them out.

The psychological reasons for this phenomenon are obscure. White attributes it to a lack of empathy: the statesman sees what he "must" do for his own state, but makes no attempt to appreciate the adversary's perspectives which may contain certain "musts" for him as well.* We

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*Ralph K. White, op. cit., pp. 22, 208, 242.

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can speculate further. Perhaps the one thing the statesman can be sure about in a highly uncertain situation is the "interests" of his own state; needing some kind of certainty to hang onto in a shifting, unpredictable situation, he seizes on this one and comes to believe that whatever the costs and consequences, the state's interests "must" be protected. The psychological comfort provided by the feeling of "no choice" has already been mentioned. The belief may arise from, or be rationalized by, considerations of domestic politics. Thus Kennedy believed, after he had set up the Cuban blockade, that he had had "no other choice", otherwise he would have been impeached.* The belief that the adversary does have

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*Robert F. Kennedy, op. cit., p. 67.

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multiple alternatives might be attributable to wishful thinking: the statesman wants so much for the adversary to behave in a way which preserves his state's interests that he lets himself believe that the

adversary <u>can</u> do so. Or as someone (I believe North and Holsti) has pointed out, each party tends to think the other's decision-making process is highly monolithic and co-ordinated: thus the opponent's choices are seen as not constrained by domestic pressures and conflicts.

An interesting comparison can be made here with Schelling's notion of "commitment". In Schelling's theory, a party <u>deliberately</u> arranges things so that all his options but one are foreclosed, while the adversary still has multiple options including "backing down". This is a calculated "tactic" designed to facilitate "winning". But as the foregoing remarks indicate, there are apparently strong psychological tendencies for both parties to feel that this <u>is</u> the condition that exists, without any tactics or moves being undertaken to arrange it that way. Statements to the effect that "we are committed, and you are not, so you must be the one to back down," may thus reflect how the parties really feel, and may not be mere tactical ploys. Further, if this psychological tendency operates symmetrically on both parties, it obviously tends to frustrate deliberate committal tactics, a la Schelling.

<u>Related but non-cataclysmic elements: prisoner's dilemma and miscalculation</u>

One thorny problem is how to distinguish "cataclysmic processes" from the operation of a prisoner's dilemma. In both cases, the parties wind up in an outcome which they both would have preferred to avoid. In both, something about "the situation" brings on mutual damage or disaster more or less "beyond the will" of the parties. An easy and somewhat superficial answer is to say that cataclysmic elements cause the parties "really" to lose control, whereas in a prisoner's dilemma, the parties retain control; they proceed to greater violence or war by conscious, calculated choice rather than because some accidental occurence wrests control of events from their hands. However, once the notion of "compulsion" is introduced as

a cataclysmic factor, the distinction is less clear. In "psychological compulsion", discussed above, the statesman technically does not "lose control"; he decides to act, he still controls events, even though he perceives the situation as giving him "no choice".

However, I believe the distinction can still be made and is worth making. There are both "strong" and "weak" versions of the prisoner's dilemma, the difference turning on lead-time considerations. In the strong version, war or escalation occurs because of incentives to "doublecross" the other party. The incentives exist largely because the doublecrossed party does not have time to redress the situation, to re-establish symmetry. The incentive for "offensive doublecross" is to obtain an immediate advantage which cannot be neutralized; the incentive for "defensive doublecross" is to pre-empt an opponent who is expected to doublecross. These kinds of incentives were at work in the 1914 mobilization race, in addition to the cataclysmic factors mentioned above. They operated through the widely held belief that "mobilization meant war" and the further belief that a considerable advantage would accrue to the side which mobilized and attacked first. The analogue in the nuclear age is of course the incentive to pre-empt when both sides have a nuclear "first-strike capability".

In the "weak" form there are no doublecross incentives. This is simply a situation in which both parties would rather fight (or escalate) than back down. There is no incentive to doublecross because there is no significant un-neutralizable advantage in moving first. If one party decides to attack or escalate, the other has time to cancel the first party's advantage, or limit its own losses, by an appropriate reaction.

"Cataclysmic compulsion" is superficially similar to this weak form of the prisoner's dilemma. One party commits an act which the other

considers an "affront", damaging to its prestige. The other wishes (feels compelled) to redress the damage, is able to do so, and does so (it could be argued) because the cost of reacting is less than the cost of accepting the humiliation. However, there is a crucial difference. In a prisoner's dilemma situation (both forms), action is taken after a process of reasoned calculation, a weighing of costs and benefits. In cataclysmic compulsion, the need to act stems from emotional drives, not calculation. I know that the concept of "emotion" is notoriously ambiguous; all "values" which are "calculated" are rooted in emotion in an ultimate and broad sense. The distinction, however, is not in terms of the values involved but in the mental process behind the act. Surely there is a difference, clearly revealed in empirical cases, between action taken under "blind" emotion, more or less regardless of risks and costs, and action following some sort of reasoned calculation. President Kennedy's fears of a Russian "spasm response" in the Cuban crisis were fears that they would escalate dangerously "without stopping to think," and that the United States might then do likewise. Alternatively, or to put a finer point on it, the statesman does "think" but what he thinks is that he "cannot accept" what the opponent has done; retaliation is seen as a kind of absolute imperative, not subject to cost-risk constraints. In sum, the fear of "events getting out of control" via cataclysmic compulsions is a fear that statesmen's "passions", or notions of absolute imperatives, may displace reason.

In one of his letters to Kennedy during the Cuban crisis, Krushchev said: "If you have not lost your self-control and sensibly conceive what this might lead to, then, Mr. President, we and you ought not to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And a moment

may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose." *

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*Robert F. Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 89-90.

Krushchev apparently was referring to the well-known phenomenon of both parties getting "locked in" by a process of commitment and counter-commitment. Superficially it might seem that getting locked in is one of our cataclysmic factors, since once this occurs "events are out of control" in the sense that war has become inevitable. However, I believe this is not properly classified as "cataclysmic" because the statesmen are still in control and they continue to act according to reasoned calculation even though their actions lead to war and they know it. What has happened is that incentive structures on both sides have been re-arranged so that it is now less costly to fight than to back away. The structure of the situation has been transformed from a chicken game to a (weak) prisoner's dilemma because the costs of "yielding" have sharply increased for both parties. Accidental, irrational and other cataclysmic elements might have entered into the creation of such a situation, but the situation itself, and what follows from it, should not be considered "cataclysmic".

The notion of "miscalculation" is rather similar. Of course, one form of miscalculation might be a failure to anticipate that one's own act might activate some cataclysmic factor--e.g., an irrational response by the adversary. It seems useful theoretically, however, to reserve this term to the rational bargaining dimension. Here, miscalculation means essentially a misperception of the opponent's interests and consequently

an erroneous prediction of his probable ("rational") response to one's own move. Or it could follow from a false perception of the opponent's expectations concerning one's own probable behavior. A familiar form of miscalculation is the mistaken belief that one's threat or commitment will induce the other party to concede--mistaken either because the commitment is not effectively communicated or because the other's value system is such that he prefers to risk high costs rather than yield. Miscalculation in this manner may of course result in both parties becoming "locked in" as discussed above.

Crisis Management and Manipulation of Risk

The notion of "crisis management", although not entirely clear in the literature, is largely concerned with "preserving control"--i.e. preventing "cataclysmic" elements from operating--and so is closely related to the present discussion. Conversely, Schelling's idea of "manipulating risk" involves, in large part, increasing the chances of "events getting out of control", or threatening to do so, as a coercive tactic. I hope to deal with these two subjects in a later paper.