

# Crisis Diplomacy

**Skepticism about  
Audience Costs**

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# Recap: Audience Cost Theory

- **Audience cost = penalty for backing down from threat**
- **Key assumptions**
  - **Increase over time in crisis**
  - **Higher for democracies**
- **Conclusions**
  - **Democratic peace**
  - **Democratic advantage vs. autocracies**

# Two Faces of Audience Cost Theory

- 1. Characterization of strategically optimal behavior for states in crises**
- 2. Explanation of actual patterns in real-world crises**

# Why Be Skeptical?

**Audience cost explanations seem ... weird.**

**Does the public *really* get mad when leaders are caught bluffing?**

**Does public clamor *really* push leaders into wars they don't want?**

# **Snyder and Borghard: Summary**

**Prongs of their argument against audience cost theory:**

- 1. Dependence on questionable assumptions**
- 2. Lack of empirical support**

# The Importance of Assumptions

**Does reliance on questionable assumptions matter?**

**It depends on the *purpose* the theory is used for.**

# Questionable Assumptions

(per Snyder and Borghard)

- 1. Leaders try to tie their hands**
- 2. Publics care about word-deed consistency**
- 3. Audience costs are large**
- 4. Targets of threats understand audience costs**

# Questionable Assumptions

***(1) "Leaders seek lock-in, not flexibility."***

- Actually a conclusion, not an assumption**
- So why don't leaders play along?**
  - Don't want to win?**
  - Risk aversion?**
  - Unknown unknowns?**



# Questionable Assumptions

***(2) "Publics care a great deal about consistency between threats and deeds, independent of their preferences on policy substance."***

- Critical for both purposes of theory**
- Substantive preferences can matter**
  - "Baked into" cost of war and benefit of victory**
  - Invariant over time**

# Questionable Assumptions

***(3) "Domestic audience costs are substantial, independent of other reputational considerations."***

- Extension of previous point**
- Even backing down immediately may have costs**
- Audience costs = additional penalty**

# Questionable Assumptions

***(4) "The targets of threats understand domestic audience costs mechanisms and expect them to be decisive."***

- Crucial for both purposes of theory**
- Common knowledge**
  - Relative ability to generate audience costs**
  - Rules of the game**

# Hypotheses

- **Autocracies are unlikely to stand firm when threatened by democracies**
- **Democracies are unlikely to back down after making a threat**
- **Democratic leaders are likely to be punished if they back down**

# How to Test?

- **Statistical inference**
- **Experiments**
- **Case studies**

# Case Study Method

## 1. Collect relevant cases

- Crises involving democracies and autocracies

## 2. Determine in each case:

- Did the outcome match the theoretical prediction?
- Did it match for the *reason* the theory suggests?

# Audience Costs in the Cuban Missile Crisis

- **Top-line predictions borne out**
  - **U.S. (democracy) issues public threat**
  - **Soviet Union (autocracy) backs down**
- **But were audience costs at work?**

# Audience Costs in the Cuban Missile Crisis

- **U.S. decisions**
  - **Public opinion pre-crisis**
  - **"You've got to move immediately, or ... you're going to have a lot of instability in this country"**
  - **Was Kennedy locked in? Did he want to be?**
- **Soviet decisions**
  - **Why mention the Turkish missiles publicly?**



# Snyder and Borghard: Conclusions

- **Audience cost theory relies on questionable assumptions**
- **Case studies don't support predictions or mechanisms**
- **Audience costs play a secondary role at best**

# Problems

"All Else Equal"

**Does the theory really imply that audience costs are the primary determinant of crisis outcomes?**

# Problems

## Selection Bias

**If audience costs really did work as promised, wouldn't it be rare for leaders to pay them?**

# For Next Time

- **Read Gaubatz, "Democratic States and Commitment in International Relations" (JSTOR)**

# Image Sources

— **JFK:** **Wikimedia Commons**