

Outlines of Schelling's two books, *Strategy and Conflict* and *Strategy and Arms Control*, their tensions, and my thoughts on the tensions.

### **Strategy of Conflict**

- Assume a non-pure conflict where winning does not require total annihilation of the other side but advancement of one's interests. Strategy here concerns with bargaining, or manipulation of risk. It concerns with changing variables within our control to influence the other side in ways we want. This includes convincing the other side that such variables within our control are not so. Also possible is changing such variables to a point where key variables, such as whether to engage in a general war, go out of our control so as to threaten the other side with that possibility.
- This view of strategy relies on knowing perfectly well how the other side's value system, beliefs, preferences, and others change based on change of one or more variables in our control.
- Schelling's view also assumes lack of blind trust on both sides. Any trust is based on evidence – our insane actions that make the other side trust we will use force even if it harms us also, our promise whose fulfillment is in line with our long-term strategic interests anyway, etc.
- In this strategic environment each side is gauging how one's actions influence the other and how the other side is thinking along the same lines and how that should influence one's own actions and how that change may in turn influence the other and so on.
- At its core is believability. The other side must believe we mean to attack if we move forces to a certain location in response to the other side's undesirable action.
- Irrefutably unchangeable variables like time and geography aid strategizing. There are also institutional and structural elements, like publicity and use of bargaining agent, among others. Negotiating tactics like restricting agenda are also central.
- Along these lines, a threat can have impact without believability of intent if that threat can be perceived by the other side as beyond our full control and we are perceived as willing – or unable to do otherwise – to let the situation advance to that level. Without making the threat 100% certain to be carried out, creating the probability of its being carried out can keep the adversary refrain from stirring the pot. Increase in this probability should be linked with the adversary's undesirable actions.
- In preventing a nuclear conflict preventing incentive to strike first is essential. Ensuring our second-strike capability is one solution. Keeping large nuclear arsenal on both sides can provide more security, paradoxically, as it makes potential for cheating by either side more manageable. And each side must be certain by manipulation of risk that the other is not planning an attack on them.

## **Strategy and Arms Control**

- At the core of this book is mutual understanding and reciprocity in actions.
- The first mutual understanding and the bedrock is that both sides have more to gain from stability and peace than from open military conflicts.
- Therefore the shared objective becomes agreements between them to reduce the risk of conflicts arising from misunderstandings. And this involves reducing the incentive to attack first.
- An agreement can range from a formal treaty with detailed specifications to explicit but informal understandings and tacit understandings and self-restraint contingent on each other's behavior. It is a mutually understood change in behavior based on some common understanding.
- Because types of mischief one side can do against the other is nearly limitless, formal agreements are ill-suited to guard against them. Implicit agreement that neither will commit any such mischief is more appropriate for guarding against them.
- Making such agreements work even without written contracts is the element of reciprocity. Sharing same objective, one side, upon observing the other side's action irrefutably intended for peace, reciprocates in kind.
- Types of collaborative action, on the other hand, are rather finite and can be more conveniently written into an agreement. Such formal agreements are also essential to arms control.
- In achieving and maintaining these formal agreements many elements are involved: content of the agreement itself, how that content is perceived and can lead to, avoiding cheating, negotiating tactics and process, available intelligence, and so on. Given all such elements one can ascertain the seriousness of the other side and the likelihood the other side would cheat and how to preempt such cheating.

### **The Tension between the Two Books**

- The Strategy of Conflict (SoC) centers on one-sided action to change the other side's behavior in a way that differs from our action and that we desire. The Strategy and Arms Control (SAC) centers on agreements, mutual understanding, and the role of reciprocity.
- SoC deemphasizes direct, honest communication with the other side and emphasizes our actions that forcibly change the other side's thinking. SAC focuses on establishing agreement through such communication and using actions to back up that agreement. SAC also touches on using actions to ensure motive for preemptive attack is minimized or eliminated.
- In SoC stability is achieved by creating circumstances that convince the other side to take actions we want. In SAC stability is achieved by agreements of varying types, as previously mentioned.

### **My Thoughts**

- A raw international system is anarchy. No global constitution exists that guides statesmen on what the other statesmen would do when. This void is filled by chance, which states can try to eliminate. Leaving more of a state's survival to chance leads to less stability. Leaving less of it to chance leads to more stability.
- Statesmen can rely on human nature as a substitute for global constitution. They can also use interstate agreements that also provide varying predictability.
- Manipulation of risk relies on human nature – more precisely, specific individuals in each state. The preferences of these individuals rely on the political climate in each country and many other variables. Many of these variables have not been identified by scholars or policymakers. And these individuals and such variables change over time, at least every 4 years in the US.
- Such manipulation can therefore be shaky and at worst entirely false even if the side manipulating feels confident. The basis on which the manipulation is founded can only be illusive and inconsistent.
- In business it is often said that all plans, however logically sound and well thought out by brilliant people, are guesses. By testing the plans against the reality and iterating one can better eliminate the chance involved. This testing revolves around communicating with the other side and coming to an agreement – a transaction – or a disagreement.

- In the international arena, dealing with non-nuclear issues, communicating with the other side and coming to an agreement – verbal, written, bilateral, multilateral, etc. – can also reduce chance. Through step-by-step verbal and written communication one can gauge the other side’s real thinking. Mixed into these steps can be actions, by us or the other side, that either clarify the verbal and written communications or communicate certain points more clearly than words would. This is where manipulation of risk can optimally be used, but only as a supplement to the verbal and written communications. Even if our action causes the other side to take a certain action, if our action is not publicly linked to the ongoing verbal-written communication, we cannot be certain how the other side construed our action and what that side’s action means, given unknown variables. A causality that is apparent to us may not be apparent to the other side.
- For example, in increasing the probability of our actions inadvertently leading to an all-out war, we are relying entirely on how the other side views the probability. If that probability is off by a few percentage points, from 49 to 51, then depending on the nature of the issue, everything can blow up – literally. This approach assumes we know everything there is to know about the other side’s view of the reality even as the reality changes with each minute.
- A better way is to mean what we say. If we say the other side’s aggression is worth our all-out attack, we should move our forces to achieve exactly that from the get-go, and again make our entreaties. This also establishes our reputation and we may not need to repeat such actions later, provided our successors pledge to follow. And it would improve negotiations to achieve an agreement as our words would mean more. Hence “manipulation of risk” should be more a communication of actual risk to the other side, rather than manipulation of it.
- Relying on existing studies to make these decisions can be useful. But to rely on them solely would be as dangerous as relying solely on the imperfect medical science of the 1990s – or even of today. While solution for cancer may exist, we currently don’t know all the mechanisms that lead to that solution. Similarly in foreign policy, given the effort and time needed to prove causality, little of the full reality has so far been captured, while the problems policymakers face require immediate action. Engineers, on the other hand, do not have this problem as they implement only what science has so far uncovered. While so much more is possible, natural scientists and engineers can show only a fraction of it, and still be seen as masters of reality (my brother is a geneticist and I spent some time as an engineer, so not disparaging them).
- Hence again is the need for rapid, tightly-intertwined diplomacy and actions to establish explicit and hidden truths behind each side. Simultaneously more studies should be done to uncover more of the reality, as they can be enough for some problems and in many cases can guide toward the right solution. What’s important is their methodology.
- The end goal of all this remains an agreement that reduces chance long-term regardless of changing variables. This agreement is also subject to change in execution, as the variables change. But even if one side disregards it, the agreement still provides a

benchmark that all the other sides can use to more precisely gauge that side's thinking. If the other side acts dishonestly, that in itself is also a reality we can use.

- Schelling also notes the benefit of such agreement extending beyond itself:  
“...significance of any of these modes of negotiation is not to be judged solely by the signed or ratified document that may emerge to record an explicit agreement, but also why whether certain rules, restraints, traditions, better understandings or cooperative actions result from the negotiations, even in the absence of any formal success embodied in official documents. Understandings reached, bargains struck, inhibitions created, and agreements crystallized, as an apparent by-product of negotiations, may well be more important than the particular agreement that is reached or not reached in the formal negotiations (p. 85).”
- So an “agreement” can take forms of not only written words but also irrefutably agreed upon understandings of each other. Based on this clear understanding, potential impact of our future actions becomes clearer.
- The problem with nuclear posture is slightly different. All variables, known and unknown, come down to a single metric: unacceptable destruction of one's country. One side's manipulating of risk to reduce the chance of the other side attacking first, if known to the other side as such and reciprocated, can in fact reduce that chance; the world has not had an exchange of nuclear attacks. At the same time, signed agreements to pursue exactly this can make that reduction in chance formal. Such agreements can therefore increase perceived stability even as real stability remains the same. And this perceived stability may count if an overriding unpredictability enters the calculation, such as a person without a sense of risk – if such a person can exist – seizing power.
- Agreements and manipulation of risk are therefore best when they go together. In non-nuclear issues, agreements in the driver's seat with manipulation of risk supporting them can be ideal. In nuclear posture, depending on the circumstances, the two standing on equal footing may be better.
- Discussions so far have focused on situations where trust is possible. But agreements can cause problems if one or more sides are determined to be hostile now or later, the way Hitler was. Facing such an enemy it would make sense to have manipulation of risk take a larger role. Skilled communications in both words and actions can help ascertain whether the other side is hostile or willing to pursue peace, the way Reagan and Gorbachev established relations – although I know no details other than that they talked frequently and reduced tensions. Parties already at open war, as in Syria or Bosnia, often make their hostilities abundantly explicit.
- Often correctly predicting the other side's future actions can aid today's decisions. For this we can form hypotheses. Assuming that the US actively gathers and interprets intelligence on the issue at hand, combined with the information gathered from diplomacy, we can form credible hypotheses on the other side's motive and other governing factors. Based on these hypotheses we can predict their future actions.

- To ensure the hypotheses disappoint less often, bars for validation should be set high. And bars for invalidation should be kept ruthlessly and we should err on the side of invalidating.