

ALTERED PERCEPTIONS: THE EFFECT OF ATTRIBUTION ERRORS ON THE
ESCALATION DYNAMICS OF SINO-AMERICAN CRISES

by

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(Under the Direction of Brock Tessman)

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the relationship between Attribution Theory, a major field from Social Psychology, and international crises by analyzing the effects of attribution errors on the escalation dynamics of Sino-American crises. It finds that perceptual inaccuracies such as attribution errors do play a tremendous role in the unintended escalation and/or de-escalation of key Sino-American crises of the past 50 years, including the Korean War (1950-53), the Vietnam War (1959-75), the Chinese Embassy Bombing (1999), and the EP-3/Spy-plane Incident (2001). By understanding the historical implications of such perceptual errors, both American and Chinese decision-makers should be more capable of preventing the undesired escalation of bilateral crises.

INDEX WORDS: Attribution Theory, International Crises, Sino-American Relations, Korean War, Vietnam War, Chinese Embassy Bombing, EP-3/Spy-Plane Incident

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DEDICATION

To my parents, John and Cathy Clary

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Despite considerable focus that has been placed on the study of international crises, the unintended escalation of crises continues to be one of the least understood occurrences in international relations. While it is well-understood why some types of crisis tend to escalate from a seemingly inconspicuous event to all-out war, other types, particularly those in which none of the states involved desired for escalation, continue to occur without sufficient explanation. In this sense, gaining a better understanding of the relationship between state-actors involved in a crisis and the escalation dynamics of such crises should be a primary concern. Perhaps the reason that scholars and decision-makers alike continue to be perplexed by such crises is the disconnect that seems to exist between research on the escalation dynamics of international crises and the extensive literature within the field of Social Psychology on fundamental cognitive functions such as the attribution error. This is not to suggest that scholars in either field have failed to make extensive connections between the basic ideas of the two fields, but that this type of integrative research has been limited in its applicability and appeal thus far. In this sense, one of the goals of this study is to broaden the scope of the integration between the fields of Social Psychology and International Relations to help approach elemental topics such as the unintended escalation of international crises through a different, and perhaps more helpful lens. Along these lines, this study will use the knowledge accumulated on the subject of attribution theory, and more specifically on the occurrence of attribution errors, in Social Psychological research and apply it the escalation dynamics of Sino-American crises. It is this new approach that should allow us to address the question of why some crises in international relations escalate unexpectedly and others do not?

Attribution errors are often referred to as one of the most fundamental roots of Social Psychology, as they are a regular occurrence in nearly every interaction between individuals, groups, and likely even states in the international system (Ross 1977; Gilbert and Malone 1995). Consequently, it seems intuitive that any study of interactions between various actors, including crises involving the interaction of two or more states, should begin with such fundamental errors. Gilbert and Malone (1995, 1) characterize attribution errors as the tendency for individuals to make inferences about another's disposition from their behavior without accounting for situational factors acting upon the other individual that may explain such behavior. For example, imagine if you observed a person kicking a vending machine for no apparent reason. You are likely to assume that the person is generally an angry person. Now imagine that the same vending machine takes your money without providing the soda that you ordered and you kick it. You would argue that when *you* kicked the vending machine, the behavior was normal given the situation and did not suggest that you are an angry person. The problem is that you assumed the best of yourself and the worst of the other person without taking into account the potential situational factors that were acting upon the other person (i.e. that the machine potentially took the other person's money as well, thus suggesting that their behavior was perfectly normal given the situation). In this sense, your initial dispositional inference would have been in error. Although your assumption that the other person was a generally angry person would unlikely have any negative ramifications, imagine that you and the other individual were two states involved in a crisis and the act of kicking the vending machine was a seemingly aggressive mobilization of military forces by the other state. In this regard, an inaccurate dispositional inference such as unnecessary aggression or hostility by the other state is likely to have tremendous ramifications for future interactions within the crisis, potentially increasing the

likelihood that the crisis would escalate to war. It is precisely this occurrence that this study hopes to capture and understand.

In the example above, it was the occurrence *and* the perpetuation of the attribution error that increased the likelihood for escalation. While an attribution error is likely to create an inaccurate perception of the other state in such cases, its continuation is preventable if the necessary situational correction is made to correct the inaccurate perception. A situational correction of an attribution error is an action taken by the perceiving actor that takes the situational factors acting upon the other actor during the initial perception into account and checks the new information obtained against the dispositional inference to determine if such a characterization was accurate. In this regard, the remedy for any attribution error is to sufficiently consider all of the situational conditions present at the time of the other actor's behavior and determine if the other actor was behaving in the perceived manner because it always acts in such a manner or because of the particular situation it was acting under. While such corrections are not always possible, as they require a good deal of information about the situation and the other actor that may not be obtainable, their absence is a good indicator that an attribution error is likely to have occurred.

While previous theories of crisis escalation may be able to predict that the crisis in the example above would be likely to escalate to war, none focus exclusively on the relationship between psychological explanations for state behavior and the effect that that behavior has on the escalation dynamics of an international crisis. Although attribution errors are a particular type of perceptual error, a concept that is well developed in international relations by scholars such as Robert Jervis, this study is more than just a simple addition to such theories. This study sets out to utilize the abundant information available regarding attribution theory and crisis escalation to

better explain why some states involved in crises, provided that all parties involved desire peace, are able to negotiate a peaceful settlement, while others are not. To accomplish this, I intend to draw upon Fearon's rationalist explanation for conflict in which he suggests that the anarchic nature of international politics, the difficulty associated with the collection of credible information about an adversary's capabilities, resolve, or intentions, and the incentive for states to misrepresent their true capabilities, resolve, or intentions increase the likelihood that states, that otherwise would desire peace, will go to war with each other. Although this rationalist theory of conflict provides a logical story for why states that do not desire conflict with each other end up at war none the less, it fails to explain exactly why this may be the case. It is this gap that this study hopes to fill in the sense that attribution theory is able to explain why problems associated with the collection of credible information in international politics cause states to make inaccurate perceptions of each other's behavior and dispositions, which can in turn initiate a spiraling of tensions that often results in conflict. In this regard, attribution errors act as a theoretical bridge between the rationalist assumption of information problems in international politics and the eventual occurrence of conflict in some cases.

Although the primary focus of this study is on the relationship between the occurrence of attribution errors and the escalation or de-escalation of international crises, it will also argue and test the effect of attribution errors on international crises *within* enduring rivalries. Enduring rivalries are those relationships between two or more states in the international system that experience long-lasting competition over salient concerns such as territory and thus suffer a great deal of crises during the course of the rivalry. As many of these crises tend to escalate to unintended levels, such relationships should be valuable to our study of the effect of attribution errors on the escalation dynamics of international crises. As attribution errors are the product of

insufficient information about a particular situation or another actor, we should expect to see more attribution errors being made under conditions where the actors involved are relatively unfamiliar with each other's behavioral tendencies. Along these lines, we might expect to see more attribution errors being made and perpetuated in crises, and thus more escalation of crises, in the first few years of a rivalry, as the states involved are likely to know very little about the behavioral tendencies of each other under the conditions of such a rivalry. As the states interact with each other more and more, they are likely to be more aware of the behavioral tendencies of each other overtime. In this sense, we would expect to observe fewer attribution errors being made and/or perpetuated in crises in the later years of an enduring rivalry. For our purposes, the relationship between China and the United States meets the criteria of an enduring rivalry, as it is a long-standing, competitive relationship that has experienced a large number of crises over tangible concerns such as the sovereignty of Taiwan. As this is the case, we will be able to use Sino-American crises to test the hypothesis that crises occurring during the early years of an enduring rivalry are more prone to escalation, while those occurring during later years are less likely to escalate.

The following section is intended to provide a substantive background of Sino-American relations as well as to explain why Sino-American crises were chosen as the cases to be studied, with a preview of the remainder of the paper at the conclusion.

Overview of Sino-American Relations (1949-2001)

The relationship between the People's Republic of China and the United States began in 1949 upon the evacuation of the government of the Republic of China under the rule of Chiang Kai-Shek to Taiwan. In the early years of the relationship, the two nations were at odds over

most issues, with particular interest being paid by both sides to the question of the rightful ruler of China. The Communists, led by Mao Zedong, argued that they were the sole and rightful rulers of all of China, including Taiwan, while the Americans refused to recognize the rule of the Communist party and continued their support of the Guomintang (KMT) government of Chiang Kai-Shek exiled on Taiwan. In 1950, the United States, as part of a United Nations peacekeeping force, invaded the Korean Peninsula in order to repel the invasion of South Korea by the Communist-controlled North. As China was a young and potentially vulnerable nation and had aligned itself with the Soviet Union and North Korea after its inception in 1949, it had a vested interest in the events transpiring on the Korean Peninsula. After the counter-attack by United States' led forces to the border between North and South Korea, Chinese-led forces moved below the Yalu River and attacked the U.N. led force on behalf of the North Koreans. While the Korean War was originally a civil war between North and South Korea that ended in an armistice and the creation of the demilitarized zone on the 38th parallel in 1953, the war represents the only case in Sino-American relations that escalated to direct war between the two nations.

Sino-American relations did not warm much after the Korean War as the Cold War continued to rage on and the United States continued to oppose the spread of Communism around the world. It was this pursuit that led to the American involvement in the Vietnam War many years later. The Vietnam War was, much like the Korean War, a civil war between the Northern and Southern parts of Vietnam primarily over the issue of Communism. As the Americans joined the side of South Vietnam to help assist their fight against the Communist-led North, the Chinese supported North Vietnam's attempts to unite the nation under their rule. While the Chinese and the Americans did not fight directly in the Vietnam War, the Chinese consistently made threats that they would get involved in the conflict directly and send troops to

the aid of the North. By the end of the conflict, the United States and China had taken several steps to formalize relations after the success of Ping-Pong diplomacy as well as Richard Nixon's well-publicized visit to China in 1972 and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, in which the two nations announced their intention to normalize relations and in which the United States acknowledged, however ambiguously, that Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau were all part of 'one-China,' which was led by the mainland. Although formal relations were not to be established until several years later during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, this document continues to serve as the fundamental basis for the Sino-American relationship.

As this ambiguous 'one-China' policy has been the basis for relations between the two nations for the past forty or so years, the relationship has been unable to move beyond key issues such as the sovereignty of Taiwan or human rights in China and has thus been hampered to some degree. These disparities have established a constant rift between the two nations often resulting in growing and retracting tensions that increase the potential for bilateral crises such as the three Taiwan Straits Crises between 1954-55, 1958, and 1995-1996. This unvarying division between China and the United States not only limits the amount of cooperation that is possible between the two nations, but also creates a wave-like pattern of relations that experiences emotional highs and lows moving from one bilateral crisis to the next. This wave-like nature of relations creates a cycle (Figure 1) that can be broken up into four sectors: punishment and isolation, reassessment and opening, high and unrealistic expectations, and mutual disillusionment and recrimination (Puska 1998, 1-4).

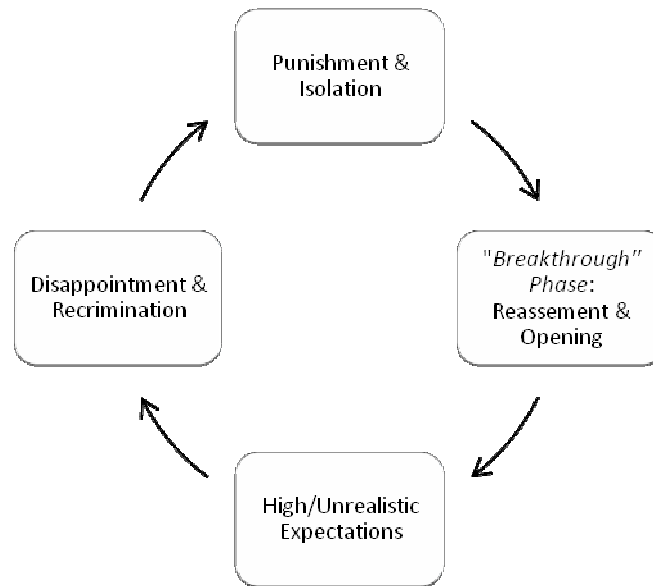


Figure 1: Sino-American Cyclic Paradigm¹

In the punishment and isolation phase, there is little, if any rhetoric or cooperation between the two nations. This period occurs after a bilateral incident that creates a rift between the two nations. A few examples of bilateral incidents that created a division between the two nations are the Tiananmen Square incident (1989), the ‘accidental’ American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999), or the EP-3 or ‘Spy-plane’ incident (2001). It is during the first phase that there is a “danger that those on both sides who oppose constructive engagement between the two nations will use this period to vilify their opponent and raise the level of rhetoric and tension” (Smith 2001, 1). The next phase, reassessment and opening, is categorized by relations recovering from the split created by a bilateral incident. This phase usually begins with the opening of dialogue between the two nations, followed by a re-examination of their relationship that results in the creation of several broad goals to be achieved through this new opening. The third phase, high and unrealistic expectations, is a result of the opening phase’s increasing optimism and goal-establishing mentality. This phase is further characterized by the

¹ Adapted from Puska (1998, 3).

nearly universal belief that relations between the two nations is warming and that other bilateral incidents will be avoided in the future. This leads to the fourth phase in which disappointment and recrimination results from the reality that only smaller goals had been achieved since the second phase, causing most actors involved to become disenchanted with the state of relations. This phase creates tension and apprehension between the two nations until the next bilateral incident occurs, resulting in the cycle beginning over again with the first phase.

Another key component that has governed Sino-American relations is a mutual perception gap (see Figure 2) between the two nations based on key philosophical and cultural differences. This fissure between China and the United States exists on several different levels of each nation's government and society. Perhaps the most significant difference between Chinese and American philosophy is their overall method of 'thinking:' correlative (Chinese) vs. causal (American). Puska (1998) argues that this gap is based on several different factors, the first being the 'form-substance gap,' based on opposing perceptions of time. For the Chinese, time is open-ended and without a beginning or an end, implying that time is eternal and thus has little or no value. On the other hand, Americans tend to believe that time has both a beginning and an ending. This sense of time is based heavily in the Judea-Christian tradition, which establishes that time began when God created man and the Earth around him, known as Genesis, and that time will eventually come to an end, known as Armageddon. In this sense, Americans tend to view time as fleeting and are inclined to focus more on the future than on the past. This belief that time is fleeting makes Americans "impatient for change," often clashing with the "seemingly eternal patience of the Chinese" (Puska 1998, 7).

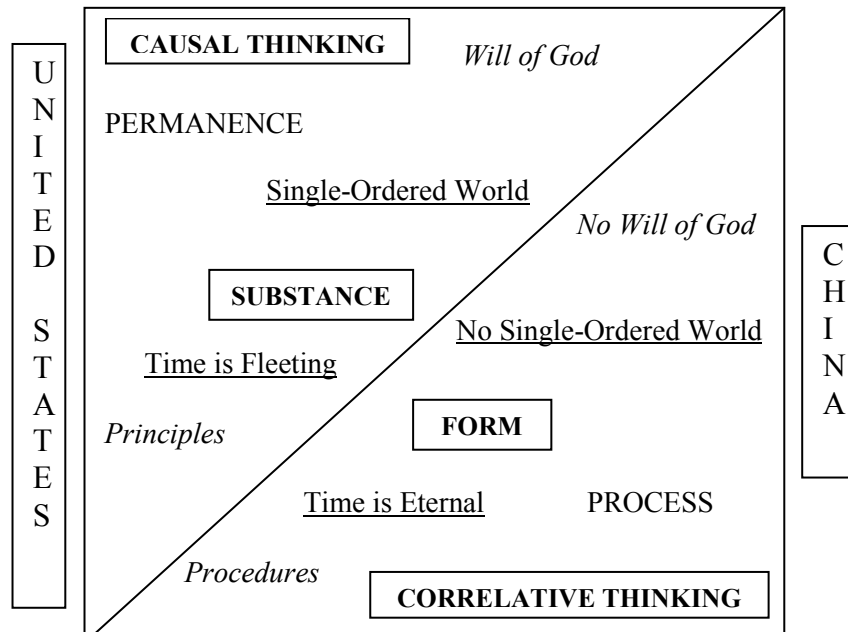


Figure 2: ‘Mutual Perception Gap’ in Sino-American Relations²

The clash of American impatience and Chinese patience can be seen in many of the interactions between the two nations. In diplomatic meetings between the officials of both nations, success is measured very differently by both sides. The Chinese measure success based on form, such as the involvement of a high-level official in the summit through an office call that is often deemed as inappropriate by the American representatives at the meeting. Americans characterize success based on more substantive matters, such as the material discussed or agreed upon during the meeting. During such meetings, both sides are predisposed to fail to meet the fundamental standards of the other side, causing one or both sides to feel offended. For the Chinese, this means that the potential for further discussions on substantive matters (however slim) will be reduced. For the Americans, the lack of substance in the meeting with the Chinese cause them to become offended as well, “fueling distrust” and raising concerns over the utility of meetings between the two nations, making future high-level contacts unlikely as well as

² Adapted from Puska (1998, 8).

increasing the occurrence of bilateral incidents between the two nations (Puska 1998, 5-6). It is this perceptual gap that makes Sino-American crises generally more prone to attribution errors and why such crises were chosen for this study.

As this is a study of the effect of attribution errors on the escalation dynamics of international crises, we are interested in finding a set of crises that achieved varying degrees of escalation. To find such cases, I used the Correlates of War's five-stage hostility rating system in a search of Sino-American crises and found four cases that achieved different levels of hostility, or escalation between the years of 1950 and 2001. These cases include the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and the Hainan Island Incident, more commonly referred to as the EP-3 or 'Spy-plane' incident. In each of these cases, we will first determine if an attribution error was made by either the Americans or the Chinese. If an error was made, we will then observe whether or not the nation that made the error also made a situational correction. If they did, then we would expect to observe that the event or crisis would de-escalate prior to reaching the next stage of escalation. If they did not make a situational correction, then we would expect to observe that the event or crisis would escalate to the next stage on the hostility rating system until either the error is corrected for or the crisis breaks out in direct warfare between the two sides.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, I will provide a review of the relevant literature on the various approaches to the study of state behavior within international crises and crisis escalation, with a particular focus on the psychological approach. I then will provide a similar review of the relevant literature on the attribution theory and attribution errors within the field of Social Psychology. From there, I begin building a theory on the effect of the attributional process on the escalation dynamics of Sino-American crises as well as on the Sino-American rivalry. The

next two sections will consist of empirical studies of four bilateral events/crises involving the United States and China from 1950-2001 to test the theoretical argument developed in the previous section. A final section will assert the central conclusions as well as the potential policy implications of the study.

Chapter 2

State Decision-Making and Behavior in International Crises

This chapter will serve as a review of the relevant literature within the field of international relations on international crises. Of particular interest will be literature on various theories of decision-making and state-behavior, such as the rational choice approach, prospect theory, and the psychological approach. The chapter will begin with a brief discussion comparing and contrasting the psychological approach, the rational choice approach, and prospect theory in international relations. This will be followed by a discussion of work conducted on the subject of cognitive explanations for state behavior and decision-making within international conflict, with specific detail applied to the work on perception and misperception by Robert Jervis. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of the relevant literature on the subject of crisis escalation, providing a general overview of the work conducting on the topic up to date.

Literature on International Crisis Behavior and Decision-Making

As this study is an analysis of the relationship between attribution errors and escalation within international crises, an investigation of the relevant literature on international crises and crisis behavior is required. The study of state behavior in regards to the escalation (or lack thereof) of an international crisis is well-developed and consists of various explanations in the form of differing and often competing models of conflict and escalation-processes within crises. These competing models of behavior within international crises are the rational-choice approach, prospect theory, and the psychological approach. Analyses that use the rational-choice approach begin with the fundamental assumption that decision-makers are rational, utility-maximizers that

make “purposive choices, that they survey their environment and, to the best of their ability, choose the strategy that best meets their subjectively defined goals” (Lake and Powell 1999, 6-7). In this sense, actors can be thought of as having a ranking order of preferences regarding interactions within the international system, the highest of which is the preservation of state sovereignty followed closely by the establishment and perpetuation of peace if that state’s security is not threatened. Using such preferences, we would then expect that in situations in which a state’s vital security interests are relatively unthreatened, that state would desire and pursue the peaceful resolution to disagreements with other states. However, as we noted in the introduction, the unintended occurrence of conflict between two states that did not initially desire such conflict is a relatively common feature of international politics. The question then becomes, why does such conflict continue to occur if it is arguably ‘irrational’ for such conflict to occur in the first place?

In a study utilizing a rationalist lens to analyze the phenomenon of the unintended occurrence of conflict, Fearon (1995, 400) found that the “combination of private information about relative power or will and the strategic incentive to misrepresent these afford a tenable rationalist explanation for war.” He contends that even in cases in which both states desire a peaceful resolution, the uncertainty, or the lack of credible information, about another state’s capabilities or resolve increases the risk for conflict. This is the case because states often have an incentive to misrepresent their intentions in bargaining with an opponent due to their desire to obtain a favorable resolution to the issues at stake in a particular conflict, which encourages them to exaggerate their true willingness or capability to fight. This results in states being unwilling to share private information that would more clearly reveal their will or capabilities to fight. In the event that a state has the opportunity to reveal its interests in the issue at stake it considers vital

enough to fight over, the chance of war by miscalculation is likely to decrease. However, Fearon notes that such announcements revealing a state's true intentions are rare and often unsuccessful because of the incentive for states to provide inaccurate information about their resolve and capabilities in order to gain a more favorable outcome during bargaining with its adversary. He contends that if such an announcement is observed to have no effect on either state's payoffs regarding the bargaining phase, the risk of war will be the same as a situation in which no announcement was made.

Fearon (410) continues by pointing out that while rationalist explanations for war such as anarchy, the incentive to misrepresent one's capabilities and resolve, and commitment problems are constant features of international relations, they are unable to explain why states are able to "strike a bargain preferable to war in one instance but not another." He suggests that "specific models in which commitment or information problems operate allow one to analyze how different variables" make war more likely in some cases and less likely in others. For our purposes, we are interested in creating a model of how information problems, such as the lack of credible information, information asymmetries, or the misrepresentation of critical information, operate within international crises in order to analyze how attribution errors affect the escalation dynamics of Sino-American crises. In this sense, attribution errors offer one potential answer to the prevailing question of conflict research: why are states able to reach a peaceful settlement prior to war in some cases and not in others when the states involved desired peace?

In contrast to the rational choice approach, analyses that use prospect theory are interested in modeling real-life decision-making rather than optimal decision-making by looking at the particular preferences of a state in cases where the outcome is uncertain. Prospect theory utilizes the manner in which decision-makers frame things in terms of losses and gains in order

to predict whether an actor's behavior will be risk-acceptant or risk-avoidant. As was the case with the rational choice approach, prospect theory provides another lens by which the behavior of states within crises can be viewed. If State A is in a losses-frame over a territorial dispute with State B for example, we would expect that State A's decision-makers to be risk-acceptant in interactions with State B over that territory. Along these lines, if State B's decision-makers are aware that State A's decision-makers are risk-acceptant regarding the disrupted territory, they are likely to alter their behavior, assuming they wish to avoid conflict, by carefully considering the impact that future statements and actions might have on State A's response. However, what happens if State B (1) is unable to discern what frame State A is acting under, or even worse, (2) inaccurately discerns the frame that State A is acting under? As was the case with rationalist explanations for conflict behavior, the constant feature of information problems in international politics makes the accurate perception of an adversary's frame difficult to determine, which in turn increases the prospect that attribution errors will be made regarding a state's frame as well.

As was mentioned above, attribution theory is a study of the particular perceptual frame that an actor is acting under. Continuing the example from above, if State B's decision-makers were to inaccurately perceive the particular frame that the decision-makers from State A were acting under, their behavior would likely provoke an unexpected and perceptually negative response from State A. For example, if State B perceived State A to be acting under a gains-frame regarding the territory in dispute, they are more likely to act aggressively in the dispute because they perceive that State A will most likely not respond if the cost of the response is too high—thus State B's decision-makers' goal would be to make the cost of responding to its actions unnecessarily high. The problem is that their original attribution of a gains-frame to State B was in error, which is precisely the type of interaction that attribution theory is able to explain.

Finally, research utilizing the psychological approach is concerned with analyzing the operational environment of the actor's involved and how the environment is perceived by key decision-makers. Mor (1993, 3) argues that this approach is subjective in nature because a crisis is a "phenomenon whose existence depends on the perceptions of decision makers." He (4) continues by suggesting that these perceptions can be divided into two basic groups of factors that impact the functioning of decision makers: "personality factors (which include individuals' personality structures, belief systems, and related images) and situational variables (which refer to environmental changes and their relation to individuals' motivations and cognitive performance)." The psychological approach is thus primarily focused on explaining how these factors (dispositional and situational in nature) shape the behavior of actors within crises. Perhaps more important for this paper is explaining how these same factors shape the behavior of actors in direct relation to their perceptions of another's behavior within crises, as it is the perception of another's behavior that helps to determine how one will act towards that other actor.

Cognitive Explanations for State Behavior in International Conflict

The area of particular interest within the psychological approach is literature on the subject of cognitive factors that affect a state's behavior within international crises and conflict. The first scholar to meaningfully bring the fields of psychology and international relations together was Robert Jervis in his seminal work, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Jervis sought to synthesize valuable research on the psychological dimension of decision-making from the field of psychology with research on state behavior and interaction within international conflict. Along these lines, Jervis analyzed the emotional and cognitive

domains of decision-making to formulate a better understanding of why states may behave in the manner that they do. Of particular interest was to gain a better understanding of how perception and misperception by states involved in a conflict may help to determine various outcomes of interest in international relations. While not focused exclusively on the subject of attribution errors, Jervis' work includes a discussion of many of the same concepts involved with such perceptual errors—such as the formation of images of other actors in conflict, the role of attitude change in light of discrepant information, and the tendency for actors to perceive other actors as less calculating than they are. In this sense, Jervis' work is focused on a multitude of perceptual errors, while this study is limited to one specific perceptual error.

That being said, Jervis' work provides a jumping off point for gaining a better understanding of misperception within international crises. For example, Jervis (1976, 68) argues that decision-makers often infer other states' intentions based solely on their military posture without taking into account external forces that may have encouraged or forced such a policy. He continues by suggesting that “a peaceful state knows that it will use its arms only to protect itself, not to harm others” and “further assumes that others are fully aware of this.” This phenomenon is the product of the attribution process in the sense that actors are incapable of viewing the internal dynamics of another actor's decision-making process and must make attributions about another's behavior based solely on their behavior when checked against prior expectations. Along similar lines, actors are also likely to make misperceptions because they are acting under the false assumption that other actors are able to perceive their intentions and behavior clearly. These occurrences result in perpetuation of the initial misperception through inaccurate policies by the perceiving actor such as incorrect signaling (i.e. making threats when they should be making concessions, or the corollary). Jervis (72) continues by suggesting that:

When the state believes that the other knows that it is not threatening the other's legitimate interests, disputes are likely to produce antagonism out of all proportion to the intrinsic importance of the issue at stake. Because the state does not think that there is any obvious reason why the others should oppose it, it will draw inferences of unprovoked hostility from even minor conflicts.

In this sense, the perception of 'unprovoked hostility' is often the result of state's belief that their intentions are quite clear to all parties involved and that unexpected response is the product of the other state's disposition.

While Jervis' work must be at the forefront of any analysis of misperception in international conflict, it does not attempt to apply an understanding of perceptual errors beyond that of a theoretical understanding. Using Jervis, in conjunction with specific research from the field of Social Psychology, this study will focus on the role of one particular perceptual error and apply it to several Sino-American crises. Along these lines, this study differs from Jervis' work in that it will move beyond a study of perception and misperception in shared cultures. By limiting his study to only shared cultures, Jervis' theory is unable to make generalizations about cases in which significant cultural differences exist. To account for this omission, this study will build upon Jervis' analysis of misperception by studying the same phenomenon in the context of different cultures, particularly the different cultures that exist in the United States and China.

Another work of relevance to the study of attribution theory within international relations is Jonathan Mercer's *Reputation and International Politics*, in which he develops the important notion of reputation and the role that it plays in international relations. Mercer (1996, 6) writes that a reputation is a "judgment of someone's character (or disposition) that is then used to predict or explain future behavior" and goes on to argue that a reputation forms when two things occur: "an observer uses what are called dispositional or character-based attributions to explain another's behavior" and then uses "past behavior to predict future behavior." In the context of

attribution theory, reputation is thus the expected behavior that other actors come to expect of another actor. If an actor acts in a particular manner that is consistent with his/her's prior behavior, he/she is likely to develop a reputation for that type of behavior. As this is the case, an actor's reputation may play a significant role in how other states perceive its actions because other actors believe that that actors' disposition is the only thing that matters when explaining his/her behavior. This focus on reputation and disposition is one source of attribution errors in international relations. As we will see in the next chapter, by focusing only on another actor's dispositional qualities to explain his/her behavior (without considering situational factors that may be acting upon the other actor), there is an increased risk for attribution errors to occur. In contrast, Mercer (1996, 46) argues that a particular actor's reputation may *not* matter "if observers believe that the transient situation explains a target's behavior, then that explanation cannot be used to predict or explain future behavior in a different situation." In this regard, reputations make up a significant part of an attribution error because many attribution errors are based solely on a particular state's reputation. If an attribution error is avoided and situational factors are used to explain another actor's behavior, then reputation is unlikely to matter.

As the psychological approach is primarily interested in the internal and external forces acting upon the decision-maker within international crises, the definitions of what a crisis entails should reflect this distinction. James A. Robinson (1972, 23) provided a three-tiered perceptual definition that helped to organize the field, consisting of: "identification of the origin of the event (whether external or internal for decision-makers); time available for response (short, intermediate, or long); and relative importance to participants of the values at stake (low or high)." Hermann (1972, 13) built on this definition and proposed a 'situational cube' of three dimensions: threat, decision time, and awareness, and proposed a new definition that stated that

“a crisis is a situation that (1) threatens high-priority goals of the decision-making unit, (2) restricts the amount of time available for response before the decision is transformed, and (3) surprises the members of the decision-making unit by its occurrence.” While it is likely a valid supposition that key actors within a crisis are genuinely shocked by the crisis occurrence, we are more interested in Hermann’s first two propositions. The fact that crises commonly involve high-priority goals as well as a limited time-frame in which to make decisions suggests that there is a tremendous amount of pressure on the decision-making unit within crisis situations. It is this inherent nature of international crisis that makes an analysis of the occurrence and effect of attribution errors of interest.

Holsti and George (1975, 29) for example argue that stress has a tremendous effect upon the decision-making process and recommend that research focus “on the *process* of the decision-making but also on the *content and quality* of the decisions or choices of policy that emerge from that process.” Brecher (1980, 25-26) confirms this point by arguing that when there is an increase in the level of threat during a crisis, high levels of ‘crisis-induced’ stress results due to the pressures of limited timeframes and the constant specter of war within a crisis. In this sense, the inherent nature of crises (i.e. limited timeframes and the looming threat of war inducing high levels of stress) often results in lower quality decisions that can and often result in attribution errors on the part of the observer and unexpected behavior on the part of the actor being observed. This unexpected or surprising behavior of the other being observed frequently results in attribution errors being made about that actors’ dispositional nature because others observe that low-quality decisions and attribute the perceived behavior to that actor’s disposition.

Holsti (1989) created a set of cognitive constraints that are likely to exist under the conditions of the most intense and protracted crises. The list included the following constraints

on a crisis actor's capability to carry out fundamental cognitive functions during times of crisis.

Of particular interest were the following constraints on a crisis actor's ability to³:

- (1) Define the main elements of the situation; for example, what are the nature and sources of the threat, and what is at stake?
- (2) Assess the situation from the perspective of other parties.
- (3) Make adjustments to meet real changes in the situation (and, as a corollary, distinguish real from apparent changes).
- (4) Deal with the possibility that one of many conceivable but highly unlikely events will occur as a result of system failures or 'normal accidents.'
- (5) Search for new information relevant to assessment of the options.
- (6) Maintain receptivity to new information, even that which calls into question the validity of preferred course of action (and, as corollaries, discriminate between relevant and irrelevant information, resist premature cognitive closure, and tolerate ambiguity).

The first four constraints relate directly to an actor's ability to analyze a particular situation, particularly situational constraints potentially acting upon other's actors involved in the crisis. As we know from our analysis of attribution errors, an actor's understanding and ability to interpret key situational constraints acting upon another is critical to prevent the occurrence and allow for the correction of attribution errors. These cognitive limitations towards analyzing the situational conditions within a crisis likely increase the potential for attribution errors to be made and/or perpetuated primarily because they force decision-makers to rely on cognitive shortcuts that are often readily available to them. These shortcuts include things such as reliance on past experience, a tolerance for ambiguity and stereotyping, and a distinct resistance to sensitivity to other's perspectives (Holsti 1989, 27). The problem with such shortcuts is that they encourage decision-makers to frequently base decisions on incomplete or inaccurate information—a practice that almost certainly increases the likelihood for attribution errors. The other two constraints have to do with the reception and interpretation of information within a crisis. Again, as we know from our analysis of attribution errors, an actor's ability to absorb and interpret new information from his/her observations is critical to making situational corrections of dispositional

³ For a complete list, see Holsti (1989, 25-26)

attributions—under the conditions of most crises, this ability is likely limited because of stress from time-constraints and the intensity of crisis.

If the key actors within an international crisis are under intense pressures due to various internal and situational constraints, then perhaps attribution errors are more likely to influence the crisis' outcome. However, it is important to note that some crises are going to occur simply because there is a conflict of interests (i.e. the parties involved have conflicting high-priority goals) or what Fearon (1995, 382) refers to as issue indivisibilities that cannot be resolved. Along these lines, it cannot be assumed that attribution errors will always occur and, perhaps most importantly, that a lack of attribution errors can still lead to conflict if the conflict of interests is too great to overcome. To compensate for this fact, there must be a distinction made between intended and unintended crises. Robert McCalla (1992, 11) makes such a distinction by arguing that intended crises will occur when “one actor believes there is an incompatibility between its preferences and those of its opponent that it can exploit.” As intended crises are of little value to analyzing the occurrence of miscalculated escalation within international crises, this paper will focus on the incidence of unintended crises, more specifically, the incidence of unintended escalation of these types of crises. McCalla (1992, 11-12) defines an unintended crisis as “one in which neither side can be said to have deliberately generated the crisis” and that can be thought of as being unintended on two different dimensions: “unintended as to their occurrence and unintended as to their magnitude.” He continues by pointing out that these types of crises are the result of situational or dispositional misperceptions. Situational misperceptions occur when one or both actors incorrectly perceived the particular situation afflicting them and proceed to act according to their misperception, resulting in unexpected behavior. This unexpected behavior occurs because the perceiving actor checks the perceived behavior of the

other actor with either (1) the expected behavior of the perceived actor (derived from previous interactions and based on cognitive shortcuts and stereotypes) or (2) the expected behavior of any of actor put into the specific type of situation (derived from previous interactions with other states who acted in a particular manner under similar conditions).

The Escalation of International Crises

Now that we have a better understanding of the psychological factors that affect the decision-making of states involved in international crises, we can begin an analysis of state behavior within international crises, particularly state behavior in regards to the escalation or de-escalation of such crises. There is a relatively large literature on the issue of escalation within international crises⁴, including analysis of such variables as geographical proximity (Brecher 1993; Ben Yehuda 1997; Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997), enduring rivalries and protracted conflicts (Goertz and Diehl 1992, 1993; Vasquez 1996; Rioux 1996, 1997; Brecher 1993, Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997; Colaresi 2002), regime-type and domestic political considerations (Fearon 1994; Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997; Hewitt and Wilkenfeld 1997; Rioux 1997, 1998), imbalances in material capabilities (James 1988; Brecher 1993), and issue-salience and a state's resolve to act (Leng 1993, Carlson 1998). While each of these variables provide valuable explanations for why some crises escalate while others do not, none of them include a psychological dimension for a crisis' escalation. Along these lines, this study will explain how some of these explanations, although valuable in certain contexts, are insufficient at explaining why some crises escalate out of control when neither party desired such escalation.

⁴ For a general overview of research conducted in this area, see Brecher, James, and Wilkenfeld's chapter, "Escalation and War in the Twentieth Century: Findings from the International Crisis Behavior Project" in Vasquez, *What Do We Know About War?* (2000). pp37-53.

The first explanation for crisis escalation is that of geographical proximity, which suggest that the closer geographically (measured in distance) the actors involved in a crisis are, the more likely that a crisis is to escalate. The fundamental logic is that proximity allows for easier access and preemption on the part of the actors involved (Brecher 1993, Ben Yahuda 1997). However, such explanations are limited because they cannot explain why crises involving non-contiguous states escalate, such as those involving China and the United States. The second explanation for crisis escalation applies to crises within enduring rivalries. The concept of an enduring rivalry was first suggested by Goertz and Diehl (1992), who contend that enduring rivalries have three key components: (1) competitiveness, (2) time, and (3) spatial consistency. First, the relationship between the nations involved must include competition over some intangible or tangible good. Second, an enduring rivalry must be ‘enduring,’ or in other words, it must persist for an extended period of time. Third, such relationships must include a consistent set of states in their ‘spatial domain,’ which can include two or more nations. A predominant example of an enduring rivalry is that of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China during most of the Cold War.

In regards to the escalation of international crises, enduring rivalries have been shown to increase the likelihood of escalation. For example, the frequency of verbal threats, sanctions, and military mobilizations between rivals increases the likelihood of crisis escalation (Brecher, James, & Wilkenfeld 2000, Bremer 2000, and Vasquez 2000). Rioux (1996, 1997) found that the very presence of an enduring rivalry increases the risk of escalation as well as the fact that crises involving rivals that have endured a large number of past crises are more likely to escalate than those involving a low number of past crises. These findings, while potentially applicable to the Sino-American relationship fail to capture psychological explanations for why rivals may make verbal threats or invoke policies such as sanctions or military mobilizations. In this regard,

psychological explanations, in conjunction with enduring rivalry arguments of escalation, may be a relationship worth more analysis.

A very similar area of research to enduring rivalries is that conducted on protracted conflicts. Brecher, James, & Wilkenfeld (2000) define protracted conflicts as those crises that occur within a long series of crises. For example, the Taiwan-Straits crises between the United States and China are considered a protracted conflict by the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project because it is a set of four-related crises that took place between 1948 and 1996. In distinguishing between protracted conflicts and enduring rivalries, Colaresi (2002, 265) suggests that protracted conflicts are generally over only “objectively high-gravity issues,” while an enduring rivalry “allows the issues under contention to vary in severity and intensity.” Research on the relationship between protracted conflicts and crisis escalation, although limited, is of interest here as well. Such conflicts have been found to increase the likelihood of crisis escalation because the states involved share a common distrust of each other as well as anticipation for violence between them (Brecher 1993, Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997). This finding is significant because it implies that crises such as the 1995-1996 Taiwan-Straits crisis are more prone to escalation than others. As in the case with enduring rivalries, such explanations are limited as they do not take into account potential psychological explanations for the distrust and anticipation of violence shared between the two sides of a protracted conflict, which may be the underlying cause of the escalation.

Another potential explanation for crisis escalation is that of key domestic political considerations such as regime-type or domestic audience costs. The fundamental argument of such explanations is that there are particular characteristics of interactions between democracies, such as institutional constraints, domestic audience costs, and economic factors such as a lack of

trade and resource competition that may influence the escalation dynamics of crises (Rioux 1998). Fearon (1994) found that democracies are less likely to become involved in or escalate crises against other democracies because domestic audience costs are simply too high regarding conflicts with other democracies, as citizenry within democracies expect a particular behavior towards other democracies. He also posited that democracies are better suited to signal other nations of their intentions more credibly, particularly when directed towards another democracy, which may decrease the likelihood of crisis initiation and/or escalation. On the other hand, Brecher (1993) found that authoritarian regimes are more likely to escalate international crises involving other authoritarian regimes. Thus, in dyads involving two democracies, the likelihood of crisis escalation is low while in dyads involving two autocracies, the likelihood of crisis escalation is high. As our study is on a democratic-autocratic dyad, these findings have little bearing.

For the purposes of our study, we are not especially interested in the suggestion that democracies tend not to become involved in crises with each other, rather, we are interested in the relationship between democracies and non-democracies regarding crisis escalation. Rioux (1998) posited that crises between democracies and non-democracies may be more prone to escalation because democracies have a tendency to ‘go all out’ in such conflicts. This is primarily due to high domestic audience costs associated with a potential loss in such crises. Democratic leaders have a huge incentive to win such crises, because a loss makes removal from office more likely. If this were the case, we would expect to see most, if not all, Sino-American crises escalate out of control and rarely de-escalate. We will see in our analysis of attributional explanations for crisis escalation that Sino-American crises rarely escalate to war, let alone to

militarized disputes. In most instances, such crises de-escalate prior to reaching dangerous levels or fail to materialize altogether.

The final explanation for crisis escalation of interest is that regarding the effect of issue-salience, or the level of stakes that a particular issue evokes, on a crisis participant's resolve to act. For example, Leng (1993) found that when vital security interests are at stake, the chances for escalation increase because the participants are more likely to pursue coercive bargaining strategies and are thus far less likely to compromise than when non-vital security interests are at stake. Along similar lines, Carlson (1998, 226) developed a one-sided incomplete information game to determine the conditions under which states will risk escalating a crisis and found that some actors are "willing to shoulder tremendous escalation costs if the issue at stake is deemed relatively important," while others are less willing to escalate because the "issue in dispute is not considered worth incurring serious escalation." What is of particular interest is her suggestion that *both* high-cost tolerant and low-cost tolerant actors will be willing to escalate under certain conditions, which makes it difficult to discern whether a particular actor possesses a high-cost tolerance or not. This difficulty lends itself well to attributional explanations for crisis escalation because it suggests that there is room for error when states are making calculations about the behavior of other states within crises. In this regard, an attributional explanation for crisis escalation must be able to explain the unintended escalation of a crisis irrespective of the stakes involved.

Chapter 3

Constructing Attributions: The Roots of Perception in International Politics

The following chapter will provide a brief review of research conducted within the field of Social Psychology on attribution theory. The chapter will begin with a brief discussion of attribution theory and its key underpinnings as well as providing a basic definition of the fundamental attribution error. It will continue by discussing various characteristics about such errors, such as the situational correction, as well as key implications, such as the development of distrust and hostility, that are of interest for our study of the escalation dynamics of Sino-American crises. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the group attribution error that will provide a framework by which the role of attribution errors can be studied in the context of international relations.

Brief Overview of Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is a Social Psychological theory that is interested in how individuals perceive and explain the behavior of others around them as well as themselves. Fritz Heider (1958) made this key distinction between dispositional and situational attributions. When an event occurs and there are multiple actors, individuals will attempt to attribute the behavior of the other actors to either their disposition or to the particular situation that occurred. In most cases, individuals will use key situational factors present at the time of another actor's behavior to explain such behavior. However, in some instances, individuals have a tendency to attribute the behavior of another actor to their disposition without first considering the situational factors acting upon the actor when the behavior occurred. This distinction made it possible to begin thinking of the external and internal factors that affect and shape the behavior of individuals and

set the predominate question for the Social Psychology research agenda: “When is responsibility for an action assigned to people, and when is it assigned to the environment?” (Mercer 1996, 49). Heider’s work propelled various experiments that tested hypotheses about the attributions of behavior (Jones and Davis 1965; Jones and Harris 1967). Jones and Harris (1967) for example, adapted Heider’s work and hypothesized that individuals infer disposition directly from behavior and referred to this concept as correspondent inference theory. Because it is common for individuals to infer disposition from another’s behavior, there is an overwhelming tendency for these same individuals to discount or completely ignore situational constraints on other’s behavior.

This phenomenon, coined by Lee Ross (1977) as the fundamental attribution error, by Edward Jones (1979) as the overattribution effect, and later by Daniel Gilbert and Patrick Malone (1995, 1) as the correspondence bias⁵ is defined as “the tendency to draw inferences about a person’s unique and enduring dispositions from behaviors that can be entirely explained by the situations in which they occur” (see Figure 3). Attribution errors are often the product of an individual’s inherent nature to ignore (whether intentionally or subconsciously) situational explanations for another’s behavior because of underlying attitudes about the particular actor or situation at hand. These preconceived notions are critical because they assert that individuals often have numerous biases that alter and shape many of the perceptions that they make of the others around them, including various stereotypes that were developed by past experiences. For example, if an individual observes a particular situation for the first time, they are likely to assume that the behavior of all actors involved (including themselves) is the standard behavior that should occur. If the same situation were to arise again in the future, that individual is likely

⁵ For the purposes of this paper and to reduce confusion, the tendency for individuals to attribute behavior only to another’s disposition and not to likely situational explanations will be referred to as an attribution error.

to expect to see similar behavior to the first situation—if the behavior is similar, then the individual is not likely to make any adjustments to his/her beliefs about the situation or the individual. However, it is when the behavior is perceived as unexpected or unusual that attribution errors are most likely to occur, because the individual is likely to assume that there must be some dispositional quality that the other actors possess that explains their unexpected behavior regarding the particular situation at hand.

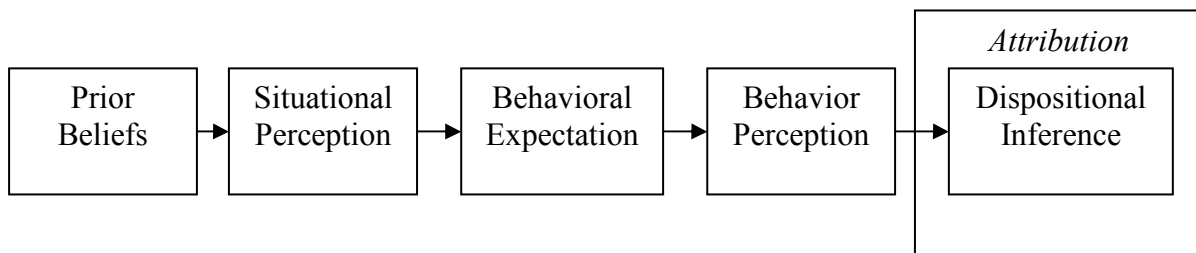


Figure 3: The Making of an Attribution Error⁶

Gilbert and Malone (1995) suggest that the formation of attributions is a six-stage process (see Figure 4) that all actors follow when perceiving the behavior of another actor in any given situation. These attributions can result in a correct attribution or an attribution error depending upon whether or not the final stage (the situational correction) is successfully employed by the observer. If a situational correction is made, it is extremely likely that the attribution made will be accurate. In this case, the behavior of the actor(s) that one is observing is within the parameters of that one would expect to see under similar situational conditions, or in other words, the behavior of the other(s) was not unexpected or surprising. If however, a situational correction is not made, then the risk of an error occurring increases. With this in mind, it is important to note that the absence of a situational correction does not guarantee that an attribution will be inaccurate—in some cases, the actor being observed actually possesses the

⁶ Figure adapted from Gilbert and Malone (1995, 37).

qualities that were initially attributed despite the set of situational conditions present at the time. Along these lines, while overlooking a situational explanation for another's behavior is often not a preferable strategy to employ, it will not always result in an incorrect or even damaging attribution of another's disposition.

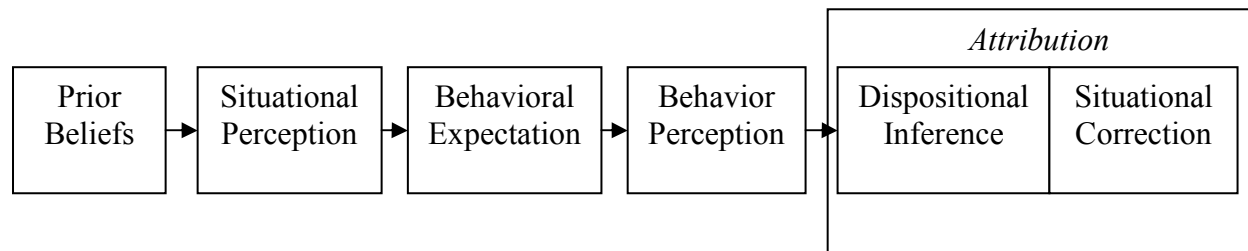


Figure 4: The Sequence of Events that Occurs when an Attribution is Made.⁷

STEP 1 → *Prior Beliefs*: Cognitive biases already formed from previous interactions and/or the reputation of the other shape expectations about what type of behavior *should* be observed about a particular situation and about the particular actor(s).

STEP 2 → *Situation Perception*: The observer perceives the situational constraints (environmental or external factors affecting the other actor's behavior) of the other actor. (i.e. have I observed this situation before? If so, what conclusions did I reach about it?)

STEP 3 → *Behavioral Expectation*: The observer filters the actor's behavior through prior beliefs and expectations about how an actor *should* behave within the particular situation (i.e. is this actor acting in a manner that is consistent with how it has acted in the past under similar conditions?)

STEP 4 → *Behavioral Perception*: Once the other actor's perceived behavior is filtered through the preconceived expectations about that behavior (expected = new behavior reflects trends in past behavior; behavior is viewed as typical; unexpected = new behavior does not reflect trends in past behavior—behavior is viewed as unusual), the observer forms a perception about the behavior/attitude of the other actor—this perception can be of a positive or a negative nature depending upon what the expected behavior was and the direct or indirect effect (i.e. the stakes of the situation) the behavior may have on the observer.

STEP 5 → *Dispositional Inference*: This perception of the other actor's behavior is attributed to his/her disposition, meaning that it is assumed that the actor acted in the manner it did because it is in its nature to do so. If the perception is of a positive nature, then a benign or neutral image of

⁷ Figure adapted from Gilbert and Malone (1995, 37).

the other is likely to be established. If the perception is of a negative nature, then a hostile or antagonistic image of the other is likely to be established. It is important to note that the dispositional inference occurs prior to any situational corrections and is perceived as a cognitively-automatic process (Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull 1988).

STEP 6 → *Situational Correction*: A situational correction is the act of correcting an inaccurate dispositional inference (an attribution error). In this sense, the observer will take into account the environmental and external factors acting upon the other actor and use those to explain why the other actor acted in the manner that it did. In most cases, if a situational correction is made, the inaccurate dispositional inference will be completely corrected. However, in some cases, even if a situational correction is made, some or all of the inaccurate dispositional inference may remain because the situational correction itself was inaccurate. Likewise, if no situational correction is made, some or all of the inaccurate dispositional inference may remain. This phenomenon is further described below.

Even though the process of making an attribution is a six-stage process, the pivotal step seems to be the occurrence of a situational correction, or the lack thereof. Gawronski (2004, 184-185) draws on theory-based bias correction (cf. Strack, 1992; Wegener and Petty, 1997; Wilson and Brakke, 1994) by suggesting that an individual might neglect a situational correction due to at least four different factors: (1) observers may explicitly believe that situational factors have little impact on general human behavior, (2) observers may believe that situational factors have a strong impact on human behavior, but that they may unintentionally fail to make such corrections, (3) observers may believe that situational factors have a strong impact on human behavior, but that they may intentionally fail to make such corrections, or (4) observers may believe that situational factors have a strong impact on human behavior and that they may make such corrections, but in such a manner that is incomplete and biased. In all four cases, an attribution error would be more likely to occur because individuals who fall within the first three cases fail to make situational corrections altogether and those who fall within the fourth case tend to make incomplete or inaccurate corrections. In regards to the fourth case, Van Boven et al. (2003, 256) suggest that situational corrections tend to be insufficient because:

[T]he appropriate amount situational correction is often ambiguous, so people tend to be conservative, ceasing correction when their estimate is ‘good enough.’ To the degree that people rely on a sense of their relative accuracy as a stopping cue for situational correction, their biased assessments of correction in themselves and others may lead them to cease correcting too soon. In other words, they may reason erroneously, ‘I’m not sure how much to correct, but I’ve corrected more than other people, so that’s probably good enough.’

This finding suggests that the act of making a situational correction is more trial and error than science in that there are no clear cut criteria for determining when a situational correction is sufficient or not. For example, if we were to observe a crisis involving two states, one of whom was acting in a seemingly hostile manner and the other in a seemingly benevolent manner, we would almost certainly infer an aggressive disposition to the ‘hostile’ state and a conciliatory disposition to the ‘benevolent’ state. In this sense, we would be likely to blame any future hostility between the two sides on the ‘hostile’ state, a perception that might be in error depending upon the situational explanations for the future hostility. Kelley (1980) suggests this is likely the case because attributions based on only one observation provide limited information about the typical behavior of the person being observed—it is the co-variation of the observed behavior that allows us to make more accurate observations about another’s general nature. In other words, the recurrence of observations is important. If you are able to observe the same actor’s behavior under similar circumstances, you are able to make a better observation of his/her behavior. In the example above, the observation that the ‘hostile’ state was generally aggressive was made based on one interaction between the two states. Thus, we should be skeptical of our assumption that any future hostility is the fault of the generally ‘hostile’ state because we simply do not possess enough information to ensure that our observation is accurate. Only replication of the event (i.e. that the other person interacts with another person in a similar manner) will either confirm or deny the accuracy of the attribution.

As replication of the situation is often the best method of confirming an observation, it is often the case that replicating the same set of circumstances is extremely difficult or impossible. In the example above, because we are observing an interaction between the two states for the first time, we are dependent upon the information available by this observation only. In this sense, while we may be suspicious of our initial conclusion, we are unlikely to change it because of the lack of information to refute it. While this could potentially be an accurate conclusion regarding the future hostilities, chances are, some other explanation better explains it. In this case, the 'benevolent' state could turn out to be just as aggressive as the 'hostile' state, but the particular circumstances of our initial observation suggested otherwise. If, for example, the stakes of the crisis changed between our initial observation and the next one, the situational forces acting upon the two states could significantly alter their behavior. In this sense, it is quite possible that the 'future hostilities' that we blamed on the 'hostile' state may turn out to be the product of aggression on the part of the 'benevolent' state under the new conditions or the product of neither of the state's behavior. The dilemma for the observer in cases such as these is determining if a situational correction is needed to make accurate inferences about the dispositions of both states. However, there is no clear cut method for determining if such a situational correction were warranted. The fundamental problem is that we cannot observe the thoughts of either state and thus cannot know for sure that the aggressive or conciliatory behavior was common to either of them and not simply the product of the changing stakes of the crisis. Thus the burden is upon the observer to perceive the behavior of both states to the best of his/her abilities in order to discern the internal motivations for a particular behavior—in this case, we could observe that the statements being made by the two states reflected a change in

their perception of the stakes of the crisis. In this sense, we might realize that the stakes had indeed changed and that a situational correction of our initial inferences may be in order.

Another interesting finding about situational corrections is that in most instances, people expect others to engage in less situational correction than them and to make more extreme dispositional attributions for a constrained actor's behavior. Van Boven et al. (2003, 256) argue that this is the case because situational correction is an "effortful, internal process" that is significantly easier to observe in regards to one's own behavior than that of others. It is simply easier to understand your own behavior than that of others because you cannot peer into their minds and observe their thought-processes directly, a factor that leads to three common phenomenon in human interactions—first, that individuals will tend to underestimate others' situational corrections (because people tend to assume the worst about others perceptions of themselves), second, that individuals will likely overestimate their own situational corrections (a problem that results in incomplete situational corrections and thus the perpetuation of attribution errors), and third, that individuals are likely to believe that others are more likely to make attribution errors than they themselves are, an occurrence that is almost always incorrect and is an attribution error in and of itself.

While the analysis above is limited to the perceptions of individuals, there exists a branch of attribution theory that applies the same logic of an individual's tendency to make attribution errors to the attribution behavior of groups. The reasoning for the inclusion of a group attribution error is because attribution tends to occur at the group level. As a group observes the behavior of another group, they tend to attribute one or more of the group's member's behavior to the disposition of the entire group. This second type of attribution error, called group attribution error, was first encountered by Allport (1954) in a study of prejudice, but not fully developed

until Allison and Messick (1985, 564), who defined the group attribution error as “people’s tendency to infer the attitudes of an entire social group strictly on the basis of one group member’s behavior.” In this sense, group members are more likely to attribute the decision-making of their own group to the set of rules that they must function under, while attributing the decisions of another group to its member’s *attitudes* rather than to the particular rules that governed their decision-making process. Thus, just as individuals tend to attribute another’s behavior and decisions to its disposition, groups have a tendency to attribute another group’s behavior to its disposition rather than accounting for key situational factors that may be able to explain such behavior. This is significant because most of the interactions within international relations that we are interested in occur at the group or national-level.

Chapter 4

A Brief Discussion of the Identifying Criteria for Attribution Errors

The following chapter will act as a guide for identifying key characteristics of attribution errors of interest to this study. The primary motivation behind this chapter is to provide a road map for the remainder of the paper by helping to establish a clearer notion of what attribution errors are and why they are potentially significant to the study of international relations. These key characteristics include an analysis of the conditions under which one would be most likely to expect an attribution error to occur, an analysis of the primary causes of attribution errors, and finally, a discussion of some defining criteria for helping to identify an attribution error when one occurs. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how attribution errors can be observed and analyzed in terms of international crises.

Identifying Criteria for Attribution Errors

Now that we have a better understanding of the attributional process, we can begin to understand *why* attribution errors occur, *when* and under what conditions they are most likely to occur, and most importantly, we can begin to pinpoint how to recognize an attribution error when one occurs. Firstly, we are interested in understanding why attribution errors occur. Gilbert and Malone (1995) posit that attribution errors are made by actors because: 1) they are unaware of situational constraints acting upon another actor, 2) they have inappropriate expectations for how others should act in the situation at hand, 3) they lack the capacity to correct inaccurate dispositional inferences, or because 4) they lack the desire or motivation to correct inaccurate dispositional inferences. The first reason for why various actors make attribution errors is that one cannot get in the mind of another person and thus cannot be completely confident of

another's intentions. When we view our own behavior, we are able to observe the external forces affecting that behavior and attributing it to those external forces (Jervis 1976, 68). When we observe another's behavior, there is no surefire way to be certain of the external forces acting upon and affecting that person's behavior, therefore we are much more likely to make errors in this regard.

For example, imagine if one state observed another state attack its neighbor for no obvious reason. That state is likely to assume that that state is generally aggressive. Now imagine that the first state is forced into a situation where it must also attack its neighbor, but only because the neighbor was preparing to attack them the next day. That state would argue that its behavior was normal and not aggressive like the behavior of the other state because it could rationalize the behavior as self-defense. The problem is that the first state assumed the best of itself and the worst of the other state without taking into account potential situational factors that were acting upon the other person (i.e. that the other state could have been attacking its neighbor out of self-defense as well and was perfectly normal given the situation). The first state may have been able to make such a correction had they observed the situation more closely and noticed the other state's neighbor mobilizing its forces on the other state's border in preparation for an attack. Although most actors do not even realize that they make attribution errors (as it is a subconscious cognitive process), these fundamental errors can sometimes be overcome by recognizing that "when a behavior occurs in the presence of a sufficiently strong, facilitative force, an observer should not infer that the actor is predisposed to perform that behavior... ..In other words, one should not explain with dispositions that which has already been explained by the situation" (Gilbert and Malone 1995, 3).

A second reason for why an actor may make an attribution error is because it has inappropriate expectations of either the actor or the situation, resulting in the other's behavior being interpreted as unexpected and unusual. Inappropriate expectations can take many forms, such as expecting another actor to behave in the same manner that the observer itself would have behaved under the same conditions. The problem with this is that not all actors react to similar situational constraints in the same way—in our example above, the observer perceived the person who kicked the vending machine as a generally angry person. While this is a possible explanation for the behavior, it is much more likely that the person was kicking the vending machine for a reason (i.e. that it took his money without delivering a soda). However, if the observer had never been the victim of a vending machine in this manner, then the observer is likely not to attribute the other's behavior to this explanation—because the observer does not possess that particular expectation about reacting to a faulting vending machine. In this sense, the observer is frequently biased by its beliefs about how an actor should behave under certain conditions and thus perceives the behavior and infers dispositional traits to the other that are often inaccurate.

The final two reasons for why various actors make attribution errors apply not to the actual act of forming an attribution error, but to an actor's ability, or lack thereof, to rectify making an error by making the situational correction necessary to mitigate an error's effects. Firstly, an actor may lack the capacity to correct their attribution errors. As is the case with the formation of attribution errors to begin with, correcting such errors often requires a great deal of information about another's behavior and the situational factors acting upon it that either does not exist or is extremely difficult to obtain. In order to make a situational correction, an actor must be confident that its initial dispositional inference of another actor is inaccurate and

requires reassessment. Along these lines, it must be 1) aware that it has made an error, 2) aware that a correction can and should be made, and 3) capable of obtaining the necessary information to make a situational correction. The second explanation for why an attribution error might be perpetuated is because an actor may lack the desire to correct its attribution errors. It is possible that it is in the interest of an actor for numerous reasons to continue to perpetuate a particular attribution because it is often difficult to retract an initial dispositional inference as they are very lasting.

The second facet of the attributional process that we are interested in understanding is when and under what conditions attribution errors will occur. While it is impossible to state generally when attribution errors will occur and will not occur (as their occurrence is dependent upon the absence of certain conditions), it is possible to discuss the types of conditions that are most conducive to attribution errors and those that are not. The first set of conditions under which attribution errors are more likely is when information about the individual and/or situation being observed is limited (Gilbert and Malone 1995). These types of conditions most commonly exist when an attribution is based primarily on a limited number of observations that cannot be replicated by the observer. In this case, individuals make inferences based on a limited amount of available information, which frequently lead to attribution errors because situational corrections are extremely unlikely to be made under conditions of limited or incomplete information. If you are unsure whether or not a situational correction should be made, you are most likely to rely on your initial impression and stick to it—if this initial inference was in error, then you are highly likely to perpetuate the error.

Another condition under which attribution errors are more likely is one in which the actors involved are unable to focus on each observation for very long because of various

constraints upon their cognitive capabilities. Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull (1988) conducted a study that found that people are unlikely to make the necessary situational corrections to correct attribution errors because situational corrections require extensive cognitive effort in order to gather enough data to overrule a dispositional inference already made. Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull found that when individuals are ‘cognitively busy,’ they are less likely to make situational corrections because they are unable to exert the necessary effort to make such corrections—or in other words, in situations that are full of distractions (i.e. most social interactions), people are more likely to make attribution errors. As is often the case with most interactions, individuals are constantly observing numerous actors’ behavior under a number of different situational conditions. If an individual is unable or unwilling to devote the necessary effort to gather the necessary information to correct an automatic dispositional inference, then they are very likely to make and perpetuate attribution errors.

Along similar lines, attribution errors are more likely to occur when individuals are surrounded by multiple, salient observations at one time. Because observers are barraged with a large amount of incoming data, they must establish an ordering of preferences and beliefs that are based primarily on the salience of the incoming information (Bedny and Karwowsky 2004). Due to this, individuals are likely to organize and interpret incoming data in a manner consistent with what they perceive as most important first and least important last. This is significant because it helps to explain why individuals, when observing the behavior of others, have a natural tendency to focus on the individual and his/her behavior rather than the situational factors acting upon that individual. People have to prioritize who and what they observe and how they interpret it primarily because they have too much incoming data to absorb and interpret.

Another set of conditions under which attribution errors are more likely to occur are based on elemental disagreements between the actors involved in a particular situation. These fundamental disagreements include:

- (1) Fundamental disagreements about the causes or explanations for the situation between the actors involved;
- (2) Fundamental differences in prior beliefs regarding previous interactions between the actors involved—the actors involved perceive previous interactions between themselves in fundamentally different manners, meaning that their perception of the history between the actors involved is fundamentally different;
- (3) Fundamental differences in prior beliefs regarding previous experience with the situation at hand—the actors involved perceive previous encounters with the situation at hand in fundamentally different manners, meaning that their behavioral expectations of an actor in the situation at hand are fundamentally different;

Under any of these conditions, attribution errors are more likely because the parties involved fundamentally disagree over a key phase or phases of the attributional process, such as possessing conflicting prior beliefs about a particular situation or expected behavior. If the actors involved in a particular interaction enter into the situation with fundamentally different perspectives toward one or more of the attributional steps, then they are very likely to make inaccurate observations that lead to inaccurate inferences about other actor's dispositions.

A final condition, and perhaps most pertinent to our study, under which attribution errors are more likely is determined by the cultural makeup of a particular society (i.e. is the society individualistic or collectivistic?) Miller (1984) found that Indians (when compared with Americans) tend to refer more to situational explanations and less to dispositions when asked to describe a person they know as well as his/her behavior. Morris and Peng (1994, 949) contend that this finding does not necessarily indicate different processes of attribution because “the *objects* of attribution also differed (Americans talked about their American acquaintances, and Indians about their Indian acquaintances).” In trying to correct for this disconnect, Morris and Peng conducted a study comparing the dispositional and situational tendencies of Chinese and

Americans. They found that Americans tend to emphasize dispositionism, while Chinese tend to emphasize situationalism. In an assessment of American and Chinese participant's evaluation of the importance of the causes of murder reported by the media, American participants tended to weigh the importance of dispositional causes over situational causes, particularly for out-group members than in-group members (i.e. an attribution error), while Chinese participants tended to emphasize the importance of situational causes over dispositional causes. The in-group/out-group distinction was significant because it suggested that the American participants were more likely to make attribution errors about Chinese than other Americans and the Chinese more likely to make attribution errors about Americans than other Chinese..

This finding was confirmed in their study of Chinese and American newspaper coverage of murders, in which they found that American reporters tend to focus on the dispositional qualities (personality traits, attitudes, and psychological problems) of the murderer (i.e. that the murderer was deeply disturbed, that he/she had a very bad temper), while Chinese reporters tend to focus on situational factors (the relationship between the murderer and his victim, pressures within Chinese society) when reporting about the same murder. This is significant because it suggests that attribution errors are more likely to occur in individualist societies such as the United States and less likely in collectivist societies such as China and that the difference between the two is broad in scope and cognitively deep.

The final and perhaps most important facet of the attributional process that we are interested in is to develop a method for helping us identify an attribution error when we observe one. From the literature above, we know that in order for an attribution error to occur, three conditions must be met: (1) an observation of another's behavior is attributed to their general disposition, (2) without a situational correction (or an incomplete situational correction), and (3)

in the presence of situational explanations that explain such behavior. Along these lines, we should be able to determine that an attribution error has occurred if we observe a situation involving at least two actors that meets these three criteria. For example, Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz (1977) conducted a study of participant's reactions to basketball player's free-throw shooting performance in various sets of conditions. They randomly assigned basketball players to shoot free throws in a well-lit gymnasium and in a badly lighted gymnasium. They found that participants attributed the poor-performance of the badly-lit gym's players to their general abilities rather than to the bad lighting present. In this example, we can determine that an attribution error has occurred because the observer made an observation about the player's performance and attributed it to his general disposition in the presence of situational factors that obviously explained such behavior *without* making any situational correction (or at least making an incomplete correction). Had the observer determined that the poor-performance was more likely due to the bad-lighting than to poor basketball skills, there would likely have been no attribution error made, although it is still possible that the player's poor-performance was due to poor skills irrespective of the conditions.

We can draw a couple of conclusions about the nature of attribution errors from this example. Firstly, that it is far easier to determine if an attribution error has occurred as an outside observer. Had we of been involved in the study above as an observer, it would have been difficult (but not impossible) to determine that an error was made and that a correction was needed. Harris and Jones (1967, 1) suggest that in any given interaction, a person can be perceived as having a disposition corresponding to his/her behavior or actions when that behavior seem to have been "freely offered and not coerced by situational pressures." In this sense, to make an accurate dispositional inference means to either account for (a situational

correction) or discount the conditions that existed at the time of the behavior. Secondly, it is far easier to determine if an attribution error has occurred after the particular interaction is over—as we are far more likely to have enough information to determine if an error had indeed occurred, although this is not always the case.

Now that we have a pretty good understanding of how to generally identify an attribution error, we must apply the lessons learned above to our study of international crises. In international crises, the types of behavior that are most often unexpected or of interest to its participants are those actions or decisions that are perceived as unnecessarily aggressive or hostile. Within the confines of a precipitating event or crisis, state actors are constantly worried whether or not their opponent(s) desire escalation to the next level—from event to crisis and from crisis to war. If an opponent is believed to desire escalation, then the perceiving nation has no choice but to pursue a similar policy. If however, they are believed to desire peace, then the perceiving nation (assuming that they also desire peace) is likely to pursue a course of action that ensures that the event or crisis does not escalate. In this regard, it is extremely important that the perceiving state be able to make accurate inferences about its opponent's desire for peace and resolve to act. In this sense, a state must be careful to observe as much about the behavior of the other state and about the various situational factors that may or may not be significant. As in the example above, the state would not have made the inaccurate inference that the other state's attack on its neighbor was unnecessarily aggressive had it observed the mobilization of the other's neighbor's forces on its border.

For our purposes, we should be able to identify an attribution error within a crisis when an inference of aggression or hostility is made in the presence of some situational explanation acting upon one or more of the states involved. In such cases, situational explanations can

include, but are certainly not limited to, lessons learned from previous interactions between a) the states involved in the crisis, b) the perceiving state and other states not necessarily involved in the crisis, or c) between states not necessarily involved in the crisis that provided well-known historical lessons that may be applied to the current situation. The first situational explanation can be derived from information obtained by the parties involved in a crisis from their previous interactions. As we know from our discussion of the literature on attribution theory, situational corrections require information that is often most easily obtained through the replication of a particular situation or interaction. In international relations, we know that states are constantly interacting with each other and are thus likely to hold information about each other's prior behavior and dispositions. In this sense, they may hold some knowledge from a previous interaction that allows them to explain their opponent's behavior better than an attribution of aggression or hostility may be able to. While this may not always be the case, as states often change behavior and disposition, a state should filter its observations through its knowledge of previous interactions with its current opponent(s) before inferring the new behavior to a negative disposition.

The second situational explanation is similar to first in that it comes from knowledge about previous interactions, but is distinct in that the actors involved are different. As we noted above, states are constantly interacting with each other in the international arena and thus gain knowledge about a particular state's behavior *and* about particular situations. It is this knowledge of particular situations that can occasionally be of use in preventing an attribution error. If a state gets involved in a crisis with another state that is very similar to another crisis that it may have been involved in with another state, it is likely to hold information about that type of crisis that should assist it in making accurate inferences about its opponent's disposition. In this regard, the

perceiving state should hold certain expectations about how the opponent will act under that particular set of conditions. If the opponent acts consistently with these expectations, then whatever inferential lesson that was learned from the past crisis, if any, should be applied to the opponent in the current crisis. If the opponent acts inconsistently with these expectations, then it the state is likely to assume that there is some dispositional quality that the opponent possesses that caused to it act unexpectedly. It is this quality that should assist the state in accurately inferring the opponent's behavior to its disposition.

The final situational explanation of interest that could potentially be used to prevent an attribution error by states involved in a crisis is based on the knowledge learned from historical interactions between states that provide well-established lessons for the current state-actors in the international system. The fundamental idea is that there have been millions of interactions in the past and that one of them is likely analogous to the current situation. Tetlock and McGuire, Jr. (1985, 491-492) suggest that states do just that—draw analogies to historical examples to help them gain a better understanding of the current situation. They, however, suggest that while learning from the past is not necessarily a bad thing, “policymakers often draw simplistic, superficial, and biased lessons from history” and “rarely consider a broad range of historical analogies before which one best fits the problem confronting them.” In this sense, states are likely to use historical analogies that are inaccurate, a problem that may increase the risk of making attribution errors. The solution it seems is for a state to exhaust its knowledge of historical examples, relying on the knowledge of analysts familiar with the relevant history, before using a historical analogy as a situational explanation. If no clear consensus can be reached regarding a proper historical analogy, then the state should refrain from using one.

While these three explanations can be used to alleviate the problem of attribution errors, they are by no means a panacea. The danger associated with using such situational explanations to make dispositional inferences is that a state may apply them in the incorrect situations. For example, if a perceiving state believes that a new crisis is exactly the same as a prior crisis between itself and the current opponent, then it is likely to pursue a very similar course of action that it did in the past case. However, if its perception of the current crisis is inaccurate, meaning that the current crisis is different from the prior one, then the state may be in danger of making an attribution error. If the crisis truly is different, then it is likely the disposition of the opponent is different—the danger then is that the perceiving state explains away hostile behavior to the situation only to find out that it was incorrect and that its opponent truly is hostile. Since this is the case, a state must be pretty certain that its perception of the situation is accurate. For our purposes, however, the use, lack of use, or misuse of such situational explanations is much easier to analyze in hindsight. In this regard, such explanations should provide a viable framework by which to analyze Sino-American crises.

Chapter 5

Attribution Errors and the Escalation of International Crises

The primary objective of the following chapter is to establish a theory explaining the role that attribution errors and their subsequent or failed correction play in international crises. More specifically, we are interested in establishing a theory that helps us understand why some crises tend to escalate when none of the actors involved desired or even expected such an escalation. Of particular interest will be the role that attribution errors within crises play in enduring rivalries such as the one that exists between China and the United States. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the relationship between the making of attribution errors and the escalation dynamics of international crises, followed by the creation of a model of decision-making within a crisis when an attribution error is made. This will be followed by a discussion of the role of attribution errors in crises within enduring rivalries. Finally, the chapter wraps up with a discussion of the hypotheses derived from the model as well as the cases to be tested in subsequent chapters.

Attribution Errors Effect upon Escalation Dynamics Using a Rationalist Lens

Using Fearon's rationalist explanations for war developed in Chapter 2, we know that the scarcity of credible information is a common feature of international politics. This is significant to our study of attribution errors because we know from Chapter 3 that attribution errors are often the product of a lack of information about either another's behavior or the situational factors affecting their behavior, suggesting that interacting states within international politics are incredibly vulnerable to the making and perpetuation of attribution errors. In this sense, the fundamental lack of credible sources of information and the incentives associated with

misrepresenting one's true capabilities, intentions, and resolve are the causal explanation for why attribution errors occur and may be more likely in international relations than in most other types of interactions. While this factor is significant, it does not explain the potential implications for an increased propensity of attribution errors in international politics.

If we assume that attribution errors are likely just as common of a feature of international politics as the information problems that produce them, then we can begin to analyze the role that they may play in conflict processes in the international system. The first facet that we must develop is any potential distinctions between the different types of attribution errors that states may make. As we noted in Chapter 3, attribution errors can be of a positive or negative manner, meaning that not all attribution errors will affect interactions between states the same. Positive attribution errors, or those dispositional inferences about another state that are of a positive manner, are a rare occurrence in international relations because it requires that the perceiving state assume the best about another state's capabilities, resolve, or intentions in the absence of any situational explanations for such positive behavior. Such perceptual errors are rare because states in the international system often are forced to assume the worst about other states' capabilities, resolves, or intentions for fear of being taken advantage of, a product of an anarchic international system and the prisoner's dilemmas that it creates. However, if a positive attribution error were to be made, we would expect to see the perceiving state behave in a conciliatory manner towards the other state, which is likely to increase the chances for a peaceful settlement to conflicts of interest and prevent unintended escalation, although neither of these are guaranteed, as such outcomes are dependent upon reciprocation of the positive behavior by the other state. Such reciprocation cannot be assumed because the other state could perceive the conciliatory behavior as a misrepresentation of the first state's true intentions or capabilities or

that the other state utilizes the conciliatory behavior as an opportunity to take advantage of any potential bargaining edge that may now be perceived as existing.

For the same reasons that positive attribution errors are unlikely to occur in international politics, negative attribution errors are likely to be the type of perceptual error that states make regarding other states. A negative attribution error, or those dispositional inferences about another state that are of a negative manner, occur because states in the international system tend to pursue the security-maximizing strategy of initially assuming the worst about another state in order to prevent being taken advantage of as per the prisoner's dilemma. As this is the case, we would expect states in the international system to make negative dispositional judgments about other states first, and only after careful consideration of available information about behavioral and situational factors that may have caused the behavior, determine if such judgments were accurate or not. At this point, if the initial dispositional inference is corrected for due to the presence of sufficient situational evidence that could explain the unexpected behavior, we would expect to see the perceiving state's behavior return to a more neutral stance in regards to bargaining. If however, the initial negative dispositional inference is left uncorrected (in the presence of sufficient evidence that could have been used to explain the unexpected behavior), then we would expect to see the perceiving state's behavior become more aggressive towards its adversary.

This type of behavior would be likely to exacerbate the effect of various escalatory variables that we noted in Chapter 2, such as issue importance, geographical proximity, or domestic politics, within the relationship, creating an artificial conflict of interests that could lead to a spiraling of tensions and a security dilemma. It is important to note that the conflict of interest in this particular instance would be considered artificial only because the initial negative

dispositional inference was made in the presence of overwhelming situational evidence that would be capable of explaining the unexpected behavior, suggesting that any escalatory behavior on the part of either state beyond this point would be artificially created by the perpetuation of the initial attribution error. Another important factor to note is that it cannot be assumed that all negative attribution errors that are left uncorrected will result in conflict, as the development of a conflict of interest between the two states does *not* necessarily guarantee that the other state will reciprocate in a negative manner, thus spawning a spiraling of tensions and a security dilemma.

A Model of Crisis Decision-Making when Attribution Errors are Made

The first step to constructing a model of crisis-decision-making that takes the attributional process into consideration is to gain a better understanding of what constitutes a crisis and the conditions that make them likely to occur. The International Crisis Behavior (ICB) Project defines international crises at the macro-level as the product of some precipitating event that destabilize relations between two or more states by increasing the likelihood for disruptive interactions, while crises at the micro-level are defined by conditions under which decision makers perceive (a) their basic value(s) to be threatened, (b) finite time for response, and (c) heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000, 3). Both levels of analysis are critical to our understanding of international crises because we desire to identify when crises occur as an outside observer as well as how actors *within crises* identify the occurrence of a crisis. In this regard, an international crisis is initiated after the occurrence of some precipitating event such as an accident or type of military mobilization that is followed by a reaction by one or more of the actors involved that escalates the event to a crisis. After the onset of an international crisis, there again is an opportunity for escalation to various stages, the

final of which is all-out war between the parties involved. It is these escalation dynamics of the events prior to and during an international crisis that we are interested in analyzing.

Since crises occur as a result of some escalating behavior by one or more of the parties involved, it seems likely that attribution errors may play a fundamental role in the escalation or de-escalation of international events to crises and crises to war. After the occurrence of a precipitating event, states are in a position where they must observe the behavior of the other actors involved in the event. These observations are often made under great duress due to various time and situational constraints (i.e. the amount of information available) that are associated with such events and are thus more susceptible to inaccurate perceptions via attribution errors. As we know from previous chapters, attribution errors are an observation of another's behavior that is attributed to their general disposition without a complete situational correction in the presence of situational explanations that explain such behavior. If attribution errors are more likely to be made by states interacting with each other during the precipitating events of international crises, then we would expect to observe the actors involved make inaccurate perceptions of each other's disposition. These perceptions could include beliefs about the intentions, resolve, or just general nature of the other, all beliefs that could alter the behavior of the perceiving nation and increase the likelihood that the event would escalate to a crisis. If perpetuated beyond the onset of the crisis, such an error would make escalation of the crisis to all-out war more likely unless the actor(s) who made the error made the appropriate situational correction. As we can see in Figure 5, attribution errors help to determine if and when a precipitating event will escalate to a crisis as well as if that crisis will continue to escalate after its onset.

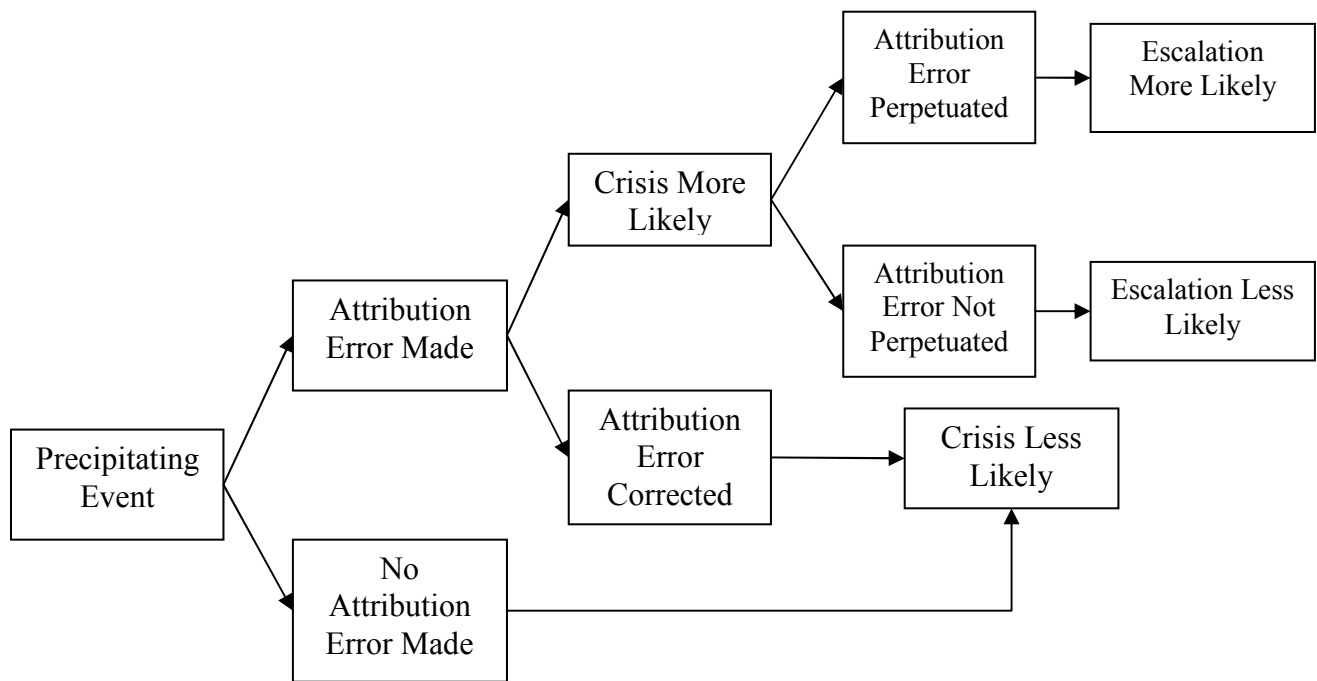


Figure 5: Effect of the Attributional Process on the Escalation Dynamics of Crises

While Figure 5 shows the role of attribution errors from the start of an international event to the onset of a crisis to the potential escalation of a crisis, Figure 6 details the relationship between the situational correction of an attribution error and the escalation of a crisis. If an attribution error is made, there are two possible outcomes: for a situational correction to be made or not. Along these lines, there are several conditions that must be met for a situational correction to be made: (1) a state must realize that it has made an attribution error, 2) a state must desire to correct its error (i.e. desire for the crisis to de-escalate prior to the outbreak of war), and 3) a state must possess the information necessary to correct its error. If a state realizes it has made an attribution error, desires to make the necessary correction, and either possesses or obtains the information necessary to make such a correction, it will likely make one because it desires for the crisis to de-escalate prior to the outbreak of war. In this regard, the act of making a situational correction makes de-escalation the likeliest outcome, although not a guarantee. In some cases,

the conflict of interests is simply too high for one or more of the actors involved in the crisis to back down. In other cases, the de-escalation of a crisis is dependent upon the timing of a situational correction. For example, if a state makes an attribution error, they begin to behave in a manner consistent with their perception of the other state's disposition (i.e. of their intentions or resolve to act). If this behavior is then perceived by the other state as hostile, tragically an attribution error itself, then it is far less likely to desire to back down because it now believes that its opponent is likely unwilling to back down and thus desires escalation. In such an event, it is unlikely that a situational correction would be made by either actor as the crisis would begin to spiral out of the control of either party. Therefore, for a situational correction to be successful at correcting an attribution error, it must be made prior to the formation of hostile perceptions by one's opponent. At that point, mutual feelings of hostility will difficult to overcome because the states involved will no longer desire to make a situational correction.

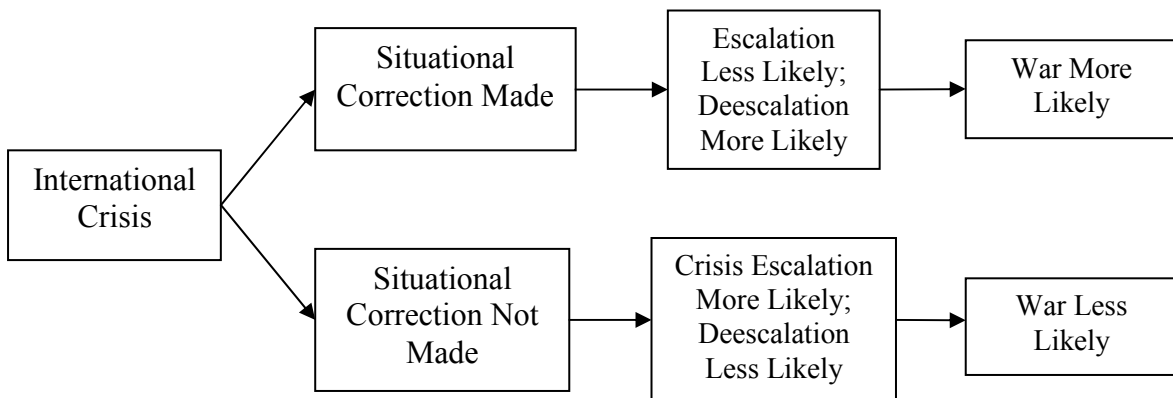


Figure 6: Effect of Situational Corrections on the Escalation Dynamics of Crises

These attributions of a hostile disposition to the other state often result in a hostile response towards the other in the form of inaccurate policies or actions (such as threats) towards the other and a distrust of the other state's stated intentions and future actions, both of which make negotiations to terminate or de-escalate a crisis difficult and unlikely. The first product of

attributions of a hostile disposition to other actors is the increased probability for inaccurate policies in response to the other state. This is due to the fact that a state is likely to act in a manner consistent with its beliefs, whether those beliefs are accurate or not. For example, if a state believes his opponent to be unnecessarily aggressive and hostile given the particular situation, then its policies will likely reflect such a belief and take the form of increased threats and fewer concessions. The likelihood for escalation increases because the other state (whether they initially held the aggressive or hostile intentions) will likely reciprocate such threats. This inevitably results in increased tensions between the two states and significantly decreases the likelihood that any correction will be made because the initial inference, whether it was correct or not, would now be confirmed by the aggressive response by the other state. The second product of the attribution of a hostile disposition to another actor is the distrust of the other actor's stated intentions and future actions. Building off of the tensions generated by the inaccurate policies, the states are now much more likely to distrust each other than they may have been prior to the onset of the crisis. If the perceiving state has reached the conclusion that the other state has a hostile disposition, then it is much more likely to perceive future behavior as hostile and much more likely to question the intentions of the other state even in the presence of arguably peaceful and non-threatening behavior. In this sense, the attribution of a hostile and aggressive disposition to another state is incredibly difficult to overcome and frequently results in the escalation of the crisis that the two are involved in.

In order to prevent such hostile dispositions from being made and perpetuated as well as the unintended escalation of a crisis, two conditions must be met. A state must have both the *capacity* and the *desire* to make a situational correction. The first condition requires that a state have the capacity by which to make a situational correction. This includes (1) the realization that

they have a made an attribution error about another's disposition and (2) that they possess or are capable of obtaining the necessary information by which to correct their error. Firstly, a state must be able to realize that it has made an attribution error and that the error is responsible for the escalation to crisis and/or the perpetuated escalation of a crisis. If a state is unaware that its dispositional inference of its opponent may be incorrect and/or that the false inference is responsible for the unwarranted and undesired crisis escalation, it is very unlikely that it will correct such an error. In addition, the time for a state to make a situational correction is primarily limited to the period immediately following the initial dispositional inference. The probability that a state will realize it has made an attribution error and then make a situational correction will likely decline over time because the longer an error is perpetuated, the greater the chance that a hostile response will be formulated by the perceiving state that will lock the two nations into an escalation of tensions.

Secondly, a state's ability to recognize an attribution error is further exacerbated by the difficulty associated with information-gathering during a crisis. In order to make a complete situational correction, a state must either possess or be capable of obtaining the information necessary to make a complete situational correction. This information most often takes the form of a newly formed perception based on the other state's behavior after the initial inference. As the states involved in a crisis continue to interact and observe each other's behavior, they are often presented with opportunities to recalculate their initial inferences. For example, if a state observes a particular type of behavior by its opponent that is inconsistent with the initial inference, they may be able to conclude a situational correction is necessary. However, the difficulty facing decision-makers that have made an attribution error (as well as for those who study such crises) is that the amount of information needed to make a complete situational

correction is often unclear, as it varies from case to case. In a case where the dispositional inference is relatively weak, a state will likely require much less information than in a case where the initial attribution is strong. Another problem facing decision-makers is that decision-making within crises is usually under time and situation-induced duress, making it difficult for states to acquire information that would allow them to make a situational correction. Decision-makers often have to rely on cognitive shortcuts that allow for limited information-processing, which makes the perpetuation of an attribution error more likely. In this sense, even if a state desires to avoid escalation, it may be unable to avoid it because new perceptions are likely to be corrupted to adapt to the initial, false inference. This would explain why a great number of crises escalate even though both sides initially did not desire such escalation.

The second condition necessary to make a situational correction is that a state must have the desire to correct its error. If a state is presented with new information that challenges its initial dispositional inferences, then it must determine whether or not a correction is needed. A state is likely to make a situational correction not because it desires to have a favorable view of its opponent, but rather because it has realized that it has made a mistake that allowed the crisis to escalate to undesired levels and wishes to correct for it. It is this desire to avoid escalation that explains why a state would choose to make a situational correction of an attribution error. However, even if a state realizes that it has made an attribution error *and* has the necessary information, it may still fail to make the necessary situational correction. This type of behavior would be expected to be seen within two types of crises: (1) crises that are rooted in a conflict of interests where the stakes are quite high and both sides have little desire to back down and deescalate the crisis and (2) crises where both sides cannot back-down for a variety of reasons, resulting in escalation of the crisis. The first type of crisis is one in which both sides refuse to

back-down or to negotiate the de-escalation of the crisis because there is a conflict of interests in which the stakes are extremely high for both sides. These types of crises are most commonly over extremely salient issues such as disputes over security or territory. Crises that involve a conflict of interests with high stakes for both parties will frequently escalate to war. While this escalation is likely undesired by either side, they both will continue their course of action and perpetuate any attribution errors they may make because they are blinded by the issue at stake and thus refuse to make any conciliatory gesture in the form of a situational correction. In this sense, a situational correction within a crisis can be thought of as a conciliatory gesture (i.e. a signal that the state is willing to back-down) on the part of a state that has made an attribution error. While attribution errors may cause states to perceive the salience of the issue or the level-of-the-stakes at hand to be greater than they actually are, such errors likely play a limited role in such crises. As this is the case, crisis de-escalation is likely due to one or more of the actors involved perceiving that the issue at stake is not worth going to war over, rather than the correction of an attribution error.

The second type of crisis is one in which both sides cannot back-down because they are inadvertently locked into a particular course of action that forces them to continue to act in a manner consistent with the initial inference. In these types of crises, the false inference that an attribution error created of an opponent prevents that state from making a situational correction because the image has possibly created opposition within the decision-making elite and/or the domestic audience of that nation. The fundamental problem associated with attribution errors is that they are often difficult to correct because the initial inference a state makes about an opponent is often very strong. In this regard, members of the decision-making unit and/or the domestic audience may believe that the initial inference was correct and does not require a correction and

are thus willing to perpetuate that image of the other at all costs. In this event, it is up to those that may realize that an attribution error has been made to convince those in the elite or domestic audience that an error was made and thus requires correction. The difficulty is that there may be some members of the elite or domestic audience that refuse to change their perception because such an image suits their interests (i.e. they may desire war with the other state) or because they refuse to accept new information that challenges their now strongly-held beliefs.

Now that we have a better understanding of the role that an attribution error and its subsequent correction or perpetuation play in the escalation of international crises, we can create a generalized model of decision-making within international crises that includes discussion of attribution errors. This model (see Figure 7) consists of two primary parts: the psychological and decision-making environment. The psychological environment consists primarily of the attributional process (with the notable absence of a situational correction) in which state-actors perceive the initial behavior of other actors involved in a precipitating event with them and formalize attitudes and images of the other states without taking situational explanations into account. The decision-making environment is where the decision-maker determines whether it possesses the information necessary *and* the desire to make a situational correction, assuming that it has realized it made an attribution error. If it does possess both, it will make a situational correction and will enact policies reflected of such (thus de-escalating the crisis). If it does not, then it will not make a correction and will perpetuate the error, escalating the crisis.

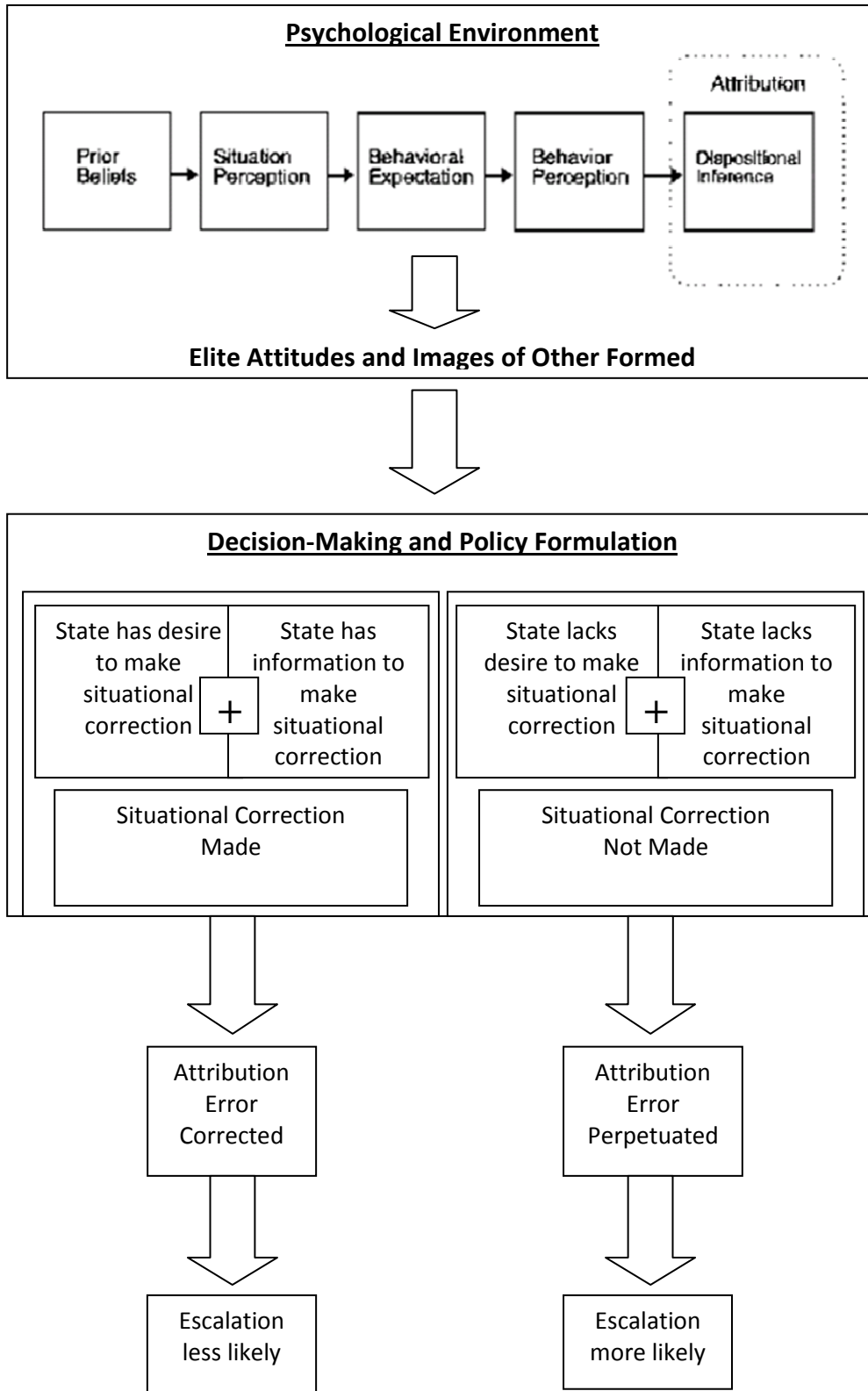


Figure 7: A Model of Decision-Making within Crises when an Attribution Error is made

While the discussion above has been generally focused on the role of attribution errors in international crises, we are specifically interested in the role that such errors play in crises within enduring rivalries. An enduring rivalry is a relationship between two or more states in the international system that suffers from a higher-level of tensions and an increased number of crises and conflicts than a non-rivalry relationship. While China and the United States have not been involved in a large number of wars (an arguably defining characteristic of enduring rivalries), they have been involved in more than their fair share of bilateral crises, suggesting that their relationship is an enduring rivalry at least in context of international crises. As we know from literature within the field of Social Psychology, attribution errors are extremely likely when two actors interact for the first time (as they have little to no knowledge to base observations on) and decline in probability the more the same two actors interact. This is the case because actors who are familiar with each other are far less likely to make attribution errors about each other and, in the event that they do make an attribution error, are significantly more likely to realize an error has been made and/or possess or gather the necessary information to make a situational correction.

As enduring rivalries are relationships based on numerous interactions between the same states, the same logic may also apply. At first, two rivals are unfamiliar with each other and have limited knowledge about the other's disposition, such as their resolve to act or their intentions, and are thus more prone to make attribution errors of each other. Overtime, the states begin to form impressions about the general nature of their opponent(s) and thus are capable of basing new observations on this understanding. This makes attribution errors less likely because more information means increased opportunities for complete situational corrections. To take it a step further, if rivals are more likely to make attribution errors early on in the rivalry, then perhaps

crises that occur early in a rivalry are more likely to escalate to war than crises that occur later in the relationship. This may be the case because states involved in a rivalry are often able to replicate each situation over and over again, which makes it significantly easier for decision-makers to make correct situational and dispositional inferences. In other words, if you've seen a situation with the same actor once, you've seen it a million times.

Research Design

Finally, we are now able to formalize a theory of the relationship between attribution errors and the escalation dynamics of international crises within and out of enduring rivalries and formulate the following hypotheses⁸:

Hypotheses

H₁: If a negative attribution error is made by one or more states involved in a precipitating event *and the error is left uncorrected*, then we should observe the event escalate to a crisis.

H₂: If a negative attribution error is made by one or more states involved in a precipitating event *and the error is corrected for*, then we should observe the event de-escalate prior to becoming a crisis, provided that both parties involved desire a peaceful settlement to the event.

H₃: If a negative attribution error is perpetuated by one or more states involved in an international crisis *and the error is left uncorrected*, then we should observe the crisis escalate to war.

H₄: If a negative attribution error *is corrected for and no longer perpetuated* by one or more states involved in an international crisis, then we should observe the crisis de-escalate prior to becoming a war, provided that both parties involved desire a peaceful settlement to the crisis.

H₅: Negative attribution errors made in the first few precipitating events or crises of an enduring rivalry are less likely to be corrected for and are thus more likely to escalate a precipitating event to an international crisis and/or a crisis to war, provided that both parties involved desire a peaceful settlement to the event or crisis.

⁸ In these hypotheses, the act 'correcting' an attribution error will be measured by determining whether or not a situational correction is made following a state's initial dispositional inference.

H₆: Negative attribution errors made after the first few precipitating events or crises of an enduring rivalry are more likely to be corrected and thus less likely to escalate a precipitating event to a crisis and/or a crisis to war, provided that both parties involved desire a peaceful settlement to the event or crisis.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for this research is the Escalation or De-escalation of an international crisis. International crises involve two or more state actors that often disagree about some tangible and salient thing (i.e. the possession of territory, a bilateral incident involving some sort of accident, disagreements over trade, etc.). Sometimes these crises can work themselves out with the disagreement between the parties involved being peacefully resolved (either temporarily or permanently). In these types of crises, some factor such as a change in behavior or attitude by one or all parties involved or a conciliatory gesture (i.e. some type of concession) is made that helps to de-escalate the crisis, or to prevent the disagreement from escalating to direct conflict. In other cases, the parties involved may not be able to work out their disagreement for whatever reason, causing the crisis to endure and likely escalate to direct conflict. The process of escalation or de-escalation within an international crisis is relatively easy to observe as they either result in (1) de-escalation (i.e. the termination of an international crisis prior to becoming a militarized interstate dispute (MID)), (2) escalation to the level of a MID⁹, followed by de-escalation (i.e. the termination of a MID prior to direct conflict) between the parties involved (escalation), or (3) escalation to direct conflict. In this sense, the dependent variable will be measured by observing a particular international crisis and determining which of three conditions above are met.

⁹ The Correlates of War dataset uses a hostility rating system of 1-5, where 1=no militarized action, 2=threat to use force, 3=display of force, 4=use of force, 5=war (Ghosn et al. 2004). A rating between 2-5 is a MID, while a 1 is simply a de-escalated crisis.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this research design is the dyadic relationship between the United States and China from 1950-2001, including precipitating events, international crises, militarized interstate disputes (MIDs), and wars. This analysis results in four cases involving varying levels of hostility and escalation within Sino-American relations:

- (1) *The Korean War*, 1950-1953 (hostility rating =5, escalated to war)
- (2) *The Vietnam War* (only Sino-American interaction included), 1959-1975 (hostility rating = 2, escalated to level of a MID, followed by de-escalation)
- (3) *Chinese Belgrade Embassy Bombing*, May 1999 (hostility rating =1, did not escalate to level of crisis)
- (4) *Hainan Island Incident (EP-3/Spy-plane Incident)*, April 2009 (hostility rating =4 for China, =3 for United States, escalated to MID, followed by de-escalation)

The first case, the Korean War, is a clear case where a bilateral crisis escalated to war. In this case, both sides failed to de-escalate the crisis prior to the outbreak of war. The second case, the Vietnam War (a war between Vietnam and United States, but also an indirect crisis involving the United States and China), is a case that escalated to the level of a MID or the threat to use force, but not to war. The final two cases of varying levels of escalation and hostility will be included together in one chapter for the primary purpose of testing hypotheses 5 and 6. These cases include the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, which failed to escalate to the level of a crisis and achieved a hostility rating of one, and the Hainan Island Incident, more commonly known as the EP-3 or 'Spy-plane' incident, which escalated to the level of a MID or a display of force by the United States and a use of force by China, but not war.

Chapter 6

The Korean War (1950-1953)

The Korean War is perhaps the most clear-cut case where a crisis that involved both the United States and China escalated to war. The Korean War started out as a civil war between the Communist-controlled North and a Capitalist-controlled South during which Josef Stalin gave Kim Il-Sung and North Korean forces his support to invade the South in order to unify the Korean peninsula under Communist rule. However, as the Cold War had begun at the conclusion of World War II, the Korean civil war was guaranteed to become an international conflict over which the larger conflict between Communism and Capitalism would be a major guiding influence. In 1950, an American-led United Nations military force joined the war in order to support South Korean forces which had been overrun by the North as far south as Seoul and Pusan. After the United Nations intervention, South Korean and American-led U.N. forces repelled North Korean forces to the 38th parallel and proceeded to invade North Korea, and captured Pyongyang in October 1950. This turn out events gravely concerned the Chinese government because many believed that the American-led U.N. forces would possibly continue their invasion beyond the Yalu River (the official border between China and North Korea) in an attempt to overthrow the newly formed People's Republic of China and reinstall Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist-led government of the Republic of China (Stokesbury 1990, 83). Chinese forces intervened on the side of North Korea only a few days after the U.S.-led invasion of the North and were eventually successful at pushing the U.N. force well below the 38th parallel, which forced a stalemate at the 38th parallel as well as the signing of an armistice (cease-fire) in July 1953, thus ending the Korean War.

Preventing Chinese Intervention in the War

As noted above, the turning point of the Korean War corresponded with the eventual intervention of Chinese military forces in the conflict in October 1953. For our purposes, it is this intervention by Chinese forces in the war that illustrates the role that attribution errors and the lack of subsequent corrections played in the unintended escalation of the Korean War. Prior to October 1953, the Chinese were genuinely uninterested in getting directly involved in any conflict, let alone the Korean War, unless provoked to do so. Chinese leaders desired to avoid such involvement primarily because they had just won a civil war of their own the previous year and were just beginning to recover and establish their rule as the People's Republic of China. Whiting (1960, 45) confirms this point by arguing that there was little evidence that China played any role in the planning or execution of the North's invasion of South Korea primarily because "for Peking, the main military problems remained the conquest of Taiwan and Tibet, the 'pacification' of southern and central China, and the reduction of military expenditures so as to relieve inflationary pressures." As they were focused on domestic concerns, the Chinese, although generally interested in advancing Communist goals in Asia and beyond, likely did not intervene in the Korean War for ideological reasons. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) desired gains for communism, it was unwilling to directly participate in such ventures at the expense of its domestic goals, such as the security of its vital industrial base in Manchuria that lay within relatively easy reach of American bases in Japan (Whiting 1960, 50-51).

After the American-led U.N. invasion of the Korean Peninsula, however, the Chinese began to grow increasingly concerned about the conflict because they feared that American and U.N. involvement may expand beyond the scope of Korea to a potential invasion of the Chinese mainland and the reinstatement of the Nationalist (KMT) government to rule there. Although the

Chinese feared American intervention in their domestic affairs, they remained committed to the liberation of Taiwan and thus avoiding direct involvement in the war unless provoked to do so (Whiting 1960, 55-57). At the same time, American leaders, fearing that China may intervene in favor of the North, decided to attempt to assure Chinese leaders that American intentions regarding Korea were limited to the liberation of the South and the return of the pre-war status quo. For example, at the onset of the Korean War and sensing a strategic advantage, Chiang Kai-Shek, the Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) leader of Taiwan, asked for American permission and support to launch an offensive to reclaim the Chinese mainland. President Truman, realizing that such an attack would detract from American focus on the Korean conflict and provoke an immediate Chinese response and potential intervention in the Korean War. In addition to denying Chiang's request, Truman provided public reassurances that the United States had no intention of attacking or threatening China and ordered the American Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Straits to protect Taiwan from a potential Chinese attack *and* to explicitly reject any Nationalist-led actions to be taken against the Chinese mainland (Xia 2006, 44). In this sense, the United States likely did not desire to deter Chinese intervention in the Korean War using force, rather, to use public statements of their intentions and strategic placement of a limited military force to enforce the status quo in the Taiwan Straits to reassure the Chinese and to prevent their intervention in the conflict.

However, public statements of American intentions to prevent Chinese involvement in the war were ignored by the Chinese because they perceived the presence of the American Seventh Fleet as an invasion of Chinese territorial waters (Baijia 2006, 183). In response to the American action, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Zhou Enlai, denounced the move as "armed aggression against the territory of China in total violation of the United Nations charter" (as cited

in Whiting 1960, 58). The Chinese had failed to interpret the American statements and actions in the manner in which Truman had intended, resulting in an attribution of general aggression against China on the part of the Americans. From this point onward, Chinese leaders perceived American behavior as unnecessarily aggressive and thus reconciled future American statements and actions accordingly. While this particular situation did not directly lead to Chinese intervention and the escalation of the Korean conflict, it certainly had an indirect bearing on future Chinese decision-making regarding intervention in the war. By sending the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Straits, Truman believed that he was acting in the best interests of *both* the Taiwanese and the Chinese by enforcing the status quo and preventing aggression towards each other. However, American decision-makers had underestimated China's desire to reunite the Chinese mainland with Taiwan. Up until the mobilization of the Seventh fleet, China had used the reunification of Taiwan as one of the primary reasons for non-intervention in the Korean conflict. Now, however, their fears of an American-supported Nationalist invasion of the mainland appeared to becoming a reality.

In this sense then, the Americans had made an attribution error regarding the situation over Taiwan. They had failed to realize that China linked the Taiwan issue to the non-involvement in the Korean War. Without such a rationale, Chinese intervention in the war became more likely because they now feared that the Americans had grander intentions for reuniting the mainland under Nationalist rule. Had American leaders assessed the situational factors acting upon the Chinese, they may have realized that the Communist's highest domestic *and* foreign policy objective was to reunite Taiwan and all of China under Communist rule. Although the mobilization of the Seventh Fleet was intended as a deterrent to Chinese efforts to reunify Taiwan with the mainland and thus likely to provoke a Chinese reaction, it was also

intended to signal the Chinese that the United States would not invade the mainland. It was this second objective that American leaders had failed to achieve, thus ensuring a Chinese response that would be perceived as unnecessarily hostile. This created an image of the Chinese as hotheaded and aggressive, each of which were attributions made in the presence of situational factors that should have been sufficient to explain them away, but were not. In this particular situation, American leaders could have avoided provoking a hostile response by the Chinese by not sending the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Straits and instead placing it in a location that would allow them to achieve their strategic objective of protecting Taiwan from a Chinese invasion as well as make statements suggesting the United States would protect Taiwan from a Chinese invasion at all costs as well as statements suggesting that they desired to prevent Chinese intervention in the Korean conflict. Such a situational correction would have made it possible for the Chinese to perceive American intentions more accurately as well as the Americans to prevent provocation of the Chinese over the Taiwan issue during the duration of the Korean War.

Along similar lines, the Chinese could have taken key situational factors acting upon the United States into account to prevent making an error as to general American aggression. Firstly, the Chinese could have observed that the United States was temporarily constrained by its involvement in the Korean conflict and thus would be unable to launch a viable offensive on the Chinese mainland until the war was over. In the same context, the Chinese could have observed that the mobilization of American forces to the Taiwan Straits were strategically limited to providing defense of Taiwan—while they would still perceive such an action as intervention in Chinese domestic affairs, they would have been less likely to make an attribution error of general American aggression towards China and instead observe that the American actions were

primarily for defensive purposes. In addition, they could have observed the absence of a Taiwanese mobilization of forces to invade the mainland after the movement of the Seventh Fleet in the Straits. Secondly, the Chinese could have deciphered American intentions from President Truman's statement of January 5, 1950 in which he stated that the United States would not get involved in the Chinese civil war and that they would "not provide military advice or aid to Chinese forces" on Taiwan (Perkins 1978, 692). Although each of these factors, when considered alone, may have seemed insufficient to correct the initial inference of aggression on the part of the Americans, in conjunction, these factors could have been used by the Chinese to make an accurate inference about American intentions towards China. Correcting for the initial aggressive attribution may have allowed the Chinese to perceive future actions by the United States during the crisis more accurately, often in a less hostile manner, and thus evoke a less hostile response from the Chinese. While the analysis regarding the attribution errors of the Chinese and the Americans in this Taiwan Straits incident is relevant and interesting to our theory of the escalation dynamics of Sino-American crises, it is important to note that the discussion of the events regarding a potential correction of such errors is strictly hypothetical and serves only as conjecture about the alternative path that the conflict could have taken in the absence of attribution errors.

Despite the fact that the Taiwan Straits incident reflected potentially escalating behavior by both states, the escalation of the Korean conflict did not occur until much later. As we noted above, the Chinese were very concerned that the American-led U.N. invasion of the Korean Peninsula was a pretext to an eventual attack on the mainland. While one possible route for such an attack was through the Taiwan Straits, Chinese leaders were primarily concerned with the preponderance of the American and U.N. forces on the Korean Peninsula. This was the case

because they believed that if the American-led invasion of the North was successful, they would continue pushing past the Yalu River, China's border with North Korea, all the way to Beijing to remove the Communist regime there. This concern was seemingly well-founded as several American leaders, including Douglas MacArthur, the leader in charge of the U.S.-led force, believed that U.N. troops should continue beyond the Yalu River into China to eliminate Chinese bases across the border that were supplying the North (Stokesbury 1990, 83). However, President Truman as well as many of his advisors did not believe that such a policy would be advisable and accordingly advised MacArthur to observe the utmost caution when approaching the Chinese border with North Korea so as not to provoke Chinese intervention. Although General MacArthur believed that an attack on the Chinese military bases across the Yalu was necessary, the general consensus among American leaders was that the traditional friendship between China and the United States should resume after the Korean War, which led "White House and State Department officials to the additional assumption that if the United States made clear to China's leaders that America harbored no ill will or aggressive designs against them, China would not intervene should UN forces advance above the 38th parallel" (Kaufman 1986, 88).

In order to promote such an approach to China, American leaders pursued several policies that were intended to reassure the Chinese that they held no 'ill will' towards them. First, while the American-led U.N. force would be allowed to cross the 38th parallel into North Korea, only South Korean forces would be allowed to advance into the northeastern-most sections of the country. Kaufman (1986, 85) notes that "as a matter of policy, no non-Korean ground forces were to be used in the northeast provinces of Korea bordering the Soviet Union or in the area along the Manchurian border." Secondly, American leaders ordered all air strikes against North Korean targets to be limited to the area along and South of the Yalu River

(Whiting 2006, 221). Thirdly, American leaders considered a British proposal that would have established a buffer zone between the Yalu River and the American-led forces near Pyongyang. Although no such buffer zone was enacted, it reflected the extent to which some American leaders were willing to go to assure the Chinese that they would not invade the mainland.

However, this good-will approach towards the Chinese failed to prevent Chinese intervention in the conflict. Firstly, while Chinese leaders continued their policy of non-intervention in the Korean War, the continued advance of the U.N. force towards the 38th parallel increasingly concerned Chinese leaders that an invasion of their nation was potentially imminent. For the Chinese, the 38th parallel was to be their ‘line in the sand’ that would determine whether or not they would intervene in the war. Mao Zedong, for example, stated that “if American imperialism interferes, but they don’t cross the 38th parallel, we will not do anything; if they cross the parallel, we will fight with them” (Baijia 2006, 190). Along similar lines, Chinese leaders, acting through the Indian ambassador to China, K.M. Panikkar, “warned the United States that they would not permit the American forces to cross the 38th parallel without taking some retaliatory measures” (Kaufman 1986, 87). The problem with such statements were that they were made outside of formal communication channels in the case of Mao Zedong, as none had existed since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, or that they were made through unreliable formal channels as in the case of Panikkar, whom American officials perceived as “little more than agent of Chinese propaganda” (Kaufman 1986, 87). Another problem was that even had Pannikar’s message been deemed as credible, it had said nothing about Chinese reaction to South Korean forces crossing the 38th parallel. The Americans took such messages as a sign that Chinese threats of intervention were most likely idle in nature and that advance beyond the 38th parallel would most likely *not* provoke Chinese intervention.

Secondly, in the event that Chinese threats of intervention were accurate, American leaders determined that airstrikes against North Korean military targets would not be made beyond the Yalu River and that the advance of American forces would be limited to near Pyongyang. The fundamental idea was, in addition to limited advance to the northeastern provinces to only Korean forces, to prevent provocation of the Chinese at all costs. Even as it was becoming clear that Chinese forces intended to intervene in the conflict and were thus crossing the Yalu into North Korea, American leaders ordered General MacArthur to scrub a proposed airstrike against a bridge across the Yalu River from Sinuiju (Korea) to Antung (Manchuria) because it was perceived by Robert Lovett, the Deputy Secretary of Defense as well as President Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk that the bombing would not alter the flow of troops across the river and that it might “result in accidental bombing of Antung and other points on the Manchurian side of the river” (Kaufman 1986, 95). Only when MacArthur replied to American leaders that Chinese forces were “pouring” across the border did they approve air strikes against targets along and beyond the Yalu River (MacArthur to JCS 1950).

The final approach to reveal America’s lack of aggression towards the Chinese was American leader’s consideration of a proposal by the British for a buffer zone to be established along the Yalu River on the North Korean side to prevent interaction between U.N. and Chinese forces after the initial intervention of Chinese forces. However, General MacArthur strongly opposed such a plan because he believed that the Chinese would become fully involved in the conflict regardless of any assurances made by the Americans. He argued that any belief to the contrary was “wishful thinking at its very worst” and that any such assurances would be comparable to the Munich appeasement of Hitler in 1938: ‘To give up any portion of North

Korea to the aggression of Chinese Communists would be the greatest defeat of the free world in recent times...” (Whiting 2006, 222-23). Such an analogy, often a tool utilized by decision-makers to simplify the decision-making process by relating the current situation to some historical case, was in error because it had been MacArthur’s actions and statements during the period leading up to the initial Chinese intervention that led them to intervene in the war. In this regard, MacArthur’s attribution of Chinese aggression, as reflected by his inaccurate analogy of the Chinese intervention to the Munich Appeasement, was in error (Khong 1992, 115-117).

MacArthur’s attribution error of Chinese intentions to intervene in the war was the product of more than just his inaccurate analogy to the Munich Appeasement. In the time leading up to the initial Chinese intervention by the beginning of November 1953, MacArthur had begun to pursue what seemed to be personal objectives regarding Chinese intervention. However, in early-to-mid October, MacArthur had generally followed Washington’s requests and orders. On October 15, 1953, General MacArthur met with President Truman for the first time at Wake Island to discuss the potential implications regarding Chinese intervention of the American advance beyond the 38th parallel that had begun on October 7th. At the meeting, Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who had accompanied Truman on his trip, mentioned to MacArthur that the Chinese had privately threatened to enter the Korean conflict if U.N. forces were to cross the 38th parallel. MacArthur suggested that he did not understand fully why the Chinese would make such a threat and that they were probably greatly embarrassed by the predicament in which they now found themselves (Truman 1956, 416-18 as cited in Kaufman 1986, 91). In the same meeting, MacArthur also suggested that resistance in Korea would likely end by November of that year and that American forces would be home by Christmas. Thus, as

late as mid-October, MacArthur had followed Washington's plan and believed that Chinese intervention was unlikely and that invasion of the mainland was unnecessary at that time.

However, soon after gaining approval to cross the 38th parallel, MacArthur began pursuing what seemed to be personal objectives. Firstly, two weeks prior to the Chinese intervention, MacArthur had altered American standard operating procedure regarding the advance of South Korean-only forces into the northeastern provinces of North Korea. Ignoring Washington's orders, MacArthur ordered American and U.N. forces to advance into the area beyond Pyongyang and on October 24th, he ordered the same forces to advance all the way to the Yalu River. While it thus seems as if the primary cause for Chinese intervention in the Korean War was MacArthur pursuing his own objectives irrespective of Washington (an explanation rooted in Bureaucratic Politics), the Chinese had made the decision to intervene in the conflict soon after the American-led U.N. force crossed the 38th parallel. However, such news failed to reach American leaders in Washington until Chinese forces had pushed more than 70 miles into North Korea (Kaufman 1986, 97). Thus, any situational correction of attribution errors on the part of either side would have to be made prior to the American crossing of the 38th parallel on October 7, 1950.

As the crossing of the 38th parallel by American-led U.N. forces was the catalyst for Chinese intervention in the conflict, it is necessary to understand the options and information that each side possessed prior to the event to analyze the role that attribution errors may have played in the American decision to cross into the North as well as the Chinese decision to intervene. Prior to invading North Korea, the Americans had continued to inaccurately perceive that the Chinese held a relatively weak resolve to intervene in the conflict and that short of advancing beyond the Yalu River into Manchuria, the chances for Chinese intervention were near zero. The

Chinese on the other hand, while failing to realize that their intentions to intervene upon the American crossing of the 38th parallel were unclear, had made a concerted effort to make their intentions regarding intervention known to American leaders. However, it was their attribution of American aggression related to the Seventh Fleet situation as well as suspicions involving the likelihood of an American invasion into mainland China that all but ensured that the Chinese would intervene on behalf of the North, thus escalating the crisis to war.

Although some American leaders, particularly MacArthur, believed such an invasion would be necessary (at least to attack Chinese supply bases just across the border), most believed that Chinese intervention in the war would turn out to be disastrous for the U.S., as reflected by their actions to prevent provocation of the Chinese. However, it is unlikely that the Chinese would have been able to discern benevolent American intentions from their actions. For example, several actions taken by the Americans seemed to reinforce the initial attribution of aggression such as (1) the denial of the buffer-zone plan between the Yalu River and Pyongyang, (2) American bombings of North Korean targets along and south of the Yalu, and most significantly, (3) the American advance beyond the 38th parallel and eventual capture of Pyongyang. Had the United States established a buffer zone between Chinese and American forces immediately following, or even prior to the invasion, they may have been able to effectively convey their benevolent intentions more clearly thus preventing Chinese intervention—although there is no guarantee that the Chinese would have been willing to overlook the American advance beyond the 38th parallel. Secondly, in the absence of the buffer zone, the Americans seemingly confirmed the worst of Chinese fears by conducting bombing runs near the Chinese border. Even though the bombings were conducted south of the Yalu, the Chinese would have perceived such bombings as American forces advancing even closer to

China, confirming their initial fears that the United States would push beyond the Yalu. Lastly, the American advance beyond the 38th parallel seemed to shore up any doubt there was in the Chinese leadership as to American intentions regarding an invasion of China, as they felt that they had made themselves perfectly clear that any advancement beyond that point would ensure Chinese intervention.

In this regard, the American attribution of a weak Chinese resolve to intervene in the conflict under any circumstance that did not involve advancing across the Chinese border was the primary explanation for the escalation of the crisis to war. Had the Americans accurately perceived that there *were* circumstances in which the Chinese would intervene, they would surely have avoided provoking them. In terms of Prospect theory, China was in a losses-frame once the American's crossed the 38th parallel because they perceived such an action as a signal of American intentions to invade China and were thus more risk-acceptant towards intervention. The Americans failed to realize the transition from a gains-frame prior to the crossing (thus inaccurately attributing risk-avoidance to the Chinese disposition) because they believed the Chinese would not intervene in the war for three primary reasons: (1) they believed that the Chinese were not in a position to militarily oppose the U.S., (2) the Americans believed that the Sino-Soviet alliance encourage China to remain uninvolved because it would follow the Soviet example, and (3) American decision-makers believed that China had failed to send a clear message about whether or not it would enter the war (Baijia 2006, 190-191).

The first explanation for a weak Chinese resolve to intervene was based on the notion that the Chinese were simply ill-prepared for intervening in the war no matter what they claimed to the contrary. The Chinese had just come out of a major civil war against the Nationalists that had sapped a great deal of strength from the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The American

perception was that the PLA would be incapable of matching the military might of the U.N. force in Korea because of such exhaustion as well as superior numbers (Baijia 2006, 189-190). The problem with such an assumption is that it fails to account for the fact that the Communist party had only just come to power and was extremely sensitive to threats to its continued existence. Had the Americans taken such a situational factor into account, they may have been able to observe that Chinese resolve to intervene was actually quite high provided they felt threatened enough. If they were to feel that their existence was threatened by some American action, then they would be far more likely to function under a losses-frame and be more acceptant of the costs of intervening. In this sense, the Chinese government had tied its continued existence to the defense of its border with North Korea. If the Americans were to threaten the Chinese border by crossing the 38th parallel, then the Chinese would be forced to intervene for their own survival. In this sense, the Americans failed to realize that if the Chinese were to intervene in the war, it would not be for ideological reasons, rather, as an effort to protect themselves. Instead of reassuring the Chinese of the benevolence of American intentions, American actions forced the Chinese into a corner where their only option was to intervene and escalate the crisis to war.

The second explanation for a weak Chinese resolve was that American decision-makers believed that the Sino-Soviet alliance would encourage China not to intervene unless the Soviet Union did first. In this regard, the Americans acted under the assumption that the Chinese would follow the Soviet example irrespective of various situational differences affecting them. The problem with such an assumption is that it fails to account for unique situational factors acting upon the Chinese such as the geographical proximity of the Korean conflict to their border and capitol and the fact that they were militarily inferior to the U.N. force just across the border. To correct for such an inaccurate attribution of Chinese resolve, the Americans could have taken

such factors into account to determine that Chinese resolve to act was not tied directly to the resolve of the Soviets.

The third, and final explanation, was that American leaders perceived Chinese threats of intervention as lacking credibility and thus were able to calculate that the risk of Chinese intervention was quite low. The interpretation of this was that the Communist-led government had been threatening to invade Taiwan for the entire year prior to the onset of the Korean War. The Americans had come to realize that such threats lacked credibility because the Communists did not possess the capability for such an attack, particular in the face of an American-led response. In this sense, American leaders applied such lessons to the current situation and perceived the Chinese threats of intervention in the current crisis as improbable. What they failed to realize was that an offensive attack against Taiwan and a defensive effort against an incursion beyond the Yalu are two completely different things regarding the capabilities of the Chinese. First, it is far easier to convince oneself to act in defense of one's territory than in an offensive effort to gain or retake territory. Second, both efforts required different capabilities. An invasion of Taiwan would require amphibious, naval, and air capabilities that China simply did not possess, while defense of the land border between Manchuria and North Korea required a large number of land forces, which is exactly what Chinese had a surplus of. In this regard, the Americans could have calculated that the Chinese resolve to act was high in both cases, but that its military capabilities presented two very different courses of action—in the Taiwanese case, the Chinese were capable of threatening but not acting, while in the Korean case, the Chinese were capable of threatening (as we noted above) *and* capable of acting.

In the case of the unintended and undesired escalation of the Korean crisis between China and the United States to war, we can conclude that the occurrence and perpetuation of attribution

errors likely played a pivotal role. Had the aggressive inferences about both sides been avoided in the Taiwan Straits incident prior to Chinese intervention, both sides may have been far more capable of communicating clear intentions as well as to more accurately observe the potential explanations for each other's behavior during the buildup to escalation. Going beyond the Taiwan Straits crisis, however, we can more directly observe the role that attribution errors may have played in the intervention of the Chinese in the Korean War. Had the United States, for example, decided not to cross the 38th parallel and/or to establish a buffer zone between the 38th parallel and the Yalu River, the Chinese may never have intervened in the war. The United States would have been better suited to make such policy changes had it been able to take the necessary situational explanations into account that would have revealed to them that their perception of a weak Chinese resolve to intervene was inaccurate. Given the situational constraints acting upon the Chinese, it was not irrational for them to intervene in the Korean War. However, the occurrence of attribution errors adapted what was perceived as rational behavior by the Chinese because they inaccurately perceived American actions as unnecessarily hostile.

In the same sense, the American advance beyond the 38th parallel was also completely rational behavior given the situational conditions they were acting under. However, such an action was only perceived as rational by American decision-makers because they were biased by false attributions of weak Chinese resolve to act. Taking such factors into account, Foot (1991, 418-419) reveals that there is near unanimity among Western scholars of the Korean War that Chinese intervention in the conflict could have been averted. In this sense, it seems quite likely that had attribution errors not been made and/or perpetuated by either the Chinese or Americans, Chinese intervention and the subsequent escalation of the Korean crisis to war would have been avoided.

Chapter 7

The Vietnam War (1959-1975)

Nearly a decade after becoming involved in the Korean War, the United States entered into a very similar conflict involving communist-controlled forces in North Vietnam and capitalist-controlled forces in South Vietnam. The reason for this intervention was much the same as the reason that they had become involved in the Korean War. The ongoing ideological struggle between communism and capitalism that existed throughout the Cold War had spread to the Vietnam, and American decision-makers deemed it necessary to intervene to ensure the safety and continued existence of capitalist-friendly elements in South Vietnam. This intervention naturally concerned Chinese leaders because it bore a striking resemblance to the American invasion of Korea nearly a decade before. The similarities between the two wars were fairly easy to observe; an ideological struggle involving communist-led forces in the North and capitalist-led forces in the South that becomes the central focus of the larger struggle between the same elements during the Cold War. Beyond such general similarities, there was one specific similarity that is of specific interest for our analysis of attribution errors during the wars. The lack of formal lines of communication between both nations created conditions favorable for attribution errors to be made during both conflicts.

During both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the United States and China did not have direct relations or formalized lines of communication with each other. In both cases, China and the United States issued numerous public assurances as well as used third party intermediaries (i.e. Sweden and India during the Korean War) to send signals to one another about their respective intentions. The problem with such informal communication was that public statements and discussion utilizing intermediaries were almost always perceived by both parties as lacking

credibility. Whiting (2006, 232) suggests that “given the absence of direct diplomatic exchanges or back-channel communications, both parties were left to rely on their own perceptions of the other party’s intentions.” Therefore, it can be argued that a lack of formalized communication to assist the signaling of intentions generally makes the occurrence of attribution errors more likely when compared to relationships that possess formal channels of communications. In the case of the Sino-American relationship, this phenomenon is evidenced by the frequency of inaccurate attributions during the Korean War and the subsequent improvement on each state’s ability to make situational corrections to correct for such errors in ensuing crises such as the Vietnam War.

In contrast, the most significant difference between the Sino-American interaction during the Korean War and the Vietnam War is that the Korean case resulted in direct warfare between Chinese and American forces, while the Vietnam case did not. One possible explanation for the lack of direct Chinese military involvement in the conflict was that both the Chinese and the Americans had learned valuable lessons about interpreting each other’s actions and intentions (Whiting 2006, 232). These lessons, particularly noticeable in American decision-making during the Vietnam War, are evidenced by distinct changes made on American behavior directed towards potential Chinese intervention in the conflict. For example, Dean Rusk, the Assistant Secretary for Far East Affairs during the Korean War and Secretary of State during the Vietnam War, argued that:

Our conduct of the war and especially the bombing of North Vietnam were influenced by the possibility of Chinese intervention... [W]ith our policy of gradual response, at no time did we present Beijing and Moscow with a major change in the war that forced them to decide whether or not to intervene... We downplayed the importance of our own military actions for the benefit of the Chinese and Soviets, not wanting to provoke them into responding... Our Chinese specialists stated almost unanimously that if we sent ground operations into North Vietnam, the chances of Chinese intervention were high and for that reason I strongly opposed U.S. ground operations versus North Vietnam... [that] would likely have triggered Hanoi’s mutual security pact with China... We watched for potential mobilization of Chinese forces, avoided bombing territory adjacent

to China, and tried to avoid threatening the Chinese or leaving our own intentions unclear as had been done by General MacArthur's advance to the Yalu (Rusk and Rusk 1990, 456-457, as cited by Whiting 2006, 232).

Rusk's observations about the difference between American behavior during the Korean and Vietnam Wars reflects the change how the United States perceiving the potential for Chinese involvement in both conflicts. Khong (1996, 11) suggests that the "lessons of Korea had an especially powerful influence on Vietnam decision-making because they not only predisposed the policymakers toward intervention but also predisposed them toward selecting a specific option among several prointervention options." In this sense, during the Vietnam War, as opposed to the Korean War, Chinese intervention was treated as a distinct and real possibility from the very beginning of the conflict as opposed to a threat that gradually developed over time. Similar to Khong's analysis, Zhai (2000, 139) refers to the American strategy during the Vietnam War as a "China-induced U.S. strategy of gradual escalation" that allowed American decision-makers to make more accurate attributions of Chinese intentions and to avoid making the same types of errors that led to Chinese intervention and the eventual escalation of the Korean crisis to all-out war. Such an adaptation was successful primarily because American decision-makers took the lessons learned about Chinese behavior during the Korean War and reshaped their conception of the expected behavior of China during precipitating events and crises that occur near their borders.

This shift in the expected behavior of the Chinese helped to shape American behavior primarily because American decision-makers were now cognizant of some types of actions that were most likely to evoke a Chinese response as well as many of the situational factors that help to shape Chinese foreign policy and crisis behavior. The accumulation of knowledge from lessons learned during the Korean War also reflected the development of the Sino-American

relationship from their first major interaction, during which they knew relatively little about each other's behavioral tendencies, to the next one, during which they knew substantially more about such tendencies. Such development is of interest to this study because it suggests that crises that occur early on in a foreign relationship or enduring rivalry, as the Sino-American case was to become, are more likely to escalate to war than those that occur later on in the relationship. The primary reason for this elevated risk of escalation is the increased frequency of attribution errors at the onset of an enduring rivalry. Thus, as an enduring rivalry increases in duration, we would expect to see fewer attribution errors being made and/or perpetuated and thus fewer crises escalating to war, a trend that we will continue to observe in the next chapter.

The Threat of Chinese Intervention: Take Two

The potential for Chinese intervention in the Vietnam War, just as was the case during the Korean War, was the key factor during the war that will help us analyze the role that attribution errors and their subsequent correction played in the escalation dynamics of the conflict. Prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident on August 2nd, 1964 and the subsequent escalation of the war between the United States and North Vietnam, the prospect of Chinese intervention in the war was a minimal concern for American decision-makers. However, as the war began to escalate, the prospect of a Chinese intervention similar to that during the Korean War started to enter into American calculations about further escalation. During that time, the Chinese were primarily observing the developments in Vietnam with caution and apprehension, although the conflict remained a top foreign policy priority for them. The Vietnam conflict, much like its Korean counterpart, was a top foreign policy concern for the Chinese for three reasons: (1) the geopolitical and domestic realities that the Chinese were facing at the time, (2) a sense of

obligation to assist a fellow communist regime in the global ideological struggle between communism and capitalism, and (3) the close ties and similarities between North Vietnam's struggle and the Chinese revolutionary experience (Zhai 2000, 4-5).

First of all, during much of the 1950s and early 1960s the Chinese were faced with what they perceived as a hostile geopolitical environment in which the United States was their primary adversary. After their hostile interactions during the Korean War, Chinese apprehension towards Western, and particularly American, influence in Asia had expanded to the point that the elimination of such influence in places such as Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam had become a top foreign policy priority. In this view, the Chinese were operating in a losses-frame because they perceived American involvement in their 'domestic' and 'regional' interests and the continued containment of China by the United States as preventing them from becoming the traditional regional and international power that they perceived themselves to be (Zhai 2000, 4). In addition to several geopolitical concerns, Chinese decision-makers were also faced with a domestic economic crisis that occurred from 1959 to 1962 as a direct result of the failed Great Leap Forward experiment. Whiting (1975, xiv) suggests that such a crisis "aroused anxiety in Peking that external enemies would exploit PRC [People's Republic of China] vulnerability, a fear that appeared justified by selected indicators of American, Nationalist, Indian, and possibly Russian intent." In light of such vulnerability and sense of loss, American decision-makers would have to accurately gauge these critical situational factors acting upon the Chinese when determining if, and under what conditions, the Chinese would intervene in the Vietnam War.

The second reason that the Chinese were wary of American involvement in the Vietnamese conflict was because of the ongoing ideological struggle between communism and capitalism during the Cold War. As was the case during the Korean War, the Chinese felt

obligated to some degree to assist their communist neighbors and allies in their struggle against Western imperialism. To a larger extent, however, the Chinese intervened, at least indirectly in conflicts such as the Vietnam War, in order to promote Mao Zedong's vision of China as a major global power. Zhai (2000, 4) suggests that:

In Mao's mind, without a corresponding change in the existing international system, the recent Communist victory in China would not be secure, consolidate, and legitimized. Just as the old international order had helped cause China's suffering and humiliation, so too would the creation of a new order contribute to the rebirth of a strong and prosperous China.

While it would be difficult to argue that ideology played only a token role in either the Korean or Vietnam Wars, Chinese intervention, whether direct or indirect, in both conflicts reflected something larger than the struggle between communism and capitalism. Mao and other Chinese leaders used the ideological battleground of the Cold War to help shape China's identity and to advance its global standing. Thus, ideology, while important for the Chinese, did not trump the importance of their domestic and international development. In this sense, China was generally unwilling to play too direct a role in ideological struggles in places like Laos and Vietnam because it feared another war with the United States would severely hamper the achievement of their domestic and foreign policy objectives, a situational factor that American decision-makers would have to account for to avoid Chinese intervention (Zhai 2000, 4).

The third and final explanation for Chinese apprehension towards American involvement in the Vietnam War was the existence of similarity and close personal ties between many Chinese and Vietnamese leaders. Beyond intervening to support North Vietnam's ideological struggle against the South, the potential for Chinese intervention in the war hinged on the fact that Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the North Vietnamese, had close personal ties with key CCP leaders such as Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi, not to mention that the Chinese felt somewhat

obligated to at least intervene indirectly in support of Ho because of the support he offered the CCP during the Chinese Civil War many years earlier (Zhai 2000, 5). In this sense, any American calculation of Chinese resolve to intervene would have to account for such a factor.

Although these factors outline the role that American involvement in the Vietnam War played in Chinese foreign policy objectives, they only offer part of the picture regarding the Chinese decision to intervene and American calculations of preventing such intervention. As was discussed above, the accumulation of knowledge regarding the American and Chinese perception of each other's respective intentions and actions during the Korean War helped to dramatically shape their interaction during the Vietnam War. After their experiences in the Korean War, neither the Americans nor the Chinese were interested in fighting another war against each other. In 1954, only one year after negotiating a cease-fire to end the Korean War, Zhou Enlai urged the North Vietnamese to accept a partition at the 17th parallel between South and North Vietnam at the first draft of the Geneva Accords because he feared that the United States would intervene in the war, forcing the Chinese to enter the war in defense of the North (Zhai 2000, 54-55). While such a plan never came to fruition, it illustrates the Chinese desire to prevent American involvement in Southeast Asia as well as to avoid another war with the United States so soon after the Korean War. However, once the United States intervened in and eventually escalated the Vietnamese conflict, the Chinese were forced to reconsider that position.

Despite the development of the Sino-American relationship and the significant amount of learning that occurred between the Korean and Vietnam Wars, there remained some within the American decision-making apparatus that continued to falsely attribute Chinese resolve to intervene as weak. In February 1964, W.W. Rostow, the head of policy-planning at the Department of State, suggested that the United States should invade North Vietnam because the

risk of Chinese intervention was quite low. Rostow argued that “Vietnam would avoid ‘virtual vassalage’ from China and that China would keep Vietnam from sending troops to South Vietnam in fear of escalation” (as cited in Whiting 2006, 234). In support of this view, Rostow called for a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) to be conducted to determine what the implications of an attack on North Vietnam would be. The SNIE projected that there was not a high-risk of Chinese intervention *unless* American forces invaded deep into North Vietnam or attacked Chinese bases in China (SNIE 50-2-64, pp.378-380). Whiting (2006, 235) argues that “the downgrading of the likelihood of Chinese intervention by U.S. analysts facilitated their acceptance of options for escalation, but the gradual increase in Chinese involvement affected the U.S. calculation of the risk of Chinese intervention.” Thus, initial American predictions of a Chinese response to American escalation of the conflict by increasing the number of troops stationed in the South as well as eventually invading the North were perceived as being unlikely to provoke Chinese intervention.

In contrast, as early as June and July 1964, Chinese leaders began to discuss the conditions under which they would intervene on behalf of the North. On a CCP delegation visit to Hanoi in July, Zhou Enlai pledged that China would surely intervene to assist in “the struggle of the Southeast Asian people” and stated that “Our [China’s] principle for the struggle should be to do everything we can to limit war to the current scale while preparing for the second possibility [of American intervention]” (*Zhou waijiao dashiji* 1993, 413, as cited in Zhai 2000, 131-32). In response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Beijing took no visible action, but four days later declared “Aggression against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam means aggression against China” (Peking Review 1964, as cited in Whiting 2006, 235). On October 9th, a new SNIE was conducted to reassess the likelihood of Chinese intervention in response to American

escalation of the war. It suggested that the Chinese might launch a defensive air response against American forces in North Vietnam, but that it was doubtful that the Chinese would do so (SNIE 10-3-64, as cited in Whiting 2006, 235). As the war began to escalate and attacks against American targets in North Vietnam began to increase later that year, the concern over potential Chinese intervention in the war continued to be minimal at best. However, as the Chinese began to conduct joint air exercises with the North Vietnamese in early 1965, the Americans began to consider the risk of Chinese intervention as increasing in likelihood, as evidenced by a joint State-Defense long-range China study conducted in March that concluded that “China was likely to intervene if North Vietnam was in jeopardy, if the Chinese were endangered, or if large Kuomintang forces entered the war” (Whiting 2006, 237). Thus, the prospect of Chinese intervention had increased from a minimal likelihood at best to conditional upon the Chinese perceptions of insecurity regarding North Vietnamese and/or itself.

The explanation for such a dramatic transition in American estimates of Chinese resolve to intervene on behalf of the North Vietnamese is reflected by the lessons learned from interactions with the Chinese during the Korean War. Although some American decision-makers perceived Chinese resolve to act as weak at the onset of the Vietnam War, they were now more sensitive to and thus better able to accurately interpret Chinese statement of intention regarding intervention for three reasons. First, China had developed a reputation to challenge American involvement in East Asia through direct intervention during the Korean War. Mercer (1996, 7) contends that reputations, such a high Chinese resolve for intervention, develop because observers use the “past to predict similar behavior in the future.” Chinese actions during the Korean War signaled to American decision-makers that China’s resolve to respond militarily in

the face of threats to its sovereignty was actually quite high and that it would intervene in any conflict that it deemed threatening to its interests.

The second reason for the improvement of American perceptions of Chinese resolve to intervene was due to significant differences in the manner by which American decision-making was conducted between the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In the case of the Korean War, decision-making was relatively disorganized and dispersed between publically-recorded meetings between President Truman and his key advisors from the Departments of State and Defense and the frequently independent decision-making of General MacArthur. Such disorganization was significant because publically-recorded meetings, such as those conducted by Truman and his advisors, increase the risk of group decision-making problems such as ‘group-think.’ This is the case because participants often feel pressured to agree with the prevailing opinion of the group’s leader, the group as a whole, or from influential, external sources of opinion (i.e. General MacArthur or public opinion) irrespective of whether they agree with it or not (Janis 1979, Herek et al. 1989). During such meetings, group members often fail to air dissenting opinions, causing deliberation over critical information and decisions to be shortened as well as increased risk-taking, often resulting in sub-par decision-making and inaccurate attributions. In contrast, during the Vietnam War, most decisions were the product of informal meetings between Lyndon Johnson and his Tuesday Lunch Group (made up of members such as Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) (Barrett 1993). These types of meetings were off the record and likely resulted in higher-quality decisions because they likely avoided the problem of ‘group-think’ by allowing for the airing of alternative policy options and interpretations of Chinese intentions.¹⁰

¹⁰ Although one cannot be certain of the exact decisions made during these meetings, as no records were kept of their proceedings.

The final explanation for why American decision-makers were better able to interpret Chinese signals of intentions was due to the fact that such information was easier to obtain than during the Korean conflict. While the communication structure between the two nations remained non-existent during the Vietnam War, China had done a better job at making its intentions known. From the onset of the conflict, Chinese decision-makers had attempted to make it abundantly clear to the United States through tacit support of the Vietminh and numerous statements that it would not stand for an American invasion of North Vietnam. Whiting (1975, 172) contends that such efforts were “carried out in a manner as to be certain of detection by United States intelligence but not by general audiences at home or abroad.” He continues by suggesting that the manner by which the Chinese delivered their message of resolve to act on behalf of the North was significant because it allowed for the “maximum private credibility with minimum public embarrassment or provocation for the United States.” Thus, instead of relying solely on public messages that would be perceived by American decision-makers as saber-rattling and thus lacking credibility, as was the case during the Korean War, Chinese decision-makers had adapted the manner by which they signaled Chinese intentions. Such an adaptation led American decision-makers to perceive Chinese signals as credible and thus accurately attribute a high resolve to intervene to China’s disposition. In this sense, the presence of credible signals of Chinese resolve helped to successfully deter an American invasion of North Vietnam and escalation of the conflict to all-out war, as opposed to the Korean case, during which the absence of such credible signals prevented successful deterrence and allowed for an escalation to war.

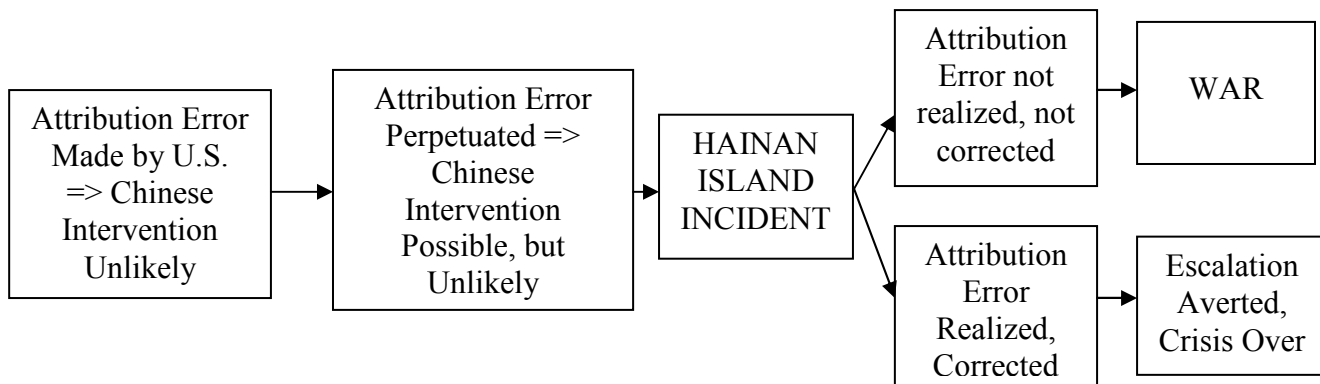
Hainan Island Incident

This newly developed American sensitivity towards the Chinese resolve to intervene in the war was tested during an encounter between Chinese and American fighter-jets. Beginning in August 1965, and continuing well into April, American decision-makers began calling for retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnamese targets across the border in response to guerilla attacks on American air bases in the region. In response, China began an overhaul of its air power capabilities in South China by increasing the number of aircraft available for patrol over North Vietnam, signifying that “it was prepared to accept the risks of retaliation and escalation by engaging aircraft that strayed over Chinese territory” (Whiting 1975, 179). On April 9th, 1965, Chinese forces reported that 8 American aircraft had entered Chinese airspace over Hainan Island and proceeded to intercept them. While information regarding the specific occurrence of events that day, both sides announced that one of the American fighters had been struck by a missile and crashed. The Chinese claimed that the missile that hit the American plane had come from an American fighter, while the Americans contended that the plane was shot down by the Chinese MIGs sent to intercept the fighters.

Irrespective of who was to blame for the downing of the American plane, the fact that the incident did not immediately result in American retaliation of the Chinese air base reflected the change in the manner by which American decision-makers perceived Chinese intentions. After being informed of the downing of the American plane, President Johnson asked whether or not the plane had been over the island prior to being shot down. General Cox, a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, replied that the plane had indeed been in Chinese airspace over the island at the time of the incident (Beschloss 2001, 274-276). In response to the incident, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) (acting on order from President Johnson) ordered that the Pacific rules of

engagement regarding flight patterns be altered to reflect the recent change of events. The new JCS Rules of Engagement stated that American planes were not to challenge China’s 12-mile territorial limit at sea and that “no pursuit is authorized into territorial sea or air space of Communist China” (JCS message to CINCPAC 1965). This change in the standard operating procedure regarding the conduct of American air operations near the Chinese border is a reflection of the successful correction of the initial American attribution of a weak Chinese resolve to intervene. Had the Johnson ordered a retaliatory strike against the Chinese airbase, as opposed to altering an aspect of American policy towards China, Chinese intervention and escalation of the conflict to all-out war would have been significantly more likely to occur. The alteration of the Rules of Engagement for American fighters regarding Chinese airspace showed that American decision-makers now attributed a greater resolve to intervene to the Chinese than at the onset of the crisis because they had accurately perceived many of the situational factors acting upon the Chinese that were mentioned above. While the threat of Chinese intervention had not been eliminated following the Hainan Island incident, it does reflect one of only a few moments during the crisis where escalation to all-out war was a real possibility, as reflected in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: Attribution Errors during the Vietnam War



Chapter 8

Chinese Embassy Bombing (1999) and the EP-3/Spy-Plane Incident (2001)

This final chapter on the study of attribution within Sino-American crises will provide analysis of two contemporary crises that occurred between 1999 and 2001: The Chinese Embassy Bombing (1999) and the EP-3 (Spy-plane) Hainan Island incident (2001). These two cases are discussed in conjunction with each other for two reasons. Firstly, each case is better understood in relation to their role in Sino-American relations following the end of the Cold War and prior to the War on Terror. Relations between the two nations during this period followed the cyclical pattern that was mentioned in chapter 1, in which the Sino-American relationship experiences a consistent flow of highs and lows. The second reason why analysis of these two cases is provided in this manner is because each case represents a unique set of circumstances that threatened escalation to either a crisis or beyond, and in all of which such escalation was avoided for some reason or another.

Chinese Embassy Bombing (1999)

On May 8, 1999, two American B-2 bombers launched five 2,000 pound joint-direct attack munitions (as part of a NATO sanctioned bombing mission) on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, killing three Chinese journalists, injuring more than 20 Chinese ambassadorial staff members, and extensively damaging the embassy building itself. In the aftermath of the bombing, American officials declared that the incident had been an accident and apologized to the Chinese government for the loss of the Chinese journalists. The Chinese reaction to the incident, however, failed to accept that the attack was not intentional, which resulted in violent street demonstrations outside American interests in China and around the

world. While the incident did not escalate beyond the precipitating event stage, as no threat or use of force followed, it remains one of the more significant bilateral crises between China and the United States over the past 20 years. What is significant to note for our purposes was the role that attribution errors played in the initial hours of the incident and their subsequent, albeit slow, corrections.

A major source of the attribution errors that were to follow was based on the fact that American decision-makers, at the onset of the event, had failed to realize the seriousness of the situation regarding the Chinese response to the bombing. Campbell and Weitz (2006, 335-36) note that the absence of Chinese specialists at the first governmental meetings discussing the bombing as well as the Pentagon's reluctance to share information about the incident prevented American decision-makers from gauging the severity to which the Chinese perceived the incident. They believed that the Chinese would perceive the incident in the same way that they did; that the bombing was unintentional and thus an accident. Accordingly, Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, and Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, issue a joint statement in which they stated that the incident had been the product of an outdated database of addresses and map of Belgrade and said, "We deeply regret the loss of life and injuries from the bombing" (Cohen and Tenet 1999). In addition, President Clinton told reporters that the bombing was a mistake and expressed his "sincere regret and condolences to both the leaders and the people of China" (CNN 1999). The problem with such a response was that the Chinese demanded more than an apology. Li Zhaoxing, China's ambassador to the United States, told Jim Lehrer on the Public Broadcasting Service's NewsHour, "If you just say 'sorry' and walk away without doing anything else in a through manner this will only add [to] the anger and indignation of the Chinese people" and added that "We attach more to facts, rather than words. No matter how

eloquent one could be” (Ambassador Li Zhaoxing 1999, as cited in Campbell and White 2006, 337). Along similar lines, Tang Jiaxuan, China’s Foreign Minister called the Americans to conduct a thorough investigation of the bombing, make the results public, and to “severely punish those responsible” (CNN 1999).

The failure of American decision-makers to initially realize the seriousness of the situation was based on a couple of factors. Firstly, they had perceived the incident as a tragic accident and concluded that an apology would be sufficient to sooth Chinese leaders. The problem with such a solution was that it failed to take into account the Chinese public’s reaction to the bombing, and the subsequent pressure that it would place upon Chinese leaders. Immediately following the bombing, the Chinese public began receiving information and images of the bombing through Internet sites and Chinese media outlets. Campbell and Weitz (2006, 328) argue that the Chinese media imagery of dead bodies “set amidst the ruins of their destroyed embassy wing naturally evoked suspicion because the surrounding buildings remained remarkably undamaged,” imparting a “sense of design and precision to the attack.” Such images evoked a major response by the Chinese public, which resulted in the assembly of huge crowds outside of the American embassy and consulates across the country and eventually the outbreak of violence directed towards the American entities. This public response, while initially encouraged by the Chinese government (as denoted by formal governmental approval for the mass protests as well as providing buses to transport university students to the protests), placed an increased burden on Chinese leaders to receive a detailed explanation for the bombing as well as some sort of reparation for China’s loss (Cheng and Ngok 2003, 88-90).

Secondly, American decision-makers were unable to anticipate the magnitude of the Chinese response because of the perception by the Chinese public and some of the Chinese

leadership that the bombings were not an accident. Gries (2001, 27) provides analysis of the Letters of Condolence written to the Guangming Daily, a prominent Chinese national newspaper who suffered the loss of two of its journalists in the bombing, and notes that as a whole “the texts agree that the bombing intentionally infringed on Chinese sovereignty and, by extension, insulted Chinese self-respect.” Gries (32-33) goes on to note that the disparity between American and Chinese perceptions of the bombing was the product of the ‘ultimate attribution error’ or the ‘intergroup attribution bias’ in which in-group members tend to explain the bad behavior of other in-group members to the social situation beyond the member’s control and the bad behavior of out-group members to the bad disposition of the individual as well as their group. In the embassy bombing case, American decision-makers had perceived the incident as an accident because they were able and willing to make a situational correction of American behavior—that the bombing was the product of inaccurate and outdated information and not hostile intentions. In contrast, Chinese decision-makers perceived the bombing as an intentional attack upon China because they were either unable to, or more likely, unwilling to make the situational correction of American behavior. Thus, in the absence of information explaining how the bombing was caused by faulty and outdated intelligence, they attributed the attack to an American disposition for aggression and hostility towards China.

While this perceptual gap between American and Chinese decision-makers (and their respective publics) risked escalating the precipitating event to crisis and perhaps eventually military posturing and/or armed hostilities, such escalation was avoided because (1) Chinese leaders eventually reigned in mass protests, (2) the existence of an American apology and acceptance of blame provided a stepping stone to future negotiations over a peaceful resolution to the incident once popular passions began to subside, (3) American leaders eventually provided

more information regarding the incident after an extensive internal investigation, detailing the elements of the event reflecting the accidental nature of the bombing, and finally, (4) American leaders began discussion of possible compensation for the loss of Chinese lives and property.

First of all, escalation to the crisis stage was avoided because the Chinese government began reigning in mass protests outside of the American embassy in Beijing and consulates across the country. During the first few days of the incident, the Chinese government had allowed mass demonstrations to occur outside of American interests all over China. These demonstrations became violent when protestors began to hurl eggs, rocks, bottles, pieces of concrete, and eventually paint bombs and Molotov cocktails at the American embassy building, which started small fires inside the building. Campbell and Weitz (2006, 329) note that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers that were sent to monitor the demonstrations only intervened when the protestors "tried to scale the fences surrounding the building or threatened foreigners unluckily in the area." By allowing the demonstrations to become violent, not to mention to even occur, Chinese leaders attempted to make the seriousness of the situation perfectly clear to American leaders. However, Chinese authorities had underestimated how violent the demonstrations would become and thus determined that they would have been cracked down on because they feared the potential for another Tiananmen Square type incident. On May 10th, 2 days after the embassy bombing, Hu Jintao, then China's Vice-President, made a televised speech in which he announced support for the Chinese people's "keen patriotism," but warned that "We must prevent overreaction, and ensure social stability by guarding against some people making use of the opportunities to disrupt the normal public order" (Hu Jintao 1999, as cited in Campbell and Weitz 2006, 331).

The second and third reasons for why escalation of the event was prevented were loosely based on the similar notion that American decision-makers did, however slowly, begin to realize the perceived seriousness of the situation by the Chinese. Firstly, it is important that the United States had treated the incident as an accident and thus had issued an apology from the onset of the incident. The simple presence of the apology, although not enough to completely mitigate a Chinese response, did help to prevent the incident from escalating because it allowed for the prospect of resolve. In the absence of an official apology, resolution of the incident would have been difficult and escalation would have been more likely. Secondly, as they began to realize the gravity of the situation, American decision-makers offered more information about the bombing in an attempt to clearly reveal that it had indeed been an accident. On June 17th, a U.S. delegation, led by presidential special envoy Tomas R. Pickering, the third-ranking member in the State Department, presented findings from American investigations into the causes of the incident. Campbell and Weitz (2006, 339) note that in his presentation to Chinese leaders, Pickering “highlighted three overarching failures: a flawed technique to locate the intended target (the FDSP), a reliance on inaccurate and incomplete databases, and a defective review process that should have exposed the error” as well as that the United States “had no reason to attack the embassy on purpose” because it would have violated U.S. doctrine and practice.

The final reason why the incident did not escalate was because American leaders began negotiations with the Chinese over compensation for the loss of human life and damages to the Chinese embassy buildings. On July 30th, Chinese and American leaders announced an agreement in which the United States would pay \$4.5 million to the twenty-seven people injured in the bombing and to the families of the three Chinese journalists killed in the attack (Sinha 2003, 91). Several months later, the two sides reached an agreement in which the United States

agreed to pay \$28 million to the Chinese government as compensation for physical damages done to the Chinese embassy building in Belgrade and the Chinese government agreed to pay \$2.8 million to the American government for damages done to American diplomatic facilities in China (Campbell and Weitz 2006, 342). While American efforts to convince the Chinese that the bombing had indeed been an accident, including such compensation deals, were generally unsuccessful, they outline how the gradual situational correction by American decision-makers regarding the seriousness of the Chinese reaction helped to prevent the escalation of the incident to a militarized dispute or beyond.

EP-3/Spy-Plane (Hainan Island) Incident (2001)

Nearly two years after the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Chinese and American leaders found themselves involved in another bilateral crisis that threatened to destabilize relations between the two nations yet again. On April 1, 2001, a U.S. EP-3E ARIES II reconnaissance plane and Chinese J-8II interceptor jet fighter collided with each other in mid-air over the South China Sea, causing the loss of the Chinese pilot and plane and the emergency landing of the American plane on Hainan Island. After landing on the island, Chinese authorities captured the American plane and its crew and held them on Chinese soil until Chinese demands for an official American apology for the collision was issued. While the crisis eventually was resolved by the return of the American crew and plane to American authorities, the 11-day period between the initial collision and the return of the American crew drew analogies by decision-makers in both nations to the tense environment that they had just overcome two years earlier during the Belgrade Embassy Bombing incident (Gries 2001, 26).

The primary source of attribution errors during the crisis had to do with the attribution of blame for the incident. First of all, the two sides disagreed over the sovereignty of the airspace in which the collision had occurred. The American government perceived the collision as an accident that had occurred over international waters in the South China Sea. In contrast, the Chinese believed that the location of the collision had occurred over its territorial airspace within its 'exclusive economic zone' that had been granted to it as part of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which China had been a signatory and the United States had not. The U.N. treaty states that the exclusive economic zone exists within 200 nautical miles of the Chinese coastline (Article 57), that China the sovereign rights to the zone for the purpose of exploring, exploiting, conserving and managing natural resources that may exist there (Article 56), and finally, that the "high seas are open to all States..." and comprises for these states "(a) freedom of navigation [and] (b) freedom of overflight" (Article 87) (*UN Convention on the Law of the Sea* 1982, Parts V and VII (Articles 56, 57, and 87)). Although the treaty seems to suggest that the location of the collision was within international waters, the Chinese utilized their interpretation of the treaty's tenets to contend that their territorial airspace stretched to 200 nautical miles from their coastline. As this was the case, the Chinese placed blame for the collision and the death of their pilot on the American plane and its crew because they believed that the American plane had violated Chinese airspace and created the conditions under which the collision took place.

Secondly, the attribution of blame by the Chinese was also reflected by the claims that the collision, irrespective of its location, was the fault of the American plane's actions and not those of its fighter jets. The Chinese, based upon the testimony of the pilot of the other Chinese fighter jet, claimed that the collision had been the fault of the American plane because it had

“veered at a wide angle towards the Chinese,” ramming into one of the Chinese fighters (Brookes 2002, 107). The Americans contested these claims and argued that the collision was the fault of the Chinese fighter. For years prior to the collision, the United States had conducted these routine reconnaissance flights off the coast of China to the resentment of the Chinese who were unable to conduct such missions along the American coast themselves as well as the fact that they perceived such missions to be violations of their sovereignty (Blair and Bonfili 2006, 378). As this was the case, the Chinese began altering the manner by which they intercepted American planes. Blair and Bonfili (2006, 378) note that in the year prior to the collision, “Chinese fighters flying from Hainan island began flying dangerous intercepts, frequently crossing close ahead of the U.S. aircraft and creating turbulence that buffeted the larger, slower U.S. planes.” In this sense, the Chinese attributed blame for the collision to the Americans, while the Americans attributed blame to the Chinese.

The problem of such a perceptual gap is that, irrespective of who was really to blame, the Chinese had lost the life of its pilot as well as its plane, while the Americans had survived the incident relatively unscathed. Had there been only a collision, but no loss of life, the Chinese would likely have treated the situation very differently. However, because of the loss of life, the Chinese felt as though they were the ‘victims’ of the crisis and thus demanded an official apology by the American government. The dilemma for the United States was that, although they blamed the Chinese for the collision, they had to negotiate the release of their crew and plane that, from their perspective, were being held hostage on Hainan Island. At this point, the crisis had reached a stalemate in which the Chinese held firm in their demands for an official apology (due to their attribution of blame to the Americans), while the Americans held firm at their demands for the return of their plane and crew in the absence of any apology (due to their

attribution of blame to the Chinese). On April 4, Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a letter to China's Vice-Premier, Qian Qichen, and proposed a series to resolve the crisis, one of which was the a 'statement of regret' regarding the loss of the Chinese pilot (U.S. Department of State, 2001).

The prospect of this 'statement of regret' helped to restart negotiations between the two sides over the resolution of the crisis. John Keefe (2001, 8), a special assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to China, noted that during the negotiations, the "Chinese authorities wanted [a] letter from [the Ambassador]... [that apologized] for the loss of the Chinese pilot and for the EP-3 landing on Hainan Island without permission" than with the "facts surrounding the collision." Eventually, the two sides worked out the details around a 'statement of regret,' later to be known as the 'Letter of the Two Sorries.' Keefe (2001, 8) notes that the deal was the United States would produce a letter that stated that "it was 'very sorry' about the loss of the Chinese pilot suffered by the Chinese people and the pilot's family and about the plane entering Chinese airspace without verbal clearance," while the Chinese would agree "to release the aircrew immediately after the U.S. delivered the letter, to hold a meeting with the U.S. to discuss the causes of the accident and ways to prevent future accidents, and to develop a plan with the U.S. for the return of the plane." Thus, the Chinese would get what they perceived as an official apology for the loss of their pilot and American recognition that the American plane was to blame for the incident, while the United States get what it perceived as the return of its crew and plane in exchange for a 'statement of regret,' not an apology. After delivery of the letter to the Chinese, the Chinese announced the release of the American crew, thus ending the stalemate and de-escalating the crisis.

The EP-3 (Spyplane) incident is a case in which a precipitating event immediately escalated to a militarized interstate dispute (MID) and crisis level, but de-escalated prior to the outbreak of war because of the conciliatory actions taken by both sides after the crisis had ceased escalating. While it is highly unlikely that the escalation to a crisis or MID could have been avoided, as the sequence of events dictated the type of response each side would make, it is important to note the role that attribution errors and their subsequent correction played in preventing further escalation of the crisis. From the start, both sides were more willing to attribute blame to the other state than to patiently consider the situational factors that likely caused the collision. Factors such as disagreement over the sovereignty of the location of the collision, over the specific details of the collision itself, as well as over the international protocol for the treatment and return of another nation's plane and crew in the event of an emergency landing all helped to guarantee that the crisis would escalate.

However, when the United States made the realization that a 'statement of regret' would be the only solution to bringing home their personnel, thus mentioning the potential for such a resolution to the Chinese, both sides were able to more clearly discuss their disagreements over the facts of the incident as well as to the particular resolution that they sought. It turns out that once negotiations were started, American and Chinese conceptions of resolution were actually compatible. The Chinese need to maintain 'face' in light of the collision and emergency landing on Hainan Island did not necessarily conflict with the American need to ensure the return of their plane and crew. Therefore, by making the situational correction that the Chinese only desired to save 'face' in light of the crisis outcome (i.e. that they were the only side to lose a life and to have its sovereignty 'violated'), the United States was able to begin the process of resolving and thus de-escalating the crisis. Had the United States not offered to make a 'statement of regret,'

which was a real possibility considering that they did not accept blame for the incident, the two sides would likely not have moved beyond the stalemate that they were locked in. In such a case, the longer the United States refused to deliver an apology and the longer the Chinese held the American crew, the more difficult it would have been for the two sides to resolve the crisis, making escalation significantly more likely.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Attribution errors are a common occurrence in nearly all individual and group interactions. While most of these errors are often inconsequential, their existence consistently threatens inaccurate perceptions of the behavior of other groups or individuals. The analysis of the four cases of Sino-American crises suggests that attribution errors are not exclusive to individual social interactions and that interacting states within international crises are just as vulnerable to attributional miscalculations as any other individual or group. The significant difference between attribution errors that occur in society and in international politics is that interactions within the international system nearly always involve higher stakes, such as the consistent threat of escalation to all-out war. Along these lines, foreign policy decision-makers and analysts should be cognizant of the role that these errors may play in decision-making within international crises.

Primary Findings

The first challenge of a study of attribution errors is to first prove that decision-makers within the particular cases under analysis made attribution errors in the first place. Analysis of each of the four Sino-American crises of the past 60 years shows that attribution errors, often of a negative nature, were made initially made by one or both actors in each case. This confirms that attribution errors are likely a common occurrence in international politics, specifically within international crises. The next challenge then was to determine the particular effect, either independently or in conjunction with other variables that attribution errors may have played in each respective crisis. The first finding is that attribution errors, when left uncorrected, will

likely cause decision-makers involved in international crises to behave in a manner that is inconsistent with the optimal behavior that their opponent's behavior should have dictated. In the case of a negative attribution error, such behavior would most likely take the form of hostile and/or aggressive behavior towards the opponent that is likely to provoke an escalatory response from the adversary that it is directed at. In this sense, although the initial behavior of the opponent could have been sufficiently explained by the situational constraints acting upon it, the perceiving state failed to account for such situational factors. This failure causes a potentially inaccurate negative dispositional inference to be made and in turn, what would likely be perceived by the opponent as an unnecessarily negative response. As is often the case in such interactions, a spiraling of tensions erupts because of negative response after response from each side, until eventually conflict breaks out. However, it is important to note here that while the occurrence of the negative response and the spiraling of tensions that follows may be the independent product of an attribution error, such a response only makes substantive sense in the context of another variable, such as issue importance, imbalances in relative material capabilities, geographical proximity, or domestic politics. In this regard then, attribution errors can be thought of as having an independent effect only in the context of some other escalatory variable—it is the negative attribution error that exacerbates the effect of an escalatory variable such as an imbalance in relative material capabilities.

This finding is confirmed by the events leading up to the Chinese intervention in the Korean War. For example, the initial negative attribution error that the Chinese made about American intentions after the placement of the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Straits exacerbated the Chinese government's concerns regarding the potential for an American-led invasion of the mainland using nationalist (KMT) forces to reinstall the Chiang Kai-Shek-led

regime there. This increased sensitivity regarding its territorial sovereignty and integrity began to alter the Chinese position on intervention in the Korean conflict. While the Taiwan incident did not completely shift Chinese sentiment towards immediate intervention, it did create a more vigilant and sensitive, and inevitably more aggressive Chinese response to American actions on the Korean Peninsula because they inaccurately perceived that the chances for an American invasion of the Chinese mainland either during or after the Korean conflict were higher than they were in reality. Although this error in Chinese perceptions of American intentions likely increased the risk of Chinese intervention in the Korean conflict, it did not guarantee intervention. Only after the Americans made a negative attribution error of their own regarding the Chinese resolve to intervene did a spiraling of tensions erupt.

After repelling the North's invasion of South Korea, the United States made a negative attribution error of the Chinese behavior regarding their resolve to intervene in the conflict. At the onset of the Korean conflict, American leaders perceived that the Chinese resolve to intervene was low, suggesting that the Chinese would not intervene, let alone threaten to intervene, short of an American invasion of the Chinese mainland. While this attribution of a low resolve to intervene was initially accurate and relatively neutral in its orientation, the Americans failed to account for the effect that the Taiwan incident had had on the Chinese resolve. In this sense, by continuing to operate under the false belief that the Chinese resolve to intervene remained low, the Americans were more willing to act aggressively regarding its invasion of the North. By failing to make a situational correction after the Taiwan incident, the Americans changed what was an accurate attribution of Chinese resolve to an inaccurate dispositional inference regarding Chinese resolve. This dispositional inference became a problem as the Chinese behavior reflected, what was in reality, a moderate-to-high resolve to intervene under

particular circumstances and the inaccurate American expectation of Chinese behavior that would reflect a low Chinese resolve to intervene.

By holding such an inaccurate expectation, the Americans were more likely to interpret Chinese threats of intervention and mobilization of troops near the North Korean border as unnecessary Chinese aggression, rather than as a reasonable Chinese response given the situational factors that they perceived as important (i.e. the Taiwan incident). However, instead of perceiving the Chinese threats of intervention and mobilization of troops as the reasonable (given the situational factors) and legitimate warning that they were, the Americans continued to ignore such threats because they falsely believed that the Chinese would not intervene so long as they did not invade the Chinese mainland. Only after the Americans crossed the 38th parallel and Chinese forces began to move south of the Yalu River in response, did the American leaders realize that their attribution of a low Chinese resolve to intervene was inaccurate. However, because of the responses that had already been set in motion by both Chinese and American leaders on the ground, all-out war between Chinese and American forces was seemingly inevitable. Thus, in the Korean example, we see a fairly clear case where an initial negative attribution error by one state, followed by another error by the other state regarding each states' intentions and/or resolve, created the conditions favorable for a spiraling of tensions and the eventual outbreak of war, confirming hypotheses 1 and 3, which predicted that an attribution error, left uncorrected, will cause a precipitating event to escalate to a crisis and a crisis to escalate to war.

The next finding is that negative attribution errors, followed by a successful situational correction, will prevent continued escalation of an event or crisis and cause notable de-escalation to pre-crisis conditions, provided that both parties involved desire a peaceful settlement to either

the event or crisis. In such a case, we would expect de-escalation to pre-crisis conditions to occur because a successful correction of a negative dispositional inference of another state is likely to cause the perceiving state to behave in a manner that is consistent with the type of behavior that is to be expected in response to the opponent's initial behavior. In this sense, it is important to note that both states must desire for a peaceful settlement to the event or crisis because if the perceiving state desires for conflict, the situational correction will not alter their desire for conflict. Along similar lines, if the opponent desires conflict, then the situational correction of initial attribution error is likely to reveal to the perceiving state such a desire, which would almost certainly not be followed by de-escalation of the event or crisis. If, however, both parties *do* desire for a peaceful resolution to the event or crisis and any negative attribution errors are successfully corrected, we would expect to see more conciliatory behavior by the perceiving state towards its opponent in an attempt to reassure it of its desire for peace. Such reassuring behavior would likely be reciprocated, causing the event or crisis to de-escalate. Again, it is important to note that de-escalation of the event or crisis is only possible prior to the onset of a spiraling of tensions between the two states, because once negative behavior by the perceiving state is responded to by negative behavior by the opponent, it is extremely unlikely that a situational correction will be made or that a situational correction will be successful. This finding is confirmed by the Vietnam War, the Chinese Embassy Bombing, and the EP-3/Spy-Plane Incident cases respectively.

In the Vietnam case, we observed how the initial American attribution of a low Chinese resolve to intervene on behalf of the North Vietnamese resulted in what was perceived by the Chinese as aggressive American behavior (i.e. American bombing raids over North Vietnam). This attribution was in error because the Chinese resolve to intervene remained moderate-to-high

following the lessons they learned during the Korean conflict. They believed that if they made their intentions to intervene upon the American invasion of the North clearer to the Americans than it did during the Korean case, they would be able to deter such an invasion. The problem was that some American decision-makers had failed to sufficiently take into account the impact that the Korean case had had on Chinese decision-making regarding American intervention in Asia. The attribution error became negative when American leaders observed Chinese threats of intervention and obvious indirect support of the North Vietnamese, which was unexpected given the American perception of a low-Chinese resolve to intervene. Where the Vietnamese case differed from the Korean case was that American leaders were able to take these observations of Chinese threats and actions and slowly, but surely use them as evidence that the Chinese resolve was higher than they initially had thought. They were able to accomplish this because of the lessons learned from the Korean War—that if you perceive the Chinese to have a low resolve and they begin to behave in a manner inconsistent with the expectations of such a disposition, you likely have attributed a low resolve in error and that a reassessment is in order. Such reassessment was evidenced by numerous Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIE) that had been conducted prior to an American decision to invade North Vietnam.

Although American correction of its inaccurate attribution of a low-Chinese resolve began during discussion of such intelligence estimates, it was not until the Hainan Island incident that the American correction was completed. By changing the standard operating procedures regarding the American Air Force's engagement near Chinese airspace, Lyndon Johnson had successfully corrected the initial attribution error of a low Chinese resolve to intervene, revealing that the Americans had begun to operate under a new attribution of a moderate-to-high Chinese resolve. In this sense, the Vietnam case confirms hypothesis 4, which predicted that a negative

attribution error, followed by a successful situational correction, would result in de-escalation of a crisis, provided both parties desired a peaceful settlement. The Vietnam case, in conjunction with the Korean War case, also has a direct bearing on hypotheses 5 and 6, which predict that the first few events or crises of an enduring rivalry will be more likely to result in conflict than those that occur in later years. As the Sino-American relationship from 1949-1972 is classified as an enduring rivalry, the difference between the outcomes of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts may shed some new light on previous findings regarding the likelihood of conflict within enduring rivalries that suggest that the probability of conflict should increase as the duration of an enduring rivalry increases. While this study's findings are not robust enough to refute such claims (as the study is only limited to two cases that occurred during an enduring rivalry), it does raise significant questions about the potential relationship that exists between attribution errors and enduring rivalries. Perhaps the difference between the results in this study and those of other analyses on enduring rivalries is that hypotheses 5 and 6 stipulate that both parties to the event or crisis must desire a peaceful settlement to the event/crisis in question. If they do not, then we might expect that a conflict of interests exists that likely alters the way in which attribution errors function between the states involved. If nothing else, this study's findings should encourage future research on the relationship between attribution errors and enduring rivalries.

Along similar lines to the Vietnam War case, the EP-3/Spy-Plane case also confirms hypothesis 4 in that it shows an initial negative attribution error that was corrected for, followed by de-escalation of a crisis to pre-crisis conditions. At the onset of the crisis, the Chinese attributed the collision between the American and Chinese fighter, and the subsequent death of the Chinese pilot, to American aggression, which placed the blame for the incident squarely on the United States (at least from the Chinese perspective). This attribution was inaccurate because

it failed to account for the fact that American leaders perceived the airspace where the collision occurred to be international airspace, which would suggest that the Americans were not behaving in an inherently aggressive manner by entering Chinese airspace and engaging a Chinese fighter jet as the Chinese believed. At the same time, American leaders blamed the Chinese fighter pilot's aggressive maneuvers for the collision and attributed such an aggressive disposition to the Chinese in general. Although these attributions of mutual aggression allowed the precipitating event to escalate to a full-blown crisis, the American 'statement of regret' acted as a situational correction by acknowledging some blame for the collision, which opened the door for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. By stepping back and analyzing the situational factors affecting the Chinese leaders, American decision-makers observed that the death of the Chinese fighter dictated that the Chinese government had to receive some sort of apology for the incident in order to save face in light of domestic political considerations, which was the most likely explanation for their seemingly aggressive behavior. By making a 'statement of regret,' which the Chinese perceived as an official apology, the Americans were able to achieve a peaceful resolution to the crisis through the release of their EP-3 spy-plane and its crew.

In the same vein as the Vietnam and Spy-plane cases and hypothesis 4, the Chinese Embassy Bombing case confirms hypothesis 2, which predicted that a negative attribution error, followed by a successful situational correction, will result in the de-escalation of a precipitating event prior to reaching crisis-level. In the Embassy Bombing case, we observed the Chinese making a negative attribution of American aggression from the intentional (at least from the Chinese perspective) bombing of their embassy in Yugoslavia. This attribution was in error because it failed to account for American explanations that the bombing was the product of a faulty intelligence database of Belgrade addresses and was thus accidental. This case de-

escalated prior to reaching crisis-level primarily because of the American offer of an official apology and reparations for the loss of life and infrastructure as a result of the bombing. By offering such an apology and reparations in a timely manner, the Chinese were able to accept the bombing as accidental, thus making a successful situational correction, because the Americans would be unlikely to offer reparations had the bombing been intentional. In this sense, an initial dispositional inference of unmitigated hostility of the Americans was corrected for to allow the precipitating event to de-escalate prior to reaching crisis-level.

Limitations of the Findings

The first obvious limitation to this study's findings is that it is limited in scope to Sino-American crises only, which implies that any implications or findings laid out above can only be applied in context to the Sino-American relationship. Only in the presence of more extensive testing, including other crisis-suffering relationships, will such findings be potentially applicable in a more generalized sense. That being said, the findings laid out above can be used as guidelines for future research on the subject of attribution errors in international relations, providing a starting point for research on other relationships to take place. In addition, the study is also limited by its relatively small number of cases, which affects the robustness of the findings laid out above. It cannot be ruled out that the study's findings are limited to the Sino-American relationship or a specific type of international crisis. Only through more extensive and diverse testing will such concerns be remedied.

Another primary limitation is that attribution errors as an explanation for the occurrence of conflict in the international system is dependent upon other theories of crisis escalation such as geographical proximity or imbalances in relative material capability arguments. Only in such

contexts would the effect of attribution errors be identifiable. While this dependency upon other explanations of crisis escalation is not a major concern, it must be noted that attribution theory only provides guidance regarding the formation and implications of perceptions among interstate actors, which in the context of other explanatory variables, may affect the occurrence of conflict in international politics. In such a context, attribution errors may be viewed as having an effect upon how such escalatory variables function regarding conflict.

Another critical limitation has more to do with the nature of the international system than with the results of the study. In international relations, states are often incapable of accessing the type of credible information that is necessary to make situational corrections of attribution errors. This suggests that the very nature of international relations may make the occurrence of attribution errors possible and perhaps likely, but their subsequent correction difficult, if not impossible in some instances. As this is likely, in some cases, it may not matter whether or not decision-makers realize that they or their opponent has made an attribution error because of the simple fact that a situational correction of such an error may be difficult or impossible to achieve. In such cases, this study's policy prescriptions to be laid out below would likely have little bearing on the perceptual processes at work.

One last limitation, and perhaps the greatest, is that there is simply no way to show that the correction of an attribution error would have prevented escalation except in a strictly hypothetical sense. For example, in the Korean War case, one could make the case that had the Americans realized sooner that the Chinese resolve had been altered by the Taiwan incident and was thus higher than they initially suspected, they may have not made the decision to cross the 38th parallel and thus may have prevented Chinese intervention in the conflict. The problem with offering such a scenario is that it is strictly hypothetical and cannot be used to truly test any

hypotheses that we may be interested in studying. In the absence of such analysis, all we can do is to compare the outcome of each of the four cases and make generalizations about attribution errors and the role that they play in the escalation dynamics of Sino-American crises. In a generalized sense, we can say that attribution errors can be corrected given the presence of the realization that an error has been made and that there is sufficient credible information to correct it, and when correct, de-escalation tends to be the result. Any specific implications of such generalizations would only be hypothetical at best and would tell us little about what we really want to know about the role of attribution errors in international crises.

Policy Prescriptions

This section will provide any policy prescriptions that can be drawn from lessons learned during each of the four Sino-American crises analyzed. As we have noted numerous times throughout this study, attribution errors appear to be a fairly common occurrence among actors in international politics. As this is the case, it makes sense that analysts and policy-makers alike understand the potential implications of such perceptual errors and any potential remedies that may be prescribed. From the perspective of the outside observer, the occurrence of attribution errors is significantly easier to spot than for those actually involved in a crisis because information regarding the motivation's for each side's behavior is usually much clearer in hindsight than in the heat of battle so to speak. However, there are some actions that decision-makers can take in order to decrease the risk that they make damaging attribution errors and/or make successful corrections if and when such perceptual errors are made. For example, Holsti (1989, 25-26) notes that in order to overcome key cognitive constraints upon actors in international relations, decision-makers can take the following actions:

- (1) Define the main elements of the situation; for example, what are the nature and sources of the threat, and what is at stake?
- (2) Assess the situation from the perspective of other parties.
- (3) Make adjustments to meet real changes in the situation (and, as a corollary, distinguish real from apparent changes).
- (4) Deal with the possibility that one of many conceivable but highly unlikely events will occur as a result of system failures or 'normal accidents.'
- (5) Search for new information relevant to assessment of the options.
- (6) Maintain receptivity to new information, even that which calls into question the validity of preferred course of action (and, as corollaries, discriminate between relevant and irrelevant information, resist premature cognitive closure, and tolerate ambiguity).

In the context of attribution errors, many of these suggestions seem to make a great deal of sense. For instance, the first point encourages decision-makers to assess the situational factors acting upon all actors involved in a crisis to the best of their ability. To assist with this, they can follow the second suggestion by assessing the context of the situation from the perspective of the other participants. In this sense, they should be asking themselves: how would I behave if I was placed in the same exact situation/environment? Other advice would be to accept that some behavior may be the product of system failures or strictly accidental, which would suggest that decision-makers not go out of their way to explain away another state's behavior, but rather, to at least consider the possibility that such behavior is the product of a particular situational context or normal accident. To achieve these goals, decision-makers should always be actively searching for and acceptant of new information, particularly if it does not correspond with the type of behavior that they would expect to see. Thus, instead of jumping to conclusions about another state's general character when it acts in a manner that is unexpected, decision-makers should slowly and carefully consider all potential explanations. If after such careful consideration, the behavior cannot be explained away, decision-makers should resort to the security-maximizing strategy of assuming the worst about an opponent to hedge all bets regarding potential prisoner's dilemmas that may arise.

As we observed in the Korean War case, leaders must be willing to accept new information when it is made available to them. The United States should never have crossed the 38th parallel because such an act provoked the Chinese to intervene in the war on the North Korean side, causing the conflict to spiral out of control and risking the United States losing the conflict. The Chinese had sent signal after signal to the Americans saying that they were resolved to intervene if the United States led forces crossed the 38th parallel—While this information was believed to be a bluff by the Chinese because the United States perceived that they had no strategic interest in the matter, the United States could have accepted the information and determined whether or not a correction of Chinese resolve was in order. While it is not clear that such a correction would change the course of action by either side or that it was even possible under the conditions at the time, states within international crises must be wary that their attributions may be inaccurate and that there might be a better explanation for why their opponent has acted in a particular way. Guy Olivier Faure (2005, 39) suggests that

One approach to breaking the vicious circle of mutually hostile images, with its spiral-type development, is to help each side to reevaluate their perceptions. The point is to show the inconsistency between the image of the other and the real-point is to show the inconsistency between the image of the other and the reality of that party's behavior.

As we saw in the case of the Vietnam War, by stepping back and recalculating the situation at hand, the United States was able to make a very significant situational correction and thus changed the standard operating procedures in the regards to how American forces would deal with Chinese actions. This single decision helped the United States to begin the process of de-escalating the crisis between themselves and the Chinese government and thus helped to stave off direct military conflict between China and the United States during the Vietnam War.

However, such prescriptions are significantly easier to suggest than to enact for decision-makers involved in a crisis. For one thing, crisis-conditions usually dictate a quick and urgent

response due to the high-stakes and potential to be taken advantage of by an aggressive state. In this sense, many of these suggestions are likely to be ignored or only tacitly considered because there simply is not the time to dedicate to such extensive processes. Such conditions are the underlying explanation for why attribution errors exist in the first place. If every individual or group had access to perfect information and an unlimited time-frame by which to make perceptual decisions, every perception would be dead-on and wars would only be fought when one or both parties truly desired it. The reality is that there never is perfect information and there is certainly never an unlimited time-frame by which to make perceptual decisions in the context of an international crisis. By making snap-judgments about an individual or group's disposition, such as an attribution error, individuals and groups use cognitive shortcuts that make perception possible in the first place under time-constraining conditions. Thus, while they may not be ideal, attribution errors may be a reality that decision-makers in international relations must face. Only in conditions that allow for relatively careful consideration of the suggestions laid out above will such perceptual errors truly be avoided.

Prospects for Future Research

After analysis of the role of attribution errors within international relations, it becomes clear that such perceptual errors play a significant role in how they interact with each other. This being the case, the amount of research on the specific subject of attribution theory within international relations seems to insufficient. Future research on the subject of attribution errors in international politics could be expanded beyond the Sino-American context that this study is limited to and include other international relationships that experience international crises. Such relationships could include, but certainly are not limited, India-Pakistan, Israel-Palestine, Japan-China, or even to historical relationships such as the Soviet Union-United States. In such a

context, it is obvious that there are a great number of cases that could be studied regarding attribution errors. By increasing the number of cases and by improving the identifying criteria for attribution errors and their subsequent situational corrections, or lack thereof, future research could also be conducted on a quantitative level, providing more robust findings than a qualitative study could achieve. A quantitative analysis could focus on a particular region of the world, such as East or South Asia, the Middle East, or Europe, or could choose to focus on the entire set of international crises using the International Crisis Behavioral (ICB) Project. Another advantage to increasing the number of cases and conducting a quantitative analysis would be the inclusion of other crisis variables such as crisis duration, the effectiveness of crisis management and/or crisis mediation, the effect of heterogeneity or homogeneity among crisis actors, or crises that occur within enduring rivalries or protracted conflicts.

Beyond expanding the number of cases, future study of the role of attribution errors within Sino-American crises could focus on the relationship between attribution errors and the occurrence of security dilemmas, which would allow for more detailed analysis of the making of attribution errors as a security-maximizing strategy that seems to reinforce many Neorealist assumptions about conflict. Another possibility would be to challenge the Rationalist framework utilized in this study by using an alternative approach, such as that of Constructivism, in order to analyze the role that attribution errors may play in conflict processes as per the Constructivist framework and assumptions. In such a case, the analysis would still begin with the assumptions of an anarchic international system and similar information problems as Fearon's Rationalist model of conflict presupposes. However, where a Constructivist approach would differ would be the inclusion of the assumption that anarchy is what states make of it and thus are not always subject to the conditions of the prisoner's dilemma or the spiraling of tensions and security

dilemmas that it creates among states in the international system (Wendt 1992). Such an assumption would allow for the researcher to focus more on the occurrence of positive attribution errors, if and when they may occur in international relations, as well as those cases where a negative attribution error is made, but not corrected, followed by an absence of conflict. In this sense, a Constructivist approach may provide thoughtful analysis of those cases that are left out of the Rationalist framework utilized by this study and thus provide a potential alternative approach to analysis of attribution theory in international relations.

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