1

The Ability to Follow Through and Other Conditions for Statements' Effectiveness

The introductory chapter established that while statements of resolve are a fixture of international politics and are believed by most scholars and policymakers to serve a useful purpose, important unanswered questions remain regarding their role in international conflict. Chief among these is the question of under which conditions statements of resolve can be effective at influencing adversary beliefs and behavior. Although the Introduction presented several explanations that have previously been offered for the effectiveness of statements, including domestic audience costs and international reputational costs, there is no consensus or clear empirical evidence regarding which theory offers the strongest explanation. This leaves a gap not only in our theoretical understanding but in our practical ability to predict when statements of resolve are likely to be effective versus when they are a waste of breath.

In this chapter, I argue that despite all of this theorizing about what makes statements of resolve effective, one important condition has not been fully explored. This condition is the ability to follow through on statements of resolve. While the importance of having an ability to follow through has been acknowledged by some previous research, most recent theories do not treat the ability to follow through as very interesting or analyze it very deeply. In contrast, I argue that it is important to develop a better understanding of what the ability to follow through consists of and how various observable factors can influence it. This chapter will explain why analyzing the ability to follow through is so crucial and then lay out my theory regarding factors that contribute to the ability to follow through in more detail. It will also compare the implications of my theory to the implications of other existing theories.

STATEMENTS AS A SIGNALING MECHANISM

Before discussing the ability to follow through, I will begin by providing a deeper overview of what we know so far about how statements of resolve

operate in international conflict. The key question to answer is, why should statements of resolve be important? After all, in many cases, countries that are involved in international conflict are already aware of each other's general preferences. For example, even without any public statements from the United States, the government of Iran could probably infer based on past history that the United States would prefer for Iran to not have nuclear weapons. Perhaps, this expectation of US opposition and the knowledge that the United States is a powerful country could be enough to deter Iran. If this were the case, statements of resolve might be unnecessary. In reality, however, it can be difficult to determine exactly how vital a country considers a particular issue to be to its interests. History is full of examples of miscalculations about how much an adversary cared about an issue, such as the Soviet view that the United States would grudgingly accept its nuclear missiles in Cuba (Dobbs 2008, 113) and the US view that China would not intervene in the Korean War (Roe 2000).

I define resolve as the value that a country or leader places on a particular issue, which determines how far the country will go to achieve its preferred outcome on that issue. A country's exact level of resolve regarding a particular issue is an example of what game theorists refer to as "private information" (Fearon 1995). The fact that this information is private can lead to potentially inefficient outcomes. Rationalist logic suggests that states involved in bargaining in the context of international conflict could benefit from being able to honestly share information about their respective resolve and capabilities with each other. This would allow them (barring other complications) to reach a settlement reflecting the likely outcome of a military conflict without actually having to fight a costly conflict. However, a major obstacle to such an efficient outcome is that states have private information about their capabilities and resolve, and they have the incentive to make exaggerated claims about these things in order to obtain a better settlement (Fearon 1995). Given that leaders have this incentive to claim they are more resolved than they truly are, we might be tempted to dismiss statements of resolve as a waste of breath.

Yet, as mentioned in the Introduction, several scholars have put forward theories regarding how statements might be able to effectively convey resolve to adversaries and thus influence the outcomes of international disputes. Each of these theories relies on some sort of consequence or "cost" associated with making statements as an explanation for their effectiveness. The cost may be a decline in domestic support, as in domestic audience cost theory (Fearon 1994a), or harm to the state's international position, as in Sartori's (2005) and Trager's (2010) theories. Regardless of the nature of the cost, it has a similar effect and plays a crucial role in conflict bargaining. If resolved statements carried no cost, then all leaders could and would make these statements freely, and it would be impossible to determine which statements were genuine. Thus, statements would convey no useful information about resolve.

Fortunately for leaders seeking to convey resolve, the presence of a domestic and/or international cost associated with statements allows the statements to be genuinely informative about the issuer's resolve. Specifically, this happens through a signaling mechanism, which differentiates the behavior of resolved and unresolved leaders, and/or through a commitment mechanism, which commits a leader to follow through on statements because of the added cost that statements create for backing down. In simpler terms, leaders who are genuinely more resolved are more likely to make statements of resolve because less resolved leaders are deterred from making statements by the potential cost. Furthermore, the act of making a statement itself can actually make a leader more resolved by creating a new cost for backing down. Thus, if statements of resolve are costly, then leaders who choose to make statements can be expected to be more resolved on average than leaders who choose not to make statements.

If statements are informative due to their costs, then an adversary who hears statements of resolve should be more likely to believe that the issuer of the statements is actually resolved to stand firm. As the adversary's belief that the issuer of statements is resolved increases, the adversary itself should become more likely to back down. This is because any adversary that underestimated the issuer's resolve should have its belief corrected by the statements, and once an adversary is convinced that the issuer of statements is fully resolved to fight or continue fighting, the adversary must back down unless it is willing to do the same. If the adversary is more likely to back down, then the issuer of resolved statements should be more likely to obtain a favorable outcome. Therefore, there is reason to expect that resolved statements will increase the probability of a favorable conflict outcome.

Resolved statements can be expected to increase the probability of a successful outcome both in international conflicts that have not yet escalated to force and in conflicts in which the use of force is already ongoing. Although most formal models used to derive theories about statements' effectiveness focus on pre-force bargaining, leaders can and do make statements while force is being used in order to express resolve to stay the course or escalate. From the perspective of the country hearing the statements, the calculations involved in making the initial decision to fight and making the decision to continue fighting are very similar. The main difference between pre-conflict bargaining and bargaining while fighting is that information can be learned from battle outcomes while fighting (Powell 2004; Slantchev 2003; Wagner 2000). However, battle outcomes mostly convey information about capabilities and do not negate the role of statements in conveying resolve. For example, Taliban fighters in Afghanistan probably know that the United States has high military capabilities, but they may doubt US resolve to bear the costs of fighting them over the long term. Therefore, the Taliban arguably learns at least as much from US statements as from US military operations. It is true that the coupling of statements with military operations probably increases the informational value

of the statements because it establishes that the United States has at least some willingness to follow through on tough talk. However, without any resolved statements by US officials, military operations alone would tell the Taliban very little about long-term US intentions.

It should be noted that there are some theories which suggest that making statements of resolve is not always desirable. Levantoglu and Tarar (2005) and Kurizaki (2007) argue that public threats might be less efficient than private threats because of the potential to create audience costs on both sides. Their models are supported by some empirical evidence that resolved statements made by the leader of one country can cause citizens in another country to have greater disapproval for backing down (Gottfried and Trager 2016). However, their models do not indicate that public statements are ineffective, but just that they are less efficient under some circumstances. A bigger challenge is raised by Slantchev (2010) and Trager (2010), who each argue that signaling resolve to an adversary can sometimes be counterproductive because it can prompt the adversary to make military preparations that decrease the signaler's chance of victory. However, it is not clear that this would be the case very often, and Slantchev and Trager predict that countries are more likely to refrain from signaling resolve when this risk exists. Therefore, we should still expect resolved statements that are actually issued to have a generally beneficial effect on conflict outcomes.

This section has laid out the basic logic of why we might expect statements to be able to function as effective signals of resolve in a variety of different types of conflicts. The crucial question for this book, however, is when statements of resolve are *most likely* to be effective. To answer this question, we must understand which factors create variation in the effectiveness of statements. As explained earlier, recent theories have argued that statements of resolve are effective due to the costs associated with making or backing down from them. Scholars working in the tradition of these theories have focused on using variation in these costs to explain variation in effectiveness (Fearon 1994a; Schultz 1999; Weeks 2008). I agree that variation in these costs should be considered when seeking to explain statements' effectiveness, and at the end of this chapter I develop hypotheses related to this. However, I argue that by focusing so much on the costs of backing down, recent literature has neglected to fully explore another important condition for statements' effectiveness, namely the ability to follow through. This book shows that a crucial factor influencing the effectiveness of resolved statements is whether the leader has the ability to follow through on the statements by carrying out the implicit or explicit threats contained within them.

IMPORTANCE OF THE ABILITY TO FOLLOW THROUGH

Although several theories have previously been put forward to explain what makes statements of resolve effective, there is one important condition that has

not been fully considered. This condition is the ability to follow through on resolved statements by carrying out the implicit or explicit threats contained within them. While the importance of having an ability to follow through has been acknowledged by some previous research (for example, Debs and Weiss 2015; Zagare and Kilgour 2000), exactly what the ability to follow through consists of has never been explored in depth. Thus, previous research does not provide a comprehensive method of assessing whether a leader has the ability to follow through or not. In this book, I seek to define the ability to follow through more clearly by considering how both physical factors and political factors contribute to the ability to follow through in a parallel manner. As I define it, the ability to follow through consists of both an absence of major obstacles to following through and an absence of unacceptable risks to following through. If adversaries believe a leader lacks the ability to follow through on resolved statements because the risks and obstacles are too high, the statements are unlikely to be effective. There are various situations in which a leader may lack the ability to follow through.

In some situations, following through on statements of resolve may be literally impossible for leaders. The existing literature largely ignores this possibility, typically assuming that leaders can automatically follow through on their statements of resolve if they want to do so. One exception is Zagare and Kilgour (2000), who note that having the capability to hurt an opponent is an important component of any successful deterrent threat. However, Zagare and Kilgour treat this condition as uninteresting. If the impossibility of following through on a threat is extremely obvious, then it is true that the failure of the threat is unsurprising and not greatly interesting. For example, when North Korea threatens to strike Manhattan with nuclear missiles, but has never successfully tested a missile capable of hitting Manhattan, it is not puzzling that this threat is unsuccessful.

In other situations, however, observers might be uncertain about whether following through on a statement of resolve is possible. One reason for this is domestic political constraints. In almost all types of regimes, leaders face some constraints on their ability to act. In democracies, these constraints are usually institutionalized. However, even most authoritarian leaders have at least a small circle of supporters on whom they rely to remain in power (Weeks 2012), and this group is likely to have some formal or informal ability to constrain the leader's actions. If leaders face domestic political constraints on their ability to carry out threats, this can make their ability to follow through on statements of resolve ambiguous to outside observers. If it looks likely that other domestic actors will block the ability to follow through on statements, this will undermine the credibility of the statements and make them less effective.

Another situation in which the ability to follow through might be ambiguous is when following through is perceived as too risky for the leader. It has long been known that the risk of overly high costs can prevent an actor from following through. For example, in discussions of nuclear deterrence, the risk

of mutually assured destruction is often considered an obstacle to credible threats (Schelling 1960; Schelling 1966). Furthermore, in any formal model of conflict bargaining, actors will take into account the expected costs and outcome of fighting when considering whether to fight or back down. Still, most existing theories related to statements of resolve do not devote much attention to what the costs and consequences of fighting are and fail to consider how they might vary among leaders. This is important to consider because, in addition to whatever losses or gains accrue to the country as a whole, leaders may also face personal consequences due to the outcome of a dispute.

Leaders who take the risk of fighting and leave their country worse off are likely to be punished. Quantitative evidence shows that domestic audiences will often remove leaders who lose conflicts (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Chiozza and Goemans 2004; Debs and Goemans 2010; Miller 2015), particularly if the leader is deemed culpable for the conflict (Croco 2011; Croco and Weeks 2015). Even before a conflict is won or lost, domestic publics may disapprove of leaders if there are unacceptably high causalities (Aldrich et al. 2006). Wood (2012, 113) lists examples of US presidents who have suffered from reduced domestic popularity for standing firm and carrying out their threats, including Johnson's experience with Vietnam and George W. Bush's experience with Iraq. Thus, leaders may have reason to fear the consequences of following through on statements with force. If adversaries perceive that the risks of following through are too high, either for the country as a whole or for the leader personally, this could make statements of resolve less effective.

In sum, there are several reasons – both physical and political – why leaders may lack the ability to follow through or why this ability might be ambiguous to adversaries. If adversaries doubt the ability to follow through, statements of resolve are likely to be less effective. In contrast, if adversaries can see that a leader faces no substantial risks or obstacles to following through on resolved statements, they are more likely to take the statements seriously.[1] Therefore, although we already have a variety of theories that explain how statements can function as signaling mechanisms, it is important to analyze the ability to follow through as well to obtain a better understanding of variation in the effectiveness of statements.

It is important to note that by taking into account both obstacles and risks to following through, my definition of the ability to follow through encompasses both pure ability and also willingness to follow through. If there are physical or political obstacles that make it absolutely impossible for a leader to follow through, then this is a clear case of lack of ability to follow through.

[1] An adversary's perception of a leader's ability to follow through may also be influenced by the characteristics of the adversary itself, such as how its government processes information. However, I assume that adversaries' perceptions will generally have a basis in reality.

If instead, it is overly high risks that prevent a leader from following through, then this might arguably be more of a case of lack of willingness to follow through. While this is a valid distinction, I still opt to use the umbrella term "ability to follow through" to refer to both situations. I do so for brevity and also to emphasize how risks and obstacles both have a similar impact on the effectiveness of statements in practice. In using this umbrella term, I seek to emphasize my focus on a range of different considerations associated with following through on statements, in contrast to previous research that has focused on considerations associated with backing down.

It is also important to note that the ability to follow through is distinct from resolve itself, even though some previous research has blurred this distinction by defining resolve in terms of the cost of fighting. Again, I define resolve as how much a country or leader cares about an issue. Thus, there might be situations in which a leader cares a lot about an issue and therefore could personally be considered resolved, but lacks the ability to follow through. There might also be situations in which a leader can easily follow through on any statement, but is unresolved because he or she simply does not care about a particular issue. Furthermore, resolve and the ability to follow through differ in terms of observability. Whereas resolve is an internal characteristic of individuals that cannot be observed directly, the ability to follow through consists of external factors that can usually be observed without great difficulty.

Finally, it should also be noted that there is one theoretical perspective that might argue against the importance of the ability to follow through. Fearon's (1994b) game theoretic analysis of the role of signaling compared to the balance of power and interests predicts that observable factors should be taken into account when an adversary is considering initiating a crisis and therefore should not matter during the crisis itself. If it was assumed that factors related to the ability to follow through were fully observable before a conflict, then Fearon's analysis might argue against the ability to follow through having any impact on the effectiveness of statements made in times of conflict. However, while my theory does rest on the assumption that adversaries can make reasonably good inferences about the ability to follow through, their inferences are not always perfect. In all three of the historical cases that I examine in Chapters 6–8, I find that adversaries updated their beliefs about the ability to follow through as the conflict progressed. This is one reason why Fearon's analysis might not be applicable. Furthermore, Fearon's assumption that crisis initiation is a strategic choice is a strong one. While some confrontations between states do result from a deliberate decision of one to challenge the other, it is also common for disputes between countries to arise in an unplanned manner or as an inevitable result of broader policies. This is another reason why Fearon's predictions may not always be relevant. Therefore, Fearon's argument should not be seen as ruling out the importance of the ability to follow through in most real-world instances of international conflict.

Having established the importance of the ability to follow through, I will now move on to analyzing what it consists of in more detail. In the upcoming sections, I will discuss specific factors that can reduce the risks and obstacles to following through, make a leader's ability to follow through on statements more obvious to adversaries, and therefore make statements of resolve more effective. Although my theory is intended to be general in nature, I will often turn to examples from the United States to illustrate concepts, since the United States is the focus of my empirical chapters.

MILITARY STRENGTH

The most obvious factor impacting the ability to follow through on resolved statements is military strength. Inadequate military capabilities relative to the adversary can undermine the effectiveness of resolved statements in several ways. First, if military strength is too low, following through on resolved statements might be literally impossible. If following through on resolved statements is entirely beyond a nation's military capabilities, then there is no reason to take the statements seriously. As noted previously, this is the case for North Korea's threats to attack the United States, which have been unsuccessful at changing US policy. As a White House spokesperson said, "The DPRK will achieve nothing by threats or provocation, which will only further isolate North Korea" (MacAskill 2013).

Second, even if following through is not impossible, lower military strength relative to the adversary typically means a higher expected cost of fighting and a lower probability of winning. This means that leaders will generally be more reluctant to follow through on statements of resolve when their country is relatively weaker. Knowing this, adversaries are more likely to regard statements of resolve by weaker countries as bluffs, even if following through is technically possible. One well-known case that might represent this situation is the US dismissal of Chinese threats to intervene in the Korean War. China warned the United States that it would enter the war if US forces came too close to its border. However, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assessed that China would probably not follow through on its threats for a variety of reasons, including that China feared fighting the United States, that the best opportunity for intervention had already passed, that there was a risk of high casualties for China, and that intervention would make the Chinese regime more vulnerable to attacks by domestic anti-communist forces (Roe 2000, 107–108). Thus, the military impediments that China faced contributed to US skepticism of its threats, despite the fact that China did ultimately intervene.

Third, even if a country with relatively low capabilities has enough resolve to be willing to attack despite the risks, its lower capabilities will mean that it can probably impose less pain upon its adversary. Therefore, even if the first country successfully conveys its resolve with statements, the adversary may not back

down if it does not view fighting as prohibitively costly. For example, although Ukraine has expressed resolve to fight to maintain its territorial integrity (Besheer 2014; Brumfield 2014), Russia has not altered its policy of providing military support to Ukraine's separatists. Because the Ukrainian military is smaller and weaker than the Russian military, Russia probably has little to fear in fighting Ukraine.

In sum, if a country has greater military strength relative to its adversary, not only will there be lower physical obstacles to following through, but the risk of losing or incurring high casualties will be lower. Therefore, adversaries should understand that militarily stronger countries will be more likely to follow through. Furthermore, since stronger countries can impose more pain when following through, adversaries should be less willing to tolerate the risk of fighting them. For all of these reasons, an adversary is more likely to back down in response to a statement of resolve from a stronger country.

This argument is in keeping with previous work. Mearsheimer (1983) argued that the success of deterrent threats depends upon a potential challenger's perception of the likelihood and cost of winning a military conflict with the state attempting deterrence, which in turn depends in large part upon relative military strength. Early statistical analysis of deterrence theory found some support for predictions that threats are more credible when military capabilities are greater in cases of immediate deterrence (Huth 1988; Huth and Russett 1984). In more recent work testing the effectiveness of general deterrence threats, Johnson, Leeds, and Wu (2015) find statistical evidence that military alliances with greater capabilities and higher levels of military coordination are more effective at deterring attacks against member states. In addition, Press (2005) includes the balance of power as a factor affecting threat credibility in his "current calculus" theory and argues that this played a role in the "Appeasement" Crises prior to World War II, the Berlin Crises during the Cold War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Military capabilities are also a standard component of formal models of signaling and conflict bargaining. For example, Kydd (2015, 172–173) presents a simple costly signaling model which shows that the probability that an adversary will back down in response to a state's threat is increasing in the threatener's probability of winning a military conflict, decreasing in the threatener's cost of fighting, and increasing in the threat recipient's cost of fighting. All of these predictions imply that threats by countries with greater military capabilities are more likely to be successful. Therefore, my prediction that greater military strength will increase the effectiveness of statements of resolve is not unique, but it is such an obvious and important implication of my broader argument about the ability to follow through that it is worth testing. Therefore, this book will test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Statements of resolve will be more effective when the country issuing them has greater military strength relative to the target of the statements.*

Military strength is an obvious component of the ability to follow through, but it is not necessarily the most interesting component. Because they are based on a concrete physical reality, military capabilities are relatively easy to observe. There are, of course, some components of military capabilities that are hard to measure, such as morale and training, and some military equipment may be hidden. Because of this, countries do sometimes disagree about their military strength in relation to each other. Still, the room for disagreement is limited. For example, there can be no reasonable disagreement with the fact that the United States is currently the most militarily powerful country in the world. Despite this unambiguous power advantage, this book will show that there are sometimes doubts about the US ability to follow through. Therefore, I now turn to the discussion of two domestic political factors that can inhibit or render ambiguous the ability to follow through, even for powerful countries.

HAWKISHNESS OF VETO PLAYERS

Having discussed the physical capability to follow through, I now turn to the political ability to follow through, which is often more ambiguous and has received less attention in previous work. One domestic political condition that might affect the level of obstacles to following through is the biases or preferences of other individual or institutional actors in the government who have the power to provide a check on the leader's ability to initiate or continue conflict. I refer to these actors as "veto players," a term which I define *broadly* to include those that lack explicit institutional veto power but whose concurrence a leader would want before initiating military conflict. Almost all leaders, except for a few personalistic dictators, are likely to have some veto players.

In democracies, the most obvious veto player is the legislature. For example, Congress is the most prominent institutional veto player in the United States. Certain individual members or committees of Congress might also be powerful enough to be considered veto players by themselves, under some circumstances. Howell and Pevehouse (2007) discuss how Congress prevented intervention in Indochina in 1954, blocked aid to the Contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and delayed intervention in Bosnia in the 1990s. In parliamentary democracies, the legislature can also function as a veto player, although it may be less likely to oppose the leader in practice. In addition to the legislature, there are also likely to be actors in the executive branch who can constrain a leader (Saunders 2015). In particular, leaders are often dependent upon experts in the security establishment when making military decisions. For example, President Kennedy was reliant on military officials for evaluating the feasibility of military options during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison 1969). In nondemocratic regimes, the