

## Drawing Red Lines Right

In the past two years, the expression “red line” has become a regular feature of the global policy debate. So much so that it risks becoming a punch line. Red lines have appeared in discussions about the Ukraine crisis, Iran’s nuclear program, and Syrian use of chemical weapons. President Obama famously stated in 2012 that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.”<sup>1</sup>

The expression “red line” risks becoming a punch line.

In fact, the expression has been used for a long time in international life, though its exact origins are unclear. One of its first contemporary appearances is the “Red Line Agreement” of 1928 between partners of the Turkish Petroleum Company. The line in question, allegedly drawn in red on a map by Armenian businessman Calouste Gulbenkian, defined the perimeter inside which no company was allowed to operate independently. What is clear is that the phrase “red line” came to be used in the meaning analyzed here in the 1970s.

Today, even though it always involves interaction between at least two players and suggests the idea of a game-changing event, a “red line” can have different meanings. It is used for instance in diplomacy to define one’s own position internally (“our red line should be...”) in preparation for a negotiation, to state that such-or-such concession would be unacceptable, or to fix the limits of a commitment.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, it is used to privately define a threshold for action, often a *casus belli*. For instance, in the current Middle Eastern chaos, some have stated that the destabilization of Jordan would prove intolerable and thus

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Bruno Tertrais is a Senior Research Fellow at the Paris-based Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (Foundation for Strategic Research) and a member of the editorial board of *The Washington Quarterly*. He can be reached at [b.tertrais@frstrategie.org](mailto:b.tertrais@frstrategie.org). He would like to thank Elbridge Colby, Brad Roberts, and Thomas Schelling for comments on an earlier draft.

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constitute a red line, notably for Israel.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the expression has been widely used in Israel since the 1970s. The country's red lines often go unstated publicly—instead Israel communicates them coercively, intending to teach adversaries what they are via repeated actions or in order to restore deterrence (for example, the transfer of heavy armaments by Iran or Syria to Hezbollah). They are also sometimes conveyed privately to the adversary.<sup>4</sup>

From an analytical and political standpoint however, the question of red lines is interesting mostly insofar as it refers to *the manipulation of intents through (mostly public) statements for deterrence purposes, referring to the deliberate crossing of a certain threshold by an adversary, and relevant counteraction if this threshold is crossed.*

It is a path-dependent process, different for instance from the diplomatic “bottom lines” mentioned above. The said threshold may refer to military escalation, either vertically (e.g. the use of chemical or nuclear weapons) or horizontally (e.g. the attack of a U.S. ally). It may refer to the production of sensitive material, such as the quantity or grade of enriched uranium produced by Iran; or to the exports of non-conventional technologies like the transfer of nuclear material or installations by North Korea; or, alternatively, to a political decision such as a Taiwanese declaration of independence. Analyzing why and how red lines can work or not is thus in large part a subset of studying deterrence: avoiding an action through the threat of retaliation. (Ultimatums are coercion, not deterrence.)

Given their importance in international life, it is useful to be able to tell when and how it can be appropriate—if at all, for red-lining often brings criticism—to draw a red line when trying to dissuade an adversary.

## The Trouble with Red Lines

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Red lines have a mixed record. As demonstrated in the examples below, they often fail to deter an adversary because the circumstances or consequences were unclear, or the determination to carry out the punishment was not manifest, or the penalty insufficient. They can also have unwanted effects. A few examples help illustrate in more depth:

### **Red lines fail when circumstances or consequences are not clear.**

A key reason why red lines fail is the classical reason behind why many conflicts start in the first place: a failure of understanding, generally due to a lack of clarity about triggering circumstances or consequences.

A variety of circumstances could trigger a counteraction. Most states have made it clear that full-fledged military aggression against their sovereign territory represents a red line that would spark a defensive response. But what about areas where questions of sovereignty or territory are more vague, such as

distant possessions with a particular status? For example, the Falklands/Malvinas islands, attacked by Argentina in 1982, were a British Overseas Territory—London never issued a clear statement that it would fight for them in the same way it would have if England had been attacked directly.

This issue is even murkier for maritime borders. Those are never visibly demarked, and many are the object of legal disputes. What exactly does attacking Japan, or China, or Vietnam, or the Philippines mean in such circumstances? Likewise, U.S. President Barack Obama's August 2012 red line statement on Syria was particularly unclear. Obama said, "A red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized...if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons."<sup>5</sup> The expression "a whole bunch" sounded improvised, and must have left Syrian leaders perplexed. And what exactly was "movement" supposed to mean? At the time, this was not clear at all.

Lack of clarity in communicating consequences also plays a role. As a rule, vague threats are less likely to impress a potential adversary than are precise ones. In 1950, Beijing sought to deter the United States from crossing the 38th Parallel (into North Korea) by stating that it would take a "grave view" of such an event.<sup>6</sup> Hardly a clear-cut threat. This is similar to the initial U.S. statements about Cuba in the 1960s: in September 1962, Kennedy declared that if strategic weapons were deployed on the island, "the gravest issues would arise."<sup>7</sup> Flash-forward to the post-Cold war era: in the late 1990s, U.S. warnings to Belgrade over the fate of Kosovo only mentioned an intention to "respond" or to "take immediate action."<sup>8</sup> A few years later, President George W. Bush's statement—meant to deter North Korea from exporting nuclear technology—only said that "we would hold North Korea fully accountable of the consequence of such action."<sup>9</sup>

The consequences of crossing Obama's red line on Syria were equally unclear. Movement or use of chemical weapons "would change my calculus; that would change my equation...There would be enormous consequences."<sup>10</sup> We now know that arming of the opposition was the U.S. administration's preferred response, but that could not have been clear to the Syrian regime. Another statement a few months later was barely more precise: "...There will be consequences and you will be held accountable."<sup>11</sup> Only by June 2013, when Washington stated that it had ascertained the Syrian use of chemical weapons,

**Red lines fail when there is a lack of clarity about triggering circumstances or consequences.**

did the administration make it known that it planned to send weapons to rebels.<sup>12</sup>

U.S. policy statements of the past 25 years contain many examples of equally unclear mentions of the “unacceptable” or “intolerable” nature of an adversary’s various actions.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, former Israeli red lines about the Iranian nuclear program have rarely been accompanied by the announcement of specific corresponding punitive measures.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the issuer of the red line is unlikely to be taken seriously if his policy appears self-contradictory. For instance, a warning to Syria not to attack Israel or else the Syrian regime itself would be targeted was unlikely to fully convince Damascus as, at the same time, Israeli leaders hinted that the Assad regime was preferable to alternatives. (Syria fired several times onto the Golan Heights in retaliation for Israeli raids.)<sup>15</sup>

**Red lines fail when the adversary is not convinced of one’s determination.**

If the adversary is not convinced that it will actually suffer consequences if it crosses the line, red lines may also fail. This perception of weakness can exist either because of the vagueness of promised consequences, or because of the reputation of the party making the threat.

The March 1939 British–French security guarantee to Poland failed to impress Hitler because of the appeasing behavior of London and Paris during the Czechoslovakia crisis. In 1950, Washington dismissed Beijing’s warnings about Korea: China was seen as weak and dependent on Moscow.<sup>16</sup> John F. Kennedy’s September 1962 warning to the Soviet Union regarding nukes in Cuba did not impress Nikita Khrushchev because of a perceived U.S. softness during the Berlin crisis the previous year.<sup>17</sup> The weak UK response to the occupation of the South Thule Island in 1976 encouraged Argentina to take action in the Falklands.<sup>18</sup> Barack Obama’s warning to Syria about chemical weapons did not seem to trouble Damascus because of the U.S. president’s apparent reluctance to use force in the Middle East. As one commentator put it, when it comes to red lines—and deterrence in general—“simply having the ability to inflict pain and communicating that ability will not cut it.”<sup>19</sup>

A further problem comes when a red line threshold is raised, requiring a situation to grow more dire before a state will take action. The party trying to exercise deterrence then loses credibility. For example, lack of U.S. action after previous warnings probably encouraged North Korea to carry on with its nuclear program. In 1994, the Clinton administration warned that fuel reprocessing would be crossing a “red line” which might trigger “military action.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, nothing happened when Pyongyang started doing so in 2002. Four years later, President Bush warned North Korea against transferring nuclear weapons or material. But just a few months after that, Washington refused to bomb the

reactor it built in Syria, to the dismay of Vice President Cheney (who thought that destroying the reactor “would mean that our red lines meant something”).<sup>21</sup>

Likewise in late 2012, Obama clarified his warning about chemical weapons being “moved” as meaning “transferred to terrorist groups” or “being prepared for use.”<sup>22</sup> Then, part of the warning seemed to disappear as the U.S. president emphasized only their use: “If you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable.”<sup>23</sup>

As a former Israeli official puts it, “I have witnessed decision-makers cause contempt for redlines and at the moment of truth become color-blind.”<sup>24</sup>

**Red lines fail when the penalty is not greater than the potential benefit.**

Finally, and this is again an old problem in deterrence, even in the case of a clear line and a determined defender, the adversary may calculate that the price is worth paying anyway. A classic in this regard is the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat knew that attacking Israel would result in the strongest possible military response; still, he believed that, despite a probable loss on the battlefield, he would restore the international reputation of his country and change the geopolitical equation with Israel. (Interestingly, he also refrained from crossing the 1949 armistice line, which suggests that he had internalized a possible Israeli nuclear deterrence red line.) Of course, Israel responded conventionally.

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In 1981, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin warned that Israel would not permit its enemies to develop weapons of mass destruction.<sup>25</sup> Still, this is exactly what most of them did or continued doing. Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Syria had or have military-oriented nuclear programs and chemical weapons even though Israel’s determination was clear and its willingness to use military coercion was manifest. (It had just destroyed the French-built Osirak reactor in Iraq.) The development of weapons of mass destruction may just have been too important to relinquish.

Successive U.S. warnings about Kosovo also did not deter Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic’s actions against Albanian populations in 1998–1999. One possible explanation is that such warnings had become less clear over the years and that Belgrade may not have believed that the terms of the original 1992 warning were still valid (“In the event of conflict in Kosovo caused by Serbian action, the United States will be prepared to employ military force”).<sup>26</sup> But it is also possible that, after the secession of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, the fate of Kosovo—which had a key role in Serbian history—was too important to give up, even at the risk of Western intervention.

**Red lines encourage adversary actions below the threshold.**

Another major problem with red lines is that they may actually encourage “below the threshold” adversary action. An actor could believe that everything else is permitted. The famous example of U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s 1950 geographical definition of the “defensive perimeter” of the United States in Asia, which implicitly excluded the Korean Peninsula and thus let Pyongyang and its allies believe that Washington would not defend Seoul, obviously comes to mind.<sup>27</sup> But successive U.S. administrations made similar mistakes:

- In 1961, John F. Kennedy gave Nikita Khrushchev the impression that his only red line was a Soviet invasion of West Berlin, thereby implicitly suggesting that a forced separation of the Soviet and Western sectors would not be unacceptable to Washington.
- In 1990, U.S. ambassador April Glaspie told Saddam Hussein: “[W]e have no opinion on the Arab–Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait.” This led the Iraqi leader to believe that he could safely invade Kuwait.<sup>28</sup>
- In 1991, President George H. W. Bush wrote to Saddam Hussein that the United States “will not tolerate the use of chemical or biological weapons, or the destruction of the Kuwaiti oil fields and installations” and that Saddam “would be held directly accountable for terrorist actions against any member of the coalition.”<sup>29</sup> However, in his talks with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker emphasized only the third scenario as a red line.<sup>30</sup> This may have led Iraq to believe that the other two were not as important—and may have encouraged Baghdad to torch the oil fields.
- The next year, President George H. W. Bush issued the so-called Christmas Warning, a letter to Slobodan Milosevic stating, “In the event of conflict in Kosovo caused by Serbian action, the United States will be prepared to employ military force against the Serbians in Kosovo and in Serbia proper.”<sup>31</sup> This may have been seen as an indirect “green light” for intervention in the Bosnian war, which had started a few months earlier.
- North Korea may have understood a solemn warning by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2006 regarding “the transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities” as a de facto acquiescence to its nuclear program per se.<sup>32</sup> China’s own statements are even more encouraging for Pyongyang: according to a recent statement by Foreign Minister Wang Ji, “We have a red line, that is, we will not allow war or instability on the Korean peninsula.”<sup>33</sup> Taken at face value, this means that North Korean nuclear provocations are tolerable for Beijing.

- U.S. statements to the effect that Washington would not tolerate Iran “building” or “obtaining” a nuclear weapon Tehran may have interpreted as an implicit *nihil obstat* to obtaining all the building blocks of such a weapon without assembling them.
- U.S. attempts to deter Syria from using chemical weapons may have comforted Damascus into thinking that massive repression would be tolerated by Washington. (According to U.S. Senator John McCain: “Obama’s red line is Assad’s green light.”)<sup>34</sup> Bashar al-Assad may have even interpreted it as signifying that some chemical agents such as chlorine—prohibited by the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, but much cruder and less toxic agents than dedicated chemical weapons—could be used without a major risk of retaliation.
- Statements by Western officials to the effect that the Alliance would not act in Ukraine may have encouraged Moscow to increase its military involvement there. For instance, NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow said in September 2014, “I don’t see any red line that, if crossed, would lead to military engagement.”<sup>35</sup> As two commentators put it, “drawing such a bright line around NATO territory is being read by Putin as a signal that non-members such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are—literally—up for grabs.”<sup>36</sup>

**Red lines will be tested, with risks of miscalculation and unwanted escalation.**

Parents know that the boundaries they draw will often tempt their children to test them. The same applies to international life. Red lines may incite the other party to test one’s resolve or determine the exact boundaries of permitted actions. At first glance, this is a rational course of action if an actor judges that the risk is worth taking. Declaring an air defense identification zone (airspace requiring a craft’s identification, location, and control in the interests of national security) or patrolling, fishing, or exploring in disputed waters, for instance, are a few favorite techniques in Asia. But they may lead the adversary to embark on a deliberate strategy of gradual escalation in order to blur the line and make it politically more difficult for the defender to justify retaliation. (This is the so-called boiling frog theory: a frog plunged into hot water will immediately jump out—but, allegedly, if the frog is placed into tepid water and the temperature gradually rises, the frog will not notice the difference and will remain in the water to boil.)

The interaction between Israel and its neighbors is once again fertile with examples. In 2000, Hezbollah killed and captured Israeli soldiers despite Israeli warnings not to attack the country.<sup>37</sup> For years, Israel warned Syria and Iran not to transfer strategic weapons to Hezbollah.<sup>38</sup> But this red line was tested by

small-scale deliveries—Israel only started enforcing it in January 2013 by destroying armed convoys in Syria.<sup>39</sup>

A September 2014 incident at the NATO border also illustrates the problem. Russia detained an Estonian policeman, allegedly while on Estonia's territory. Coming on the heels of the NATO Summit in Wales, this may have been a Russian provocation: a test by Moscow of the Alliance's resolve.<sup>40</sup>

Last but not least is the example of Syrian use of chemical weapons. Damascus proceeded with a slow escalation, preparing for chemical weapons use in late 2012.<sup>41</sup> Then it started using the weapons in small quantities, still without any reaction from the international community.<sup>42</sup> Even after its official "disarmament," the regime started using chlorine on a regular basis—a low-intensity chemical weapons use. The Syrian chemical weapons crisis also provides an example of unwanted escalation: intercepted communications provide evidence that the mix of agents used in August 2013—which caused dramatic effects on the population—had not been properly mastered.

Red lines also involve other unwanted effects. In some cultures, honor and prestige would lead to deliberately crossing a red line, even at a high cost, because the issuance of the red line has been perceived as a provocation.<sup>43</sup>

And even if the adversary believes he only takes limited and controlled action, the situation may still spin out of control. When Islamabad embarked in systematic but small-scale encroachments of the Line of Control in the Kargil region in 1999, it triggered an Indian retaliation that could have turned into a full-fledged war. The cyberattacks of Russian origin that targeted Estonia in 2007 were relatively harmless (and could not have been covered by the Article V security guarantee of the Washington Treaty), but what if one day Moscow miscalculated and a cyberattack against NATO had dramatic, cascading effects? It was dangerous for North Korea to sink a South Korean warship and bomb South Korean islands in 2010; Pyongyang seemed to be testing the limits of the U.S. security guarantee to Seoul, but such actions could have provoked a dangerous military escalation. And clashes at sea between China and its neighbors may very well one day lead to the same results.

## **Dilemmas in Drawing the Line**

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To be sure, drawing red lines—just like many instances of attempts at deterrence—is a complex issue. The red line discourse has to take into account several different audiences: the adversary matters, of course, but so does one's own domestic audience (the general public as well as other institutions such as Congress) and one's allies when the red line pertains to extended deterrence commitments.<sup>44</sup> Governments may have a hard time reconciling the expectations of all these constituencies.



Drawing red lines involves—beyond preventing a specific action by a specific actor—gauging the impact on other interests, like the perceptions of future adversaries and allies. There is no universal agreement about the importance of reputation in international politics.<sup>45</sup> But there is documented evidence of the influence of the perception of an actor's past behavior on subsequent decision-making. (The example of the Kennedy–Khrushchev relationship comes to mind: the latter saw the former as weak on Berlin, which encouraged him to provoke the United States in Cuba.) In any case, it would be unwise for a political leader to not understand the precedent set in choosing not to act once a red line has been crossed. Vice President Cheney has suggested, for instance, that U.S. action to destroy the North Korean-built nuclear reactor in Syria would have delivered “a real shot across the bow of the Iranians.”<sup>46</sup> Others have suggested that U.S. hesitations to respond to Syrian use of chemical weapons signals to the Iranians that U.S. threats to use force against Iran are not serious;<sup>47</sup> the same hesitations may have encouraged Russia to take action in Ukraine.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, no politician wants to forego his freedom of action, especially if there was an element of bluff in their threat. (Some have referred to a “commitment trap,” which forces leaders to take action if deterrence has failed in order to preserve their reputation.)<sup>49</sup> Governments do not like feeling boxed in—freedom of action is one of the most precious commodities in political life, especially when contemplating the use of force. As former U.S. diplomat R. Nicholas Burns says, “in matters of war and peace, you generally don’t want to back yourself into a corner by drawing lines in the sand that automatically trigger reaction, because that denies you the flexibility in negotiations where you want to preserve all options.”<sup>50</sup>

There is an additional complication when it comes to extended deterrence. Allies need reassurance from the one providing deterrence, but the provider does not want those under its umbrella to become reckless. The case of U.S. Asian allies comes to mind: Taiwan should not think that the United States would necessarily protect it from the consequences of a unilateral declaration of independence.

Red lines thus create important policy dilemmas. “If the red line is too vague it is not credible; if it is too sharp, it may be more credible but the cost of not realizing it is high.”<sup>51</sup> And if too sharp a red line may encourage action below the red line, too fuzzy a red line may foster action to test the threshold. There is no ideal way to draw a red line. There are “fifty shades of red.”<sup>52</sup>

**Red lines create important policy dilemmas: what’s too vague or too sharp?**

## Should Governments Avoid Red Lines?

**D**iscarding red lines would be tantamount to giving up on deterrence.

Does this mean that the art of red-lining should be discarded, as many commentators have suggested recently?<sup>53</sup> That would be tantamount to giving up on deterrence. Establishing red lines is fundamental to deterrence in order to avoid misunderstandings, misperceptions and miscalculations.<sup>54</sup> They are also needed to reassure allies. It is simplistic to argue, as U.S. Senator Rand Paul did, in favor of giving up red lines altogether. He called on the U.S. administration to follow the example of President

Reagan, who allegedly “chose not to announce his policies in advance” and believed that “we should not announce to our enemies what we might do in every conceivable situation.”<sup>55</sup> This is not what red lines are about anyway.

For sure, drawing a red line is “a conscious cancellation of free will.”<sup>56</sup> It is, to some extent, the equivalent of burning one’s bridges or vessels. But sometimes that is the price to pay for deterrence to be successful. Thomas Schelling called it “the art of commitment”; it is about getting oneself “in a position where we cannot fail to react as we said we would—where we just cannot help it—or where we would be obliged by some overwhelming cost of not reacting in the manner we had declared.”<sup>57</sup>

**M**any of the most important red lines drawn since 1945 have, in fact, not been crossed.

Do we know that red lines work? It is evidently impossible to demonstrate a negative proposition, in this case that the adversary was effectively deterred (although archives and testimonies can sometimes offer clues). But it is a fact that many of the most important red lines drawn since 1945

have not been crossed.

- The most important and obvious one is that of nuclear deterrence. The absence of any nuclear use in retaliation for the red line of “vital interests” having been crossed since 1945 is something most analysts would not have expected a few decades ago.<sup>58</sup>
- Another is Article V of the 1949 Washington Treaty, “the red line of collective defense.”<sup>59</sup> Although it was invoked after the 9/11 attacks, no state has ever embarked on military aggression against a NATO country in Europe or North America. Officials of the Baltic States, who feel the most threatened by a revanchist Russia, explicitly refer to Article V as a red line.<sup>60</sup>

- President Kennedy drew a famous red line in his October 22, 1962, speech.<sup>61</sup> He actually drew two different lines, one geographic (the quarantine) and one strategic (the warning that missiles launched from Cuba against the Western hemisphere would be treated as Soviet missiles launched against the United States). The first one was tested but eventually held. The second one was meant to diminish the value of Soviet missiles in Latin America.
- China has warned repeatedly that a Taiwanese declaration of independence would be unacceptable. The 2005 Anti-Secession Law passed made it clear that China would meet such a declaration with the use of force.<sup>62</sup>
- After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. President Jimmy Carter enunciated what became known as the so-called Carter Doctrine, aimed at deterring Moscow from going further.<sup>63</sup> The creation of the U.S. Central Command followed in 1983.
- In 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker delivered a solemn oral warning to Iraq. He said that if chemical or biological weapons were used, the Baghdad regime would be eliminated.<sup>64</sup> Experts disagree on whether deterrence actually operated, but there are good grounds to believe that it did.<sup>65</sup>
- In 1992, the George H. W. Bush administration delivered a strong warning to Yugoslav President Milosevic to not use military force in the Serbian province of Kosovo. The red line held until the late 1990s (see above).
- Regarding Iran's nuclear program, even though Tehran crossed Israel's first red lines, the most recent—and solemn—one has stood so far.<sup>66</sup> In 2012, Prime Minister Netanyahu literally drew a red line on a diagram in front of the UN General Assembly, making clear that Israel's red line was Iran being a few months or weeks from one bomb's worth of 20 percent uranium (about 240–250 kilos of enriched uranium). Iran's conversion of the material into fuel and reduction in production means that Tehran has, according to at least one senior Israeli official, “internalized our red line.”<sup>67</sup>
- In 2012, President Obama reportedly sent a direct message to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, warning that any disruption of international traffic in the Gulf would constitute a red line and would be met by a harsh U.S. response. This was backed by the visible reinforcement of U.S., UK, and French maritime forces in the Gulf.<sup>68</sup>

**Doing red lines right is a delicate balancing act: a measure of ambiguity is always needed.**

So, the problem is not so much about the principle of red lines than about the way they are drawn. How to do red lines right?

## A Delicate Balancing Act

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Doing red lines right is a delicate balancing act. One analyst suggests that “if the stakes are unusually high, the red line particularly bright, and the commitment to act firm,” they can be a “useful deterrent.”<sup>69</sup> It is not that simple. But the lessons of history, as well as logic and common sense, offer a few suggestions.

### **Red lines should be drawn carefully.**

This should go without saying—but the historical record unfortunately shows that it does not. Any deterrence message that the highest political authorities issue should undergo careful preparation and drafting.

### **Red lines should include clarity on either the circumstances or the consequences.**

The wrong way to draw a red line is when neither the line itself (the circumstances or threshold) nor the consequences of crossing it are made clear. But in order to maintain some room for maneuvering and thus avoiding the “commitment trap,” one of these two elements can include some margin for interpretation. In other words, the line can be either red and blurred, or pink and clear (or a little bit of both, but not too much). This conforms to the classical theory of deterrence, in which a measure of ambiguity or fuzziness is generally needed.

A good example of balance between clarity and flexibility is Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that “an armed attack...against one or more of [the NATO members]” will result in members taking “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force.”

Another interesting example is the Carter Doctrine, which stated that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>70</sup> It includes the right mix of clarity, resolve, and flexibility.

Still another example is the so-called doctrine of “deliberate ambiguity” that characterizes U.S. and UK nuclear doctrines: since the early 1990s, Washington and London have stated repeatedly that they would meet the use of chemical or biological weapons with an “overwhelming” or “devastating” response. This was meant to take into account the hypothetical use of a low-level agent which would not warrant the employment of nuclear weapons—but without stating so explicitly—and to maintain the freedom of choosing a nuclear response if needed.

The threshold can be fine-tuned in crises to avoid unwanted escalation. For instance, on October 23, 1962, President John F. Kennedy redrew the planned quarantine’s red line from 800 miles to 500 miles in order to give the Soviet Union one more day of reflection. Ultimately, this strategy worked.

**But they should always project a sense of determination.**

However, in all cases, the adversary needs to be persuaded of the defender's determination. At times when the United States or the West in general is seen as being weak (or weaker than it really is), merely threatening "costs" or "consequences" might not be enough, even if the threshold for action has been clearly defined. President Obama's statements on Iran are an example of a consistent and carefully drawn red line, which include just the right amount of flexibility (he will not allow Iran to "obtain a nuclear weapon" and mentions the possible use of force),<sup>71</sup> but his reputation as someone who would hesitate to use military force in the Middle East may have affected Tehran's calculations. Some have suggested that, in light of Iran's possible perception of the Syrian experience, the proper way to ensure that Iran is deterred from crossing the nuclear threshold is for the administration to ask Congress to pre-authorize military action.<sup>72</sup>

**Additional clarifications may prove necessary for the red line to work.**

A red line has to be tended to and nurtured. It may require a fresh coat of paint after seeing the effect on an adversary's initial reactions, or if an adversary tests it, or as time passes to remind adversaries that it still holds (especially if leaders who drew the initial red line are no longer in power). A good example is President Obama's reminder that the U.S. security guarantee does indeed cover the Japanese-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as well as other U.S. actions such as flights within the Chinese air defense identification zone.<sup>73</sup> Recent examples also include NATO's attempts to deter non-conventional aggression: U.S. Supreme Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove stated that attacks by soldiers in unmarked uniforms (so-called "little green men") could be treated as armed aggression if they could be attributed to specific country;<sup>74</sup> and Alliance members solemnly stated in September 2014 that cyber-attacks, too, could trigger an Article V response.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, throughout the 1990s, U.S. leaders failed to convince Belgrade that the White House's 1992 Christmas Warning on Kosovo was still fully valid after President George H.W. Bush left office.

**Such clarifications may also prove necessary to deter actions below the red line.**

An adversary should not view all actions below the red line as being tolerable or acceptable. The defender may have to state that certain actions below the threshold also carry consequences. For instance, in order to ensure that Iran does not come right up to the nuclear weapons threshold, U.S. officials may have to hint that obtaining a "nuclear device" (that is, an experimental but not militarily usable prototype) or an "unassembled weapon" would not come without severe consequences. Likewise, to avoid further Russian aggression against non-NATO members, the Atlantic Alliance could threaten not only

sanctions against Russia but also serious military assistance, including deliveries of offensive weapons, to any friendly country attacked by Moscow.

**When stakes are high, never give the impression that you would give up the military option.**

Appearing to retreat from a commitment to use force can seriously weaken the deterrent effect. President Obama seemed to immediately backtrack from his clarification about the Senkaku Islands in response to a question: he gave an evasive answer including the hypothesis that the United States might not want to “engage militarily.” That may have appeared to Chinese eyes as a sign of wavering commitment.<sup>76</sup> On a different note, even though nobody expected that the United States would use force to counter Russian actions in Ukraine, it may have been unwise for President Obama to state explicitly that Russia will not be “deterred from further escalation by military force.”<sup>77</sup>

**Communicating the red line privately is often a good strategy, though not a panacea.**

A private communication of red lines has advantages. It conveys a sense of seriousness and projects the deterrence relationship outside the tumult of domestic and international debate; by so doing, it helps the defender avoid the “commitment trap” (and simultaneously gives flexibility to the other party, who will feel less tempted to cross the red line for honor or prestige reasons). At the same time and for the same reasons, the deterrent effect might be weaker than if the other party believes that, because a red line was drawn publicly, one would be forced to take action if the line is crossed (not to mention that, in some cultures, solemn public warnings are taken much more seriously than private ones). One could privilege private communications, however, to clarify the red line or indicate to the adversary that he is close to crossing it.

## **Red Lines Remain Important**

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The limitations of red lines are the same as the limits of deterrence itself. Some actors may prove largely immune for structural reasons (e.g., it is difficult to threaten retaliation against terrorist groups) or circumstantial ones (leaders may have their sense of rationality impaired by mental diseases or drug abuse, or merely by crisis stress, etc.). And some domains do not easily lend themselves to drawing such lines: cyberspace is one example, because of the difficulty to ascertain the identity of the aggressor.<sup>78</sup> However, red lines remain a powerful policy instrument. The unfortunate experiences of the last few years should not be a justification for discarding them, but an encouragement instead to do them right.

## Notes

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