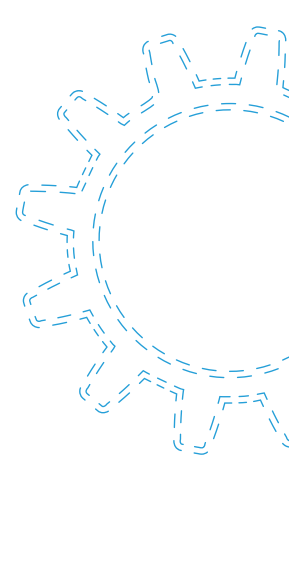
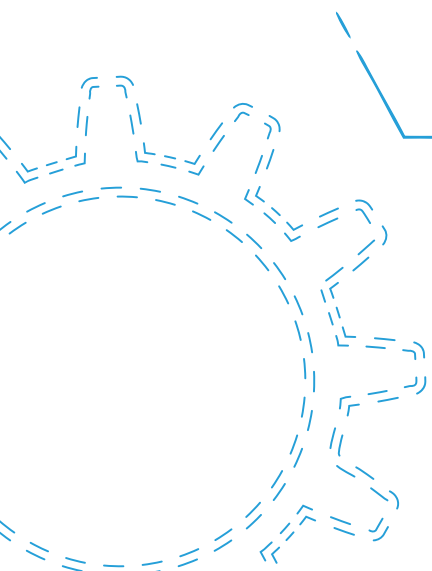


SALAMI TACTICS: FAITS ACCOMPLIS AND INTERNATIONAL EXPANSION IN THE SHADOW OF MAJOR WAR

Richard W. Maass



Salami tactics offer an attractive option for expansionist powers in the shadow of major war — using repetitive, limited *faits accomplis* to expand influence while avoiding potential escalation. Despite its long history of colloquial use, however, the term has never received a thorough conceptualization. Modeling a state's decision to initiate salami tactics reveals five conditions that increase their appeal to policymakers: when retaliation would be costly, reversal is unlikely, *faits accomplis* are easy, fears of future predation can be undercut, and further gains are possible. Two case studies 200 years apart illustrate how these conditions operate: the U.S. annexation of Florida and Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. Detering salami tactics poses unique strategic challenges to current U.S. foreign policy, which should work to ensure that the key escalation decision remains with potential aggressors rather than being foisted onto defenders via *faits accomplis*.

U.S. relations with both China and Russia have become increasingly antagonistic in recent years, illustrated by competitive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, trade war, election interference, and cyber attacks, as well as provocative maneuvering in the South China Sea, the Arctic, and elsewhere. Yet even as great-power competition has “returned,” clashing interests are far from guaranteed to produce major war.¹ Instead, strategists and scholars alike warn of “a new Cold War” plagued by “hybrid warfare” and “gray-zone conflicts.”² As the U.S.-Chinese relationship takes center stage, some of the most policy-relevant questions in the 21st century concern how states compete

in the shadow of major war, rather than through it.

Salami tactics are one such method: using repetitive, limited *faits accomplis* to expand influence within a local context while avoiding potential escalation. The basic notion — gaining ground slice by slice rather than all at once — has recently manifested in China's assertions of maritime control in the South China Sea and Russia's territorial seizures in Georgia and Ukraine,³ as well as in other contexts from Israel's expanding settlements in the West Bank to India's and Pakistan's efforts to alter the status quo in Kashmir.⁴ Such behavior is particularly challenging for U.S. foreign policy given the inherent fragility of extended deterrence when fac-

1 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, The White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; cf. Daniel H. Nexon, “Against Great Power Competition: The U.S. Should Not Confuse Means for Ends,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 15, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2021-02-15/against-great-power-competition>; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 180–86; and Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 189–200.

2 Anna Fifield, “Chinese Foreign Minister Warns U.S. Against Taking the Countries ‘to the Brink of a New Cold War,’” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-tells-us-to-stop-taking-them-to-the-brink-of-a-new-cold-war/2020/05/24/4eda6ffc-9da9-11ea-9d96-c3f7c755fd6e_story.html; Robert D. Kaplan, “A New Cold War Has Begun,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 7, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/>; Michael McFaul, “Cold War Lessons and Fallacies for U.S.-China Relations Today,” *Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 7–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1850406>; Alexander Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January 2016): 175–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12509>; and Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015).

3 M. Taylor Fravel, “Threading the Needle: The South China Sea Disputes and U.S.-China Relations,” in *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 233–60; Nayan Chanda, “China's Long-Range Salami Tactics in East Asia,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (April 2014): 34–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/npq.11445>; and Stephen J. Cimbala, “Sun Tzu and Salami Tactics? Vladimir Putin and Military Persuasion in Ukraine, 21 February–18 March 2014,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 3 (2014): 359–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2014.932623>.

4 Stanley Hoffman, “A New Policy for Israel,” *Foreign Affairs* 53, no. 3 (April 1975): 409, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20039519>; Mahesh Shankar and T. V. Paul, “Nuclear Doctrines and Stable Strategic Relationships: The Case of South Asia,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January 2016): 14, 18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12503>; and Christopher Clary, “The Future of Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Program,” in *Strategic Asia, 2013-2014: Asia in the Second Nuclear Age*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Travis Tanner (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2013), 138.

ing “less-than-existential conflict.”⁵

Despite the term’s recurring colloquial use, however, salami tactics have not yet been thoroughly conceptualized or systematically employed to study international politics, an unfortunate oversight in a world where major war remains a devastating prospect.⁶ By using game theory to identify clear conditions that incentivize salami tactics (and related ways in which aggressors seek to heighten their advantage), this article can inform policy in situations where threatening *post hoc* military retaliation is unlikely to deter aggression. In so doing, it contributes to the scholarly literatures on expansionism and deterrence, advances related debates in U.S. foreign policy, and lays the groundwork for further research.

What follows proceeds in six sections. The first section defines and conceptualizes salami tactics by focusing on four key features: rivalry, *faits accomplis*, limited scope, and potential repetition. The second section examines the circumstances under which leaders should see salami tactics as useful, reasoning with the aid of a formal model (presented in Appendix I⁷) and predicting associated behavioral incentives. In brief, salami tactics are most appealing when: 1) retaliation would be costly; 2) reversal is unlikely; 3) *faits accomplis* are easy; 4) fears of future predation can be undercut; and 5) further gains are possible. The next three sections test the model’s real-world applicability by laying out the case-study methodology used, illustrating how the United States exploited those five conditions to annex Florida during the 1800s and 1810s, and observing similar dynamics in Russia’s expansion into Georgia and Ukraine during the 2000s and 2010s. Finally, the sixth section confronts the challenges involved in deterring salami tactics, offering policy recommendations based on the preceding analysis.

Salami Tactics

The term “salami tactics” describes the repeated use of limited *faits accomplis* to gain influence within some competitive arena at an adversary’s expense without provoking major retaliation. Instead of pursuing a single decisive victory, the object is to advance slice by slice, securing cumulative gains at minimal cost. The concept resides at the tactical level (as a method for pursuing expansionist strategic objectives), and its potential amplifies the significance of otherwise minor actions.

The term’s origins can be traced back at least as far as the late 1940s, when Hungarian Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi claimed that he defeated his domestic rivals by inciting them to abandon ever-larger segments of their own party, “cutting them off like slices of salami.”⁸ Thomas Schelling adapted the notion to the Cold War, describing a method used by both superpowers to erode each other’s sphere of influence: “One can begin his intrusion on a scale too small to provoke a reaction, and increase it by imperceptible degrees, never quite presenting a sudden, dramatic challenge that would invoke the committed response.”⁹

More recently, salami tactics have appeared in some studies of bargaining and war, but the concept has received far less scholarly attention than its utility would suggest.¹⁰ When mentioned, the term has typically been used colloquially and without thorough conceptualization, remaining largely a phenomenon of the “you know it when you see it” variety. This section fleshes out the concept of salami tactics by focusing on four key features: rivalry, *faits accomplis*, limited scope, and potential repetition.

First, salami tactics presuppose an enduring rivalry — sustained competition over time between a consistent set of actors within a certain arena.¹¹ Such relationships are characterized by a preoccupation with relative gains, as adversaries view each

5 Mira Rapp Hooper, “Uncharted Waters: Extended Deterrence and Maritime Disputes,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2015): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1038180>.

6 John Mueller, “‘Pax Americana’ Is a Myth: Aversion to War Drives Peace and Order,” *Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 115–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813398>.

7 The appendix can be found in the online version of this article at <https://tnsr.org/2021/11/salami-tactics-faits-accomplis-and-international-expansion-in-the-shadow-of-major-war/>.

8 “Hungary: Salami Tactics,” *Time Magazine*, April 14, 1952, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,857130,00.html>.

9 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 68.

10 Robert Powell, “Uncertainty, Shifting Power, and Appeasement,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 4 (December 1996): 750, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2945840>, 750; James D. Fearon, “Bargaining Over Objects That Influence Future Bargaining Power,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Aug. 28–31, 1997, 1; Virginia Page Fortna, *Peace Time: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 15, 22; and Bahar Leventoglu and Branislav L. Slantchev, “The Armed Peace: A Punctuated Equilibrium Theory of War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (October 2007): 757, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00279.x>.

11 Paul F. Diehl, ed., *The Dynamics of Enduring Rivalries* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 2–6; William R. Thompson, ed., *Great Power Rivalries* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, eds., *War and Peace in International Rivalry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Michael P. Colaresi, *Scare Tactics: The Politics of International Rivalry* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

other's policies in terms of a zero-sum struggle for influence. The competitive arena in international politics is often regional, with the prospect of major war understood to be ever present, given the stakes involved. This context raises the profile of individual actions due to their potential to snowball into further gains or losses, distinguishing salami tactics from isolated expansionist episodes such as Armenia's pursuit of Nagorno-Karabakh or China's reabsorption of Hong Kong.

Second, salami tactics involve the execution of *faits accomplis* — deliberate alterations of the status quo without the adversary's prior consent.¹² *Faits accomplis* may take many forms (e.g., broadening a patrol route, constructing fortifications, occupying territory, etc.), but their defining characteristic lies in confronting the adversary with a changed reality and forcing it to decide whether to accept this new status quo or attempt to reverse it. If a *fait accompli* involves physical changes that are impossible to undo without direct military confrontation, that decision is weighted by the knowledge that any reversal attempt would be costlier than acquiescence and that the resulting war would be of the adversary's own making.¹³ In the words of Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing, "The former defender is now the potential challenger, carrying the burden of having to initiate the risks of a further confrontation."¹⁴

Third, the logic of salami tactics requires that each *fait accompli* be limited to a range of consequences not expected to provoke major retaliation. Striking this balance by inflicting a loss that is too minor to warrant the cost of reversing it places the adversary in the frustrating situation of being dissatisfied with the change, yet rationally unwilling to recover what was lost. Shifting the burden of escalation in this way maximizes a state's chances of getting away with its *fait accompli*: For the adver-

sary, "the game is over, he has lost, and he had best accept it."¹⁵ Unlike more direct efforts to achieve a decisive victory, salami tactics capitalize on the adversary's short time horizons and incentives to avoid war, even at the risk of long-term decline.¹⁶ Salami tactics fail when they spark unanticipated costly retaliation, for instance through a misjudgment of how much the adversary values the target or by provoking a demonstration of resolve.¹⁷

Fourth, salami tactics involve the prospect of repeat predation. This may take the form of a premeditated step-by-step campaign, but it may also involve the opportunistic pursuit of broad ambitions as early successes can spawn future possibilities. To be clear, salami tactics are a policy (not an outcome), so the concept does not require multiple successful *faits accomplis*. Indeed, thwarting one may prevent another from being attempted. Nevertheless, the potential for repeated low-level predation to generate cumulative gains is central to the policy choice (even as that potential may, in turn, heighten an adversary's sensitivity to perceived patterns of aggression).

Salami tactics represent a common, if understudied, approach to international competition. For example, China has recently expanded its influence in the South China Sea not by conquest, negotiation, or arbitration, but through "demonstrative" actions like patrols and construction projects that have unilaterally changed day-to-day realities in and around the Spratly archipelago.¹⁸ Russia has behaved similarly, not only separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, and Crimea from Ukraine, but subtly expanding border fences in Georgia, extending provocative military flights over Eastern Europe, and moving to control Arctic natural resources.¹⁹ In each case, the altering of situations on the ground has forced neighbors and their allies to respond in the shadow of potential escalation.

12 Dan Altman, "By *Fait Accompli*, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 2017): 883, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049>; cf. Dan Altman, "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm," *International Organization* 74, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 490–522, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000119>; and Ahmer Tatar, "A Strategic Logic of the Military *Fait Accompli*," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 2016): 742, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqw018>.

13 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 190; and Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 44.

14 Glenn Herald Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977): 227.

15 Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, 227.

16 David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

17 Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal Determination in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

18 Andrew Chubb, "PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015," *International Security* 45, no. 3 (Winter 2020/21): 79–121, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00400.

19 Jonathan N. Markowitz, *Perils of Plenty: Arctic Resource Competition and the Return of the Great Game* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Paul Salopek, "Vladimir Putin's Mysterious Moving Border" *Politico*, April 3, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/georgia-border-russia-vladimir-putin-213787>; and Thomas Frear, Lukasz Kulesa, and Ian Kearns, "Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014," European Leadership Network (November 2014), <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Dangerous-Brinkmanship.pdf>.

Although these unilateral extensions of influence have not gone unnoticed, analysts continue to struggle with how best to conceptualize them. Some discuss hybrid warfare, a blend of conventional and irregular military operations potentially involving both state and nonstate actors as well as a diverse array of offensive means.²⁰ Others focus on gray-zone conflict, revisionism employing unconventional means in “the ambiguous no-man’s-land between peace and war.”²¹ That very ambiguity has exposed both concepts to frequent critique, however: They usefully highlight the propensity of 21st-century aggressors to rely on means short of war, but such broad umbrella categories are relatively ill-equipped to offer precise policy guidance.²²

When Are Salami Tactics Useful?

Wars receive the lion’s share of scholarly attention, but expansion via subtler means is far more common than many realize. In a recent article, Dan Altman found that states have been roughly nine times more likely to gain territory by *fait accompli* than by coercive threat since World War I.²³ As he and Ahmer Tarar have argued, such findings imply that international security scholars should complement bargaining models of war with greater attention to *faits accomplis*.²⁴ This section offers an important step in that direction, walking through

the logic and implications of a new model of salami tactics (presented in Appendix I).

A substantial literature produced in the 1990s and 2000s used game theory to examine why international bargaining breaks down and wars occur,²⁵ highlighting leaders’ uncertainty about each other’s intentions, the difficulty of leaders credibly committing to restrain themselves after power shifts, and their unwillingness to compromise or divide a prize, among other issues.²⁶ Despite these contributions, existing models rely on assumptions that are poorly suited to analyze salami tactics. First, most models frame coercive bargaining as a series of demands and concessions, whereas a *fait accompli* sees one state create a new status quo and dare its adversary to react.²⁷ Second, many existing models limit the adversary’s options to acquiescence or war, neglecting feasible nonmilitary modes of retaliation. Third, although some bargaining models confront the prospect of repeat predation (which is central to salami tactics), many previous models of *faits accomplis* have not.²⁸ The model developed here incorporates each of these considerations.

Salami tactics aim to execute repeated *faits accomplis* without provoking costly retaliation. Under what circumstances will that approach appeal to policymakers? One way to answer this question is to model the state’s decision to launch a *fait accompli* and its rival’s subsequent decision wheth-

20 Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007, https://potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf; Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, ed., *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicisation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Chiyuki Aoi, Madoka Futamura, and Alessio Patalano, “Hybrid Warfare in Asia: Its Meaning and Shape,” *Pacific Review* 31, no. 6 (2018): 693–713, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2018.1513548>.

21 Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 2; cf. Van Jackson, “Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Redlines, and Conflicts Before War,” *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 39–61; James J. Wirtz, “Life in the ‘Gray Zone’: Observations for Contemporary Strategists,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 33, no. 2 (2017): 106–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2017.1310702>; and Raymond Kuo, *Contests of Initiative: Countering China’s Gray Zone Strategy in the East and South China Sea* (Washington, DC: Westphalia, 2020).

22 Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 15, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>; Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (February 2016), https://www.fpri.org/docs/brands_-_grey_zone.pdf; Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare,” 177–78; John Arquilla, “Perils of the Gray Zone: Paradigms Lost, Paradoxes Regained,” *Prism* 7, no. 3 (2018): 119–28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26470539>; and Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milewski, “War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction,” *Survival* 63, no. 1 (February–March 2021): 101–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1881256>.

23 Altman, “By Fait Accompli.”

24 Altman, “By Fait Accompli”; and Tarar, “Strategic Logic of the Military *Fait Accompli*.”

25 James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379–414, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818300033324>; R. Harrison Wagner, “Bargaining and War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (July 2000): 469–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669259>; Dan Reiter, “Exploring the Bargaining Model of War,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 27–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592703000033>; and David B. Carter, “The Strategy of Territorial Conflict,” *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 4 (October 2010): 969–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00471.x>.

26 Todd S. Sechser, “Goliath’s Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power,” *International Organization* 64, no. 4 (October 2010): 627–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818310000214>; Thomas Chadeaux, “Bargaining Over Power: When Do Shifts in Power Lead to War?” *International Theory* 3, no. 2 (2011): 228–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s175297191100008x>; Scott Wolford, Dan Reiter, and Clifford J. Carrubba, “Information, Commitment, and War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 4 (August 2011): 556–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002710393921>; and Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, “Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War,” *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818313000192>.

27 Altman, “By Fait Accompli,” 883.

28 Tarar’s model sees *faits accomplis* driven by an information problem (an alternative to war or accepting an ultimatum) and a commitment problem (an alternative to crisis bargaining), but it remains subject to the second and third critiques. Tarar, “Strategic Logic.”

er or not to retaliate. To begin, envision a state and its rival interacting in some local situation that falls within the broader context of their rivalry — for example, the United States and the Soviet Union crafting policies toward the city of Berlin during the early years of the Cold War. As noted in the conceptual discussion above, each side views that local situation in terms of relative gains, and the game begins with the two sides coexisting under a mutually understood status quo. The model proceeds in two stages.

First, one state decides whether or not to attempt to expand its local influence via a *fait accompli*. If it chooses not to expand, the local status quo remains, as does that of the overall rivalry. If it chooses to launch a *fait accompli*, on the other hand, that state bears a certain cost to expand its local control, tipping the needle of the overall rivalry slightly in its direction. It may also anticipate that this success will create opportunities for future gains, increasing the appeal of its initial *fait accompli*.

After the state has launched its *fait accompli*, in the model's second stage, the rival chooses whether to accept the result or retaliate. Accepting the *fait accompli* means losing commensurate local influence, watching the needle of the broader rivalry tip slightly away, and assuming some risk that this appeasement may lead to further predation. If it chooses to retaliate, on the other hand, the rival would pay some cost to punish the state for its transgression, attempting to reverse the *fait accompli* and restore the former status quo either by compelling the state to withdraw or expelling it by force.

Several aspects of this model are worth noting. The rival is uncertain about the state's future intentions, so its assessment of the risk of future predation may differ from the state's own plans. In other words, the two sides may value future gains or losses differently in their present decision-making, a contrast to previous models that assume perfect information and address the prospect of repeated *faits accomplis* by discounting potential future changes equally for both sides.²⁹ Amid this uncertain future, the rival is forced to confront a completed act that it may or may not be able to reverse at an acceptable cost. Furthermore, its potential retaliation may involve not only war but also other means of punishment, whether direct or indirect, including military or nonmilitary action. Several existing models incorporate the first of these dimensions but not the second or third, while the most prominent model of *faits accomplis*

incorporates the second but not the first or third.³⁰ Combining all three helps us to consider how salami tactics play out under different conditions and how nonmilitary forms of retaliation, such as economic sanctions, can shape interactions.

Assuming that the state's leaders are rational, the initial decision to launch a *fait accompli* depends on whether its expected value exceeds that of the status quo. This, in turn, depends on the probability of the rival choosing to acquiesce. In brief, the model predicts that a state should pursue salami tactics if its expected present and future gains — taking into account uncertainty as to whether its *fait accompli* will succeed — are greater than the expected costs, including those of the *fait accompli* itself and potential punishment from its rival.

The rival's decision to retaliate is driven by its own strategic calculations. Following its own rational decision process, the rival should accept the *fait accompli* when it expects acquiescence to generate a greater payoff than retaliation. According to the model's logic, this occurs when the cost of retaliation exceeds the present and future influence that it expects to save by trying to reverse the *fait accompli*. When this condition holds, the state's leaders should expect their rival to acquiesce. If the reverse is true, they should expect it to retaliate.

Modeling these considerations on both sides of the rivalry enables us to identify the circumstances under which the state should launch a *fait accompli* and expect its rival to acquiesce — in other words, when it should expect to get away with using salami tactics. A state is most likely to pursue salami tactics when: (1) the cost of retaliation is high; (2) the likelihood of the rival reversing its *fait accompli* is low; (3) the cost of the *fait accompli* is low; (4) the rival's fear of future predation is low; and (5) the state's own expectation of further gains is high. These five conditions shape not only the initial decision to pursue salami tactics but also how states go about doing so (because maximizing each condition increases their overall chances of success).

First, a state is more likely to pursue salami tactics when the cost of retaliation for its rival is high. Assuming that the rival's leaders are rational, they should be subject to deterrence and should accept a *fait accompli* if retaliating would entail prohibitive costs. This gives the state an incentive to harden potential targets, threaten to counter-retaliate if provoked, and to emphasize the grim prospect of escalating conflict through bilateral, multilateral, and public diplomacy. The state's counter-retalia-

29 Fearon, "Bargaining Over Objects"; and Carter, "Strategy of Territorial Conflict." As Chadeaux observes, Fearon's proposition that negotiating over the sources of power never leads to war does not hold for states that value the future differently. Chadeaux, "Bargaining Over Power," 242–43.

30 Powell, "Uncertainty"; Debs and Monteiro, "Known Unknowns"; and Tarar, "Strategic Logic."



tory threats will be particularly effective if it can credibly threaten targets of value to its rival, underscore its resolve by claiming core interests in the local context of the *fait accompli*, and maintain diverse means of counter-retaliation (diluting the rival's ability to deter it in turn).³¹

Second, a state is more likely to pursue salami tactics when its *fait accompli* would be difficult to reverse. This gives the state a strong incentive to engineer *faits accomplis* that fundamentally change local realities on the ground, eliminating any realistic prospect of restoring the previous status quo. Doing so relegates retaliation to the purpose of punishment alone, which may be morally satisfying but strategically counterproductive. Where a rival enjoys diverse means of retaliation, it may seek to re-center the needle of the broader rivalry by abandoning the local context of the *fait accompli* and instead retaliating against distinct targets elsewhere. But this, too, may prove counterproductive if it escalates the conflict with no clear path to recover what was lost. Cognitive biases against updating prior reference points af-

ter suffering losses may further predispose the rival's leaders against accepting a *fait accompli*, motivating the state to solidify its new status quo as thoroughly as possible before the rival can decide whether to retaliate or acquiesce.³²

Third, a state is more likely to pursue salami tactics when the costs of executing the *fait accompli* are low. An affordable price tag is preferable both in material terms and as a domestic selling point for leaders weighing a *fait accompli* against other policy options. This makes salami tactics especially appealing in local situations that require relatively little effort to spark meaningful change, where only peripheral interests of the rival are concerned, or that offer intrinsic opportunities to further minimize costs. For example, changing facts on the ground can be far easier when support from local populations is mobilized against the rival. Similarly, the state entertains a lower risk of sparking major war by targeting peripheral interests within a broadly defined rivalry (e.g., the Cold War in Africa and Asia), where existential stakes do not raise the inherent cred-

31 Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974): 536–37.

32 Richard W. Maass, "Why Washington and Moscow Keep Talking Past Each Other," *Monkey Cage*, *Washington Post*, March 12, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/12/why-washington-and-moscow-keep-talking-past-each-other/>.

ibility of deterrence and hence the likely cost of attempting a *fait accompli*. States pursuing salami tactics are incentivized to exploit cost-saving opportunities that are intrinsic to the local situation where possible, such as relying on sympathetic private actors who may be able to modify the local status quo with relatively little external support.

Fourth, a state is more likely to pursue salami tactics when it expects to be able to minimize its rival's fear of further predations. Within the context of an ongoing rivalry, numerous factors incline the rival's leaders to overestimate the state's revisionist ambitions, including the risk of cumulative exploitation, the rivalry's prominence in their own strategic worldview, personal experiences of conflict, the emotional strain of crisis decision-making, and psychological tendencies to attribute an adversary's undesirable actions to hostile intent rather than external constraints.³³ Nevertheless, that assessment is not predetermined — it is also shaped by the state's own rhetorical framing of its actions and accompanying policy signals, as well as the rival's perceptions of the state's strategic incentives, domestic characteristics, and leaders.³⁴ Therefore, a state pursuing salami tactics has a strong incentive to portray its actions as normatively legitimate and its ambitions as explicitly limited in order to provide rhetorical ammunition for doves advocating acquiescence within the rival government. For example, a state may seek to legitimize its *fait accompli* by offering rationales that are logically coherent, morally acceptable, and widely espoused, as when Adolf Hitler brandished norms of national self-determination to justify his annexation of Austria. It may also claim plausible deniability, insisting that the *fait accompli* was the work of third parties and not an act of foreign policy (e.g., claiming a patrol entered a restricted area “by mistake” or that “private citizens” seized local control). As Schelling wrote, “One tests the seriousness of a commitment by probing it in a noncommittal way, pretending the trespass was inadvertent or unauthorized if one meets resistance, both to fore-

stall the reaction and to avoid backing down.”³⁵

Fifth, salami tactics are most appealing when the state's leaders do not expect the first slice to be their last — in other words, when the initial *fait accompli* promises to spawn further opportunities for expansion. Although leaders need not have an explicit campaign involving multiple *faits accomplis* mapped out in advance, having broader ambitions should increase their awareness of the cumulative gains that may be possible through further opportunistic expansion. Even a failed *fait accompli* may provide valuable intelligence about the rival's interests and perspective that can inform future policy, testing its willingness to compete and potentially identifying new areas for predation.³⁶ Smart leaders will mind the limits of this approach: The more frequent and brazen their *faits accomplis*, the more likely it is they will appear to harbor uncompromising revisionist aims warranting substantial sacrifices in order to defeat. That said, history shows that balancing is not an automatic response to a rising power, and the rival's reactions may be hamstrung by dilapidated capabilities, economic recession, pressing threats elsewhere, domestic infighting, or other factors.³⁷

Combining these five conditions, an ideal scenario for salami tactics might see a state seize control of an area of peripheral interest to its rival in a manner that is not feasibly reversible, is broadly consistent with prevailing international norms, and is likely to generate further opportunities for expansion. In doing so, it would solidify its gains on the ground as quickly as possible, using plausibly independent third parties, if available, and consistently emphasizing its own lack of expansionist ambitions, while also underscoring both the legitimacy of the change and the dangers of escalation if the new status quo is threatened. Despite resenting the *fait accompli*, its rival would see little to gain from retaliating in this scenario, maximizing the state's chances of getting away with salami tactics.

Moving beyond this ideal scenario, the model also identifies a second scenario in which circumstances may incentivize a state to launch a

33 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Jack S. Levy, “Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1997): 87–112, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600908>; and Sebastian Rosato, “The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers,” *International Security* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/15): 48–88, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00190.

34 Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Charles L. Glaser, et al., “Correspondence: Can Great Powers Discern Intentions?” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015/16): 197–215, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_c_00230.

35 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 67.

36 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 68.

37 Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Edelstein, *Over the Horizon*; and MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*.



fait accompli despite anticipating punishment — in other words, even if it does not expect to get away with salami tactics. Combining the state's decision to expand with its rival's decision to retaliate, the model predicts that even if the rival enjoys relatively inexpensive means of retaliation and fears further predation, the state may launch a *fait accompli* anyway if the probability of reversal is low and its expected net gains are high. Even where retaliation seems likely, then, the calculus behind this second scenario may motivate a *fait accompli*.

By the time James Madison assumed the presidency in 1809, conditions were ripe for him to employ salami tactics in pursuit of Florida. Madison took full advantage, repeatedly launching small-scale *faits accomplis* to undermine Spanish authority and seize control.

Case Studies and Salami Tactics

The next two sections offer initial support for this model by presenting case studies of the U.S. annexation of Florida and Russia's expansion in Georgia and Ukraine, using process-tracing methodology to investigate how local circumstances and geopolitical context incentivized expansion in the shadow of major war.³⁸

Previous perceptions of a cavernous qualitative-quantitative divide have given way to growing recognition of the unique virtues of combining game theory with case studies. As Peter Lorentzen,

Taylor Fravel, and Jack Paine write, "Formal models and ... process tracing share an under-recognized affinity — a focus on causal mechanisms — that makes process tracing a valuable tool for the empirical investigation of formal models."³⁹ The causal mechanisms described above concern how specific elements of the strategic interaction between a state and its rival can incentivize a state to adopt salami tactics and shape its resulting behavior. Accordingly, each case study examines the available evidence to determine whether and how the expansionist state sought to take advantage of the model's five conditions to facilitate its territorial ambitions.

The two case studies presented here were selected with two purposes in mind. First, in order to illustrate the model's predictions in action, both cases were chosen for their close fit with the model's scope conditions: The states involved saw the local context in terms of their broader regional rivalry, and both cases involved limited *faits accomplis* featuring the prospect of repeat predation.⁴⁰ Second, in order to illustrate how these dynamics occur in contrasting contexts, the cases reflect major differences across many factors relevant to theories of international expansion, including historical era, region, system polarity, and military technology, as well as aggressor regime type, ideology, and leader traits.⁴¹ The result is a rich opportunity to observe persistent patterns of behavior. In addition, the enduring prominence of both aggressors further underscores the modern relevance of these case studies.

Although the concept of salami tactics is potentially applicable in any competitive arena, focusing on cases of territorial expansion is useful here for several reasons. First, territorial expansion represents arguably the clearest manifestation of relative gains in international relations.⁴² Second, it attracts historical and journalistic attention,

38 Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, eds., *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in *Case Study Method: Key Issues, Key Texts*, ed. Roger Gomm, Martyn Hammersley, and Peter Foster (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2000), 140–43.

39 Peter Lorentzen, M. Taylor Fravel, and Jack Paine, "Qualitative Investigation of Theoretical Models: The Value of Process Tracing," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 29, no. 3 (July 2017): 468, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F0951629816664420>.

40 Lorentzen, Fravel, and Paine, "Qualitative Investigation of Theoretical Models," 480–83; cf. Robert H. Bates, Avner Grief, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurient Rosenthal, and Barry R. Weingast, *Analytic Narratives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). Future studies might examine variations in the use of salami tactics by also examining cases where they were not employed, which lie beyond the scope of this initial investigation.

41 Jason Seawright and John Gerring, "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options," *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 2008): 306, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F1065912907313077>.

42 Joseph Grieco, Robert Powell, and Duncan Snidal, "The Relative-Gains Problem for International Cooperation," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (September 1993): 729–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938747>; and David L. Rousseau, "Motivations for Choice: The Salience of Relative Gains in International Politics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 3 (June 2002): 394–426, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002702046003004>.

increasing the availability of transcript evidence and hence facilitating case-study research.⁴³ Third, territorial pursuits rank among the most prominent causes of war, amplifying their significance for international security.⁴⁴ Finally, Altman's finding that states are far more likely to pursue territory by *fait accompli* than coercive bargaining implies that the findings are probably generalizable to a broad and underappreciated universe of cases.⁴⁵ That said, some elements are likely context-dependent — for example, the risk of accidental escalation may be greater in more permeable strategic arenas such as sea and space where states rely on patrols to manifest their influence and there are fewer physical obstacles to penetrating an adversary's zone of control.

The first case study is presented in five subsections and investigates how U.S. leaders took advantage of each of the model's five conditions to wrest control of Florida from Spain. The second case study observes similar dynamics in Russia's recent expansionism, but rather than duplicate the structure of the first, it is presented in two subsections using each of the model's two scenarios to highlight the roles of military and nonmilitary retaliation. As in the Florida case, the first scenario captures why Russia was able to expand while avoiding U.S. military retaliation. Given the high likelihood that its brash *faits accomplis* in Ukraine would spark diplomatic and economic sanctions, however, the second scenario can help to explain why Russia's leaders nevertheless chose to execute them. Taken together, these cases usefully contribute historical perspective to ongoing debates about international competition in the 21st century.

Salami Tactics in History: The U.S. Annexation of Florida

Spanish-American rivalry peaked during the early 19th century over clashing ambitions for regional power in North America. Even while cooperating during the Revolutionary War, both countries coveted the vast territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River.⁴⁶ Spanish leaders seethed when Great Britain gave it to the United States, harassing U.S. agricultural shipments by leveraging Spain's control of the Mississippi's key port at New Orleans as well as the mouths of the Pearl, Mobile, and Apalachicola Rivers along Florida's Gulf Coast.⁴⁷ In response, President Thomas Jefferson resolved to secure U.S. exports by annexing New Orleans and Florida. He set out to purchase those coastal areas in 1802, upon hearing that Spain had sold them to France, but Napoleon countered by selling the Louisiana Territory to the United States instead (rumors of Florida's transfer having been false).⁴⁸ With New Orleans in hand, Jefferson considered conquering Florida under cover of a possible British alliance before the latter's trade restrictions sent U.S.-British relations spiraling toward the War of 1812.⁴⁹

By the time James Madison assumed the presidency in 1809, conditions were ripe for him to employ salami tactics in pursuit of Florida. Madison took full advantage, repeatedly launching small-scale *faits accomplis* to undermine Spanish authority and seize control. Sending agents to foment localized rebellions, he used those rebellions as a pretext to unilaterally annex the districts surrounding Baton Rouge in 1810 and Mobile in 1813.⁵⁰ He and his successor, James Monroe, proceeded to covertly support incursions into East Florida while emphasizing their own plausible deniability, most notably looking the other way as Gen. Andrew

43 Lorentzen et al., "Qualitative Investigation," 479–80.

44 Paul K. Huth, "Enduring Rivalries and Territorial Disputes, 1950-1990," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 7–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/073889429601500102>; John A. Vasquez and Marie T. Henehan, *Territory, War, and Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Douglas M. Gibler, *The Territorial Peace: Borders, State Development, and International Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

45 Altman, "By Fait Accompli."

46 Richard W. Maass, *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited U.S. Territorial Expansion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 48–52.

47 Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, Vol. 16 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910), 114–15; and David Mayers, *Dissenting Voices in America's Rise to Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17.

48 *American State Papers: Foreign Relations* (hereafter *ASP:FR*), Vol. 2, 1797–1807, Library of Congress, 627, <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwspink.html>.

49 Richard W. Maass, "'Difficult to Relinquish Territory Which Had Been Conquered': Expansionism and the War of 1812," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 1 (January 2015): 70–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht132>; and *ASP:FR*, Vol. 2, 628.

50 Wanjohi Waciuma, *Intervention in Spanish Floridas, 1801-1813: A Study in Jeffersonian Foreign Policy* (Boston: Branden Press, 1976); Isaac Joslin Cox, *The West Florida Controversy, 1798-1813* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1967); and Rembert W. Patrick, *Florida Fiasco: Rampant Rebels on the Georgia-Florida Border, 1810-1815* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1954).



Jackson “exceeded his orders” by seizing Spanish forts during the First Seminole War.⁵¹ Their persistent efforts to dissolve Spanish authority paid off in 1819 when Secretary of State John Quincy Adams negotiated the formal cession of Florida.⁵²

This section considers each of the model’s five conditions in turn, examining how they facilitated U.S. salami tactics. Escalating conflict would have doomed Spain’s broader empire, a fact that Adams leveraged in negotiations. U.S. efforts undercut Spain’s local control in ways it was ill equipped to reverse, relying on inexpensive means to accomplish that feat. Madison and Monroe legitimized their official interest in annexing Florida based on the right to self-defense against the chaos unfolding there, and U.S. ambitions proved far broader than their initial *faits accomplis*. Overall, the U.S. annexation of Florida offers a textbook case of salami tactics.

How Costly Was Retaliation for Spain?

Spain had a lot to lose in any potential war with the United States during the 1810s. A civil war between supporters of King Ferdinand VII and Joseph Bonaparte (1808–1813) left it unprepared to fight, and its vast empire hung by rapidly fraying threads. Spanish authority in Florida depended on a handful of poorly defended forts that proved vulnerable to local rebellions and external assaults. In 1810, West Florida’s governor even offered to transfer his territory to the United States if he failed to receive immediate support (Congress approved and Madison sent agents to accept, but Havana and Mexico provided aid).⁵³ Any chance for Spain to hold onto Florida in a war would have required more reinforcements than it could afford.

Elsewhere, rebel movements were pushing the Spanish Empire to the brink of collapse, especially after victories in Buenos Aires, New Granada, Venezuela, and Chile in 1816 and 1817. Scrambling to resurrect their country’s imperial status, Spanish leaders saw war with the United States as threatening

utter disaster.⁵⁴ Knowing this, U.S. leaders signaled resolve and consistently marked Florida as a core interest due to U.S. commerce in the Gulf.⁵⁵ Spain initially hoped to retaliate with support from the Concert of Europe, but after the Napoleonic Wars it found the European powers unsympathetic and inclined to prioritize continental stability. British naval mastery ensured a decisive voice on the group’s policies relating to the Western Hemisphere, and Britain preferred to press Spain for trade concessions rather than help to restore its disintegrating empire.⁵⁶ Ferdinand was not even invited to the Concert of Europe’s October 1818 conference at Aix-la-Chapelle, where Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh secured an agreement to deny military aid, “even if the most suitable propositions were made by Spain.”⁵⁷

Well-informed of Spain’s local weakness and the lack of European support, Adams made a point of highlighting the risk of escalation during negotiations. In December 1818, he startled Spanish negotiator Luis de Onís y González-Vara by threatening to recognize the Latin American republics — a move favored by Monroe and Congress but dreaded by Spain.⁵⁸ Knowing that escalating conflict with the United States would sound the death knell for Spain’s imperial history, Spanish leaders even grudgingly refrained from treating Jackson’s invasion as a *casus belli*. Instead, they authorized Onís to take the best deal Adams offered: signing the Transcontinental Treaty that formally transferred Florida to the United States; setting a firm transcontinental boundary along the Sabine River, Red River, Arkansas River, and the 42nd parallel to the Pacific Ocean; and obliging the United States to pay up to \$5 million in private claims against Spain.⁵⁹

How Difficult Were U.S. *Faits Accomplis* to Reverse?

U.S. leaders sought to irreversibly dissolve Spanish authority in Florida through local rebellions backed by external intervention. In 1810, Madison

51 William Earl Weeks, “John Quincy Adams’s ‘Great Gun’ and the Rhetoric of American Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 1 (January 1990): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1990.tb00074.x>; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 351–65; and Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 122.

52 William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 74, 117–18; and *ASP:FR*, Vol. 4, 1815–1822, Library of Congress, 497–98, <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwspink.html>.

53 *ASP:FR*, Vol. 3, 1807–1815, Library of Congress, 571, <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwspink.html>; and Maass, *The Picky Eagle*, 59.

54 Weeks, *John Quincy Adams*, 69; and Stagg, *Borderlines in Borderlands*, 197.

55 *ASP:FR*, Vol. 2, 627; and John S. Bassett, ed., *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. 2 (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), 393.

56 Mark Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and Its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy After Napoleon* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 198.

57 Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and Its Legacy*, 199; and James E. Lewis, Jr., *The American Union and the Problem of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783-1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 123.

58 Charles F. Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, Vol. 4 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1875), 188, 208–09.

59 Maass, *The Picky Eagle*, 62. Spain begged for a guarantee that the United States would not recognize the Latin American republics, but Adams offered only verbal reassurances. U.S. recognition followed one year after the treaty was ratified.

sent William Wykoff to incite popular uprisings in West Florida, instructing Mississippi Governor David Holmes to prepare militia to occupy the area “in the event of either foreign power interference with West Florida, or of internal convulsions.”⁶⁰ Rebels seized the Spanish fort at Baton Rouge that September, and Madison announced its unilateral annexation one month later.⁶¹

In 1811, Madison sent George Mathews to East Florida, which he considered “ripe for revolt.”⁶² Mathews gathered 70 Georgians and nine Floridians who, calling themselves “Patriots,” seized the border town of Fernandina and Amelia Island in March 1812.⁶³ Madison disavowed Mathews’ actions when Great Britain protested, but he told Georgia Governor David Mitchell not “to compel the patriots to surrender the country, or any part of it, to the Spanish authorities.”⁶⁴ As the War of 1812 approached, he further instructed Mitchell that a Spanish denial of amnesty for the “Patriots” could be treated as “a sufficient cause to delay proceeding further, in restoring the territory.”⁶⁵ A Southern movement to seize Florida during the war (despite it being fought against Great Britain, not Spain) was narrowly defeated by sectional opposition in the Senate, but a rump bill did authorize the capture of Mobile, which surrendered without a fight in April 1813.⁶⁶

Most egregiously, Jackson seized every remaining Spanish fort except St. Augustine in the spring of 1818, ordering its capture also before Monroe countermanded it.⁶⁷ Although Monroe claimed he had gone rogue, Jackson entered Florida under orders to eliminate the Seminole threat and clearly saw destroying Spanish power there as part of his

mission.⁶⁸ With Spain’s grasp reduced to one outpost, Monroe declared Florida a failed state: “To a country over which she fails to maintain her authority, and which she permits to be converted to the annoyance of her neighbors, her jurisdiction for the time necessarily ceases to exist.”⁶⁹ Adams warned Onís “that if we should not come to an early conclusion of the Florida negotiation, Spain would not have the possession of Florida to give us.”⁷⁰ With no feasible path to reversing the U.S. *faits accomplis*, Spanish leaders signed away Florida, despite recognizing U.S. conduct as “Machiavellian.”⁷¹

How Costly Were U.S. *Faits Accomplis*?

The United States invested minimal resources undermining Spanish rule in Florida, relying primarily on individual agents, local rebels, and frontier militias. Madison initially sent one man (Wykoff) to inform West Florida’s residents that “in the event of a political separation from the parent country, their incorporation into our Union would coincide with the sentiments and policy of the United States.”⁷² After local conventions demanded autonomy during the summer of 1810, rebels seized Baton Rouge and declared independence from Spain without any formal U.S. military commitment.⁷³ Mathews’ “Patriot War” similarly saw one U.S. agent harness unruly borderland civilians to subvert Spanish authority.

Beyond such deliberate incitements, U.S. leaders privately welcomed the involvement of external actors. Adventurers led by Scottish filibuster Gregor MacGregor seized Amelia Island during the summer of 1817, declaring an independent “Republic of

60 Waciuma, *Intervention*, 144.

61 *ASP:FR*, Vol. 3, 397.

62 J.C.A. Stagg, “James Madison and George Mathews: The East Florida Revolution of 1812 Reconsidered,” *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 1 (January 2006): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2006.00536.x>.

63 Stagg, “James Madison and George Mathews,” 45–47; James G. Cusick, *The Other War of 1812: The Patriot War and the American Invasion of Spanish East Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); and Joseph Burkholder Smith, *The Plot to Steal Florida: James Madison’s Phony War* (New York: Arbor House, 1983).

64 *ASP:FR*, Vol. 3, 573.

65 Stagg, *Borderlines in Borderlands*, 123.

66 Cox, *West Florida Controversy*, 616–19.

67 Bassett, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, 346; and *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, Vol. 1, 1789–1819 (Library of Congress), 697, <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwspink.html>.

68 Weeks, *John Quincy Adams*, 109; and Nugent, *Habits of Empire*, 122.

69 James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897*, Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1897), 24.

70 Adams, *Memoirs*, 42; cf. Weeks, “Adams’s ‘Great Gun.’”

71 J.C.A. Stagg, *Borderlines in Borderlands: James Madison and the Spanish-American Frontier, 1776–1821* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 176.

72 Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. 9 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1940), 884.

73 Stanley Clisby Arthur, *The Story of the West Florida Rebellion* (St. Francisville, LA: St. Francisville Democrat, 1935), 37–88, 105–14; and Waciuma, *Intervention*, 148–66.



the Floridas.” After they abandoned it, insurgents under French corsair Louis-Michel Aury seized the island in the name of independent Mexico.⁷⁴ Adams argued in the Cabinet that the U.S. military should expel “the marauding parties at Amelia Island” to show that — unlike Spain — it was capable of maintaining order.⁷⁵ Monroe sent troops to suppress the outlaws that December, using his second annual message to declare Spanish authority in Florida “completely extinct.”⁷⁶

Even the most significant U.S. investment in destabilizing Florida — Jackson’s campaign against the Seminoles and Spanish forts — proved remarkably inexpensive. Entering Florida in March 1818 with more than 1,000 men under arms, Jackson’s force was far stronger than the Native American tribes and Spanish garrisons that it faced. Jackson found several tribal settlements abandoned (having been warned of his approach) and the garrisons at St. Marks and Pensacola surrendered their forts without a fight.⁷⁷ In the end, as one military historian writes, “the campaign was something of an anticlimax.”⁷⁸

Did U.S. Leaders Seek to Relieve Spanish Fears of Future Predation?

Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe made no secret of their desire to annex Florida, but they sought to reassure Spain by casting their motivations as legitimate and their intentions as peaceful. Jefferson initially tried to establish a legal claim to West Florida by arguing that it had been included in the Louisiana Purchase (despite still being under Spanish rule), but France’s refusal to play along doomed that effort.⁷⁹ Madison repeatedly emphasized his own plausible deniability as his agents worked to destabilize Spanish Florida, publicly blaming each intrusion on renegade private actors. Reflecting his perspective, Judge Harry Toulmin decried filibusters

scheming to seize the Spanish fort at Mobile (while simultaneously encouraging its residents to emulate the rebels of Baton Rouge).⁸⁰ Madison condemned the “Patriots” and pirates who took Amelia Island, even as he wielded their successes as evidence of Spain’s evaporated authority. Similarly, Monroe rebuked Jackson strongly enough to convince Onís that his takeovers of Spanish forts were rogue acts rather than official policy, only for Adams to weaponize them diplomatically.⁸¹

In parallel to this plausible deniability, Madison and Monroe justified increasingly aggressive intrusions by referencing the U.S. right of self-defense against threats posed by pirates, Native Americans, and escaped slaves based in Florida. Madison claimed that his 1810 annexation of Baton Rouge was provoked by “a crisis ... subversive of the order of things under the Spanish authorities.”⁸² Jackson argued in 1818 that “the immutable laws of self defense ... compelled the American government to take possession of such parts of the Floridas in which the Spanish authority could not be maintained,” words that Monroe echoed in his annual message.⁸³ Adams even composed a lengthy, uncompromising defense of Jackson’s seizures of St. Marks and Pensacola on the grounds that British agents had “rekindled” a “negro-Indian war against our borders” in which the Spanish fort commanders were complicit.⁸⁴

Aside from these rhetorical gambits, U.S. leaders sought to relieve Spanish fears of future predation by pledging to respect a firm boundary with Spanish Mexico. In 1816, Madison instructed U.S. Minister to Spain George Erving to “offer to the Spanish all the territory that we have, or claim, west of the Sabine [River in Texas], in consideration of East Florida being granted to us.”⁸⁵ Spanish leaders eventually saw a firm boundary as the most valuable concession they could realistically achieve, making it their key demand during the Adams-Onís negotiations.

74 Frank Lawrence Owsley, Jr. and Gene A. Smith, *Filibusters and Expansionists: Jeffersonian Manifest Destiny, 1800-1821* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 122–40.

75 Weeks, *John Quincy Adams*, 57–58.

76 Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 40; cf. 14.

77 Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Viking, 2001), 149, 161.

78 Richard W. Stewart, ed., *American Military History*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2008), 163.

79 Maass, *The Picky Eagle*, 57–58; Waciuma, *Intervention*, 52; and Cox, *West Florida Controversy*, 83.

80 Stagg, *Borderlines in Borderlands*, 83–85; Cox, *West Florida Controversy*, 437–86; and Charles C. Griffin, *The United States and the Disruption of the Spanish Empire, 1810-1822* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 106–15.

81 *ASP:FR*, Vol. 4, 496–97.

82 *ASP:FR*, Vol. 3, 397.

83 Bassett, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, 374–75; and Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, 41.

84 *ASP:FR*, Vol. 4, 541; cf. Weeks, “Adams’s ‘Great Gun’”; and Weeks, *John Quincy Adams*, 74, 117–18.

85 Stagg, *Borderlines in Borderlands*, 283, n. 49; cf. Lewis, *American Union*, 89; and Philip C. Brooks, *Diplomacy and the Borderlands: The Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), 136–39.

As Onís expressed, Spain's primary wish was "that the boundary line shall, as far as possible, be natural and clearly defined, and leave no room for dispute to the inhabitants on either side."⁸⁶

Did U.S. Leaders Anticipate Further Gains?

U.S. territorial ambitions did have limits, but those limits extended far beyond the early *faits accomplis* in Baton Rouge and Mobile.⁸⁷ All of Florida had been in Jefferson's crosshairs, even as he tried to claim that its western tip had been included in the Louisiana Purchase.⁸⁸ Madison was content to consume Florida slice by slice so long as Spain refused to deal, instructing both Wykoff and Mathews to begin their insurrectionist efforts in West Florida and then proceed into East Florida.⁸⁹

When Monroe and Adams finally agreed to recognize a transcontinental boundary in return for Florida's cession, they knew that the United States would probably violate it sooner or later.⁹⁰ Despite having unequivocally renounced any claim to Texas in 1819, six years later Adams instructed U.S. Minister to Mexico Joel Poinsett to approach Mexican leaders about pushing the border beyond the Sabine River to the Brazos, Colorado, or Rio Grande.⁹¹ Under Presidents John Tyler and James Polk, the United States would go on to annex everything from Texas to California.⁹²

The U.S. annexation of Florida fits the salami tactics model, showing how circumstances enabled U.S. leaders to repeatedly employ limited *faits accomplis* without provoking major war. Although Spain resisted for years, the potential costs of war grew ever more daunting as its broader empire crumbled. Local events consistently underscored its decaying grasp on Florida, making a restoration of the prior status quo increasingly unrealistic. Madison and Monroe sacrificed little in pursuit of the territory, relying on private actors and unauthorized

actions to undermine Spanish rule. They legitimized that pursuit via legal claims, self-defense concerns, and purchase offers while publicly denouncing the violence they had covertly incited. Moreover, their ambitions extended throughout Florida and beyond. As this case study shows, salami tactics are an age-old option in international politics.

21st-Century Salami Tactics: Russian Expansion in Georgia and Ukraine

How have salami tactics translated in the 21st century? In 2008, Russia forcibly detached Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia during a five-day war, proceeding to integrate their militaries, economies, and citizenries via treaties in 2014 and 2015.⁹³ Also in 2014, Russia reacted to Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution by forcibly annexing the country's Crimean Peninsula and inciting a separatist war in its eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. These actions were widely interpreted within the context of the U.S.-Russian rivalry in Eastern Europe, fueled by Russia's displeasure at its neighbors' westward foreign policy alignments and lingering Cold War distrust.⁹⁴ As the United States did in Florida, Russia employed salami tactics to expand its territorial control in the shadow of major war.

This case, which occurred two centuries after the U.S. annexation of Florida, illustrates how strategic circumstances can fuel similar patterns of behavior despite countless contextual and actor-specific differences. It also offers an opportunity to examine both of the model's scenarios in action, given the prominence of nonmilitary retaliation to Russia's actions in Ukraine. Accordingly, this case study is structured in two sections. The first examines how Russian leaders expanded without provoking U.S. military retaliation by emphasizing the high costs

86 ASP:FR, Vol. 4, 616.

87 Maass, *The Picky Eagle*.

88 ASP:FR, Vol. 2, 626.

89 Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison*, Vol. 7 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), 194; and Carter, *Territorial Papers*, 884.

90 Adams, *Memoirs*, 274–75.

91 Maass, *The Picky Eagle*, 124; and Karl M. Schmitt, *Mexico and the United States, 1821-1973: Conflict and Coexistence* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 38–41.

92 Maass, *The Picky Eagle*, 129–37.

93 "Georgians Protest Against Russia-Abkhazia Agreement," *BBC News*, Nov. 15, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30071915>; and "Putin Signs Treaty Integrating South Ossetia Into Russia," *Al Jazeera America*, March 18, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/18/putin-signs-treaty-integrating-south-ossetia-into-russia.html>.

94 Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 7–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00236; Richard W. Maass and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Correspondence: NATO Non-Expansion and German Reunification," *International Security* 41, no. 3 (Winter 2016/17): 197–200, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_c_00270; Andrei Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (New York: Routledge, 2015), 68; and Philip M. Breedlove, "NATO's Next Act: How to Handle Russia and Other Threats," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 96–105, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946936>.

of retaliation, working to achieve irreversible *faits accomplis*, targeting peripheral areas containing weaker local opposition, blaming third parties and offering legal justifications, and seizing opportunities for further predation. The second section investigates why Russia launched its later *faits accomplis* in Ukraine despite the near-certainty of facing diplomatic and economic sanctions (given international law's unambiguous prohibition of conquest and widespread recognition of the United States as its primary enforcer).⁹⁵

Avoiding Military Retaliation

Russia's salami tactics displayed all five of the model's conditions, enabling it to seize territory in Georgia and Ukraine while avoiding potential U.S. military retaliation. Although there was no longer a threat of Russia conquering Western Europe, its nuclear arsenal and conventional military resurgence revived Cold War fears that slice-by-slice aggression might paralyze U.S. deterrence. Nuclear weapons are not necessary for salami tactics (as the Florida case showed), but their possession by an aggressor may nevertheless facilitate small-scale *faits accomplis* by ensuring that escalation entails maximal risk. The British television comedy *Yes, Prime Minister* aptly summarized that danger in 1986 when its titular character fretted, "We'd only fight a nuclear war to defend ourselves, and how could we defend ourselves by committing suicide?"⁹⁶ Accordingly, U.S. leaders quickly ruled out military retaliation in reaction to Russia's *faits accomplis*, judging that attempting to reverse them was not worth the risk of escalating the conflict. Defense Secretary Robert Gates responded to Russia's actions in August 2008 by saying, "The United States spent 45 years working very hard to avoid a

military confrontation with Russia. I see no reason to change that approach today."⁹⁷ President Barack Obama reacted similarly to Crimea's annexation, stating, "We don't need a war."⁹⁸

Russian leaders designed their *faits accomplis* to be irreversible, short of war, by quickly establishing "facts on the ground" in both Georgia and Ukraine.⁹⁹ In 2008, Russian troops rapidly occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁰⁰ The occupying forces also gained local notoriety for periodically extending border fences during the night (initiating fresh localized *faits accomplis*).¹⁰¹ In February 2014, soldiers in disguise established checkpoints separating Crimea from mainland Ukraine and quickly seized the parliament, airports, and military bases.¹⁰² As the takeover's extent became clear, Ukrainian leaders faced extreme on-the-ground disadvantages that ensured prohibitive costs if they were to fight back. Reversing these *faits accomplis* was infeasible without severe losses and greater risks, ensuring that U.S. military retaliation would not be forthcoming.

Russia also targeted areas that were peripheral to U.S. interests where its forces had a decided edge over local opposition. Russia's leaders had long enjoyed a relatively free hand in encouraging separatism in Georgia — by subsidizing the separatist South Ossetian budget, exercising "de facto control ... especially over the security institutions and security forces," and distributing Russian passports to local inhabitants (so-called "passportization").¹⁰³ Once the invasion began, Georgia's far smaller military proved thoroughly outmatched. Six years later, Russia's takeover of Crimea was swift and largely bloodless, its troops posing as local self-defense forces in unmarked uniforms. Lacking U.S. military support and aware that reinforcing Crimea might be used as a pretext for a broader intervention, the

95 Richard W. Maass, "Enforcing Territorial Integrity: U.S. Support for the Prohibition of Conquest in International Law," in *The United States and International Law: Paradoxes of Support Across Contemporary Issues*, ed. Lucrecia García Iommi and Richard W. Maass (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

96 *Yes, Prime Minister*, "The Grand Design," aired Jan. 9, 1986, BBC; cf. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 108.

97 Steven Lee Myers and Thom Shanker, "Bush Aides Say Russia Actions in Georgia Jeopardize Ties," *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/world/europe/15policy.html>.

98 Noah Rayman, "Obama: 'We Don't Need a War' With Russia," *Time*, April 17, 2014, <http://time.com/66402/barack-obama-war-russia-putin/>.

99 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "The Growing Danger of Military Conflict with Russia," *National Interest*, Oct. 11, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-growing-danger-military-conflict-russia-18013>.

100 Luke Harding and Jenny Percival, "Russian Troops to Stay in Abkhazia and South Ossetia," *Guardian*, Sept. 9, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/09/georgia.russia>.

101 Salopek, "Putin's Mysterious Moving Border"; and Andrew Higgins, "In Russia's 'Frozen Zone,' a Creeping Border with Georgia," *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/24/world/europe/in-russias-frozen-zone-a-creeping-border-with-georgia.html>.

102 John Simpson, "Russia's Crimea Plan Detailed, Secret and Successful," *BBC News*, March 19, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26644082>.

103 "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Volume II," European Union, (September 2009), https://www.mpil.de/files/pdf4/IIFFMCG_Volume_II1.pdf, 132; cf. Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 206–09.

fragile interim Ukrainian government instructed its personnel not to resist.¹⁰⁴ As Francis Fukuyama described, Russia played a “very duplicitous game of keeping the level of intervention low enough that it doesn’t attract major attention and pushback from publics in the West.”¹⁰⁵

Similarly, the risks of escalating conflict effectively deterred potential U.S. military retaliation to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, despite that action being a relatively unambiguous violation of international law.

In both episodes, Russian leader Vladimir Putin tried to reduce fears of broader ambitions by blaming third parties for the violence and claiming justification under international law. In South Ossetia, separatist attacks goaded Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili into launching the assault that Putin used as a pretext for war. He framed Russia’s actions as “retaliatory measures” in response to Saakashvili’s “aggressive actions in South Ossetia.”¹⁰⁶ In Crimea, Putin claimed that the “little green men” establishing checkpoints and seizing government buildings were “self-defense groups” who may have acquired their Russian-looking uniforms from local shops,” admitting only afterwards that “of course, Russian servicemen backed the

Crimean self-defense forces.”¹⁰⁷ As similar forces seized government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk, Putin again insisted, “There are no Russian units in eastern Ukraine ... [A]ll this is being done by the local residents,” even as captured soldiers confessed to being Russian paratroopers.¹⁰⁸

Putin also argued that his actions were justified by principles of self-defense and self-determination. In 2008, he claimed that Georgia’s assault killed Russian peacekeepers and civilians, justifying an intervention “to provide for the security of our peace-keepers and of the citizens of the Russian Federation who are residents of South Ossetia.”¹⁰⁹ In 2014, he argued that Crimea’s annexation was needed to protect Russians there against potential oppression by the new government in Kiev: “This is legitimate and corresponds with our interests of protecting people who are historically tied to us. ... This is a humanitarian mission. We won’t dictate anything to anyone but of course we won’t stand aside if people are threatened.”¹¹⁰ Putin also sought to legitimize the annexation by a local referendum that reported 97 percent in favor, with 83 percent voter turnout (though it included no status quo option and a gaffe by Putin’s Human Rights Council revealed actual results of only 50–60 percent in favor with 30 percent turnout).¹¹¹ These efforts distorted international law and failed to convince most observers (especially as the subsequent *faits accomplis* implied a pattern of revisionism), but they nevertheless represented deliberate attempts to muddy the waters and encourage restraint.¹¹²

Much about Putin’s foreign policy planning remains unknown beyond his inner circle, but the available evidence suggests longstanding efforts

104 Steven Erlanger and Andrew E. Kramer, “Ukraine Finds Its Forces Are Ill Equipped to Take Crimea Back From Russia,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/world/europe/ukraine-finds-its-forces-are-ill-equipped-to-take-crimea-back-from-russia.html?_r=0; and Josh Rogin and Eli Lake, “U.S. Told Ukraine to Stand Down as Putin Invaded,” *Bloomberg*, Aug. 21, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-08-21/u-s-told-ukraine-to-stand-down-as-putin-invaded>.

105 “Interview: Francis Fukuyama Says Putin Playing A ‘Very Duplicitous Game,’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Sept. 4, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/a/fukuyama-interview-russia-ukraine/26566678.html>.

106 Jon Swaine, “Vladimir Putin Vows Russia Will Retaliate Against Georgia,” *Telegraph*, Aug. 8, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/europe/georgia/2521987/Vladimir-Putin-vows-Russia-will-retaliate-against-Georgia.html>.

107 Julian Borger, “Putin Offers Ukraine Olive Branches Delivered by Russian Tanks,” *Guardian*, March 4, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/04/putin-ukraine-olive-branches-russian-tanks>; and Kathy Lally, “Putin’s Remarks Raise Fears of Future Moves Against Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-changes-course-admits-russian-troops-were-in-crimea-before-vote/2014/04/17/b3300a54-c617-11e3-bf7a-be01a9b69cf1_story.html.

108 Lally, “Putin’s Remarks”; and Maria Tsvetkova, “Men in Green’ Raise Suspicions of East Ukrainian Villagers,” *Reuters*, Aug. 26, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-fighters-idUSKBN0GQ1X520140826>.

109 “Transcript: CNN Interview with Vladimir Putin,” *CNN*, Aug. 29, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/29/putin.transcript/>.

110 Borger, “Putin Offers Ukraine.”

111 Paul Roderick Gregory, “Putin’s ‘Human Rights Council’ Accidentally Posts Real Crimean Election Results,” *Forbes*, May 5, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2014/05/05/putins-human-rights-council-accidentally-posts-real-crimean-election-results-only-15-voted-for-annexation/#7dfc0b4710ff>.

112 William W. Burke-White, “Crimea and the International Legal Order,” *Survival* 56, no. 4 (August–September 2014): 65–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.941548>.

to sponsor pro-Russian politicians in neighboring states and to liberally dispense Russian passports among sympathetic minorities, cultivating influence via the former while retaining the option to intervene militarily using the latter as a pretext. The overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich appears to have surprised Putin, who had invested heavily in Yanukovich's regime, prompting his decision to forcibly salvage the areas of Ukraine he valued most.¹¹³ The opportunistic nature of Crimea's annexation underscores that *salami* tactics need not be entirely premeditated — Putin would likely have preferred that Yanukovich simply remain in power and continue refusing to join the European Union (which is what sparked the Euromaidan protests in the first place).

Provoking Saakashvili and recognizing the formal independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia enabled Russia to largely avoid retaliation of any sort in 2008. The ample lip service that Putin paid to norms of self-defense and self-determination empowered those abroad who favored restraint. Although President George W. Bush maintained that “bullying and intimidation are not acceptable ways to conduct foreign policy in the 21st century,” he refrained from retaliating beyond airlifting a Georgian brigade back from Iraq and providing humanitarian aid.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the risks of escalating conflict effectively deterred potential U.S. military retaliation to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, despite that action being a relatively unambiguous violation of international law.

Expecting Nonmilitary Retaliation

While Putin may have hoped to avoid any significant U.S. retaliation when intervening in Georgia in 2008, he probably expected nonmilitary retaliation in 2014. Annexing Crimea flagrantly violated Ukraine's territorial integrity, and doing it so soon after the Georgian intervention established

a pattern that threatened other Eastern European countries (including NATO allies). Secretary of State John Kerry echoed Bush's 2008 rebuke — “You just don't in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion” — but, unlike Bush, Obama implemented a progressive series of diplomatic and economic sanctions in cooperation with the European Union.¹¹⁵ The model's second scenario can explain Putin's decision to annex Crimea, despite facing a high likelihood of such punishment, if he valued the peninsula more than he wanted to avoid the expected costs of acquiring it, and if the probability of reversing his *fait accompli* was sufficiently low.

There can be little doubt that Putin saw Crimea as valuable in both geopolitical and domestic political terms. Its annexation and the subsequent separatist war halted Ukraine's progress toward NATO membership (as the 2008 war had for Georgia), which Putin considered to be a major threat. Annexing Crimea also guaranteed Russian control of the Sevastopol naval base — previously contracted under the 2010 Kharkiv Pact — which NATO membership may have jeopardized. As Putin noted upon signing the annexation bill, “We have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO's navy would be right there ... and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia.”¹¹⁶ Domestically, Putin used the annexation to fuel nationalist support, criticizing former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's 1954 decision to divide Crimea from Russia and declaring, “In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia.”¹¹⁷ His approval rating leapt by roughly 20 points to over 80 percent after the annexation.¹¹⁸

With military retaliation deterred, the primary costs of annexing Crimea were diplomatic and economic. The G8 suspended Russia indefinitely, a rare step that functioned largely as a signal of

113 Daniel Treisman, “Why Putin Took Crimea: The Gambler in the Kremlin,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 47–54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946857>.

114 “Bush Accuses Russia of ‘Bullying’ in Georgia,” *Reuters*, Aug. 15, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-ossetia-bush-idUSN1547288320080815>; Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 165–88; and Steven Pifer, “George W. Bush Was Tough on Russia? Give Me a Break,” *Politico*, March 24, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/bush-georgia-obama-ukraine-104929>.

115 Will Dunham, “Kerry Condemns Russia's ‘Incredible Act of Aggression’ in Ukraine,” *Reuters*, March 2, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-usa-kerry/kerry-condemns-russias-incredible-act-of-aggression-in-ukraine-idUSBREA210DG20140302>.

116 “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” Office of the President of Russia, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

117 Office of the President of Russia, “Address by President of the Russian Federation.”

118 Julie Ray and Neli Espipova, “Russian Approval of Putin Soars to Highest Level in Years,” *Gallup*, July 18, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/173597/russian-approval-putin-soars-highest-level-years.aspx>; and Michael Birnbaum, “How to Understand Putin's Jaw-Droppingly High Approval Ratings,” *Washington Post*, March 6, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/how-to-understand-putins-jaw-droppingly-high-approval-ratings/2016/03/05/17f5d8f2-d5ba-11e5-a65b-587e721fb231_story.html.

international displeasure.¹¹⁹ U.S. and E.U. sanctions were more consequential, combining with falling oil prices and a broader economic downturn to impair Russia's economy. By the end of 2015, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev estimated that the sanctions had cost the country more than \$100 billion.¹²⁰ That said, oil prices remained roughly \$100 per barrel into August 2014, and without foreknowledge of the price drop Putin probably expected milder economic fallout from the sanctions than what ultimately occurred.¹²¹ Moreover, he strove throughout the crisis to deter further sanctions by threatening counter-retaliation — embargoing European agricultural products and emphasizing that he had more cards to play, such as threatening Europe's energy supply, undermining the Iran nuclear deal, and countering other U.S. objectives abroad.¹²²

Overall, Putin likely chose to execute his Ukrainian *faits accomplis* despite the likelihood of nonmilitary retaliation because he was confident that they would freeze Ukraine's NATO bid, ensure control of Sevastopol, and rally the Russian people. Meanwhile, U.S. leaders worried about calibrating their diplomatic and economic reactions to inflict punishment while avoiding further escalation. This dynamic produced the impression that “it's Putin's hard power versus the West's soft power,” with critics interpreting U.S. nonmilitary retaliation as a sign of weak leadership or poor strategic understanding.¹²³ As Will Inboden colorfully described, “Putin's playing Risk, while Obama's playing Candy Land.”¹²⁴ No leadership deficiency on either side is required to explain this asymmetry, however. By design, salami tactics put the adversary in a pickle: Risking major war by trying to forcibly reverse a *fait accompli* in an area of peripheral interest is simply not a rational decision.

Deterring Salami Tactics

Extended deterrence has challenged U.S. policymakers since the early Cold War, and it will continue to do so as long as preventing another power from dominating its region remains their primary strategic interest.¹²⁵ In recent decades, emerging technologies have shaped the means involved in providing extended deterrence, but they have not resolved the underlying dilemma.¹²⁶ Building on the analysis above, this section offers a recipe for how to calibrate extended deterrence efforts. By identifying five key conditions that increase the appeal of salami tactics and enable aggressors to amplify their advantage, the model suggests five corresponding ways that policymakers can discourage potential aggressors from adopting salami tactics: by lowering the costs of retaliation, preventing irreversible *faits accomplis*, raising the costs of potential *faits accomplis*, demonstrating vigilance against repeat predation, and undercutting cascading ambitions. Eroding expectations of getting away with salami tactics moves an aggressor's calculus from the model's first scenario to its second, which hinges on a tighter cost-benefit analysis that is more susceptible to deterrence.

First, policymakers looking to lower the costs of retaliation should diversify their range of retaliatory options for responding to potential *faits accomplis* by developing nonmilitary forms of retaliation, weighing potential tit-for-tats, and leveraging technology where possible. Since salami tactics often target peripheral interests, strategists should plan for such contingencies, assuming military retaliation may be a game not worth the candle.¹²⁷ Russia's western borders and China's maritime

119 Felicity Vabulas, “Does the G-8's Suspension of Russia Actually Matter?” *Monkey Cage*, *Washington Post*, April 3, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/03/does-the-g-8-suspension-of-russia-actually-matter/>.

120 Ivana Kottasova, “Sanctions Will Cost Russia More than \$100 Billion,” *CNNMoney*, April 21, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/04/21/news/economy/russia-ukraine-sanctions-price/>.

121 “Crude Oil Prices – 70 Year Historical Chart,” *Macrotrends*, accessed Oct. 19, 2021, <http://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart>.

122 Andrew E. Kramer and Neil MacFarquhar, “Putin Bans Some Imports as Payback for Sanctions,” *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/07/world/europe/putin-orders-import-ban-in-retaliation-for-sanctions.html?_r=0; and Yulia Yuzik, “Iran Gives Russia Its Best Chance to Hit Back Against Western Sanctions,” *Time*, Aug. 8, 2014, <http://time.com/3091410/iran-gives-russia-its-best-chance-to-hit-back-against-western-sanctions/>.

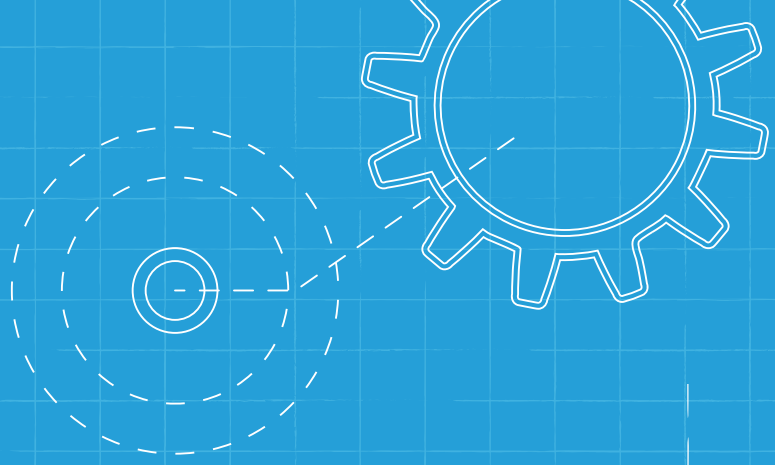
123 Strobe Talbott (@strobetalbott), “Chess metaphors proliferate at Ukraine crisis escalates, but they're misleading. It's Putin's hard power versus the West's soft power,” Twitter, March 18, 2014, 3:37 p.m., https://twitter.com/strobetalbott/status/446052768529526784?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

124 Will Inboden, “Putin's Playing Risk, While Obama's Playing Candy Land,” *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/04/putins-playing-risk-while-obamas-playing-candy-land/>.

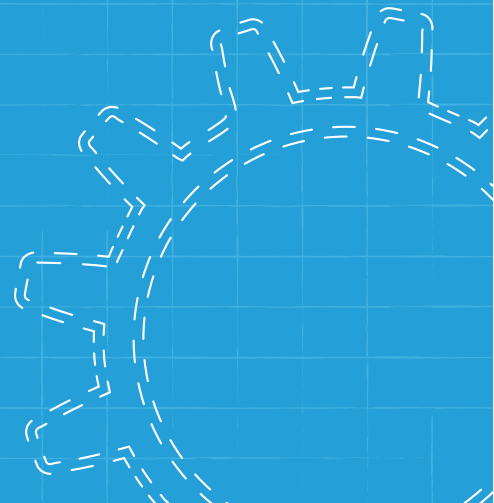
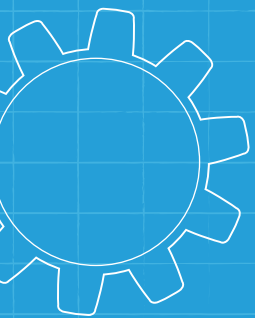
125 Arthur A. Stein, “Domestic Constraints, Extended Deterrence, and the Incoherence of Grand Strategy: The United States, 1938-1950,” in *Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*, ed. Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 96–123; George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*; and Stéphanie Von Hlatky and Andreas Wenger, eds., *The Future of Extended Deterrence: The United States, NATO, and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

126 Rupal N. Mehta, “Extended Deterrence and Assurance in an Emerging Technology Environment,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1621173>; cf. the special issue “Emerging Technologies and Strategic Stability,” ed. Todd S. Sechser, Neil Narang, and Caitlin Talmadge, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019).

127 Rapp Hooper, “Uncharted Waters”; Andrew O'Neil, “Extended Nuclear Deterrence in East Asia: Redundant or Resurgent?” *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November 2011): 1439–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2011.01044.x>.



Overall, the escalation trap inherent in employing salami tactics suggests that policymakers concerned with deterring *faits accomplis* should prioritize denial methods and diverse punishments rather than relying on threats of *post hoc* military retaliation.



disputes both fall into this category, making Spanish Florida a better analogy than Cold War Berlin for considering those potential flashpoints.¹²⁸ The credibility of a deterrent threat is inherently suspect when it hinges on leaders choosing to launch a costly war over peripheral interests. Therefore, deterring salami tactics depends on clearly communicating the likelihood of responding with less costly, yet still damaging, forms of retaliation, such as using nonmilitary means, precision and cyber capabilities, or reciprocal *faits accomplis* targeting other unconnected interests.¹²⁹

Policymakers should also work to prevent aggressors from expecting to execute irreversible *faits accomplis*. The rebels in Baton Rouge and the little green men in Crimea both caught local authorities flat-footed, quickly establishing new on-the-ground status quos. Consistent with previous research, the model presented here implies that denying quick victories and ensuring sufficient time to react is critical.¹³⁰ Leaders should prioritize their ability to rapidly identify active threats and to assess real-time intelligence in potential target zones. They should also prioritize “deterrence by denial” methods, such as fortifying key strategic points, and tactical planning to frustrate invaders and lengthen the window before their control solidifies.¹³¹

Increasing the upfront costs of aggression is also central to deterring salami tactics. Visibly signaling security commitments and conducting joint military exercises can help to reassure allies and deter attacks, but threats of military retaliation ultimately still rely on the defender’s will to intervene *post hoc*.¹³² Where salami tactics are concerned, that will is likely to be absent ex-

cept where leaders prioritize their broader reputations as credible providers of extended deterrence over material interests.¹³³ As a result, policymakers concerned about salami tactics should look for upfront ways to convince potential aggressors that *faits accomplis* will not pay. For example, undertaking denial measures in full view of the adversary (to the extent possible without compromising their effectiveness) can alter its strategic calculus. Deployments such as NATO’s 2016 decision to send battalions to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland can also serve this purpose, especially if calibrated to enhance local defensive capabilities rather than simply acting as tripwires signaling resolve for *post hoc* intervention.¹³⁴ Such efforts thwart salami tactics by ensuring that the key escalation decision remains with the aggressor (preventing a *fait accompli* from foisting that decision onto the defender).

Vigilance against repeat predation depends not only on unwavering diplomacy but also on maintaining a domestic policy consensus, which should never be taken for granted especially when dealing with peripheral interests. The Munich analogy has often been stretched and strained, but Hitler’s piecemeal conquest of central Europe nevertheless illustrates how minor concessions can snowball into a grave threat.¹³⁵ The United States need look no further than how its own interest in free trade on the Mississippi River expanded to controlling New Orleans, annexing Florida, and eventually driving Spain from Cuba (not to mention Texas, California, Hawaii, and beyond) to see how initially minor gains rooted in defensive interests can lead to broader power projection.¹³⁶ Identifying where successive *faits accomplis* might threat-

128 Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 66–68.

129 The latter’s potential to spiral represents a danger that, if clearly understood, raises the long-term costs for the first mover.

130 Paul K. Huth, “Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War,” *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (June 1988): 423–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1957394>.

131 Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 14–16.

132 Roseanne W. McManus, “Making It Personal: The Role of Leader-Specific Signals in Extended Deterrence,” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (July 2018): 982–95, <https://doi.org/10.1086/697462>; Brian Blankenship, “Promises Under Pressure: Statements of Reassurance in U.S. Alliances,” *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2020): 1017–30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa071>; Jesse C. Johnson, Brett Ashley Leeds, and Ahra Wu, “Capability, Credibility, and Extended General Deterrence,” *International Interactions* 41, no. 2 (2015): 309–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2015.982115>; and Ralph Clem, “Military Exercises as Geopolitical Messaging in the NATO-Russia Dynamic: Reassurance, Deterrence, and (In) stability,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): 130–43, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/865>.

133 Frank P. Harvey and John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility: U.S. Reputation and International Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), chap. 2; cf. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve*.

134 Dan Reiter and Paul Poast, “The Truth About Tripwires: Why Small Force Deployments Do Not Deter Aggression,” *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 33–53, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/13989>; and Brian Blankenship and Erik Lin-Greenberg, “Trivial Tripwires?: Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance,” *Security Studies*, forthcoming, available at SSRN: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3788647.

135 Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), chap. 7; Jeffrey Record, “The Use and Abuse of History: Munich, Vietnam and Iraq,” *Survival* 49, no. 1 (2007): 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330701254628>; and Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood, “The Ghost of Munich: America’s Appeasement Complex,” *World Affairs* 173, no. 2 (July/August 2010): 13–26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870285>.

136 Maass, *The Picky Eagle*, chaps. 3, 7.

en core national interests is essential to calibrating efforts to deter salami tactics' first steps.

Finally, undercutting aggressors' visions of cascading expansion depends on clear, consistent, and credible signaling.¹³⁷ Even a superpower may represent a flimsy deterrent to an aggressor that can reasonably question its will to act. The prohibition of conquest under international law offers a useful focal point, but that prohibition was in place when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and when Russia seized Crimea in 2014, underscoring the fact that universal principles are no substitute for formal alliances and unambiguous diplomacy.¹³⁸ Those examples also illustrate how *faits accomplis* can still catch an adversary off guard in an age of increased transparency via real-time satellite surveillance.¹³⁹ Moreover, holding states accountable for the actions of sponsored third parties can negate pretensions of plausible deniability and further undercut visions of slice-by-slice expansion.¹⁴⁰

Overall, the escalation trap inherent in employing salami tactics suggests that policymakers concerned with deterring *faits accomplis* should prioritize denial methods and diverse punishments rather than relying on threats of *post hoc* military retaliation. Although nuclear deterrence often receives the most attention, salami tactics subvert its logic by forcing the defender to choose between acquiescing or launching a costly war in an area of peripheral interest. The latter's obvious lack of appeal undermines the credibility of extreme deterrent threats, opening the door for aggression in a manner reflecting the stability-instability paradox.¹⁴¹ Ensuring that potential *faits accomplis* will be costly, difficult to achieve, and met with diverse punishments beyond the local situation itself stands a better chance of deterring salami tactics.

Of course, therein lies the dilemma: Salami tactics are most likely to be used to target peripheral interests where the adversary may simply not wish to make those investments.¹⁴² The devil remains in the details — just as salami tactics exploit the gap between the cost of retaliation and interests at stake, effective deterrence depends on cost-effective denial measures and credible modes of punishment. Few scholars doubt the U.S. military's capacity to deter and defeat invasion, but many question what level of investment maximizes U.S. interests in regions like the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia.¹⁴³ This analysis contributes to this vibrant debate by reinforcing confidence in the utility of taking upfront measures where U.S. leaders judge aggression worth preventing and by calling for skepticism regarding the long-term effectiveness of threatening war from a retrenched position.

Conclusion

Salami tactics are frustrating. When effective, their use of *faits accomplis* insidiously “shifts the burden of the initiative for coercion or violence to those who would reverse it,” inflicting relative losses while rendering acquiescence the only rational response.¹⁴⁴ This analysis has identified five conditions under which that approach appeals most to aggressors: when retaliation would be costly, reversal is unlikely, *faits accomplis* are easy, fears of future predation can be undercut, and further gains are possible.

Those conditions facilitated both the U.S. annexation of Florida and Russia's recent expansionism. The Florida case confirms that salami tactics are a long-standing option in international politics, rath-

137 Sechser, "Goliath's Curse"; and Robert F. Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 2 (May 2010): 347–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055410000158>.

138 Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 919–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12082>; and Jesse C. Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds, "Defense Pacts: A Prescription for Peace?" *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 1 (January 2011): 45–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2010.00122.x>.

139 Jeffrey A. Engel, ed., *Into the Desert: Reflections on the Gulf War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29–31; cf. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 262.

140 Burke-White, "Crimea and the International Legal Order," 68.

141 Glenn Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in *The Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), 184–201.

142 Regional stakes contribute to the credibility of extended deterrence: Vesna Danilovic, "The Sources of Threat Credibility in Extended Deterrence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 3 (June 2001): 341–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002701045003005>.

143 Stephen Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy: Why America Shouldn't Dominate the World," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020): 19–29, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: Why the Sole Superpower Should Not Pull Back from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

144 Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, 26.

er than a product of the nuclear age.¹⁴⁵ The Crimea case further indicates how nonmilitary punishments like diplomatic and economic sanctions may bear more heavily on aggressors' decision-making than the possibility of military retaliation. Taken together, these case studies show how similar circumstances can facilitate expansionism across vastly different eras, power distributions, regime types, and actors.

The enduring shadow of major war ensures that salami tactics will remain a recurring feature of international politics, posing a special challenge for a United States that lacks interest in the tit-for-tat conquests past empires often used to compensate for rivals' gains.¹⁴⁶ As the United States continues to weigh its reactions to China's rise, the latter's behavior in the Spratly Islands and elsewhere indicates that the model presented here should remain a relevant guide for the Biden administration and beyond. Given calls for retrenchment at home and peripheral interests that span the globe, U.S. policymakers will continue to face an uphill battle dealing with salami tactics. 🇺🇸

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Image: Mstyslav Chernov, CC BY-SA 4.0¹⁴⁷

145 cf. Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

146 Maass, *The Picky Eagle*.

147 For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Russia-backed_rebel_guards_his_position_near_the_division_line_with_Ukrainian_army_with_anti-tank_missile_near_Dokuchaevsk,_eastern_Ukraine,_Friday,_June_5,_2015.jpg. For the license, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>.