

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: Why Do Asymmetric Crises Escalate?

During the crisis that preceded the outbreak of the March 2003 Iraq War, the world was fixated on the thrust-and-parry between the Bush administration and the regime of Saddam Hussein. The conflict was a highly unequal one: it pitted the most powerful country in the world versus a relatively weak international pariah. The situation seemed to be crystal clear: Iraq *had* to strike a bargain or face destruction by a force they could not hope to resist. Yet, seemingly oblivious to his rational interests, Saddam failed to do everything he might have to mollify his opponent. In the end, the Bush administration resorted to violence to resolve the crisis. Although accusations and recriminations flowed freely between governments worldwide during the tense crisis standoff, it is interesting to note that there was one point on which world opinion was virtually unanimous: that if it came to war, the United States would win. In other words, everyone involved viewed the crisis as an inherently asymmetric one. Why, given the immense odds against the Iraqi regime if the crisis degenerated into violence, did Saddam fail to do everything he could to forestall an American intervention? Why did this asymmetric crisis end violently?

This failure is particularly perplexing to academic analysts given the central causal role played by imbalances of power in international relations theory. One of the

central tenets of the realist paradigm, generally considered the dominant school of thought in international security studies, is that states make decisions on war and peace with their relative power position foremost in their mind. From this perspective, Saddam's behavior defies all logic. In the pages that follow, I offer a simple and straightforward explanation for the behavior of Saddam and other leaders facing vastly superior opponents in a crisis situation: that the political leadership of weak states fail to fear violent conflict with a powerful democratic opponent to the same extent they would fear a conflict with a powerful authoritarian opponent.<sup>1</sup> This lack of fear leads weak leaders to take chances in confrontations with democracies they would not dare take against an authoritarian regime. However, the Bush administration itself also played an important part in the escalation of this conflict. I therefore offer an explanation for the behavior of strong actors faced with weaker opponents as well: when one has the power to almost certainly overcome their opponent, domestic politics become an overriding factor in bargaining decisions. Democratic political institutions place comparatively more pressure on leaders to stand firm in the face of weak foreign adversaries than do authoritarian political institutions.

As such, I argue that, in an asymmetric crisis situation, regime type can serve as a powerful predictor of when such crises will escalate to violence. Obviously, many studies in a variety of international relations research programs have launched from a similar

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<sup>1</sup> As scholars of comparative politics are aware, there is commonly a definitional distinction drawn between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" states (e.g. Linz, 1975). However, for the purposes of this dissertation I consider both to be of a common substantively "non-democratic" group. Therefore, for the sake of narrative convenience, I simply refer to all non-democratic regimes as "authoritarian."

premise.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many of these existing studies linking regime type to conflict, which attribute importance to the nature of the regime in all of the involved parties, I posit that only the regime type of the powerful actor exerts a systematic influence on asymmetric crisis bargaining.<sup>3</sup> This influence occurs through two primary causal routes.

First, democratic political institutions provide leaders of comparatively stronger states with a political interest in striking resolute and uncompromising stances.

Bargaining tough in a crisis situation, put simply, is a vote-winner. Given the potential political benefits of appearing resolute, and the relatively low short-term risks of such a strategy, powerful democratic leaders have every incentive to push their position aggressively. Powerful authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, face significantly less pressure to use crises to bolster their domestic political position. This allows them to strike a more reasonable stance in negotiations.

Second, through a combination of insights drawn from the crisis bargaining and asymmetric war literatures, among others, I describe how strong democratic states are more liable to be seen by weak opponents as soft and vulnerable in comparison to a strong authoritarian state. This lack of fear leads weak leaders to stake out far bolder bargaining positions in a crisis than would seem advisable given their disadvantageous power position. These bold bargaining positions, combined with the incredulity of their powerful adversaries, explain the frequent degeneration of asymmetric crises into

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<sup>2</sup> With the most obvious example being the vast literature on the idea of a “Democratic Peace” where democratic domestic political institutions are thought to inhibit violent conflict between states. Although it is an idea at least as old as Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* (2005 [Smith Translation]), the modern scientific study of the phenomenon can be traced back to Small and Singer’s (1976) original attempt to investigate the phenomenon quantitatively.

<sup>3</sup> See Rosato (2003) for examples of dyadic versus monadic explanations for the Democratic Peace. Generally, dyadic rather than monadic explanations have found the most consistent and robust support empirically.

violence. On the other hand, weak states respect powerful authoritarian regimes to a much greater degree. In these cases, weak leaders are likely to tread lightly in crisis bargaining and arrive at a peaceful resolution far more frequently.

The end result is a relatively striking departure from the conventional wisdom on how regime type tends to impact conflict behavior: strong democracies are relatively crippled in their ability to impose their will on weaker adversaries with a brinkmanship strategy. The result, more often than not, is that democracy makes violent crisis escalation more likely rather than less. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, are far more credible intimidators. The result here, bizarrely, is that they will be associated with peaceful conflict resolution. This discovery not only poses a unique challenge to existing theories of international conflict, but represents an ominous warning to real-world political decisionmakers.

The primary subject of this study is the asymmetric crisis phenomenon. However, the concepts of “asymmetry” and “crisis” have been defined in a myriad of different ways over the years. Therefore, it is important to be very specific in regards to what exactly this study has in mind when it refers to “asymmetric crises.” To begin with the crisis half of the equation, I define an *international crisis* as a situation in which at least one state-level actor perceives that another state-level actor is jeopardizing its interests. The emphasis of this definition of crisis is on the perceptions held by state-level actors. In other words, crisis is a fundamentally subjective rather than an objective phenomenon, such as militarized conflict. To be even more precise, a crisis occurs when at least one state level actor: 1) perceives a threat to one or more basic values, 2) perceives that they have limited time to confront this threat, and 3) perceives that any attempt to confront this

threat raises a very real possibility of war. This definition of crisis, while certainly open to critique, has nevertheless been accepted as a legitimate point of reference by many notable scholars.<sup>4</sup> However, on the subject of asymmetry, one finds no predominate definitional consensus. In the study that follows, I define asymmetry as a 10:1 or greater disparity in the resources possessed by the two sides involved in a given international conflict.<sup>5</sup> Both of these definitional choices will be explored in greater detail later in this introduction.

The remainder of this introductory chapter proceeds in four sections. In the first, I describe the fundamental puzzle of asymmetric crises. Why are asymmetric crises important from a theoretical perspective? Perhaps more importantly, does the empirical record justify an in-depth study of asymmetric crisis escalation? In the second section, I discuss the important central concepts of my dissertation. Here, I discuss the central unit-of-analysis (the asymmetric crisis) and the dependent variable of primary interest to the study (violent and peaceful crisis resolution). In the third section, I introduce my primary hypotheses and derive three alternative explanations of asymmetric crisis escalation from the existing international relations literature. These three explanations provide a set of independent variables currently available to use in answering the puzzle of asymmetric crisis escalation. In the chapters to come, I show that these existing alternatives all fail to sufficiently answer the asymmetric crisis puzzle on an empirical level. In the final section, I provide a roadmap for the remaining four chapters of my dissertation.

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<sup>4</sup> This definition is inspired by those of Snyder and Diesing (1977), Lebow (1981) and Brecher and Wilkenfeld (2000) all of which employ very similar criteria.

<sup>5</sup> This definition was chosen, in part, because of its appearance in prominent studies of asymmetric war (e.g. Arreguin-Toft, 2001, 2005).

## 1.1 The Puzzle of Asymmetric Crisis

At its core, this study is motivated by a very simple and straightforward puzzle: why do asymmetric crises end violently? In the study of modern political science, the concept of uncertainty plays a role of almost unrivalled importance.<sup>6</sup> From the strategic interactions of states, organizations, and social groups all the way down to the individual human being, there is perhaps no force that plays a greater role in politics than uncertainty. Perhaps no subfield of political science struggles with the presence of uncertainty more often than the study of international relations. By its very nature, the modern Westphalian anarchic international system not only inhibits observers from understanding the world around them with accuracy, but provides the inhabitants of this system with an actual *incentive* to hide the truth from others. Much of the stochasticity, or seemingly random unpredictability, of international events is ascribed to this uncertainty. It follows that, if uncertainty was not a significant issue, prediction and explanation would be much easier to achieve.<sup>7</sup> However, the reality of asymmetric crises punctures this hopeful academic counterfactual fantasy: in a situation where *certainty*, rather than uncertainty, reigns over the pivotal power question, we nevertheless witness very unpredictable outcomes. The short and easy answer to the puzzle, obviously, is that certainty over power relationships only counts to certain degree in crisis bargaining. The long answer, a compelling theoretical framework that identifies the factors that *do* matter

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<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive theoretical discussion of how uncertainty impacts international politics in the “big picture,” see Mearsheimer (2001). For a far more individualistic and psychological take on uncertainty, see Jervis (1976).

<sup>7</sup> The role played by quality information serves as a prominent theme in formal game-theoretic treatments of international conflict (e.g. Fearon, 1995).

in crises beyond power, is a much more difficult enterprise. This study represents the first comprehensive effort to provide one for the domain of asymmetric crisis.

In a world characterized by material scarcity, politics represent the mechanism by which individual human beings negotiate the distribution and management of these scarce resources amongst themselves.<sup>8</sup> Given the fundamental importance of resource access to continued survival, political bargaining assumes a unique level of salience in human affairs. This salience presents individuals with the overriding incentive to use every capability in their arsenal to achieve success. As such, violence and coercion constantly remain in the background of all politics as a last-ditch option for acquiring the necessary resources to maintain continued personal survival. While it is certainly true that violence is not at the forefront of all political bargaining – many institutionalized political systems have emerged to reduce the salience of violence in political life – the current anarchical structure of politics at the international level serves as a permissive condition allowing violence to retain a central role.

Schelling's (1960, 1966) seminal work on the role of violence in political bargaining provides a nuanced theoretical framework for understanding what "power" actually represents. The ability to inflict violence, "brute force" in Schelling's (1966) terminology, is itself actually very limited in real value. It is the bargaining leverage that violence, "the power to hurt," provides a political actor that actually gives him power.<sup>9</sup> The strategic use of this leverage to *coerce* another is how violence is employed in bargaining scenarios. Not all bargaining that occurs in politics can be characterized as

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<sup>8</sup> A classic, if debatable, definition of politics derived from Easton (1953).

<sup>9</sup> For a similar relational view of power, see Lukes (1974).

coercive in the Schelling sense, but much of the bargaining that occurs in the international realm over matters of sovereignty and security fall within this category. However, this is not to say that coercive bargaining is *limited* to the international realm. Coercive bargaining can occur within a domestic context just as easily as it does in the international context; especially in societies lacking established and credible institutions.

Within the international relations and comparative subfields, the study of asymmetric coercive bargaining situations has endured a relatively marginal status. Sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, theories of conflict behavior and bargaining are usually constructed with symmetric conflicts in mind. For example, Blainey's (1973) widely respected treatise on war points primarily to miscalculation of the power balance as the most common cause of conflict. While a compelling argument, Blainey implies that these miscalculations occur because states have a hard time differentiating the true balance of power between more or less equal adversaries. More recently, Fearon's (1995) rationalist take on the problem of violence is even more explicit on this point. Fearon argues that, if states possessed perfect information on the balance of power around them, there would be *no* rational incentive to engage in war. Instead, the rational choice would be to simply accept the power verdict and strike a peaceful bargain accordingly. The common thread running through these and other prominent studies is that capability symmetry, and the challenge of identifying superiority between more or less evenly matched adversaries, is the root source of violence. The implication is that if states had more reliable information on the power balance, conflict would not be much of a problem.

The historical record of the twentieth century, however, suggests that wars are not simply a consequence of relatively symmetric power balances. In the wake of the wars of national liberation following the Second World War – along with the traumatic defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War – a vibrant international relations literature in the study of asymmetric warfare has emerged in parallel to more traditional studies.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, scholars have also recently begun to consider the unique bargaining problems faced by weaker actors in international negotiation more broadly.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the study of domestic coercive bargaining scenarios in the context of asymmetric capabilities has received increasingly significant attention as well.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, studies of asymmetric war, asymmetric international negotiation, and asymmetric domestic bargaining share a notable common theme: that coercive bargaining in conditions of capability asymmetry are *substantively distinct* from that which occurs between two more evenly matched opponents. In a symmetric war, states maneuver and strategize to attain an upper hand on their opponent with “conventional” military forces and techniques. In asymmetric wars, a weaker side must engage in unorthodox cost-imposing tactics to compensate for their material weakness – they cannot fight a war as if it was symmetric or their weakness would lead to certain destruction and defeat. In asymmetric negotiation, states must be the constant lookout for unconventional levers of influence to achieve their goals. Similarly, in domestic scenarios

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<sup>10</sup> While the asymmetric war concept has appeared in various guises at least as far back as Herodotus (1996 [de Selincourt Translation]), the modern scientific research program associated with the phenomenon has emerged comparatively recently with most scholars tracing its origin to Mack (1975).

<sup>11</sup> The best general work on the plight of weak states in the realm of international negotiation can be found in Habeb (1988).

<sup>12</sup> Most notably, Scott’s (1985) *The Weapons of the Weak* has emerged as one of the most widely cited studies on the strategies employed by those bargaining from a position of disadvantage.

involving a capability-weak social group, cost-imposition is also identified as a typical strategy. A weak domestic subgroup cannot fight using a conventional civil war or insurrection strategy suited to more symmetric conflicts. A common theme thus emerges: although all wars, negotiations, and domestic conflicts can be cast as instances of coercive bargaining, the nature of the bargaining that occurs within the asymmetric context is fundamentally distinct.

Therefore, this study aspires to join earlier efforts to study asymmetric bargaining by providing a theory of asymmetric coercive bargaining tailored to the international crisis context. While asymmetric crises have certainly been acknowledged before in more general research on the crisis phenomenon<sup>13</sup> as well as in more case-specific studies,<sup>14</sup> a rigorous effort to thoroughly investigate the phenomenon is currently missing from the theoretical literature.

However interesting a theoretical puzzle asymmetric crises might be, it is valid to ask the “so what” question. In other words, is it a puzzle empirically worth exploring? Although this chapter began with the seemingly unexplained violent outcome of the recent Iraq crisis, it may be that this case was simply an anomaly. If asymmetric crises themselves are empirically rare, a theory explaining them would certainly represent a marginal contribution. Even more importantly, if asymmetric crises that end in violence are rare, it would call into question whether there is even a significant problem with the common power-as-primary-explanatory-variable presumption in the first place. In such a case, a theory of asymmetric crisis escalation would become an even more marginal

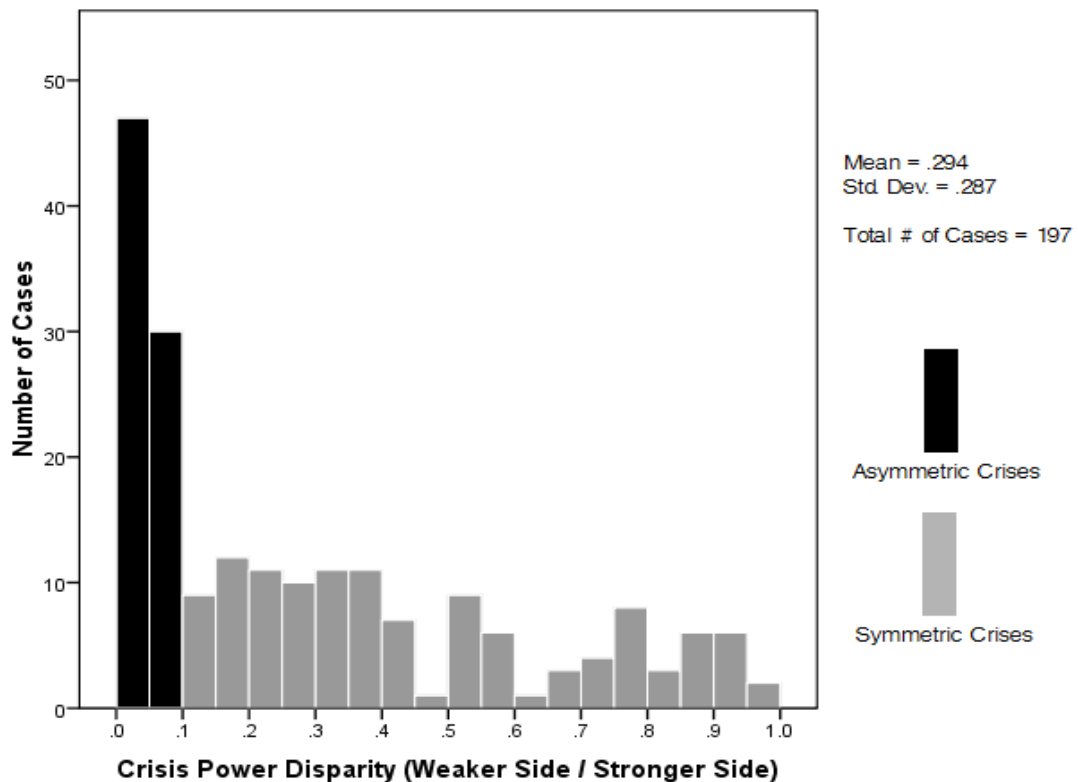
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<sup>13</sup> Such as its appearance in Snyder and Diesing (1977): 190.

<sup>14</sup> Stern and Sundelius (1992) for example.

endeavor providing a description of a very rare and exotic species of animal. Fortunately, given available data on asymmetric crises, neither of these problematic potentialities seems borne out.

This study primarily employs the data collected by the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project (Brecher, Wilkenfeld, and Moser, 1988; Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 1989; Brecher, 1993; Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 1997, 2000) to study the phenomenon of asymmetric crises. Although I will reserve a more thorough discussion of this data for chapter 3, some initial introduction to this evidence is warranted here. My investigation begins with an empirical pool of 197 international crises drawn from the ICB. Within each crisis, I measured the power disparity between the two sides involved. The resulting distribution can be seen in Figure 1.1:



**FIGURE 1.1 – Distribution of All Crises by Power Ratio**

The result, to say the least, is striking. Contrary to what the predominance of symmetric thinking in the literature would imply, asymmetric crises do not represent a small marginal category of crises in general. In fact, even with my comparatively restrictive 10 to 1 criteria, a very significant number (77 to be precise) of all crises can be labeled “asymmetric.” Indeed, according to my data, the *average* crisis occurs between two sides exhibiting around a 3 to 1 capability disparity.<sup>15</sup> The implication of this basic finding is

<sup>15</sup> By “average,” I refer to the mean power disparity ratio observed in crises as a group.

crystal clear: asymmetric crises are not in fact rare and therefore relatively unimportant situations. Rather, if anything, *symmetric* crises represent a departure from the norm, not asymmetric crises.

While asymmetric crises may be far more common empirically than previously assumed, it does not necessarily follow that the realist presumption about them is incorrect. In other words, if asymmetric crises end peacefully more often than symmetric crises on a consistent basis, then the presumption that power can serve as a predictor of violent escalation would emerge more or less intact. The data, reported in Table 1.1, do not seem to provide the basis for such a conclusion:

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**TABLE 1.1 – Breakdown of Peaceful/Violent Outcomes by Crisis Type**

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		<i>Crisis Outcome</i>		Total
		Peaceful	Violent	
<i>Crisis Type</i>	Asymmetric (10+:1)	<b>41</b> (53.2% of Asym.)	<b>36</b> (46.8% of Asym.)	77 (39.1% of All)
	Symmetric (Others)	<b>58</b> (48.3% of Sym.)	<b>62</b> (51.7% of Sym.)	120 (60.9% of All)
Total		99 (50.3% of All)	98 (49.7% of All)	197

$\chi^2 = 0.453, p = 0.501$

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Simply looking the raw numbers, two things stand out. First, amongst all crises, there is an almost perfect 50-50 split in outcomes. Second, this split does not differ significantly when crises are separated into symmetric and asymmetric types. Granted, although

asymmetric crises are *slightly* more likely to end peacefully than symmetric ones, the difference is very plausibly the result of random chance (as the  $\chi^2$  statistic indicates). While it is easy to read too much into a simple 2 X 2 correlation matrix like that reported in Table 1.1, it does back the basic contention that power disparity, alone, does not represent the simple and powerful explanatory factor advertized by structural realism.

In sum, the current paucity of theoretical frameworks explaining asymmetric crisis escalation combined with the fact that such conflicts occur far more frequently than the balance of the literature presumes, suggest an interesting puzzle worthy of rigorous dedicated attention.

## **1.2 Central Concepts: Asymmetric International Crises and Crisis Outcomes**

Obviously, the conclusions reached in any empirically-based theoretical study such as this one are entirely dependant upon the operational definitions chosen to capture what are in reality very abstract concepts. In this study, three operational definitions stand out as fundamentally important: the definition of international crisis, the definition of asymmetry, and the definition of a crisis escalation. In the following section, I turn to the debate over these crucial three definitions and the choices made for this study.

### *International Crisis*

The study of international crises has been one of the dominant subject focuses in international security studies as long as the subject has existed. Thucydides' (1954 [Warner Translation]) landmark study of the Peloponnesian War included an analysis of the Corinthian crisis blamed for sparking the ancient conflict. Similarly, historians have

long analyzed the circumstances of specific crises and their long-term effects.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Allison (1971) employed a similar strategy to provide one of the earliest scientific efforts to understand crisis decisionmaking. However, since the pathbreaking work of Schelling (1960, 1966) re-cast crises not as isolated incidents but part of a general category of bargaining situations, modern scientific scholarship has attempted to gain insight into the phenomenon by departing from single case studies in favor of comparisons between multiple examples of these strategic instances. However, clear schools of thought have emerged on what, exactly, constitutes a crisis.

International crises are a very visceral part of the study of international relations – most scholars would agree on the key features of a crisis. An international crisis must first be an interstate affair. Although crises are obviously not limited to the international arena, these situations are considered unique in terms of the destructive potential they hold for all parties involved. This feature leads to the second key component of a crisis: it must represent a very real potential for violent conflict. While states can disagree on many things, when violence is brought to the equation minds are immediately focused. True international crises are not, therefore, something states engage in lightly; they can quickly become moments where existence itself is called into question. Finally, there is the fairly unique element of time pressures whether real or imagined. What makes crises so dangerous is not just the fact that decisionmakers must perform complex calculations of capabilities and interests with very significant consequences, but that they must make them under duress.

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<sup>16</sup> With perhaps no crisis receiving as much dedicated ink as the Sudeten crisis of 1938 which ended with the infamous “Munich” episode of appeasement (e.g. Gilbert and Gott, 1963).

While these key elements of an international crisis are not usually contested, challenges inevitably arise in composing a set of criteria for identifying a population of crises from the empirical record. Part of the challenge is that crises are partially defined by two elements very difficult to identify: conflicts where violence is perceived as a likely potential outcome and conflicts where prompt action is perceived to be necessary. The key word in both cases is “perception.” Crises are not, strictly speaking, an objective phenomenon – they result from the perceptions of political leaders in regards to their situation. The empirical difficulty arises from figuring out these situational perceptions. In current studies of crisis, there have been two general empirical approaches to this challenge: 1) attempt to work around the problem by devising an objective operational definition or 2) to wrestle with actual perceptions of state leaders in an attempt to identify crises that fit the spirit of the visceral definition. Each approach has its respective advantages and disadvantages.

The objective approach’s primary virtue is its high degree of reliability and consistency: clear objectively identifiable indirect indicators of crises allow analysts to avoid the thorny problem of identifying and categorizing subjective perceptions. Perhaps no empirical project captures this mentality better than the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data that serves as a cornerstone of the Correlates of War (COW) project (Jones, Bremer, and Singer, 1996). The core definitional component of a MID is the “threat, display, or use of military force.” The key here is that the identification of a MID is a completely objective enterprise: threats, military displays, and actual violence either observably occur or they do not. This approach has two significant virtues. First, this definition is more forgiving in instances where documentation and evidence may be

scant. This allows coders to include many cases that might otherwise be excluded due to the lack of high-quality evidence necessary for detailed perceptual analysis. Second, it outflanks the problem of coding inconsistencies and questions via its straightforward scheme – interpretation is largely removed from the equation thereby increasing the dependability of the data. However, the MID criteria cannot be considered a watertight conceptual surrogate for “international crises.”

The objective MID definition exhibits two primary shortcomings: it includes incidents that might not be considered a crisis in the classic sense and it excludes incidents that would be. The first shortcoming involves the “threats” or “displays” of force MIDs. In these cases, it is possible that the threats and displays noted do not represent “crisis” actions. Sometimes, non-serious threats are made by states to send a variety of political messages. Displays of force also do not necessarily indicate a crisis – they may simply be a signal intended to underline a longer-term policy of general deterrence.<sup>17</sup> Also, not all actual uses of force can be associated with a “crisis” as it is classically conceived. Sometimes, leaders simply attack an adversary without a precursory crisis confrontation. Simply stated, the MID definition potentially includes a whole host of cases that do not resemble crises as they are usually understood. In regards to the second shortcoming of the MID approach, crises can sometimes occur, and are

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<sup>17</sup> See Morgan (1977) for the original introduction of the concept of general deterrence.

resolved, *without* formal or observable threats, displays or uses of force.<sup>18</sup> These crises would therefore be left out of the MID framework entirely. Therefore, although it has compelling features, there are legitimate questions as to whether MIDs are an ideal surrogate for the crisis concept.

The subjective empirical approach to crisis identification attempts to tackle the perceptions problem head-on by making it the focus of their operational definition. Snyder and Diesing (1977) and Lebow (1981) each follow this basic approach. In both of these studies, a crisis is considered to exist only when state actors perceive themselves to be in a pressure-packed situation that might end up in war along with a perceived time pressure to deal with the problem. This relatively more demanding set of criteria, in comparison with the MID definition, forces these scholars to engage in a smaller scale and highly qualitative approach to their empirical analysis. While this strategy yields a body of data that exhibit the classical traits of a crisis, it is empirically laborious. The main risk with this approach is that, because of the relative quality of the data required to defensibly classify a case a “crisis,” many cases which would fit the definition may get left out.

In short, the objective MID definition is more effective at producing a larger set of consistent data, while the perceptual definition is more effective at producing a smaller set of conceptually accurate data. Fortunately, the ICB data of Brecher and Wilkenfeld

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<sup>18</sup> An actual example of just such a case occurs in my asymmetric crisis data. In 1947, Czechoslovakia expressed its intention to take advantage of the United States’ Marshall Plan for European reconstruction. Upon hearing of this news, Soviet Leader Joseph Stalin was perturbed. He sent the Czech government a message that their participation in the Marshall Plan would represent “an unfriendly act.” Given that Czechoslovakia was surrounded by Soviet troops at the time, the subtext of the message was clear. However, an overt “threat, display, or use of force” never occurred. As such, the crisis does not show up in the MID data, but *does* appear in the ICB data. In the end, the Czech government chose not to join the Marshall plan (Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 1997: 339-340).

(1997, 2000) offer a compelling middle-point alternative between these two extremes. The ICB data focuses upon crises defined by the perceptions of the actors involved. In other words, the ICB employs the classical perceptual definition of Synder and Diesing (1977) and Lebow (1981). At the same time, the ICB has endeavored to code and capture as many crises as possible. By employing numerous researchers with relevant qualitative expertise, they have generated a large body of dependable data on perceptually-defined crises. This data, however, is far from perfect. The ICB has nowhere near the number of cases as the MID data (a few hundred compared to a few thousand). Therefore, it may be surmised the more rigorous empirical burden may have cost the ICB quite a few cases which could have been included otherwise. Also, presumably because of the data requirements, the ICB only records crises that have occurred since 1918 (the end of World War I) as opposed to the MID data which covers cases stretching back well into the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, while the ICB is not without its drawbacks, it provides the greatest balance of case selection and conceptual validity. As a result, I chose to embrace the ICB as the best available source of empirical data for my own investigation of asymmetric crises.

### *Asymmetry: The Defining Condition*

Although this is first and foremost a study of crisis bargaining dynamics, it begins with the premise that asymmetric crises represent a distinct class of phenomenon. This starting point is a departure from traditional treatments of power disparity for two reasons. First, existing approaches tend to treat power disparities as a “continuous variable” in methodological parlance. In other words, power differential is usually

conceived of as a measure that moves along some sort of constant continuum from more to less “equal.” Second, in most studies of international conflict, power disparity is characterized as an attribute that impacts the outcome of a conflict in a more or less linear fashion. Put another way, for every unit increase in power disparity there will be a corresponding linear impact in the “expected utility” states place on conflict.<sup>19</sup> Changes in utility then impact the likelihood of certain outcomes – again, in linear fashion.<sup>20</sup> While such an approach may be warranted when considering conflicts where force is actually applied – such as wars – it is considerably less compelling in situations where power disparity exists as a background factor that merely colors a decisionmakers perception of his environmental situation. Although power disparity can be measured in continuous terms, there is reason to doubt that power disparities impact crisis bargaining decisions in an analogous linear fashion.

Real-world political decisionmakers are generally very calculating creatures, but their ability to assess their environment with razor-fine accuracy is dubious. Indeed, one of the central conclusions of both Blainey (1973) and Fearon (1995) is that decisionmakers lack the ability to make accurate assessments of their relative power position. Instead, actual decisionmakers tend to assess their power position in very general terms. In other words, they tend to think in terms of “roughly equivalent” or “asymmetric.” Weede (1976) argues that the relationship between distributions of power and the perceived risk of conflict is non-linear – what matters are not simple disparities in power per se, but situations in which the differential is *clearly* skewed. The implication of

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<sup>19</sup> For a thorough discussion of how expected utility is used to understand behavior under conditions of uncertainty, see von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944).

<sup>20</sup> For an example of this relatively common approach, see Bueno de Mesquita (1981).

this distinction in the minds of decisionmakers is enormous: it implies that asymmetric crises represent a fundamentally distinct class of cases separate from crises in general. Scholars of asymmetric war have already established a precedent for re-classifying conflict in such a fashion. The central thread running through the entire asymmetric war literature is that conflicts pitting unequal adversaries follow far different “rules” than conflicts involving more evenly matched belligerents.<sup>21</sup> Following in this tradition, I argue that power differential should be employed as a defining condition, rather than simply as an attribute.

Employing asymmetry as a definitional concept produces an unavoidable empirical challenge. Namely, what level of power disparity is “enough” to be considered asymmetric? The substantive answer to this question is relatively straightforward: when one side of a conflict is superior enough in capabilities that virtually no observer could plausibly conclude that they are in fact evenly matched. In other words, asymmetric crises occur between actors who are so unevenly matched that even the most irrational or deluded decisionmaker would be hard-pressed to misinterpret the situation. This requirement, in turn, demands a comparatively restrictive operational definition of asymmetry. In the existing discourse, the label “asymmetric” has been applied to a large number of underlying power disparities. Quinn et al.’s (2006) study characterizes asymmetry as a residual category where all crises that do not take place between actors of roughly equal capabilities are placed. Military doctrine of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in both the Soviet and Western traditions, was dominated by a “3:1 rule” – attack, in ideal conditions, was only to be attempted in operational conditions where the aggressor had a

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Mack (1975), Paul (1991), Arreguin-Toft (2001, 2005), and Merom (2003).

3 to 1 advantage in men and materiel (Jaffe, 2003). The reasoning behind the three-to-one rule is that an attack in these circumstances would result in reasonably certain success by virtue of overwhelming numbers. Sun Tzu (1994 [Sawyer translation]), the insightful ancient Chinese philosopher of conflict, reckoned similarly that the cautious general should not tackle his adversary head-on unless he had at least a 5 to 1 advantage in arms. Such differences in opinion highlight the troubling fact that, no matter where one draws the conceptual line, there is no definitive consensus on a definition for asymmetry.

The decision rule this study has adopted was drawn from the study of asymmetric war: that a 10 to 1 or greater power disparity must obtain for a crisis to be labeled as truly asymmetric. This number echoes the disparity criteria chosen by Arreguin-Toft (2001, 2005). This 10:1 decision rule is a compelling one for two reasons. First, it fulfills the substantive aim of delineating crises which are clearly asymmetric to any reasonable observer. It sets the bar for inclusion high enough so that there will be comparatively little debate as to whether included crises are truly asymmetric. Second, it allows for the fact that most states cannot afford to dedicate all of their resources to any single conflict. Realistically, all states will have to satisfy a portfolio of other pressing security commitments as well. With a 10:1 advantage, it is reasonable to surmise that, even given other obligations, a powerful state would still be able to apply overwhelming force against a particular adversary. It is important to acknowledge that this 10:1 decision rule is imperfect. However, by setting the bar so high, there is very little risk of this study including borderline cases.

### *Violent Crisis Escalation: The Primary Dependent Variable*

The primary dependent variable employed in this study is quite simple: do asymmetric crises degenerate into violence or do they conclude peacefully? The choice of violence as the primary dependent variable was driven by both normative and theoretical concerns. On a simple normative level, an understanding of the reasons behind outbreaks of interstate violence is valuable in and of itself. The immense human suffering caused by any armed conflict represents a tragedy worth working to ameliorate. To the extent that policymakers can benefit from the findings presented here, it is hoped that this project can provide a real service. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, like many before it, appears likely to be dominated by asymmetric power relations. A full understanding of asymmetric crisis will therefore serve the world well.

Theoretically, asymmetric crises that degenerate into violence are significant not just because of the violence itself, but what that moment represents conceptually. A crisis can be conceived of first and foremost as an attempt by a state to attain a foreign policy objective *without* a resort to violence. Crises represent an attempt to use brinksmanship, the *prospect* of imminent violence, to compel an adversary to do something they would not otherwise do. In other words, a crisis represents, in the spirit of Lukes (1974), an attempt to influence the behavior of others. Schelling (1966) similarly distinguishes the ability to compel from the application of “brute force.” Crises are moments where power is applied in its ultimate coercive form. When a crisis degenerates into the exchange of violence, it has left the realm of pure coercion into something else – namely violent bargaining. The initiation of violence represents the failure of coercive bargaining. On a theoretical level, this study is primarily concerned with the factors that contribute to

bargaining failure. Why is it, when the coercive capabilities of the belligerents are so clearly stacked in favor of the stronger side, is a peaceful bargain not achieved?

By choosing “violence” rather than “war” as my definition for crisis escalation, I depart somewhat from the existing crisis bargaining literature. Synder and Diesing (1977) and Lebow (1981) have all argued that crises and wars are fundamentally separate phenomena but do not present detailed arguments as to why low levels of violence are distinguishable from war. On an intuitive level, the separation of war and low-level violence is somewhat understandable – wars are conventionally thought of as significant events involving substantial loss of life and property. Many low-level conflicts fail to have the sometimes far-reaching impact of larger ones. Nevertheless, wars are generally only distinguishable from lower-level conflicts on a *post-hoc* basis. For instance, the most commonly used definition of war is the Singer and Small criteria of 1,000 battle-deaths employed by the COW project (Small and Singer, 1982). While this operationalization does successfully separate smaller from larger scale conflicts, the difference is only obvious in retrospect. This traditional concept of war is problematic for asymmetric crisis studies on two levels.

Firstly, the definitional requirement of some minimum nominal threshold of death and destruction before a conflict is designated a war is intrinsically biased. Weak states by definition have smaller populations and militaries to start with. When weaker states are involved in an exchange of interstate violence, small losses that might be easily bearable for a larger state can have a devastating effect on a smaller one. Weaker states are therefore more sensitive to lower levels of violence and more prone to give up before a conflict reaches the “war” stage. Nevertheless, these smaller conflicts can be just as

disruptive and traumatizing to the weak as a larger conflict would be to a more powerful state. Therefore, conventional definitions of war are likely to systemically underrepresent the number of significant armed conflicts endured by weaker states.

Secondly, the post-hoc nature of the “war” designation undermines the theoretical connection between decisions made in crises and their consequences. In their early stages, wars and small-scale conflicts are virtually indistinguishable from one another. A “war” simply represents a small-scale conflict that developed into a more protracted and therefore deadly conflict. However, this development does not rely upon the *intentions* of either state. In other words, no state employs violence with the intention of involving itself in a costly and bloody conflict. In a crisis, violence is employed in the hope of ending a conflict quickly without having to engage in further bargaining. Wars, as defined by COW, occur when this initial expectation of quick success proves to be unfounded. Conceptually, the decision for “war” is never made, but the decision to employ “violence to force a resolution” is. Therefore, the initial decision to employ violence represents the only conscious choice made by a leader in a crisis situation.<sup>22</sup> For theories premised on how situational factors impact crisis bargaining decisions, whether a war develops from an initial exchange of violence on a lower level is actually somewhat irrelevant. War represents an unintended consequence of the initial decision to employ violence. In other words, war is actually only a *subset* of outcomes all sharing a common substantive trait: conflicts where at least one leader had come to the conclusion that a peaceful bargain was unattainable and violence was necessary to force a resolution.

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as Zartman and Faure (2005) argue, “escalation” is best thought of as a change in bargaining dynamics rather than as an “intensification” of a conflict. Therefore, the shift from non-violent coercive bargaining to violent bargaining represents a truly escalatory move whereas more intense violence represents something else altogether.

As a result, I argue that the substantively interesting outcome of crises is not whether or not a war develops, but whether violence is employed as a means to resolve the crisis. Besides being theoretically more compelling, this approach is also exposed to less controversy empirically. The levels of violence necessary to constitute a “war” are themselves a subject of considerable debate. Instead of wading into the very difficult waters of trying to distinguish “war” levels of violence from “non-war” levels of violence, simply designating all violence as being a part of the same universe of outcomes is much less controversial. All crisis violence, whether it ends up reaching the level of war, however defined, shares a common substantive cause: the *conscious decision* to abandon non-violent brinkmanship in favor of a more direct solution. It is the fact that this decision is made at all that makes real-world asymmetric crises so puzzling. It is puzzling why a strong power would choose to employ the instruments of violence when patience would likely allow a beneficial bargain to take shape as peaceful pressure is applied to the weak. It is puzzling why a weak power would be obstinate enough in crisis bargaining to provoke a violent reaction from a much stronger power. In essence, this enigma is the central focus of my dissertation: why is the decision to employ violence in an asymmetric crisis ever made at all?

### **1.3 Explaining Asymmetric Crisis**

Earlier in this introductory chapter, it was determined that power disparities in and of themselves are relatively poor predictors of crisis outcomes. Although asymmetric crises seem to conclude violently slightly less frequently than symmetric ones, the difference is not nearly as substantial as conventional intuition would seem to dictate.

Indeed, in the sample of crises depicted in Table 1.1, the difference was not significant in a statistical sense. Logically, this presents a puzzle: *why* is power so unimportant in a situation where it ought to be an overriding factor? The simplest explanation would seem to be that power simply does not matter whatsoever in crisis bargaining. This explanation, while it might excite the foot soldiers of the theoretical paradigm wars, seems to fail the common sense test. Such a stance is tantamount to saying that political leaders make in their decisions in crises with absolutely no regard to their relative power position. Rather, this observed empirical puzzle is far more likely attributable to some other factor that *inhibits* a leader's incentive to act according to the dictates of systemic structure. The core claim of this study is that there *is* such a factor: regime type. However, I argue that regime type exerts a unique effect only observed in asymmetric contexts. By arguing for a causal mechanism that *only* applies in asymmetric contexts, I depart from conventional approaches to crises. There are a plethora of existing frameworks that posit factors *other* than power as a factor driving peaceful outcomes, but none of them are constrained in this fashion. To bolster the credibility of my approach, this study derives three alternative explanations of crisis escalation from the existing literature to pit against my own.

My own hypotheses will be more fully explained and explored in chapter 2 of this study. However, for the purposes of the following discussion of the alternatives, it is important to introduce the basic outlines of my own argument. My argument boils down to three central claims. First, I argue that regime type serves as the primary explanatory variable explaining asymmetric crisis escalation. Second, I argue that the regime type of the stronger side exerts the substantive causal power over the outcome of asymmetric

crisis whereas the weaker side's regime type will have no noticeable effect. Finally, I argue that in the context of asymmetry stronger democracies tend to be associated with violent escalation while stronger authoritarian regimes tend to be associated with nonviolent crisis resolution.

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**Table 1.2 – Summary of the Primary Regime-Based Hypotheses**

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H<sub>1,1</sub>: If the powerful side in an asymmetric crisis is democratic, then it will increase the likelihood of violent escalation.

H<sub>1,2</sub>: If the powerful side in an asymmetric crisis is authoritarian, then it will decrease the likelihood of violent escalation.

*H<sub>1</sub> Causal Mechanism: The behavior of both the powerful side and weak side in an asymmetric crisis will be influenced heavily by the regime type of the powerful side. For the powerful, democratic political institutions provide leaders with an incentive to “bargain hard” and therefore increase the chances of crisis deadlock. For the weak, democratic political institutions in their opponent are perceived as a handicap preventing them from carrying out violent threats, leading them to “bargain hard” as well and independently contribute to the chances of deadlock. The combined result is an increased likelihood of violence being employed to break this deadlock.*

H<sub>2</sub>: The regime type of the weak side in an asymmetric crisis will not significantly increase or decrease the likelihood of violent escalation.

*H<sub>2</sub> Causal Mechanism: All political leaders in a position of weakness will behave similarly because of the precariousness of their position. Their weakness, and the resultant direct threat to their regime's continued existence as an independent entity, supersedes any domestic political pressures they might face.*

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### *Alternative Hypothesis 1: The “Resolve” Hypothesis*

Although realism is frequently associated with the impact of material power on international relations, it is important to note that it is (to a contemporary realist anyway) merely a means to an end rather than an end itself. Although Morgenthau (1948) mused that power politics owed its existence to an animalistic craving for domination and control in human beings, modern realists have cited far less sinister motivations for state behavior. Most follow Waltz (1979) in his assumption that security (defined as continued existence or survival) dominates the actions of all states in the international system. Power is merely the most important means that states possess to pursue their goal of continued security. Security is so paramount that it trumps calculations of power in political behavior. If a state is forced to choose between what is perceived to be certain destruction via submission and resistance with a very small chance of success, realism suggests that a rational state valuing its continued survival will, albeit reluctantly, opt to resist. Accordingly, states are expected to be highly resolved when issues of survival are perceived to be at stake. The resolve hypothesis on the escalation of asymmetric crisis was inspired by the crisis bargaining work of Snyder and Diesing who argue:

“If one party is superior in military strength and also clearly has more at stake in the conflict, it will be the more resolved. But the military inferiority of one party may be compensated by its greater interests engaged, thus making the parties equally resolved. A militarily stronger party may be less ‘resolved’ in the crisis than its opponent if it does not value its interests as the opponent values his.”<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that Snyder and Diesing integrate capabilities with issue salience into a single “resolve” factor. I argue, on the other hand, that the latter has a more direct relationship with “resolve” than the former. The relationship between resolve and security is a crucial one in this study. States can be resolved to achieve many

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<sup>23</sup> Snyder and Diesing (1977): 190.

different types of aim short of survival. In other words, security and resolve are not necessarily synonymous. Nevertheless, when security is at stake, all states are expected to demonstrate significant levels of resolve. This is not always the case in other issue areas. When issues of security are involved, a state will be highly reluctant to bargain away what it sees as a fundamental interest. This intransigence has a observable impact in crisis situations: when one state bargains from a position of desperation, escalation of the crisis into violence becomes a real possibility. States will opt to risk war rather than bargain away their security.

Again, states can be highly resolved to attain objectives not directly related to security. However, it is difficult to construct a generalizable framework to include every single occasion when a state will demonstrate resolve.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, it is reasonable to presume that when their security is at stake all states will demonstrate high levels of resolve. Therefore, although an admittedly imperfect solution, I choose to characterize states as “resolved” only when issues of survival are at stake.

Since I essentially equate resolve with fear over continued survival, it is important to operationally define the conditions when a state can be expected to hold such a fear. A very strict definition would only include cases where a state faces its own complete destruction as a result of a crisis. In other words, a state would have to face the prospect of its existence as a sovereign entity ending. However, a quick survey of historical crises turns up relatively few crises where the outright annexation of one belligerent by another is openly at issue. This can be partly explained by the fact that very few aggressors are

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<sup>24</sup> Indeed, some scholars, such as Sartori (2001, 2005) prefer a reputational approach to understanding the problem of resolve. However, other research, such as Hopf (1994), casts doubt on the extent to which reputation actually matters to the extent assumed.

likely to expect a state to commit suicide simply by virtue of being confronted with a brinkmanship strategy. Rather, expansion-minded states are likely to simply invade, initiate war, and skip any significant crisis bargaining phase.

On the other hand, crises frequently erupt over issues of territorial control. Sovereignty over territory is an absolutely crucial issue for any state: the means for continued survival are directly linked to the mobilization of territorial resources in the form of power.<sup>25</sup> While political bargains may be renegotiated or rescinded relatively easily, the reversal of territorial losses is a much more difficult enterprise. Territory therefore represents the ultimate bargaining chip any state possesses and the finite nature of this resource leads them to guard it very doggedly.<sup>26</sup> A loss of territory can cripple a state in subsequent confrontations with potential aggressors. Therefore, a state will likely equate a threat to its territory as a threat to its ultimate survival.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, I designate states facing either annexation (which is relatively rare) *and* territorial loss as states facing a threat to their fundamental security interests. States facing a threat to their existence or territory will fear for their survival and therefore exhibit high levels of resolve.

A state motivated by concerns for survival will be highly resolved to defend itself regardless of the objective odds it may face in a violent conflict. This calculation is

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed, according to Liberman (1996), conquest still “pays” even in our modern industrialized era.

<sup>26</sup> A contention reinforced by the central contentions of “prospect theory.” (see Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Levy, 1997; McDermott 1998, 2001, 2004)

<sup>27</sup> The historical events surrounding the 1938 Munich crisis over German control of the Sudetenland provides a compelling basis for such a depiction. Although Hitler did not seek the outright annexation of Czechoslovakia during the crisis, it was tacitly understood by all sides that the possession of the Sudetenland would leave the Czechs unable to defend themselves in any future confrontation with Germany (Taylor, 1961). In essence, the crisis became a confrontation over Czechoslovakia’s existence as a sovereign entity. Many crises involving territorial claims follow a similar pattern.

hardly problematic for the stronger side in such a crisis. A state with a significant capability advantage *and* high resolve by virtue of perceived security risks would not hesitate to risk the escalation of an asymmetric crisis. The concept of resolve, however, is vital to understanding the behavior of the weaker side. A state opposed by vastly stronger adversary is in a very delicate situation. A miscalculation could easily mean the end of its existence as an independent entity since allowing an asymmetric crisis to escalate to violence could easily result in its destruction on the battlefield. Therefore, weaker sides should be significantly more risk averse and only leave itself vulnerable to destruction if it feels it has *no other choice*. In other words, an outgunned state should be willing to negotiate on virtually anything to avoid the risk of destruction...but when its destruction *itself* is at issue it has very little to lose by being obstinate.

In sum, the resolve hypothesis would expect an asymmetric crisis to escalate to violence when a participant is resolved enough to render meaningful bargaining impossible. Although states can be highly resolved in many areas, they are *universally* expected to be highly resolved when their survival is threatened. Indeed, given the odds weaker states face in a violent conflict there is very little *other* than survival worth the risk of war. Therefore, when issues of security (defined as continued sovereignty and territorial integrity) are involved, an asymmetric crisis is more likely to escalate despite the capability imbalance.

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**Table 1.3 – Summary of Alternative Hypothesis 1: The “Resolve Hypothesis”**

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AH<sub>1.1</sub>: If asymmetric crises involve territorial claims or annexation demands, then they are more likely to escalate to violence.

AH<sub>1.2</sub>: If asymmetric crises do not involve territorial claims or annexation demands, then they are less likely to escalate to violence.

*AH<sub>1</sub> Causal Mechanism: Actors which feel their security threatened by the loss of territorial assets or the outright loss of their sovereignty will remain intransigent in crisis negotiations thereby raising the probability of violent confrontation.*

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*Alternative Hypothesis 2: The “Intermediary” Hypothesis*

The neoliberal school of international relations theory tends to focus upon how the relations between specific actors in the system are impacted by third-party agents and organizational structures. It could easily be argued that asymmetric crises that escalate to violence do so because of a failure of external actors to intervene to keep the peace. Asymmetric crisis escalation can therefore be characterized as a failure of international order. This order can be provided by any number of sources. Both uninvolved states and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) possess the ability to act as intermediaries to maintain international order in moments of interstate tension. The involvement of third-party mediation can rectify bargaining problems for both sides by providing a mechanism for more effective and trustworthy interaction. This intermediary alternative hypothesis was primarily inspired by the research of Quinn et al. (2006) which focused upon the

ability of external mediation to influence crisis bargains.<sup>28</sup> Quinn et al. find that external mediation can increase the probabilities of a successful formal agreement, and implicitly successful peaceful resolution, in asymmetric crises. Here, I slightly repurpose their framework as an alternative explanation for asymmetric crisis escalation.

External actors can both provide reasonably neutral arbitration during a crisis and assist the parties in monitoring any accord after a crisis.<sup>29</sup> One could argue that asymmetric crises would benefit the most from the involvement of external intermediaries. Given the great disparity of power, strong actors have an incentive to dodge meaningful bargaining and simply impose their own solution to a crisis problem. On the other hand, weak actors are in a poor position to ensure that any bargain, no matter how fairly or unfairly it may be slanted, can be meaningfully enforced after the fact.

The involvement of external intermediaries can reduce tension by giving pause to the stronger side in an asymmetric crisis. While a strong actor would normally be free to employ strong-arm tactics to acquire the best bargain possible, the introduction of third parties raises the possibility of future punishment for excessively confrontational tactics. If the stronger side is seen as disregarding the will of the international community to give diplomacy every opportunity to defuse a crisis, they can bear numerous subsequent costs. Such costs could include everything from chilly bilateral relations to future counterbalancing alliances. At worst, a strong actor could face the direct intervention of external

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<sup>28</sup> On the subject of mediation's effectiveness in resolving international disputes more generally, see Dixon (1996), Moravcsik (1999), and Gelpi (1999).

<sup>29</sup> This theme is prominent in neoliberal scholarship (see Krasner, 1983; Axelrod, 1984; Keohane, 1984; Taylor and Groom, 1988).

actors on the side of its weaker opponent thereby undoing the asymmetric advantage it had held previously. Undoubtedly, such risks would not necessarily impact the goals of a highly motivated strong actor, but the introduction of this additional element to the crisis dynamic could at the very least introduce additional time for a peaceful bargain to take shape. In itself, the presence of external intermediaries can introduce an element of patience into asymmetric crisis and reduce the chances of violent escalation.

For the weak side, it is easy to see how the involvement of external intermediaries would be openly welcomed: it reduces the probability of being crassly exploited. Weak actors face two vexing problems in asymmetric crisis bargaining. First, they negotiate from a position of very little leverage. Having so little bargaining power makes it very difficult for a weak state to accurately ascertain the true intentions of their adversary. The stronger side is in a position to overstate their claims and to “bluff” in order to attain the most advantageous deal possible. Given the weak actor’s position, calling out its opponent for such tactics and strategies becomes very difficult and fraught with very real peril. Second, weak actors are in a very poor position to ensure compliance with any peaceful bargain that may emerge from crisis negotiations. Even in cases where the weak actor makes very tough sacrifices to attain a mutually acceptable settlement of the crisis, there is the ever-present risk of the strong actor reneging on their promises. In other words, the weak are forced to bargain with the knowledge that, in the end, any bargain that is reached might not be worth the paper it is written on. These problems can introduce an “all or nothing” mentality in the weak: if they are unable to bargain in good faith they have very little incentive to concede anything whatsoever. The introduction of third party intermediaries allow for the weak to both more accurately ascertain the

intentions of their stronger adversaries during the bargaining phase itself and provide a measure of assurance that any agreed resolution will be subsequently respected. By reassuring the weak that they are not completely isolated and alone against their strong opponent, intermediaries reassure the weak that a peaceful bargain can be attained and enforced.

In this study, I employ a fairly broad operationalization of “external mediation.” Intermediaries can include both sovereign state entities (such as hegemonic “policemen”) and non-governmental organizations. Substantively, both states and IGOs are able to provide the services of information and enforcement enabling peaceful bargains to take shape. Powerful states, by virtue of their place in the system, have a unique capability to enforce order.<sup>30</sup> Organizations, through their ability to both control information and influence incentive structures for compliance with bargains, can provide a similar degree of order despite their lack of independent ability to compel.<sup>31</sup> For the purposes of this study, both global and regional institutions will be considered IGOs capable of providing such services.

One of the intriguing elements of the intermediary hypothesis is how it addresses the potential role played by uninvolved actors in a crisis situation. Indeed, any asymmetric crisis is only asymmetric within the context of the specific actors involved. Asymmetry is not an absolute condition...it obtains only because other actors decline to get directly involved. The possibility of external involvement – a ray of hope for the weak and the greatest fear of the strong – naturally looms in the background of any

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<sup>30</sup> A sentiment with a long tradition in international relations scholarship (see especially Gilpin, 1981 and Kindleberger, 1981).

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, an idea with a long pedigree (e.g. Keohane and Nye, 1977 and Keohane, 1984).

asymmetric confrontation. It is sometimes noted that international orders work best when they are needed least (e.g. Mearsheimer, 1994/1995). Asymmetric crisis provides an arena to test the expectation that intermediaries serve the interests of peace in an environment where external involvement could play a decisive role.

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**Table 1.4 – Summary of Alternative Hypothesis 2: The “Intermediary Hypothesis”**

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AH<sub>2.1</sub>: If non-aligned “third party” actors play a substantial intermediary role, then asymmetric crises are less likely to escalate to violence.

AH<sub>2.2</sub>: If non-aligned “third party” actors do not play a substantial intermediary role, then asymmetric crises are more likely to escalate to violence.

*AH<sub>2</sub> Causal Mechanism: Actors with little interest in either side “winning” a crisis can act as intermediaries between crisis belligerents. By enhancing communication and providing mechanisms for making and enforcing agreements, such intermediaries enable meaningful bargaining and prevent violent breakdowns.*

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*Alternative Hypothesis 3: The “Openness” Hypothesis*

Much like my own hypotheses, the openness hypothesis argues that asymmetric crisis escalation can be explained by the domestic political institutions of the actors involved. However, this hypothesis claims that democratic political institutions will be associated with comparatively *less* asymmetric crisis violence than authoritarian political institutions. In the spirit of Moravcsik’s (2003) conceptualization of liberalism, this hypothesis focuses upon the process for selecting political leaders and the impact this process has upon their later decisions. Although it is important to note that I do not claim

that “regime type” is the only factor of note in the liberal approach to international analysis, I use the term to categorize two separate lines of thinking linking democracy with crisis outcomes. On the one hand, Lebow’s (1981) highly qualitative and inductive analysis of crisis suggests that democratic states in crisis end up in war less frequently due to the superior quality of their decisionmaking. Fearon (1994b), on the other hand, arrives at a similar conclusion by virtue of his audience costs model of crisis decisionmaking. Both thinkers separately arrive at the conclusion that democratic institutions could alleviate recurring problems in crisis. Essentially, the transparency inherent in the operation of a legitimate democratic political system can reduce bargaining problems making a resort to violence less likely but not necessarily impossible.<sup>32</sup>

Lebow’s (1981) study, a widely ranging and in-depth study of twenty-six case studies of crisis, seeks to uncover regularities in how political leaders made decisions over a comparatively larger number of crises. One of Lebow’s central findings is that simple analyses of leaders and their decisions in specific crises are of limited scientific value; the underlying socio-political environment, the arena in which such decisions are made, shapes the nature of crisis management in any given state. Therefore, studies of specific crisis decisions must be leavened with the study of the structural conditions in which political leaders make these decisions. Regime type is obviously a crucial element of this structural milieu. Lebow contends that, among other things, “a relatively open

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<sup>32</sup> The frequently cited “Democratic Peace” literature (e.g. Maoz and Russett, 1993; Dixon, 1994; Raymond, 1994; Mousseau, 1998; Oneal and Russett, 1999) is not included here because of previous research suggesting questions as to whether it truly applies to crisis situations (and situations of potential escalation) rather than primarily issues of conflict onset (see Morgan and Campbell, 1991; Layne, 1994; Rousseau et al., 1996; Senese, 1997; Reed, 2000; Sweeney, 2003).

decision-making environment” is conducive to peaceful crisis resolution (Lebow, 1981: 335).<sup>33</sup> Such openness forces leaders to make sound decisions less likely to result in a war and instill confidence in their opponents that they are dealing with believable adversaries. Indeed, open political institutions also serve to familiarize leaders with the process of compromise and bargaining.

Fearon’s (1994b) research on the effect of regime type in crisis bargaining indicate that democratic political institutions may not only constrain a leader’s freedom to resort to force, but that it may constrain his ability to negotiate in a crisis. Fearon argues that democratic leaders are able to signal more credibly in a crisis, given that they face audience costs for acting contrary to these signals. However, these audience costs also work against a democratic leader’s freedom to negotiate. Once a leader enters a crisis, any retreat from his initial bargaining position carries the risk of invoking these audience costs and, potentially, losing political power. The audience costs that democrats face in a crisis are not as severe a problem for the authoritarian, given that they are less accountable. Once again, transparency in the operation of the internal political regime allows for states to credibly bargain thereby reducing chances of miscalculation and violent escalation.<sup>34</sup>

The openness hypothesis directly contradicts my own. While my own theoretical ideas will receive a more thorough hearing in chapter 2, suffice it to say for now that the primary differences between the openness hypothesis and my own are twofold. First, I argue that the regime of the stronger actor in an asymmetric crisis “matters more.” By

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<sup>33</sup> A prominent theme in the “crisis management” literature in which Lebow’s study is partly rooted (e.g. Williams, 1976; George, 1984, 1991; George and Simons, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> However, Fearon’s (1994b) “audience costs” argument cuts both ways, as I argue in chapter 2.

virtue of its power, the stronger side is usually in a position to control the evolution of a crisis to violence lending correspondingly greater weight to its decisions. Second, and most obviously, I argue that the same transparency credited with less crisis violence is actually an indirect cause of *increased* crisis violence. Therefore, it provides a compelling direct counter-expectation to my own for empirical evaluation.

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**Table 1.5 – Summary of Alternative Hypothesis 3: The “Openness Hypothesis”**

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AH<sub>3,1</sub>: If an asymmetric crisis involves a democratic set of actors, then they are more likely to escalate to violence.

AH<sub>3,2</sub>: If an asymmetric crisis involves an authoritarian set of actors, then they are more likely to escalate to violence.

*AH<sub>3</sub> Causal Mechanism: Democratic institutions, by virtue of their transparency, reduce the chance of miscalculating a leader’s intentions. Signals transmitted by democratically accountable decisionmakers are also more believable due to the audience costs they face for backing down. Also, democracy improves the quality of decisions through the pressures of public scrutiny.*

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#### **1.4 Towards a Theory of Asymmetric Crisis**

The remaining four chapters of this dissertation are dedicated to devising a focused and compelling theoretical answer to the puzzle of asymmetric crisis. In these chapters I describe my theory of asymmetric crisis escalation in detail and test it against the three alternative hypotheses discussed in the previous section. My approach follows in the sociological tradition of Merton’s (1968) “middle-range theory.” Rather than attempt to forge an overarching theory that could conceivably cover *all* crises or cases of

asymmetric conflict, I choose to approach the problem in a very specific and focused manner. This approach is obviously open to criticism. Nevertheless, I feel that the field would benefit from a narrowly applicable, yet manifestly useful, explanation for this specific phenomenon. Although I do not claim to make inferences beyond the arena of asymmetric crisis, my findings could still provide potential insights into the study of international conflict and politics. Last but not least, it is expected that my findings will provide valuable information to current policymakers around the world. Given the fact that nuclear weapons have rendered great power conflict all but obsolete, the twenty-first century will likely be dominated by asymmetric crises like those I examine here. Therefore, the lessons of the previous century can provide a real service in the current one.

In the following chapter, I describe my theory of asymmetric crisis escalation in detail. In this chapter, I begin by discussing how regime type and succession procedures are connected to the seemingly unrelated issue of crisis bargaining. Starting from the key assumption that leaders wish to hold on to their power, I discuss how domestic political institutions impact a leader's decisionmaking in the high-stakes and high-pressure environment. I then discuss how asymmetric power capabilities impact these calculations from both the perspective of the strong and the weak. I then describe how decisionmaking constraints of the strong and weak interact to produce violent escalation.

In chapters three and four, I present the empirical case for my regime-based theory of asymmetric crisis escalation. My empirical examination takes a two-pronged approach. In chapter 3, I aim to quantitatively demonstrate the veracity of my theory in comparison to the three alternatives described earlier. In this examination, I employ the

data of International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project to test my theory on a sample of 77 asymmetric crises drawn from the history of the twentieth century. Through the use of logit-based maximum-likelihood estimation models, I present a statistically compelling series of estimations showing that my theoretical expectation outperforms the alternatives. Substantively, I find that as the regime type of the stronger side is shifted from strongly authoritarian to strongly democratic, the predicted probability of a violent conclusion increases by about 50%. My primary model, designated MODEL 1, generates a correct forecast over 70% of the time. I also demonstrate the robust nature of my findings by showing their insensitivity to slight definitional changes and changes of econometric technique. In chapter 4, I take a qualitative approach to further investigate a representative sub-sample of four cases of asymmetric crisis drawn from the pool of 77 analyzed in chapter 3. In this chapter, I show how the actual events of the Anschluss Crisis of 1938, the Suez Crisis of 1951, the Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979 and the U-137 “Whiskey on the Rocks” Crisis of 1981 all reflect the causal dynamics described by my theory.

In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss the theoretical and practical conclusions that can be drawn from my investigation. My theory, while empirically compelling, is ultimately non-determinate. The probabilistic nature of human politics virtually dictates such a limitation. Therefore, I endeavor to describe exactly what it is I have proven and how it could be useful in subsequent research. Despite these caveats, I believe that this study represents a step forward useful to theoretician and policymaker alike.

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