North Vietnamese Diplomatic Posture during the Vietnam War

Carlyle A. Thayer

According to Oriana Skylar Mastro, her book *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* "is designed to provide the first comprehensive framework for understanding when and how states incorporate talking with the enemy into their war-fighting strategies" (p. 6). The framework of analysis aims to explain "how states calculate the costs of conversation throughout a war" (p. 126). This framework is important, she argues, because the existing theoretical literature does not explain how and why adversaries transition from war or pure fighting to "talking while fighting" (p. 1) and "either ignores or gives a shallow treatment as to how states approach talking to the enemy" (p. 5). As a consequence, "states currently lack a framework for understanding an opponent's approach to wartime diplomacy and how to best shape it" (p. 1). The book argues that diplomacy and warfighting are integral and interactive parts of a state's wartime strategy rather than two separate behaviors (p. 3).

Mastro develops several concepts in her analysis—diplomatic posture, strategic costs, and strategic capacity. It is necessary to provide a brief description of each concept in order to fully understand her thesis. Diplomatic posture is defined as a "belligerent's willingness to engage in direct talks with its enemy at a given point in a war" (p. 6). A state's diplomatic posture can be "either open or closed with the enemy at a given time" (p. 6) and can shift during war. According to Mastro, "when costs are considered high, [states] will choose a closed diplomatic posture. If a belligerent deems the costs low enough, it will shift to an open diplomatic posture" (p. 14). Strategic cost is defined as "the likelihood an adversary will infer weakness in the form of reduced war aims, degraded ability to fight, or waning resolve from an open diplomatic posture," and strategic capacity is understood as "the ability of the enemy to respond to such an inference by escalating, intensifying or prolonging the fighting" (p. 126).

Mastro applies her framework to four case studies: Chinese diplomatic posture in the Korean War, Chinese diplomatic posture in the Sino-Indian War, Indian diplomatic posture in the Sino-Indian War, and North Vietnamese diplomatic posture in the Vietnam War. This review focuses

CARLYLE A. THAYER is an Emeritus Professor at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. He can be reached at <carlthayer@webone.com.au>.

on the fourth case study, North Vietnamese diplomatic posture in the Vietnam War. This case study is copiously sourced, with reference to over two hundred Vietnamese Communist Party and government documents that the United States captured and translated during the war as well as interviews with party, diplomatic, and military officials in Hanoi (p. 103). These primary sources are supplemented with memoirs and the extant academic literature. The case study is confined to the three-year period from March 1965, when the United States commenced bombing North Vietnam and introduced ground troops in South Vietnam, to April 1968, when North Vietnam responded positively to President Lyndon Johnson's offer to seek a diplomatic solution to the Vietnam War.

Almost immediately after the United States entered the Vietnam War in 1965, it adopted an open diplomatic posture toward North Vietnam. According to Mastro, the United States supported over two thousand attempts to open talks with North Vietnam without preconditions during the three-year period under review (p. 101). Washington adopted this open diplomatic posture because the costs of conversation were low and U.S. strategic capacity was immense. Indeed, the United States increased combat troop levels progressively from several thousand in late 1963 to 400,000 by 1966. It also expanded the air war over North Vietnam, flying over twice as many sorties and dropping more than two-and-half times the ordnance in 1966 than in the previous year. The United States targeted North Vietnam's petroleum, oil, and lubricant storage sites and bombed closer to urban areas than before.

By contrast, throughout the three-year period, North Vietnam adopted a closed diplomatic posture and steadfastly rebuffed all U.S. and third-party efforts to open direct bilateral discussions without preconditions. The country signaled its diplomatic posture when it released its "Four Points" in April 1965 after the deployment of U.S. Marines to South Vietnam.[1] During this three-year period, the United States combined offers of talks with a suspension of bombing attacks, but none of these pauses elicited a positive response from Hanoi. Indeed, North Vietnam signaled its resolve by stepping up its infiltration of combat troops. Hanoi insisted on a complete halt of all U.S. bombing and other acts of war against North Vietnam.

[1] Vietnam's preconditions for talks included U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, adherence to the 1954 Geneva Agreements, inclusion of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (commonly referred to as the Viet Cong), and the assurance that the future of Vietnam would be decided by the Vietnamese people without foreign interference.

If there was to be any possible opening for discussions, Hanoi insisted that Washington focus on its preconditions.

Why did North Vietnam adopt a closed diplomatic posture during the three-year period under review? Mastro argues that its leaders feared that Washington would infer that North Vietnam was weak and escalate the U.S. war effort. In order to change its diplomatic posture from closed to open and enter into direct talks, North Vietnam believed that it needed "to demonstrate its ability to resist U.S. coercive efforts" (pp. 107–8). In sum, "the strategic costs of conversation were too high to consider an open diplomatic posture" (p. 110).

North Vietnam decided to lower the costs of conversation by launching a general offensive and uprising (the Tet Offensive) in late January 1968. The Tet Offensive was designed to convey the country's resilience and strategic capacity, and therefore its ability to frustrate the United States' strategic aims of coercing North Vietnam to the negotiating table. On January 30, 1968, Communist military forces launched a coordinated series of attacks throughout South Vietnam, including on 36 out of 44 provincial capitals, 5 out of 6 major cities, 64 district capitals, and 50 hamlets (p. 113).

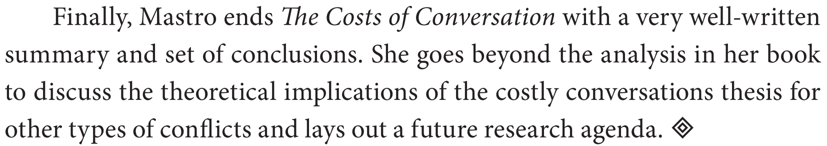
The Tet Offensive was a military disaster for North Vietnam. Most Communist military forces were easily routed, and the so-called Viet Cong infrastructure, or Communist underground, was decimated. But the Tet Offensive was an unexpected political success because of its domestic impact in the United States. On March 31, 1968, President Johnson gave a nationally televised address announcing that he had ordered an immediate end to the bombing of North Vietnam above the twentieth parallel, would seek a diplomatic solution to the war, and would stand down and not seek re-election (p. 102).

North Vietnam responded positively three days later, and discussions on the format and content of the talks commenced immediately. Why did North Vietnam shift its diplomatic posture from closed to open so quickly? Mastro concludes: "Hanoi's expected costs of agreeing to talks changed from high (before April 1968) to low (after President Johnson's speech), and these cost valuations were the primary determinant of Hanoi's diplomatic posture….[A]fter the psychological impact of Tet, Hanoi's leadership assessed the costs of conversation to be low because Hanoi had credibly demonstrated resiliency and domestic political factors now hampered U.S. strategic capacity" (pp. 103–4).

Mastro ends her analysis of North Vietnam's diplomatic posture at this point, her self-imposed remit. She does not discuss in detail the five years it

took from the commencement of bilateral talks until the Paris Peace Accords were reached in January 1973.

Mastro, however, tests her costly conversation thesis, as noted above, against four alternate perspectives, and she convincingly demonstrates that these alternate approaches "do not address the conditions under which those talks may come about in the first place." Her thesis contributes to our understanding of wartime diplomacy by identifying the factors that carry the most weight for leaders when calculating the cost of an open diplomatic posture (pp. 128–29).



Finally, Mastro ends *The Costs of Conversation* with a very well-written summary and set of conclusions. She goes beyond the analysis in her book to discuss the theoretical implications of the costly conversations thesis for other types of conflicts and lays out a future research agenda. ◈