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The Diplomacy of “Red Lines”

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¹ This monograph is an expanded version of Bruno Tertrais, « Drawing Red Lines Right », The Washington Quarterly, vol. 37, n° 37, Fall 2014 ; as well as a translated and updated version of *L'art de la ligne rouge*, Recherches & Documents n° 1/2015, Paris, FRS, 2015.

The expression “red line” has become a regular feature of the global policy debate. It has notably been used with regard to the Iranian nuclear programme, the Syrian civil war, and the Ukraine crisis.

Although its increasingly frequent use is a recent trend, the term refers to a well-known political phenomenon: preventing an event or occurrence that is deemed unacceptable. The expression always involves interaction between at least two agents on the international stage, and suggests the idea of a game-changing fact or act, yet it can have several distinct meanings. It is used, for instance, in diplomacy to define one’s own internal position (“our red line should be...”) in preparation for a negotiation, or to state that such and such a concession would be unacceptable. For example, in 2014 Iran affirmed that maintaining its uranium enrichment capability is a “red line” that it would not allow to be crossed in the framework of any agreement with the international community². The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), for its part, holds the view that “the Green Line [the 1949 armistice line, author’s note] is a red line” in the context of the negotiations to create a Palestinian State³. Likewise, the expression is used by governments to privately define a threshold for action (for instance, a *casus belli*, or the precise terms of commitment to an ally). In the midst of the current chaos in the Middle East, it has been suggested that the destabilisation of Jordan would be intolerable and thus constitute a red line for Israel⁴.

Moreover, it is in Israel – a country that has for decades maintained a constant policy of deterrence towards its State and non-state adversaries – that the term has doubtless been most frequently employed since the 1970s⁵. The country’s red lines are often unstated publicly and are only communicated to its adversaries through the use of coercive means, aiming to develop a learning process in the adversary’s mind regarding deterrence (for example, in the context of the ongoing Syrian crisis, Israeli strikes to signal the prohibition of strategic arms transfers by Iran or Syria to Hezbollah). Israeli red lines are also sometimes conveyed directly to the adversary in a private and discrete fashion, if necessary through the use of an intermediary⁶.

² According to an unnamed senior Iranian official, “our Supreme Leader (...) has set a red line for the negotiators and that cannot change and should be respected. (...) Uranium enrichment should be continued and none of the nuclear sites will be closed”. Quoted in Louis Charbonneau and Parisa Hafesi, “Exclusive: Iran digs in heels on nuclear centrifuges at Vienna talks – envoys”, *Reuters*, 18 June 2014.

Seeking to highlight the fact that the United States will not deploy ground troops in Iraq, the Secretary of State, John Kerry, talked about a “red line” that Washington would not cross. Quoted in Helen Cooper, “Obama Enlists 9 Allies to Help in the Battle Against ISIS”, *The New York Times*, 5 September 2014.

³ Palestine Liberation Organization, Negotiations Affairs Department, *The Green Line is a Red Line: The 1967 Border and the Two-State Solution*, Fact Sheet, undated.

⁴ David Rothkopf, “The real red line in the Middle East”, *Foreign Policy*, 30 June 2014.

⁵ The term is also used in Israel in another context: the “red line” (kav adom) of the Sea of Galilee is the line (213 metres below sea level) below which the replenishment of the lake’s natural freshwater reserves becomes difficult, and pumped water from the lake is no longer permitted. Shoshana Kordova, “Word of the Day / Kav Adom: don’t cross that line. The red one”, *Haaretz*, 6 December 2012.

⁶ Micah Bar, *Red Lines in Israel Deterrence Strategy* (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv, Ministry of Defense Publishing, 1990.

Other countries have adopted such an approach in the Middle East. In the 1980s, the leaders of Hezbollah were deterred from targeting the Soviet presence in Lebanon by a demonstration carried out by Moscow: the Soviet intelligence services targeted an important religious dignitary and mutilated him following an attack on the country's diplomatic representatives⁷. In the 1990s, the U.S. intelligence services carried out what was later described as “an intelligence operation” in order to deter Iran from again targeting U.S. interests following the Khobar Towers attack (American lodgings in Saudi territory) in 1996; the nature of this operation has not been made public – it appears to have threatened Tehran with revealing the identity of all the Iranian agents in the region known to U.S. services – but the warning was received loud and clear⁸.

This paper will refer to a restrictive definition of red lines: *the manipulation of an adversary's intent through (mostly public) statements for deterrence purposes, referring to the deliberate crossing of a certain threshold by an adversary, and relevant counteraction if this threshold is crossed*. This definition refers to a dynamic process (which distinguishes it from, for instance, the diplomatic “bottom lines” mentioned above). The threshold in question may refer to military escalation, vertically (e.g. the use of chemical weapons by Syria), or horizontally (e.g. when in February 2016, Turkey's deputy prime minister Yalcin Akdogan, warned the Kurds that “the YPG [a Kurdish armed group, author's note] crossing west of the [River] Euphrates is Turkey's red line”⁹)¹⁰. It may also refer to the production of sensitive material (e.g. the quantity or grade of enriched uranium produced by Iran), or to exports of non-conventional technologies (e.g. the transfer of nuclear material or installations by North Korea), or alternatively, to a political decision (e.g. a unilateral declaration of Taiwanese independence)¹¹.

Analysing why and how red lines can prove effective or not is thus in large part a subset of studying deterrence: avoiding an adverse action through the threat of retaliation (deterrence by “threat of punishment”), or indeed, much less commonplace, through

⁷ Strategic Advisory Group, US Strategic Command, *Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence*, 1995, p. 4.

⁸ Richard Clarke & Steven Simon, “Bombs that would backfire”, *The New York Times*, 13 April 2006; and Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies. Inside America's War on Terror*, New York, Free Press, 2004, pp. 120-129.

⁹ Quoted in Andrew Rettman, “Turkey clashes with allies over attack on Syria Kurds”, *EU Observer*, 15 February 2016.

¹⁰ On the first point, for example, the term “red line” is often used to describe the United States' commitment to the defence of Israel. In 1975, the Israeli Defence Minister Ygal Allon used the expression “red line” to define his country's survival in the eyes of Washington (United Press International, “Allon Cautions US on Talks”, 19 June 1975). More recently, President Obama evoked Egypt's compliance with its peace treaty with Israel as a “red line”: “They have to abide by their treaty with Israel. That is a red line for us, because not only is Israel's security at stake, but our security is at stake (...)” (*Presidential Debate in Boca Raton*, 22 October 2012). On the second point, the expression “red line” was used by France to refer to the boundary line that Libya should not cross when attacking Chad (the 15th Parallel in 1983, and then the 16th the following year). Similarly, the “Damara red line”, 75 kilometres from Bangui, was the line established at the end of 2012 by the forces of the Economic Community of Central African States protecting the capital from Séléka.

¹¹ For example, U.S. President George W. Bush stated in 2008, “And I made it abundantly clear that there was some red lines for the United States on this issue, that there would be no unilateral declaration of independence (...)”. George W. Bush, *Interview with Foreign Print Journalists*, 30 July 2008. On a related note, in 2004 Syrian President Bashar al-Assad used the term “red line” when referring to the creation of an independent Kurdish State (*Interview with CNN-Türk*, 8 January 2004).

action aiming to prevent the adversary from attaining its goals (deterrence by denial”)¹². The corresponding notion of ultimatums is an entirely different matter: they involve coercion, not deterrence, as the goal is to force an actor to do something, rather than to prevent it from doing something.

Given their importance in the international landscape, it is useful to try to understand when and how it can be appropriate – if at all, for red-lining is often highly criticised – to draw a red line when trying to deter an adversary.

WHY ARE RED LINES CROSSED?

Red line diplomacy has a mixed record. More often than not, as the examples below will underline, red lines have failed to deter an adversary – either because the threshold not to cross or the consequences of doing so were unclear, or because the determination of the defender was not manifest, or because the penalty incurred was not sufficient for deterrence to be effective. Moreover, red lines can have unwanted or pernicious effects.

Red lines fail when the threshold or the consequences of crossing it are not clear

The first reason for the failure of red lines is a classical explanation for many conflicts: a lack of understanding among the protagonists, due to the unwillingness or the inability of the defender to state clearly what it is seeking to avoid, or what the consequences of crossing the line would be. This is the exact reason behind the outbreak of numerous wars throughout the course of history¹³.

Such lack of clarity might be about the precise circumstances that would trigger a counteraction. Most States have made it clear that full-fledged military aggression against their sovereign territory would constitute crossing a red line, thereby triggering a defensive response in kind. The red line in this case is quite simply the international borderline, generally considered to be inviolable¹⁴. But the situation is often more complex. Borders are not always clearly defined, and their definition is sometimes the subject of disagreement. Things are even murkier with regard to maritime borders, which are not only hardly ever visibly demarked, but many of them are also the subject of legal and political disputes. The Russian/Japanese border in the 1930s is a good example (with wars in 1938 and 1939). Another is the “Line of Control” separating Indian and Pakistani territory in Kashmir, established in 1971, leaving a grey area in the Siachen region, in which both parties subsequently attempted to conquer positions. What exactly does “attacking Japan (or China, the Philippines, Taiwan, or Vietnam)” mean under such circumstances?

¹² This reference is to the distinction proposed by Glenn Snyder (see Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence by Denial and Punishment*, Princeton, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1959).

¹³ See for example, Geoffrey Blaney, *The Causes of War*, New York, The Free Press, 1988, chapter 3.

¹⁴ The inviolable nature of borders is a general principle of international law. Their intangibility is a different concept, which is applied in the case of a State’s independence (the principle being that internal borders become international borders, according to the rule *uti possidetis*) and can be sanctioned by conventional instruments (cf. the decision by the African Union Organisation in 1964 to limit border disputes between States originating from decolonisation).

The same goes for distant possessions with a particular status. The Falklands/Malvinas islands, which were attacked by Argentina in 1982, were designated a British Overseas Territory. London had never issued a clear statement declaring that the United Kingdom would be ready to fight for the islands, as would be the case had Great Britain itself been attacked, and Buenos Aires thus had no patent reason to think that this would be the case.

Finally, even if the line itself is clearly drawn (in the case of a border or terrestrial cease-fire line that is clearly demarked and not a subject of dispute), the exact definition of what constitutes aggression – crossing the line – can prove problematic. Certain countries' recourse to militia or non-state groups to act on the territory of neighbouring countries could be a means of trying to circumvent or blur the demarcation of the line in order, for instance, to conquer positions. This was the strategy adopted by Italy in 1936 (with the violation of the Non-Intervention Agreement in the Spanish Civil War). More recently, Pakistan in 1999 (the Kargil crisis), and Russia in 2014 (the Ukraine crisis) also resorted to this tactic.

U.S. President Barack Obama's August 2012 red line statement on Syrian chemical weapons was particularly unclear. Obama said, "A red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. (...) if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons"¹⁵. The expression "a whole bunch" sounded improvised, and must have left Syrian leaders perplexed. And what exactly was "movement" supposed to mean? At the time, this was not clear at all. We now know that Obama's statement was indeed improvised; it went beyond the policy that had been defined by the Administration in the preceding weeks, to the surprise of the President's advisors¹⁶.

The lack of clarity about the consequences of crossing a red line is also a significant factor to consider when trying to explain why deterrence fails. As a rule, with all other things being equal, vague threats are less likely to impress than precise ones. As Richard Ned Lebow underlines, an exceedingly flexible commitment which limit the cost of abstention will not be interpreted as a sign of resolve"¹⁷.

In 1950, Beijing sought to deter the United States from crossing the 38th Parallel northwards by stating that it would take a "grave view" of such an event¹⁸. This threat can hardly be deemed clear-cut (and Washington took barely any notice of it). The same can be said of initial U.S. statements regarding Cuba in 1962. In September, President Kennedy declared that if strategic weapons were deployed on the island, "the gravest issues would arise"¹⁹, undoubtedly insufficient to impress President Khrushchev. In the late 1990s, American warnings to Belgrade over the fate of Kosovo only mentioned an

¹⁵ Quoted in CNN Wire Staff, "Obama Warns Syria Not to Cross Red Line", *CNN.com*, 21 August 2012.

¹⁶ See Peter Baker et al., "Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put U.S. in Bind on Syria", *The New York Times*, 4 May 2013.

¹⁷ Richard N. Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 85.

¹⁸ P.K. Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950", *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall-Winter 2001.

¹⁹ Statement by President John F. Kennedy on Cuba, US Department of State, Bulletin, Volume XLVII, No. 1213, 24 September 1962, p. 450.

intention to “respond” or to “take immediate action” if Yugoslavia used force there²⁰, which was evidently insufficient. Several years later, President George W. Bush’s attempt to firmly deter North Korea from exporting nuclear technology merely said, “we would hold North Korea fully accountable of the consequence of such action”²¹. Did he seriously believe that Pyongyang would be impressed by such a statement? It is hardly surprising, given the vague nature of the threat, that North Korea secretly continued the construction of a nuclear reactor in Syria – the consequences of which were not fully appreciated at the time.

The consequences promised by the United States of crossing the red line on the use of chemical weapons in Syria were equally unclear. President Obama had stipulated that movement or use of chemical weapons “would change my calculus; that would change my equation. (...) There would be enormous consequences”²². Observers and commentators took this statement as a threat of military action, but it is now known that arming the opposition was the U.S. Administration’s preferred response, although that could not have been clear to the Syrian regime. Another of Obama’s statements several months later was barely more precise, “The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable. If you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable”²³. Only in June 2013, when Washington publicly stated that the use of chemical weapons had been established, did the Administration make known that it planned to arm Syrian rebels²⁴. But without ruling out the possibility of military action.

Another similar example, this time with regard to Iran, involves the successive red lines drawn by the Israeli government since 2002 concerning the Iranian nuclear programme, which have rarely been accompanied by the announcement of specific measures should Tehran infringe the red lines²⁵. (The threat of military action against Iran has naturally been employed on many occasions by Israel, but generally without referring to a specific threshold).

Many other examples of equally vague references to the “unacceptable” or “intolerable” nature of such and such a decision or act by an adversary can be found in U.S. foreign policy statements over the past twenty-five years²⁶.

²⁰ Quoted in “Crisis in the Balkans: Statements on the United States’ Policy Towards Kosovo”, *The New York Times*, 18 April 1999.

²¹ President Bush’s Statement on North Korea Nuclear Test, 9 October 2006.

²² Quoted in CNN Wire Staff, “Obama Warns Syria Not to Cross Red Line”, CNN.com, 21 August 2012. The United States’ first use of the term “red line” in this context was by the Department of Defense spokesman, George Little, during the previous month, “We would caution them strongly against any intention to use those weapons. That would cross a serious red line.” Quoted in Stanley Kurtz, “The Frightening Truth About Syria’s WMDs”, *National Review Online*, 3 September 2013.

²³ Quoted in Josh Rogin, “Exclusive: Secret State Department cable: Chemical weapons used in Syria”, *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2013.

²⁴ Mark Mazzetti et al., “US is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels”, *The New York Times*, 13 June 2013.

²⁵ Yoel Guzansky, “Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts”, *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 16, n° 2, July 2013.

²⁶ For examples see Rosa Brooks, “Would Machiavelli Have Drawn a Red Line?”, *Foreign Policy*, 2 May 2013.

Finally, the issuer of a red line is unlikely to be taken seriously if its policy appears incoherent or self-contradictory. For instance, Israel's warnings to Syria since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 – not to attack Israel otherwise the Syrian regime itself would be in danger – were highly unlikely to prove fully convincing to Damascus as, in parallel, Israeli leaders were hinting that the Assad Regime was less objectionable than the alternatives. (Syria fired several times into the Golan Heights in retaliation for Israeli raids in Syrian territory)²⁷.

Red lines fail if the adversary is not convinced of the issuer's determination

Another major reason for the failure of red lines is the fact that the adversary is not convinced that it will actually suffer consequences if it crosses the line. This perception of weakness can exist either because of the vagueness of the promised consequences, but also because of the “reputation” of the leader or regime issuing the red line.

Research does not show any consensus on the importance of reputation in international politics²⁸. It seems, however, that it is not negligible. Numerous documented examples exist regarding the influence of perception of an actor's past behaviour on a subsequent decision made by another actor. As such, the British-French security guarantee to Poland in March 1939 failed to impress Hitler, because of the behaviour of London and Paris regarding the Czechoslovakia crisis in 1938. In the same vein, Beijing's warnings in 1950 concerning Korea were dismissed by Washington: other than the vague nature of these warnings (see above), the nascent Chinese regime was seen as weak and dependent on Moscow²⁹. John F. Kennedy's September 1962 warning to the Soviet Union did not impress Nikita Khrushchev because of the U.S. President's perceived weakness during the Berlin crisis the previous year³⁰. Argentina was encouraged to take action with regard to the Falklands/Malvinas Islands in light of the weak British response to the occupation of the South Thule Island in 1976³¹. Barack Obama's warning to Syria about chemical weapons had little chance of troubling Damascus because of the U.S. President's image as a political leader disinclined to take risks, and, particularly, his apparent reluctance to use military force in the Middle East, compounded by the fact that U.S. public opinion is now overwhelmingly wary of military intervention.

As one commentator puts it, when it comes to red lines – and deterrence in general – “simply having the ability to inflict pain and communicating that ability will not cut it”³².

²⁷ Yoel Guzansky, “Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts”, *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 16, n° 2, July 2013.

²⁸ See in particular Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996; Paul K. Huth, “Reputations and Deterrence: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment”, *Security Studies*, vol. 7, n° 1, Fall 1997.

²⁹ P.K. Rose, “Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950”, Central Intelligence Agency, *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall-Winter 2001.

³⁰ See Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961. Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth*, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2011.

³¹ Tory J. Beattie, *Conventional Deterrence and the Falklands Islands Conflict*, Thesis, US Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, March 2010.

³² Benjamin Alter, “Doing Red Lines Right”, *The National Interest*, 12 September 2013.

A further problem arises when a red line is moved, with the party trying to exercise deterrence losing credibility as a result:

- North Korea was probably encouraged to carry on with its nuclear programme by the lack of decisive U.S. action after previous warnings were ignored by Pyongyang. In 1994, the Clinton Administration warned that fuel reprocessing (to produce plutonium) would constitute a “red line” for the United States, which would be likely to result in “military action”³³. Yet, Washington did nothing when Pyongyang started producing plutonium in 2002. Four years later, President George W. Bush solemnly warned North Korea against transferring nuclear technology or material. But, when just a few months later Washington was informed of the discovery of a reactor under construction in Syria, the Administration did not react, to the dismay of vice-President Cheney who was of the opinion that bombing the reactor “would mean that our red lines meant something”³⁴.
- Likewise, Iran discovered that it could cross successive Israeli red lines without being exposed to military retaliation, which can only have encouraged Tehran to pursue its nuclear programme³⁵.
- President Obama’s warning about the “movement” of Syrian chemical weapons was clarified in late 2012 as in fact meaning “the transfer to terrorist groups” or “being prepared for use”³⁶. Then it seemed to quite simply evaporate, as the U.S. President subsequently only emphasised the hypothesis of use: “If you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable”³⁷.

As a former Israeli official put it, “I have witnessed decision-makers have contempt for red lines and at the moment of truth become colour-blind”³⁸.

Red lines fail when the penalty incurred is not superior to the potential benefit of crossing them

Finally – and this is also an age-old deterrence problem – even in the case of a clear line, a clearly defined penalty, and a manifestly determined defender, the adversary may calculate that the price is worth paying.

³³ Prepared Statement by the Honorable William Perry, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Former Secretary of Defense, *North Korea. Briefing and Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 110th Congress, 1st Session, January 18 and February 28, 2007, Serial n° 110-115, Washington, USGPO, 2007, p. 15.*

³⁴ Cheney said after he left office, “It would rock the North Koreans back on their haunches in terms of thinking they could peddle their nuclear technology and get away with it. It would mean that our red lines meant something.” Quoted in Peter Baker, *Days of Fire. Bush and Cheney in the White House*, New York Doubleday, 2013, p. 553.

³⁵ See Graham Allison, “Red Lines in the Sand”, *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2010.

³⁶ Quoted in David E. Sanger & Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Shifting Its Warning on Syria’s Chemical Arms”, *The New York Times*, 6 December 2012.

³⁷ Quoted in Josh Rogin, “Exclusive: Secret State Department cable: Chemical weapons used in Syria”, *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2013.

³⁸ Michael Herzog, “Beyond the Red Line”, *Haaretz*, 12 October 2012.

A classic example in this regard is the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat knew that attacking Israel would result in the strongest possible military response; but he nonetheless believed that despite a probable loss on the battlefield, he would restore the pride and reputation of his country and thereby change the political equation in the Near East. (Interestingly, he nevertheless refrained from crossing the 1949 armistice line, which suggests that he had internalised a possible Israeli nuclear deterrence red line³⁹.)

In 1981, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin warned that Israel would not allow its enemies to develop weapons of mass destruction⁴⁰. Yet, this is exactly what many of them did or continued to do. Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Syria had or have military-oriented nuclear and chemical programmes in spite of the fact that Israel's determination was clear and its willingness to use military coercion was manifest; at the time the country had recently destroyed the French-built Osiraq reactor in Iraq. The development – generally in secret – of weapons of mass destruction appears to have simply been too important for these countries to give up, even if that meant incurring military risk in the medium to long term.

U.S. warnings regarding Kosovo did not deter Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic's actions in 1998-1999. One possible explanation is that such warnings had become less clear as time progressed and that Belgrade may not have believed that the terms of the 1992 warning (see below) still held. But it could also be that after the secession of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, the fate of Kosovo – which has a key role in Serbian history – was perceived as being too important to give up, even at the risk of Western intervention.

Red lines encourage adversary actions “below the threshold”

A second major problem with red lines is that they may actually encourage an adversary to act below the line or “below the threshold”. An actor may consider that “everything goes” providing that the line is not crossed.

The famous example of U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson's statement about the “defensive perimeter” of the United States immediately comes to mind. Acheson had implicitly stated in 1950 that the Korean Peninsula was not covered by the U.S. “defensive perimeter”, which led North Korea and its allies to conclude that Washington would not defend its South Korean ally⁴¹. But other examples are readily identifiable:

- In 1961, John F. Kennedy gave the impression to Nikita Khrushchev that his only red line was a Soviet invasion of West Berlin, thereby implicitly suggesting that a forced separation and subsequent isolation of the Western sectors would

³⁹ The causal link between Israel's nuclear status, presumed at the time by Cairo, and President Sadat's decision to limit the objectives of the Egyptian army is backed up by accounts from Egyptian officials. See for example T. V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-use of Nuclear Weapons*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁰ Begin's statement was as follows: “Tell all your friends, tell anyone you meet, we shall defend our people with all the means at our disposal. We shall not allow any enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction turned against us”. Quoted in Shlomo Nakdimon, *First Strike: The Exclusive Story of How Israel Foiled Iraq's Attempt to Get the Bomb*, New York, Summit Books, 1987, p. 240.

⁴¹ Dean Acheson, *Speech on the Far East*, National Press Club, Washington, 12 January 1950.

not be unacceptable in Washington's eyes. "The consistent message he had sent Khrushchev – directly in Vienna and indirectly thereafter through public speeches and back-channel messages – was that the Soviet leader could do whatever he wished on the territory that he controlled as long as he didn't touch West Berlin or Allied access to the city."⁴²

- In July 1990, during an official meeting, U.S. ambassador April Glaspie told Saddam Hussein that the dispute between Iraq and its neighbours was not an American concern and the United States did not have a position on the issue, leading the Iraqi leader to believe that he could safely invade Kuwait (this was compounded by the fact that the State Department had also informed Saddam that there was no U.S. defence commitment to the country)⁴³.
- In January 1991, in a letter to Saddam Hussein, President George H. W. Bush informed the Iraqi President that the United States would not tolerate the destruction of Kuwaiti oil fields, terrorist actions against members of the coalition seeking to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, or the use of chemical or biological weapons⁴⁴. However, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, during his talks with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz (during which Baker handed Aziz the U.S. President's letter, which Aziz refused to take) emphasised only the third scenario, thereby potentially leading Iraq to believe that the other two scenarios were less important to the United States, which may in turn have encouraged Baghdad to torch Kuwaiti oil fields.
- In December of the following year, President George W. H. Bush issued the so-called "Christmas Warning": a letter to Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic stating that "in the event of conflict in Kosovo caused by Serbian action, the United States will be prepared to employ military force against the Serbians in Kosovo and in Serbia proper"⁴⁵. This was doubtless interpreted as an indirect "green light" for intervention in the Bosnian war, which had had broken out several months earlier (and in which Belgrade supported the Serbian separatists).
- The firm warning by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2006 regarding "the transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to States or non-state entities" may have been understood by North Korea as a de facto acquiescence to its nuclear program *per se*⁴⁶.
- Certain Chinese statements have been even more encouraging for Pyongyang: according to a recent statement by Foreign Minister Wang Ji, "we have a red line, that is, we will not allow war or instability on the Korean

⁴² Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961. Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth*, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2011, p. 488.

⁴³ "[W]e have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait." Quoted in John J. Mearsheimer & Stephen M. Walt, "An Unnecessary War", *Foreign Policy*, 1 January 2003.

⁴⁴ Text in George H. W. Bush & Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, New York, Knopf, 1998, p. 442.

⁴⁵ Quoted in "Crisis in the Balkans: Statements on the United States' Policy Towards Kosovo", *The New York Times*, 18 April 1999.

⁴⁶ "The transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to States or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable of the consequences of such action." President Bush's Statement on North Korea Nuclear Test, 9 October 2006.

peninsula”⁴⁷. Taken at face value, this means that North Korea nuclear provocations are tolerable in the eyes of Beijing.

- American statements seeking to deter Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon (see below) may have been interpreted in Tehran as an implicit *nihil obstat* to obtaining all of the building blocks of such a weapon.
- U.S. attempts to deter Syria from using chemical weapons may have induced Damascus into thinking that massive repression of the uprising in the country would be tolerated by Washington. (According to US Senator John McCain: “Obama’s red line is Assad’s green light”⁴⁸.) It may even have been interpreted by the Syrian regime as signifying that agents such as chlorine – whose use is prohibited by the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, but which is much cruder and less toxic than chemical munitions per se – could be used without a risk of major retaliation.
- Statements by Western officials suggesting that NATO would not militarily intervene in Ukraine may have encouraged Moscow. For instance, the NATO Deputy Secretary-General Alexander Vershbow stated in September 2014, “I don’t see any red line that, if crossed, would lead to military engagement”⁴⁹. As two commentators have put it, “drawing such a bright line around NATO territory is being read by Putin as a signal that non-members such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are – literally – up for grabs.”⁵⁰

Red lines, by their very nature, will be tested, with the concomitant risk of miscalculation and unexpected escalation

Every parent knows that the red lines they draw will often tempt their children to test them. The same phenomenon applies to the international stage. Drawing red lines may incite the other party to test the tricer’s resolve, if only to establish the exact limits of what is permissible. At face value, this is a rational course of action. For example, declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone over disputed territory; patrolling, fishing or exploring in disputed waters; and carrying out limited incursions into a disputed region are common techniques in Asia, where many significant borders are still disputed.

But drawing red lines may equally lead the adversary to embark on a deliberate strategy of gradual escalation in order to blur the line, and to make it politically more difficult for the defender to justify retaliation. This is the so-called boiling frog theory: a frog plunged in hot water will immediately jump out, but if the water temperature is raised very slowly, it may well end up being boiled. (The twentieth century “salami tactic”

⁴⁷ “China draws ‘red line’ on North Korea, says won’t allow war on peninsula”, *Reuters*, 8 March 2014.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Elizabeth Titus, “McCain says Obama’s ‘red line’ was Assad’s ‘green light’”, *Politico*, 5 May 2013.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Mark MacKinnon, “NATO not coming to Kiev’s rescue, regardless of Putin’s action”, *The Globe and Mail*, 2 September 2014.

⁵⁰ Kurt Volker & Erik Brattberg, “NATO must stand up to Putin’s threat to invade Ukraine”, *The Washington Post*, 28 August 2014.

also comes to mind in this respect⁵¹). This tactic is generally employed by any actor seeking to avoid a visible shock, which could mobilise governments and opinion.

- At the beginning of the 1950s, the United States was ambiguous regarding whether or not the Quemoy and Matsu Islands, near to the mainland but controlled by the Republic of China, were under its protection; Mao Zedong did not fail to test America's resolve in 1954, and again in 1958.
- The red line established by France in Chad (the 15th Parallel) was tested by incursions by the Transitional Government of National Unity (GUNT, backed by Libya) in 1986, and then by a Libyan airstrike in 1987⁵².
- Pakistan seemingly tested India's value of the Line of Control (the Indo/Pakistani ceasefire line in Kashmir), in the Kargil region in 1999 through a campaign of limited and "unclaimed" incursions (see above).
- In August 2014, when a Russian military invasion of Ukraine under the pretence of a humanitarian intervention was widely feared, a French daily newspaper ran the headline "Russia-Ukraine: the red line"⁵³. Yet, Moscow's whole strategy aimed to avoid a large-scale air-land invasion of Ukraine; instead, Russia gradually inserted men and equipment into Ukrainian territory over the space of several months, thereby retrospectively avoiding the possibility of evoking the crossing of a "red line".
- The interaction between Israel and its neighbours is also littered with examples. In 1976, with the objective of deterring Syria, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin established a red line in southern Lebanon, from Jezzine to Deir- ez-Zahrani, 25 kilometres north of the River Litani, which Damascus was forbidden from crossing. What constituted a transgression of this line was defined relatively flexibly (perhaps too much so): it was tested by Syria in December 1976 and January 1977⁵⁴. In 2000, Hezbollah captured and killed several Israeli soldiers despite Israeli warnings not to attack its territory, providing an example of action up to the limit of a red line⁵⁵. In a similar vein, for years, Israel warned Syria and Iran not to transfer strategic weapons to Hezbollah⁵⁶. But the two countries tested the red line on multiple occasions and Israel only started to enforce it in January 2013 by destroying convoys in Syrian territory⁵⁷.

⁵¹ This expression (*szalámitaktika*) was invented in the 1940s by the Hungarian Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi to describe the way in which the Party attacked non-Communist political groups.

⁵² Florent Séné, *Raids dans le Sahara central (Tchad, Libye, 1941-1987): Sarra ou le Rezzou décisif*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012, p. 197.

⁵³ *Libération*, 16 August 2014.

⁵⁴ Efraim Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, Washington, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1999, p. 109.

⁵⁵ Mitch Ginsburg, "Strongman's handcuffs: The futility of red lines", *The Times of Israel*, 28 May 2013.

⁵⁶ Yoel Guzansky, "Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 16, n° 2, July 2013.

⁵⁷ Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon publicly stated in April 2013 that the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah was a "red line" for Israel. "Ya'alon: Israel Acted to Stop Transfer of Weapons to Hezbollah", *The Algemeiner*, 22 April 2013. See also Yoel Guzansky, "Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 16, n° 2, July 2013.

- Last but not least is the example of the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. Between the end of 2012 and the summer of 2013, Damascus proceeded with slow escalation. The regime prepared for chemical weapon use in late 2012, without provoking a reaction from the international community⁵⁸. Then it started to use the weapons in small quantities, still without any significant reaction on the part of the international community⁵⁹. And after its official "disarmament", the regime began using small quantities of chlorine – a case of low intensity use of chemical weapons.

An incident in September 2014 at the NATO border neatly illustrates this problem. An Estonian policeman was detained by Russia, supposedly because he was in Russian territory. Given that a NATO summit had just come to a close, this was possibly an act of provocation on Russia's part, or a case of Moscow testing the Alliance's resolve⁶⁰.

In the field of nuclear deterrence, it is entirely possible to envisage a scenario whereby a State carries out a High-Altitude Electro-Magnetic Pulse (HA-EMP) strike, directly above an adversary's territory but in space. Can the attacked country (a HA-EMP strike affects electrical circuits on the ground) consider this act of aggression to be at the "nuclear threshold" in the same vein as a direct nuclear attack on its soil?

There may also be unwanted effects. In some cultures, considerations of honour and prestige could lead to a deliberate crossing of a red line drawn by another actor because the issuance of the red line was perceived as unacceptable provocation⁶¹. Even when the party crossing the line deems to have acted with caution, the risk of miscalculation still exists. When Islamabad embarked on a campaign of systematic encroachments of the Line of Control in 1999, it triggered an Indian retaliation that could well have turned into a fully-fledged war. The cyber-attacks of Russian origin that targeted Estonia in 2007 were relatively harmless (and could not have been covered by Article V of the Washington Treaty), but what would happen in the case of miscalculation on Moscow's part in the future and a cyber-attack against NATO were to have dramatic, cascading effects?

Another example of dangerously testing the water is North Korea's sinking of a South Korea warship and bombing the island of Yeonpyongyang in 2010. Pyongyang seemed to be testing the limits of U.S. security assurances to South Korea, but such actions could have provoked a dangerous military escalation. And clashes at sea between China and its neighbours, which are increasingly more frequent, may very well one day lead to the same result.

The Syrian chemical weapons crisis is also a good example of the risks of unchecked escalation: there is evidence from intercepted communications that the mix of chemical

⁵⁸ David E. Sanger & Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Shifting Its Warning on Syria's Chemical Arms", *The New York Times*, 6 December 2012.

⁵⁹ Adam Entous et al., "As Syrian Chemical Attack Loomed, Missteps Doomed Civilians", *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 November 2013.

⁶⁰ "Estonia angry at Russia's 'abduction' on border", *BBC News*, 5 September 2014.

⁶¹ See Rosa Brooks, "Would Machiavelli Have Drawn a Red Line?", *Foreign Policy*, 2 May 2013.

agents used in August 2013 – the game-changing event that mobilised the international community – had not been properly mastered⁶².

DILEMMAS IN RED LINE DIPLOMACY

The aforementioned problems and failures are unsurprising. Correctly drawing red lines – just like many instances of attempted deterrence – is a complex issue.

Any discourse or declaration aiming to establish a red line has to reconcile various kinds of constraints, essentially by taking into account several different audiences: the adversary one is seeking to deter, of course, but also one's own public opinion and domestic institutions, as well as one's allies when the red line pertains to extended deterrence commitments⁶³. Governments may have difficulty reconciling the expectations of all these constituencies without disappointing or upsetting any of them. As Richard Ned Lebow underlines, ambiguous commitments are often the product of competing and contradictory demands.⁶⁴

Another difficulty arises from the fact that, beyond the immediate aim of preventing a specific action by a specific actor, drawing red lines involves gauging the impact of the policy on other interests, on the perceptions of future adversaries, and on those of allies. Many observers have suggested that U.S. hesitation regarding the use of force following the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime has signalled to Tehran that Washington's threats to use force against Iran should Tehran cross the nuclear threshold should not be taken too seriously⁶⁵, or indeed that similar hesitation may have encouraged Moscow to take action in Ukraine⁶⁶.

Moreover, the hypothesis of reputational damage to the country is often taken into account in the deliberations of its political leaders. It would indeed be unwise for a political leader to dismiss the potential negative impact of inaction on their country's reputation once a red line has been crossed. Given that 2014 witnessed the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, it is apt to recall the extent to which this factor was crucial in shaping the behaviour of the great powers. Russia believed that abandoning Serbia in the case of conflict with the Austro-Hungarian Empire would give the rest of the world the impression that Russia was weak; following its defeat by Japan in 1905, it did not support Belgrade during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913⁶⁷. For its part, Austria-Hungary believed that backing down from conflict with Serbia would gravely affect its great-power status, which it believed had been diminished by the Balkan Wars⁶⁸. Germany also considered its prestige to have been affected by the crises of the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ For a sceptical analysis of "audience costs" (the domestic political cost of not taking action) see Marc Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis", *Security Studies*, vol. 21, n° 1, February 2012.

⁶⁴ Richard N. Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 85.

⁶⁵ Yoel Guzansky, "Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 16, n° 2, July 2013.

⁶⁶ Bill Hoffmann, "Sen. Ron Johnson: Obama's 'Red Line' Gave Putin 'Green Light'", *Newsmax*, 6 March 2014.

⁶⁷ Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace. The Road To 1914*, New York, Penguin Group, 2013, pp. 481-482.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 484, p. 496, p. 498.

preceding years, and that its great-power status was also on the line; support for Austria-Hungary was moreover seen as a necessity, for lack of which Germany risked losing her one real ally⁶⁹. As the historian Margaret MacMillan puts it, “demonstrating that you are a great power and avoiding humiliation are powerful forces in international relations”⁷⁰.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy was aware that Khrushchev perceived him as weak; he thus owed it to himself to restore his administration’s credibility. Leaders also think about the future – namely establishing, preserving, or restoring their reputation with a view to future crises. The Cuban Missile Crisis was also a matter for Washington of preventing a new crisis concerning Berlin. And the supposed need to preserve its reputation as “the guardian of the free world” was not insignificant in U.S. policy regarding Vietnam⁷¹. More recently, U.S. vice-President Dick Cheney suggested that U.S. military action to destroy the nuclear reactor built by North Korea in Syria would have delivered “a real shot across the bow of the Iranians”⁷².

In other words, *the issue of reputation is ultimately key to red line diplomacy*, as it is likely to have an impact on it in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, the actor to whom the deterrence discourse is addressed may perceive the value of the red line, and the likelihood that reprisals would be forthcoming, on the basis of the reputation of the actor drawing the line, which would thus partly determine the credibility of the deterrence threat. On the other hand, a State may take account of its perceived reputation, on the basis of its past actions, in the manner in which it establishes a red line; it may draw the line in such a way that it believes would also preserve its future interests or those of its allies.

All this may lead towards firm commitments and promises of a strong response should a red line be crossed. At the same time, no political official wants to forego their freedom of action, especially if there was an element of bluff in their threat. Certain experts have referred to a “commitment trap” which forces leaders to take action if deterrence has failed in order to preserve their reputation or that of their country⁷³. No Government likes being boxed in and freedom of action is one of the most precious commodities in political life, especially when the use of force is being contemplated. As former U.S. diplomat R. Nicholas Burns says, “in matters of war and peace, you generally don’t want to back yourself into a corner by drawing lines in the sand that automatically trigger reaction, because that denies you the flexibility in negotiations where you want to preserve all options”⁷⁴.

Things are all the more complicated when it comes to extended deterrence. Allies need to be reassured, but the defender must also avoid a scenario in which they feel protected to the point of becoming reckless. This dilemma is well versed, and was already

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. xxxviii, p. 563, p. 610.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 503.

⁷¹ See Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect. The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, New York, Vintage Books, 1996; and Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1979.

⁷² U.S. vice-President Dick Cheney quoted in Peter Baker, *Days of Fire. Bush and Cheney in the White House*, New York, Doubleday, 2013, p. 553.

⁷³ Scott D. Sagan, “The Commitment Trap: Why The United States Should Not Use Nuclear Threats to Deter Biological and Chemical Weapons Attacks”, *International Security*, vol. 24, n° 4, Spring 2000.

⁷⁴ Quoted in James Kitfield, “What is a ‘Red Line’ Worth?”, *The National Journal*, 2 May 2013.

discernible at the beginning of the twentieth century, as the lead up to the First World War demonstrates. Russia wished to protect Serbia, but not to the extent of encouraging rash initiatives on Belgrade's part⁷⁵. The United Kingdom had decided to commit itself to the defence of France against Germany, but did not want this commitment to encourage Paris to act in a fashion that would excessively strengthen its national position on the European stage⁷⁶. The contemporary case of U.S. allies in Asia also comes to mind. For instance, Taiwan should not think that Washington would necessarily protect it from the potential consequences (Chinese military invasion) of a unilateral declaration of independence.

Red line diplomacy is thus particularly complex, as red lines create significant policy dilemmas. For instance, "if the red line is too vague it is not credible; if it is too sharp, it may be more credible but the cost of not realizing it is high."⁷⁷ And while a line that is too sharp can suggest to the adversary that there is no risk providing the adversary remains below it, a line that is too vague incites the adversary to test it. There is thus no ideal way to draw a red line. There are, in a certain sense, "fifty shades of red".⁷⁸

SHOULD THE PRACTICE OF RED LINES BE ABANDONED?

Does this mean that diplomacy should dispense with red lines, as many American commentators suggested following the Syrian crisis⁷⁹? That would be tantamount to discarding an essential element of deterrence and thus of crisis prevention. *Establishing red lines is consubstantial to deterrence, as such lines are necessary in order to avoid misunderstandings, misperceptions, and miscalculations*⁸⁰. Red lines are also necessary in the framework of extended deterrence, in order to reassure allies. It is simplistic to argue, as U.S. Senator Rand Paul has done, in favour of giving up red lines altogether, and calling on the U.S. Administration to follow the example of President Reagan, who allegedly "chose not to announce his policies in advance" and believed that "we should not announce to our enemies what we might do in every conceivable situation" (which, in any case, is by no means the goal of red lines)⁸¹.

It is true that drawing a red line constitutes a form of "conscious cancellation of free will"⁸², which recalls other metaphors of political and military decision making:

⁷⁵ Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace. The Road to 1914*, New York, Penguin Group, 2013, p. 482.

⁷⁶ See Richard N. Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 85.

⁷⁷ Yoel Guzansky, "Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 16, n° 2, July 2013.

⁷⁸ The expression is borrowed from Herald Staff, "Fifty shades of red", *Boston Herald*, 15 June 2013.

⁷⁹ Examples include Aldeo Matteucci, "Red-lining in diplomacy", *Diplo*, 26 October 2012; Rosa Brooks, "Would Machiavelli Have Drawn a Red Line?", *Foreign Policy*, 2 May 2013; Ginsburg, op. cit.; Patricia Taft, "The Year of Red-Line Diplomacy", *Fund for Peace*, 24 June 2013; Daniel Farber, "Red Line Thinking", *The Newshound Blog*, 29 October 2013.

⁸⁰ The classic work on this question is Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976.

⁸¹ Rand Paul, "Where I Stand on Containing Iran", *The Washington Post*, 16 April 2014.

⁸² Yoel Guzansky, "Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 16, n° 2, July 2013.

“burning one’s bridges”, and “crossing the Rubicon” (see below). But that is the price to pay for deterrence to be successful. Thomas Schelling, one of the founding fathers of modern deterrence theory, called it “the art of commitment”. It is about establishing oneself “in a position where we cannot fail to react as we said we would – where we just cannot help it – or where we would be obliged by some overwhelming cost of not reacting in the manner we had declared”⁸³. In his view, “It is essential, therefore (...) to leave as little room as possible for judgment or discretion in carrying out the threat. If one is committed to punish a certain type of behaviour when it reaches certain limits, but the limits are not carefully and objectively defined, the party threatened will realize that when the time comes to decide whether the threat must be enforced or not, his interest and that of the threatening party will coincide in an attempt to avoid the mutually unpleasant consequences.”⁸⁴.

But is all that worth the bother? To answer in the affirmative, it is necessary to demonstrate that red lines can be effective. This is evidently difficult, as it is patently impossible to demonstrate a negative. (Therein lies the issue of the effectiveness of deterrence in general) Archives and testimonies can sometimes offer clues; such and such an actor can retrospectively claim to have been deterred. But the essential fact is that many of the most important red lines drawn since 1945 have not been crossed:

- The most important and obvious red line is that of nuclear deterrence. The absence of any use of nuclear weapons means that the “vital interests” red lines of countries with nuclear weapons at their disposal have never been crossed. (Certain observers highlight the examples of the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982 to suggest that nuclear deterrence does not work, but these examples are barely relevant⁸⁵).
- Another famous red line is Article V of the 1949 Washington Treaty, “the red line of collective defence”, as it was recently dubbed in relation to the Ukraine crisis⁸⁶. Although it was invoked after the attacks on the 11th September 2001 (carried out by a non-state actor highly unlikely to be receptive to deterrence through the threat of reprisals), no State has ever undertaken military aggression against a member-State of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), in Europe or North America. Officials from the Baltic States, who feel most threatened by a revanchist Russia, explicitly refer to Article V as a “red line”⁸⁷.

⁸³ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Yale University, 2008 edition, p. 43.

⁸⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 40.

⁸⁵ During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt and Syria attacked the territory occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War, but never threatened Israel’s 1949 borders. During the Falklands War in 1982, Argentina attacked a British overseas territory rather than the United Kingdom proper. Neither Israel nor the United Kingdom had communicated, directly or indirectly (Israel’s discourse on nuclear deterrence is often oblique, insofar as the country does not publicly acknowledge its possession of nuclear weapons), the fact that their nuclear deterrent covered such territory. As such, it is hard to cite these examples as proof that “nuclear deterrence does not work”.

⁸⁶ Steven Erlanger, “NATO Steps Back into the USSR”, *The New York Times*, 22 May 2014.

⁸⁷ According to former Latvian Defence Minister Artis Pabriks: “we have to give a clear signal that [challenging Latvia’s security] is a red line, not a red line as in Syria, but that if you cross it we will shoot”. Quoted in Steven Erlanger, “Eastern Europe Frets About NATO’s Ability to Curb Russia”, *The New York Times*, 23 April 2014. Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves stated, “I do believe that the borders of NATO are a red line. I have faith in that.” Quoted in *The Economist*, “The decline of deterrence”, 3 May 2014.

- Just as well known is the red line drawn by President Kennedy in his speech on the 22 October 1962. In it, Kennedy in fact drew two different red lines: one geographic (the “quarantine” established around the island), and the other strategic (the warning that any missile launched from Cuba against the Western hemisphere would be treated as a Soviet missile launched against the United States).⁸⁸ The first was tested by the Soviet Union, but eventually respected. The second was intended to diminish the risk of circumnavigation of U.S. deterrence, and was evidently respected.
- The People’s Republic of China has repeatedly warned that a Taiwanese declaration of independence would be unacceptable. The Anti-Secession Law passed in 2005 made it clear that any declaration of this nature would be met with the use of force⁸⁹.
- In January 1991, the United States communicated a firm warning to Iraq (see above). President Bush wrote to Saddam Hussein stating that should chemical or biological weapons be used by Baghdad, the Iraqi regime would be removed⁹⁰. Certain experts disagree on whether deterrence was actually successful on this occasion⁹¹, but there are good grounds to believe that this was indeed the case.⁹²
- In December 1992, as recalled above, the George H. W. Bush Administration delivered a strong warning to Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic not to use military force in the Serbian province of Kosovo. The red line held until the late 1990s (see above).
- Regarding Iran’s nuclear programme, as examined above, Israel’s first red lines were crossed by Tehran, but they were either elliptical or not accompanied by a clear promise of retaliation. However, the most recent, which is also the firmest,

⁸⁸ “To halt this offensive build up, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba, from whatever nation or port, will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back (...). It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.” Quoted in U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, October 1962.

⁸⁹ Article 8 of the Chinese Anti-Secession Law states that “In the event that the ‘Taiwan independence’ secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.” **Anti-Secession Law adopted at the Third Session of the Tenth National People's Congress on March 14, 2005.**

⁹⁰ “The American people will demand vengeance. And we have the means to exact it... [T]his is not a threat, it is a promise.” He then warned that if such weapons were used, the American objective “would not be the liberation of Kuwait, but the elimination of the current Iraqi regime”. Quoted in Benjamin Buch & Scott Sagan, “Our Red Lines and Theirs”, *Foreign Policy*, 13 December 2013.

⁹¹ For a sceptical view see Benjamin Buch & Scott Sagan, “Our Red Lines and Theirs”, *Foreign Policy*, 13 December 2013.

⁹² The idea that the American threat played an essential role in Iraq’s decision not to use chemical and biological weapons (which the country possessed at the time) is confirmed by accounts of Iraqi officials, notably Tarek Aziz, and Generals Kamal and Al-Samarrai (see in particular *Frontline: The Gulf War*, Public Broadcasting System, 10 January 1996; and R. Jeffrey Smith, “U.N. Says Iraqis Prepared Germ Weapons in Gulf War”, *The Washington Post*, 26 August 1995).

has thus far not been crossed⁹³. In September 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu literally drew a red line on a diagram in front of the United Nations General Assembly. This red line corresponded to the production of a sufficient quantity of enriched uranium 20% comprised of isotope U-235 to make a nuclear weapon (about 240-250 kilos of enriched uranium) once this uranium had been enriched to 90% U-235. Iran's reaction – slowing down production and converting a part of its stockpile into fuel – seems to suggest that Iran “internalised” the Israeli red line, to use the expression of a senior Israeli official⁹⁴. (It is, however, important to note that the former director of the Safeguards Department of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Olli Heinonen, believes that the red line in question was only “circumvented”⁹⁵).

- Also in 2012, President Obama reportedly sent a direct message to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, warning him that any disruption of international traffic in the Gulf – at the time Iran had issued a number of threats to this effect – would constitute a red line and would be met with a harsh US response. This warning was backed up by the visible reinforcement of U.S., UK, and French maritime forces in the Gulf⁹⁶.

The problem is thus not so much the principle of red lines as the way in which they are drawn. How can this be done effectively?

A DELICATE BALANCING ACT

Establishing red lines in an effective fashion is a delicate balancing act. One analyst suggests that “if the stakes are unusually high, the red line particularly bright, and the commitment to act firm”, then a red line can prove to be a “useful deterrent”⁹⁷. But it is not that simple. Yet, the lessons of history, as well as logic and common sense can help to propose a few suggestions.

Red lines should be drawn extremely carefully

This should go without saying – but the historical record, including some of the aforementioned examples, shows that this is not necessarily the case. Any deterrence message issued by the highest political and military authorities should be prepared and drafted with the utmost care. The likely adverse reactions must be immediately prepared for (for instance by outlining them), in order to, so to speak, refine the traits and colour of the line.

The firmest – and thus theoretically the most credible – red lines are those that are publicly established by a head of State or government in the form of a statement

⁹³ For an overview of Israel's red lines on Iran see Shashank Joshi & Hugh Chalmers, *Iran: Red Lines and Grey Areas*, Royal United Services Institute, April 2013.

⁹⁴ Quoted in David Makovsky and Gabrielle Tutin, *The Thin Red Line: Is Iran Outmanoeuvring the US and Israel?*, Washington, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 April 2013.

⁹⁵ See David Makovsky and Gabrielle Tutin, *The Thin Red Line: Is Iran Outmanoeuvring the US and Israel?*, Washington, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 April 2013.

⁹⁶ “US Warns Iran on Hormuz through Secret Channel”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 13 January 2012.

⁹⁷ James Kitfield, “What is a ‘Red Line’ Worth?”, *The National Journal*, 2 May 2013.

carefully prepared in advance or a text such as a communiqué or letter, along with red lines that are the subject of a multilateral agreement.

Red lines should be clear on either the circumstances or the consequences

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

In the opinion of Sir Michael Quinlan, of one the principal British theoreticians (and practitioners) of deterrence, it is better to be clear – all other things being equal – regarding the nature of the red line rather than the consequences of transgressing it; he believes, quite correctly, that the more precise the threat, the more opportunity the adversary has to prepare in advance to suffer the consequences of its actions and thus the less it will be deterred⁹⁸.

In terms of the nature of the line, an incontrovertible geographic marker or the use of a well-defined type of weapon are particularly likely to prove successful. This could be a parallel, such as the 38th Parallel on the Korean Peninsula, or the 15th Parallel in Chad during the 1980s⁹⁹. The North Atlantic Treaty also precisely defines the scope of its collective defence clause (Article V)¹⁰⁰. This could involve the use of a nuclear weapon (with the aforementioned caveat regarding a HA-EMP strike)¹⁰¹. However, chemical and particularly biological weapons are more difficult to define in red line terms: in numerous cases, these weapons can be homemade, and the in the case of the latter, quite simply naturally occurring. (The origins of an epidemic due to a naturally occurring agent could not be easily determined.)

⁹⁸ “Michael Quinlan, “Deterrence and Deterrability”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 25, n° 1, 2004.

⁹⁹ In 1983, France drew a “red line” along the 15th Parallel in order to deter Libya from attacking Chad. The line more or less corresponded to the boundary between the Sahel and the Sahara. It was also supposedly defined in terms of the maximum range of action of the Libyan air force. See Florent Séné, *Raids dans le Sahara central (Tchad, Libye, 1941-1987): Sarra ou le Rezzou décisif*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2012, p. 196. The line was “pushed up” to the 16th Parallel in 1984 following an incursion by Libyan forces (see below).

¹⁰⁰ For the purpose of Article V,5 an armed attack on one or more of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack: on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France [On January 16, 1963, the North Atlantic Council noted that insofar as the former Algerian Departments of France were concerned, the relevant clauses of this Treaty had become inapplicable as from July 3, 1962], on the territory of or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer; on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when in or over these territories or any other area in Europe in which occupation forces of any of the Parties were stationed on the date when the Treaty entered into force or the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.” *North Atlantic Treaty*, signed in Washington on the 4 April 1949, Article VI-1.

¹⁰¹ During the Cold War, strategists attempted to establish firebreaks that would be capable of controlling the escalation of a military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union; during the 1960s a consensus emerged around the fact that the only realistic firebreak, which would likely be understood by the two main protagonists in a time of war, was the threshold separating conventional warfare from nuclear warfare.

A good example of balance between clarity and flexibility is Article of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that “an armed attack”, “against one or more of [the NATO members]” in the region defined by the Treaty will result in members taking “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force”¹⁰².

Another interesting example is what became known as the Carter Doctrine, namely the declaration by U.S. President Jimmy Carter following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, whose aim was to discourage Moscow from going further, in the face of fears that the Soviet Union might be tempted to push on further towards the Gulf¹⁰³. This forceful declaration, made during the State of the Union Address, was followed by the creation of a new regional military command – Central Command – in 1983.

A third such example is the so-called doctrine of “deliberate ambiguity” which long characterised the U.S. and UK nuclear doctrines: Washington and London repeatedly stated that the use of chemical or biological weapons would be met with an “overwhelming”, “devastating”, or “proportional” response. This was meant to take into account the hypothesis of the use of a low-level chemical or biological agent that would not warrant the retaliatory use of nuclear weapons. It was also designed to maintain the political authorities’ freedom of action should deterrence fail. The concept was introduced at the time of the Gulf War in 1991. (For a period of time France drew on this concept in its own deterrence discourse¹⁰⁴).

The threshold can be fine tuned at times of crisis in order to avoid unwanted escalation. For instance, on the 23rd October 1962, President John F. Kennedy adjusted the quarantine zone around Cuba from a distance of 800 nautical miles to 500 nautical miles in order to give the Soviet Union an additional day of deliberation.

As seen above, in 1976, to deter Syria, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin established a red line in southern Lebanon, from Jezzine to Deir ez Zahrani, 25 kilometres north of the River Litani, that Damascus was prohibited from crossing¹⁰⁵. But Rabin also made it clear that the criteria to determine whether the red line was crossed would include some flexibility.

On a different note, namely nuclear deterrence, the French concept in its classical form attempts to reconcile the different dilemmas and priorities of nuclear deterrence in the following manner: any threat to “vital interests” would trigger a nuclear riposte, whatever the means employed, but such interests are not defined especially precisely (Paris limits itself to defining its core vital interests: territory, population, and

¹⁰² *North Atlantic Treaty*, signed in Washington on the 4 April 1949, Article V.

¹⁰³ “Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” President Jimmy Carter, *State of the Union Address*, 21 January 1980.

¹⁰⁴ During a speech on nuclear deterrence, given in January 2006, President Jacques Chirac stated: « State leaders who envision (...) to use, one way or the other, weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they would expose themselves to a firm, adapted response from our part. And this response could be conventional. It can also be of another nature. » Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, lors de sa visite aux forces aériennes et océanique stratégiques, Landivisiau - l'Île Longue / Brest, 19 January 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Efraim Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, Washington, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1999, p. 109.

sovereignty). The adversary would receive a nuclear warning should it be mistaken regarding their demarcation, or should it attempt to test French resolve.

All States with nuclear capabilities had recourse to red lines to describe the threshold for the use of their nuclear forces. These red lines are described with varying degrees of precision, but almost always with a fairly significant degree of room for interpretation, which is doubtless necessary in this context given the stakes. Since 2010, Russia has been considering the use of a nuclear weapon in response to an attack carried out with weapons of mass destruction, but also in classical terms “if the very existence of the State is threatened”¹⁰⁶. Pakistan has never really published a nuclear doctrine, but, in 2002, indirectly and subtly let it be known through some of the country’s nuclear officials that Islamabad had four red lines: (1) the loss of a significant portion of its territory, (2) the destruction of a large section of its air-land battalion, (3) economic suffocation through blockades of its main ports, (4) massive political destabilisation leading to a loss of sovereignty exerted by the Pakistani authorities on their territory. Islamabad also let it be known that these thresholds were “*indicative*” and that the country’s leaders would consider the situation from an overarching perspective before deciding whether or not to proceed with a nuclear riposte¹⁰⁷.

Conversely, and this is without doubt a counter-example, India announced a relatively rigid doctrine in 2003: *any* use of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear but also chemical and biological) against Indian Territory or Indian forces could lead to a *massive* nuclear response¹⁰⁸. It is unclear whether India’s potential adversaries are convinced of the credibility of this doctrine.

But they should always project a clear sense of determination on the part of the defender

However, in all cases, the adversary needs to be persuaded of the defender’s determination to carry out reprisals if the red line is transgressed. At a time when Western countries are often, rightly or wrongly, seen as being weak by their potential adversaries, vague threats of “costs” or “consequences” are insufficient even if the threshold for action has been clearly defined. Similarly, stating that “we are not ruling anything out”, and “all options are on the table” is undoubtedly inadequate. (This is perhaps even the worst course to follow as such declarations often inflame commentators and opinion without having an effect on the adversary.)

Conversely, President Obama’s statements regarding Iran’s nuclear programme are a good example of a consistent and carefully drawn red line, which includes precisely the right amount of flexibility and vagueness (he will not allow Iran to “obtain a nuclear weapon”) and explicitly mentions the possible use of force. But the current problem for American deterrence is Mr Obama’s reputation as someone who would hesitate to use military force, and this reticence has undoubtedly affected Tehran’s calculations. For

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Nikolai Sokov, *The New 2010 Russian Military Doctrine: The Nuclear Angle*, Monterey, The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 5 February 2010.

¹⁰⁷ See Paolo Cotta-Ramusino & Maurizio Martellini, *Nuclear safety, nuclear stability and nuclear strategy: A concise report of a visit by Landau Network – Centro Volta*, Landau Network – Centro Volta, 21 January 2002.

¹⁰⁸ Prime Minister’s Office, *Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Progress in Operationalizing India’s Nuclear Doctrine*, Press Release, 4 January 2003.

this reason some observers have suggested that, in light of events concerning the Syrian chemical weapons crisis in the summer of 2013 (during which President Obama announced, to widespread surprise, that he would seek congressional approval for strikes against Syria), that the best way to ensure that Iran is deterred from crossing the nuclear threshold would be for the administration to ask Congress to pre-authorise military action, with the aim of preventing Tehran from being able to expect a lengthy internal U.S. debate with an uncertain outcome should it acquire a nuclear weapon.¹⁰⁹

The defender's determination can also be clearly demonstrated via additional gestures; beyond the repetition and definition of the deterrence discourse in various guises (but obviously under the same terms), "friendly reminders" such as visits, deployments of military forces in the region, overflights, etc. may be employed. The fact that the red line enshrined in Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty has never been crossed by a State is also due to the fact that NATO member States have established a dedicated military organisation along with joint doctrines for the use of military force, and that they regularly carry out visible exercises and manoeuvres, often involving the principal guarantor of the Alliance's security, the United States. During the Cold War, the REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) exercises were part of deterrence. This has also been the case since 1950 on the Korean Peninsula.

The defender can also ensure that a response is perceived as being almost automatic, in other words give the impression that it is ready to entirely forgo its freedom of action. A risky means of implementing this strategy is the "tripwire" concept that was in vogue during the Cold War. The presence of American soldiers in close proximity to the Iron Curtain was supposed to guarantee, in the eyes of the Soviet Union, the fact that the U.S. commitment to the defence of Europe in the case of an invasion would be immediate and almost forced. This concept was pushed to the limit by the Soviet *Perimetr* mechanism constructed during the 1980s; once activated, the system would automatically launch all remaining Soviet missiles at the United States. (However, given that it was not brought to the attention of the United States it had no deterrence value¹¹⁰).

Additional clarifications, or even the "reestablishment of deterrence" may be necessary for the red line to work

Once established, a red line has to be tended to and nurtured. It may be necessary to put "a fresh coat of paint" on red lines after having observed the adversary's initial reactions. If the adversary tests the defender's resolve, it becomes necessary to re-establish the credibility of deterrence, either by issuing a warning in one form or another (manoeuvres, limited military action, etc.), or by strongly reaffirming the promise of retaliation. The reaffirmation of the red line may also be necessary quite simply because time has passed and the adversary may consider that an old red line established by leaders or governments that are no longer in power is no longer valid.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin Alter, "Doing Red Lines Right", *The National Interest*, 12 September 2013.

¹¹⁰ See David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand. The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy*, New York, Doubleday, 2009, pp. 152-154. The concept of a *Doomsday Machine* was envisaged during the 1950s. It is mentioned, satirically, in Stanley Kubrick's film *Doctor Strangelove*.

For instance, when Libya tested the French red line in Chad (see above), Paris reacted by bombarding the Ouadi-Doum runway in 1986 and 1987¹¹¹. Another, more recent example is the reaffirmation of the U.S. commitment to Japan's security following the clashes between Japanese and Chinese vessels over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and China's establishment of an Air Defence Identification Zone.¹¹² These actions clearly demonstrated to Beijing and other American allies that Washington fully intended to honour its commitments.

Other recent examples include an attempt by NATO to deter a non-conventional attack. The Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, General Philip Breedlove, declared that attacks by non-uniformed forces (referred to as "little green men") would be treated as armed aggression if they could be attributed to a specific country¹¹³; moreover, in September 2014 the members of the Alliance firmly declared that cyber-attacks could also fall within the remit of Article V¹¹⁴.

By contrast, throughout the 1990s U.S. leaders failed to plainly reaffirm the validity of the White House's 1992 Christmas Warning on Kosovo, settling instead for more vague declarations (see above).

Clarifications may also be needed to deter actions below the red line

It is important to ensure that the adversary cannot consider all actions below the red line to be tolerable or acceptable. The defender may have to state that certain actions below the threshold would also have serious consequences, even though they would not be the same as those resulting from a transgression of the red line. For instance, in order to ensure that Iran does not go all the way to the nuclear threshold, Western officials may have to hint that obtaining a "nuclear device" (that is, an experimental prototype that can be tested, but which is not militarily usable, notably because of its size and weight which would prevent it from being delivered by a missile or an aircraft) or an "unassembled weapon" (i.e. all of the necessary components to make a weapon) would be met with severe consequences¹¹⁵.

When the stakes are high, one should never give the impression of being prepared to give up all military options

Appearing to retreat from a commitment to use force can seriously weaken the desired deterrent effect. Regarding the protection of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, President Obama, having affirmed that these islands were protected by the United States (see above), unfortunately seemed to immediately backtrack from his clarification in response to a question, stating that America might not want to "engage militarily". That

¹¹¹ Florent Séné, *Raids dans le Sahara central (Tchad, Libye, 1941-1987): Sarra ou le Rezzou décisif*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012, p. 197.

¹¹² "Our treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands". *Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan*, 24 April 2014.

¹¹³ "NATO would respond militarily to Crimea-style infiltration: general", *Reuters*, 17 August 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/17/us-ukraine-crisis-breedlove-idUSKBN0GH0JF20140817>

¹¹⁴ *Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales*, 5 September 2014, para. 72,

¹¹⁵ There is no official, universally recognised definition of what exactly constitutes a nuclear "weapon".

may have appeared to China as a sign of wavering commitment¹¹⁶. On a different note, even though no one expected that the United States would use force to counter Russian actions in Ukraine, it may have been unwise for President Obama to explicitly state that “Russia will not be deterred from further escalation by military force”¹¹⁷.

Communicating the red line privately is often a good strategy, albeit not a panacea

The private communication (for instance, via a letter personally delivered by an emissary) of red lines has its advantages. It conveys a sense of seriousness to the entity that the defender is seeking to deter, and projects the deterrence dialogue outside of the tumult of the domestic and international debate; in so doing, it helps the defender to avoid the “commitment trap” (and simultaneously gives a certain degree of flexibility to the other party, which will feel less tempted to cross the red line for reasons of honour or prestige). At the same time, for the same reasons – this is the essence of the dilemma, as examined above – the deterrent effect might be weakened if the other party believes that the defender’s reputation is no longer on the line, and that the defender will be more freely able to not follow through with its threat... It should be added that a threat expressed only privately and discretely could be taken less seriously in certain cultures (for example in China), which highly value strong public commitments. Yet, in any case, private communication can serve as an excellent means of clarifying, if need be, the boundaries of a publically defined red line, or of indicating to the adversary, if necessary, that it is close to crossing it.

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The limitations of red lines are those of deterrence itself. Some actors may be largely immune to traditional deterrence logical for structural reasons (for instance, in cases involving stateless terrorist groups) or circumstantial ones (certain leaders may not be susceptible to a deterrence dialogue if their sense of rationality is impaired by a psychological impediment, drug or alcohol abuse, or simply – as is often the case – by the stress caused by the crisis). Moreover, some aspects of international affairs by their very nature do not easily lend themselves to deterrence through the establishment of red lines: cyber-space, for instance, because of issues regarding the identification of the attacker and the potential uncontrollable effects of numerous actions in this domain¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁶ Roger Cohen, “Russia’s Weimar Syndrome”, *The New York Times*, 1 May 2014.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Dave Boyer, “Amid Russia’s seizure of Crimea, Obama urges NATO members to ‘chip in’”, *The Washington Times*, 26 March 2014.

¹¹⁸ On the limitations of red line diplomacy regarding cyberspace see Lieutenant Colonel John A. Mowchan, “Don’t Draw the (Red) Line”, *Proceedings*, vol. 137, n° 10, October 2011.

Red lines nevertheless remain a powerful policy instrument. The unfortunate experiences and failures of the last few years should not serve as a justification for discarding them, but rather as an encouragement to improve them as an instrument – namely, to develop and refine “red line diplomacy”.

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APPENDIX: “Red line”, “line in the sand”, “yellow line”...: origins of an expression

The origins of the expression “red line” may lie in Julius Caesar’s crossing of the River Rubicon, which takes its name (from the Latin *rubeus*) from the colour of the mud that it carries along. Caesar, deciding to cross this body of water, which marked the border between the province of Cisalpine Gaul, in 49 BC, committed an act against Roman law and crossed a point of no return in his rebellion against Pompeii. It was at this point that, according to Suetonius, he said, “the die is cast” (*alea jacta est*).

Yet, given the colour red’s traditional association with blood and thus with violence (and, by extension, danger), the expression may have multiple origins.

In modern times, it was first associated with the heroic battle of Balaclava (1854), which pitted Russia against an international coalition during the Crimean War. The correspondent of the Times of London, William Russell, described the British regiment, whose uniforms were red, facing up to the Russians, as “a thick red streak tipped with a line of steel”. The expression apparently appeared with regard to this battle in Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Tommy”, which evokes the “thin red line of heroes”.

The first contemporary instance of the expression “red line” is the “Red Line Agreement” of 1928, established between the partners of the Turkish Petroleum Company. The line in question, allegedly drawn in red on a map by Armenian businessman Calouste Gulbenkian, defined the perimeter inside which no company was allowed to operate independently. In 1931, a “Red Line” (also known as the Glenday Line) was drawn to delineate the border between Sudan and Kenya.

The expression was then used during the 1950s to mean the engine rotation speed that aircraft pilots and automobile drivers should not exceed.

Since the 1970s, the expression has also been applied to diplomacy. In 1975, the Israeli Defence Minister Ygal Allon used the expression “red line” to define his country’s survival in the eyes of Washington¹¹⁹. In 1976, to deter Syria, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin established a red line in southern Lebanon (see above). In 1983, to defend Chad, France traced a “red line” from Mao to Abéché, along the 15th Parallel

¹¹⁹ *United Press International*, “Allon Cautions US on Talks”, 19 June 1975.

(and then moved up the following year to the 16th Parallel), which Libyan forces were forbidden from crossing¹²⁰.

The expression “a line in the sand” is linked but has a broader meaning. It is often believed to be of biblical origin, despite the fact that the text used to justify this origin does not clearly describe the tracing of a line¹²¹. In any case, it suggests the idea of a challenge, of irreversible choice, which recalls the “crossing of the Rubicon” described above. Around 168 BC, a Roman envoy, Gaius Popillius Laenas, drew a line in the sand around King Antioch IV, enjoining him not to cross it before having made a decision regarding his intention to attack Alexandria. At Fort Alamo in 1836, Colonel William Travis drew a line in the ground, asking for volunteers to cross over it and join him. In the novel *Tom Sawyer* (1876), Tom draws a similar line and challenges another boy to cross it.

In French, the expression “yellow line” (*ligne jaune*), which comes from road markings (yellow was the colour used up to 1972), is freely used (especially in the political sphere). The white line that stops at short T3 type intervals (established at 1.33 metre intervals), which only allows for overtaking of extremely slow vehicles, is traditionally called the “deterrence line” (*ligne de dissuasion*).

¹²⁰ Frank Jacobs, “The World’s Largest Sandbox”, *The New York Times*, 7 November 2011.

¹²¹ In the Gospel According to John (chapter 8), Jesus wrote on the ground and defied the scribes and Pharisees to stone the adulterous woman: “Let he among you who is without sin cast the first stone”.