We thank Francis J. Gavin for his insightful review of our article, “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail.”\textsuperscript{1} Gavin’s essay offers several thoughtful criticisms of our study, and of the use of quantitative methods in nuclear security studies more broadly. In our joint response with Matthew Kroenig (“The Case for Using Statistics to Study Nuclear Security”), we explained why Gavin’s critiques of our methodological approach are well off the mark. Here we turn to his specific criticisms of our article and its findings. Gavin’s arguments are interesting and worthy of serious consideration, but they fail to undermine our paper’s central conclusions.

Our article explores how nuclear weapons influence international crisis bargaining. When states attempt to coerce (or ‘compel’) their adversaries into changing their behavior or relinquishing possessions, do nuclear weapons provide them with an advantage? Or are nuclear weapons useful primarily as tools of deterrence?\textsuperscript{2} We found a surprising answer: nuclear states generally are no more successful at coercing their adversaries than other states, despite the enormous destructive potential of their nuclear capabilities. Why is this the case?

Military technologies provide coercive leverage to the extent that they: (1) increase a state’s ability to seize disputed items militarily, or (2) bolster a state’s capacity to punish its adversary at an acceptable cost. Most of the time, nuclear weapons meet neither of these criteria.

On the first count, using nuclear weapons to seize territory or other disputed possessions would likely be counterproductive: doing so could damage or destroy the very item that the challenger hoped to obtain. It would make little sense, for example, for China to wrest the Senkaku Islands from Japan by launching a nuclear attack against the disputed territory.

Alternatively (and more likely), China might attempt to gain control over the islands by threatening to destroy Tokyo. Yet this brings us to a second point: nuclear weapons are high-cost tools of punishment. Carrying out a coercive nuclear threat would be exceedingly costly for the challenger. It would result in international blowback and establish a dangerous precedent, among other costs. Challengers might pay these costs if their vital interests were on the line. But our review of the historical record indicates that coercive threats rarely involve stakes that are high enough for the challenger to justify paying such a stiff price. Coercive nuclear threats therefore will usually be dismissed as incredible.


\textsuperscript{2} The distinction between deterrence and compellence was articulated in Thomas C. Schelling’s \textit{Arms and Influence} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).
Deterrence, however, is a different story. The costs of implementing nuclear deterrent threats would be comparatively low, because such threats are carried out only after an attack against a country or its ally. And the stakes are typically higher – indeed, the defender’s national survival may be at stake. Deterrent nuclear threats, then, are more likely to be credible. Many observers found it believable, for instance, that the United States would have used nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe during the Cold War. By contrast, it would have been far more difficult to have persuaded anyone that the United States was willing to launch a nuclear attack for the central purpose of forcing the Soviets out of East Berlin in the 1950s.

Our argument stands in stark contrast to the emerging view that nuclear weapons (and nuclear superiority) are useful for military blackmail. Nuclear weapons allow states to bully and intimidate their adversaries, according to this line of thinking, because they are so destructive. Nonnuclear (or nuclear-inferior) countries are therefore less resolved during crises with nuclear-armed (or nuclear-superior) opponents: weaker countries would rather bow to the wishes of their superior opponents than face the possibility of a catastrophic nuclear attack. A key tenet of this view is that nuclear weapons loom in the background, even when their use is not explicitly threatened. In this view, nuclear powers need not play dangerous games of brinkmanship to get their way in world politics; simply possessing the bomb is often sufficient to do the trick.

Does the historical record support our argument? To find out, we analyzed a database of 210 militarized compellent threats. The dataset contains well-known episodes, like the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, in addition to less studied (but not necessarily less important) cases of coercive diplomacy, such as the 1969 Sino-Soviet border crisis, the 1975 USS Mayaguez incident, the 2001-2002 standoff following the terrorist attacks on India’s parliament, and many others. Our central objective was to compare whether nuclear challengers enjoy a higher rate of coercive success than their nonnuclear counterparts. We found that there was very little difference in the success rates of nuclear and nonnuclear challengers. Nuclear weapons, in other words, appear to provide states with little coercive leverage.

Gavin is not persuaded by our study: he calls our theory “unconvincing.” Yet it is not clear that he disagrees with us. Indeed, he provides no evidence suggesting that our

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argument or evidence is incorrect. However, he offers several critiques of the scope and assumptions of our study. Here we respond to four specific criticisms: (1) our evidence does not help explain the 1958-1962 superpower standoff over Berlin and Cuba; (2) we study minor cases that are unimportant; (3) the distinction between deterrence and coercion is sometimes blurry; and (4) we do not properly deal with selection effects. We consider each of these points in turn, and explain why none of them pose a major challenge to the findings we presented in our paper.

Gavin’s main complaint about our article is that it does not help him better understand the superpower standoff from 1958 to 1962. This is a puzzling criticism, since this was not the purpose of our article. Our objective was to investigate whether nuclear weapons help states make more effective coercive threats. The crises that occurred from 1958 to 1962 are undoubtedly relevant for understanding this question, but they are by no means the only cases that offer insights into it. Indeed, our article documents numerous cases in which the coercive diplomacy of nuclear states failed: the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, the 1982 Falklands crisis, the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf crisis, and others. Gavin does not challenge us on those cases, nor does he explain why the 1958-1962 episode is a more important lens through which to view our question. In short, he offers no reason to doubt our argument about the coercive limitations of nuclear weapons.

Gavin’s criticism is equally puzzling because he offers no reason to believe that our theory cannot account for the 1958-1962 period. As Gavin’s own work has shown, there is considerable doubt whether nuclear superiority was responsible for the American coercive success during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The outcomes of the Berlin crises that preceded the Soviet missile deployment to Cuba are also consistent with our theory: Khrushchev was unable to use the (implicit) threat of nuclear war to force American troops out of West Berlin, despite repeated efforts to do so. Contrary to Gavin’s suggestions, the 1958-1962 episode actually squares quite well with our argument.

Gavin’s second criticism of our article is that we examine the wrong cases. In his view, it is

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5 Instead, Gavin’s most forceful critiques address our methodological approach, which we discuss in our joint response with Kroenig.

6 Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 119. Gavin also notes in his essay that the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis could also be described as a Soviet victory. If so, then the crisis is even more consistent with our theory, since it would constitute a lesser coercive success for nuclear states than it might initially seem.

7 Khrushchev faced a difficult challenge: as the coercer, he had to credibly threaten the first-use of nuclear weapons. For reasons explained in our article (and above), this is exceedingly difficult to do. By contrast, the United States merely had to convey that it would retaliate if it were attacked first. Khrushchev therefore faced an inherent bargaining disadvantage, irrespective of the nuclear balance. See Alexandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev’s Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 209. In the end, many officials in Washington dismissed Khrushchev’s threats as bluster. One might surmise that Khrushchev failed because he was up against a nuclear-superior United States. In our view, however, this was not a decisive factor.
uninformative to study episodes in which nuclear war was not an obvious danger. He wonders, “Should every disagreement involving a country with the bomb be coded as a nuclear standoff? Why would we automatically assume that the nuclear balance is front and center when leaders of two nuclear states clash in some form?”

In fact, we assume no such thing. Quite the contrary: the central claim of our study is that most coercive threats – even those made by nuclear states – do not raise the specter of nuclear war. But Gavin is wrong to assume that these episodes have nothing to teach about whether nuclear weapons convey coercive leverage. Indeed, expanding our scope beyond nuclear standoffs is crucial to understanding the coercive effects of nuclear weapons.

First, nonnuclear crises provide a critical basis for comparison. We cannot know whether nuclear states achieve better coercive outcomes than their nonnuclear counterparts unless we study both groups. Imagine, for example, that we wish to find out whether a particular sports drink improves athletic performance. Studying only people who consume the drink would take us only halfway. We would also need to know how people fare without the sports drink so that we can compare the two groups. A similar logic holds in our study: only by comparing nuclear and nonnuclear coercers can we determine whether one group enjoys greater bargaining leverage. Evaluating crises in which there was seemingly little danger of nuclear war is central to this task.

Second, studying lower-profile crises helps avoid stacking the deck in favor of our argument. High-profile nuclear confrontations like the Berlin crisis tend to be considered historically important precisely because they nearly led to war. These crises, however, also tend to be crises in which coercive threats were not terribly successful: had threats been more effective in these crises, they would have been resolved long before they escalated to dangerous levels. Studying only high-risk cases therefore might overlook the most successful coercive threats, and bias the evidence in our favor.

Third, nuclear weapons may carry coercive leverage without ever being invoked. Indeed, some scholars have argued that nuclear weapons cast a shadow even in crises that we might consider nonnuclear. Although we disagree with this claim, we cannot fairly evaluate it without looking at a broad spectrum of crises in order to determine whether nuclear-armed states achieve systematically higher rates of success. If our theoretical argument is wrong and nuclear weapons are, in fact, useful for coercion, examining only dangerous nuclear standoffs might not give us a complete picture of their utility.

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9 We elaborate on this issue in Sechser and Fuhrmann, “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail,” 179-80.

10 Gavin himself hints at this possibility. See Gavin, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons,” 22, note 74.
In short, lower-risk crises are a central part of the story: not only do they help us place the most dangerous nuclear crises in their proper context, but they also help ensure that we have not inadvertently skewed the data in favor of our own theoretical argument.

Our main claim in “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail” is that nuclear weapons may be useful for deterrence, but they are poor instruments of compellence. Gavin, however, questions the distinction between these two concepts, arguing that in the 1958-1962 standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, both sides saw themselves as protecting the status quo, while casting the other as the aggressor. “Defining the status quo,” he argues, “is often in the eye of the beholder.”

The ‘status quo,’ of course, is the core of the distinction between deterrence and compellence: deterrence aims to maintain the status quo, whereas compellence seeks to modify it. We agree with Gavin that states rarely see themselves as aggressors: actions that may appear aggressive to outsiders are often viewed as defensive by the leaders who order them. But it does not follow that we cannot objectively identify the status quo in historical cases.

Our study employs a database of compellent threats that defines the status quo as objectively as possible. The rules of the dataset define a compellent threat as “an explicit demand by one state (the challenger) that another state (the target) alter the status quo in some material way.” In other words, our operational definition of “compellence” does not require that the two sides agree on who was the aggressor and who was the defender; the question is whether the challenger’s demand required the target to modify the material status quo in some way – even if that status quo was only recently established. If so, then the case is included in the dataset; if not, it is excluded. This is faithful to Thomas C. Schelling’s original conceptualization of compellence, which held that compellent threats are unique because they require the target to act – to “do something” – in order to comply. Gavin may disagree with using a material baseline to identify compellent attempts, but if so, he does not explain why.

Gavin further argues that leaders often have both deterrent and compellent objectives during crises: in the Berlin episode, for example, he wonders: “Was Khrushchev trying to compel the Western powers to leave Berlin or deter the United States from supporting West Germany’s nuclearization?” Our answer would be: both. Khrushchev failed in his

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14 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 69.

first objective, and succeeded in the second, just as our theory expects. Deterrence and compellence are logical opposites, but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Coding issues aside, one might nevertheless argue that the distinction between deterrence and compellence is unhelpful for understanding how nuclear weapons affect crisis bargaining. It might be preferable, according to this line of thinking, to analyze all crises together, regardless of whether a state is trying to preserve the status quo or change it. The problem with this approach is that it glosses over the central prediction of our theory: that nuclear weapons are poor instruments of compellence, but potentially useful for deterrence.

Moreover, drawing the distinction between deterrence and compellence is useful for policy purposes. How should policymakers respond to potential proliferators, like Iran? Scholars may not believe that it is important to distinguish between attempts to wrest away territory and attempts to defend it, but policymakers certainly do. If a nuclear arsenal allows states to grab territory with greater ease, reverse unfavorable policies, or extract other concessions, the prospect of nuclear proliferation is quite threatening. In that case, aggressive nonproliferation policies – including, potentially, the use of military force – might be justified. However, if nuclear weapons serve primarily defensive functions, the consequences of proliferation would be less severe. To be sure, allowing another state to build the bomb might still be undesirable. Yet the argument for aggressive nonproliferation policies weakens considerably if nuclear weapons deter but don’t compel.16

Gavin’s final criticism is that our study provides only partial insight into the dynamics of nuclear coercion. The reason, he explains, is that “the question of resolve and the military balance has already come into play before a crisis is even initiated, so studying nuclear crises does not reveal the full story of whether and how military power plays affect world politics.”17 In other words, one also would need to study “the crises that never happened” in order to glean a complete picture of how nuclear weapons shape the dynamics of coercion. Studying only coercive threats, as we do in “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail,” tells only part of the story.

Gavin highlights a thorny and well-known problem in international relations scholarship: the problem of so-called “selection effects.”18 The basic principle is that in observational studies (i.e., studies in which we cannot conduct experiments), the phenomena we observe

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are not random events: they are the result of strategic decisions and explicit choices. Those decisions, however, could skew our conclusions by concealing important pieces of the puzzle. In the sports drink example above, assessing the drink’s effect on athletic performance could be complicated by the possibility that individuals who choose to consume the drink (i.e., “select themselves” into that category) probably are more likely to exercise, and thus be in better athletic condition. If we simply compared the performance of people who regularly purchase the drink against those who do not, we would likely find a sizable difference – but not necessarily because the drink itself has had any effect.

Gavin is undoubtedly correct that researchers must be conscious of potential selection effects to avoid drawing hasty inferences. He does not, however, offer any reason to believe that selection effects are responsible for the findings we report in our article. All observational studies – including the archival studies he touts – are subject to selection effects, but this does not by itself undermine their validity. One must also explain why that selection effect has produced an incorrect inference. Gavin has not done this.

In fact, our article explicitly considers the possibility that self-selection dynamics might be driving the results. Specifically, we evaluate whether nuclear states might be achieving coercive “victories” without ever having to issue threats. Using several methods of varying technical complexity, we find little evidence to suggest that this is the case. Selection effects undoubtedly exist in the cases we examine, but they do not appear to explain the patterns that we have uncovered.

Our article addresses a central question in world politics: what political dividends might nuclear weapons bring to their owners? An emerging view holds that nuclear weapons have coercive utility. Nuclear weapons, according to this perspective, help countries compel changes to the status quo in ways that serve their political interests. Our paper challenges this emerging consensus. We argue that nuclear weapons are poor tools of blackmail, in part, because it is difficult to make coercive nuclear threats credible. Our analysis of 210 compellent threats provides support for our theory: we find that nuclear states are not more effective at coercive diplomacy, on average, than their nonnuclear counterparts.

Gavin’s essay, in our view, does not undermine our central conclusions. Although we find his criticisms unpersuasive, it is important to note that there is much about which we agree. Most importantly, we share the view that questions relating to the causes and effects of nuclear proliferation are tremendously important, and worthy of dedicated study. We also share his view that historical analysis is an indispensable tool for understanding the political effects of nuclear weapons, especially when combined with statistical analysis. Our statistical tests were meant to be our first word on this subject, not our last. Since the publication of our article, we have been researching the role of nuclear weapons in dozens of cases.

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of Cold War and post-Cold War crises for precisely the reasons that Gavin identifies. A thorough analysis of these cases, we believe, only strengthens support for our argument that nuclear weapons are poor tools of coercion and intimidation, despite (and in some cases because of) their destructive power.

We thank Gavin again for his engagement with our work, and we hope that this exchange encourages further thinking and research about the role of nuclear weapons in world politics, and about the broader methodological issues raised in these essays.

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20 Our analysis of these cases will be included in our book with the working title *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*. 
References