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During war, when and why do states decide to offer talks, and what factors cause these decisions to change? In *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime*, Oriana Skylar Mastro answers these questions in a succinct, compelling manner. Through her Costly Conversation Thesis (CCT), which explains why belligerents adopt an open or closed diplomatic posture during war, she breaks new ground by offering the “first comprehensive framework for understanding when and how states incorporate talking with the enemy into their war-fighting strategies” (p. 6). As a result, the book is a must read for policymakers and those involved in wartime diplomacy, while scholars of international relations, especially those specializing in Asian studies, will find it both theoretically compelling and historically elucidating.

According to the CCT, leaders are chiefly concerned about the strategic costs of conversation. A belligerent’s willingness to talk may be perceived by an adversary as a projection of weakness, thereby encouraging them to prolong, intensify, or escalate the conflict. Mastro defines a belligerent’s willingness to engage in direct talks with their adversary during war as their *diplomatic posture*. Belligerents choose either an open or closed diplomatic posture, with an open posture being one where the warring party is willing to talk directly with the enemy and to do so without any preconditions; a closed posture is when either of these two conditions are not met.

Two factors determine whether leaders adopt an open or closed posture: first, the likelihood that the adversary will interpret weakness from an open diplomatic posture; and second, the *strategic capacity* of the enemy—the degree to which they can prolong, intensify, or escalate the conflict in response. Thus, decision makers choose to adopt an open or closed posture based on their perceived costs: when costs to talking is low, states choose an open posture; when perceived as high, they adopt a closed posture. To mitigate adversaries’ inference of weakness, states also attempt to demonstrate *resiliency*, defined as “the state’s ability to both absorb and deflect costs at a given level of violence,” providing further insight into states’
war-fighting strategies in support to their diplomatic posturing (p. 14).

From this, Mastro sets out to evaluate the CCT through analysis of four historical cases, including both China’s and India’s diplomatic posturing during their conflict in 1962, China’s calculus during the Korean War, and North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. In each case she draws on a rich set of data, including archival material and historical biographies and memoirs, and provides cogent analysis assessing key decision makers’ strategic calculus when shifting their diplomatic positions related to their war-fighting strategies.

One of the many strengths of her analysis is the inclusion of competing explanations for states’ shifting diplomatic posturing. In each case study, alternative explanations—such as the traditional bargaining model of war, ideational factors, and the role of domestic and international costs—are considered, to which she methodically demonstrates the CCT’s superior explanatory power. Thus, the CCT, while at first seeming overly simplistic in its bold predictions of belligerents’ diplomatic posturing and war-fighting strategies, proves remarkably compelling.

In sum, The Costs of Conversation provides a significant step forward in explaining why nations decide to talk in the first place. As Mastro argues, the CCT demonstrates that the mere offering of talks is perceived as the first concession during conflict. This in turn influences an adversary’s beliefs about the distribution of power and the other party’s resolve, even before offers are exchanged. Although existing scholarship recognizes the essential role diplomatic talks play, Mastro’s work breaks new ground in theorizing the conditions under which talks are held in the first place. As a result, in the final chapter, Mastro lays out practical applications for policymakers and additional avenues for future research—including theories on crisis bargaining, cause of war, war duration, and termination, as well as mediation, intrastate conflict, and conflict with non-state actors, and further refinement of domestic factors influencing elites’ perception and cost calculations.
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