Understanding Schelling's Nuclear Paradigms with Francis J. Gavin

[00:00:00] Welcome and Introductions

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Welcome to *Horns of a Dilemma*, the podcast of the *Texas National Security Review*. I'm Sheena Chestnut Greitens, editor-in-chief of *TNSR*, and I'm here with Dr. Ryan Vest, our executive editor. Today, we're pleased to be joined by Professor Frank Gavin, author of the article, "Strategic Stability and Its Limits: Reflections on Schelling," which appears in the special issue of the *Texas National Security Review*. Frank Gavin is distinguished professor and director of the Henry Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at the School for Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.

He also serves as chair of the editorial board for the *Texas National Security Review*, so we're delighted to welcome him in both capacities today. He's the author of, most recently, "*The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty: Rethinking International Relations and American Grand Strategy in a New Era,*" and two books that came out in 2025, "*Thinking Historically: A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy*" and "*Wonder and Worry: Contemporary History in an Age of Uncertainty*."

Frank, welcome back to *Horns of a Dilemma*. It's great to have you on the show.

Francis J. Gavin: It's great to see you, Sheena and Ryan. This is fun to be on the other end of the microphone here. This is good.

Ryan Vest: It's great. We're glad to have you here, especially with this article.

[00:01:15] Why Schelling Matters

Ryan Vest: I love this article because it centers on Thomas Schelling, who is such a foundational thinker of the nuclear age. As we get started today, I was wondering if, for listeners who may not be as familiar with him, if you could talk about Schelling and why his work still looms so large over how we think about nuclear strategy today.

Francis J. Gavin: Sure. Ryan, you're absolutely right that Schelling is this foundational thinker, and there's a whole variety of reasons for that. I think the clarity of his prose, his clear, brilliant incisive analysis, but it's interesting because he was not a strategist per se. He was an economist.

In fact, he studied industrial economics and market organization and he got involved in really the origins of security studies, the way people decided to wrestle with and think about the nuclear question. And there's several foundational thinkers of which, he's one of them. Probably the big three are him, Albert Wohlstetter, and then Bernard Brodie.

And he's a fascinating character because he was an economist in a lot of ways associated with what we think about game theory. Although, interestingly, in his Nobel speech for economics, he actually derided game theory, but whose major works just had an incredible influence on how people thought about how nuclear weapons affected international politics and particularly American Grand strategy, to the point that, he still, I would argue, is—if you were to ask people what's the first or most important thing you read about nuclear weapons/nuclear strategy—Schelling is at the top of the list. So a foundational thinker.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Let me follow up on something you said just a minute ago, which is that Schelling is a Nobel Prize winning economist. He's not a historian; he's not a traditional military strategist. And so, I'm wondering, you know, when you were writing this essay, and in the years that you've reflected on Schelling's body of work, how do you think that background shapes his approach to stability, deterrence, the use of force, and in what ways, then, did that help him see things differently than a lot of the other thinkers at the time?

[00:03:32] Economist Meets Nuclear Dilemmas

Francis J. Gavin: Yeah, it's a great question, Sheena, and I think it has to do with the fact that nuclear weapons generate a whole series of extraordinary dilemmas. The most obvious one being that, at heart, these weapons really aren't usable in battlefield—that the use of thermonuclear weapons would be such a horrendous catastrophe that it generates this dilemma.

You have this incredibly powerful weapon. It's a tool of your strategy and statecraft, but at heart it's probably—to use it would be a reflection of failure. And so, instead of throwing his hands up in the air, which many people did, or

talk about ideas of eliminating all the nuclear weapons in the world, or thinking about finding a way to use them in the battlefield, I think Schelling was drawn to the idea of how do you get out of this puzzle?

How can you find ways to generate political benefits, even leverage, from the existence of these weapons that in many ways negate the whole notion of advantage that we associate with military technology?

Ryan Vest: I love talking about this, and for those that don't know, as the chair of our editorial board, Frank is always pushing us to bring more of a historical perspective to the journal and publish more historical pieces. And one of the things I love about this is that the heart of the article, you write that by exploring the tensions in Schelling's work, we can better assess what lessons from the past apply to emerging technologies today and really use the historical paradigm to look at that.

But I have to wonder: Is strategic stability even the right ambition for this? Why did you feel that this re-examination was necessary right now?

[00:05:20] What Is Strategic Stability

Francis J. Gavin: So it was— I had found, it'd be interesting Sheena, if you find this too— I would talk to both my academic friends and my policy friends and they would talk about how the goal of American policy was strategic stability. And it was almost assumed that everyone knew what that was, and it was an unalloyed good like motherhood and apple pie.

And yet, when you would ask people, "W hat does it mean?" people would just look at you crazy. We assumed that we knew what it meant, and there's a lot of things that you think in the back of your head and you wonder about. So, when I thought about strategic stability— and I think what Schelling's most influential contribution, which I recognized in this article, was his contribution to the idea that states should get together to negotiate limits on how many weapons they should build, what kind of weapons and what posture because nuclear weapons at a certain point don't generate advantage and, in fact, can be destabilizing. And you can make the case that these notions of strategic stability that he had led directly to the intellectual architecture that led to the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) and treaties.

But there were [times] when I would start digging through the record; there were some tensions. On the one hand, strategic stability seemed to be oriented towards the idea of never giving either side the incentive to go first and to

accept a sort of mutual vulnerability that would leave both sides exposed to catastrophe.

But if you go through the history, American leaders, understandably, were never comfortable with that mutual vulnerability. There were brief periods during when McNamara was Secretary of Defense when it was accepted as policy, but more or less— and for reasons you could understand— American leaders weren't very comfortable with that.

But there was a deeper tension for me, and that was the fact that another important element of American grand strategy was limiting nuclear proliferation, and its key tool to limit nuclear proliferation was to extend its nuclear umbrella— in other words, to protect other states with its nuclear forces.

Now, this was problematic because it was an incredible promise to make. We all know the story of "Would you trade Pittsburgh for Paris?"

But the United States, in its efforts to make that promise credible, did a variety of things that were destabilizing for the strategic relationship. For example, the United States has always reserved the right to go first.

It has developed weapon systems that are counterforce, meaning they are targeting the adversary's military capabilities. It has had strategies that look preemptive, the idea being that if a conflict breaks out, we're gonna use these weapons first in order to disable and disarm the adversary's ability to respond.

That cuts against every notion of strategic stability, yet it actually is a key element to proliferation stability. So, as I thought about this and I looked through the documents, I saw all these tensions: the tensions between no one could define this or say what it was. The idea that having strategic stability and mutual vulnerability both was somewhat unnatural, but it also cut against another important goal that the United States had, which was proliferation stability.

And I think this generates a whole bunch of interesting tensions that don't surface very easily. And at least as I try to show in the article, that I can't find evidence that Schelling necessarily grappled with these tensions.

[00:09:14] Schelling’s Contradictions

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: So one of the things that I really like about the special issue on strategic stability and emerging technology that this essay appears in is how much it explicitly grapples with questions about uncertainty and contradiction. And that's really an interesting part of the historical perspective that you bring in, because I remember talking about both nuclear coercion from Schelling and strategic stability and some discussion of whether these goals were in tension.

But you lay out really, really clearly that Schelling's writings sometimes seem to point in opposite directions, right? And one body of his writing is stabilizing and the other is not. So how do you make sense— when you're grappling with a thinker as foundational, as Schelling— how do you make sense of their own inconsistencies? Do you think he ever resolved it or came down over time on one paradigm or another, or did this just persist throughout his intellectual life?

Francis J. Gavin: So I've got a good news story and a bad news story here. Schelling was an economist. Economists spend a lot of their time trying to find [or] generate ways to eliminate uncertainty through their formula, right? And uncertainty is often seen as a problem to be solved, whereas we who deal in the world of international politics, it's actually a reality that never goes away.

And so Schelling had the instinct, I think, that many leaders have and many people have to both eliminate uncertainty but also to exploit uncertainty. I'll tell you an interesting story. It's not in the article, but I once asked Henry Kissinger what was the most interesting intellectual or policy exercise or workshop or conference or symposia he ever participated in. And he thought— no one had ever asked him this, which is interesting. Kissinger had participated in all of them, you name it. And he said, "I actually think it's the Harvard-MIT arms control working group that Schelling set up."

And as I made clear in the article, the two pieces that are in contradiction with each other, *Strategy of Conflict* and *Strategy of Arms Control,* were written at the same time, and are the ones that are at odds with each other. And when I asked Henry why this was so influential, he said, "Well, you had this extraordinarily smart interdisciplinary group. You had physicists, nuclear engineers, biochemists, economists, historians, political scientists— all really grappling with this incredibly difficult question."

So the good news story is I think Schelling was able to bring together this incredible group, to command this audience of fairly high egos, and get them to work together in 1960 and 1961 to really grapple and wrestle with this question.

And then, additionally, to have some policy influence, right? Schelling was also doing a lot of work for the government. So the good news story is here's this honest, extraordinary effort to wrestle with a really hard question, which, Sheena, as you correctly point out, there's a lot of tensions and contradictions in, and they're trying to work through, and he produces these two books—one, co-authored with Mort Halperin, who talks about how you have to accept mutual vulnerability and build limitations, the other which says, "How do you exploit the fears and uncertainty?" And so that leads to the second point, which is the policy influence. And this is something, Ryan, to your point about history.

[00:12:58] Berlin Crisis Memo Story

Francis J. Gavin: I remember confronting this document, which is in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, at some point and just being really struck by it. And it's a document I lead off with. It's the summer of 1961. Kennedy is actually up at Hyannis Port, and we know from looking at the document that he read it, and he marked it up and Bundy sends it up. It's right in the summer of '61 where things are really heating up over Berlin.

The president has just had a disastrous conference with Khrushchev. Kennedy is convinced that the crisis is coming to a head, that it may be a military crisis. And given that the crisis is gonna be over Berlin, this is going to present real challenges because East Berlin was in East Germany a hundred miles in enemy territory, and the Soviet Union controlled how the crisis would unfold, because it could shut down the city, it could—like they had done in 1948 during the blockade— they could do all sorts of things to put pressure on, and the United States and NATO would have to respond.

And so as they ran through these scenarios—and they had a series of exercises they called the Live Oak exercise— one of the ideas was: Okay, East Berlin's cut off. We'll send a division up the Audubon, an American division to relieve them.

What would happen then if the Soviets and these Germans destroyed that division? And as they work through the scenarios, they came to the conclusion that nuclear weapons would have to be used fairly quickly. And then the question becomes, how do you use nuclear weapons? And this is something President Kennedy thought about a lot, and Kennedy realized that if you were going to use one nuclear weapon, the pressure to use a lot of them was going to be there because there were such advantages to going first. So he was really wrestling that summer with how to think about that—how, if the actual fight came, these weapons be deployed.

And so Schelling produces this memo, which he reads, and it's a very odd memo. It essentially says, "You're not going to launch a preemptive nuclear war for this because that would be crazy"— although, a note on the side, they did look into that and I can talk to you about that a little bit— "they're not very useful on the battlefield, so what you should do is use it as a signal to signal resolve." Because one of the sort of insights that Schelling had was that in these kind of battles of wills, the ability to signal resolve are really important. So, more or less, he was saying, "Just lob a nuclear device somewhere in Soviet territory, not for military advantage, not to necessarily kill anybody, but to tell the Soviets you were serious."

I'm reading that document, [and] I'm thinking— if I'm Kennedy sitting in the summer of 1961—I'm thinking, "So you're telling me we have this terrible crisis, and what you're asking me to do is to lob a random nuclear weapon into enemy territory. That's what you're advising me?"

Of course, there's a follow up memo from Paul Nitze who says, " First of all, why do you think the Russians are going to think this is signaling? They're going to think it's a full-scale attack, and then they're going to launch everything at you. And you would've lost the advantage of a first strike and you would have a nuclear war."

So there was this tension for me between the brilliance of Schelling and his ability to pull together this extraordinary group to think through these things, and this advice that was listened to on the most important issue in one of our most dangerous periods by a president of the United States who read it.

And I had to imagine Kennedy thought, "This is really nuts. This is actually really nuts. This is beyond not helpful." That was the first time I thought, "Okay, there might be a problem here with how Schelling went about these things." So the good news is, I give him credit for kind of wrestling with these hard dilemmas, of which, to be honest, there is no answer. I don't think he actually— whether he was aware that he had these contradictions or not is not always entirely clear to me. But then when he tried to convert it to policy advice, I think it was less than helpful.

And I would just end that little rant with the idea that I think Schelling's key intellectual blinders or flaws, which was shared by a lot of the security studies people— [though] not Brody, but many of the others—where they thought this military technology was so overwhelming that it shaped and made clear what all the outcomes would be. They forgot about the politics part of it.

And when you're a politician, a leader, no matter what, these weapons still are tools of strategy and statecraft. And you even see this—I talk a little bit this in the article—about how Schelling understood and many of the security studies people, even sometimes to this day, understand what caused the First World War. [It's] as if these autonomous factors that were create by the qualities of the military technology mattered more than the politics itself. I don't think Schelling had a very good sense of the politics of the issues involved. So it's a long-winded way of saying there's good and bad in it.

Ryan Vest: Certainly the case. I know I love using Schelling when I teach because there were a lot of dichotomies in his ideas and a lot of tension.

[00:18:27] Risk Manipulation and Chicken

Ryan Vest: But one of the things I love— I always advocate that if you want to talk to a politician or to a military leader, you need to speak the language of risk. That's something I thought Schelling has always done very, very well.

You talk about in the article that he didn't believe necessarily that the purpose of nuclear weapons was destruction, but it was to pose risk to the enemy and force these discussions on how much risk was acceptable. I was wondering if we could dig into that just a little bit more deeply, and why that could be stabilizing or destabilizing.

Francis J. Gavin: Yeah, that's another really great point, Ryan, and I think that this is another one of those where you put yourself in the position of a leader. We all know, for those of us who've studied this, the great vivid images that Schelling would use about driving a car and pulling the steering wheel out and throwing it out or the game of chicken.

All the things that imply that when you're in some competition of risk-taking, when you're trying to manipulate risk, when there's this competition, you want to seek advantages in that. And my sense as a presidential historian is that this is not really something presidents seek.

The idea that you're going to enter a crisis and take the steering wheel out and throw it out the window is not a policy option most presidents look for. And the one exception to this was Richard Nixon, who— even though, I doubt he himself read Schelling— a lot of what he had observed, particularly in how Khrushchev had behaved during Suez and the Berlin crisis, he thought that there was some advantage to being seen as irresponsible.

And you look at several points in the Nixon administration— he's the only president I can find who's really willing to engage in this kind of risk-taking, and even he would back off in the end. There are all these stories, say during the '73 Middle East War, where we go to a nuclear alert with the idea of signaling that something might happen, that we're willing to manipulate risk. And you look at the Soviet records and they didn't even pick up the message. They didn't really understand it.

I think that analogizing complex, consequential, and—with nuclear weapons—potentially catastrophic interactions between great powers as if you're playing a game of chicken really doesn't capture how things actually work. I think this is, again, comes to some of the misunderstandings of what Schelling and his colleagues thought was actually going on in the origins of the First World War and in other sort of contexts.

So, I think most statesmen recognize risk is there, and they balance between trying to find advantages in it but also trying to remove it. But when I think it comes to thermonuclear weapons, most presidents, fortunately—even our current president—recognize the gravity. This is not something that you want to play games of chicken with.

Again, I don't think—that is a core understanding of politics that I don't think Schelling just didn't fully grasp. [It's] as if these are economic transactions, game-theoretic transactions, and I just don't think that really captures how leaders think about these things.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: So I find this just a fascinating paradox at the heart of the article— this idea that strategic stability and nuclear coercion are sometimes in direct tension with each other. I think that's a really good explanation of why policymakers sometimes try to pursue both at the same time, because they recognize the risk, they recognize the gravity of the risk, but they're also responsible for trying to find some advantage in a situation, even when the risks are high, and they take them very seriously. So I think that's a fascinating point.

[00:22:11] Bad History Bad Lessons

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: I wanted to ask you maybe a little bit more about something you mentioned a couple times now, which is that Schelling and those around him are drawing on a flawed understanding of history, and in some cases, maybe taking the wrong lessons. Ideas about surprise attack, arms races, inadvertent stumbling into war—you've mentioned the First World War a

couple of times— were based on a really simplified or just mistaken reading of that history.

So can you talk a little bit more about, a) if the stakes are this high and they had all these smart people, why wasn't the history better? That's my first question. And b) then unpack for the readers—because the article does a great job of this—how some of these flawed readings of important, critical historical episodes shaped the development of strategic stability and these debates that the article walks through and that Schelling was working on.

Francis J. Gavin: So that's a really good insight, and I think to capture it, one has to go back to the mindset in the world of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when there's still this memory of the Second World War. And there's this idea of the two crucial events of the Second World War are considered surprise attacks.

First Stalin's attack on Russia— Operation Barbarossa—and then of course the one Americans were very painfully aware of, which was Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. The idea that these were surprise attacks was conventional cultural belief, right? Of course, when FDR announces it, when everyone thinks about it—certainly in the American imagination—it is seen as this dastardly bolt from the blue.

As you go through the historical record— and you know this, Sheena, because this is a area that you would be familiar with— while the attack on Pearl Harbor itself was a surprise, the idea that Japan, after months and months of the US tightening the noose economically and diplomatically around Japan, with an understanding that the result was not unlikely to be aggression, is clear.

You can understand why FDR and a lot of people didn't want anyone to know that. It's not that there's some conspiratorial thing that FDR knew Pearl Harbor was coming. It's more that the United States had come to the conclusion by the summer of 1941 that Japan's aggression was unacceptable and that it had to really push it back, and it had extraordinary economic leverage over Japan, tried to negotiate, and the United States' diplomatic position to Japan was humiliating, right? We know this now; it's not really controversial. So the idea that it's a surprise attack—that somehow one day Japan got up and decided to do this and the United States had no idea this was going to happen— was commonly thought, but was a perversion of the reality.

It's similar to Barbarossa, right? You can't organize an attack that big without months and months of preparation. Stalin just ignored all the evidence he saw.

Richard Ned Lebow had a great book decades ago about the cognitive dissonance that leaders often go through when they see evidence of a disaster. So the whole notion of surprise attack— remember, in the late '50s, that's what everyone was worried about. They're worried about you take a surprise attack, you add an authoritarian country, and you add nuclear weapons, and the great fear was one day you're going to wake up, and the Soviet Union's going to launch a bolt from the blue.

And it seems crazy to us now, but you can imagine looking backwards, where if people assume that the Second World War was begun by these authoritarian states just ruthlessly attacking without warning, such a thing could happen again. Schelling didn't really dig deep to explore whether that happened.

When you actually ask yourself—depending on how you define a surprise attack—how many surprise attacks have there been in history? It's not very common. Then you get to things like accidental war or inadvertent escalation. During the early '60s, Barbara Tuckman wrote this tremendous book, *The Guns of August*, which is a beautifully written history of how the First World War happened.

Its argument is essentially this was a war that happened that nobody wanted and that there were forces external to the political process. A.J.P. Taylor also contributed to this— the notion that military timetables led to, or that almost by accident, a war can happen or could spiral out of control that no one has any control over.

What's interesting to me is when you go through— and there's an enormous historiography on the First World War and people disagree about a lot of the factors— what's fairly clear is you can go and see point by point people make a decision, and they know it might have this consequence, but it's a process. It's not an accident. Everyone goes into it. They may have been—to Ryan's earlier point about risk—they may have been playing bad bets and playing bad poker, but they knew what their hand was and they knew what their hoped-for outcome was.

So there's a hint of truth to all of these. There's a hint of truth that it escalated in ways people didn't hope for. It was not exactly totally a planned operation. The origins of the Second World War certainly were, to some element, surprising. But by Schelling and his colleagues focusing so much on factors that were outside of the political process—outside of what states and their leaders sought— it created a way of understanding the world that almost, ironically, was apolitical. If you could just understand the quality and characteristics of

these weapons, control them on one hand, exploit them on others, you would be able to generate outcomes that you wanted or avoid those you didn't.

It just was a very odd way to me as a historian, as I was looking at how states made decisions, that they would do this. Now, to Sheena's excellent question, "Why didn't they know better? It's a really good point. I think Americans, we do have a technological determinant side to us.

This is true in a lot of our assessments of any number of questions. We see technology as the cause of and solution to all of life's major problems, as Homer Simpson once said about alcohol. I also think it was at a time where the current fears, the sense of a bolt from the blue that could come where nobody wanted—people went and look at the past through those jaded colored lenses to find evidence that that's what they were going through today, even though it might have not have been the most comprehensive analysis.

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Let me ask you: Why do you think it matters today that Schelling was a lousy historian? Because you clearly tie that to these debates in the present—I'm being a bit tongue in cheek here—but why does it matter for today's conversations about strategic stability that we get this history more accurate than Schelling and his contemporaries did?

[00:29:48] Cold War Posture Origins

Francis J. Gavin: Yeah, so I would say a couple things. One is that something that I think the American Security Studies community can definitely be accused of is they look through things through a very American lens. They expected the nuclear behavior of other states to mirror what the behavior of the US-Soviet competition was. As China starts to increase its nuclear capabilities, the real interesting puzzle is why, for so long, they did so much less than they could have and actually existed in a state really not even seeking mutual vulnerability until recently.

So I think that understanding that the first question to ask about nuclear weapons is, "Why does the state want them? What do they hope to achieve with them?" And just to backup in the history a little bit—this is a little bit of obscure history, but it's history that really, really matters.

If you look at why the United States developed the nuclear posture that it did during the Cold War, elements of which it still has—which actually was not about mutual vulnerability—it had to do with a very particular problem set, and

that was how to defend Europe against overwhelming Soviet conventional forces.

Right after World War II, the United States' policy was: We're not going to do it. We'll help the Europeans rebuild themselves. We'll go home. We demobilize. Korean War happens. China goes communist. Soviets have an atomic device. There's this sense of emergency. Kennan's original grand strategy is thrown out the window.

People say, "What the heck do we do in this situation?" And there's basically four options, right? The first option was Kennan's option: The Americans and Soviets go home, you tell Germany to reunify. Everyone said, "That's nuts. It looks like the interwar period, and the Soviets are closer than the Americans. We don't want to do that."

Second option: The Americans match the conventional capabilities of the Soviet Union, send 90 divisions to West Germany. Eisenhower said that would create a garrison state. The highest differential tax rate in the US was actually 90% in the 1950s, so you would've been talking about a full mobilization of a peacetime economy that would've been politically, desperately unpopular.

What's the third option? Well, the French and the British were developing nuclear weapons. You let the West Germans have nuclear weapons? No. That would solve your security problems, right? If the West Germans had nuclear weapons, you could go home. But the West Germans were a half generation removed from the Wehrmacht. Nobody wanted the West Germans to have nuclear weapons. Not only that, they were a divided country. So they were essentially not interested in stability. They were revanchist by definition.

If you're the Soviet Union, and you think about you put down worker strikes in East Berlin in 1952, in a situation where West Germany has nuclear weapons and you have a problem in East Germany, and the West Germans say, "Nope, you're not allowed to do that. We're going to use our nuclear weapons if you do," the whole Soviet grand strategy is threatened. So that's not an option, because not only are the Soviets—the one thing they'll fight World War III over is to make sure the Western Germans never get nuclear weapons.

By the way, the British and French would fight World War III to make sure the West Germans don't get nuclear weapons. So that option's out. What's the one option you have left? You defend Western Germany, and since you're conventionally outgunned, you have to use nuclear weapons. Okay, well, where do you use them?

You want the West Germans to be involved in the support because you want them not to have nuclear weapons but to provide conventional forces. You want them to be on your side, not the Soviet side. So the west Germans say, "Okay, you're going to defend us. You're not going to drop the nuclear weapons in West Germany, are you?"

Because that's not a great deal. If you tell them, "We're going to use those weapons the minute you cross the border"—which the French would've been happy with—the West Germans are going to say, "So you're going to incinerate us?" So the only strategy, for political reasons, that made sense was preemption.

So if you want to keep the West Germans on board, you had to hit Soviet-Warsaw Pact forces as they were mobilizing, which meant you needed tons of counterforce. You needed, basically, launch-on-warning capabilities. You needed to pre-delegate authority. You needed to create that absolutely crazy nuclear complex you see in *Dr. Strangelove*. The reason it matters is we've all taught Dr. *Strangelove* in classes, and the lessons that our students get from it is that the military is crazy, and that there's bureaucratic political reasons for this to happen.

The origins of that strategy—when Curtis LeMay, who was crazy, was asked to carry it out— they said, "Here's the political goal we have to achieve. West Germany can't have nuclear weapons. We have to keep them in the Western alliance. We can't start World War III, nor can we bankrupt the country by going to full-on Sparta-like military." This is the only option that they really had. That weird, very ahistorical posture— just like I point out in the article that defending East Berlin is very weird and ahistorical—people like Schelling looked at that. They looked at Berlin, which was very strange and *sui generis,* and came up with a whole variety of laws for how nuclear weapons were supposed to work everywhere around the world. Strategic stability and coercion, all that stuff, emerges from that.

By going back and actually understanding the history, you can then go back and say, "Okay, we're in 2026. How much of this applies today?" You know, START just ended a few weeks ago. Some of our friends, Sheena, who are in the arms control world are just like, "This is the end of the world." Is it?

This gets to another point I make in the article. There's always been this tension between whether mutual vulnerability is a natural phenomena that occurs and you don't need any help because of the nature of the weapons or whether you need political treaties to do it.

Why should there be arms control treaties between two countries that are essentially at war with each other, or at least in some level of conflict? But in our arms control world, you had a lot of people saying, "Well, we're supporting Ukraine as they kill lots of Russians, but let's please keep the START Treaty going."

There's a sort of a strangeness to this that kind of fundamentally misunderstands how international politics works. So I think that's one of the reasons why I think people have to understand this, because as they're going into the world today and trying to understand where they are.

Because most people when they're going to learn about international politics, they're going to spend a lot of time reading Thomas Schelling. They're going to spend a lot of time thinking about these issues. Where did those concepts come from? What was the world they were developed in? Are they applicable to the world that they face today?

That's why I think it matters.

[00:36:38] Emerging Tech and Politics First

Ryan Vest: This article you wrote appears in Volume 9, Issue 2 of the *Texas National Security Review*, which is a special edition devoted to strategic stability and emerging technologies. You've talked a lot today about Schelling and his deficiencies in understanding politics, but you point out in the article that often war is driven more by political decisions than military technology or posture. Stability theory tends to invert that logic a little bit. What gets lost when we look at technology as the primary driver of war and peace instead of these politics?

Francis J. Gavin: Yeah, the reason this was all put together—I was the old-timey historian asked to talk about nuclear stuff. But of course, we're in an era right now, and we've published some great stuff on this where we're seeing this extraordinary emergence of powerful technologies whose consequences we don't fully understand, and we don't fully understand necessarily how they affect the battlefield.

And you see this really going on in the war in Ukraine, where every day, whether it's unmanned vehicles, whether it's artificial intelligence—probably at some point we're going to have robotics involved— changes the nature of the battlefield. But then the question becomes: Do these new technologies create destabilizing characteristics that could actually generate dangers and fears and

crises that you wouldn't want otherwise?—which was always the argument about nuclear weapons.

I actually think you can flip that on its head. One of the things that emerged from both the Soviets and the Americans recognizing how catastrophic nuclear use would be was that they had a shared interest. This is where I think Schelling, in talking about strategic stability, did actually matter.

There was a recognition that these technologies generate a shared interest between potential adversaries because there wasn't really an outcome where a war using these technologies would make any sense from a political perspective. When you look at it—and Schelling, of course, in talking about strategy and arms control and talking about mutual vulnerability helped create that intellectual architecture for the Soviets and Americans who agree to limit the strategic forces. But there's another one, and this both highlights the tensions and contradictions. The United States and the Soviet Union also realized that there was an incentive not just to limit the competition between them, but to limit who else got these nuclear weapons. Of course, you get the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Now, as I highlight in the article, those goals are in tension. The things you want for strategic stability are often at odds with things you want for proliferation stability. The thing about politics is that's how you manage those contradictions and those tensions. The United States sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. One of the things—whenever you go to global Arms control treaties—they're always going on about how the United States and the Soviet Union don't do their Article VI agreements, which is to reduce global forces to eliminate them.

They never had any intention of it, and they have reduced them, but like the whole idea was: How do we manage this really terrible contradiction between the fact that we wanna limit the competition between us so that we don't use these weapons, while recognizing we also wanna limit proliferation, which, weirdly the Soviets and the Americans shared an interest in? Neither the Americans nor the Soviets wanted other states to develop nuclear weapons.

That brings us to today, which is you've got two bitter rivals between China and the United States who have serious geopolitical, economic, even ideological competition, but a recognition that these technological forces are such that they can generate a shared interest, both in making sure that technology does not generate unneeded or unwanted or problematic tensions between them, but also

a shared interest in making sure as that technology diffuses, that some third party doesn't create some sort of issue or problem.

And I often wonder if—because the level of ideological and geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union in the mid and late '60s, when they first started talking about both non-proliferation cooperation and strategic arms treaties was far higher than it is between the US and China. I know people like to argue with me, but this doesn't even compare. Yet they found a way to recognize that they both had a political interest in doing something about this.

I think emerging technology potentially is a similar situation with the United States and China. You're not going to resolve the disputed Taiwan issue, South and East China Sea, or macroeconomic policy. But on this sort of more narrow but consequential issue of emerging technology, not just artificial intelligence, but you think of something in biotechnology. There's a lot of crazy stuff when you marry biotechnology with artificial intelligence that can be unbelievably transformative and also life planet endingly terrifying. You would think that there's probably possibilities for these two rivals/adversaries to find common interest in coming up with a agreements on them.

[00:42:34] Takeaways and Closing

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Let me ask you about how we think about and pull all these threads together when we look at the global environment today, because like you said, we're in the middle of a debate about superpower strategic stability with the exploration of New START. We're thinking about these questions about whether new countries are going to acquire nuclear weapons and whether the great powers despite geopolitical competition have an interest in limiting proliferation and creating more proliferation stability.

But then we also have this whole set of emerging technologies, which you just alluded to, talking about biotech. We have an article in this special issue on AI and a whole range of emerging technologies—AI, cyber, autonomous systems— that are arguably raising new questions or new applied questions about the nature of technology and warfare. Strategic stability is coming back up as a guiding framework.

So I guess I wanted to ask you, to close this out, what do you think, based on your study of this history, people who are looking at these emerging technologies should be most wary of, most careful about?

And if that's the wrong paradigm, what do you think should replace it? In other words, what are the kind of takeaway lessons to guide policymakers as they navigate this new technological and geopolitical moment?

Francis J. Gavin: Great question, and I put it very simply: not to let the technology itself shape the conversation, but to recognize that underneath any technological development, no matter how powerful, no matter how transformative, that ultimately states, when they engage with each other, have sets of interests that are either coincide or in conflict. The issues that led, after the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, to the Americans and the Soviets finally getting together to talk about both their own nuclear competition and limiting proliferation was recognizing and resolving some of the underlying political disputes, and when those underlying political disputes were not resolved, at least acknowledging they were there and putting them on ice.

So it was, when you put politics first, regardless of what the technology's capabilities are, these states are driven by their interests, their fears, their concerns, and their worries. So any engagement, while we should understand the technologies and their changes, before we ask any question, ask the political question is: What is it that states want? What are they trying to do? What do they fear about these technologies?

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: That's a great parting lesson for us all to think about. I'm gonna go away and think about that for a while, Frank.

Thank you. This has been a fascinating discussion. We could clearly keep talking about these issues for a while more. Frank, thank you so much for joining us today.

Francis J. Gavin: Thank you, Sheena. Thank you, Ryan. This was so much fun.

[00:45:31] Outro and Credits

Sheena Chestnut Greitens: Thank you for joining us for *Horns of a Dilemma,* the podcast of the *Texas National Security Review*. Our guest today has been Frank Gavin, author of many books, chair of the editorial Board of the *Texas National Security Review*, and most importantly for today, author of the article, "Strategic Stability and Its Limits: Reflections on Schelling," which as always can be accessed on our website, TNSR.org.

If you enjoyed this episode, please be sure to subscribe and leave a review wherever you listen. You can always find more of our work provided for free at our website, TNSR.org. Today's episode was produced by TNSR Digital and Technical Manager Jordan Morning and made possible by The University of Texas System. This is Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Ryan Vest. Thanks for listening.