A BATTLEFIELD OF SIXTY-FOUR SQUARES: THE ROLE OF CHESS IN COLD WAR FOREIGN POLICY

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White moves first, that is the rule. But that is not where the rules end. After the first four moves in a game of chess, there are three hundred million possible variations of how the game can play out.[1] The ability to predict your opponent's next move whilst simultaneously strategizing your own is proof that chess is a game of intellect and mental agility, and that understanding the rules is not enough to succeed by far. The clairvoyance required to excel at chess is one of the contributing factors to why the game has been an integral training tool amongst militaries from the antiquity of Sun Tzu to present-day America. The skills developed in chess mastery are not solely applicable to the board game, but also to the art of strategic thought.[2] Chess strategy aids nation states in visualizing the consequences of political or military decisions, ultimately allowing them to win over their adversaries and further their self-interest.

This phenomenon was especially prevalent during the years of the Cold War, as chess served as both a literal and figurative tool in facilitating the diplomatic relationship between the United States of America in the West and the Soviet Union in the East. Chess, as non-traditional diplomacy, reached its peak when both blocs agreed upon allowing their Grandmasters to play in the Chess World Championship in 1972. With the tournament's neutral location of Reykjavik, Iceland, the capitalists and the communists got as close as possible to true combat, although this time it was across the chessboard. This case study of the usage and effects of chess as foreign policy during the Cold War will analyze the game's impact in several spheres. To begin, the historical role of chess in diplomacy will be investigated, specifically its impact upon national identity and its efficacy in bolstering bilateral relationships. This will be followed by a study on both the American and Soviet federal rationale and public reaction to the 1972 Chess World Championship, and then an in-depth analysis on how chess pertains to physical and psychological warfare. Subsequently, the importance and long-term ramifications of these events will be evaluated, along with commentary on the impact of chess in international relations. Through a microcosm of a battlefield of sixty-four squares, the Cold War was fought with pawns and knights instead of weapons of mass