



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 600

October 2, 2024

Escalation: A Tool to Be Considered, Not Dismissed

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In recent years, it has become nearly gospel that “escalation” during an acute crisis or conflict is inherently a bad thing. Indeed, “escalatory” has become a synonym for “bad” or “dangerous” or “undesirable.” As a result, many of our national security professionals and uniformed officers nearly reflexively dismiss taking actions or postures that could be considered “escalatory” or “provocative” in both real-world and simulated crisis or conflict.

These ideas and practice are flawed. Crises and conflicts, especially between great powers, are ultimately issues of stake and resolve, and become competitions in risk taking. In many cases, escalation, or the threat of escalation, is required or desirable to achieve the desired objectives. In fact, deterrence by cost imposition inherently requires the withheld threat of escalation and is not credible without a willingness to do so.

This paper is based upon our years of service within the Defense Department as (respectively) a senior military officer and a civilian. These views are offered with an eye towards re-examining the concept of escalation as a useful tool of statecraft.



Escalation Defined

Escalation, defined as an increase in the intensity of violence or the geographic or other scope of a conflict, is a tool. Escalating a conflict can perform a number of functions, from communicating stake and will to demonstrating capability, to outright winning the conflict. It is also a critical component of deterrence itself. As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Keith Payne has written, deterrence, at its core, is the withheld threat of escalation.¹ Escalation or the threat of escalation can be accomplished with any instrument of national power.

On the Avoidance of Escalation

Escalation can make a conflict worse, if employed with an improper regard for potential adversary reactions. However, it can also end a conflict sooner by convincing adversaries that they have miscalculated and undervalued one's stake and commitment and that one is therefore prepared to intensify the level of violence or expand the conflict geographically.

Indeed, escalation is not necessarily inconsistent with the Law of Armed Conflict and can be advantageous by ending the conflict in a way that minimizes civilian casualties and broader collateral damage.² Ultimately, national security professionals may find during acute crisis or during the midst of an active conflict that escalation may be *required* to deter further aggression, defeat aggression, and achieve an outcome that maintains security for the United States and its allies.

Unfortunately, the United States has a generation of national security professionals trained to think "escalation" is always bad. Indeed, in wargame after wargame, we have observed that officers use "escalatory" as a synonym for "bad" or more precisely "a path we should not pursue." Instead, actions that demonstrate "restraint" on the part of the United States are overwhelmingly posited as inherently good courses of action—irrespective of whether such restraint actually helps the United States achieve its objectives.

Both authors have facilitated or directly observed numerous wargames and tabletop exercises where national security professionals avoid taking steps seen as potentially "escalatory" for fear of provoking the adversary. Very often these professionals, when discussing potential courses of action, will say "that's escalatory" to options or postures that could make a decisive difference in the course of the scenario's conflict. Those options at times have included what are indeed escalatory steps that could increase the level of violence significantly—but very often, even relatively benign options are described as "escalatory" and are therefore dismissed out of hand. Instead, players often times tout catch phrases such as "we show our strength by exhibiting restraint"—whatever that means. Indeed, the only totally, completely, inherently de-escalatory step one can take is to surrender.

Two examples of players avoiding escalation and exhibiting restraint come to mind. In one exercise, senior military officers—almost all general officers or flag officers—emulated a national security council advising the Blue president in the face of Red aggression against a



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 600 | October 2, 2024

non-treaty partner. When Red employed a limited number of low-yield nuclear weapons against the Blue partner, the players decided neither to escalate the level of violence nor expand the conflict—nor did they choose to respond in kind, for fear of being perceived as too *escalatory*. Consequently, the Blue players showed restraint by continuing to support fighting Red with conventional forces. Put another way, Red paid no cost for its nuclear employment. Two moves—and 41 Red nuclear detonations on the non-treaty partner and a number of full-fledged Blue treaty allies later—the Blue players decided that it was indeed time for a nuclear response, but that such a response should come from Blue’s nuclear armed allies—not Blue itself. In this scenario, because of Blue’s fear of escalation and the lack of cost imposed upon Red, the scenario that unfolded was one of near continuous Red employment of nuclear weapons across half a continent.

The second example involved mid-grade officers operating as a Blue Command staff. While setting up a deterrence posture to dissuade Red from initiating aggression against an overseas Green ally, the players decided not to flow Blue fighters, bombers, and ground forces into theater, because such a move could be seen as escalatory. Two moves later, Red was advancing across Green, and Blue did not have the time to get the requisite forces into theater before Green was overrun. During the post-exercise, when asked what they would have done differently, one colonel responded with “I sure wish we had flowed forces into theater in Move 1.”

In both cases, the desire to avoid escalation made victory much more difficult to achieve once the conflict began or once the adversary chose to escalate to a particular level of violence. By not taking considered and prudent risks at the beginning of the conflict (when the stakes were lower and less blood and treasure had been spent by both Red and Blue), the U.S. national security professionals had set themselves up for failure. One of the lessons they learned was that the drive to avoid all risk can lead to a worse situation later in a conflict when *the adversary, not the United States*, had escalated and set the operational tempo—and corresponding level of violence—within the conflict. Consequently, the players were faced with the dilemma of making ever more dramatic, and therefore strategically riskier moves, in an attempt to restore deterrence—or accept defeat.

While it is tempting to think that these are isolated incidents, this is far from the case. Indeed, we see real world examples of national security professionals consistently and almost reflexively calling for restraint and de-escalation. From Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s calling for Israel to show restraint and underscoring “the importance of avoiding further escalation” following Hezbollah strikes on northern Israel,³ to calls not to “escalate” in response to the killing of five American service members and two contractors in Iraq by Iran-backed groups,⁴ to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s call for Israel not to escalate the conflict with Hamas.⁵ It seems that national security policymakers’ first impulse is to seek de-escalation. In none of the aforementioned cases have those policymakers described why escalation may be bad. Instead, it was often times presented as fact that “escalation” is inherently counter to U.S. or allied interests.

Why is this the case? Why is there an almost reflexive default position among U.S. national security professionals to avoid escalation? There are no easy answers to these questions. Part



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 600 | October 2, 2024

of it may be a consequence of the Defense Department's Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) system, in which upwardly mobile officers and civilians are trained by other civilian and military leaders. Part of it may be a culture of risk aversion among national security professionals due to the decades-long U.S. role as a status quo power.

Risk Perception Among Status Quo Versus Revisionist Powers

The United States has, since the end of Cold War, been a status quo power that seeks to preserve and defend the existing international order that is characterized by free and open trade, a historical lack of interstate conflict (particularly interstate conflicts for which the goal is territorial conquest), and a promotion of classical liberal values and human rights. The United States has opposed threats to the existing international order for decades, particularly when states that wanted to overturn the status quo employed force to achieve revisionist aims.

States that seek to preserve and defend the status quo by their nature seek to return to the status quo once a conflict ends.⁶ By definition, they do not seek radical changes to existing systems or arrangements. Consequently, they tend to be risk averse – they like what they have, they do not want to lose it, particularly through potentially risky actions.

Revisionist states – states that are highly motivated to overturn the status quo – are by their nature more willing to accept risk. Simply put, the status quo is intolerable for them, which is why they are willing to accept risk as a means to overturn the status quo. Escalation inherently involves some risk. But revisionist powers seeking to overturn an existing order are willing to accept the risks that come with escalation.

We now have perhaps two generations of officers and civilians who have been trained to think about escalation – and the risks inherent in escalation – in an exclusively negative light. Consequently, escalation has become, if not forbidden in American strategic thought, a tactic seen as undesirable and avoidable. This view of escalation among American national security professionals creates real problems when it comes to not only pre-conflict and intra-war deterrence, but to conflict termination and achieving desirable outcomes.

Since deterrence involves a withheld threat of escalation, an apparent unwillingness to escalate undermines one's ability to deter. Messaging that one's priority is to avoid escalation can render a deterrent threat or actions taken to restore deterrence questionable or even incredible. This is true even if an actor has the capability to escalate, given that deterrence requires both capability and will to be effective. Put another way, it does not matter how much capability an actor has if the receiver of the deterrent message questions one's will to employ force. It should be remembered that seeking to avoid escalation or provocation is not the same as deterring, and may, in fact, degrade deterrence--something that U.S. national security professionals often confuse.



Adversary Reactions: Pricing-In and Wrong-Footing

An actor's decision to initiate a crisis, conflict, or a provocation is the summation of their perceptions of the potential costs and benefits of action and restraint, coupled with a risk analysis based upon projected outcomes. Said another way, for every action revisionist actors take, they "price-in" the expected response from the status quo power.

Put simply, revisionist state "Red" knows its provocation likely will trigger a reaction from status quo state "Blue." Red has gamed out the likely Blue reaction(s) before it has initiated a conflict. If Red believes that Blue will respond in a way that does not include significant escalation, but instead demonstrates restraint, it is more likely to initiate conflict. Moreover, if Red initiates a conflict and Blue responds in a non-escalatory fashion in an attempt to appeal to Red restraint, Red is unlikely to alter its course of action, because Blue's response was already "priced-in" by Red pre-conflict.

The key to restoring deterrence or convincing opponents to alter their course of action is to show them that their calculations that one's reaction would be tolerable are wrong. Some refer to this as the concept of "wrong-footing" an adversary.

Wrong-footing is not easy. It requires doing something that one's opponent did not expect, such as imposing an unexpected cost or exposing an unknown vulnerability on the Red actor who initiated the conflict in order to convince it that Red has underestimated Blue's decision-making and therefore miscalculated. Blue must further convince Red that not only is the conflict not going the way it planned, but there is a high chance that Red will lose the conflict it initiated. Wrong footing must sow enough doubt in Red's decision making such that Red sees it must recalculate the willingness of Blue to do what is necessary to deny Red victory or impose intolerable cost on Red – and therefore compel Red to seek an end to the conflict on terms that are still somewhat acceptable to both parties. Most importantly, Blue must convince Red that if the conflict does not end soon, Red could find itself in a worse place than the status quo ante.

Escalation: Not Too Hot, Not Too Cold

There is a degree of art to crafting a strategy that employs escalation. One must ensure that any escalation is not "too hot" – but also that it is not "too cold." It is necessary to avoid a threat so disproportionate that it is incredible, or its execution provokes a higher, unacceptable level of violence. Escalation could – if calibrated incorrectly – make the conflict worse and cause the adversary to escalate in response.

As an example, using nuclear weapons on an opponent's strategic forces as an escalatory response to a revisionist power conducting a limited invasion of one of its neighbors would likely be incredible because employing strategic nuclear weapons against strategic targets would be highly disproportionate to a limited invasion.

An inadequate threatened response, however, is unlikely to change the course of the adversary's behavior. For example, an actor may be tempted to impose economic sanctions on



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 600 | October 2, 2024

the invader, but if the invader believed that such sanctions were the likely response to the invasion, and proceeded with the invasion anyway, then those sanctions would not change the invader's behavior. The use of sanctions would not be sufficient – or, escalatory enough – to get the invader to back down.

Stakes must be understood. An actor must decide how far it will go to defend its various interests. If an actor employs military force to defend its interests and the status quo, it must accept a certain level of violence. In that sense, the threat or act of escalation could end the violence before the adversary engages in a protracted conflict that is ultimately more costly to all parties.

Indeed, if an actor does not wrong-foot an adversary and the adversary continues down the path of conflict, it is possible that the conflict could become protracted, more intense, and ultimately more costly for all parties. Alternatively, escalation – if calibrated correctly – may end the conflict decisively and early.

Ultimately, national security professionals must understand their nation's stakes, limits, objectives, and what a post-conflict status quo might be that is desirable for them (and does not plant the seeds for another conflict), and then employ what tools are required – potentially, to include a decisive escalation – to achieve the objectives laid out for them.

Of Offramps

Instead of escalating during wargames and tabletop exercises, many national security professionals offer their opponents "offramps" – that is, an opportunity for their opponents to end a conflict in a way that "saves face." But revisionist powers initiate conflict not to "save face," but to overturn an order they find intolerable.

The idea of offering off-ramps is a phenomenon that has become fashionable over the last twenty years. This is seen in wargames when military officers playing the "Blue" or "good guy" team have taken significant military losses and seek to offer their opponent a path to conflict termination that they hope Red will accept.

This approach rarely works in multi-celled wargames, where military officers and civilian defense policy makers emulate Red decision makers. There is a particularly good reason for that. Offramps to a conflict are only attractive when an actor wants to get out of a conflict. A Red team representing a revisionist power that is winning a conflict and is on a path to achieve its objectives has no incentive to accept an offramp from a Blue that is losing – particularly if they believe that the Blue team has an aversion to accept risk or failed to escalate the conflict in a decisive fashion.

Indeed, off-ramps *are only* accepted by an adversary when it is compelled to do so, i.e., when one is clearly winning the conflict, and the adversary is losing. To demonstrate this, a simple analogy is useful. Two middle-school boys are in a fistfight after school. The boy who is losing the fight is in no position to offer the boy who is winning the fight an off-ramp; the boy who is winning the fight will decide at what point the fight will end, and therefore is in a position to offer terms. The boy who is losing the fight can seek one of four options: 1) accept



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 600 | October 2, 2024

the terms of the boy who is winning the fight; 2) break free and run away; 3) seek third party intervention or additional allies of his own; or 4) come up with a bold new plan to change the course of the fight and achieve victory.

Far too often, however, the authors have seen military officers in the midst of simulations in which they are losing a conflict with a revisionist adversary prematurely offer off-ramps – very often with disastrous “in-game” consequences.

Conclusion

Our nation’s military officers and civilian policymakers must understand escalation dynamics. They must think deeply and critically about risk acceptance – and how avoiding operational risk and showing “restraint” may put the United States at greater strategic risk. They must understand that escalation can be a tool – useful at times, dangerous at others – within a larger toolkit, not one to be dismissed out of hand.

If America’s national security professionals do not do these things, our nation runs the risk of not only failing during a large-scale conflict, but actually incentivizing adversary aggression and escalation.

¹ Keith B. Payne, “The Great Divide in US Deterrence Thought,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2020), pp. 16-48, available at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-14_Issue-2/Payne.pdf.

² International Committee of the Red Cross, “The Law of Armed Conflict – Basic knowledge,” available at https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/law1_final.pdf.

³ “Blinken to Gallant: Important to avoid further escalation of the conflict,” *Israel National News*, June 25, 2024, available at <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/392060>.

⁴ Idrees Ali, Simon Lewis, and Phil Stewart, “US has communicated need to not escalate conflict to Iran and Israel, says Blinken,” *Reuters*, August 6, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-has-communicated-need-not-escalate-conflict-iran-israel-says-blinken-2024-08-06/>.

⁵ Jim Garamone, “Austin Urges Israeli Counterpart to De-escalate Conflict With Hamas,” *DOD News*, May 19, 2021, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2624439/austin-urges-israeli-counterpart-to-de-escalate-conflict-with-hamas/>.

⁶ For more in-depth analysis on risk aversion and decision-making see, Jon K. Maner, Matthew T. Gailliot, David A. Butz, and B. Michelle Peruche, “Power, Risk, and the Status Quo: Does Power Promote Riskier or More Conservative Decision Making?,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 33, Issue 4 (April 2007), available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0146167206297405>; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Power Politics and the Balance of Risk: Hypotheses on Great Power Intervention in the Periphery,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (April 2004), pp. 177-211, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3792561>; and, William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser, “Status Quo Bias in Decision Making” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1988), pp. 7-59, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41760530>.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 600 | October 2, 2024

The National Institute for Public Policy's *Information Series* is a periodic publication focusing on contemporary strategic issues affecting U.S. foreign and defense policy. It is a forum for promoting critical thinking on the evolving international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security. Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security. National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundations for the generous support that made this *Information Series* possible.

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