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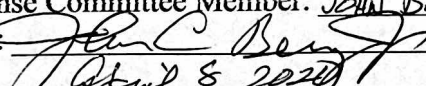
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Executive Summary

Title: U.S. Naval Forces and Horizontal Escalation: Pros, Cons and Recommendations.

Author: Major Alexander Thomas Luedtke, United States Marine Corps.

Thesis: U.S. naval services should not recommend horizontal escalation to the national command authority as a military strategy to compel a peer adversary to relent during a crisis or conflict because of the increased likelihood of inadvertent escalation, the low probability of success, and the significant risk to national interests. Instead, the naval services must continue to develop operational concepts such as Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE), Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), and Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) that deter Chinese expansionism by denying a *fait accompli*.

Discussion: Horizontal escalation is defined as a way to impose costs and risks on an adversary in an area geographically distinct from the central theatre in order to coerce or deter an adversary. Dormant since the 1980s, support for horizontal escalation has resurfaced as the U.S. conceptualizes strategies to respond to various *fait accompli* scenarios related to great power competitor expansionism. The relevance of horizontal escalation is based three assumptions, 1) that deterrence has failed, 2) the outcome of direct military resistance is uncertain, 3) a direct defense of a specific objective is likely to be unsuccessful. Proponents posit that these same assumptions are valid for the contemporary problem of blunting expansionism by great power competitors. From these assumptions, proponents argue that horizontal escalation is the most advantageous way to deter further vertical escalation and dissuade a peer adversary from pursuing further objectives in the primary conflict zone. While horizontal escalation can include a wide range of military means, this study is limited to naval forces whose innate characteristics and capabilities make them a logical first choice for executing horizontal escalation. From a naval perspective, this study counters the assertions supporting horizontal escalation by deconstructing the underlying logic, strengthening the central premise of current naval concepts, that an integrated naval force capable of blunting expansionism in the primary theatre is the most advantageous way to satisfy the National Defense Strategy (NDS).

Conclusion: U.S. naval services should not recommend horizontal escalation to the national command authority as a military strategy to compel a peer adversary to relent during a crisis or conflict because of the increased likelihood of inadvertent escalation, the low probability of success, and the significant risk to national interests. Instead, the naval services must continue to develop operational concepts such as Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE), Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), and Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) that deter Chinese expansionism by denying a *fait accompli*.

Preface & Acknowledgements

I'd like to acknowledge John Berry of the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab who originally proposed this topic for research at Command and Staff College. Mr. Berry's dedication to logic and critical thinking is worthy of emulation and I am in his debt. Over the course of my research, the thoughts of Elbridge Colby, Dr. Michael Fitzsimmons, and David Ochmanek stood out as sound strategic advice and I thank them for their contributions to my research and their own lifelong commitments to national security. I am also indebted to Dr. Brandon Valeriano of the Krulak Center whose mentorship was invaluable. Additionally, I'm thankful for Dr. Eric Shibuya, Dr. Paul Gelpi, Dr. Nathan Packard, and LtCol David Hyman of Command and Staff College, all of whom provided encouragement and direction. Furthermore, I extend my gratitude to the entirety of Marine Corps University for their professionalism, support, and sacrifices over the course of the academic year.

Introduction

This study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) In light of recent national defense and military strategy, how might naval forces be employed to put the enemy's global interests at risk in a crisis or conflict with a peer adversary? 2) What are the pros and cons of this type of horizontal escalation? To answer these questions, this study analyzes various outputs of strategic thought published since the 1980s, when the concept of horizontal escalation was first highlighted in U.S. national security strategy.¹ This study draws its inferences from three primary sources: the global wargames conducted at the U.S. Naval War College from 1979 to 1988, a declassified paper on horizontal escalation and riposte options generated by the Office of the Secretary of Defense in 1980, and the Halsey Alfa wargames conducted at the U.S. Naval War College from 2003 to present. Of note, conclusions reached from the Halsey Alfa wargames are captured in a classified annex due to operational security.

To reach conclusions concerning the pros and cons of horizontal escalation, this study analyzes the logical framework used in arguments for and against horizontal escalation by U.S. military forces against the USSR during the Cold War. With this logical framework as a reference, possible options for horizontal escalation during conflict or crisis between the U.S. and China in the near future are proposed and assessed. Of note, the focus on China is a result of recent defense planning guidance which directed the naval services to focus on the military problems created by China's military modernization. Ultimately, U.S. naval services should not recommend horizontal escalation to the national command authority as a military strategy to compel a peer adversary to relent during a crisis or conflict because of the increased likelihood of inadvertent escalation, the low probability of success, and the significant risk to national

interests. Instead, the naval services must continue to develop operational concepts such as Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE), Expeditionary Advance Base Operations (EABO), and Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) that deter Chinese expansionism by denying a *fait accompli*.

Background

In the context of naval strategy and tactics, naval thinkers and commanders have proposed indirect approaches as sound strategy since at least the birth of the U.S. Navy. Such proposals sought to use the ability of naval forces to move freely about the sea, hitting a foe in unexpected places to divert the enemy's attention from his central theatre.² John Paul Jones's feats of derring-do while conducting commerce raiding in English seas during the Revolutionary War are a prime example of such strategy in action.³

From the idea of indirect approach, various thinkers derived similar military strategies which sought to take advantage of the innate characteristics of naval forces in order to meet the wide variety of national security challenges faced by the U.S since the end of World War II. Offshoots of the indirect approach can be recognized by names such as war-widening, second area operations, offshore control, offshore-balancing, cost imposition, riposte options, asymmetrical response, geographic escalation, and indirect defense. However, the most prominent of these types of indirect military strategies is horizontal escalation, which has remained a consistent idea in multiple credible academic and government sources for the last 50 years. Additionally, horizontal escalation has been consistently explored in war games since the 1980s, the results of which reveal how this strategy evolved over decades of thinking.⁴

Horizontal escalation rose to prominence as a proposed military strategy in support of the Carter Doctrine in 1980. Shaken by the tumultuous events of 1979 and fearful of Soviet

expansion into the Gulf, the Department of Defense envisioned a set of riposte options that would deter further attacks or dissuade Soviet leadership from pursuing additional objectives.⁵ As noted in the executive summary, the authors assumed that the outcome of direct U.S. military resistance was uncertain and that the U.S. was unlikely to succeed in a direct defense.⁶ These assumptions are notable in that they are similar to the assumptions on which the current National Defense Strategy forms the crux of its argument, specifically that the U.S. requires a new strategy to offset great power competition.⁷ This is a possible answer to why horizontal escalation continues to resonate in American strategic thought.⁸ From these assumptions, the authors argued that for horizontal escalation to be a valid military strategy, these ripostes would have to improve the U.S. position by affecting adversary calculations as to the costs and benefits of continued aggression, acquiring bargaining chips which could be used to obtain favorable settlements of the conflict, or by forcing the adversary to divert forces from the main conflict to other front.⁹ Furthermore, the authors believed that the gains must outweigh the risk of counter-attack or escalation to general war.¹⁰ These ideas formed the thrust of the argument for horizontal escalation, the crux being that it appeared to offer a maneuver warfare approach to deter Soviet expansionism in the Gulf, side-stepping the tactical, operational, and strategic problems of a direct approach.

The momentum of horizontal escalation was stalled by two contemporaries, Robert Komer, who characterized horizontal escalation as a ‘mirage’, and Harold Brown who labelled horizontal escalation as ‘completely out of balance’.¹¹ However, the logical framework of horizontal escalation still jumped to the Reagan Administration and became an integral part of his initial national defense strategy. This is evident in then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger’s testimony that horizontal escalation was a main effort towards the deterrence of

the Soviet Union, arguing that the ability and willingness to shift or widen the war to other areas would blunt Soviet expansion.¹²

In support of this national defense strategy, the U.S. naval services invested into developing and promulgating a supporting maritime strategy that, "...established a general approach to the most effective use of naval forces in the context of a range of specific maritime situations that American naval planners considered the most likely if a major war with the Soviet Union were to occur in the 1980s. In their time, the maritime-strategy documents created for the Navy a consensus approach that filled a need for clarity and consolidation of thinking in a way that naval leaders found well aligned with thinking within the Navy and Marine Corps, as well as with national defense policies.¹³

As a result of this integrated strategic effort, the naval services secured the resources required to create what is now colloquially referred by the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps as the 'legacy force', which then enjoyed a multi-decade run of tactical success.¹⁴ Having centered the maritime strategy on the requirement to have a superior fleet capable of power projection and horizontal escalation, strategic discourse was barraged with deftly constructed supporting arguments, epitomized by pro-sea power strategist Colin S. Gray who opined, "...the notion of horizontal escalation, using superior sea power to press for advantage against a geographically extensive Soviet defense perimeter...is potentially a commonsense way of making profitable use, as feasible, of superior maritime mobility and flexibility. It is not a promising idea for effecting a rapid offset to large-scale loss in Central Europe."¹⁵

In the interim years between Caspar Weinberger's testimony in 1983 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the naval services continued to explore the concept of horizontal escalation in annual wargames.¹⁶ The collapse of the Soviet Union dramatically altered the strategic situation,

setting the naval services on a different course until 2018 when the issuance of the National Defense Strategy restored great power competition as the focal point for national security.¹⁷ This course correction reignited interest in horizontal escalation as the naval services made similar assumptions regarding the prospects of direct U.S. military resistance or defense against Chinese expansionism. At present, the naval services are in the midst of refining their concepts in support of the National Defense Strategy. In general, the three approved concepts, Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO), Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE), and Expeditionary Advance Base Operations (EABO) set a direct course towards blunting Chinese expansionism. This study supports the direct approach to deterrence outlined in these concepts by deconstructing the logic used to support horizontal escalation, highlighting logical fallacies and demonstrating why horizontal escalation remains a ‘mirage’.

What is Horizontal Escalation?

Omitted from the background was a brief overview of definitions and context on the intellectual origins of escalation theory. For the reader’s reference, this section covers those topics in order to set-up deconstruction of the logic supporting horizontal escalation. The following excerpts provide the most common definition of horizontal escalation,

1. Escalation that involves an increase in the intensity of armed conflict or confrontation, such as employing types of weapons not previously used in the conflict or attacking new categories of targets, is often collectively described as vertical escalation, in contrast to horizontal escalation, which refers to expanding the geographic scope of a conflict (for example, by conducting operations into or through territory previously treated as neutral by the combatants).¹⁸
2. Horizontal escalation...is a strategy that would seek to impose costs and risks on a (adversary) beyond the immediate conflict zone sufficient enough to compel it to relent on the issue at hand.¹⁹
3. ...Horizontal escalation (is) widening the geographic scope of a conflict, and (is) contrasted with vertical escalation, an expansion of a conflict’s intensity through the amount of force or the types of weapons or targets involved. Its logic is

principally coercive, designed to convince an adversary to abandon a course of action by imposing costs or threatening interests not previously imperiled by the conflict.²⁰

As these excerpts demonstrate, horizontal escalation is regarded as a military strategy rather than an international relations theory. This distinction is important because the seminal works of escalation theory contain limited analysis of horizontal escalation. Works such as Herman Kahn's *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, Richard Smoke's *War: Controlling Escalation*, Bernard Brodie's *Escalation and the Nuclear Option*, or Thomas Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* provide scant commentary on horizontal escalation, suggesting that horizontal escalation was originally derived from escalation theory concerned with nuclear war by successive generations of military strategists.²¹

This fact resonates in another leading work on escalation management which notes, "...in practice, however, the lines separating vertical, horizontal, and political escalation are often far from clear... labeling an action as vertical or horizontal escalation usually does not reveal or explain very much about it even, when doing so is relatively straightforward."²² This gap of intellectual foundation causes the characteristics of horizontal escalation being inconsistently understood, resulting in logical fallacies when the strategy is applied to national security problems. This being the case, this study critiques horizontal escalation from the perspective of military strategy, defined as, "... the creation, employment, and articulation of the military instrument of national power to achieve policy objectives."²³ Through this approach, the pros and cons of horizontal escalation strategy become apparent and practical.

The Logic of Military Strategy

Having established that horizontal escalation is a military strategy, this study proceeds with a brief overview of the logic that underpins military strategy in order to establish the

evaluation criteria for determining the pros and cons of horizontal escalation. For the purposes of this study, the logic of military strategy is, "...a function of creative art, the logic, or science...founded upon the evidence of history; the arithmetic of available resources; a clear acknowledgment of time horizons and distances; and astute analysis of friendly, neutral, adversary, and enemy interests and will...requires an understanding of facts and assumptions to inform strategic decision making. Its logic is both **inductive and deductive**, guiding purposeful action toward its end.²⁴

Furthermore, current joint thinking posits that for a military strategy to be logical it must have the following characteristics:

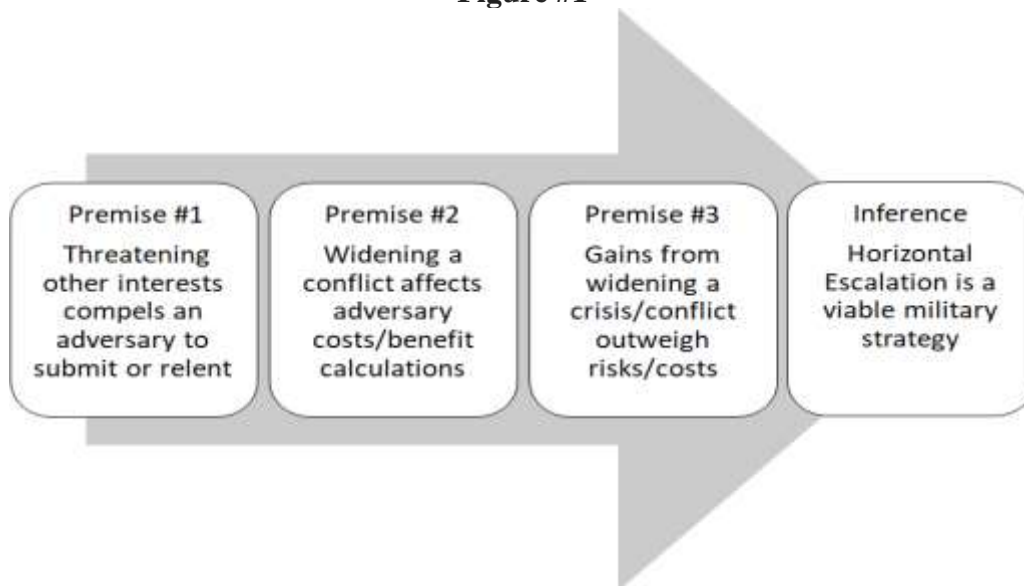
1. Provide a choice that bridges present facts to a desired future state or condition.
2. Address enemies, adversaries, allies, and other actors.
3. Identify resource, risk, and organizational issues, colloquially known as being resource informed.
4. Be comprehensive and cumulative.
5. Operate across multiple time horizons.
6. Be competitive by creating or preserving friendly advantages.
7. Be perishable and flexible by expecting when to develop or transition to a new strategy.
8. Answer the question "why?"
9. Be distinct from the products and activities that military organizations use to organize, resource, and shape their future capabilities

With this criteria in mind, this study proceeds with an inductive and deductive analysis of horizontal escalation in order to determine the validity of horizontal escalation as a military strategy.

An Inductive Analysis of Horizontal Escalation

The inductive argument for horizontal escalation flows as such:

Figure #1



As depicted in figure #1, it is unlikely that each premise is certain which weakens the final inference. This weakness is noted by all credible studies of horizontal escalation and form the crux of the arguments against horizontal escalation as a viable military strategy.²⁵ The uncertainty of each premise increases the likelihood that predictions about gains, risks, and costs are unsound. This results in a stability-instability paradox where , “...measures to deter an enemy from seeking military advantage through deliberate escalation may increase the chances that escalated provoking accidents will occur, or confidence-building measures to prevent inadvertent escalation may encourage the adversary to engage in deliberate escalation by signaling a reluctance to risk fighting with higher levels of violence.”²⁶ Applied to a possible Chinese-U.S. conflict this paradox, “...present(s) significant risks of inadvertent escalation if military forces were permitted to operate in keeping with their doctrinal tenets without regard for escalation thresholds...each seems to assume that it will suppress enemy escalation by dominating the conflict.”²⁷

However, the inductive argument for horizontal escalation also creates an alternative paradox in which all premises could be true, which would strengthen the final inference. This paradox is noted by most credible studies of horizontal escalation where nearly all authors envisioned limited scenarios where the inductive argument for horizontal escalation could meet the standards of strategic military logic. The crux of the argument being that there could be a scenario where a causal link is created by a horizontal escalation action. Given the nature of war, this is improbable, which further weakens the inductive argument for horizontal escalation.

A Deductive Analysis of Horizontal Escalation

From a deductive perspective the logic supporting horizontal becomes more circumspect. This is because there are no *modus ponens*, a rule of logic that states if a conditional statement is accepted, and the antecedent holds, then the consequence may be inferred.²⁸ The following figure depicts this fallacy:

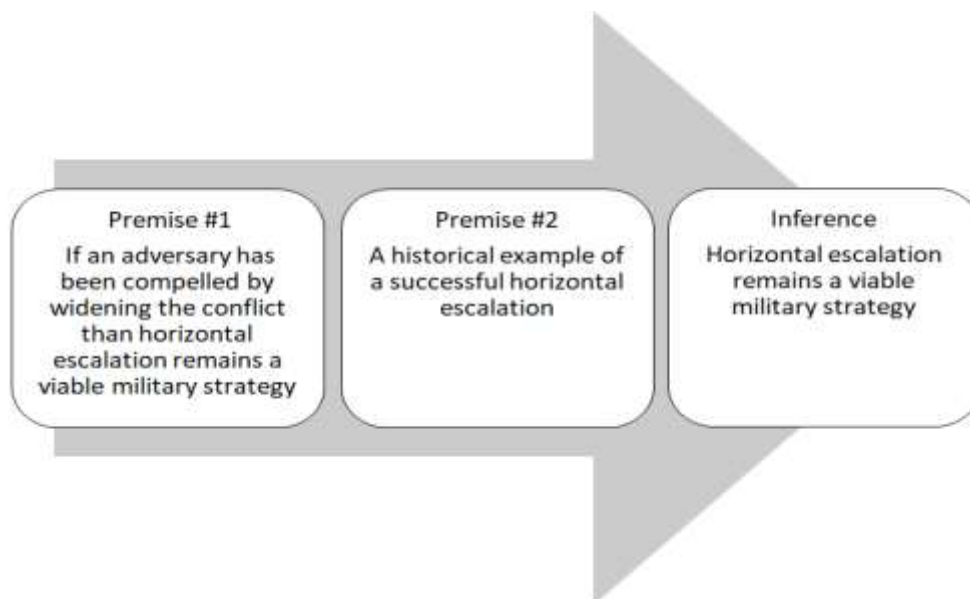


Figure #2

The lack of a generally accepted *modus ponens* undermines the strength of a deductive argument in support of horizontal escalation. This fallacy was noted by T. J. McKearney in his analysis of the Solomons naval campaign during World War II. In his thesis, he argues that while the Solomon naval campaign could be construed as a horizontal escalation, the inferences drawn from the facts of the campaign force a conclusion that challenges the core premise of horizontal escalation, namely that the gains are comparable to the risks and costs.²⁹ A similar critique is made by David Ochmanek and Elbridge Colby who argue, "...This isn't because horizontal escalation and cost imposition can't be effective in the abstract, although it is hard to identify examples from history of it working. Rather, it is because widening a war at the expense of the local fight generally favors China and Russia, not the United States and its allies."³⁰ Along this same line of thinking, it follows that a deductive analysis supports a con argument against horizontal escalation due to a lack of a *modus ponens*. Without this key logical base, the argument for horizontal escalation is weakened, increasing the likelihood that the final inferences are unsound.

Summary of Logical Analysis

Having established the logical framework of horizontal escalation, this study envisions and evaluates military options for how naval forces could be employed to put a peer adversary's global interests at risk in a crisis or conflict. As previously described, a military strategy that uses naval forces to conduct horizontal escalation must be logical from both an inductive and deductive standpoint. A pro inductive argument produces a likelihood that corresponds with the gains, risks, and costs of horizontal escalation action. A pro deductive argument follows from a conditional statement where there is general consensus about its veracity, which is a difficult but possible threshold to meet given the nature of war and escalation. A con inductive argument has

weak causal inferences, generalizations or analogical connections. Whereas a con deductive argument would be invalid *prima facie*. By subjecting possible military options to the rigor of inductive and deductive analysis, the pro and con arguments for each option informs future discussion and consideration of horizontal escalation as a military strategy. With this in mind, the study proceeds with review of horizontal escalation options that have been proposed and gamed in the past, followed by analysis of such options, ultimately culminating in the selection of a set of options to apply to a *fait accompli* scenario triggering a conflict or crisis between the U.S. and China in the near future.

Historical Horizontal Escalation Options

When horizontal escalation was first proposed as a military strategy in support of the Carter Doctrine in 1980, the following military options were considered as ways improve the U.S. position in a limited war against a peer adversary:

1. Support insurgent groups or external adversaries of client states
2. Attack facilities in the Indian Ocean
3. Invade a client state
4. Punitive actions against a client state
5. NATO mobilization
6. Coordinated actions with another regional power
7. Destruction of an adversary fleet in Indian Ocean
8. Attacks against military or industrial targets within the borders of the adversary
9. Selective naval blockade
10. World-wide naval blockade.³¹

Each of these options was formed out of the logic of deterrence by punishment, seeking to coerce the adversary, either by deterrence or compellence, to produce the desired outcome.³² After considering the risks, costs, and benefits of these options, the authors concluded that, "...posing broad threats of a wider war could precipitate the very war we are striving to deter. Once war breaks out, escalation would be difficult to control since it would depend in large part on actions taken by both sides. Nevertheless, if deterrence fails, and if direct action against invading...is not effective, war-widening, with all its risks, offers the only alternative to acquiescence...or to escalating to nuclear warfare."³³ The architects of these options argued that despite the costs and risks, horizontal escalation would either deter further vertical escalation or dissuade a peer adversary from pursuing further objectives in the primary conflict zone.³⁴ This argument is important to note as concepts such as Distributed Maritime Operations and Expeditionary Advance Based Operations posit that with new technology and an integrated approach, the same effect can be achieved in the central theatre without the risks and costs of war-widening.³⁵ This juxtaposition indicates that advancements in doctrine and technology have invalidated the assumptions underlying horizontal escalation which creates further doubt that such options would result in favorable strategic outcomes.³⁶

A few years later, the naval services continued exploring horizontal escalation with a series of wargames, called the Global War Games, which ran from 1979 to 1988, for the purpose of, "...gaining insights into how naval campaigns might be conducted on a global scale in the event of conflict between the United States (Blue) and allies and the Soviet Union (Red) and satellites."³⁷ Over this period of time, the players consistently explored military strategies, "... in terms of both the vertical (increased intensity of conflict) and the horizontal (war-widening). From a maritime perspective, the dimension that related most directly to naval employment was

horizontal escalation, where commanders searched for ways of applying pressure to Red away from the central area of battle.”³⁸ The historical record of these wargames shows how horizontal escalation evolved as a military strategy as successive generations of military planners gamed a wide range of options. As a result of this multi-year effort, planners from the Armed Services concluded that:

1. **Blue did not achieve major success employing horizontal escalation strategies.**
2. The potential for horizontal escalation appeared to increase with the length of the conflict.
3. Linking a long war strategy with horizontal escalation appeared to offer tangible benefits.
4. **Blue experimented with a number of approaches, but seemed unable to influence Red or to discover any significant vulnerability. Red remained wedded to a Central Front focus and refused to be diverted.**
5. For Blue, not only were areas of potential Red weakness difficult to reach geographically, efforts to do so could dilute valuable resources that were often needed elsewhere.
6. If Blue chose to mass sufficient forces to be effective off the main axis of action, the availability of troops to support the primary theater could be adversely affected. Conversely, if Blue mounted an attack with a less favorable force ratio, effects were marginal.
7. Horizontal actions showed the potential of achieving the desired dispersion of Red forces.
8. **Red found opportunities to use this same strategy. By launching attacks into other areas, Red caused Blue to divert sizable forces away from other theaters. Additionally, through the use or threatened use of surrogates, Red was also able to tie down Blue resources.**³⁹

These conclusions demonstrate that across years of gaming, the range of military options associated with horizontal escalation in these war games increased, making it increasingly difficult for participants to distinguish between the dimensions of escalation.⁴⁰ Naval thinkers saw horizontal escalation as essential to deterrence because it strengthened the argument that the naval services, “...require a capability not only to inflict punishment but also to deny war aims by

holding at risk the military capability of a potential aggressor.”⁴¹ Unfortunately, this conclusion was based on a logical fallacy of hasty generalization whereas those fleeting strategic advantages came at the cost of failing to compel the adversary to abandon his course of action on the central issue. As horizontal escalation failed to produce the desired end state, players found themselves vying for ephemeral advantages in protracted wars with peer adversaries with ever increasing risk of nuclear war as attrition limited conventional military options. This lack of escalation dominance produced outcomes where the risk of inadvertent or accidental escalation was increased to the point where it defies the fundamental logic of military strategy.⁴² Nevertheless, the prevailing attitude at the conclusion of the war games was that the above mentioned conclusions strengthened horizontal escalation’s credibility as a military strategy despite not meeting the criterion of military logic. This inconsistency is noted by two prominent contemporaries, Robert W. Komer and John J. Mearsheimer who opined that it was, “...simply not plausible to think in terms of threatening the Soviets with a tit-for-tat strategy.”⁴³

The global war games conducted from 1979-1988 assisted with the circulation of horizontal escalation throughout the naval services, setting the stage for further exploration as a response to the access denial challenges at the operational level of war explored by the Halsey Alpha Group since 2003.⁴⁴ However, considering the current dynamics at play between the U.S. and China, the viability of these historic options is questionable as eroding military advantage is undermining the value of deterrence by punishment *Vis a Vis* China.⁴⁵

Plausible Options

Having set the historical and logical background of horizontal escalation, this study can answer the question, how might naval forces be employed to put the enemy’s global interests at risk in a crisis or conflict with a peer adversary? This study answers these questions by

examining the inductive and deductive arguments for military options that use naval forces to put China's global interests at risk in a crisis or conflict triggered by a *fait accompli* scenario, thus extrapolating the pros and cons of such a strategy. This study makes four assumptions to arrive at its conclusions:

1. That China is no longer deterred.
2. That the likely outcome of a direct defense is failure and is thus too risky or costly for the U.S.
3. That the desired outcome is for China to abandon its current course of action and return the central theatre to the previous status quo.
4. That the relative national power dynamics between the U.S. and China remain competitive.

After evaluating previously gamed military options and considering the relative power dynamics projected to exist between the U.S. and China, this study sees two plausible conventional options for naval forces to conduct horizontal escalation against China.

1. Interdiction of imports/exports
2. Destroy out of area military forces, bases, and projects

The first option, a campaign of blockades and *guerre de course* to interdict imports and exports, rests on the central assertion that China is so reliant on both imports and exports that it is critically vulnerable to these forms of naval warfare. Proponents contend that the U.S. naval services, in conjunction with its allies and partners, could design and implement an integrated naval campaign to interdict and disrupt the Chinese economy in depth, thereby imposing enough risks and costs to force China to relent during a crisis or conflict triggered by a *fait accompli* scenario.⁴⁶ These central inference rests on five premises:

1. That Chinese reliance on oil imports from the Middle East is critical.

2. That the Chinese economy and government is not resilient enough to endure such pressures.
3. That Chinese commercial maritime traffic is vulnerable because it has to transit strategic choke points.
4. That naval services have sufficient combat power to impose such costs over an undetermined amount of time.
5. That allies and partners would be willing to participate

Unfortunately, this inductive argument is flawed because of the low probability of each premise being true. For instance, the premise regarding the vulnerability of the Chinese economy is questionable given that China is the world's largest export economy, the world's largest trade partner, and the 33rd most complex economy in the world.⁴⁷ The scope and complexity of the Chinese economy undermines the premise that a naval campaign could impose enough costs and risks to force China to relent. Furthermore, this military option is further undercut from a deductive standpoint whereas the history of commerce raiding against powers with widespread commerce and a strong navy is proven to be strategically indecisive.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, there is a marginal logical probability that an internationally supported naval campaign which interdicted Chinese imports/exports by controlling key strategic choke points could signal a sufficient amount of resolve to compel China to abandon a *fait accompli*. However, it is more probable that such a strategy wouldn't meet other criteria which forces a skeptical conclusion of the viability of this military option.

The second option, using naval forces to destroy out of area military forces, bases, and projects, is extrapolated from China's pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which can be regarded as an, "...as an effort to expand China's strategic depth, which has generated new

requirements and options for Beijing to use and station military forces overseas.”⁴⁹ Combined with the, “... building a network of overseas “strategic strongpoints” consisting of military bases and commercial ports that can support military operations. China established its first permanent overseas military presence in Djibouti in 2017 and Argentina in 2018, and reportedly has reached an agreement for the PLA to operate from a naval base in Cambodia.”⁵⁰

Given the global dispersion of BRI activities, the thinking supporting this option posits that naval forces could attack these interests in order to compel China to relent. This option is particularly appealing as it seems to reduce the inverse risks and costs of imposing a difficult global maritime interdiction campaign. Furthermore, it aligns well with the core capabilities of the naval forces, namely strike and expeditionary operations. As with the first option, the inductive argument for this option relies on an unstable logic chain that makes risky predictions about causation between a horizontal escalation action and the adversary reaction. Being that analysis of escalation history has resulted in bleak conclusions regarding the ability of great powers to anticipate each other’s escalation strategies, the deductive argument is similarly unstable.⁵¹ Combined with the unequal value of overseas outposts when compared to the value of attaining victory over contested maritime terrain or the reunification of Taiwan begets the conclusion that such actions will more than likely result in strategic disadvantages which increase the risk of, “...painful and possibly massive retaliation without a plausible way of achieving our goals.”⁵² Nevertheless, there is a marginal logical probability that a naval campaign that destroys Chinese overseas interests could signal a sufficient amount of resolve to compel China to abandon a *fait accompli*. However, it is more probable that such a strategy wouldn’t meet the other criteria of military logic which again forces a skeptical conclusion of the viability of this military option.

What are the pros and cons of this type of horizontal escalation?

The main con of horizontal escalation is that it is unlikely to compel a peer adversary to relent and is therefore moot. Furthermore, critics of horizontal escalation assert that horizontal escalation:

1. Increases the risk of escalation.⁵³
2. Increases risks and costs by motivating an adversary to take action to reduce vulnerability.⁵⁴
3. Increases risk by diverting critical and limited resources from the central front which undermines allies and partners.⁵⁵
4. Increases cost by widening the scope of the conflict or crisis.⁵⁶

It is also unlikely that the naval services would be able to implement a horizontal escalation strategy given the state of naval force structure, the projected growth of adversary militaries, and current service strategies.⁵⁷ To support such a strategy, the naval services would have to successfully argue for a disproportionate share of the defense budget in order to field fleets proportionate to the task. Furthermore, a horizontal escalation centric strategy runs counter to the goals and priorities of the current National Defense Strategy as well as current naval concepts. The National Defense Strategy clearly prioritizes forces that are able to deter aggression and by standing in contested zones to blunt and defeat offensive action.⁵⁸ In keeping with this strategy, both the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps are pursuing operational concepts which are well suited to the task.⁵⁹ Furthermore, such approaches continue to be successful in consequential war games, which cannot be said for horizontal escalation now or in the past.⁶⁰ It is telling that horizontal escalation has never progressed from being a, "...niche element in an integrated set of asymmetrical tools for deterrence and escalation management."⁶¹ This consideration when

combined with a resolute criticism from veritable thinkers strongly signals that horizontal escalation is an illogical military strategy.

The main pro is that horizontal escalation could act as a supporting effort to a direct defense in the central theatre. This possibility is left open by even the most ardent critics. However, this study concluded that it would be best to use other doctrinal terms when describing these types of actions. As noted in the Global War Games, indirect approaches proved most promising in protracted conflicts with a peer adversary.⁶² This being the case, it is also possible to envision indirect approaches in support of a direct defense that would set conditions for success in the central theatre.⁶³ In this framework, the cost-benefit analysis of military options such as interdiction or the threatening of overseas interest bears positive, logical outcomes.⁶⁴

Recommendations for Further Research and Policy

In spite of years of unfavorable outcomes in serious war games, horizontal escalation continues to resonate because it seems to offer a convenient solution to the challenging task of restoring deterrence when rising competitors such as China attempt to seize new or disputed territory. As this study shows, the logic underpinning horizontal escalation suffers from fatal flaws that yields disadvantageous outcomes. On the other hand, the prospects of indirect approaches remain promising. Just as the Chinese military modernization has driven the naval services to re-design their operational concepts and force structures, Chinese strategic thought ought to compel military strategists to re-think the strategy of deterrence. When the U.S. Navy's maritime strategy was first rolled out, there was a supporting push in Proceedings, consisting of dozens of articles penned by leading Naval officers, Admiral James D. Watkins led the way by asserting, "...Deterrence simply means convincing a potential aggressor that the risks involved in aggression are greater than its possible benefits."⁶⁵ For the U.S. military, operational concepts

such as Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and Distributed Maritime Operations strengthen deterrence by frustrating Chinese operations with new technology, joint operations, and better integration. This being the case, further research ought to explore this premise by analyzing the Chinese military perspective on emerging naval concepts through the lenses of Chinese precepts of deterrence and escalation. Doing so may yield strong evidence to support the premises underlying budding naval concepts. These perspectives would be used to refine operational concepts through reiterative wargames, honing U.S. mental models for escalation and deterrence *Vis a Vis* China. Another useful effort is to establish a common understanding of escalation, within the context of *Joint Note 1-19: The Competition Continuum*, in Joint doctrine. Doing so, would assist in reconciling the gaps this study noted, anchoring the DOD on a common mental model for escalation, further informing strategy and military advice to the national command authority.

Conclusion

This study explored horizontal escalation as a military strategy and ultimately concluded that using naval forces to conduct horizontal escalation against a peer adversary to put the enemy's global interests at risk in times of crisis or conflict will likely result in disadvantageous outcomes for the United States and its Armed Forces. In general, the strength of the inferences which support a pro inductive argument for horizontal escalation are fatally weakened when challenged by in-depth analysis and historical perspective. Furthermore, envisioning scenarios where horizontal escalation deters an adversary such as China over issues where it would pursue a *fait accompli* action dangerously neglects the stability-instability paradox where , "...measures to deter an enemy from seeking military advantage through deliberate escalation may increase the chances that escalated provoking accidents will occur, or

confidence-building measures to prevent inadvertent escalation may encourage the adversary to engage in deliberate escalation by signaling a reluctance to risk fighting with higher levels of violence.”⁶⁶ Additionally, proponents of horizontal escalation have historically oversold the potential of this strategy without adequately addressing the risks and costs. Therefore, U.S. naval services should not recommend horizontal escalation to the national command authority as a military strategy to compel a peer adversary to relent during a crisis or conflict because of the increased likelihood of inadvertent escalation, the low probability of success, and the significant risk to national interests. Instead, the naval services must continue to develop operational concepts such as Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE), Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), and Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) that deter Chinese expansionism by denying a *fait accompli*.⁶⁷

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