

Managing Escalation

Lessons and Challenges from Three Historical Crises Between Nuclear-Armed Powers

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A war between the United States and a capable, nuclear-armed adversary would introduce the risk of destructive strikes on a scale the United States has not seriously contemplated since the end of the Cold War. The main debate in the policy world is between advocates of theories of victory that are reliant on denial and advocates of theories of victory that depend on cost imposition. Cost-imposition strategies, such as those requiring a distant blockade or a punitive air campaign, require the United States to successfully navigate what we refer to as the *Goldilocks Challenge*: how to identify with high confidence a “sweet spot” of pressure points that are valuable enough to influence enemy decisionmaking but not so valuable that they cause unacceptable retaliation.

The argument for a cost-imposition strategy rests on two assumptions that are fundamental but underanalyzed: (1) that such sweet spots exist and (2) that policymakers can identify and continuously track the boundaries of these sweet spots with sufficient confidence that leaders are willing to authorize attacks against these targets as part of a wider campaign. To help the U.S. Air Force evaluate the feasibility of a cost-imposition strategy and assess the associated risks of uncontrolled escalation, we examine in this report the ability of past decisionmakers to identify adversary thresholds and to apply this information to control escalation during militarized crises between nuclear-armed states.



APPROACH

In this report, we analyze three historical cases of militarized crises and conflicts between nuclear-armed major powers:

- the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis between the United States and the Soviet Union
- the 1969 border conflict between China and the Soviet Union
- the 1995–1996 crisis between the United States and China over Taiwan.

These cases are illustrative of the types of scenarios U.S. policymakers could plausibly confront in the future but do not amount to a comprehensive sample of potential escalation and de-escalation pathways.

The premise of this report is that historical analysis of prior crises between nuclear-armed powers can offer significant insights into prospective barriers to managing escalation risks during wartime. Because a major war between nuclear-armed states has never happened, no historical analogy can account for all the attributes of such a conflict, including the pace of decisionmaking, scale of destruction, and perceived stakes. Together,

however, they can help to bound forecasts by revealing reoccurring pressures, dilemmas, distortions, and obstacles that may be heightened in a future conflict. We give special attention to how decisionmakers perceived the risks of escalation, how they used the available information to infer adversary intentions, and how they assessed their options. We do not make specific predictions about how certain states will act during future crises and conflicts or evaluate the relative merits of potential theories of victory. Rather, we identify recurring patterns of behavior and shed light on plausible blunders, hurdles, and accidents that U.S. planners can prepare to mitigate.



CONCLUSIONS

Our historical analysis identified the following considerations for managing escalation risks during wartime:

- **The United States will have a limited ability to control how adversaries interpret its coercive actions.** Adversaries may wrongly surmise U.S. intentions from uncoordinated, unauthorized, or unrelated policies or actions—and vice versa. Varied strategic cultures and historical experiences can also cause misinterpretations of intentions and signals.
- **Decisionmakers may not immediately recognize that a crisis or conflict has begun.** Delays can impede the transmission of coercive signals, skew assessments of adversary resolve and valuation of targets, and limit parties' ability to avert or control escalation during crises or the opening stages of conflict.
- **Decisionmakers' assessment of the value of a target or the significance of a threat may change over time as a conflict evolves and potential costs become clearer.** Leaders' valuation of targets, evaluation of the relative costs and benefits of reprisals, and perception of adversary intent may change over the course of a conflict. This suggests that the boundaries of any sweet spot within the Goldilocks Challenge framework will be fluid, increasing the prospect of inadvertent escalation.
- **The reorganization or creation of decisionmaking bodies may alter access to or interpretation of information, complicating efforts to sway power centers.** Changes in the composition or procedures of such forums may change the balance of influence among leaders and contribute to unpredictable outcomes. This may complicate attempts to tailor coercive strategies for individual leaders and confound behavioral predictions.
- **A perceived loss of control over the intensity, pace, or scope of a confrontation might not compel a rival to capitulate.** Leaders may respond in unpredictable ways to unanticipated escalation or a loss of battlefield or theater awareness. To clear the fog of war, some leaders may choose to escalate.
- **Nuclear threats may increase adversary fears without compelling substantial changes in behavior.** In each of our cases, an inferior nuclear power antagonized a more powerful rival. Varied attitudes toward the utility of nuclear weapons for warfighting may make some leaders more tolerant of nuclear threats.



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