

HCSS StratMon 2016

# BACK TO THE BRINK

ESCALATION AND INTERSTATE CRISIS



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**BACK TO THE BRINK**  
ESCALATION AND INTERSTATE CRISIS  
**HCSS StratMon 2016**

*The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2 CRISIS: DEFINITIONS AND EMPIRICS</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1 DEFINING CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS IS – AND IS NOT	17
2.2 CRISIS TRENDS	24
2.3 CONCLUSION	32
<b>3 CRISIS AND ESCALATION</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1 ESCALATION, ESCALATION THRESHOLDS AND THE ESCALATION LADDER	35
3.2 THREE MECHANISMS OF ESCALATION	41
3.3 ESCALATION AND DETERRENCE	44
3.4 ESCALATION DOMINANCE	49
3.5 ESCALATION AND CRISIS STABILITY	51
<b>4 SO WHAT: INSIGHTS FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>63</b>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For some time, many thought that interstate crisis was consigned to the dustbin of history. Even if it ever was, the lid has certainly come off in recent years. The Crimea Annexation Crisis and the resulting standoff between Russia and the West as well as more recent crises pitting Turkey against Russia (late November 2015) and Saudi Arabia against Iran (early January 2016) are only some of the latest examples. Rather than isolated incidents, these events mark a larger trend: the comeback of interstate crisis.

Interstate crises – disruptions of ordinary interactions between states with a heightened probability of war – are not necessarily new, but their recent incarnations suggest that their dangerous effects for international peace and security are increasing. Decision makers have been slow to respond to this trend. Since the end of the Cold War, many of the lessons about crisis have been forgotten as the attention shifted to unconventional threats like terrorists and failed states. Now that crisis and crisis management return as critical challenges on the security agenda, there is an urgent need to reacquire crisis literacy. This study report serves precisely that objective. It identifies insights for crisis anticipation, crisis prevention and crisis management in today's world by taking stock of the empirical and theoretical crisis scholarship literature.

At the foundation of any interstate crisis is the presence of conflicting interests between two or more states. That disagreements exist between states is natural and inevitable. Seen as a surrogate for war, crises may even fulfil an indispensable role in the management of international relations, because they allow states to solve their disputes and achieve their strategic objectives with minimum levels of violence. In fact, the historical record counts over 450 international crises since the end of World War I, of which 45% did *not* involve any violence at all. At the same time, a crisis that is not properly managed carries with it a greater risk of flaring out of control and sparking a full-fledged war. The essence of

crisis management therefore lies not in the avoidance of crisis altogether, but in the careful balance of preventing war and protecting one's core values and interests.

Effective crisis management requires first and foremost an understanding of the nature of crisis and its quintessential characteristic: *escalation*. Escalation marks an increase in the intensity of dispute or conflict between two parties, which occurs when a change in one state's behavior is considered to cross a threshold in the eyes of at least one other state. As the intensity of moves and countermoves increases, a crisis moves up the ladder of escalation, with every rung denoting the crossing of a new threshold. Traditionally, escalation has been conceived of as a one-dimensional process of an increase in the intensity of military hostilities – vertical escalation. A more appropriate understanding of escalation in the context of contemporary crisis should also include horizontal escalation. Rather than steps up and down the ladder, this moves away from the ladder with sidesteps into other dimensions, including place, time, and domain. Whether the trigger is accidental, inadvertent or deliberate, escalation easily reinforces itself because *not losing* becomes a goal in itself once a crisis has started, even if the initial stakes are low. Together, the interactive, multidimensional, and self-reinforcing elements of escalation make the course of a crisis hard to predict.

Nevertheless, a basic understanding of crisis dynamics is essential to effective crisis management. To manage the ladder of escalation and de-escalation effectively, decision makers will need to understand the prerequisites for effective deterrence, escalation dominance and crisis stability: dissuade adversaries, dictate the rules of the game, and reconsider the structural conditions (like the offense-defense balance) that make a crisis more likely. We formulate nine insights for crisis management for defense and security organizations (DSOs) to help decision makers prepare for future crises.

1. **Invest in crisis informatics.** DSOs need to enhance both their *crisis early warning* and *crisis monitoring* capabilities. Strategic Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance tools will provide a better understanding of where crises erupt, track how they develop and examine pathways that lead to or away from crisis escalation, both at the micro-level and the macro level. These tools are put to use, but not necessarily owned or operated, by DSOs.

2. **Develop metrics of effectiveness for crisis intervention.** The enhanced understanding of the real dynamics and atmospherics of crisis will provide better gauges for what works and does not work in crisis intervention, including both the efforts of DSOs and of many other actors that are active in crises. This in turn will provide a better basis to decide upon various courses of action, including escalation or de-escalation.
3. **Manage escalation (do not shy away from it).** Crisis management is as much a competition in risk taking as it is about risk calibration, about knowing when to ratchet up the pressure, and when to ratchet it downwards. It is crucial to address escalatory moves of a crisis opponent in a concerted manner, aimed at protecting vital interests while preventing escalation to war. It requires that senior decision makers possess crisis literacy and are exposed to the fundamental tenets of crisis management as part of their professional training. Analogous to war gaming, a practice quite prevalent amongst military practitioners, crisis games should be played regularly involving a broader circle of security and defense decision makers.
4. **Hybrid crises require hybrid escalation dominance.** Escalation dominance in contemporary conflict is dependent on the ability and flexibility to escalate and de-escalate both vertically and horizontally. Multidimensional (de-)escalation adds a more complex layer to crisis management that necessitates a broader toolkit of crisis management capabilities. It requires a more granular understanding of the opponent, of his perceptions and his actions. The intricate play of multidimensional and dynamic (de-)escalation requires a broad portfolio of calibrated measures in order to step up and down and sideways along the escalation space. The design of a diversified options portfolio for crisis contingency planning can benefit from the establishment of a hybrid task force to develop new policy options. Institutionally, the establishment of a body on top of the defense and security ‘silos’ – a national security council spearheaded by an advisor – will facilitate cross domain coordination.
5. **Different mechanisms of escalation call for different deterrent strategies.** Deterrence can be effective against deliberate forms of escalation. Deterrence promises punishment if particular thresholds are crossed. Such threats have to be credible in order to affect the adversary’s decision-making calculus. Deterrence is of little help when dealing with other mechanisms of escalation – inadvertent and accidental. Here, deterrence by denial may be much more effective. Setting clear rules of engagement,



improving operational control, and establishing hot lines for communication are instrumental in these regards, even if crisis adversaries will try and disrupt these.

6. **Understand your thresholds... and those of your adversary.** Both crisis prevention and crisis management require an understanding of your own thresholds as well those of the adversary. A clear articulation of what is considered vital and what is not, of one's core values and objectives, is a first essential prerequisite. This requires a core of strategic thinkers both in the higher ranks of the civil service and among the various political decision makers that together discuss these issues. A clearly related, but distinct, question is if and how one's thresholds should be clearly communicated as 'red lines' to the outside world. At the same time it is also necessary to consider the effect of one's own action on the opponent's calculus taking into account what it considers to be vital. This requires a firm knowledge and grasp of the perceptions of the opponent, of his motivations and interests, and his room for maneuver, that builds on an extensive knowledge infrastructure of deep military, political, economic and social expertise, residing both inside and outside the government.
7. **Create a joint crisis grammar.** Effective crisis management requires the creation of a joint *crisis grammar* with the opponent, aimed at establishing a shared understanding of the meaning and the significance of actions across different domains. Multiple channels of communication may need to be created, both with the leadership of the crisis participants and their constituencies, as well as with any actor not immediately involved in the crisis, including the international community and the intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations that exist. This includes meetings between the political and military leadership of the (potential) crisis participants and the installation of hotlines between them. It entails the articulation of priorities both in national security strategy documents and in public statements. It encompasses a public diplomacy aspect that is still underappreciated in many Western capitals, which can be used to empower the agents of resilience in target societies against the agents of conflict.
8. **Do not talk the talk if you do not walk the walk.** Signaling one's priorities to an opponent will only be effective if it relies on a combination of 'tying hands' and 'sinking costs'. This is not advice to engage in 'games of chicken' that can lead to situations that can easily spiral out of control. Rather

it means that while words without deeds are ineffective, leaving decision makers prone to all sorts of reputational costs if they don't follow through on commitments they made, deeds without words may trigger unforeseen escalatory spirals because the message they are intended to convey is misunderstood. Therefore, once interests are considered vital, it is important to support words with action, while action needs to be accompanied by political communication to render clear the message. In the context of managing multidimensional escalation, this requires the coordination of actions and statements across the involved actors – both within government and between governments.

9. **Tackle crisis stability head on.** Crisis stability is generally not (only) the product of fortunate circumstances but is rooted in structural conditions that act as an active constraint on the tendency of crises to escalate. This requires confronting the issue of crisis stability and the structural conditions that affect it head on. It entails awareness of the potential of first strike instabilities and the closing of any windows of opportunity before they open. It necessitates convincing one's opponents that there is no first strike instability in both directions as well as the elimination of any discrepancies between objective and subjective perceptions of the offense-defense balance. It means that one needs to take one's opponent considerations and worries seriously. And it requires the establishment of rules for new domains and instruments through constant dialogue both via track one and track two dialogues.

The insights presented here will have different applications depending on the type of opponent (e.g. state, non-state, nuclear, non-nuclear), the domain (e.g. conventional, nuclear, cyber, space), the theater (e.g. East-West, South). Lifting the theoretical fog of crisis, however, marks the first step in preparing for the management of future crises, wherever they may erupt. Applying these insights to a specific challenge will be the next step.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The rise and fall of powers in the contemporary international system is accompanied by a marked increase in assertive state behavior.<sup>1</sup> This trend is not bound by borders, evidenced by the tensions over pivot states such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine, as well as over the wider East and South China Sea region.<sup>2</sup> The Crimea Annexation Crisis and the resulting standoff between Russia and the West, has been followed by a succession of interstate crises, in recent months including Turkey versus Russia (late November 2015) and Saudi Arabia versus Iran (early January 2016). In the current strategic environment interstate crises, broadly defined as militarized disputes between two states involving a heightened risk of escalation to war, threaten to become more intense and more dangerous. While full scale state-on-state war may have become a rare phenomenon, the risk of violent escalation continues to loom large over such disputes. Our national decision makers are neither used nor well equipped to deal with interstate crises that pose a real risk to international peace and security. Over the past few decades, within the context of the unquestionable military superiority of the West, the attention of policymakers and scholars shifted to unconventional threats such as failed states, terrorism and climate change. The return of crisis, however, means that managing situations short of war is one of the critical challenges in today's security environment.

The essence of crisis management lies in the ability to balance the protection of one's own core values and interests with the ability to avoid an escalation to war. This balancing act is impossible without understanding, first and foremost, how instruments of state power can be used to achieve strategic objectives, both for

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- 1 Stephan De Spiegeleire, Eline Chivot, João Silveira, Michelle Yueming Yang, and Olga Zelinska. 2014. *Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness: The Chinese and Russian Cases*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. <http://www.hcss.nl/reports/assessing-assertions-of-assertiveness-the-chineseand-russian-cases/145/>.
  - 2 Tim Sweijs et al., *Why Are Pivot States So Pivotal?* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2014).

purposes of deterrence and compellence. It also demands that policymakers are aware that crises are essentially conflicting interactions between two or more crisis protagonists, characterized by a sequence of their actions and reactions, which are prone to escalation, and, at the same, time constrained by structural conditions. Finally, it requires coming to terms with the fact that the essence of crisis continues to lie in its unpredictability.<sup>3</sup> There is, in effect, no playbook for crisis management. In these regards, crisis may be compared to a game of chess. Even the most experienced chess player can never be in full control of the game. Still, experience and insight may enable a chess player to not only think about the next move, but consider a series of moves, and reflect on the reaction of the opponent. Unlike chess games, however, real world crises are not constrained by a set of fixed rules and participants often create new rules as they go along.

In this context, (re-)acquiring our general *crisis management literacy* is therefore essential, in order to equip our defense and security organizations (DSOs) with the right kind of mindset, policies, and tools to deal with future crises, wherever they may erupt.<sup>4</sup> Rather than analyzing the challenges posed by a specific crisis, this paper will attempt to enhance our understanding of the fundamentals of crisis management relying on a combination of historical data and theoretical argument.

A rich body of crisis scholarship that blossomed during the Cold War might yield valuable insights on how modern day crises originate, escalate and de-escalate. These studies and their lessons follow roughly three branches:<sup>5</sup> one

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3 Paraphrasing Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword* (Yale University Press, 2008), 97.

4 Defense and Security Organizations refer to the official bodies of state that are directly responsible for defense and security. These include the Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Development, but also other partners within the security sector such as Ministries of Justice, Interior Ministries, international security organizations such as NATO, penitentiary and border control institutions, national and local police and justice institutions.

5 These are – of course – not strictly divided literatures. Crisis scholarship has also evolved and more recent work includes a combination of all three approaches.

deducts its insights from game theory,<sup>6</sup> another uses large-number studies of crises to identify patterns and regularities,<sup>7</sup> and a third branch formulates policy prescriptions from in-depth case studies.<sup>8</sup> The comeback of crisis compels us to dust off the crisis scholarship of these three branches and adapt its lessons for crisis anticipation, crisis prevention and crisis management in today's world.

The order of this paper is as follows. After this introductory first section, section two defines what crisis is, and what it is not, relays various forms and functions of crisis in interstate relations, and offers (what little) empirical data we have about interstate crises of the past century and the conditions under which they tend to escalate.

Section three then explains the key theoretical concepts that help us to understand the logic and dynamics of interstate crisis. Here we propose escalation as its quintessential characteristic. From there on we elaborate on various escalation related concepts. We describe the escalation ladder, introduce vertical and horizontal escalation, and reflect on the role of thresholds in escalation. We examine three mechanisms of escalation and assess the underlying motives of crisis participants. We then proceed to discuss the notion of escalation dominance and talk about the structural conditions affecting crisis stability, as well as its opposite, crisis instability.

The final section builds on the previous sections and describes insights for crisis management and suggests the content of a crisis management agenda that

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- 6 For the pioneering work, see Daniel Ellsberg, *The theory and practice of blackmail*, 1968, Rand Corporation [Santa Monica]; Thomas C. Schelling, "An Essay on Bargaining," *The American Economic Review* 46, no. 3 (June 1, 1956): 281-306; Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword*. Yale University Press, 2008; Thomas C. Schelling, "Bargaining, Communication, and Limited War," *Conflict Resolution* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 1957): 19-36; Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 1981); Herman Kahn. *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*. Vol. 1. Transaction Publishers, 2009.
- 7 See as prime example, the International Crisis Behavior dataset, which incorporates data on 455 crises. Michael Brecher et al., *International Crisis Behavior Project, 1918-2007* (2010), <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/>. See also: Brecher & Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (1987) and Brecher's *International Political Earthquakes* (2008).
- 8 See for example, Alexander L. George, "A Provisional Theory of Crisis Management," in Alexander L. George (ed.), *Avoiding War: Problems of Crisis Management*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991; Richardson, *Crisis diplomacy*.

should receive further attention in the strategic planning of our DSOs to prepare for future crises, wherever they may break out.

The principal focus of this paper is on interstate crises involving powerful states with strong military capabilities, including, at its most extreme, nuclear weapons. War between such states would be enormously costly and cause immense damage, rendering clear the critical importance of crisis management. Nevertheless, many general concepts and findings of this paper can also be applied to other types of crisis, for example, those involving states with vast military power differentials and those involving non-state or semi-state actors.

# 2 CRISIS: DEFINITIONS AND EMPIRICS

## 2.1 DEFINING CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS IS – AND IS NOT

The term ‘crisis’ conjures images of violence and terror, but violence and crisis are not intrinsically connected. Rather, a crisis marks a critical juncture in interstate relations. Indeed, the term crisis derives from the Latin medical term *krisis* which refers to a ‘turning point of disease’. This in turn originates from the Greek verb *krinein* – ‘to separate, decide, judge’.<sup>9</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary* defines crisis as ‘a time of intense difficulty or danger’.<sup>10</sup> In the international relations and conflict literature the term is generally used to refer to a particularly dangerous turning point in a dispute that carries with it a heightened risk of military confrontation. Crisis has been described as an “intermediate zone between peace and war”,<sup>11</sup> involving “a situation of unanticipated threat to important values and restricted decision time”,<sup>12</sup> which is based on a “sequence of interactions [...] short of actual war [...] involving the perception of a dangerously high probability of war.”<sup>13</sup> During crises, decision makers feel that vital national interests are under threat, the national reputation is at risk and/or their own position is undermined. They perceive immediate time pressure to act but fear that any action on their part raises the specter of war.<sup>14</sup>

9 The Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed 15 November 2015, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=crisis>.

10 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10th edition (Oxford University Press, 1999).

11 Glenn Herald Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining Decision Making and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 10.

12 Ole R Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1972), 9. Herman originally coined these three characteristics in an article on organizational behavior, see Charles F. Hermann, ‘Some Consequences of Crisis Which Limit the Viability of Organizations’, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1 June 1963), 61–82; see also Charles F. Hermann, “Threat, Time and Surprise: A Simulation of International Crisis,” in Charles F. Hermann (ed.) *International Crises: Insights from Behavior Research* (New York: Free Press 1972).

13 Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, 6.

14 Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 10–12.

In the 1980s, Brecher and Wilkenfeld offered the following formal definition of crisis, which was used to collect historical data on crises since 1918 as part of the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project:

(1) a change in type and/or an increase in intensity of *disruptive* (...) *interactions* between two or more states, with a heightened probability of *military hostilities*, that, in turn, (2) destabilizes their relationship and *challenges the structure* of an international system-global, dominant or subsystem.<sup>15</sup>

This definition incorporates all the crucial elements of crisis and distinguishes it from comparable phenomena. It makes clear that crisis is *not* the same as interstate war. According to their interpretation of this definition, crisis can escalate a non-violent dispute into war, take place during war (so called ‘intra war crisis’, as for example the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 during the Second World War), but “a crisis can [also] erupt, persist and end without violence, let alone war.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Brecher and Wilkenfeld argue that “all wars result from crises, but not all crises lead to war.”<sup>17</sup> In this paper we generally subscribe to Brecher and Wilkenfeld’s definition of crisis and will report some statistics based on their data. However, our interpretation of crisis differs slightly from theirs on two counts. Firstly, we consider interstate crisis as a dispute that has a heightened probability of escalating to war, and therefore takes place *outside* a war context.<sup>18</sup> This is in line with the objective of this paper

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15 Brecher and Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, 4–5.

16 *Ibid.*, 6.

17 *Ibid.*, 7. This is not an universally accepted proposition. It can be argued that many cases of unprovoked military aggression (e.g. Germany’s invasion of Belgium in the World War I and its invasion of several European countries in the World War II) have not been preceded by an interstate crisis.

18 Brecher and Wilkenfeld count several examples of intra-war crises, for example the battles of El Alamein and Stalingrad in 1942-1943 during the World War II. This is difficult to square with their own definition of crisis, which emphasized “a heightened probability of military hostilities” as a crucial element of crisis. If two adversaries are already fighting full-scale war then whatever critical juncture they reach during the war it should not be called a crisis. Intra-war crises can indeed happen, for example, when a wider war encompasses more and more states. In our view such crises require that the opposing sides that have not been directly fighting each other and move closer to direct military confrontation. Otherwise we consider many of the intra-war crises listed by ICB either as the escalation of ongoing fighting or a significant change in the course of war rather than a crisis.



which is to suggest insights for crisis management, especially the ability to de-escalate and thus to avoid war. Secondly, we do not consider situations characterized by sudden attacks that immediately result in war to constitute a crisis. Such attacks do not offer many opportunities for crisis management in a conventional sense. Therefore, such crises are discarded in this paper and are viewed as direct escalation of a dispute to war.

We therefore consider interstate crisis as a form of escalation of some form of interstate dispute or conflict, which, often suddenly, increases the likelihood of war between conflicting parties. In a crisis one or more actors either explicitly or implicitly indicate that they are ready to use military force to achieve their objectives. This constitutes a significant escalation of a pre-crisis dispute, because the use of military power is the ultimate tool in the statecraft toolbox to coerce the opponent into accepting one's objectives. If a crisis is not resolved peacefully, chances are that it escalates to a military conflict and possibly to a full-blown war.

Using the definition highlighted earlier in this chapter, Brecher and Wilkenfeld's ICB project offers data on 455 crises in the period 1918-2007. The ICB dataset includes events that most closely correspond to our understanding of interstate crisis and we will primarily use the ICB dataset to show some empirical trends and regularities (Textbox 1 discusses various crisis related phenomena and how they relate to but are different from crisis).

## War

Interstate war is defined by the Correlates of War (COW) Project as a conflict between two states involving “sustained combat, involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of 1,000 battle-related combatant fatalities within a twelve month period.”<sup>19</sup> The COW project lists 95 interstate wars between 1816-2007.<sup>20</sup>

19 Meredith Reid Sarkees. 2010. “Inter-State Wars (Version 4.0): Definitions and Variables.” Correlates of War (COW) Project. <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/COW-war/inter-state-wars-codebook>.

20 Meredith Reid Sarkees, and Frank Wayman. *Resort to War: 1816 - 2007*. Washington DC: CQ Press, 2010. <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/COW-war>.

## Protracted Conflict

Protracted conflict refers to a series of hostile interactions between states that take place over longer periods of time and often stretch from years to decades and sometimes centuries.<sup>21</sup> Most of the time, hostile interactions in protracted conflict do not reach the intensity of crisis but from time to time some triggers can cause escalation and crisis onset.<sup>22</sup> The ICB dataset lists 35 protracted conflicts in the period 1918-2007.<sup>23</sup>

## Militarized Interstate Disputes

Militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) can be defined as “historical cases of conflict in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state. Disputes are composed of incidents that range in intensity from threats to use force to actual combat short of war.”<sup>24</sup> Almost any interstate crisis has involved some kind of threat or demonstration of military power. The MID dataset includes 2586 disputes (containing a total of 3316 incidents) between 1816-2010, more than twice as many historical episodes per year as counted in the ICB dataset, which implies that the threshold for the inclusion of a dispute is much lower.<sup>25</sup> This is because many of the MID episodes are minor and sometimes random clashes that do not escalate to the crisis level in both our and the ICBs understanding of this term.

## Militarized Compellent Threats

Crises are sometimes, but not always, triggered by compellent threats. The Militarized Compellent Threat (MCT) Dataset defines such a threat as “an explicit demand by one state (the challenger) that another state (the target)

21 The protracted conflict between China and Vietnam has been around for more than 1000 years. See Brecher, *International political earthquakes*, 2008, 14.

22 Ibid, 5–6. See also Gary Goertz and Paul F. Diehl, “Enduring Rivalries: Theoretical Constructs and Empirical Patterns,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (April 1, 1993), 147–171.

23 ICB. 2010. “Primary Data Collections (version 10, Released July 2010).” *ICB Data Collections*. <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/data/default.aspx>.

24 Daniel M. Jones, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer. 1996. “Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 15 (2), 163.

25 Glenn Palmer, Vito D’Orazio, Michael Kenwick, and Matthew Lane. “The MID4 Data Set: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description.” In *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 2015. <http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/MIDs>.

alter the status quo in some material way, backed by a threat of military force if the target does not comply” and registers 211 of such instances in the period 1918-2001.<sup>26</sup> Not every crisis trigger is a militarized threat, nor does a militarized threat necessarily trigger a crisis. This explains why the MCT dataset counts approximately 50% of the number of crises in the ICB dataset.

TEXTBOX 1. CRISIS-RELATED PHENOMENA.

Despite an occasional appearance to the contrary, crises seldom if ever emerge in a vacuum. The title of Brecher’s landmark study of crisis – *International Political Earthquakes* – is illuminating in this respect.<sup>27</sup> Like earthquakes, caused by colliding tectonic plates, interstate crises are more likely to break out along overlapping spheres of influence. The seismological analogy is also appropriate for the anticipation of crises. Scientists have a hard time forecasting the timing of earthquakes but they can indicate earthquake-prone geographic areas with confidence, and even estimate the probability of earthquakes of specific magnitude over a given time horizon.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, if the onset and precise form of crises is almost impossible to predict, it is certainly possible to pinpoint areas particularly prone to interstate crisis.

At the foundation of any crisis is the presence of conflicting interests between two or more states. The fact that states often have different interests is obvious – even close allies sometimes disagree on important matters. Most interstate disputes, however, are resolved via formal or informal negotiations and do not lead to a crisis.<sup>29</sup> Decision makers, however, may decide to raise the stakes and escalate from negotiations to crisis, even if they prefer negotiated settlements over costly wars. They do this to attain their strategic objectives by signaling

26 Todd S. Sechser. “Militarized Compellent Threats, 1918–2001.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no. 4 (2011), 380.

27 Brecher, *International Political Earthquakes*, 2008.

28 Thomas H. Jordan, et al. “Operational Earthquake Forecasting: State of Knowledge and Guidelines for Implementation.” *Annals of Geophysics* (2011). Wikipedia also offers a clear explanation of our ability to predict earthquakes. See also “Earthquake Prediction”, Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, 15 December 2015, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Earthquake\\_prediction&oldid=695336523](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Earthquake_prediction&oldid=695336523).

29 Intra-EU disputes, even those that turn quite acrimonious, are not real crises according to the definitions provided earlier, because, for the moment at least, nobody expects an EU member to initiate military actions against another EU member to resolve those disputes.

their willingness to incur significant costs either through tying their hands (e.g., talking tough) or sinking costs (e.g., escalating to a crisis through for example deploying military forces).<sup>30</sup> In this process, participants play up both the extent of their capabilities and their intent to stand firm:

Rational leaders may be unable to locate a mutually preferable negotiated settlement due to private information about relative capabilities or resolve, and incentives to misrepresent such information.<sup>31</sup>

***“Even a mangy sheep is good for a little wool”*: state interests, policies and crises**

In highly exceptional cases, state interests might not be readily obvious, but, more often than not, it is the specific policies and actions that are kept secret rather than the more generic state interests. The Crimea Crisis is an illustrative case. Before 2014, Russia had never officially disputed the status of Crimea, even if there had been disputes regarding the status of the Russian naval base in Sevastopol and minor territorial disputes on Russia’s access to the Azov sea. It was well-known, however, that Russia considered Ukraine to belong to its own ‘sphere of influence’. The association agreement between Ukraine and the EU was considered by the Russian leadership as direct threat to this interest. Refusal to sign this agreement by then-Ukrainian President Yanukovich under Russian pressure triggered mass protests, which consequently led to his ouster from power in February 2014. This apparently prompted Russian President Putin to take control of Crimea, based on the logic that “half a loaf is better than none” – or, in a more direct translation of a popular Russian saying, “*even a mangy sheep is good for a little wool*”.

TEXTBOX 2. STATE INTERESTS, POLICIES AND CRISES.

30 James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997), 70.

31 James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1 July 1995), 397. Others take this argument even further, war is by definition in the 'error term'. Erik Gartzke, 'War Is in the Error Term', *International Organization* 53, no. 03 (June 1999), 568.

The strategic bargaining behavior of participants may spark a crisis. These general considerations are illustrated in Figure 2.1, that shows how disputes between states can escalate to crisis and ultimately to war.<sup>32</sup>

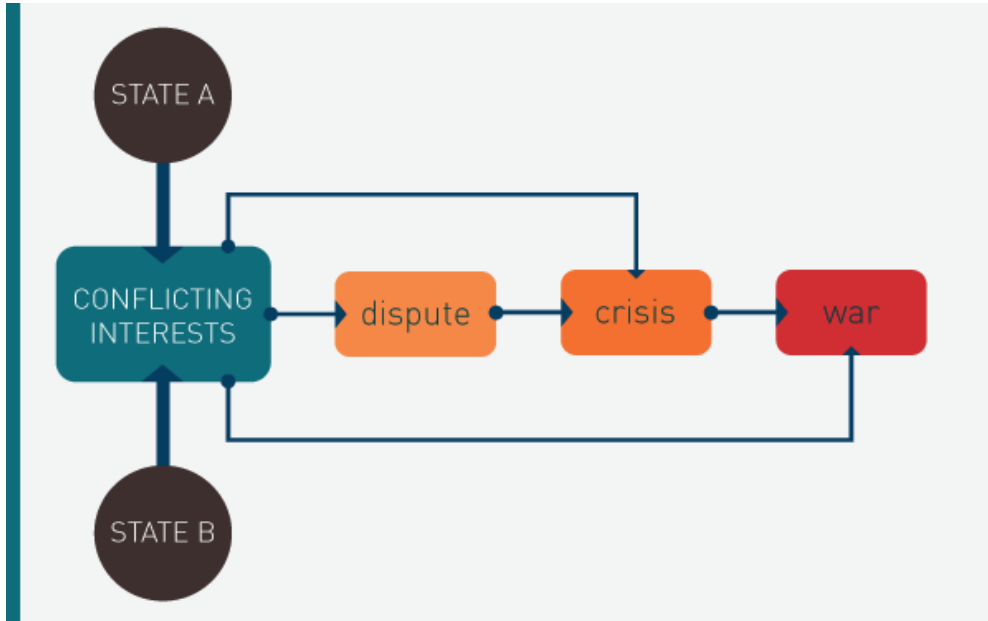


FIGURE 2.1. PATHWAYS TO CRISIS AND WAR.

Escalation of the dispute to an actual crisis should in theory signal significance of the issues at stake and the resolve of at least one of the dispute parties. Some observers therefore argue that crises are in fact cathartic for the peaceful regulation of interstate relations. Crises, it is claimed, have therefore become

<sup>32</sup> There are of course some wars that do start without being preceded by a lengthy crisis buildup. This is particularly likely if one side believes that the opponent is unlikely to agree to its demands while at the same time a surprise attack can provide substantial military and strategic advantage. Such conditions might tempt an aggressor to attack without making its demands public. Twentieth century historical examples of such attacks are abound: the Second World War featured plenty of surprise attacks (both on the Western and the Eastern front, including Germany's attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941) so did the Korean War and the Israeli-Arab Wars of 1967 and 1973. See Betz, *Surprise Attack*. Even in these cases, however, these attacks did not fall out of the blue sky but were either part of a protracted conflict or an ongoing dispute. Structural conditions favoring a preemptive attack are often referred to as crisis instability, which will be considered in more detail in the next section.

the “surrogate for war” and are instrumental in resolving “without violence, or with only minimal violence” interstate disputes “that are too severe to be settled by ordinary means and that in earlier times would have been settled by war.”<sup>33</sup> In this rendering, crises are a necessary safety valve, especially in a world in which nuclear weapons have dramatically raised the costs of going to war. Crisis and violence are closely linked, but out of 440 international crises that occurred from the end of World War I to 2002, 45% did *not* involve any violence at all.<sup>34</sup> Yet even if crises fulfil a useful role in the management of international relations, they still carry a substantial risk of escalation to full fledged war, and therefore need to be avoided or managed carefully.

In the remainder of this chapter we offer a short overview of essential empirical information about interstate crises. This information connects the definitional discussion so far with the historical realities of 20th century crises, and provides the reader with a basic understanding of crisis-related historical trends, crisis triggers, and the relationship between crisis and armed violence. Most of the information presented here relies on the ICB dataset, in some cases supplemented with comparisons to other relevant datasets.

## 2.2 CRISIS TRENDS

### FREQUENCY AND DURATION OF CRISES

What are historical trends in the frequency of interstate crises over the past century? As mentioned earlier, even a clear definition of crisis leaves some room for subjectivity and interpretation in assessing whether a particular dispute is or is not a crisis. In other words, there is no objective way to measure what makes the probability of military hostility serious enough to speak of a crisis. Different datasets show that the frequency of crises and other types of interstate disputes has fluctuated throughout the 20th century (see figure 2.2).

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33 Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*.

34 Michael Brecher, *International Political Earthquakes*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008: 21. NB: This figure does not include crises that occur within war.

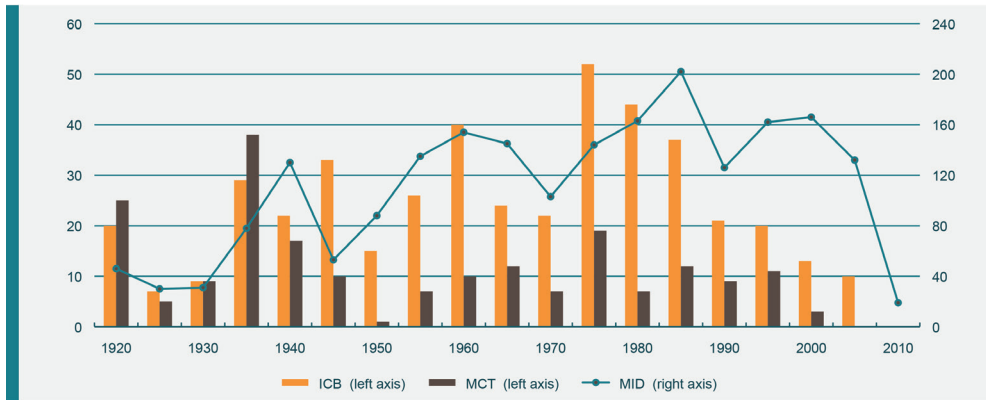


FIGURE 2.2. FREQUENCY OF CRISIS (BY 5-YEAR INTERVALS), 1920-2007.<sup>35</sup> SOURCE: ICB, MCT AND MID DATASETS

The first large wave of crises in this time period arrived in the wake of the First World War. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian empires and the creation of many newly independent states in their wake triggered a series of crises along the frontiers of these states. The presence of disputed borders and substantial ethnic minorities continues to be a source of friction up to the present day: many of the contemporary crisis hotspots are located along these pressure points, including South-Eastern Europe (the Balkans) and Eastern Europe (e.g., the Baltic States, Ukraine), the Middle East (e.g., Syria, Turkey, Iraq) and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan). A second wave of crises immediately preceded the Second World War when the aggressive foreign policies of Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union yielded many interstate crises in Europe and Asia.

Crisis were also common during the Cold War era. Their occurrence first peaked in the early 1960s (e.g. the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962), prompted by a mixture of decolonization disputes on the one hand, and the process of settling the rules-of-the-game in East-West relations on the other. A second peak followed at the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, featuring the Middle East as an important hotspot. Since then, the number of crises has been in a decline, down to roughly

<sup>35</sup> Each mark on the horizontal axis denotes the first year of the 5-year time interval, e.g. bars corresponding to 1920 show the number of crises between 1920 and 1924, and so on.

three crises per year between 2000 and 2007.<sup>36</sup> The datasets are not updated frequently so it is difficult to discern whether there has been a trend reversal in the frequency of crises in recent years. However, high-profile interstate crises like the Russian-Georgian War (2008), the NATO intervention in Libya (2011), the South China Sea crisis (especially from 2012 onwards) and the Crimea Crisis (2014 onwards) seem to signal that crises are again at the forefront of international politics in the 21st century.

A common understanding of international crisis as a high-tension, high-danger period of intense stress seems to suggest that crises should be of relatively short duration. This is indeed true for the majority of crises: about half of them lasted for less than 82 days according to the ICB data (see Figure 2.3). At the same time a sizeable percentage of all crises have been very long, with 11% of the total lasting for more than a year (and some taking more than 2 years). The presence of these long-duration crises skews the average crisis duration to 161 days, just over 5 months. The length of a crisis has been positively correlated with the likelihood of escalation: a crisis that escalates to war has a duration of 229 days on average, a full 100 days more than a crisis with little or no violence at all.<sup>37</sup>

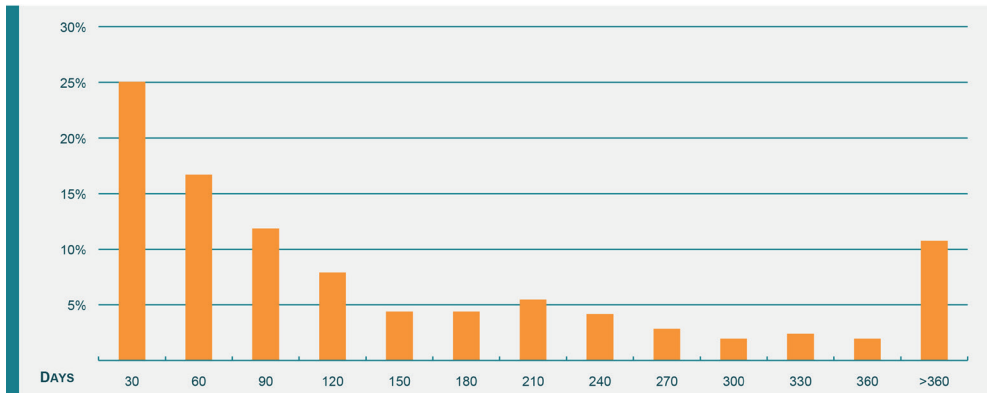


FIGURE 2.3. DURATION OF INTERSTATE CRISIS, AS % OF TOTAL NUMBER, 1918-2007. SOURCE: AUTHORS' ANALYSIS BASED ON THE ICB DATA (HORIZONTAL AXIS SHOWS DURATION OF CRISES BY 30-DAY INTERVALS: THE FIRST ONE INCLUDED ALL CRISES WITH DURATION LESS THAN 30 DAYS, THE SECOND ONE BETWEEN 30 AND 59 DAYS, AND SO ON).

36 A similar decline has been recorded for wars. Militarized interstate disputes (MID's) do remain at elevated levels even though they, too, declined after a peak in the second half of 1980s. The fact that there are more MID's in the second half of the twentieth century may be partially attributed to the fact that researchers have now much more information about the type of low-level militarized disputes that the MID registers compared to earlier periods.

37 Data gathered from the Duration (BREXIT) and Severity of Violence (SEVVIOS) variables in the ICB dataset.



## CRISIS TRIGGERS AND DRIVERS OF ESCALATION

How do crises start? Crises are typically triggered by a well identified event. This can be a deliberate action taken by one side to escalate the existing dispute, actions by a party external to a particular dispute, and sometimes an accidental event. Even when trigger events are accidents and seemingly come out of the blue, there are typically underlying conflicting interests that create a crisis. It was for instance unrest over a FIFA World Cup qualifier match that triggered the Football War between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, but the countries had long grown at odds over land reform and labor migration.

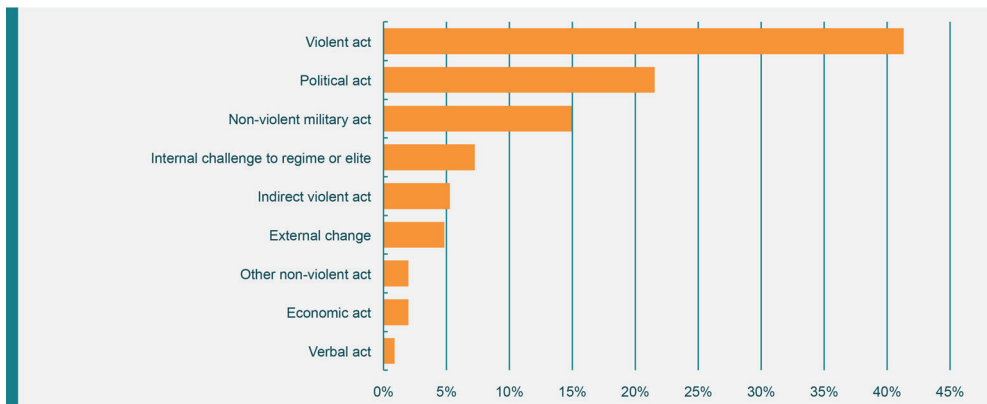


FIGURE 2.4. TRIGGERS OF INTERNATIONAL CRISIS, 1918-2007. SOURCE: ICB

However, the majority of crisis triggers are deliberate, often violent acts. Such acts as the Bay of Pigs invasion against the Cuban government in 1961 (pitting Cuba against the USA) and the hostage-taking of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah in 2006 (sparking a short war between Lebanon and Israel), account for 41% of all crises in the ICB dataset (see Figure 2.4). When non-violent military actions (such as show of force, military maneuvers or mobilization) and indirect violent acts (say, a violent act directed at an ally or client state) are added, military actions in one form or another account for the onset of more than 60% of all crises. Political acts, which comprise diplomatic sanctions, severance of diplomatic relations, violation of treaties, and other similar actions, are the second most frequent group of crisis triggers and take up slightly more than one-fifth of all crises.<sup>38</sup> Other triggers are much less frequent.

<sup>38</sup> All crisis figures mentioned in this section without citing a source are calculated by the authors based on the most recent version of ICB dataset (version 10) that contains information for all crises occurring during the 1918-2007 period.

Remarkably, the distribution of triggers remains fairly consistent over the years. Violent and military acts (that is, direct and indirect violent acts plus non-violent military acts) served as the breakpoint in almost 60% of cases since 1990, a similar proportion as before.

Crises triggered by violent acts are more likely to escalate to a full-scale war: this was the case for 29% of such crises, more than twice the rate for the crises started by non-violent breakpoints (verbal, political and economic acts), which only escalated to war in 14% of cases.

What other factors, besides violent triggers, tend to make crises more violent? One obvious factor is the seriousness of the threat to a state or its elite – at least in the eyes of national leaders – during the crisis. Threats to economic interests or general influence can often be resolved without significant violence, through bargaining and compromise (furthermore disputes around these types of threats often do not escalate to crisis in the first place). On the other side of the spectrum, if the very existence of a state is in question, it does not leave much room for negotiations, and all resources of the state are likely to be mobilized (see Figure 2.5).

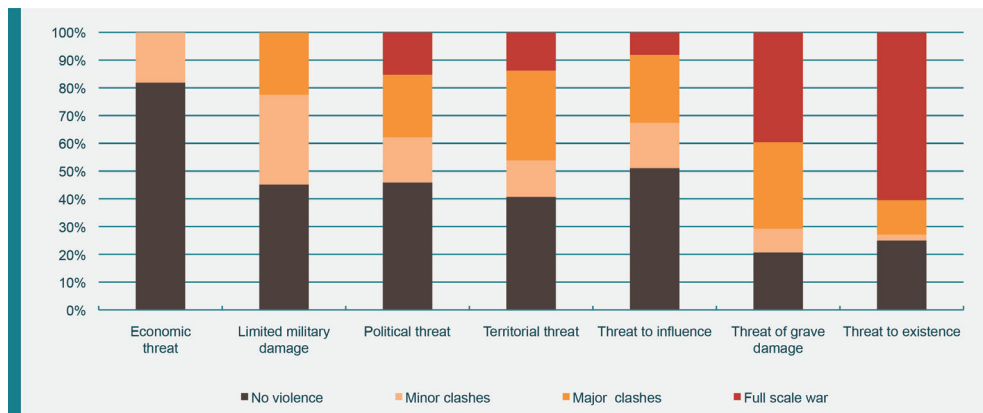


FIGURE 2.5. SEVERITY OF VIOLENCE IN CRISIS BY TYPE OF THREAT. SOURCE: ICB

Territorial disputes are also notoriously difficult to resolve, even if they vary significantly in their seriousness. In the words of Vasquez, “humans seem to prefer to fight a contest over territory where the winner takes all, rather than divide the territory in dispute.”<sup>39</sup>

Crises also tend to be more violent if they take place in the context of protracted conflict. In fact, such crises account for the majority of all international crises – 60% of all crises between 1918 and 2007. This percentage fluctuates strongly from year to year, but the long-term trend has been remarkably stable: the share of crises in the context of protracted conflict is slowly but gradually increasing over time. This is important because such crises account for almost 80% of all crises that escalate to full-scale war. Measured another way, the chance that a crisis in the context of protracted conflicts will involve full-scale war is almost three times higher than for crises not associated with protracted conflict (see Figure 2.6). Finally, protracted-conflict crises are more likely to end ambiguously rather than in a definite victory or defeat.<sup>40</sup>

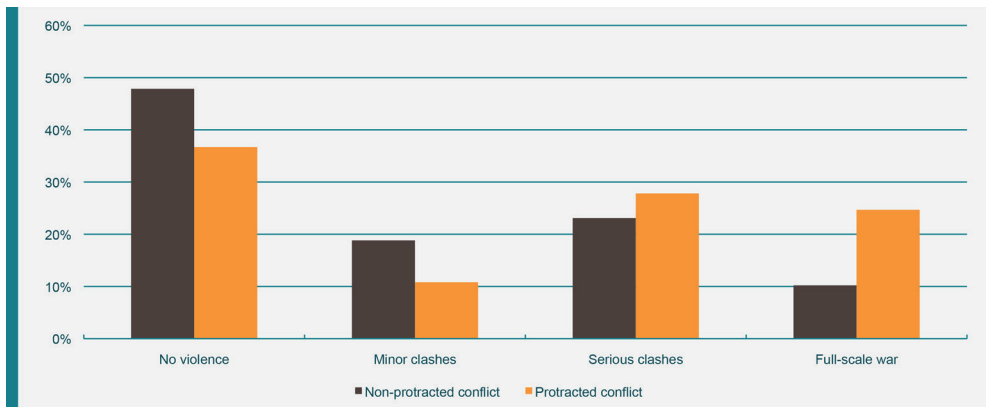


FIGURE 2.6. LEVEL OF VIOLENCE IN CRISES WITHIN PROTRACTED CONFLICT COMPARED TO OTHER CRISES, 1918-2007. SOURCE: ICB

39 John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*. Cambridge University Press, 2009: 210. See also: Willem Oosterveld, Stephan De Spiegeleire, and Tim Sweijts. *Pushing the Boundaries: Territorial Conflict in Today’s World*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2015.

40 Brecher, *International Political Earthquakes*, 33–34.

Another factor that drives the level of violence in crisis is the presence of an ethnic component. The break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in early 1990s created a host of ethnically driven conflicts that raged for years in Eurasia. Many of them have not been comprehensively resolved but rather frozen and could quickly reignite if the political climate changes. International ethnicity crises tend to differ from non-ethnicity crises along a number of dimensions.<sup>41</sup> They are often characterized by mistrust and expectations of violence by the opposing ethnic groups. Ethnicity crises are more likely to be triggered by violence and the level of violence in ethnic crisis is also substantially higher than in other crises (see Figure 2.7).<sup>42</sup>

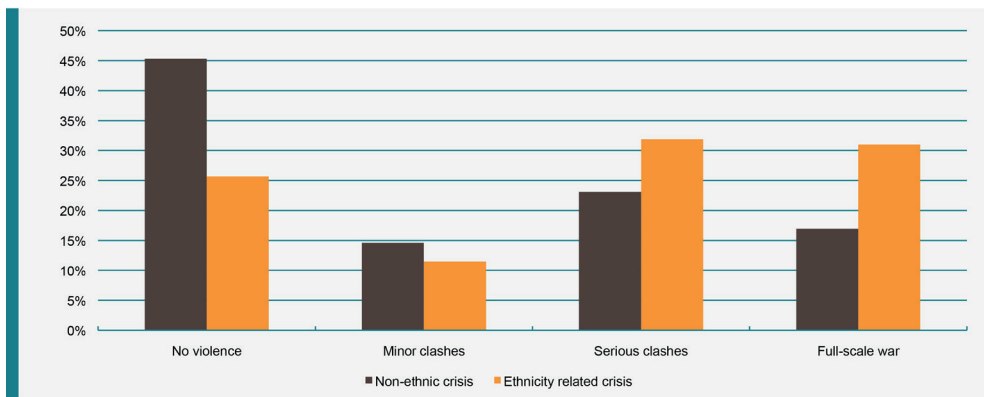


FIGURE 2.7. VIOLENCE IN ETHNICITY-RELATED CRISES COMPARED TO OTHER CRISES, 1918-2007. SOURCE: ICB.

The risk of violent escalation also grows when a large number of actors are involved in a crisis. According to ICB data, war or serious clashes break out in over 70% of all crises with more than eight actors. Similarly, MIDs with multiple participants have been much more likely to escalate into war than dyadic MIDs.<sup>43</sup>

41 Brecher and Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, 117–118.

42 Based on the ICB data.

43 Between 1860 and 1976, 690 MIDs, or about two thirds of all MIDs, remained dyadic. Of the 270 that were multiparty, 80 (or 30%) were major-major. Of those 80, 29 started as major-minor, minor-major, or minor-minor. Major-minor highest proportion of those that expanded (19 or 25% of total major-minor conflicts). Source: Charles S. Gochman and Zeev Maoz, ‘Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816-1976 Procedures, Patterns, and Insights’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 28, no. 4 (1 December 1984).

Out of a total of 960 MIDs only 91 escalated into full blown war,<sup>44</sup> but when it comes to multiparty MIDs, 23% escalated into war as opposed to only 5% for dyadic MIDs.<sup>45</sup> The involvement of more states makes the crisis harder to manage, and when their crises are resolved peacefully, they are less likely to be satisfied with the compromise achieved. A study of James and Wilkenfeld finds that even while multilateral crises more often produced an agreement than dyadic crises (74% vs. 54%), these agreements were much less likely to completely satisfy the actors (9% vs. 33%).<sup>46</sup>

### CRISIS OUTCOMES

*How* do crises end? Two noticeable characteristics of crisis de-escalation stand out. First, over half of all crises end ambiguously – in stalemate or compromise – rather than in a clear-cut victory or defeat. This helps explain why formal agreements are rather rare: they show up in only one out of five crises.<sup>47</sup> The Suez crisis in 1956, for instance, ended with Israel’s unilateral decision to withdraw its troops from the Sinai peninsula. Such unilateral acts account for 40% of all endings to crisis. In other cases, the parties to a crisis reach a semi-formal agreement, or simply de-escalate through tacit understanding. Solutions like these reflect the ambiguous feelings of states over the risks and stakes of further escalation, a sentiment perhaps best expressed in John F. Kennedy’s statement after deciding to leave the Berlin Wall untouched, thus terminating a standoff with the USSR: “It’s not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war.”<sup>48</sup>

Second, once a crisis has ended, de-escalation does not necessarily take away the tensions. Ambiguous outcomes are particularly likely to heighten the

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44 Gochman and Maoz, “Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816-1976 Procedures, Patterns, and Insights”, 600. These results are corroborated again by Cusack and Eberwein who estimate that serious international disputes escalate to war only in about 1 in 9 cases; major power disputes about 1 in 5; and minor-minor 1 out of 20. See Cusack and Eberwein, “Prelude to War”, 27.

45 Ibid, 602. This is also confirmed by Cusack and Eberwein, who rely on a different dataset and time period. see Thomas R. Cusack and Wolf-Dieter Eberwein, “Prelude to War: Incidence, Escalation and Intervention in International Disputes, 1900–1976”, *International Interactions* 9, no. 1 (1 January 1982): 26.

46 Patrick James and Jonathan Wilkenfeld. “Structural factors and international crisis behavior.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 7.2 (1984), 45. Quoted in: Vasquez (2009), 209.

47 Data gathered from the Form of Outcome (FOROUT) variable in the ICB dataset.

48 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (2005), 115.

tensions between states, and spur a relapse into crisis. More surprisingly, the likelihood of lowered tensions becomes more pronounced when the agreement is imposed from the outside (69 vs. 56%).<sup>49</sup> Other results echo these findings. A crisis with more than four actors is not only likely to turn more violent, but also more likely to sustain or raise the tension between crisis participants afterwards (and presumably make a renewed crisis more likely)<sup>50</sup> than one with fewer actors.<sup>51</sup> And when a crisis has been marked by violence in the form of serious clashes or war, half of these crises will end in a legacy of increased tension – compared to 39% for non-violent crises.

### 2.3 CONCLUSION

This chapter has laid out the essential definitional concepts of crisis and its related phenomena. It has also offered a review of empirical regularities of crises in the past century. A few key points are worth emphasizing:

- Interstate crises represent a specific type of phenomenon in interstate relations, which can be described as a short-term conflict between states short of war but characterized by a heightened probability of military hostilities. It is related to but still distinctly different from such notions as protracted conflict, militarized dispute and interstate war.
- Although the frequency of crises in the last two or three decades has generally followed a downward trend, this trend has probably seen a reversal in more recent years as there have been a succession of serious crises that have been erupting from the Black Sea Region all the way to the South China Sea.
- Protracted conflict tends to generate a disproportionate share of crises. In addition, such crises are much more prone to violence. This is important because protracted conflicts are generally well known. Paying more attention to such conflicts might help to anticipate future crises or, at least, to be better prepared when they erupt.
- Several other factors or drivers contribute to higher probabilities of violence during a crisis. These include, but are not limited to, a violent trigger, a severe threat to at least one side, the presence of an ethnic component, and a large number of participants in a crisis.

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49 Brecher, *International Political Earthquakes*, 76.

50 *Ibid.*, 76.

51 *Ibid.*, 76.

- Crisis outcomes are often ambiguous rather than clear-cut victory or defeat – more than half of all crises end in stalemate or compromise. Ambiguous outcomes, in turn, tend to be associated with heightened post-crisis tensions between states and relapses into new crises.

Overall, these empirical trends and regularities provide a detached helicopter view of the phenomenon. In a way, their reviews yield some information, and perhaps even knowledge, of the phenomenon of crisis. At the same time, they fail to capture the dynamics of crisis, how crisis escalates and de-escalates. In that sense, it is somewhat similar to surveying broad empirical regularities of a game of chess – for instance, that white tends to win more often than black – without explaining the rules and tactical approaches employed by the game’s players. In the next section, we will try to do exactly this and describe the main concepts underlying crisis dynamics – in other words, the ‘rules’ and ‘grammar’ of crisis and crisis management. For interstate crises these rules are primarily derived from a logic of escalation and de-escalation.

# 3 CRISIS AND ESCALATION

Key insights about crisis escalation and crisis management were developed during the Cold War – the era of confrontation between the two nuclear superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. In that era, reducing the risks of nuclear war whilst protecting one’s core interests became of crucial importance. A lot of intellectual effort, in particular in the US, was devoted to developing concepts and strategies to that purpose. To a large extent, the theoretical analysis of crisis and crisis management has relied on *game theory*, which can be described as “the study of mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between intelligent rational decision-makers.”<sup>52</sup>

After the end of the Cold War and the concomitant sharp reduction in the risk of a nuclear confrontation, interest in the art and science of crisis management lessened. Many concepts and insights from Cold War-era crisis management were practically forgotten or deemed irrelevant. However, the growing assertiveness of major nuclear-armed powers as well as the succession of interstate crises in recent years suggest that the crisis management ideas developed several decades ago are becoming relevant again. In this section we will therefore review the key concepts from escalation theory and crisis management, including vertical and horizontal escalation, escalation thresholds, escalation dominance, three mechanisms of crisis escalation and crisis stability.

## 3.1 ESCALATION, ESCALATION THRESHOLDS AND THE ESCALATION LADDER

A key concept for understanding the logic and dynamics of crisis is the notion of *escalation*. Escalation generally describes an increase in the intensity of dispute or conflict between two parties.<sup>53</sup> Understanding the drivers and logic of

<sup>52</sup> Roger B. Myerson (1991). *Game Theory: Analysis of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Our description of escalation is largely based on an insightful monograph published by RAND Corporation in 2008: Morgan, Forrest, E., Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter and Roger Cliff. *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG614.html>.



escalation is key to understanding, managing and de-escalating crises. A formal definition of escalation describes it as

an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants.<sup>54</sup>

This definition provides several essential characteristics of escalation that are worth considering in more detail. Escalation is an interactive phenomenon. Escalation occurs between two (or more) conflicting parties that aim to gain an advantage at the expense of each other. No one side can therefore be fully in control of escalation, because the opposite side will respond to escalatory actions in a way that leverages its advantages and/or exploits the weaknesses of the opponent. These responses can neither be controlled by the opponent nor can they generally be predicted.<sup>55</sup>

Escalation is a natural tendency of almost any form of human conflict or competition. Politics and sports, which are often the “winner takes all” competitions, provide ample examples of escalation. Doping – the use of banned performance enhancing drugs by athletic competitors – can be seen as a form of escalation in sport.<sup>56</sup> The unstoppable rise in the costs of political races in the United States in general and, in particular, of the presidential campaigns is an example of escalation in politics.<sup>57</sup> The ubiquity of escalation is often related to the observation that even if initial stakes in a dispute are low, once conflict starts, *not losing* becomes an important objective in itself. Besides its intrinsic costs (i.e. concessions awarded to the winner), defeat sends an important signal

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54 Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 8.

55 Ibid.

56 Competition in sport has clearly defined rules that are tightly controlled, thereby practically excluding escalation during a tournament itself. Doping can be thought as a rule-breaking form of escalation outside the official rules. More benign and generally allowed types of escalation in sports include the introduction of new technical equipment (new speed skates, new swimsuits, etc.) or new training approaches.

57 Political campaigns in the United States have much looser limits on funding than in Europe and as such provide a better example of funding escalation. See Dave Gilson, “The Crazy Cost of Becoming President, From Lincoln to Obama,” *Mother Jones*, February 20, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2012/02/historic-price-cost-presidential-elections>; The Economist Explains, “Why American Elections Cost So Much,” *The Economist*, February 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/02/economist-explains-4>.

about the losing side to third parties, that might be tempted to exploit the loser's weakness to their own advantage.

In addition, escalation is asymmetric with respect to chance: escalation due to accidents (i.e. random events outside direct control of either of the conflicting parties) is rather common, but examples of accidental de-escalation are difficult to find. One reason for this is the fact that uncertainty and misperception are inherent to crisis: it is often not possible for one party to distinguish between accidents and intentional actions of the other side. In this context it might be rational for decision makers to assume the worst and act as if any action of the opponent were a deliberate provocation. Many escalatory actions in armed conflict are also largely irreversible: if a particular type of weapon has been used by one side in conflict, the opposite side will likely respond in kind, in order not to be at a military disadvantage. It is therefore practically impossible for conflict actors to agree to abandon the use of such a weapon. Richard Smoke, one of the most eminent second generation escalation scholars, therefore conceived of escalation not as:

a mere possibility – something that may happen or not, like a rainstorm over the battlefield. It is an ever-present “pressure” or temptation or likelihood, something that requires more deliberate thought and action to stop and reverse than to start.<sup>58</sup>

Another key concept for understanding escalation dynamics of international crises are *escalation thresholds*. An increase in the intensity of conflict by itself does not imply a new level of escalation. What is necessary for this is that at least one crisis party considers such an increase as crossing a threshold. Some escalation thresholds are well-defined and symmetric to the conflicting sides (i.e., they are both aware that crossing a particular ‘red line’ is an escalatory act). The unauthorized crossing of internationally recognized borders by military forces would be the most visible example. Similarly, the stationing of forces or certain forms of military equipment in a particular area of one's own territory can be recognized by both parties as constituting a threshold.

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<sup>58</sup> Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*, 34–35.

Many thresholds, however, are much more subjective and asymmetric – i.e. they may be of great significance to one side, but obscure or unknown to the other side. Such a possibility is particularly likely when one crisis actor has much more at stake than the opposing actor (and when there are large military power differences between the opposing sides).

In real life many thresholds are less than obvious. Even in the case of internationally recognized borders, reality is much hazier than one might think. In many situations the *de facto* and *de jure* control over a particular territory is claimed and exercised by different parties. A recent illustration of these complexities is provided by the incursion of Turkish forces on Iraqi territory in December 2015.<sup>59</sup> The Iraqi government called this “a hostile act” and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Turkish soldiers. The Turkish government responded that it had deployed armed forces at the request of the governor of Mosul for training local forces and refused to withdraw them. Given the weakness of the central government in Baghdad and only nominal control it has over the area of Turkish deployment, the small number of Turkish troops involved and the fight against the Islamic State taking place in that area, this action appears to constitute a rather limited form of escalation (at least in the eyes of most outside actors). In another case, China does accept the *de facto* border with Taiwan since it does not exercise control over Taiwanese territory but it has repeatedly made clear that it will consider the formal declaration of independence by Taiwan a significant escalation as it would mark the crossing of an escalation threshold.

Escalation thresholds can be unclear even in peacetime situations with more or less clearly established legal rules only to be clarified once the crisis erupts. Once an acute crisis, and especially armed conflict, starts, the perception of the thresholds and their criticality can change dramatically. An international ban on unrestricted submarine warfare, for instance, was widely supported before the Second World War, but was quickly abandoned after the war’s outbreak.<sup>60</sup>

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59 Al Jazeera & Reuters. “Iraq Summons Turkey Ambassador over Troop ‘Incursion.’” *Al Jazeera*, December 5, 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/iraq-demands-withdrawal-turkish-troops-mosul-151205061510572.html>.

60 Forrest E. Morgan, “Dancing with the Bear: Managing Escalation in a Conflict with Russia.” *IFRI Proliferation Papers*, Winter 2012, 21.

The subjectivity and uncertainty of thresholds create the potential for the purposeful manipulation of thresholds by conflicting states. This manipulation can be aimed either to strengthen existing thresholds to better deter potential opponents from undesirable actions, or do the opposite – to undermine the importance and significance of the threshold to make crossing them less risky.<sup>61</sup> Political rhetoric and diplomatic efforts are essential tools of trade in this respect. For example, by demonizing particular weapons and building support for international treaties to ban them it is possible to create new internationally accepted thresholds, e.g. the taboo on the use of chemical weapons. Actors seeking to undermine the significance of a threshold can engage in ‘salami tactics’. It involves repeatedly carrying out minor violations of a threshold without any particular violation looking significant enough for a strong response, but which in their entirety undermine the threshold.<sup>62</sup>

Escalation thresholds are closely related to the *escalation ladder*, a term coined by the notable strategist of the Cold War era, Herman Kahn. Kahn – who gained notoriety for his argument that nuclear wars can be fought, controlled and won – wrote a book titled *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* in 1965. He suggested the escalation ladder as a metaphor for thinking about increasing intensity of moves and countermoves during crisis and armed conflict. His escalation ladder comprised of 44 rungs in increasing order of intensity, from “Ostensible Crisis” to “Insensate War.”<sup>63</sup>

Kahn’s view of escalation as a one-dimensional process of an increase in the intensity of conflict can be referred to as *vertical* escalation. This dimension is most often related to the intensity with which military force is applied during conflict because military force is an ultimate instrument of national power for resolving interstate crises. Our understanding of crisis can be further enriched if it is complemented with the notion of horizontal escalation. Horizontal escalation refers to the escalation of the scope of the conflict from one dimension to other dimensions, including geographical (place), temporal (time), and sectoral (domain) dimensions. More generally, the introduction of new types of instruments in a crisis refers to horizontal escalation, while using the same type

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61 Ibid, 21.

62 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 66–69.

63 Kahn, Herman. *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*. Vol. 1. Transaction Publishers, 2009.

of instruments with an increased intensity in the same domain refers to vertical escalation.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the tools of crisis statecraft are diverse and states use a variety of instruments, including political communication, diplomacy, economic policies, cyber attacks, military maneuvers and proxy forces, to put pressure on the adversary and achieve their goals during crises.

Distinguishing between the various dimensions of escalation is not always easy and this, in particular, applies more strongly to a crisis, compared to armed conflict. Once a crisis turns into an armed conflict, the battlespace becomes a critical area where the dispute is settled and military force becomes a dominant tool for resolving it. Therefore, military actions can serve as yardsticks to gauge the level of escalation. During a non-violent crisis we rarely find that one particular instrument has a dominant role. The variety of tools and the absence of a dominant one during a crisis suggest that escalation thresholds are even more subjective and uncertain at that stage (e.g. there are internationally accepted laws of armed conflict but there is no such well-defined body of law for non-violent international crisis).

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<sup>64</sup> Morgan et al. (2008) separate between three types of escalation: vertical, horizontal and political, where horizontal escalation refers exclusively to “expanding the geographic scope of a conflict”, while political refers to various other ways of escalating. This classification assumes that vertical escalation is essentially about the intensity of military fighting. However, our interest is mainly about the crisis stage, where the use of military forces (short of war) is important but only one of many instruments used by the opponents. Therefore, expanding one’s political objectives and adopting more extreme rhetoric should be considered, according to our definition, not as political escalation but as vertical escalation through the use of political instruments. Similarly, the first use of economic or trade restrictions in a crisis should be considered as horizontal escalation; but consecutive uses of increasingly harsh economic sanctions (such as asset freezes and trade bans) should be considered as vertical escalation through economic instruments.

### 3.2 THREE MECHANISMS OF ESCALATION

Crisis scholars distinguish between three mechanisms through which escalation can occur, including 1) deliberate escalation, 2) inadvertent escalation, and 3) accidental escalation (see Figure 3.1).

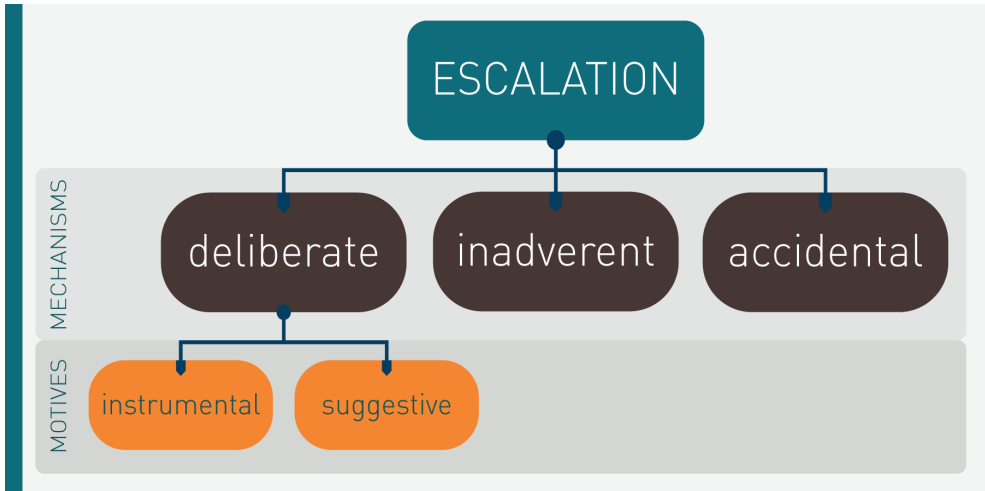


FIGURE 3.1. THREE MECHANISMS OF ESCALATION.<sup>65</sup>

*Deliberate* escalation, as its name suggests, is a purposeful action by one side to gain advantage (or reduce disadvantage) in conflict by crossing an escalation threshold. An important point here is that the party taking an escalatory step is aware of its escalatory nature and understands that it increases the level of escalation.

*Inadvertent* escalation is different in a sense that although one party takes a particular course of actions purposefully, it does not perceive such a course to be escalatory, while the opposing side does. This failure obviously comes from a misunderstanding of the opponent, and in particular, its escalation thresholds in the conflict.

<sup>65</sup> Morgan, *Dangerous Thresholds*, 29.

Finally, *accidental escalation* emerges from events and actions that were not intended by national leaders. Such events might be pure accidents or they might “result from military forces intentionally taking actions that are not intended by national leaders because the former do not understand the intent of the latter (due to failure either to give or to receive relevant orders and guidance clearly) or because they disregard it and act on their own.”<sup>66</sup> This definition can be expanded to include not only military but other actors as well. Accidental escalation erupts not through deliberate decisions but because of “friction” which may be “some kind of incident, false alarm, or mechanical failure; through somebody’s panic, madness or mischief; through a misapprehension of enemy intentions or a correct apprehension of the enemy’s misapprehension of ours.”<sup>67</sup> Crises, after all, are characterized by confusion and miscommunication, and the process of crisis decision making is inevitably “imperfect”,<sup>68</sup> thereby raising the probability of war further.

Deliberate escalation can be divided into *instrumental* and *suggestive* escalation, based on the motives behind it. Instrumental escalation is motivated by the expectation of improving one’s position in the conflict. The main goal of suggestive escalation is “to send a signal to the opponent (or to a third party) about what future escalation will or might occur in the future.”<sup>69</sup> During a crisis suggestive escalation plays a particularly prominent part. The use of military instruments in a crisis (such as raising the readiness of military forces, conducting military training exercises, concentrating forces in particular sensitive areas, and so on) in most cases serves a signaling purpose in order to convey the resolve and demonstrate the readiness to use them in actual combat if necessary (making it an example of suggestive escalation). At the same time, many such actions also have instrumental utility in the case of the onset of a military conflict. Once a crisis party has mobilized its forces, its expected payoff of a potential war increases. This in itself changes the escalation dynamic. As Slantchev explains, if an “actor restructures the situation such that fighting becomes more attractive than ending the crisis without obtaining the concession,

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<sup>66</sup> Morgan, *Dangerous Thresholds*, 27.

<sup>67</sup> Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 188.

<sup>68</sup> Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 201.

<sup>69</sup> Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 31.

then it has effectively created a commitment not to back down.”<sup>70</sup> Since motives are not visible and can only be guessed at by the opponent or external observers, distinguishing between instrumental and suggestive escalation in real-life situations is difficult or impossible in many cases.<sup>71</sup>

Deliberate escalation is closely related to brinkmanship. The term was popularized by Thomas Schelling, who famously called it “the threat of war that leaves something to chance”.<sup>72</sup> He saw it as an application of coercive bargaining involving deliberate escalatory steps to demonstrate one’s willingness to push crisis to the brink of armed conflict in order to convince the adversary to comply with one’s demands. The crucial element in brinkmanship is to create some uncertainty, that is the risk of unintentional escalation, for instance by making some visible, costly commitments or limiting one’s own freedom of action. As Schelling writes:

Brinkmanship involves getting onto the slope where one may fall in spite of his own best efforts to save himself, dragging his adversary with him. Brinkmanship is thus the deliberate creation of a recognizable risk of war, a risk that one does not completely control.<sup>73</sup>

All other things being equal, brinkmanship should generally favor the party that has more important issues at stake during a crisis.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, it might be a very risky tactic if the confrontation involves two nuclear-armed states that are similarly steadfast in pursuing their interests, especially when uncertainties and misperception come into play. The Cuban Missile Crisis is often cited as an

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70 Branislav L. Slantchev, “Military Coercion in Interstate Crises,” *The American Political Science Review* 99, no. 4 (November 1, 2005), 543.

71 This brings the fundamental question: can one demonstrate the resolve and readiness to fight in a way that does not have any instrumental benefits? NATO’s so called tripwire force placed in the Baltic countries probably provide something close to it – the force itself is too small to have significant instrumental benefits but it makes sure that any aggression against those countries will become a conflict between Russia and NATO. See also: Christopher Woolf, “NATO sets up a ‘rapid reaction force’ to counter Russian aggression,” *PRI’s The World*, September 2014. <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-05/nato-sets-rapid-reaction-force-counter-russian-aggression>.

72 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 187–203.

73 *Ibid*, 200.

74 The readiness to bear the cost of confrontation might be another important factor but we assume that in nuclear war they are too high for both sides.



example of extremely risky, real-life brinkmanship during the Cold War. It is still debated whether the United States and the Soviet Union managed to avoid nuclear war due to the great stewardship of the involved decision makers or because of good fortune.<sup>75</sup> Regardless of its causes, it was probably one of the reasons why both states, having come very close to the abyss, attempted to avoid such crises during the remaining years of the Cold War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis remains the highest point of confrontation between two superpowers.

### 3.3 ESCALATION AND DETERRENCE

The different mechanisms of escalation identified earlier require different crisis management strategies and different approaches to prevent a crisis and/or de-escalate it once it has erupted. The distinctive feature of deliberate escalation is that it represents a conscious and intentional decision to cross an escalation threshold(s) to gain advantage in a conflict. In order to prevent deliberate escalation one has to influence the decision calculus of the adversary. This is the essence of *deterrence*, a core element in the Western approach to crisis management during the Cold War. Deterrence is often defined as “the manipulation of an adversary’s estimation of the cost/benefit calculation of taking a given action” or even as the “generation of fear.”<sup>76</sup> Deterrence is aimed at dissuading an adversary from undertaking an action. In classical deterrence such manipulation is exercised via threats of punishment if the adversary tries to change the status quo (i.e. to escalate). At the other side of the coercion coin one finds compellence, which is about pressuring an opponent to undertake some action that it otherwise would not consider.<sup>77</sup> Here we will look at deterrence.

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75 For example, the Soviet Union placed a large number of tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba, which was unknown to the US. The Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, asked Khrushchev to use them in the case of invasion while being aware that such an act would lead to the complete destruction of Cuba. See Graham, Allison, and Zelikow Philip. “Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis.” *Boston: Little, Brown and Company*, 1971. See also Lebow, Richard Ned, and Janice Gross Stein. *We All Lost the Cold War*. Cambridge Univ Press, 1994. <http://journals.cambridge.org/production/action/cjoGetFulltext?fulltextid=6258872>.

76 Austin Long, *Deterrence -- From Cold War to Long War: Lessons from Six Decades of RAND Research* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 7; <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG636.html>.

77 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword* (Yale University Press, 2008), 71–73.

Successful deterrence hinges on the ability to instill a belief in the adversary that one has both the *capability* and the *intent* (or will) to inflict harm if the adversary does not comply while the harm is so costly to the adversary will prefer to avoid it.<sup>78</sup> In other words, the threat needs to be both sufficiently credible (which depends on a mixture of capability and intent) and sufficiently costly and this needs to be communicated to the adversary as well. Convincing an adversary that one possesses the capabilities is often, if not always, relatively straightforward, because it is about showing that one possesses the type of deployable military capabilities that can in fact inflict harm against which the adversary cannot defend. This requires the possession of military capabilities and the demonstration of these military capabilities to the adversary. Hence states broadcast images of military parades and exercises in which they showcase their military prowess to foreign observers. Signaling one's readiness to use these capabilities should the adversary not comply is more difficult especially when one faces a nuclear-armed opponent. States do so by issuing declaratory statements, both in oral and in written form, in which they explain their policies outlining both their core interests and what they will do to protect them in the name of deterrence. An important factor underlying the credibility of deterrent threats is the significance or importance of the issues at stake for the opposing sides. The less important the issue at stake is, the less likely is the adversary to believe that one will follow up on its deterrent threat. For this reason, credible deterrent threats, an assortment of crisis scholars argue, rely both on words and on actions.<sup>79</sup> One way to increase the credibility of deterrent threats is by introducing the possibility of inadvertent escalation to a situation, as brinkmanship does, for instance through the stationing of trip-wire forces close to a disputed border. This signals to the adversary that one takes the situation seriously and that any border infringement will lead to further escalation but it could also trigger the escalation it was intended to prevent when the opponent considers this an offensive move.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>79</sup> See on the one hand, Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy*, 1998; Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, 214; and Freedman, *Strategic Coercion*, 1998, 33 (actions need to be backed up by political communication). See on the other hand, in addition to Schelling, Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Cornell University Press, 2005); Slantchev, "Military Coercion"; and James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests," 70.

Deterrence in “crisis and crisis preventive diplomacy”, as George and Smoke already noted in 1974, is, however, extremely difficult because the thresholds are unclear and there is no deterrence doctrine either for “planning the acquisition of forces and other capabilities, for declaratory policies, or for diplomatic, military, or other action plans.”<sup>80</sup> This sometimes prompts actors to opt for deterrence by denial. Instead of threatening punishment, deterrence by denial aims to demonstrate to the adversary that its actions will be successfully countered to deny their potential benefits.<sup>81</sup> This typically involves strengthening defensive capabilities. It should be noted, though, that its main aim is to avoid escalation by demonstrating the capability to deny rather than by preparing to fight. Again, unless deterrence by denial involves truly defensive capabilities it might provoke inadvertent escalation.

Deterrence should be seen as only one element in a range of approaches to influence crisis adversaries.<sup>82</sup> Another often neglected but important element is the ability to provide reassurance, both to one’s allies and to the adversary. Reassurance is critical for managing escalation in a crisis where one’s allies are directly threatened. It is often forgotten, though, that successful deterrence also requires providing reassurance to the adversary that if it complies with the deterrent threat, it will not be punished.<sup>83</sup>

Deterrence can only work against deliberate escalation because deterrence aims to influence decision making regarding an intentional breach of thresholds. If an adversary crosses a threshold without being aware of this, deterrence is of little help. Minimizing the risk of inadvertent and accidental escalation calls for a different set of policies. One example of inadvertent escalation is when defensive measures taken by one side are perceived as offensive by the other. Escalation thresholds are after all subjective and the exact intent behind actions are not always clear to the opposite side. Clarifying thresholds by setting red lines is therefore considered crucial for preventing inadvertent escalation.

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80 Alexander L. George, and Richard Smoke. *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974, 44–45.

81 Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 162–163.

82 National Research Council. *U.S. Air Force Strategic Deterrence Analytic Capabilities: An Assessment of Tools, Methods, and Approaches for the 21st Century Security Environment*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2014.

83 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960, 74.

This is easier said than done and there are several pitfalls associated with openly stating thresholds.<sup>84</sup> Sometimes, both opponents are simply not aware of a threshold until it is crossed. The perception of thresholds often changes during crisis or conflict, depending on the fortunes of both sides. In addition, declaring a threshold might reveal one's own vulnerability, including what falls below the threshold, and encourage the adversary to exploit it. An oft-cited example here is the speech delivered by US Secretary of State Acheson in January 1950 in which he did not include South Korea in the defensive perimeter.<sup>85</sup> A few months later the Korean War started. Declaring a deterrent threshold might also render a leader vulnerable to reputational costs, if the adversary does not comply with the deterrent threat but the leader does not follow up on its threat. US president Obama has been chastised by critics for his decision not to punish Syria's president Assad when he crossed Obama's openly stated red line by using chemical weapons in 2013.<sup>86</sup>

An important precondition of preventing inadvertent escalation is a thorough understanding of the adversary's thresholds and its decision making processes. This necessitates collecting as much intelligence on the adversary as is feasible. Finally, because accidental escalation takes place due to accidents, its risk cannot be fully eliminated and one can only aim at reducing such risk (see Textbox 3). Establishing appropriate rules of engagement and tightly maintaining them, rigorous training of the engaged forces, the setting up of hotlines between national and military leaders – these are all tools that are instrumental in managing the risk of accidental escalation.

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84 Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 164.

85 Acheson, Dean. "Speech on the Far East." presented at the Speech given at the National Press Club, Washington, DC, 1950. <https://web.viu.ca/davies/H323Vietnam/Acheson.htm>.

86 See for instance: Brett LoGiurato. "GOP Senators Spent Sunday Morning Urging Obama To Take Action in Syria." *Business Insider*, April 28, 2013. <http://www.businessinsider.com/syria-mccain-graham-chemical-weapons-obama-2013-4>. Daryll Press, however, finds that it is the mixture of interests and capabilities rather than reputation that counts in how military threats are perceived. See Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

### Accidental and Deliberate Escalation in a Hybrid Conflict

The recent war in Eastern Ukraine that started in 2014 provides several illuminating examples of various mechanisms of escalation. For the EU and the Netherlands, in particular, the downing of the Malaysian Airline passenger flight MH17 on 17 July 2014 by forces allied with the Donbass separatist movement, which killed all 298 people on board (two thirds of which were Dutch citizens), was a major escalatory act. The war that had been raging already for several months in Eastern Ukraine, more than 2000 km from the Netherlands, was suddenly, forcibly and painfully brought home. Although quite soon, it became clear that the shooting down was likely the result of an accidental act, and the perpetrators most likely mistook the passenger plane for a Ukrainian military aircraft, the accident helped bringing together all 28 member states of the EU to introduce the third round of economic sanctions against Russia on July 31, 2014, which was and still is suspected of supplying the weapon delivery system, if not its handlers.<sup>78</sup> This followed two rounds of sanctions implemented in the wake of the Crimea Annexation by Russia following the February 2014 Revolution which deposed Ukrainian President Yanukovich.<sup>88</sup> The third round for the first time targeted broad sectors of the Russian economy, including finance, energy and defense. This substantially increased the economic costs of war for Russia, which had been actively supporting the Donbass rebels, and can be considered an example of deliberate escalation of the crisis in the economic area. Economically, Russia countered by introducing a ban on a majority of food imports from the EU and other countries that implemented anti-Russian sanctions on August 6.<sup>89</sup> Detailed analysis of the various escalation and de-escalation steps in this hybrid conflict and their subsequent impact on the behavior of the main crisis protagonists falls outside the scope of this paper. We do note that the MH17 shootdown, likely an act of accidental escalation, triggered a process of deliberate and multidimensional escalation (including but not limited to military and economic escalation) involving Russia and a coalition of Western states.

#### TEXTBOX 3. ACCIDENTAL AND DELIBERATE ESCALATION IN A HYBRID CONFLICT.

87 The Council of the European Union. Council Regulation Concerning Restrictive Measures in View of Russia's Actions Destabilising the Situation in Ukraine, 2014. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:JOL\\_2014\\_229\\_R\\_0001&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:JOL_2014_229_R_0001&from=EN).

88 "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline," BBC News, November 14, 2014, Accessed February 3, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

89 Birnbaum, Michael. "Russia Bans Food Imports from U.S., E.U." The Washington Post, August 7, 2014. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-bans-food-imports-from-us-eu/2014/08/07/a29f5bea-1e14-11e4-82f9-2cd6fa8da5c4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-bans-food-imports-from-us-eu/2014/08/07/a29f5bea-1e14-11e4-82f9-2cd6fa8da5c4_story.html).

### 3.4 ESCALATION DOMINANCE

Crisis participants aspire for *escalation dominance*, as a key mechanism for de-escalation and the prevention of escalation in the first place. It is another critical concept for understanding the dynamics of crisis. Escalation dominance can be described as the

condition in which one has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that would be disadvantageous or costly to the enemy, while the enemy could not do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because those available to it would not improve its situation.<sup>90</sup>

Once achieved, escalation dominance should allow one to deter and thus prevent any further escalation, because the opposite side will only incur increased costs but will not be able to achieve any of its objectives should it decide to escalate. Escalation dominance is one of the principal elements of the ability to either prevent (in the case of deterrence) or initiate crises (in the case of compellence). In the latter case, it enables an actor to successfully manage the outcome of crises through its ability to constrain and perhaps even control the actions of the opposing actor. Escalation dominance is therefore also a critical factor underlying the ability to de-escalate crises. It can be argued that the United States and the West in general enjoyed escalation dominance in conflicts with conventional state opponents in the last two decades (starting with the First Gulf War) and fought them at the level of escalation of their own choosing. This form of escalation dominance largely hinged on the ability to escalate vertically.

Vertical escalation dominance has been found of limited use, however, in insurgencies and against opponents using asymmetric tactics. Partly this is due to ethical, legal and political barriers preventing escalation options for the West in stabilization operations and counter-insurgencies.<sup>91</sup> Yet, another reason is that the escalation ladder and escalation dominance concepts do not fully capture the complexities of real-world crisis. For example, the escalation ladder metaphor assumes that the opponents have a common understanding of the same escalation ladder and on what rung they are located at the moment. It also

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90 Forrest E. Morgan, "Dancing with the Bear: Managing Escalation in a Conflict with Russia." *IFRI Proliferation Papers*, Winter 2012: 13.

91 Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*. 2001; 26 (1): 93–128.

assumes that opponents always escalate on purpose, i.e., that they move to a new, higher rung. This ignores the role of uncertainty and misperception, which are as common to any crisis and conflict as is the desire of the opponents to prevail in them.<sup>92</sup> It is much easier to escalate by chance rather than to de-escalate. In other words, de-escalation is a purposive act.

Another problem with a narrow interpretation of escalation dominance is that it focuses only on the vertical dimension of escalation, leaving aside various dimensions of horizontal escalation, which are often more important in situations short of war. Asymmetric opponents for example tend to have much more patience in achieving their goals and often aim to prolong the conflict, which can be considered an escalation in a temporal dimension. In short, if adversaries have much at stake in a conflict (with their back against the wall) they often find imaginative ways to escalate the conflict in different ways even when they are military much weaker than their opponents. Also in state-on-state crises, participants increasingly use horizontal escalation to level the playing field. If both participants possess nuclear weapons, they have an incentive to escalate horizontally, because risking the prospect of nuclear war is costly. Yet, the nuclear weapon instrument remains an undeniable escalation option in the crisis toolbox, and parties that believe that they are outmatched in conventional military terms, have developed deterrent strategies involving the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which, for instance, still feature in the nuclear postures of both NATO and Russia.<sup>93</sup> The ability to escalate horizontally therefore complements rather than substitutes the ability to escalate vertically.

It is worth emphasizing that paradoxically escalation dominance can be a prerequisite for the de-escalation of crises. If one possesses escalation dominance, then stepping up a rung in the escalation ladder (escalate) can force one's opponent to step down (de-escalate) and initiate a process in which both parties move away from the brink.

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92 Robert Jervis. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

93 Amy F. Woolf. "Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons." Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, February 23, 2015, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf>; and NATO Headquarters, "Press Release: Deterrence and Defence Posture Review." NATO, May 20, 2012, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_87597.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_87597.htm).

### 3.5 ESCALATION AND CRISIS STABILITY

*Crisis stability* is a prerequisite for crisis not spiraling out of control. Crisis stability refers, in simple terms, to a belief by all parties in crisis that despite their conflicting interests escalating the crisis to war is not to their advantage.<sup>94</sup> The opposite of crisis stability, crisis instability, describes a situation in which an “opponent begins to feel an urgency to attack.”<sup>95</sup> Crisis stability is determined by the opponents’ perceptions of each other’s intentions, capabilities, resolve, and actions taken by the crisis participants during the crisis as well as on a number of contextual factors that determine structural crisis stability. It is important to note that crisis stability or instability are not permanent features of a particular crisis, but that they rather constitute a set of fundamental but dynamic elements – they depend on actions, counteractions, perceptions and random factors, and can and do change quickly during crisis. A crisis can start out with the opponents clearly wishing to avoid armed conflict but can quickly degenerate into an unstable and dangerous confrontation. Crisis instability might emerge, for example, as a largely psychological phenomenon because of mental stress, time pressure, and the perception that war is becoming inevitable.<sup>96</sup>

Against this background there are various pathways that lead up to crisis instability. The security dilemma – when action by one side to improve its security causes the opponent to feel less secure and take counter actions in return, and so on – offers a description of one pathway to crisis instability.<sup>97</sup> Another pathway is often described as a “window of opportunity”, a limited period of time that at least in the mind of one crisis party provides passing advantage to escalate or strike. The logic applies to the nuclear domain, and was one of the critical focal points of nuclear armament strategies and arms negotiations during the Cold War,<sup>98</sup> as well as to new domains, including cyber

94 Forrest E. Morgan, *Crisis Stability and Long-Range Strike: A Comparative Analysis of Fighters, Bombers, and Missiles* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013): 16-17, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1258.html>.

95 Morgan, *Crisis Stability and Long-Range Strike*, 17.

96 Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War*, 11–25, 117–123; see also Holsti, ‘Perceptions of Time, Perceptions of Alternatives, and Patterns of Communication as Factors in Crisis Decision-Making’; Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, 77–78.

97 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*.

98 Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy, Third Edition*, 3rd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).



and space. One particular concern today is related to a potential preemptive attack on military space assets, which are crucial to the operations of Western military forces but relatively unprotected against attacks from near-peer competitors (China and Russia).<sup>99</sup>

Although crisis stability (or instability) is largely subjective and dynamic, there are certain conditions existing prior to the onset of crisis that strongly influence crisis stability. The combination of these conditions determine what is often referred to as *structural stability*. They include but are not limited to geography, force structure and posture, political relationships, etc. One important condition is the balance between offense and defense and the potential benefits of first (surprise) strike.<sup>100</sup> Structural stability is favored when successful defense is significantly easier than offense and first strike does not bring substantial benefits. Still, the impact of these conditions on crisis stability takes place through the perception of political leaders, and mistakes in the assessment of the offense-defense balance abound. For example, before the First World War national leaders believed in the advantages of offense, placing a lot of emphasis on speedy mobilization, which in turn contributed to the breakdown of diplomatic efforts to avert the war.<sup>101</sup> It turned out during the war that in reality defense had significant advantages over offense epitomized by the years of bloody trench warfare that followed. The critical overall takeaway here is that crisis stability is shaped by a set of conditions that exist prior to the onset of crisis and that may be interpreted differently by crisis participants. Crisis decision makers need to consider these conditions not only during but also prior to the outbreak of potential crises.

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99 Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 41.

100 The offense-defense balance plays a significant role in this, in which technology is one, albeit important, element. If the offense dominates, this may open windows-of-opportunity, incentivize states to engage in preemptive attacks and thereby increase crisis instability. See Stephen van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (April 1, 1998), 5–43, esp. 9.

101 Eugenia V. Nomikos and Robert Carver North, *International Crisis: The Outbreak of World War I* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976). See also S. Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War", *International Security*, 1984, 58–107.

The theoretical crisis management concepts discussed in this section show that interstate crises are highly uncertain and dynamic interactions between conflicting parties. There is no universal rule book for crisis management that can prescribe the precise steps to be taken to achieve the best possible outcomes in every situation. The theoretical concepts do suggest a number of useful and practical insights for policymakers involved in crisis management. These are the subject of the next section.

# 4 SO WHAT: INSIGHTS FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The essence of crisis management lies in the prevention of crisis escalating to war while protecting one's core values and interests. The tension between these two objectives creates a fundamental dilemma that decision makers must resolve.<sup>102</sup> To be able to do so, they must be *crisis literate* and possess a fundamental understanding of the nature of crises. Every crisis is, however, unique. Escalation dynamics are strongly affected by various structural conditions affecting crisis stability, by conflicting strategic interests, by the interactive and often unpredictable crisis behavior of the actors, as well as by random events. Given these uncertainties, the question arises whether general insights can be distilled on the basis of theoretical argument, existing literature and past experience.

As our analysis reveals, the available historical evidence – despite providing a number of interesting high level findings – does not provide a fundamental understanding of the nature of crisis and crisis escalation that decision makers can consistently apply for the purposes of crisis management. Our actual knowledge about actual pre-, intra- and post-crisis dynamics remains disappointingly – some might even argue unacceptably – sparse. All of the datasets that underpin our current knowledge about crises are country/year datasets that are generally too coarse to allow for any truly detailed understanding – let alone prediction. The thicker descriptions of case studies provide us with a somewhat more in-depth look into at least some aspects of a few crises, but these insights tend to be extremely difficult to compare or to generalize.

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<sup>102</sup> Alexander L. George, "A Provisional Theory of Crisis Management," 1991.

The theoretical crisis literature, however, yielded a number of relevant insights. Crisis can be cathartic and may play an instrumental role in resolving disputes short of war, if and only if properly managed. We proposed considering the concept of escalation as the quintessential characteristic of crisis. We explained how escalation, rather than its opposite de-escalation, is a natural feature of competition, injecting it with an upward spiral dynamic. While escalation cannot be fully controlled, if left unchecked, it will likely spiral out of control. Escalation processes should be considered along both the vertical and the horizontal dimension. The inclination of many modern day adversaries, both state and non-state, is to escalate along both dimensions. We identified the importance of thresholds in crisis escalation processes, highlighted both the need to understand the opponent's thresholds and to communicate one's own, and described how thresholds sometimes only become manifest during the crisis itself. We examined three mechanisms of crisis escalation – inadvertent, deliberate and accidental – and designated the underlying motives as suggestive and instrumental. We also reflected on the meaning of escalation dominance in the context of dictating or constraining the behavior of crises opponents and suggested that escalation dominance can be instrumental in initiating a process de-escalation. Finally, we talked about the concept of crisis stability and reflected on the structural conditions that affect crisis stability. All in all, we conclude that many insights relevant for crisis management can be derived; not as a comprehensive crisis rulebook, but rather as a general guidebook for decision makers to better prepare for future crises.

Our overall, unequivocal message is that our DSOs need to take crisis management seriously in light of the uptick in dangerous and destructive crises in the current international environment. We have argued that it would be helpful to consider the many situations short of war that we are confronted with through the prism of crisis management. This final section highlights a number of key insights and critical themes for DSOs to prepare for the challenges of crisis management in today's and tomorrow's security environment. Here we will move from the theoretical to the practical plane and offer a number of policy suggestions for DSOs to pursue.

1. **Invest in crisis informatics.** Two types of information could improve our ability to deal with crises: information about when crises might erupt (crisis early warning) and about the actual crisis dynamics (crisis monitoring). The

former aims at providing policymakers and politicians (and – maybe even more importantly – the international community as a whole) with a better ability to focus attention there where it is needed. Although as of yet it is impossible to predict the exact timing of any particular crisis, mapping out global crisis fault lines and identifying regions and zones at heightened crisis risk is certainly possible. Investment in crisis informatics could further boost this ability. Our DSOs embraced the ICT revolution of the 1990s with an eye towards improving their own operational situational awareness – and thus (so it was hoped) effectiveness. Acronyms like Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) came to describe the ‘eyes and ears’ that they required in their combat space. These very same ICT technologies are now unlocking an entirely new, much more broadly applicable amounts of situational awareness that could not just be useful operationally, but also strategically; not just to DSOs, but to the entire ecosystem of actors in a conflict space. Investment in crisis monitoring capabilities will yield a better understanding of how crises develop, and will inform more effective interventions. It will enable DSOs to track and examine the various pathways that lead to or away from crisis escalation at the micro-level – the level of actual individuals who act in certain ways, triggered by various dynamics. New crisis sensors - put to use by, but not necessarily owned or operated, by DSOs – and the data, information and knowledge that they are likely to engender, open unprecedented learning opportunities for our DSOs, our politicians and publics at large that could greatly improve our collective crisis literacy – not just on the basis of coarse, fragmentary and past crisis experiences, but on the basis of granulated, comprehensive and real-time data sources.

2. **Develop metrics of effectiveness for crisis intervention.** The enhanced understanding of the real dynamics of crisis that is likely to ensue from these efforts to collect and analyze (big) data will likely also provide better gauges for what works and does not work in ‘crisis intervention’. Progress on these metrics may allow the international community to tweak its efforts in a much more evidence-based way than has been available hitherto. Our governments have increasingly emphasized the need to measure the effectiveness of their activities in conflict zones. There is in our opinion a better than even chance, however, that the aforementioned efforts will start providing us with far better gauges of the effectiveness of not only their own efforts, but also the efforts of many other crisis actors. This in turn will provide a better basis to decide upon various courses of action, including escalation or de-escalation.

3. **Manage escalation (do not shy away from it).** Crisis management is as much a competition in risk taking as it is about risk calibration, about knowing when to ratchet up the pressure, and when to ratchet it downwards. Because escalation involves at least two actors it cannot fully be controlled by either one of them, but it can be managed. Managing escalation principally requires that any vertical or horizontal moves by the opponent on the escalation ladder or the escalation space, are recognized as such. Instead of approaching escalatory moves of a crisis opponent with moral indignation (illegitimate as these moves may be and feigned as the indignation may be), it is crucial to address them in a concerted manner, aimed at protecting vital interests while preventing escalation to war. This requires that senior decision makers possess crisis literacy and are exposed to the fundamental tenets of crisis management as part of their professional training. Analogous to war gaming, a practice quite prevalent amongst military practitioners, crisis games should be played regularly involving a broader circle of security and defense decision makers.
4. **Hybrid crises require hybrid escalation dominance.** Hybrid strategies have always been the name of the game, even if strategists and practitioners alike have only recently returned to it. While much of this boils down to old wine served in new bottles,<sup>103</sup> it highlights that escalation dominance in contemporary conflict is dependent on the ability and flexibility to escalate (and de-escalate) both vertically and horizontally. Multidimensional (de-)escalation adds a definitely more complex layer to crisis management that necessitates a broader toolkit of crisis management capabilities. It requires a more granular understanding of the opponent, of his perceptions and his actions, and a greater ability to orchestrate concerted actions along the vertical and the horizontal dimension. It also entails that decision makers create a toolbox of gradual escalation and de-escalation steps. The intricate play of multidimensional and dynamic (de-)escalation requires a broad portfolio of calibrated measures in order to step up and down and sideways along the escalation space. The more dimensions to this space, the more options one has to act and re-act proportionally, in

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<sup>103</sup> Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, eds., *Hybrid Warfare* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Hoffman, Frank, "On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs Hybrid Threats," *War on the Rocks*, accessed December 24, 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybridthreats/>.

accordance with a solid understanding of what motivates and discourages the opponent. This should in fact be part and parcel of the toolkit of the prudent strategic planner. The design of a diversified options portfolio for crisis contingency planning can benefit from the establishment of a hybrid task force as well as from regular design sessions involving key stakeholders in which new policy options are developed.<sup>104</sup> Institutionally, the establishment of a body on top of the defense and security ‘silos’ – a national security council / advisor – will facilitate cross domain coordination.

5. **Different mechanisms of escalation require different deterrent strategies.** Deterrence can be effective against deliberate forms of escalation. Deterrence promises punishment if particular thresholds are crossed. Such threats have to be credible in order to affect the adversary’s decision making calculus. Deterrence is of little help when dealing with other mechanisms of escalation – inadvertent and accidental. Here, deterrence by denial may be much more effective. When one party does not recognize that its actions cross an escalation threshold (i.e. it does so inadvertently) the best thing that the opponent can do is to clarify important thresholds. Setting clear rules of engagement, improving operational control, and establishing hot lines for communication are instrumental in these regards, even if crisis participants will try and disrupt these.
6. **Understand your thresholds... and those of your adversary.** Both crisis prevention and crisis management require an understanding of your own thresholds as well of those of the adversary. A clear articulation of what is considered vital and what is not, of one’s core values and objectives, is a first prerequisite. This requires a core of strategic thinkers, both in the higher ranks of the civil service and among the various political decision makers, that together discuss these issues. A clearly related, but distinct, question is if and how one’s thresholds should be clearly communicated as ‘red lines’ to the outside world. Setting a red line may serve as a clear deterrent, but will also create obligations and possibly create maneuvering space for the

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<sup>104</sup> For an elaboration of what this looks like in the design of stabilization efforts, see Stephan De Spiegeleire, Peter Wijnnga, and Tim Sweijs. *Designing Future Stabilization Efforts*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. Accessed January 26, 2016. <http://www.hcss.nl/reports/download/153/2537/>.

opponent to achieve his objectives without crossing a red line.<sup>105</sup> At the same time it is also necessary to consider the effect of one's own action on the opponent's calculus taking into account what it considers to be vital. This requires a firm knowledge and grasp of the perceptions of the opponent, of his motivations and interests, and his room for maneuver.<sup>106</sup> Neither belittling or demonizing nor aggrandizing or appeasing the opponent is beneficial.<sup>107</sup> An understanding of the opponent builds on an extensive knowledge infrastructure of deep military, political, economic and social expertise, residing both inside and outside the government. (Big) data analytics offers new opportunities not only to anticipate, but also to understand and explain the behavior of the opponent.

7. **Create a joint crisis grammar.** Effective crisis management requires the creation of a joint *crisis grammar* with the opponent, that is aimed at establishing a shared understanding of the meaning and the significance of actions across different domains. Multiple channels of communication may need to be created, both with the leadership of the crisis participants and their constituencies, as well as with any actor not immediately involved in the crisis, including the international community and the intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations that exist. This includes meetings between the political and military leadership of the (potential) crisis participants and the installation of hotlines between them. It entails the articulation of priorities both in national security strategy documents and in public statements.<sup>108</sup> It encompasses a public diplomacy aspect that is still

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<sup>105</sup> In some cases, decision makers might purposefully prefer to a posture of strategic ambiguity. See T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz, *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 8, 14, 295–296. For an appraisal of the dangers involved, see <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/99775/927329080-MIT.pdf>.

<sup>106</sup> James L. Richardson. *Crisis diplomacy: The great powers since the mid-nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 26–30.

<sup>107</sup> When Russia annexed the Crimea, Putin's strategy was regularly portrayed as "haphazardly" and motivated by "a deep sense of betrayal and grievance", "impulsive" and a policy with "no logic in it". Steven Lee Myers, "Russia's Move Into Ukraine Said to Be Born in Shadows," *New York Times*, March 8, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/world/europe/russias-move-into-ukraine-said-to-be-born-in-shadows.html>; Andrew C. Kuchins, "Is Putin Having a Brezhnev Moment?," *Politico*, March 11, 2014. [://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/putin-brezhnev-moment-crimea-104547](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/putin-brezhnev-moment-crimea-104547); and Tikhon Dzyadko, "Putin Doesn't Know What He Wants in Ukraine," *New Republic*, March 3, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/116833/putin-doesnt-know-what-he-wants-ukrain>.

<sup>108</sup> Richardson, *Crisis diplomacy*, 367–369.



under-appreciated in many Western capitals, which can be used to empower the agents of resilience in target societies against the agents of conflict. It may also be facilitated by contact groups that can ensure channels of communication if there are no direct lines between the crisis protagonists. Finally, think tanks could play an instrumental role not by serving as unofficial mouthpieces of their governments, but by identifying potential tensions in the articulated priorities in the strategies and proposing potential solutions to solve these tensions.

8. **Do not talk the talk if you do not walk the walk.** Signaling one's priorities to an opponent will only be effective if it relies on a combination of 'tying hands' and 'sinking costs'. This is not advice to engage in 'games of chicken' that can lead to situations that can easily spiral out of control. Rather it means that while words without deeds are ineffective, leaving decision makers prone to all sorts of reputational costs if they don't follow through on commitments they made, deeds without words may trigger unforeseen escalatory spirals because the message they are intended to convey is misunderstood. Therefore, once interests are considered vital, it is important to support words with action (in whatever appropriate form for the particular situation), while action needs to be accompanied by political communication to render clear the message.<sup>109</sup> In the context of managing multidimensional escalation, this requires the coordination of actions and statements across the involved actors – both within government and between governments.
9. **Tackle crisis stability head on.** Crisis stability is generally not (only) the product of fortunate circumstances but is rooted in structural conditions that act as an active constraint on the tendency of crises to escalate. This requires confronting the issue of crisis stability and the structural conditions that affect it head on. It entails awareness of the potential of first strike instabilities and the closing of any windows of opportunity before they open. It necessitates convincing one's opponent that there is no first strike instability in both directions as well as the elimination of any discrepancies between objective and subjective perceptions of the offense-defense balance. It means that one needs to take one's opponent's considerations and worries seriously. And it requires the establishment of rules for new domains and instruments through constant dialogue both via track one and track two dialogues.

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<sup>109</sup> cf. fn.79.

The insights here presented will have different applications depending on the type of opponent (e.g. state, non-state, nuclear, non-nuclear), the domain (e.g. conventional, nuclear, cyber, space), the theater (e.g. East-West, South) and will inevitably take on different forms and meanings across future crises. Lifting the theoretical fog of crisis marks a first important step in preparing for the management of future crises, wherever they may erupt. The objective of this paper was to introduce the key concepts that are relevant for crisis management, and thereby to enhance the general *crisis literacy*, and to flag a number of actionable key insights for DSOs so that they are better prepared for future crises. Applying these insights to address specific challenges will be the next step.

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