

Deterrence and Escalation Maneuver in a Two-peer Environment

Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) talk
January 16, 2025

Anna Péczeli, *Senior Fellow*

CENTER FOR GLOBAL SECURITY RESEARCH

Structure

- 1) Research design
- 2) Cold War escalation management strategies
 - Escalation dominance
 - Brinkmanship
 - Conflict avoidance
- 3) Applying old strategies to a new problem
- 4) The requirements of a modern escalation management approach
- 5) Policy implications
- 6) Key arguments

Research Design

- **Key concepts:**
 - Escalation: “*growth process in warfare*”
 - Deliberate, inadvertent, accidental
 - De-escalation: decreasing the intensity/scope of warfare
 - De-escalation is a form of escalation management, but they are not the same
- **2018 NDS Commission:**
 - The United States “*could lose*” a regional war against its major adversaries
 - This is largely due to the lack of a detailed understanding of the escalation dynamics that might come into play with nuclear-armed adversaries, and also due to the lack of concepts to counter adversary escalation tactics
- **Main question:**
 - How should the United States navigate escalation management in the current strategic context?
- **Contribution:**
 - I identify 7 criteria that highlight a wide range of measures that can contribute to the development of a better escalation management strategy by the US and its allies

Cold War Escalation Management Strategies

1) Escalation dominance

- Herman Kahn: when a state develops the “*capacity, other things being equal, to enable the side possessing it to enjoy marked advantages in a given region of the escalation ladder*” → ladder metaphor
- Once escalation dominance is achieved, using escalatory threats against an adversary becomes a very effective coercive tool to end a conflict on favorable terms

2) Brinkmanship

- Thomas Schelling: the “*deliberate creation of a recognizable risk of war, a risk that one does not completely control, deliberately letting the situation get somewhat out of hand, harassing and intimidating an adversary by exposing him to a shared risk*” could help to compel the adversary to capitulate → curved slope metaphor
- Uncertainties associated with conflict dynamics can be used for one’s strategic advantage

3) Conflict avoidance

- During most of the Cold War, due to resource constraints, domestic reasons and the inherent risks in the above strategies, the US and the USSR both tried to pursue conflict avoidance by compartmentalizing their proxy battles to remote regions

Applying Old Strategies to a New Problem

Why escalation dominance and brinkmanship are problematic today?

- Matthew Kroenig's superiority-brinkmanship model promises that “*a robust nuclear force reduces a state's expected cost of nuclear war, increasing its resolve in high-stakes crises, providing it with coercive bargaining leverage, and enhancing nuclear deterrence*”
- Critic:
 - Nuclear superiority based on stockpile size does not necessarily guarantee bargaining and coercive advantages
 - Using stockpile sizes as a metric of nuclear superiority is misguided
 - States do not necessarily have a mutual understanding of the nuclear balance
- Escalation dominance is unachievable due to the broadening security competition
 - Growing asymmetries, some of which the US has already accepted
- Brinkmanship is also problematic due to increased uncertainties, ambiguous red lines, and because it fosters an environment of fear and suspicion that could undermine diplomatic efforts aimed at war termination

Applying Old Strategies to a New Problem

Conflict avoidance:

- Why should states choose this option?
 - Safest and potentially the cheapest option
 - It provides mutual benefits if both sides are equally committed to it
 - It could also make sense if the stakes are highly asymmetric
- Problems:
 - If the stakes are high and only one side commits to it, the benefits are asymmetric
 - Current situation: Russia and China have demonstrated their interest in revisionist agendas, and their foreign policy conduct is expected to become more aggressive
 - They have both opted out of conflict avoidance → it is not a winning strategy for the US

Escalation management preferences:

- US: approaches that favor crisis stability, opting against brinkmanship (2022 NPR)
- Russia: growing appetite to use brinkmanship
- China: lot of uncertainties, Beijing has not embraced brinkmanship as Russia did, but there are indicators that it might be moving in that direction



The Requirements of a Modern Escalation Management Approach

Old requirements:

- 1) Developing the right **capabilities**
 - Asymmetries matter (parity is more likely to make leaders exercise caution, while the consequences of asymmetry remain highly contested)
- 2) Building credibility through **commitment and resolve**
 - Commitment requires actions that make it difficult or impossible to back down
 - Resolve is about the determination and willpower to follow through on threats
- 3) Balancing the **stakes**
 - US adversaries perceive an asymmetry of stakes which they believe translates to a better position to use coercive bargaining
- 4) Anticipating **uncertainties**
 - Schelling weaponized uncertainties and emphasized the benefits of risk manipulation
 - Uncertainties have dramatically increased today → states must learn how to operate under these conditions

The Requirements of a Modern Escalation Management Approach

New requirements:

- 5) Preparing for *multidimensional* escalation
 - Cold War models were linear and primarily vertical
 - But escalation can happen horizontally (i.e. different theaters, or different domains)
 - Segregation of escalation is unlikely to succeed
- 6) Expecting unpredictability and *dynamic* shifts in escalation patterns
 - Cold War models were linear and predictable
 - But escalation patterns today could emerge in many unpredictable and non-linear ways due to emerging technologies, diminishing firebreaks and power diffusion
- 7) Developing *adaptable* approaches to escalation management
 - Escalation is very context specific, and a lot depends on the source of escalation
 - In light of the participants, geographic location, etc. certain steps/options might be missing in a scenario → there is no “one size fits all” solution
 - States can also deliberately destroy steps on the “ladder” and move horizontally

Policy Implications

- 1) Developing the right **capabilities**
 - Escalation management strategies favor those who have a great variety of options and can use many different levers of influence
 - While achieving escalation dominance through nuclear superiority is neither feasible, nor advisable, a clearly inferior force is also dangerous
 - Instead: pursue approximate strategic equivalence with flexible options, protect current strategic advantages, and try to identify new ones
- 2) Building credibility through **commitment and resolve**
 - Commitment: capabilities, modes of deployment, joint exercises, consultations, technology transfers, etc.
 - Resolve: tailor leadership rhetoric and build a stronger domestic consensus
- 3) Balancing the **stakes**
 - Dispel misalignments in perceptions and show restraint once objectives are met
- 4) Anticipating **uncertainties**
 - Uncertain thresholds and purposeful manipulation are unavoidable, but better information and intelligence sharing, updated planning, and more realistic exercises could help

Policy Implications

- 5) Preparing for ***multidimensional*** escalation
 - In a multi-domain environment, it makes sense to achieve diversity in all strategic domains, because it might make escalation management easier
 - Multi-domain warfare carries many inherent dangers → this requires a strategy for fighting wars with nuclear-armed adversaries over limited objectives, improved planning, adjusted doctrine and operational concepts, and a new mix of capabilities
- 6) Expecting unpredictability and ***dynamic*** shifts in escalation patterns
 - Novel threats: growing chance of opportunistic aggression in the second theater, and new escalation pull dynamics
 - This requires a more holistic approach to burden sharing with allies in both theaters, and urging allies to strengthen strategic autonomy and develop their own capabilities for horizontal and vertical escalation
- 7) Developing ***adaptable*** approaches to escalation management
 - Deliberate, inadvertent and accidental escalation requires distinct solutions
 - Managing deliberate escalation requires both software and hardware adjustments
 - A post-war settlement and a face-saving option might also require some self-restraint

Key Arguments

- Today, the dangers of escalation have dramatically increased
 - Multipolar security environment
 - Revisionist intentions of adversaries
 - Growing collaboration among adversaries
 - Multi-domain threats make it harder to understand escalatory thresholds → the chances of inadvertent escalation have gone up
- None of the Cold War escalation management models are applicable in the current security environment
- However, old models still provide important guidance on the main requirements of escalation management
- My theoretical framework identified 7 criteria that could guide the development of a better escalation management strategy for the United States and its allies
- Although these recommendations do not add up to a unified theory, they reflect the increased complexities of the current security environment



CENTER FOR GLOBAL
SECURITY RESEARCH

Thank you for the attention!

peczeli1@llnl.gov

