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Toward Improved Theories of Victory in Conflicts with Nuclear-Armed Adversaries

Annotated Bibliography

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Toward Improved Theories of Victory in Conflicts with Nuclear-Armed Adversaries

Center for Global Security Research (CGSR)
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Key Questions:

- In conflicts against nuclear-armed adversaries, what strategic choices by the U.S. and its allies and partners are most likely to disincentivize further escalation, motivate de-escalation, and set the conditions for war termination and a durable peace?
- How does the potential for opportunistic aggression in a second theater affect those strategic choices and outcomes?

Workshop Topics:

1. Framing the Theory of Victory Problem
2. To Escalate or Not
3. To De-escalate or Not
4. To Terminate or Not
5. Other Relevant Readings

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Topic 1: Framing the Theory of Victory Problem

- What theories are in current discussion in the U.S. and allied communities of interest?
- What have prior studies, wargames, and workshops revealed?
- How do we build cumulative empirical evidence on these questions?

Ivanka Barzashka, “Wargaming: How to Turn Vogue into Science,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (March 15, 2019). <https://thebulletin.org/2019/03/wargaming-how-to-turn-vogue-into-science/>.

Ivanka Barzashka, now the CEO and co-founder of wargame design company Strand Analytica, argues that properly designed wargames can constitute a social scientific method all their own. While games still serve traditional purposes such as “training and development of operational concepts,” they can also help generate cumulative knowledge about the viability of various courses of action if designed with the scientific method in mind. This argument is consistent with a growing wargaming literature that has enjoyed renaissance in recent years, though to date only a few wargames have been designed with these criteria in mind. Today, Strand Analytica’s *Bestias* platform is designed for iterative games that generate cumulative knowledge and is employed in this CGSR-hosted wargaming workshop.

Brad Roberts, “On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue,” *Livermore Papers on Global Security* No. 7. (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2020). https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/CGSR-LivermorePaper7_0.pdf.

China and Russia (or Red) have emerged as clear threats to the United States, contends CGSR Director Brad Roberts. Each country harbors revisionist aims for the international system that are at odds with U.S. interests. While these adversaries have invested money and intellectual capital in preparing for possible regional wars with the United States and its allies, Washington has yet to develop theories of victory—or “a plausible set of principles for overcoming an enemy”—that effectively counter the theories of victory under development by adversaries. Roberts argues that to remedy this situation, the United States and its allies should “go to school” to study its adversaries, develop a generic theory of victory to defeat those of Red, and work to tailor this theory for specific regional contexts. Specifically, Red’s theory of victory centers on “exploiting divisions within and among [U.S.] allies and within the United States itself” to undermine any U.S. effort to reverse a *fait accompli* and demonstrating Red’s willingness to escalate to persuade the United States to give up on a regional stake.

Brad Roberts, “Between Tragedy and Catastrophe: Taking Intra-war Deterrence Seriously,” *Livermore Papers on Global Security* No. 16 (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2025). https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-09/CGSR_Livermore_Paper_16_Between%20Tragedy%20and%20Catastrophe%20WEB_0.pdf.

Building on his earlier work exploring theories of victory, Brad Roberts asserts that “intra-war deterrence”—rather than “escalation control” or “escalation management”—must guide preparing the United States and its allies to defend their interests in future wars. A pressing



need exists for the United States and its allies to develop ways of influencing their adversaries' cost-benefit calculus and risk perceptions through tailored approaches to intra-war deterrence that drive adversaries toward restraint in wartime. Restraint might include pressing an adversary to avoid escalation, to de-escalate, or to terminate a war, though such decisions are highly complex. Intra-war deterrence is fundamentally competitive and relies on U.S. allies and alliances. It may be especially relevant to mitigating the risks of opportunistic aggression by a third party while the United States fights a protracted war with a separate adversary. Wargames to date show that there is little consensus among experts about how to generate a theory of intra-war deterrence success for threats emanating from China, Russia, and North Korea. Additional work and gaming should focus on meeting this need.

Further Reading

Markus Garlauskas, "The United States and Its Allies Must be Ready to Deter a Two-front War and Nuclear Attacks in East Asia," Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Center For Strategy and Security (August 2023). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/>.

Markus Garlauskas, the director of the Indo-Pacific Security Initiative of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council, argues that real risk exists for any war with China or North Korea to escalate horizontally to include the other, leading to a two-front war in Asia. Such a widened war would risk going nuclear as both China and North Korea increasingly have incentives and capabilities to engage in limited, within region nuclear attacks. Presently, the United States is not prepared for such a two-front limited nuclear war while China is making progress for just such a contingency. Garlauskas concludes that while the United States and its allies still have options to manage escalation, they remain constrained by organizational and cognitive biases and should engage in wargaming to better prepare for a two-front contingency in East Asia.

Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory," *International Security* 4, no. 1 (1979), pp. 54-87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626784>.

In this classic piece, long-time strategist Colin Gray argues that a central role exists for strategy in the event of thermonuclear war. Rather than simply rely on the logic of mutually assured destruction, he contends that the United States needs a theory of victory in limited nuclear war that imagines how nuclear weapons might be employed to achieve or defend specific political objectives. While this is an older piece of scholarship (Gray focused his analysis on countering any plausible Soviet theory of military victory in the context of the late Cold War), his argument's central case for a theory of victory remains relevant to regional deterrence, extended deterrence, and nuclear posture today.

Andrew W. Reddie and Bethany L. Goldblum, "Evidence of the Unthinkable: Experimental Wargaming at the Nuclear Threshold," *Journal of Peace Research* 60, no. 5 (2023), pp. 760-776. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221094734>.

Andrew Reddie and Bethany Goldblum, two University of California, Berkeley scholars helping to lead efforts to mainstream wargaming in the social sciences, introduce evidence



from their online experimental wargaming platform, SIGNAL, and survey experiments. With this data, they show limited support for the idea that tailored nuclear weapons may increase the likelihood of nuclear usage in a war. Notably, China, Russia, and the United States are publicly pursuing such nuclear options. Additionally, the SIGNAL wargaming data illustrates that game players differentiate between types of nuclear weapons usage, substituting lower-yield nuclear weapons for higher-yield options when such options are available. This research is part of a larger project to generate empirical data from wargames to examine policy-relevant propositions in deterrence, strategy, and international security research.

Topic 2: To Escalate or Not

- What are the national interests, stakes and strategic objectives of Blue actors (United States, NATO allies, Japan and South Korea)? Red?
- Faced with an uncertain risk of further escalation by Red/Blue, what Courses of Action (COA) should Blue/Red consider? What are the benefits, costs and risks associated with each COA?
- What would constitute a "culminating point" for Blue/Red—where costs and risks of continued conflict become unbearable?

Michael Albertson, "Counterforce and Countervalue Targeting in Soviet and Russian Nuclear Strategies," in *Counterforce in Contemporary U.S. Nuclear Strategy*, Brad Roberts, ed. (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2025), pp. 219-232.

<https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-05/2025-0529-CGSR-Occasional-Paper-Counterforce-In-Contemporary-US-Nuclear-Strategy.pdf>.

Michael Alberston, the deputy director of CGSR, details how Soviet and Russian targeting has historically defied classification as "counterforce" or "countervalue." Instead, targeting was particularized to support attaining specific political outcomes using customized military strategies. Such strategies aimed to damage to varying degrees "a mix of political, military, and economic targets." Albertson characterizes the Soviet and Russian approach to nuclear strategy as one focused on "warfighting" to achieve victory against an adversary doing the same. In this sense, nuclear strategy is much like traditional military strategy. This approach as developed by Moscow has evolved over time, but it generally features targeting rooted in "perceptions of [Soviet and Russian] capabilities and the intentions of their adversaries as opposed to specific force developments on the U.S. side." The big question for the future of Russian nuclear targeting is how political leadership in Moscow, especially Vladimir Putin, think about using nuclear weapons against specific targets, especially countervalue targets.

Tyler Bown, "Threading the Needle: The Logic of Conventional Coercion in Nuclear Crises," *Texas National Security Review* 9, no. 1 (2025/2026) pp. 28-51. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tns.00022>.

U.S. Naval War College assistant professor Tyler Bowen identifies two conditions under which conventional coercion might succeed during a nuclear crisis. First, a coercing state



needs conventional options “that can achieve operational success while also respecting certain escalation thresholds.” Second, that challenger also needs a “strong nuclear retaliatory capability” to backstop a conventional threat. These are high thresholds for successful conventional coercion. Insofar as conventional coercion is possible, Bowen argues that the upshot of his argument is the need for operational plans that bring sufficient conventional force to bear while also “respect[ing] geographic boundaries” and avoiding strikes against “certain dual-use adversary platform.” Such an approach will keep the risks of nuclear escalation by an adversary at an acceptable level while maximizing the probability of successful conventional coercion.

Bee Yun Jo, “Conventional-Nuclear Integration (CNI) as Alliance Practice for Extended Deterrence and Assurance,” *Journal of Peace and Unification* 14, no. 1 (2024), pp. 113-130.

<https://kiss.kstudy.com/Detail/Ar?key=4074934>.

Bee Yun Jo is an associate research fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses who calls for additional theoretical and practical examination of the conventional-nuclear integration (CNI) concept, a central focus of the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG). Jo contends that CNI—defined as the “U.S. means for deterrence and assurance”—is essential to viable extended deterrence. Using NATO’s early nuclear sharing arrangements as a historical model, Jo considers ways of strengthening extended deterrence for the ROK in the context of CNI. While she does not call for mirroring NATO’s arrangements with the United States, Jo identifies ways of better “integrating” U.S. and ROK forces, namely improving “coordination, information sharing, consultation, planning and exercises that delineate seamless involvement of allies conventional roles and capabilities, backed by... all-range of [U.S.] capabilities,” including nuclear weapons.

Brian Radzinsky, “In the Mirror, Dimly: Counterforce in Chinese Nuclear Thinking,” in *Counterforce in Contemporary U.S. Nuclear Strategy*, Brad Roberts, ed. (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2025), pp. 261-265. <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-05/2025-0529-CGSR-Occasional-Paper-Counterforce-In-Contemporary-US-Nuclear-Strategy.pdf>.

CGSR senior fellow Brian Radzinsky examines China’s thinking on nuclear counterforce, observing that not until the mid-1980s did Beijing begin focusing on writing nuclear strategy. Even today, counterforce and related concepts do not appear in many public-facing writings from People’s Liberation Army (PLA) affiliates. The real focus of China’s nuclear strategy has been on preemptive or retaliatory nuclear strikes (though such work on preemption functionally fits within a nuclear counterforce tradition) and concerns over the implications of nuclear superiority or sufficiency. Most recently, China has centered its attention on holding its adversary’s “key points” at risk. Such points may represent counterforce or countervalue targets. Radzinsky also explores how the aim of Beijing’s nuclear employment is to “compel the adversary to de-escalate” rather than to directly achieve military objectives in a war, thus centering on strategies of coercion rather than brute force.

Further Reading

Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021), pp.3-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070>.



Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, the director of the Norwegian Intelligence School, traces Russia's nuclear strategy over the initial 25 years following the Cold War's end. In the early 2000s, Russia's profound conventional inferiority compared to the United States and NATO prompted Moscow's emphasis on early nuclear use. By the 2010s, Russia had invested significantly in its conventional forces, especially precision strike, and reduced its emphasis on early nuclear use, though not eliminated it. Moscow also explored non-nuclear deterrence to counter a wider range of threats during this period. Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine suggested to Russia that its conventional forces had significantly improved. By 2020, Moscow was further exploring ways of holding targets at risk using conventional forces, further de-emphasizing nuclear weapons. With this history in mind, Ven Bruusgaard introduces the Conventional Balance of Forces thesis, namely that improved conventional capabilities reduced Russia's focus on the limited nuclear options that had offset its earlier conventional inferiority. However, she stresses that Moscow retains nonstrategic nuclear options to influence or terminate a regional war when conventional options are exhausted.

Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019), pp. 61–109.
http://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00359.

MIT's Taylor Fravel and the University of Pennsylvania's Fiona Cunningham argue that China is skeptical about states' ability to control nuclear escalation following the first use of nuclear weapons. The upshot—China sees limited nuclear first use as unlikely in a crisis or conflict. Fravel and Cunningham point to China's retaliatory strike plans, refrain from limited nuclear use planning, and lack of tactical nuclear weapons as evidence of China's dim views on escalation management or control. They also stress that China has developed alternative tools—space, cyber, and conventional missile capabilities—that provide options short of nuclear use. Importantly, China's strategic thinking about nuclear weapons may "hamper its ability to identify nuclear escalation risks," and that when combined with U.S. views on the real possibility of managing limited nuclear use, could invite pressure for rapid escalation to unlimited nuclear war in the event of a military conflict between the United States and China.

Markus Garlauskas and Lauren D. Gilbert, *Deterrence is Crumbling in Korea: How We Can Fix It*, Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Center For Strategy and Security (November 2023).
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Deterrence-is-crumbling-in-Korea-How-we-can-fix-it.pdf>.

Markus Garlauskas and Lauren Gilbert, the director and deputy director of the Indo-Pacific Security Initiative of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council, respectively, reported out the findings of the "Preventing Strategic Deterrence Failure on the Korean Peninsula" study. The key conclusions from this effort center on the pathways through which deterrence may fail on the Korean Peninsula and their implications for strengthening deterrence and defense in the region. Garlauskas and Gilbert conclude that "the path toward strategic deterrence failure is far more likely to begin with limited North Korean coercive escalation" that fuels a conflict spiral. Moreover, as North Korea develops more conventional capabilities, fields a stronger second-strike nuclear option, and explores the viability of limited nuclear employment, the deterrent capabilities of the United States in peacetime or wartime will degrade. And even as the ROK-U.S. alliance is unprepared for a



full spectrum of regional threats—and is unlikely to change over the next 10 years—China is increasingly likely to interfere in any war on the Korean Peninsula to secure Beijing’s own regional interests.

Jacob L. Heim, Zachary Burdette, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *U.S. Military Theories of Victory for a War with the People’s Republic of China*, RAND Corporation (February 2024).

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1743-1.html>.

RAND analysts Jacob Heim, Zachary Burdette, and Nathan Deauchamp-Mustafaga examine how the United States might win a limited war with China “while avoiding catastrophic escalation.” Specifically, they examine five theories of victory that Washington might consider employing. Two stand out as the most viable options for winning without unwanted escalation. The most plausible theory of victory, what they call “denial,” aims to “[c]onvince the PRC that it cannot successfully take Taiwan by destroying the capabilities directly supporting the invasion, such as sea- and airlift assets.” The authors also recommend a “cost-imposition” theory of victory that tries to “convince the PRC that the costs are too high to justify continuing a war over Taiwan by using cost-imposing military measures, such as blockade or strategic air attacks.” Three alternatives—trying for “dominance “by soundly defeating the PLA, “devaluing” the benefits of seizing Taiwan, and employing “brinkmanship” threats to drive up China’s perceived costs of continuing to fight FOR Taiwan—all come with limitations that make each unsound, especially given China’s military capabilities and enduring political interest is in taking Taiwan.

Michael Kofman, Anya Fink and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, Center for Naval Analyses (April 2020).

<https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/04/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf>.

“Strategic deterrence” is a central organizing, holistic Russian concept that integrates military and nonmilitary capabilities, argues Center for Naval Analyses researchers Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds. It aims to contain adversaries in peacetime and shape their decision-making—and thus favorably manage escalation—during wartime. Strategic deterrence centers on communicating Russia’s capability to continue imposing costs and degrading expected gains in the event of continued war. In this way, it aims to de-escalate hostilities and eventually terminate war by convincing NATO and the United States to give up on their political objectives. Military tools address most of the deterrence tasks associated with crisis and conflict, including demonstrations of military power, raising readiness, deploying forces, threatening conventional or nuclear strikes, and actually conducting military strikes in single or grouped ways. While Russia’s military forces are divided into “general purpose forces and strategic deterrence forces in order to execute specific deterrence tasks,” Russia’s nonnuclear and nuclear capabilities are “conceptually organized” into those focused on regional deterrence and those focused on global deterrence. As part of the strategic deterrence concept, Russia’s warfighting concepts facilitate swiftly move from conventional to nuclear operations to levy calibrated, escalating applications of force suitable for ending a war on terms favorable to Moscow.

Patrick McKenna, “Counterforce Strategy versus Counterforce Targeting,” in *Counterforce in Contemporary U.S. Nuclear Strategy*, Brad Roberts, ed. (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore



National Laboratory, 2025), pp. 87-99. <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-05/2025-0529-CGSR-Occasional-Paper-Counterforce-In-Contemporary-US-Nuclear-Strategy.pdf>.

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Patrick McKenna delineates how threats to employ nuclear weapons serve to deter adversaries, assure allies, and if deterrence fails, achieve wartime objectives. In wartime, nuclear usage may aim to influence the operational or tactical course of a conflict, restore deterrence, limit damage at home or to allies, or levy unacceptable damage to an adversary. How nuclear weapons are targeted, specifically countervalue or counterforce targeting, necessary informs their utility in deterring, assuring, or achieving wartime objectives of various sorts. Targeting, however, is not the same as strategy. McKenna unpacks various strategic logics that may link each target with each role for nuclear weapons, making explicit the cognitive and physical effects that might be achieved through nuclear weapons usage across the full conflict continuum.

Michael Petersen, Paul Schwartz, and Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez, *Russian Concepts of Future Warfare Based on Lessons from the Ukraine War*, Center for Naval Analyses (August 2025). <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2025/08/russian-concepts-of-future-warfare-based-on-lessons-from-the-ukraine-war>.

CNA researchers Michael Petersen, Paul Schwartz, and Gabriela Ivelize Rosa-Hernandez examine the evolution of Russia's thinking on military strategy and operations considering its ongoing war against Ukraine. They conclude that despite Russia's setbacks in Ukraine and ongoing technological innovation, "Russian strategic and operational thinking on conventional military operations remains largely unchanged from approached adopted before the war." Thus, no "fundamental shifts in Russian strategic concepts or operational doctrine" can be observed as a result of wartime adaptation. From Moscow's perspective, the tactical setbacks that Russia did experience in Ukraine can be mitigated in the future by incorporating new technologies such as artificial intelligence and advanced uncrewed systems into the Russian armed forces while also engaging in new tactical innovations. The implication of Moscow retaining existing strategic and operational modes of thinking is that earlier analyses of Russia's theory of victory remains valid: rapid deployment, cost imposition, escalation dominance, and undermining U.S. and NATO "will to fight" all remain central to Russia's strategic thought.

President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (November 2025). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) explicitly calls for "peace through strength" and highlights the importance of deterrence to preventing war in the Asia-Pacific region. Intra-war deterrence is not considered in the NSS, though the document is explicit about U.S. priorities under the Trump Administration. These priorities are: ending mass migration to the United States; protecting core rights and liberties at home; challenging allies and partners to burden-share and burden-shift; pursuing regional peace deals; and strengthening economic security. Insofar as the NSS addresses nuclear weapons, it calls for the "world's most robust, credible, and modern nuclear deterrent" alongside "next-generation missile defenses."



Topic 3: To De-escalate or Not

- How has Blue's/Red's stake evolved since Decision Point A?
- In the absence of further escalation but faced with an uncertainty about whether the adversary is prepared to de-escalate, what COAs should Blue/Red consider? What are the benefits, costs and risks associated with each COA?
- What would constitute a "culminating point" for Blue/Red—where costs and risks of continued conflict become unbearable?

Dmitry Adamsky, "Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence? Strategic Culture and Coercion Innovations," *International Security* 49, no. 3 (2025), pp. 50-83. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00502.

Reichman University's Dmitry Adamsky explores the effects of Russia's war in Ukraine on Moscow's thinking about wartime coercion. Building on his earlier work, Adamsky contends that "deterrence is not a universal concept" as it is shaped by cultural context. Therefore, Russia's experience in Ukraine is mediated by deep, cultural forces that have long informed Moscow's strategic thought. In particular, he claims that Russia's military experts have concluded that "its pre-2022 deterrence strategy and the posture supporting it are obsolete;" therefore, Moscow is now exploring ways "to restore its coercive credibility." Additionally, Russia is focusing on reforms that can strengthen its nuclear coercion capabilities in conventional wars that endanger vital Russian interests. Finally, drawing on its experience in Ukraine, Moscow is further developing coercion strategies to counter a "non-nuclear near-peer competitor" that it views as lacking "strategic agency" of its own. These changes to Russia's strategic thinking will necessitate adaptation on the part of the United States and NATO. However, a push toward greater "integrated deterrence" by both the Alliance and Russia may bring with it new risks since adversaries from different strategic cultures using comprehensive approaches to deterrence may be more prone to misperception, miscommunication, and inadvertent escalation.

Tyler Jost, "The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation in China's International Crises," *International Security* 48, no. 1 (2023), pp. 47-90. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00464.

Tyler Jost of Brown University defines different "national security institutions" as "the rules that shape the flow of information between leaders and their diplomatic, defense, and intelligence bureaucracies" and identifies three types: integrated, fragmented, and siloed. Jost contends that integrated systems reliably transmit information to their leadership and foster open, competitive dialogue across its elements; such systems are the least likely to miscalculate during crisis initiation or escalation. Alternatively, fragmented institutions feature incentives to manipulate information to reflect leaders' beliefs while siloed institutions prevent the flow of information across relevant bureaucracies. In both cases, miscalculation during a crisis is more likely. Across 26 cases, Jost tracks how China's national security institutions evolved away from integration in the 1950s to more fragmented and siloed in the late Cold War to even more siloed in recent years. Tracking with this institutional evolution was an increasing number of inaccurate assessments during periods



of crisis. Jost concludes that Xi Jinping is continuing to reshape China's institutions, and the effects of these changes could further degrade the information he receives, though the effects of increasingly siloed bureaucracies in China will not be as problematic as the fragmented system that characterized it during period of the Cold War.

Reid BC Pauly, "Damned If They Do, Damned If They Don't: The Assurance Dilemma in International Coercion," *International Security* 49, no. 1 (2024), pp. 91-132. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00488.

Brown University's Reid Pauly argues that, for coercion to work, the coercer must convince its target that its threats are conditional on the target's behavior. That is, the threat of coercion can only incentivize a target to accede to the coercer's demands if the target believes that 1) they will suffer punishment for defying the demands, and 2) they will not suffer for acceding to the demands. Targets do not make concessions to coercion if they conclude they will be punished anyway. A common but often overlooked obstacle to effectively using coercion to extract concessions is that targets expect they will be punished no matter what they do. A target may have this expectation for several reasons. One reason is that it may be receiving multiple coercive demands that may conflict, particularly when the demands are being made by multiple actors with opposing interests. A second reason is that these demands may come from multiple actors with opposing interests and differing incentives for wanting to impose punishment. A third reason is that making concessions could reveal information that invites further coercion (e.g., conceding to weapons inspections). Pauly suggests three corresponding approaches coercers can take to provide "coercive assurance." One, the coercer can declare that partial concessions will avoid some punishment to incentivize partial compliance with demands over outright rejection of demands. Two, resolve the collective action problem among the coercers to avoid making incompatible demands to the target. Three, somehow establish that no new information will be revealed by conceding.

Janice Gross Stein, "Escalation Management in Ukraine: 'Learning by Doing' in Response to the 'Threat that Leaves Something to Chance,'" *Texas National Security Review* 6, no. 3 (2023) pp. 29-50. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/47414>.

Janice Gross Stein, a longtime faculty member at the University of Toronto, examines the U.S. and NATO experience supporting Ukraine in the face of Russia's deterrent threats. She identifies two U.S. objectives—avoiding a war with Russia and supporting Ukraine's efforts to repel Russia's invasion—that were frequently in tension with one another over the first two years of the war and that set the limits on the approach to escalation management that the United States developed during this period. Stein juxtaposes Russia's attempts to manipulate the uncertainty on which its deterrent threats rested with U.S. efforts to manage down uncertainty, what she labels "a pragmatic and incremental strategy" to bolster Ukraine. She concludes by identifying four challenges to such a strategy in Ukraine and more generally, including: the enduring risk of inadvertent escalation; the long-term human and economic costs of a slow pace of material support to Ukraine; the difficulty of escalation management if Russia senses its defeat is possible; and potential for Moscow to use nuclear weapons if its conventional forces perform poorly in the future. This careful case study offers an insight into how the United States continually modulated its escalation management through "learned by doing" in the context of an actual war.



Further Reading

Mattias Eken, Kiran Suman-Chauhan, Beatrice Aubert, and Paul van Hooft, *Understanding Russian Strategic Culture and the Low-yield Nuclear Threat*, RAND Corporation (August 2025).

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3859-1.html.

Nuclear weapons—particularly non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW’s)—play a dramatically more prominent role in Russia’s national security policy than they do in the national security policies of the U.S. and NATO posits a RAND Corporation team led by Mattias Eken. Russia relies more on nuclear weapons because they perceive their conventional military forces to be inferior to those of the United States and NATO, particularly in the aerospace domain. In a conflict with the U.S./NATO, using nuclear weapons could help Russia to offset its conventional inferiority. Nuclear weapons (particularly NSNW’s) are among the very few domains in which Russian capabilities are at least equivalent (and arguably superior) to those of the U.S./NATO. Consistent with its emphasis on nuclear weapons in warfighting, Russia relies on the threat of nuclear first use to discourage U.S./NATO involvement in regional conflicts. Most of Russia’s military elite regard nuclear use as a last resort to be used only against existential threats. However, Russian policy is deliberately vague about what constitutes an existential threat. The purpose of this vagueness is to enhance the deterrence effect of Russia’s nuclear arsenal, as uncertainty about what could prompt Russia to cross the nuclear threshold may dissuade the U.S./NATO from any involvement in conflicts around Russia’s periphery, including involvement that Russia does not truly consider to be existentially threatening. To better deter Russia, the report recommends that the U.S./NATO develop more flexible military capabilities—like a stand-off nuclear delivery platform—that could plausibly be used to respond to limited Russian nuclear use.

Alexandra T. Evans, Emily Higgs, Jacob L. Heim, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Zachary Burdette, and Lydia Grek, *Managing Escalation: Lesson and Challenges from Three Historical Cases Between Nuclear-Armed Powers*, RAND Corporation (February 2024).

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1743-2.html.

This report by Alexandra Evans and a team of RAND researchers assesses the feasibility of the U.S. rooting its theory of victory on a cost imposition strategy (as opposed to a denial strategy) by looking at three historical cases of militarized crises between nuclear-armed major powers. All cost imposition strategies rest on two fundamental assumptions. First, a “sweet spot” must exist where the cost that the U.S. could impose on an adversary is sufficient to convince it to accede to a demand but not so severe that it would provoke large-scale nuclear retaliation. Second, policymakers must be able to correctly identify this “sweet spot” in the midst of a crisis and impose the appropriate costs on the adversary. The case studies cast significant doubt on the underlying assumptions of a cost imposition strategy. Regarding the first assumption, leaders tend to be loss-averse and may therefore respond to escalation and losses in unpredictable and potentially highly escalatory ways, particularly when they have only incomplete information. Such unpredictable behavior suggests that a coercion “sweet spot” does not reliably exist. Regarding the second assumption, it would be impractical for policymakers to correctly identify a “sweet spot” and impose costs accordingly because both U.S. and adversary policymaker assessments of the values and significance of targets tend to be highly variable, particularly during a



crisis. Perceptions of costs are also shaped in sometimes unpredictable ways by a country's bureaucratic structures, which are themselves dynamic.

Anna Péczeli, "Managing Escalation: America's Two-peer Nuclear Problem," *Survival* 67, no. 3 (June–July 2025), pp. 25-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2508079>.

CGSR's Anna Péczeli identifies three Cold War era escalation-management strategies and evaluates their suitability for the U.S. in the modern security environment. One, championed by Herman Kahn, was *escalation dominance*. This strategy envisions (de-) escalation as a phenomenon in which adversaries move up (down) a linear scale corresponding with conflict intensity, which Kahn envisioned as a 44-step ladder. Following this theory, a country would need to possess a clear advantage in coercive capabilities at each step of the escalation ladder to convince its adversary that they cannot gain an advantage by moving up the escalation ladder, though this might invite *capabilities arms racing*. A second strategy focused on demonstrating a country's *willingness* to move up the escalation ladder if an adversary undertook a particular action, but because of the inherent uncertainties regarding actors' willingness to escalate, this strategy could lead to dangerous brinksmanship. The third strategy was conflict avoidance, where both the U.S. and Soviet Union tried to avoid antagonizing the other. The U.S. and Soviet Union eventually adopted this strategy in the Cold War because of the problems and crises caused by the other two strategies. Unlike the other two, this strategy required tacit cooperation between the two adversarial countries. These strategies—which all had significant weaknesses even during the Cold War—are even less well suited for the U.S. in the current era because of the greater complexity of the current security environment (which further undermines the first two strategies) and because Russia and China are not presently willing to engage in a strategy of conflict avoidance (which makes the third strategy impossible). To adjust to the current security environment, Péczeli recommends the U.S. pursue increasingly flexible military capabilities that can respond to unpredictable forms of adversary escalation, which may occur across domains, and find ways to demonstrate commitment and resolve.

Joel Wuthnow, "Taming The Hegemon: Chinese Thinking on Countering U.S. Military Intervention in Asia," *China Strategic Perspectives* 20, (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, September 2025), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/article/4304243/taming-the-hegemon-chinese-thinking-on-countering-us-military-intervention-in-a/>.

China assumes the U.S. would intervene in a Taiwan contingency, holds National Defense University's Joel Wuthnow, and that the magnitude of the intervention could range from providing Taiwan intelligence support to conducting strikes on the mainland. For this reason, China's strategy focuses on building up military capabilities to defeat intervention by attacking key nodes in the U.S. military system that allow it to project power in the western Pacific (e.g., early warning, command and control, space capabilities). In a conflict, Chinese attacks against key U.S. nodes would likely be both kinetic (e.g., precision missile strikes against aircraft carriers, bases, and satellites) and non-kinetic (e.g., cyber-attacks and jamming communications systems). China's willingness to fight a high-cost conflict with the U.S. over Taiwan is unknown. However, in a Taiwan contingency, the report assesses that China would strongly prefer to avoid large-scale war with the U.S. by deterring U.S. intervention. In addition to possessing the capabilities to defeat U.S. intervention in a



large-scale conflict, China would also likely engage in signaling to further discourage U.S. involvement in a Taiwan contingency. These signals could include firing missiles around strategically important U.S. assets, conspicuously approaching U.S. aircraft carriers with naval assets, and changing nuclear alert status. There are several implications of China's assumption and strategy. One is that—in the short term, at least—there is minimal deterrent value in the U.S. changing its policy of strategic ambiguity regarding defense of Taiwan. A second is that the U.S. needs to improve the robustness of the key nodes in its military system to better deter China and prevail in a conflict should one take place.

Topic 4: To Terminate or Not

- How has Blue's/Red's stake evolved since Decision Point B?
- In the context of a de-escalating conflict that has not ended, what COAs should Blue/Red consider to achieve war termination? What are the benefits, costs, and risks associated with each COA?
- What is required to set the conditions for a durable peace? Is punishment necessary?

Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End* (Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 1-16, 38-58.
<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/every-war-must-end/9780231136679/>.

In his canonical study of work termination, former senior Defense Department official Fred Iklé explores the dynamics surrounding the conclusions of wars. Specifically, he hypothesizes about the bureaucratic, domestic political, and psychological reasons why ending wars, even those going poorly, can be difficult. One of his most enduring discussions centers on the possibility of achieving war termination through escalation. Iklé observes that “the conditions on which both sides can agree for ending the fighting are not independent of the level of fighting... escalation that falls short of defeating the enemy may cut both ways.” This dynamic may induce one or more sides to call it quits as costs exceed benefits of continued aggression or, alternatively, raise the “ambition” of one or more combatants spurring them to fight on. Escalation or the threat of it can help end a war, he argues, but generally only when it is an “extraordinarily powerful move” can swiftly change an adversary's cost-benefit calculus. Iklé concludes by contending that the best way to end wars, especially those with the devastating potential of nuclear wars, is to deter them from happening in the first place.

Margaret MacMillan, “How Wars Don't End: Ukraine, Russia, and the Lessons of World War I,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2023). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-wars-dont-end>.

Longtime historian of World War I, Margaret MacMillan, draws parallels between the ongoing war in Ukraine, World War I, and prospective future wars. She puts forward the “fast-war fallacy,” namely that wars often drag on far longer than strategists may have anticipated before fighting started. In particular, new technologies and operational innovations like rapid-firing artillery and trench warfare in World War I and drone in Ukraine can create new opportunities for strong defenses and slow down a war. And as societies mobilize, the entire



strength of a country can be brought to bear to keep on fighting. One perverse tendency in prolonged wars is for certain locations—including those without inherent military utility—to take on important political value they did not have at the start of the war and thus drive military operations. MacMillan concludes that history illustrates many ways in which “[l]osers do not easily accept defeat, and factors find it hard to magnanimous,” complicating mutually acceptable war terminations.

Oriana Skylar Mastro, “How China Ends Wars: Implications for United States and East Asian Security,” *The Washington Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 45-60.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1445358>.

Oriana Skylar Mastro of Stanford’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies surveys the history of Chinese strategic thinking about war termination with an eye toward informing U.S. strategies for ending a potential war between the United States and China. After observing that China today experiences growing nationalism and enjoys a much stronger military than when it engaged in terminating past wars, she contends that “China is more likely than ever to talk only to weaker opponents, to rely on escalation to bring about peace, and to leverage third parties, including international institutions, to pressure its adversaries to capitulate.” Consequently, Mastro recommends that the United States develop a mechanism for diplomatic engagement with wartime adversaries from the start of hostilities to keep options for ending a war open, explore ways of integrating diplomats into military contingency planning to better integrate military operations with diplomatic engagement, and be ready to press countries close to China to pressure Beijing into concluding any war.

Joel Wuthnow, “China’s Forever War: What If an Invasion of Taiwan Fails?” Strategic Forums Policy Briefs, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University (October 2024), pp. 1-8.

<https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=strategic-forums>.

National Defense University’s Joel Wuthnow considers the ramifications of a failed attempt by China to invade and take Taiwan. Wuthnow observes that any attack on Taiwan, even a failed one, would take place in the context of a much longer conflict wherein Beijing will learn and adapt while retaining an interest in taking the island. Using an alternative futures analysis, he envisions four potential post-invasion scenarios. In the event of China’s severe defeat and high political vulnerability in Beijing, China might explore a prolonged blockade of the island. Alternatively, if the defeat is severe but political leadership feels secure, a return to gray zone competition might be most likely. If China retains significant military capability, suffering only a minor defeat, and its leadership feels insecure, it might be tempted to use its strategic capabilities, among them limited theater nuclear weapons. Finally, in the event of a minor defeat and secure leadership in Beijing, China might simply focus on recapitalizing its forces for a future invasion. Across these scenarios, China’s leaders would be more risk acceptant if they feared removal due to domestic or international forces. Thus, Wuthnow argues that under any case, re-establishing deterrence across the Taiwan Strait in the context of the ongoing conflict must not threaten the survival of China’s leaders.

Further Reading



Oriana Skylar Mastro, *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 1-34.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=5Yx8DwAAQBAJ&printsec=copyright#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Countries face a host of disincentives to negotiating with enemies during wartime, argues Oriana Skylar Mastro. She draws a link between battlefield outcomes and diplomatic negotiations to end wars, noting that the former informs the latter. Her “costs of conversations thesis” contends that leaders will avoid diplomatic engagement in wartime when they perceive the costs of such engagement as high and explore such engagement when they see such costs as low. Informing this cost-benefit calculation are two considerations: “the likelihood that the enemy will infer weakness from an open diplomatic posture” and “the degree to which the enemy can prolong, intensify, or escalate its war effort in response... [otherwise called] an enemy’s *strategic capacity*.” If adversaries see diplomacy as a sign a weakness and they have robust strategic capacity, then diplomatic talks to end a war are unlikely. A practical upshot of this argument is that states should find ways of “destroy[ing] the linkage... between talks and weakness,” perhaps by offering talks at the start of a war or using third parties to facilitate persistent diplomatic engagement between combatants.

Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), pp. 1-11.

https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=2DkqFuVxf6oC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&ots=AnmUJo_70h&sig=jPBGdrRN_RGBzKc5VxqJyxol5C0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

In the opening chapter of his book on the history of U.S. war termination since WWII, longtime *Foreign Affairs* editor Gideon Rose introduces what he calls the “Clausewitzian Challenge,” aligning military action with the often-overlooked political aim of a war. To bring a war to a successful conclusion requires aligning these two elements so that military actions support the realization of political aims, the motivating reason for war in the first place. Complicating this alignment can be a country’s history with war. Rose argues that “lessons from previous wars can serve as cognitive blinders, narrowing the way officials think about situations they face, and power can be a trap, underwriting hubris and folly.” This pathology has been observed throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War era. However, “lessons can also guide and power can create opportunities,” and Rose challenges his readers to find better historical analogies and applications when considering the conclusions of future wars.

Dominic Tierney, “Mastering the Endgame of War,” *Survival* 56 no. 5 (2014), pp. 69-94.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.962794>.

Swarthmore College’s Dominic Tierney contends that for a host of psychological reasons, leaders tend to focus their attention and planning on the start of wars rather than their terminations. This pathology may be especially prevalent in the United States due to “the interaction of two variables: a psychological bias that causes leaders to exaggerate the odds of success in wartime... [and] a negative bias that causes leaders to exaggerate the odds of success in wartime.” Tierney challenges U.S. planners to consider reverse-engineering victory, starting with the end-state that they hope to realize and working backwards to create the strategies and operational plans necessary to realize these objectives. This approach



will help keep the political objective of a war central and help mitigate the deleterious effects of overconfidence by challenging planners to be more explicit about how their proposed actions will lead to desirable outcomes.

Topic 5: Other Relevant Readings to Strategic Decisions

Don Casler and Tyler Jost, "Lost in Transmission: Bureaucracy, Noise, and Communication in International Politics," *International Security* 49, no. 4 (2025), pp. 160-201.

https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00511.

Don Casler of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Tyler Jost of Brown University develop a theory of international communication failure, arguing that bureaucratic institutions within states can introduce “transmission noise” that distorts leaders’ intended signals before they reach foreign audiences. Drawing on information theory, Casler and Jost distinguish transmission noise from more familiar sources of miscommunication such as sender insincerity or receiver misperception and show how coordination and agency problems between political leaders and foreign policy bureaucracies can produce inconsistent or corrupted messages. The authors contend that open institutional structures, as characterized by routinized interaction, monitoring, and information flow between leaders and bureaucrats, reduce noise, while closed structures exacerbate it. The authors test their theory through a paired historical comparison of India’s communications during the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, using archival evidence from six countries. The analysis demonstrates that India’s closed institutions in 1962 generated noisy signals that contributed to Chinese misinterpretation and war, whereas institutional reforms made by 1965 enabled clearer communication with Pakistan and facilitated diplomatic resolution.

Michael C. Horowitz and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Studying Leaders and Military Conflict: Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 10 (2018), pp. 2072-2086.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002718785679>.

Michael Horowitz of the University of Pennsylvania and Matthew Fuhrmann at Texas A&M University generate a framework for understanding the role of individual leaders in international politics, particularly in the context of military conflict, and review the leader-centric literature in international relations. Horowitz and Fuhrmann trace the intellectual evolution of leadership studies from early foreign policy analysis and political psychology through approaches that largely sidelined leaders, to a recent resurgence of work that focuses on leaders. They distinguish between two broad approaches to studying leaders: 1) an “institutional leadership” perspective that emphasizes structural and domestic constraints on leaders’ choices, and 2) a “leader attribute” perspective that grants leaders greater agency by focusing on how individual beliefs, experiences, and traits shape foreign policy behavior. The authors highlight four core findings from recent work: leadership turnover increases uncertainty and the risk of conflict; leaders play a critical role in shaping public attitudes toward war; leaders’ experiences and worldviews influence their willingness to use force; and leader-specific beliefs shape how signals and adversary



intentions are interpreted. Horowitz and Fuhrmann clarify theoretical divides within the leadership literature and identify key directions for future research, including the interaction between leader attributes and structural forces, linking experiences to beliefs, and the influence of advisers and other elites on leaders' decisions.

Stephen Kotkin, "The Weakness of the Strongmen," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2026).
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/weakness-strongmen-stephen-kotkin>.

Stephen Kotkin of Stanford's Hoover Institution challenges prevailing narratives about an emerging "age of autocracy" by arguing that contemporary authoritarian regimes, while formidable, are structurally brittle and impacted by internal vulnerabilities. Rather than focusing on regime typologies, Kotkin advances a policy-oriented framework that disaggregates authoritarianism into five constituent dimensions: coercive repression, revenue generation, regime narratives, control over citizens' life chances, and the international environment. Across each dimension, he emphasizes how the mechanisms that sustain authoritarian rule simultaneously generate weaknesses, including factionalized security services, dependence on volatile cash flows, contested historical narratives, corruption-driven elite resentment, and exposure to a global order still dominated by democratic states. Drawing on cases including Russia, China, Iran, and historical Spain, Kotkin argues that authoritarian regimes are prone to sudden elite defections, legitimacy crises, and strategic overreach, even as they maintain short- to medium-term stability. He concludes by contending that democracies retain significant leverages, especially through alliance coordination, economic policy, and normative appeal, if they avoid fatalism and focus on long-term competition rather than regime change.

Tyler Jost, Joshua D. Kertzer, Eric Min, and Robert Schub, "Advisers and Aggregation in Foreign Policy Decision Making," *International Organization* 78, no. 1 (2024), pp. 1-37.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818323000280>.

A team led by Tyler Jost of Brown University develops a theory of foreign policy decision-making that re-centers the influence of advisers, rather than focusing exclusively on leaders or institutional structures. This theory challenges both leader-centric and "emergence" models. The authors argue that advisers' stable predispositions, especially hawkishness regarding the use of force, systematically shape the counsel they provide during deliberations and thus the foreign policy decisions leaders make. The study leverages an original dataset of 2,685 U.S. foreign policy meetings from 1947 to 1988, encompassing both formal National Security Council meetings and informal presidential consultations. Textual analysis of over 100,000 speeches show that hawkish advisers emphasize military threats and violence, while dovish advisers stress diplomacy and adversary perspectives. Statistical analyses demonstrate that meetings dominated by hawkish advisers produce significantly more conflictual policy decisions, even after controlling for leader dispositions, institutional context, and selection effects. The findings highlight deliberation as a key mechanism through which adviser characteristics aggregate to shape state behavior, offering a major contribution to research on elite decision making, bureaucratic politics, and the microfoundations of international conflict.

Elizabeth Saunders, "Elites in the Making and Breaking of Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no.1 (2022), pp. 219-240. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-103330>.



Columbia University's Elizabeth Saunders synthesizes and evaluates scholarship on elites and their influence on foreign policy. Saunders argues that existing research has made substantial progress in identifying who elites are, what they want, and how they influence foreign policy, but has insufficiently addressed the dynamics of elite politics. She highlights a central tension in contemporary politics between elites' expertise and growing public resentment toward elites as unrepresentative or self-serving. This tension is sharpened by populism, polarization, and high-profile foreign policy failures. Elite behavior cannot be understood solely through static traits or expertise, as the same individuals often behave differently across roles and contexts. Saunders identifies three underexplored dimensions that shape elite influence: the politics of elite selection into foreign policy roles, the incentives elites face once in office, and the interactions among elites and between elites and mass publics. Drawing on research across international security, international political economy, and political psychology, the review argues that without incorporating these political dynamics, scholars risk overstating elite coherence or competence and underestimating the conditions under which elites fail to achieve their preferred outcomes. Saunders concludes by outlining future research agendas on polarization, declining expertise, technological change, and the evolving relationship between elites and democratic accountability, positioning elite politics as a crucial but under-theorized source of state behavior.