

Escalation or Reconciliation for Ukraine

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During times of escalating conflicts, one is tempted both to up the level of threat and to blame the adversary's behavior as the reason why this new level is necessary. Typically, each new level of threat or act of aggression is described as a moral outrage requiring retaliation against an incorrigible and dangerous opponent. Civilian populations are bombarded with images of the enemy and the need for increasing military build-up. Opposition to intervention is viewed as weak and giving in to a tyrant. Increasing the ante is presented as the needed path to create an enemy backdown. This theory of escalation dominance was articulated at the height of the cold war by strategist Herman Kahn. Kahn described an escalation ladder in which 44 gradually increasing moves would be prepared for and enacted until the enemy got the message and gave up.

A report by the Rand Corporation reviewed Soviet, Western, and other national concepts of escalation (*Concepts and Models of Escalation*, 1984). Their generalized model is purportedly related to gaming or decision theory. Game theory is a mathematical theory of rational choice. The theory classifies situations according to specified properties: e.g., Are the payoffs a constant sum in which the winnings of one side add exactly to the losses of the other? Is full information available, as in chess, or is chance, or probability, involved, as in poker? Some controversial applications of game theory culminated in Kahn's 44-Step Escalation Ladder. Steps ranged from modest critical notices to embassies through threatening military provocation, and on to the actual use of nuclear weapons targeting cities of the adversary (Kahn, 1965).

During times of active military conflict, we typically witness countering narratives as to who are the responsible parties. In the current Ukraine crisis, Russia claims support for its military actions by previously Russian occupied portions of Ukraine and blames the war on a threat to Russia posed by the US and other NATO nations. The provision by NATO of extensive military and economic aid to Ukraine is used to argue that this is a proxy war following a model in which the US and Soviet Union empires fought wars by assisting factions of other nations in order to buy influence and allegiance.

The clearly illegal Russian incursion in Ukraine does not preclude aspects of the conflict that justify the designation of it as a proxy war that is part of a long-term strategic and economic conflict. The two empires appear embarked upon steps in the escalation model. Russian steps have included armed action, bombing of infrastructures and threats of military action against NATO members. US steps have included announcements that Putin is guilty of genocide and must be replaced, providing weapons to Ukraine authorities, enacting economic sanctions against Russia, and providing logistic information used to target high ranking Russian military officers and Soviet warships. The escalation playbook is in operation. Where will it lead?

The escalation model has been subject to serious criticism. It can be played by both parties in a conflict. It holds no assurances that opposing parties will back down despite the severity of the costs. In fact, the pain inflicted can become a rallying cry to seek retribution in the form of new steps.

Actual application of the escalation model would require a formal quantitative evaluation to measure the pain associated with the particular move. Such measures, however, are highly subjective. Moreover, such assessments during time of war are likely to be wrong. Robert McNamara, US Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam war, described the "Fog of War," – the propensity to misjudge the true effects of tactics and strategies amidst a blinding array of life and death details. This fog hid the failure of the escalation model and the need for deception when a failing model of military escalation in Vietnam was pursued (Blight and Lang 2005). That deception was detailed by an examination of The Pentagon Papers (Pentagon Papers National Archive, 1967.) revealed by whistle blower Dan Ellsberg (Pentagon Papers and Watergate Trials, 1971). A similar documentation of deception sustaining war-time escalation occurred over twenty years reported in the Afghanistan Papers (**Whitlock, 2021**).

The escalation model is not the only one applicable to the conflict in Ukraine or elsewhere. An alternative, Graduated Reciprocation in Tension Reduction, (GRIT), An Alternative to War or Surrender was proposed by Charles Osgood (Osgood, 1962). The model called for one party to initiate small conciliatory moves on a unilateral basis. The moves would be pre-announced. If reciprocated the magnitude of the conciliatory moves would increase, leading, if successful to a détente (Lindskold, S. (1978)).

A controlled laboratory test affirmed some efficacy for the GRIT model. A partial test was made of the hypothesis that a renewed strategy of small conciliatory moves, preceded by honest prior announcements, will induce reciprocation from an adversary, even after a deadlock of distrust. The task was a version of the prisoner's dilemma extended to permit gradations in cooperative response and cast in the simulated settings of an arms race. False-feedback conditions permitted the experimenter to contrast the effects of the conciliatory strategy with another group who played against a foe with a tit for tat strategy. A control group of natural pairs was left to make their moves without experimenter intervention. The effects showed the efficacy of conciliatory moves and honest communication of intentions against both matching strategies and natural sequences of play (Pilisuk, M., & Skolnick, P. (1968)).

The escalation model may impose great danger if applied in the conflict involving the two countries most capable of using nuclear laden ballistic missiles. It calls for a time to step back and consider policies that might lead the world in a safer direction. Small moves such as lessening the hostile language, arranging for safe passage of civilians, and wounded soldiers promising reductions in nuclear weapons in Europe could become steps toward building a world with better outcomes for all parties.

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