

Escalation Dynamics: An Analysis of the Ukraine War

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Introduction

On the 24th of February 2022 Russian ballistic missiles struck targets across Ukraine as Russian forces began to invade along six axes of advance.² The conflict has stepped through many military escalations and has reached an existential point for the people of Ukraine. Much attention has been on the possibility of escalation to conventional and possibly nuclear war between Russia and NATO who condemn Russia war of aggression.

This commentary will analyse the academic literature on the dynamics of escalation in armed conflict, it will then put forward claims pertaining to the applicability of this literature in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine focusing on four key flashpoints of escalation: Nuclear Incidents, Chemical Weapons, War Crimes, and Military supply with possible cross border attacks.

Much of the media attention and literature around the war has focused on the possibility of escalation between NATO and Russia, almost disregarding the lived experience of military escalation within Ukraine for Ukrainians. This piece seeks to incorporate the escalation dynamics of the multiple actors involved in the conflict. These points of escalation are focused on the dynamics of further use of extreme violence within Ukraine and the possibility of kinetic military escalation between Russia and NATO.

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² Zinets, N. and Vasovic, A. (2022). Russia invades Ukraine in Europe's 'darkest hours' since WWII. *Reuters*. [online] 24 Feb.



Source: Defence Intelligence

Theory of Escalation

Theorisation of military escalation has been a long-studied topic with references to escalation processes present in the classic military works of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. Clausewitz argues that war holds an innate dynamic that drives it to extremes yet is moderated by the fact that war is an expression of politics.³ That idea has certainly driven the debate which focuses on the extent of escalation in realist terms. Academic interest in escalation hit its peak in the 20th century as the cold war drove an arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. Fears of a nuclear holocaust led the academic lines of enquiry which aimed to determine where the conflict peak was and if it has been reached.⁴ Some core concepts were developed during this time that had a profound impact on the theory of nuclear escalation.

Threshold Management

The key concern was how to avoid limited wars escalating into global conflict and how to avoid nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the U.S. As a result, several thresholds of conflict have been theorised that hold relevance for policy makers.

³ Hauter, J. (2021). How the War Began: Conceptualizing Conflict Escalation in Ukraine's Donbas. *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*.

⁴ | William Zartman, Guy Olivier Faure and International Institute For Applied Systems Analysis (2005). *Escalation and negotiation in international conflicts*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Decision makers often confront a dilemma in trying to minimize the costs that must be paid to achieve their goal in conflict.⁵ Therefore, conflicts below the threshold of conventional interstate war for nuclear armed powers have become the norm. Nuclear escalation as a result is heavily theorised with core concepts during the cold war establishing the idea of red lines, clear communication, and confidence building measures to de-escalate possible nuclear incidents.⁶

Escalation manifests through three key mechanisms, deliberate, inadvertent, and accidental escalation.⁷ The subjective nature of thresholds creates serious risks of misperception, miscalculation and inadvertent escalation as all parties are not aware of each other's red lines.⁸ This is an acute danger as actors engage in competitive escalation.⁹ The clearest example of this issue of perception leading to escalation was on the 26th of September 1983 as the Soviet Union prepared a nuclear strike over what it perceived as a growing pattern of escalation.¹⁰ These issues impact the strategy of NATO in response to war in Ukraine and the management of potential flashpoints.

Escalation Dynamics in Warfare

There are some critical contributions on the escalation dynamics within warfare. Dessler (1991) provides a compelling framework based on cumulative theory for analysing escalation in warfare. His argument takes on the analogy of a thunderstorm. If we map each incident we are left with a fragmented picture, yet it is the cumulative effect that constitutes a raging storm. As a result, the process of escalation is viewed as a cumulative escalation of violence across all mechanisms deliberate, inadvertent and accidental. Escalation can be described as raising the level of violence in conflict by crossing salencies.¹¹ This makes escalation inherently hard to predict, which appears

⁵ Carlson, L.J. (1995). A Theory of Escalation And International Conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 39(3).

⁶ George, A.L. (1991). *Forceful persuasion: coercive diplomacy as an alternative to war*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute Of Peace Press.

⁷ Morgan, F.E., Rand Corporation and Project Air Force (U.S (2015). *Confronting emergent nuclear-armed regional adversaries: prospects for neutralization, strategies for escalation management*. Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Geller, D.S. (1990). Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, and Crisis Escalation. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 34(2),

¹⁰ Downing, T. (2018). *1983: The World At The Brink*. London: Abacus.

¹¹ Duyvesteyn, I. (2012a). Escalation and De-escalation of Irregular War: Some Observations and Conclusions. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35(5).

logical as many acts of violence in wartime happen at the fringes not always controlled by hierarchical or strategic control.¹²

Duyvesteyn (2012) argues that saliency is crossed when more resources are committed or when more destructive strategies are employed. Further, she highlights that ethical and psychological saliency may also be crossed as a form of escalation.¹³ A key lesson comes from systems theory with the suggestion that escalation in conflict is a positive feedback loop. With saliencies being crossed only encouraging more escalation. In many ways war without mitigation strategies can become a race to the bottom.

Some key dynamics of escalation that have relevancy to the war in Ukraine have been investigated by academia. War crimes and sexual violence are understood as catalysts for escalation. Sexual violence is often deployed as a weapon against the family, and which deliberately transgresses the boundaries of engagement, representing extreme violence against women and the escalation of war not only against a political and military entity but as a war against the community and the family.¹⁴ War crimes also represent an escalation of conflict often to existential levels when the crimes represent ethnic cleansing or genocidal patterns of violence. These factors may represent tipping points, that complicate any possibility of reproachment between warring parties.

Flashpoints for Escalation in Ukraine

Nuclear

The use of nuclear weapons is a spectre that hangs over the security posturing of both Russia and its opponents. The fear of nuclear escalation is undoubtedly the key reason why we have not seen any conventional military intervention by NATO states. This impacts the escalation dynamics between NATO and Russia with NATO nations so far focusing on providing military aid and applying economic sanctions on Russia escalating under the threshold of conventional war.

Yet there are some key issues with possible nuclear escalation as there are hazy red lines which have not been explicitly stated, there is also significant trust deficit and confidence building measures do not exist. As escalation thresholds are based on

¹² Duyvesteyn, I. (2021). *Rebels and conflict escalation explaining the rise and decline in violence*. Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Duyvesteyn, I (2012a)

¹⁴ Leatherman, J.L. (2012). *Sexual violence and armed conflict*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

perceptions the lack of these capabilities for communication increases the risk of inadvertent or accidental escalation. Further intentional escalation may follow if Russia views NATO nations support for Ukraine as crossing an escalation threshold.

Building the mechanisms to address these issues seems incredibly challenging at the present with a lack of negotiation between NATO member states and Russia. Communication through diplomatic backchannels may be key to establishing trust over the commitment to not deploy nuclear weapons.

Russian doctrine is based on the concept of “escalate to de-escalate” this idea has vague limits but is predicated on the idea that the threat or use of a limited nuclear strike would deter escalation and win a conventional war. It is a coercive deterrent against intervention by major powers and a claim that Russia retains the right of nuclear weapon use in response to non-nuclear threats.

The Russian state ties the use of nuclear weapons to existential threats to the Russian state. With both nuclear and conventional weapons that threaten the existence of the Russian state prompting escalation. Zelensky has warned that Ukraine must prepare for tactical nuclear weapon use by Russia.¹⁵ As such the threat of this conflict to Putin’s regime and any cross-border attacks into Russia must be closely watched. The possible use of tactical nuclear weapon use by Russia within Ukraine is a possibility that Russia has consistently threatened. It is unclear what escalation would follow such an act, but escalation with NATO would be certain. Russian doctrine suggests that a tactical nuclear strike would deter and de-escalate. This doctrine is based on the idea that escalation can be controlled using nuclear weapons, a dangerous idea that will put norms of nuclear deterrence to the test.

Nuclear Power Plants

Two key areas of concern are the Chernobyl exclusion zone and the Zaporizhzhia nuclear Power Station in the town of Enerhodar which have both been occupied by Russian troops with fighting near both power plants causing widespread concern in the opening weeks of the war.¹⁶

¹⁵ CNN, J.H. (2022). *Exclusive: Zelensky says world should be prepared for possibility Putin could use nuclear weapons*. [online] CNN.

¹⁶ Mayhew, N. (2022). *How the IAEA can help nuclear power plants in Ukraine’s war zone*. [online] James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies. Available at: <https://nonproliferation.org/how-the-iaea-can-help-nuclear-power-plants-in-ukraines-war-zone/> [Accessed 9 Apr. 2022].

Fighting around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant was so heavy that part of the plant caught on fire causing fears of nuclear contamination. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi declared his wish to lead a non-political nuclear-safety mission to Ukraine and establish procedures to limit the chance of any further incidents.¹⁷

The consequences of a nuclear incident such as contamination from a damaged nuclear power plant would be so severe that it would have a significant impact on the escalation dynamics of the conflict. Framed as an accident it is likely that the responsible party would face significant international condemnation. However, military escalation in this case would be counterproductive. In the case of such an incident we may even see calls for a cease fire to deal with the consequences of the nuclear incident.

Map of Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant



Source: Source: Reuters reporting; Zaporizhzhia NPP website; Maps4News

¹⁷ www.iaea.org. (2022). *Update 19 – IAEA Director General Statement on Situation in Ukraine*. [online] Available at: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/update-19-iaea-director-general-statement-on-situation-in-ukraine> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2022].

Chemical Weapons

There have been fears of Chemical Weapon use by Russian forces in Ukraine. Russia has a track record of using chemical and biological weapons with its attempted assassinations of Sergei Skripal and Alexei Navalny standing out. Further, Russia appears to have held onto some of its chemical weapon's stocks.¹⁸

Fear stems from Russian disinformation suggesting that chemical and biological labs in Ukraine were being used to develop weapons with US funding.¹⁹ This follows a pattern of information operations that blame opposition for staging or faking chemical attacks before their use by Russia or Russian backed forces.²⁰ Such attacks were prominent in Syria by the Russian backed Assad regime.²¹

The use of these weapons appears to be a possibility and would represent a crossing of a major saliency and legal norm in the practice of war. Yet little action was taken when chemical weapons were used in Syria. However, the use of these weapons in Ukraine by Russian forces does not have the degree of separation that Assad's regime provided.

The Russian armed forces have displayed a willingness to deploy illegal weapons in Ukraine with the use of white phosphorus, cluster munitions, and anti-personnel landmines documented. The further use of chemical weapons is an escalation that Russian forces are likely to deploy in the event of military frustration.

The escalation in the event of chemical weapon use is unpredictable, however the pressure on NATO nations to act would be intensified particularly if these weapons target civilians.

War Crimes and Civilian Harm

There has been a clear pattern of extreme civilian harm by Russian forces during their invasion of Ukraine.²² As Ukrainian forces recaptured areas to the north and west of

¹⁸ Warrick, J. (2022). A legacy of 'secrecy and deception': Why Russia clings to an outlawed chemical arsenal. *Washington Post*. [online] 19 Mar.

¹⁹ Robinson, O., Horton, J. and Sardarizadeh, S. (2022). Ukraine war: Fact-checking Russia's biological weapons claims. *BBC News*. [online] 15 Mar.

²⁰ Bellingcat. (2018). *Chemical Weapons and Absurdity: The Disinformation Campaign Against the White Helmets*. [online]

²¹ Rodriguez-Llanes, J.M., Guha-Sapir, D., Schlüter, B.-S. and Hicks, M.H.-R. (2018). Epidemiological findings of major chemical attacks in the Syrian war are consistent with civilian targeting: a short report. *Conflict and Health*, 12(1).

²² Bellingcat. (2022). *Hospitals Bombed and Apartments Destroyed: Mapping Incidents of Civilian Harm in Ukraine*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/03/17/hospitals-bombed-and-apartments-destroyed-mapping-incidents-of-civilian-harm-in-ukraine/> [Accessed 9 Apr. 2022].

Kyiv from Russian troops sobering evidence of war crimes littered the devastated towns and villages. In Bucha mass graves holding more than 300 civilian dead were uncovered and dozens of civilians on the streets appear to have been summarily executed.²³ With their hands tied and gunshot wounds to the head alongside intercepted calls discussing the killing of civilians this war crime appears pre-meditated.²⁴ Evidence of Russian soldiers raping and murdering Ukrainian women and children has also been verified with the piles of burnt bodies and traumatised survivors a shattering reminder of the use of rape as a weapon of war.²⁵ Russian attempts to discredit evidence of these crimes have been debunked.²⁶

In the east of Ukraine on the 8th of April two Russian Tochka missiles struck Kramatorsk train station killing at least 39 civilians and wounding 87.²⁷ More than 4000 civilians were said to be gathered there attempting to evacuate west towards safety. These events represent the deliberate targeting of civilians as part of an emerging pattern of civilian harm.²⁸ These crimes will have a profound impact on the escalation dynamics of the conflict. The war is already an existential threat for Ukraine. However, these massacres display that fact in cold light. These forms of violence by Russian troops are likely to lengthen the conflict as Ukraine becomes unwilling to negotiate with those who have tortured, raped, and murdered Ukrainian civilians.

The Russian state claims that its military action is in response to genocide of ethnic Russians in the Donbass, yet there is no evidence of this. A recent article in RIA Novosti claimed that "Denazification is inevitably also De-Ukrainianization" it set out aims for the liquidation of Nazi's in Ukraine and repressive steps that would follow the invasion.²⁹ The escalation reduces possibilities for de-escalation and reproachment.

²³ Nast, C. (2022). *Collecting Bodies in Bucha*. [online] The New Yorker. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/collecting-bodies-in-bucha> [Accessed 9 Apr. 2022].

²⁴ Welle (www.dw.com), D. (2022). *Germany intercepted Russian troop calls on atrocities in Ukraine: report | DW | 07.04.2022*. [online].

²⁵ Human Rights Watch. (2022). *Ukraine: Apparent War Crimes in Russia-Controlled Areas*. [online] Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>.

²⁶ Higgins, E. (2022). *Russia's Bucha 'Facts' Versus the Evidence*. [online] Bellingcat. Available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/04/04/russias-bucha-facts-versus-the-evidence/> [Accessed 9 Apr. 2022].

²⁷ Griffith, E. (2022). *At least 39 civilians killed and 87 injured in rocket strike on evacuees at Donetsk railway station - Ukraine*. [online] Action on Armed Violence.

²⁸ AOAV. (2022). *Ukraine: AOAV explosive violence data on harm to civilians*. [online] Available at: <https://aoav.org.uk/2022/ukraine-casualty-monitor/>.

²⁹ Sergeytsev, T. (2022). *RIA NOVOSTI has clarified Russia's plans vis-à-vis Ukraine and the rest of the free world in a program like article: What Russia should do with Ukraine?* [online].

The moral imperative to act in the face of increasingly shocking evidence of war crimes will have an impact on NATO nations policy. These crimes appear to have shifted some policies, yet a military escalation seems unlikely despite calls for more aggressive action. Efforts have mainly focused on increasing military supply to the Ukrainian army and a more robust dialogue on ending imports of Russian gas and oil. Yet only Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia have ended the supply of these imports from Russia.³⁰ This is crucial as the payments for Russian oil and gas remain a significant support of the Russian economy despite the existing sanctions.

Military Supply and Cross Border Attacks

Another possible flashpoint of escalation would be any military action that intentionally or unintentionally crosses the border of a NATO member state. For instance, Russian missiles have struck targets only 25km from the Polish border.³¹ With NATO pouring military hardware across the Polish border to support the Ukrainian army targeting supply chains inside NATO member states may become a point of escalation by Russia.

There was controversy and fear within NATO about possible escalation due to the provision of fighter jets with Poland offering to send jets to Ukraine if they were replaced by the US.³² The hesitancy to carry out this plan indicates some fear that such a move would cross a threshold for Moscow and escalate the conflict. It seems that refusal to provide this level of hardware was an attempt to prevent inadvertent escalation.

Yet after the reports from Bucha the Czech Republic has transported tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to the Ukrainian forces.³³ Building on this on the 11th of April the Polish government agreed to send 100 T-72 Tanks to Ukraine, these acts represent significant escalations in military supply. Further, the Lithuanian government have made their intention to train Ukrainian troops in Lithuania clear. The balancing of this escalation is complicated by the lack of clearly stated red lines by either party. However, it appears that NATO member states will escalate their provision of military

³⁰ Milne, R. (2022). Lithuania becomes first EU country to end imports of Russian gas. *Financial Times*. [online] 3 April.

³¹ Dettmer, J. (2022). *Russia Mounts Missile Strike Near Polish Border*. [online] VOA.

³² www.aljazeera.com. (2022). *US rejects Poland's offer to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine*. [online] Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/us-rejects-poland-offer-to-send-mig-29-fighter-jets-to-ukraine>.

³³ Reuters (2022). Czech Republic sends tanks, infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine. *Reuters*. [online].

aid in response to revelations of war crimes by Russian forces. The possibility of escalation because of arms supply remains a persistent threat. Particularly as Putin's advisor Sergey Karaganov has threatened that by sending arms targets in Europe "could or will be hit".³⁴ These threats must be framed with Russia's "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine in mind.

Conclusion

The political objectives Russia set out at the beginning of the are unlikely to be realised. Further it is assessed that both sides lack the capability to launch major offensives in the coming months with a stalemate and war of attrition likely to set in along fronts in the south and east of Ukraine.³⁵ If wars tendency for escalation is moderated by politics, then the lack of viable political victories for either side is a dangerous reality. As a result, we are likely to see a consolidation of territorial control that each side holds now with a Russian offensive in the east and the possibility for escalation events such as chemical weapon use or nuclear weapon use by a frustrated Putin. Further, the expected stalemate will have domestic consequences for Putin's regime and may drive him to escalate even at risk of a kinetic response from NATO.

The threat of nuclear escalation hangs over all possible options. Particularly the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons within Ukraine. The flashpoints of escalation above all hold unpredictable potential. As a result, it is likely that we will see continued material support from NATO with a possible escalation in terms of more aggressive military material and economic sanctions with the pattern of the Czech Republic and Poland sending tanks and Lithuania banning oil and gas imports an option. NATO nations will likely push the escalation of non-kinetic support for Ukraine to its limit. Ultimately the de-escalation of this conflict comes with negotiations on cease fire or peace agreements. This is therefore in the hands of the Ukrainians and the Russians and with recent war crimes and poor Russian military performance it is unlikely that Ukraine would accept any agreement on Russian terms.

³⁴ Fubini, F. (2022). *Sergey Karaganov: 'We are at war with the West. The European security order is illegitimate'*. [online]

³⁵ Lacey, J., Barrick, N. and Barrick, T. (2022). *Wargaming a Long War: Ukraine Fights On*. [online] Modern War Institute.

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