

HISTORICAL CHAINS OF ESCALATION

From the Great War to the
Specter of World War III

An Analysis of Recurring Escalation Patterns
and Contemporary Geopolitical Risk

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Abstract

This paper examines the recurring structural patterns of escalation that have driven great-power conflicts from the pre-World War I era through the present day, with the aim of assessing the probability and likely pathways of a third global conflict. Through comparative historical analysis, the study traces four distinct escalation chains: the alliance entanglements and mobilization cascades that produced World War I (1882 to 1914), the interaction of punitive peace, economic collapse, institutional failure, and appeasement that enabled World War II (1919 to 1939), the nuclear brinkmanship and near-misses of the Cold War (1948 to 1989), and the post-Cold War conflicts that demonstrated recurring patterns of miscalculation, intelligence failure, and cascading unintended consequences (1990 to 2003).

The analysis identifies an unprecedented convergence of contemporary escalation dynamics across three simultaneous theaters: Russia's territorial revisionism in Ukraine, China's intensifying pressure on Taiwan, and the multi-front escalation spiral in the Middle East. Drawing on Christopher Blattman's bargaining failure framework and peer-reviewed research published in *International Affairs* (Oxford), the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, the *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* (Taylor & Francis), *Frontiers in Political Science*, *Defense & Security Analysis*, the *Texas National Security Review*, and *Daedalus*, alongside institutional analyses from RAND, CSIS, the Carnegie Endowment, and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the paper examines the formation of a counter-bloc alignment among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea (the "CRINK" axis), the systematic collapse of the global arms control architecture culminating in the expiration of New START on February 5, 2026, and the emergence of novel escalation domains in cyber, space, and artificial intelligence. The paper introduces a nine-indicator comparative framework and four analytical diagrams to assess current conditions against pre-WWI and pre-WWII baselines, finding that the contemporary environment activates escalation mechanisms from all three historical periods simultaneously rather than sequentially.

The study concludes that nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and surviving institutional frameworks continue to function as constraints without pre-1945 equivalent, but that the erosion of arms control, the compression of decision timelines by hypersonic weapons and AI, and the cross-theater linkages among revisionist powers have created a risk environment that most closely parallels the late 1930s transition period from regional aggression to global war. Three near-term scenarios are identified as the highest-probability pathways to direct great-power conflict: an accidental NATO-Russia clash along Europe's eastern flank, a Chinese blockade or military action against Taiwan, and renewed Iran-Israel escalation following the June 2025 ceasefire. The paper identifies four critical stabilizing actions: restoring arms control dialogue, expanding crisis communication channels, reinforcing alliance credibility without provocation, and establishing norms for cyber and AI weapons.

Keywords: *escalation chains, great-power conflict, nuclear deterrence, alliance systems, arms control, bargaining failure, Russia-Ukraine war, China-Taiwan tensions, Middle East escalation, CRINK alignment, nuclear-conventional entanglement, historical analogy, miscalculation, appeasement, World War I, World War II, Cold War, cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, information warfare, escalation ladder*

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Introduction

Wars between great powers do not erupt from a single decision or a single event. They emerge from chains of escalation: sequences of crises, commitments, miscalculations, and failures of diplomacy that accumulate over years or decades before a triggering event collapses the remaining space for peace. Understanding these chains, their structural preconditions, their internal logic, and the points at which intervention could have broken them, is essential to assessing whether the current international order is drifting toward a similar catastrophe.

The question is not academic. Global military spending reached \$2.43 trillion in 2023, rising 7% in a single year (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2024). The total number of armed conflicts now exceeds any point since World War II (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025). Simultaneous conflicts rage across Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. An authoritarian counter-bloc of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea has coalesced against the Western-led order. The architecture of arms control has collapsed, with New START expiring on February 5, 2026, leaving the world's two largest nuclear arsenals unconstrained for the first time since the 1960s. In October 2022, President Biden acknowledged that the threat of nuclear conflict had reached its highest point "for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis" (Biden, 2022).

This paper employs comparative historical analysis to trace the escalation chains that produced the two world wars and the most dangerous crises of the Cold War, then maps those patterns against contemporary geopolitical dynamics. The analytical framework draws on Christopher Blattman's synthesis of bargaining theory and conflict research (Blattman, 2022), which identifies five structural forces that cause bargaining failures leading to war: commitment problems (the inability to enforce agreements), uncertainty about intentions or resolve, unchecked interests (leaders insulated from war's costs), misperceptions and miscommunications, and intangible motives that make compromise unacceptable. Each of these forces is visible in the escalation chains examined here. The analysis is organized chronologically through four historical periods: the alliance entanglements and mobilization cascades of 1882 to 1914, the interaction of grievance, economic collapse, and appeasement from 1919 to 1939, the nuclear brinkmanship of 1948 to 1989, and the post-Cold War conflicts that demonstrated recurring patterns of miscalculation from 1990 to 2003. Each historical section is followed by pattern recognition and contemporary parallel assessments that draw explicit connections to the present.

Recent peer-reviewed research underscores the urgency of this analysis. A 2024 article in *Frontiers in Political Science* concluded that "there is a narrow range of scenarios that can enable great powers to wage a protracted war without it becoming a nuclear war" (Heuer, 2024). A year-long multinational research project published in the *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* found that "regional, military and geostrategic dynamics are all pointing toward increased nuclear risks, both through deliberate or accidental use" across East Asia (Seitz & Sukin, 2025). The RAND Corporation's 2023 analysis

of hypothetical U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia war scenarios demonstrated how rapidly conventional conflict could cross the nuclear threshold (Heim et al., 2023). And the Carnegie Endowment's 2025 forecasting exercise, combining expert panels with quantitative modeling across three workshops, found persistent and growing escalation risks in the U.S.-Russia, U.S.-China, and U.S.-North Korea dyads (Perkovich & Vaddi, 2025).

The paper then turns to the contemporary convergence: the Russia-Ukraine war, China-Taiwan tensions, Middle East escalation, the CRINK counter-bloc, and the collapse of arms control. Three additional sections address dimensions that cut across all eras: the role of domestic politics in driving external escalation, the emergence of cyber, space, and AI as novel escalation domains, and the evolution of information warfare from the yellow press to algorithmic amplification. The concluding section identifies the most dangerous near-term scenarios and the critical stabilizing actions suggested by the historical record.

A nine-indicator comparative framework, presented immediately below, provides a structured lens for tracking escalation conditions across eras. The central finding is that the contemporary environment activates escalation mechanisms from all three historical periods simultaneously, a convergence that is historically unprecedented. Yet nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and surviving institutional frameworks continue to act as constraints without pre-1945 equivalent. Whether these constraints will prove sufficient is the defining question of the current era.

Comparative Escalation Indicators

The following table compares the structural conditions that preceded World War I, World War II, and the current era across nine escalation indicators. The nuclear dimension (row 6) is the critical variable that differentiates today from all historical precedents.

Indicator	Pre-WWI (1914)	Pre-WWII (1930s)	Today (2024-2026)
Alliance Rigidity	Extreme: binding mutual defense pacts with mobilization triggers	Moderate: alliances existed but response was slow and inconsistent	High: NATO Article 5 is binding; CRINK alignment is informal but deepening
Arms Race Intensity	High: Anglo-German naval race, continental army expansion	Moderate: rearmament accelerated but was initially hidden	High: global spending at \$2.43T; hypersonic, AI, and space weapons proliferating
Institutional Buffers	Minimal: Concert of Europe defunct; no collective security body	Weak: League of Nations existed but lacked enforcement	Degraded: UN Security Council paralyzed by vetoes; arms control collapsed
Economic Interdependence	Significant: pre-1914 globalization peak	Low: 1930s autarky, tariff walls, currency blocs	Very high: U.S.-China \$690B bilateral trade, but decoupling accelerating
Revisionist Aggression	Austria-Hungary vs. Serbia; Germany vs. European order	Germany, Japan, Italy: sequential territorial seizures	Russia (Ukraine), China (Taiwan), Iran (Middle East): simultaneous revisionism
Nuclear Dimension	N/A	N/A	Critical: 12,000+ warheads globally; no arms control framework after Feb 2026
Domestic Radicalization	Nationalist fervor across all powers	Fascism, militarism, populist extremism	Authoritarian consolidation in CRINK; populist polarization in democracies
Information Environment	Jingoistic "yellow press" inflamed publics	State propaganda monopolies (radio, film)	Social media amplification, AI-generated disinformation, deepfakes
Miscalculation Risk	Extreme: rigid mobilization timetables	Moderate: aggressors calculated (correctly) that democracies would not respond	High: gray-zone operations, cyber attacks, and proxy entanglements blur red lines

The Alliance Web and Mobilization Cascade That Produced World War I

The war that engulfed Europe in August 1914 was not the product of a single cause but the culmination of interlocking structural pressures that transformed a regional assassination into a continental catastrophe. The system of alliances, constructed over four decades, ensured that any conflict between two powers could drag in all the others.

The **Triple Alliance** of 1882 bound Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy in mutual defense, building on the Dual Alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary formed in 1879 by Otto von Bismarck (Clark, 2012). The opposing **Triple Entente** crystallized between 1894 and 1907, linking France, Russia, and Britain through the Franco-Russian Alliance (1894), the Entente Cordiale (1904), and the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907). Crucially, the Entente was not a binding military alliance, but secret military conversations beginning in 1905 led to plans for a British Expeditionary Force alongside France, and the 1912 Anglo-French Naval Convention divided responsibilities between the two navies (Mulligan, 2010).

These arrangements created expectations of mutual support that functioned like alliance commitments without the formal clarity.

The **Anglo-German naval race**, launched by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz's Navy Bills of 1898 and 1900, intensified mutual hostility. The launch of HMS Dreadnought in 1906 reset the competition by rendering all previous battleships obsolete. By 1914, Britain maintained 29 dreadnoughts to Germany's 17, but the political damage was done (Bönker, 2012). Parallel to the naval race, continental armies swelled through conscription systems. Russia's military was expanding fastest, alarming Berlin. France extended military service from two to three years in 1913.

Germany's **Schlieffen Plan**, drafted in 1905, sought to avoid a two-front war by defeating France in six weeks through neutral Belgium before pivoting east against Russia. The plan's rigidity meant that once mobilization began, it could not be halted without catastrophic military consequences, placing enormous pressure on diplomats during crises (Tuchman, 1962). Imperial competition produced a series of crises that hardened positions. The First Moroccan Crisis of 1905, the Agadir Crisis of 1911, and the Bosnian Annexation Crisis of 1908 deepened antagonisms and spawned Serbian nationalist organizations including the Black Hand (Clark, 2012). The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 nearly doubled Serbia's territory, alarming Austria-Hungary while emboldening pan-Slavic nationalism.

The July Crisis: Five Weeks from Assassination to World War

The assassination of **Archduke Franz Ferdinand** and his wife Sophie by Bosnian Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, provided Austria-Hungary with a pretext to act against Serbia (Clark, 2012). On July 5, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg issued the "blank check," assuring Austria-Hungary of unconditional German support. Austria-Hungary's deliberately unacceptable ultimatum was delivered to Serbia on July 23. Serbia's conciliatory reply on July 25 was rejected. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28 and bombarded Belgrade the following day. Russia ordered partial mobilization on July 29 and general mobilization on July 30. Germany demanded Russian demobilization within 12 hours, declared war on Russia on August 1, activated the Schlieffen Plan, invaded Belgium on August 3, and triggered Britain's entry on August 4 (Mombauer, 2013; Clark, 2012). Each step made the next inevitable.

"The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

— Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, August 4, 1914

⚠️ **WHAT IF: What if Russia had not mobilized?**

Had Tsar Nicholas II resisted his generals' pressure to mobilize on July 30, the July Crisis might have remained a localized Austro-Serbian conflict. Germany's declaration of war on Russia was triggered directly by Russian mobilization. Without it, the Schlieffen Plan would not have been activated, Belgium would not have been invaded, and Britain would have had no casus belli. The rigid linkage between mobilization and war, in which troop movements operated on railway timetables that could not be reversed, meant that a political decision to mobilize was functionally indistinguishable from a declaration of war. This is the core danger of systems where military logic overtakes political control.

■ **PATTERN RECOGNITION: World War I Escalation Mechanisms vs. Today**

- ✓ **Alliance Entanglement:** Pre-1914 mutual defense pacts created automatic escalation. Today, NATO Article 5 and the deepening CRINK alignment create similar cascading commitment risks.
- ✓ **Arms Race Dynamics:** The Anglo-German naval race has its parallel in today's hypersonic missile competition, AI weapons development, and the new space domain.
- ✓ **Rigid Military Planning:** The Schlieffen Plan's inflexibility mirrors concerns about automated response systems, launch-on-warning postures, and AI-enabled decision compression.
- ✓ **Miscalculation Risk:** Gray-zone operations, cyber attacks, and proxy entanglements blur red lines in ways that recall the ambiguity of pre-1914 commitments.
- ✗ **Nuclear Deterrence:** This critical constraint did not exist in 1914. It is the single most important factor that differentiates the current moment from the pre-WWI era.

► **CONTEMPORARY PARALLEL**

Today's NATO (32 members) and the emerging CRINK alignment (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea) mirror the pre-1914 alliance blocs. A conflict over Taiwan, Ukraine, or the Middle East could cascade through alliance commitments much as the Sarajevo assassination triggered a chain reaction. NATO's Article 5, like the pre-1914 alliance obligations, creates automatic involvement mechanisms. Russia's deployment of North Korean troops in Ukraine and Iran's proxy networks across the Middle East have already created cross-theater linkages that recall the interlocking commitments of 1914 (Center for a New American Security [CNAS], 2025).

From Versailles to Warsaw: How Grievance, Depression, and Appeasement Produced World War II

The chain of events from 1919 to 1939 demonstrates how a punitive peace settlement, economic catastrophe, and the systematic failure of collective security enabled a revanchist dictator to dismantle the European order step by step, with each act of aggression emboldening the next.

The **Treaty of Versailles**, signed on June 28, 1919, imposed terms that Germany perceived as a "Diktat": the loss of 13% of its territory and 10% of its population, military restrictions capping the army at 100,000, reparations set at 132 billion gold marks, and the "War Guilt Clause" (Article 231) assigning sole responsibility for the war (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM], 2023). The treaty was simultaneously punitive enough to generate deep resentment and insufficiently enforced to prevent revision.

Economic collapse accelerated political radicalization. Germany's hyperinflation of 1923, triggered by war debts and the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr, wiped out middle-class savings (Evans, 2003). The subsequent stabilization under the Dawes Plan depended on American loans, which were recalled when the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 triggered the Great Depression. German industrial production fell to 58% of 1928 levels by 1932. Unemployment soared from 1.5 million in late 1929 to **over 6 million by early 1932**, roughly 30% of the workforce (USHMM, 2023). The Nazi electoral trajectory was stark: 2.6% of the vote in May 1928 rose to 37.3% in July 1932 (Evans, 2003).

The Chain of Territorial Aggression: A Cascading Precedent of Impunity

Hitler's **remilitarization of the Rhineland** on March 7, 1936, violated both the Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of Locarno. France, politically divided and unwilling to act without British support, did nothing. Hitler later admitted he would have withdrawn had France resisted (USHMM, 2023). This was the critical test, and the Western powers' failure secured Germany's western border, making eastern expansion strategically viable.

The **Anschluss with Austria** on March 12, 1938, again met no resistance. The **Munich Agreement** of September 29, 1938, ceded the Sudetenland to Germany; Czechoslovakia was not invited to the conference. When Hitler violated the Munich Agreement by occupying the rest of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939, seizing purely Czech territory with no ethnic German justification, appeasement collapsed. The **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact** of August 23, 1939, between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence and removed the last strategic obstacle to invasion. Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France declared war on September 3.

"It is us today. It will be you tomorrow."

— Emperor Haile Selassie, addressing the League of Nations after Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, June 1936

⚠ **WHAT IF: What if France had resisted the Rhineland remilitarization?**

Hitler ordered his generals to withdraw at the first sign of French military resistance. The German army in March 1936 was a fraction of its later strength, with only 22,000 lightly armed troops crossing into the Rhineland. A French response would have exposed Germany's military weakness, humiliated Hitler domestically, and potentially destabilized his regime before it consolidated power. Every subsequent act of aggression, from the Anschluss to Sudetenland to Poland, became possible only because the Rhineland precedent established that the Western powers would not enforce the treaties they had signed. This is the archetypal case study in how failing to respond to early aggression creates a cascade of greater aggression.

■ **PATTERN RECOGNITION: World War II Escalation Mechanisms vs. Today**

- ✓ **Appeasement/Incremental Response:** The Rhineland-Anschluss-Sudetenland-Poland chain mirrors Russia's Crimea-Donbas-full invasion escalation ladder. Each unchallenged act emboldened the next.
- ✓ **Institutional Failure:** The League of Nations' inability to act against Japan, Italy, and Germany parallels the UN Security Council's paralysis on Ukraine, Syria, and Gaza.
- ✓ **Economic Radicalization:** The Great Depression fueled fascism. Today, inflation, inequality, and pandemic aftershocks fuel populist extremism globally.
- ✓ **Authoritarian Axis Formation:** The Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis has its parallel in the CRINK counter-bloc: shared opposition to the existing order without deep ideological unity.
- ✓ **Revisionist Territorial Claims:** Hitler's ethnic German justifications parallel Putin's "protection of Russian speakers" and China's "sacred reunification" narratives.

► **CONTEMPORARY PARALLEL**

Russia's territorial revisionism follows the same escalation logic as the 1930s. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by proxy war in the Donbas, followed by the full-scale invasion of February 2022, parallels the Rhineland-Anschluss-Sudetenland-Poland chain. Each stage tested Western resolve; each Western restraint was perceived as confirmation that further aggression was viable.

The debate over arming Ukraine echoes the appeasement debate of the 1930s, with delayed weapons deliveries and ceasefire pressures mirroring the Munich Agreement's logic of avoiding war through concessions (Brands, 2024). As historian Hal Brands has argued, "the core strategic problem of our moment is ripped from the 1930s" (Brands, 2024).

Cold War Brinkmanship: How Miscalculation, Not Intention, Nearly Ended Civilization

The Cold War era demonstrated that in a nuclear-armed world, the primary vector for catastrophic war is not deliberate aggression but accident, misperception, and miscalculation. Multiple crises brought the superpowers to the brink, and in each case, the world survived as much by luck as by strategy.

The **Berlin Blockade** of 1948 and 1949 established the pattern of Cold War confrontation. When the Soviet Union cut all land access to West Berlin on June 24, 1948, the U.S. deployed nuclear-capable B-29 bombers to Britain as a deterrent while mounting an airlift that delivered over 2.1 million tons of freight across 250,000 flights (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.). The crisis accelerated NATO's formation and demonstrated that nuclear deterrence could prevent war. The **Korean War** of 1950 to 1953 tested whether nuclear weapons would be used; General MacArthur advocated dropping "between 30 and 50 atomic bombs" on Manchuria before Truman fired him, establishing the "nuclear taboo" (Cumings, 2010).

The Cuban Missile Crisis: Thirteen Days on the Brink

The **Cuban Missile Crisis** of October 1962 remains the closest humanity has come to self-annihilation. On October 27, "Black Saturday," Soviet submarine B-59, under depth-charge harassment from U.S. destroyers, nearly launched a 15-kiloton nuclear torpedo. Captain Valentin Savitsky, believing war had begun, ordered the torpedo prepared. Political Officer Ivan Maslennikov agreed. But flotilla chief of staff **Vasili Arkhipov refused**, reasoning that if full-scale war had broken out, the Americans would not waste resources chasing a single diesel submarine (National Security Archive, 2002). No one on the American side knew the Soviet submarines carried nuclear weapons. Approximately 140 Soviet nuclear warheads were already in Cuba; had the U.S. invaded, nuclear war was nearly certain.

“Each crisis was eventually resolved in favor of peace, but in every case both sides relied on gambles, and survived as much by luck as by strategy. At some point, luck runs out.”

— Tom Nichols, U.S. Naval War College

1983: The Year the World Almost Ended Twice

On September 26, 1983, Lieutenant Colonel **Stanislav Petrov** was monitoring the Oko satellite early-warning system when it reported five U.S. ICBM launches. Soviet doctrine demanded immediate reporting for a launch-on-warning counterattack. Petrov judged it a false alarm, reasoning that a real first strike would involve hundreds of missiles, not five. He was correct; sunlight reflecting off high-altitude clouds had confused the satellite (Arms Control Association, 2023). Weeks later, during the **Able Archer 83** NATO

exercise, the Soviet military loaded nuclear warheads onto combat aircraft, placed 70 SS-20 missiles on high alert, and mobilized entire divisions. The National Security Agency described it as "the most dangerous Soviet-American confrontation since the Cuban Missile Crisis" (National Security Archive, 2015).

⚠️ **WHAT IF: What if Arkhipov had concurred on the torpedo launch?**

A 15-kiloton nuclear detonation within the U.S. naval quarantine line would have destroyed multiple American warships. With no communication channel to explain that a single submarine officer, not the Kremlin, had made the decision, Washington would almost certainly have interpreted the strike as a deliberate Soviet nuclear attack. The U.S. invasion plan for Cuba (OPLAN 316) was ready for execution. Unknown to U.S. planners, 140 Soviet tactical nuclear warheads were already on the island. Soviet field commanders had pre-delegated authority to use them against an invasion force. Escalation to full strategic nuclear exchange between the superpowers would have been nearly impossible to prevent. The fate of civilization rested on one man's judgment in a hot, dark submarine.

■ **PATTERN RECOGNITION: Cold War Escalation Mechanisms vs. Today**

- ✓ **Nuclear Brinkmanship:** Russia's lowered nuclear threshold, Oreshnik deployment, and tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus directly echo Cold War nuclear signaling, but without the stabilizing arms control framework.
- ✓ **Proxy War Dynamics:** The Korean and Vietnam Wars have parallels in the Ukraine conflict (Western weapons vs. Russian forces) and Middle Eastern proxy networks.
- ✓ **Miscalculation/Accident Risk:** The Petrov and Able Archer incidents demonstrate that false alarms nearly caused nuclear war. Today, cyber weapons could trigger similar misperceptions.
- ✗ **Arms Control Architecture:** SALT, ABM, INF, and START treaties provided guardrails. All have expired or been abandoned. This is a critical degradation from the Cold War baseline.
- ✗ **Crisis Communication Channels:** The Moscow-Washington hotline and regular summits provided off-ramps. Communication between the U.S. and Russia/China is at historic lows.

Post-Cold War Conflicts: Recurring Patterns of Miscalculation and Blowback

The conflicts following the Cold War's end demonstrated that the end of superpower bipolarity did not eliminate the fundamental dynamics of escalation: miscalculation by aggressors, alliance entanglements, intelligence failures, and cascading unintended consequences.

The Gulf War: Failure of Deterrence Through Ambiguous Signaling

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, was enabled by a classic failure of deterrence. On July 25, 1990, U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie told Saddam that the United States had "no opinion on your Arab-Arab conflicts" (Freedman & Karsh, 1993). Saddam concluded he could present a fait accompli the world would accept. He was catastrophically wrong. The resulting coalition of 35 nations liberated Kuwait in 100 hours of ground combat in February 1991, but Saddam was left in power, and his "deterrence by doubt" strategy would prove fatally counterproductive twelve years later.

The Balkan Wars: Consequences of Delayed Intervention

A prescient October 1990 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate predicted Yugoslavia would "cease to function as a federal state within a year." The assessment had almost no impact on U.S. policy. The resulting wars killed over 100,000 in Bosnia alone. The Srebrenica genocide of July 1995, in which more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were systematically executed, became the worst mass killing in Europe since the Holocaust (United Nations, 1999). NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo nearly produced a direct NATO-Russia confrontation when Russian troops raced to Pristina Airport ahead of NATO forces. British General Mike Jackson refused NATO Supreme Commander Wesley Clark's order to seize the airport by force.

"I'm not going to start the Third World War for you."

— General Sir Mike Jackson to General Wesley Clark, Pristina Airport, June 1999

The 2003 Iraq Invasion: Intelligence Failure and Cascading Consequences

The October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate judged that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons and was pursuing nuclear weapons. The presidential WMD Commission later concluded that the intelligence community was "dead wrong in almost all of its pre-war judgments" about Iraq's weapons programs (Robb & Silberman, 2005). CPA Order No. 1 (de-Baathification) purged 30,000 to 50,000 government officials. CPA Order No. 2 dissolved Iraq's 400,000-strong military. These decisions produced Sunni insurgency, sectarian civil war, and ultimately the rise of ISIS. The Brookings Institution assessed that "before the United States invaded Iraq, Al Qaeda was on the ropes... The invasion of Iraq breathed new life into the organization" (Brookings Institution, 2007). The Costs of War Project estimates that post-9/11 wars displaced 38 million people and cost the U.S. Treasury over \$8 trillion (Crawford, 2023).

The Contemporary Convergence: Multiple Escalation Chains Running Simultaneously

The period from 2014 to the present has produced an unprecedented convergence of escalation risks across multiple theaters. Unlike previous eras, when the primary danger was a single chain of events, the current moment features **simultaneous, interconnected chains** operating in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific, with cross-theater linkages that compound the risk.

Contemporary Escalation Ladder — Where We Stand (February 2026)

Drawing on Herman Kahn's escalation ladder framework (1965), updated by Kokoshin and colleagues in *Escalation and Deescalation* (2022) for the current era, the following ladder maps twelve escalation rungs from strategic competition to strategic nuclear exchange. The "Current Status" column shows that as of early 2026, rungs 1 through 7 are active across at least one theater, with rung 8 (homeland strikes) partially crossed. The space between rung 7 and rung 9 represents the most critical firebreak in the current landscape.

Rung	Escalation Level	Description	Current Status (2026)
12	Strategic Nuclear Exchange	All-out nuclear war between great powers	Threshold not crossed
11	Limited Nuclear Use	Tactical nuclear weapon employed against military target	Russia has threatened; doctrine revised
10	Nuclear Demonstration	Nuclear detonation as political signal (e.g., atmospheric test)	Not yet; Oreshnik serves similar signaling function
9	Direct Great-Power Combat	Military forces of nuclear powers engage each other directly	Not crossed; near-misses in Baltic, Black Sea
8	Strike on Homeland Territory	Attacks on the recognized territory of a great power	Ukrainian drones strike deep into Russia
7	Theater-Wide Conventional War	Full-scale conventional war across an entire region	Russia-Ukraine at this level since Feb 2022
6	Major Proxy Engagement	Great powers supply weapons, intelligence, advisors to combatants	Active: NATO arms Ukraine; Iran/DPRK arm Russia
5	Limited Military Operations	Targeted strikes, blockades, no-fly zones, FONOPS	Active: Israel-Iran exchange; China exercises near Taiwan
4	Coercive Diplomacy	Economic sanctions, arms embargoes, ultimatums, military deployments	Active: 16,000+ Russia sanctions; semiconductor controls on China
3	Gray-Zone Operations	Cyber attacks, disinformation, election interference, covert ops	Active: Volt Typhoon, NotPetya, IRA campaigns
2	Political Crisis	Breakdown of diplomatic relations, withdrawal of ambassadors	Active: U.S.-Russia relations at Cold War lows
1	Strategic Competition	Arms buildups, alliance formation, ideological contest	Active: NATO expansion; CRINK alignment; \$2.43T spending

Russia's War in Ukraine: The Logic of Pre-WWII Territorial Revisionism

Russia's escalation trajectory from Crimea to full-scale invasion mirrors the 1930s pattern. As of early 2026, Russia controls approximately 20% of Ukraine (roughly 45,700 square miles), and casualties on both sides have been staggering: approximately 1.2 million Russian military casualties and an estimated 400,000 Ukrainian killed or injured (Russia Matters, 2026). Russia's deployment of the Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missile, nuclear-capable with MIRV warheads and Mach 10+ speed, against Dnipro on November 21, 2024, and against Lviv on January 8, 2026 (roughly an hour from the Polish border), represents explicit nuclear signaling.

Peer-reviewed analysis of Russia's escalation behavior has deepened understanding of the nuclear risks. Sherr and colleagues, writing in *International Affairs* (Oxford, 2025), argue that the Biden administration's "overcautious, incremental approach" over weapons deliveries "enabled Russia to transform the war into one of grinding attrition," and that Russia's 2024 nuclear doctrine revision, which defines a conventional attack on Russia by a non-nuclear nation supported by a nuclear power as a "joint attack" permitting nuclear response, represents purposeful ambiguity designed to constrain Western support (Sherr et al., 2025). Kühn's analysis in *Defense and Security Analysis* (2025) examines why Russia did not use nuclear weapons during the fall 2022 crisis, when Ukrainian forces liberated Kherson and Kharkiv Oblast, concluding that a combination of Chinese pressure, internal military resistance, and residual deterrence constrained Putin, but that these factors may not hold in a future crisis where Russian territorial losses are greater (Kühn, 2025). Stein's framework in the *Texas National Security Review* (2023) characterizes Western escalation management as "learning by doing" in response to what Schelling termed the "threat that leaves something to chance," a process that has successfully prevented direct NATO-Russia conflict so far but that offers no guarantee of continued success (Stein, 2023).

The Indo-Pacific Theater: The Shadow of 1941

China's intensifying pressure on Taiwan follows a logic reminiscent of Japan's pre-1941 Pacific expansion. The largest Chinese exercise, "Justice Mission 2025" in December 2025, simulated a blockade of major ports, interdiction of energy imports, and rehearsed amphibious assault (ISW-AEI, 2025). Over 4,000 Chinese incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone occurred in the first nine months of 2025 alone. The Pentagon's 2025 China Military Power Report revealed that China seeks nine aircraft carriers by 2035 and that Xi Jinping's "2027 Centennial Military Building Goal" aims to develop capabilities to prevail in a Taiwan conflict involving the United States.

Peer-reviewed research highlights the nuclear dimension of a potential Taiwan conflict. Logan's analysis in the *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2023) documents the growing entanglement between China's conventional and nuclear forces, warning that the same missiles and command systems serve both conventional and nuclear missions, creating what he terms "nuclear-conventional entanglement" that dramatically increases the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation during a conventional war (Logan, 2023).

The RAND Corporation's scenario modeling demonstrated that a U.S.-China war over Taiwan could escalate through attacks on each other's space assets and cyber infrastructure, ultimately threatening China's nuclear command and control systems and prompting Chinese nuclear use in the Pacific to compel the United States to accept Chinese gains (Heim et al., 2023). Seitz and Sukin's multinational research project in the *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* (2025) found evidence of growing "nuclear anxiety" among U.S. partners in the Asia-Pacific, with public majorities in South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia supporting indigenous nuclear proliferation, reflecting dual fears of both U.S. abandonment and entrapment in U.S.-driven nuclear conflict (Seitz & Sukin, 2025).

The Middle East Escalation Spiral

Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack triggered a cascading multi-theater conflict. Israel's campaign extended to Lebanon and ultimately to direct conflict with Iran. The Iran-Israel War of June 13 to 24, 2025 ("the Twelve-Day War") saw Israel strike Iranian nuclear facilities and Iran retaliate with over 550 ballistic missiles and 1,000+ suicide drones. The United States bombed three Iranian nuclear sites on June 22. RAND Corporation assessed in January 2026 that the ceasefire represents a "tactical pause, not a game-changer" (RAND, 2026).

The CRINK Counter-Bloc: Parallels to the 1930s Axis

The coalescence of a Russia-China-Iran-North Korea alignment represents the most significant structural shift since the Cold War's end. North Korea has supplied approximately 12 million artillery shells to Russia and deployed 10,000 to 13,000 troops to Russia's Kursk region. Iran has supplied Shahed drones; a Russian factory now produces 6,000 Iranian-design drones per year. Russia and Iran signed a 20-year strategic partnership in January 2025. China and Russia declared a "no-limits" partnership in February 2022. However, when Israel and the United States struck Iran in June 2025, neither Russia nor China stepped forward with military assistance, revealing the alignment's transactional character.

Cross-Theater Escalation Linkages

The following matrix maps the interconnections between the three primary conflict theaters across six dimensions, demonstrating how escalation in any single theater creates cascading risks across all three.

Cross-Theater Linkage	Europe Theater	Indo-Pacific Theater	Middle East Theater
Arms Transfers	DPRK shells + troops to Russia; Iran Shahed drones to Russia	China-Russia 'no limits' partnership; joint bomber patrols near Alaska	Iran drones to Russia; Russia nuclear tech to Iran; DPRK missiles to Iran proxies
Nuclear Signaling	Russia Oreshnik deployment; revised nuclear doctrine	China's 1,500-warhead buildup; dual-capable DF-21 'carrier killer'	Iran near breakout; Israeli nuclear ambiguity; DPRK 60+ warheads
Economic Warfare	\$300B frozen Russian assets; energy sanctions redirect to China	Semiconductor export controls; gallium/germanium retaliation	Iran oil sanctions; Houthi Red Sea attacks disrupt 12% of global trade
Cyber/Space	Russian cyber on Ukraine grid; NATO logistics targeted	Volt Typhoon pre-positioned in U.S. infrastructure; Chinese ASAT tests	Iran cyber attacks on Israeli infrastructure; proxy cyber operations
Alliance Entanglement	NATO Article 5 risk via Baltic/Black Sea incident	AUKUS; U.S.-Japan-Philippines-Australia quad alignment	Abraham Accords reshaping; Saudi-Iran rivalry; U.S. base network
Escalation Pathway to Global Conflict	Accidental NATO-Russia clash triggers Article 5 + CRINK response	Taiwan blockade draws in U.S. + allies; DPRK opens Korean front	Iran-Israel escalation draws in U.S.; Russia/China exploit distraction

The Collapse of Arms Control

The systematic erosion of arms control represents the most dangerous structural shift underlying all other escalation dynamics. The U.S. withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, the INF Treaty in 2019, and the Open Skies Treaty in 2020. Russia suspended New START verification in 2023. With New START expiring on February 5, 2026, no arms control framework constrains the world's two largest nuclear arsenals for the first time since the 1960s. China's rapid nuclear expansion could match U.S. and Russian ICBM numbers by the end of the decade, creating a "two peer plus" nuclear environment unprecedented in history.

The strategic implications of this collapse are the subject of growing peer-reviewed concern. The CSIS analysis "Returning to an Era of Competition and Nuclear Risk" (2025) documents how Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea have expanded nuclear cooperation through joint exercises, transfers of fissile material, and mutual support in diplomatic forums, while Russia has led efforts to dismantle international monitoring of North Korea's nuclear program by vetoing the UN panel mandate (CSIS, 2025). Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Center for Global Security Research concluded from its escalation workshop that characterizing the current challenge as a "two-peer problem" understates the danger, because ignoring "possible issues with others such as North Korea, Iran, and maybe even Pakistan would be a mistake" (CGSR, 2024). The Carnegie Endowment's forecasting exercise found that experts across all three workshops (U.S.-Russia, U.S.-China, U.S.-North Korea) assessed persistent and growing escalation risks, with particular concern about scenarios involving nuclear-conventional entanglement and the absence of crisis communication mechanisms (Perkovich & Vaddi, 2025).

The Collapse of the Global Arms Control Architecture

The table below documents the systematic dismantling of arms control treaties and frameworks since 2002, along with the strategic consequences of each loss. The bottom two rows highlight the most dangerous gap: the complete absence of any framework governing cyber and AI weapons in the nuclear domain.

Treaty/Framework	Active Period	Status	Strategic Impact of Loss
ABM Treaty	1972-2002	U.S. Withdrew	Removed constraints on missile defense; triggered Russian countermeasures including hypersonic weapons development
INF Treaty	1987-2019	U.S. Withdrew	Eliminated ground-launched missiles with 500-5,500 km range; Russia now deploys Oreshnik IRBM; no replacement treaty
Open Skies	1992-2020	U.S. Withdrew	Permitted unarmed observation flights; loss reduced transparency and increased intelligence uncertainty
CFE Treaty	1990-2023	Russia Withdrew	Limited conventional forces in Europe; Russia's withdrawal removed constraints on force deployments near NATO
New START	2010-2026	Expiring Feb 2026	Last framework limiting U.S.-Russia strategic arsenals to 1,550 deployed warheads; Russia suspended inspections 2023; no successor negotiated
JCOA (Iran)	2015-2018	U.S. Withdrew	Constrained Iran's enrichment to 3.67%; Iran now enriching to 60%+; near-weapons-grade capability achieved
Cyber Norms	N/A	None Exist	No treaty governs cyber weapons targeting nuclear C2, early warning, or critical infrastructure; most dangerous regulatory gap
AI/Autonomous	N/A	None Exist	No framework governs AI in nuclear decision-making, autonomous weapons, or hypersonic targeting; decision compression unconstrained

Economic Warfare and the Fracturing of Global Commerce

Economic coercion has historically served as both an alternative to military conflict and a catalyst for it. The current era's economic warfare campaigns are unprecedented in scope and are accelerating the fragmentation of the global economy into competing blocs, a pattern with direct parallels to the autarky of the 1930s and the economic pressures that drove Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor.

Sanctions Against Russia: Limits of Economic Deterrence

The sanctions imposed on Russia following the February 2022 invasion constitute the most comprehensive economic restrictions ever placed on a major economy. Over 16,000 individual sanctions target Russian banks, oligarchs, energy exports, and technology imports. Despite this, Russia reoriented its economy toward China and other non-Western markets and increased defense spending to approximately 9% of GDP, sustaining its war effort through energy revenues and import substitution. Ukrainian drone strikes have taken an estimated 40% of Russian oil refining capacity offline, yet crude production has declined by only approximately 3%, as Russia redirected exports of unrefined crude to willing buyers in Asia (CSIS, 2026). The West's seizure of approximately \$300 billion in Russian central bank reserves, with the generated interest being directed toward Ukraine aid (\$1 billion from the UK alone),

established a new precedent in economic warfare, one that has prompted China and other nations to accelerate de-dollarization efforts.

U.S.-China Technology Decoupling: The End of Chimerica

The U.S.-China economic relationship, once described as "Chimerica" for its deep interdependence, is fracturing along technological lines. The U.S. semiconductor export controls initiated in October 2022 and expanded in 2024 and 2025 restrict China's access to advanced AI chips, high-bandwidth memory, and advanced chip packaging equipment. China has retaliated with export restrictions on gallium, germanium, antimony, and drone components, materials critical to Western defense and technology industries. Bilateral trade remained substantial at \$690 billion in 2024, but the strategic sectors are decoupling rapidly. The period from 2024 to 2025 has been described as the "definitive end of Chimerica," with the global economy splitting into a bipolar technology ecosystem (Center for European Policy Analysis [CEPA], 2025).

The effectiveness of these controls is contested. Huawei's development of 7-nanometer chips using domestic fabrication and the release of DeepSeek-R1, a competitive AI model trained under export control constraints in January 2025, demonstrated the limits of technology denial strategies. These breakthroughs risk convincing U.S. policymakers to escalate restrictions further, while simultaneously convincing Beijing that the United States seeks to permanently constrain China's technological development, a perception that could harden Chinese resolve regarding Taiwan.

⚠️ WHAT IF: What if economic decoupling convinces Beijing that peaceful reunification is foreclosed?

The parallel to 1941 is instructive. Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor was driven partly by the U.S. oil embargo, which Tokyo concluded was designed to strangle Japan's economy and force capitulation on China. When Japanese leaders concluded that the economic noose would only tighten, the military option appeared less risky than continued strangulation. If Beijing concludes that semiconductor export controls, financial sanctions pressure, and alliance-building in the Indo-Pacific are designed to permanently contain China rather than to shape specific behaviors, the calculus around Taiwan could shift from "wait for favorable conditions" to "act before the window closes." Export controls intended to preserve Western technological advantage could, paradoxically, accelerate the timeline for military confrontation.

► **CONTEMPORARY PARALLEL**

The economic dimension of today's geopolitical competition mirrors the 1930s in structural terms. The collapse of globalized trade in the 1930s, driven by the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, retaliatory trade barriers, and competitive currency devaluations, fragmented the world economy into hostile blocs and removed the economic incentives for cooperation. Today's technology export controls, sanctions regimes, and retaliatory restrictions are creating a similar dynamic: a bifurcated global economy in which the economic costs of conflict diminish as interdependence erodes.

Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1910) famously argued that the economic interdependence of European powers made war irrational and therefore impossible. He was proved tragically wrong in 1914. The contemporary version of this argument, that U.S.-China trade volumes make war unthinkable, faces the same logical vulnerability: economic interdependence creates incentives against conflict, but those incentives can be overwhelmed by security calculations, nationalist pressures, and the very decoupling dynamics that sanctions and export controls set in motion.

The Domestic Dimension: How Internal Politics Drive External Escalation

Historical analysis consistently reveals that domestic political pressures are among the most powerful, and most underappreciated, drivers of international escalation. In every case examined in this paper, the internal politics of the key actors shaped, constrained, or amplified the decisions that led to war.

In 1914, Austria-Hungary's multi-ethnic empire was fracturing along national lines; the assassination provided hardliners with a pretext to settle the Serbian question before internal dissolution made it moot. Germany's leadership feared that time was running against them as Russia industrialized, creating a "now or never" psychology. In the 1930s, Western democracies were paralyzed by war-weary publics, economic depression, and political fragmentation. British public opinion overwhelmingly supported appeasement until March 1939; Chamberlain's popularity soared after Munich. The democratic publics' aversion to war, entirely understandable given the slaughter of 1914 to 1918, functioned as a strategic constraint that aggressors exploited.

Today, political polarization in Western democracies directly affects deterrence credibility. The debate over Ukraine aid in the U.S. Congress, which delayed critical weapons deliveries by months, is a structural parallel to 1930s isolationism. European defense spending, long below the 2% of GDP NATO target, only began rising meaningfully after the 2022 invasion. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes benefit from centralized decision-making that avoids democratic accountability costs. Putin's domestic approval ratings rose after the invasion of Crimea. Xi Jinping has tied his personal legitimacy to Taiwan's "reunification." In

both cases, domestic political dynamics create escalation pressures that are independent of the international strategic calculus.

Blattman's bargaining framework (2022) is particularly illuminating here. His five forces that cause bargaining failures map directly onto the domestic drivers of contemporary escalation. Putin's invasion of Ukraine reflects **unchecked interests** (a personalized autocracy insulated from the costs of war), **misperceptions** (Putin's belief that Ukraine would collapse in days and that Western unity would fracture), and **intangible motives** (the ideological conviction that Ukraine is not a real nation). China's Taiwan posture involves **commitment problems** (Beijing cannot credibly commit to peaceful reunification because future Chinese leaders may reverse any agreement) and **uncertainty** (neither side knows how far the other is willing to escalate). The U.S.-North Korea dynamic is dominated by **private information** (neither side knows the other's true red lines) and **commitment problems** (Pyongyang has no reason to trust U.S. security guarantees, as Libya's Qaddafi discovered after abandoning his nuclear program). Blattman's key insight, that war is "in the error term" because the factors explaining conflict don't predict it well, reinforces the central finding of this paper: escalation chains are probabilistic, not deterministic, and the factors that distinguish a crisis that is resolved peacefully from one that escalates to war are often contingent, fragile, and dependent on individual judgment under extreme pressure.

Blattman's Five Forces of Bargaining Failure Applied to Contemporary Theaters

The table below maps Blattman's five structural forces that cause bargaining failures (2022) against the three primary contemporary conflict theaters, demonstrating how multiple forces operate simultaneously in each theater.

Blattman Force	Russia-Ukraine	China-Taiwan	Iran-Israel
Unchecked Interests	Putin insulated from war costs by authoritarian structure; oligarchs neutralized	Xi's personal legitimacy tied to reunification; PLA expansion unchecked by civilian oversight	IRGC operates as state-within-a-state; ideological commitment overrides economic costs
Uncertainty / Private Info	West unsure of Russia's nuclear red lines; Russia misjudged Western cohesion	U.S. strategic ambiguity on Taiwan defense; China's actual military readiness unknown	Iran's nuclear breakout timeline uncertain; Israel's operational thresholds opaque
Commitment Problems	Russia cannot credibly commit to stopping at current lines; Minsk accords failed	Beijing cannot bind future leaders to peaceful reunification; Taiwan's status inherently revisable	Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) collapsed; no mechanism to verify Iranian compliance
Misperceptions	Putin believed Ukraine would collapse in days; miscalculated Western resolve	Each side may overestimate or underestimate the other's willingness to escalate over Taiwan	Iran underestimated Israeli strike capability; Israel may underestimate Iranian resilience
Intangible Motives	Putin's vision of historical Russia; Ukraine as 'not a real nation' ideology	Century of Humiliation narrative; CCP legitimacy linked to territorial wholeness	Ideological commitment to 'resistance axis'; sectarian identity as strategic driver

New Escalation Domains: Cyber, Space, and AI

The contemporary escalation landscape includes domains that have no historical precedent: cyberspace, outer space, and artificial intelligence. These domains introduce novel vectors for miscalculation and escalation that cannot be fully understood through historical analogy alone.

Cyber Operations as a Potential Sarajevo Moment

Cyber attacks against critical infrastructure occupy an ambiguous position between espionage, sabotage, and acts of war. The 2024 Volt Typhoon campaign, in which Chinese state-sponsored hackers pre-positioned access to U.S. water, energy, and transportation systems, was described by FBI Director Christopher Wray as preparation for "real-world harm" in a Taiwan contingency (FBI, 2024). Russia's GRU has conducted destructive cyber attacks against Ukrainian power grids (2015, 2016), the NotPetya attack (2017, causing \$10 billion in global damage), and ongoing attacks against NATO member communications and logistics.

The danger is that a cyber attack on nuclear command and control, early-warning systems, or dual-use infrastructure could be misinterpreted as preparation for a kinetic first strike, triggering a launch-on-warning response. Unlike the false alarms of the Cold War era (Petrov in 1983), which involved a single sensor malfunction, modern cyber attacks could simultaneously compromise multiple warning systems, creating a more convincing false positive. No arms control treaty addresses cyber weapons. No established norms define what constitutes an act of war in cyberspace. This is arguably the most dangerous gap in the current escalation management architecture.

The Space Domain and Anti-Satellite Weapons

Space has become a contested military domain. Russia's November 2021 anti-satellite test, which destroyed a defunct Soviet satellite and created a debris field of over 1,500 trackable fragments threatening the International Space Station, demonstrated the willingness to weaponize space despite the self-defeating nature of debris creation (NASA, 2021). China has tested multiple anti-satellite systems. The U.S. Space Force, established in 2019, now operates as an independent military branch. Destroying an adversary's reconnaissance or early-warning satellites could be perceived as a prelude to a first strike, creating the same kind of decision-compression pressure that made the July Crisis of 1914 so dangerous.

AI-Enabled Decision Compression

Artificial intelligence introduces a qualitatively new risk to crisis stability. Hypersonic weapons already compress decision timelines from 30 minutes (Cold War ICBM flight time) to as little as 5 to 10 minutes. AI-enabled targeting systems, autonomous weapons platforms, and AI-assisted intelligence analysis further compress the time available for human judgment. The 1914 lesson is instructive: the Schlieffen Plan's rigidity, which required mobilization to proceed on a fixed timetable once initiated, was a form of

decision automation that overtook political control. AI-enabled military systems risk creating a digital equivalent, in which the speed of automated response outpaces the ability of human leaders to intervene, verify, and de-escalate. As Chyba argues in *Daedalus* (2020), new technologies including cyber weapons, hypersonic delivery systems, and AI-enabled autonomous platforms are "eroding" the foundations of strategic stability by compressing decision timelines, creating novel attack vectors against nuclear command and control, and introducing uncertainty about whether a given strike is conventional or nuclear (Chyba, 2020). Krepinevich's analysis for the Center for Strategic and International Studies similarly concludes that advanced weaponry, "both nuclear and non-nuclear," is eroding the boundaries between conventional and nuclear conflict, making protracted great-power war without nuclear escalation increasingly difficult to sustain (Krepinevich, 2024).

The Information Dimension: From Yellow Press to Algorithmic Amplification

The role of media and information in escalation dynamics has evolved dramatically across the historical periods examined in this paper, but the fundamental dynamic remains constant: inflammatory narratives that dehumanize adversaries and distort threat perceptions reduce the political space for compromise and increase the likelihood of conflict.

The "yellow press" of the 1890s and 1900s, exemplified by the Hearst and Pulitzer newspaper empires, inflamed Anglo-German rivalry and contributed to the jingoistic atmosphere that made war seem inevitable. In Germany, the Navy League and Pan-German League used mass media to build public support for Tirpitz's naval program (Bönker, 2012). In the 1930s, state-controlled media in Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union created closed information environments that enabled both aggressive foreign policy and domestic repression. Radio and film became instruments of propaganda at a scale previously impossible.

Today, social media amplification, AI-generated disinformation, and deepfake technology represent a qualitative escalation of information warfare capabilities. Russia's Internet Research Agency and successor organizations have conducted documented influence campaigns targeting elections, alliance cohesion, and public support for Ukraine across NATO countries. China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy and state media ecosystem amplify nationalist narratives around Taiwan. The algorithmic structure of social media platforms, which privileges engagement over accuracy and outrage over nuance, functions as an accelerant for threat narratives. A Sarajevo-like crisis event today would be amplified, distorted, and politically weaponized within hours through channels that did not exist in any previous era.

Conclusion: Constraining Factors, Near-Term Risks, and the Imperative for Action

The convergence of contemporary escalation dynamics represents a historically unusual concentration of risk. The escalation patterns closely parallel three distinct historical periods: **the alliance entanglements and miscalculation risks of 1914, the appeasement dynamics and institutional failures of the 1930s, and the nuclear brinkmanship of the Cold War.** Today's danger is that all three patterns are operating simultaneously rather than sequentially.

Constraining Factors

Nuclear deterrence remains the most powerful restraining force in human history; no nuclear-armed state has ever been invaded by another. **Economic interdependence**, particularly between the U.S. and China (\$690 billion in bilateral trade in 2024), creates costs to conflict that had no pre-1914 or pre-1939 equivalent, though Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1910) made a similar argument about pre-1914 trade and was proved tragically wrong. **Institutional frameworks**, though weakened, still provide channels for crisis communication that did not exist in 1914 or 1939.

Most Dangerous Near-Term Scenarios

Three scenarios represent the highest probability pathways to a direct great-power conflict:

- 1. Accidental NATO-Russia clash in the Baltic or Black Sea.** The density of military operations along NATO's eastern flank, combined with Russia's aggressive air and naval posture, creates the conditions for an incident (a downed aircraft, a ship collision, a misidentified missile launch) that could trigger Article 5 invocation. The Pristina Airport incident of 1999, scaled up to the nuclear era, is the relevant precedent.
- 2. Chinese blockade or military action against Taiwan.** The "Justice Mission" exercises demonstrate rehearsal of exactly this scenario. A blockade that interdicts semiconductor exports would create immediate global economic disruption. U.S. strategic ambiguity leaves unclear whether and how the United States would respond, creating the kind of uncertainty that has historically invited miscalculation.
- 3. Renewed Iran-Israel escalation.** The June 2025 ceasefire was assessed by RAND as a "tactical pause." Iran's nuclear program, now less constrained than at any point since 2015, creates a timeline pressure similar to the countdown dynamics that drove the pre-1914 mobilization cascades.

Critical Stabilizing Actions

The historical record suggests several imperatives:

Restore arms control dialogue. Even imperfect agreements (like SALT I) provided transparency and predictability that reduced miscalculation risk. A post-New START framework, even if less comprehensive, is essential.

Maintain and expand crisis communication channels. The Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved partly through back-channel diplomacy. The current near-absence of U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China military-to-military communication is itself a risk factor.

Reinforce alliance credibility without provocation. The lesson of the 1930s is that ambiguity invites aggression. The lesson of 1914 is that rigid automatic commitments remove room for de-escalation. Effective deterrence requires clear communication of what will be defended, combined with demonstrated capability, while preserving political space for diplomacy.

Establish norms for cyber and AI weapons. The absence of any framework governing cyber attacks on nuclear command and control, early-warning systems, or critical infrastructure is the most dangerous regulatory gap in the current landscape.

“The greatest danger lies not in deliberate aggression but in the space between deterrence failure and escalation management. At some point, luck runs out.”

— Synthesis of the historical record

The question confronting the present era is not whether historical escalation patterns are repeating; they manifestly are. The question is whether the constraining factors unique to the nuclear age, deterrence, interdependence, and surviving institutions, are sufficient to prevent the chains of escalation from reaching their historical conclusion. The answer depends on choices yet to be made.

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