

FROM DETERRENCE TO DIRECT WAR

HOW A U.S.—RUSSIA CONFRONTATION COULD UNFOLD

10 KEY TOPICS EXPLORING THE PATHS, DECISIONS, AND CONSEQUENCES
THAT COULD LEAD FROM TODAY'S TENSIONS TO TOMORROW'S WAR



INTELLIGENCE



DETERRENCE



DECISIONS



CONFLICT



OUTCOMES

ESCALATION IS A CHAIN OF DECISIONS — NOT A SINGLE EVENT

1



THE WARNING BEFORE THE WAR?

Why the CIA Director went to Moscow and what Washington is trying to understand.

2



FROM UKRAINE TO NATO

How the war could cross the alliance border and trigger a NATO response.

3



THE BALTIC TEST

Could Russia challenge NATO with a limited attack to test alliance resolve?

4



ARTICLE 4 TO ARTICLE 5

The political and military decisions that could bring the U.S. into the war.

5



THE FIRST EXCHANGE OF FIRE

When deterrence breaks down and U.S. and Russian forces engage directly.

6



BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD

Cyber, space, sea, infrastructure and other domains where the war would expand.

7



THE REINFORCEMENT RACE

How military build-ups and mobilization could escalate a crisis into a major war.

8



A TWO-THEATER CRISIS

Could Russia exploit U.S. pressures in the Middle East and other global commitments?

9



THE NUCLEAR SHADOW

How a conventional war could approach the nuclear threshold.

10



HOW DOES IT END?

Four possible end states—from de-escalation to nuclear catastrophe.



THIS SERIES EXAMINES PLAUSIBLE PATHWAYS, NOT PREDICTIONS. | THE FUTURE IS SHAPED BY LEADERSHIP, CHOICES, AND THE WILL TO PREVENT WAR.

CC BY 4.0 NEWSPACEECONOMY.CA

WHY THE CIA DIRECTOR WENT TO MOSCOW

WHAT HAPPENED IN AUGUST 2026 AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR U.S.-RUSSIA ESCALATION RISK



KEY IDEA

THE MOSCOW TRIP SIGNALLED SERIOUS U.S. CONCERN WHILE ALSO SHOWING THAT A DIRECT COMMUNICATION CHANNEL REMAINS OPEN.



AUGUST 25–27, 2026

CIA Director John Ratcliffe traveled to Moscow.



RATCLIFFE VISIT

The visit took place this week.



MEETING WITH NARYSHKIN

Ratcliffe met Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service).



PUBLIC REPORTS

Reuters reported that U.S. concerns discussed included the possibility of Russian operations against NATO members, although that was not necessarily the only subject.



PUBLIC DOWNPLAYING BY TRUMP

President Donald Trump publicly downplayed the visit and said he did not believe Putin would attack NATO territory.



WHAT IS CONFIRMED

- ✓ CIA Director John Ratcliffe visited Moscow this week.
- ✓ He met Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's SVR.
- ✓ Reuters reported that U.S. concerns discussed included the possibility of Russian operations against NATO members, although that was not necessarily the only subject.
- ✓ President Donald Trump publicly downplayed the visit and said he did not believe Putin would attack NATO territory.
- ✓ Moscow described the contact as routine and denied plans to attack NATO.
- ✓ Intelligence-to-intelligence communication channels can help deter miscalculation even during high tension.

HOW THIS CONTACT REDUCES ESCALATION RISK



WARNING

U.S. intelligence identifies risks and assesses potential Russian actions.



PRIVATE COMMUNICATION

Direct channel used to convey concerns, seek clarification, and prevent surprises.



DETERRENCE

Clear communication of U.S. and alliance resolve reduces the incentive for risky actions.



DE-ESCALATION OR FURTHER RISK

Outcomes depend on Russian choices and ongoing conditions on the ground.



WHAT IT DOES NOT PROVE

- ✗ No confirmed decision by Russia to attack NATO or any NATO member.
- ✗ No evidence that a direct U.S.-Russia war is inevitable.
- ✗ The topics discussed were not limited to NATO; details of the private agenda remain partly undisclosed.
- ✗ Statements by leaders can change; risks can rise or fall with actions on the ground.

WHY IT MATTERS



INTELLIGENCE WARNING

Allows the U.S. to probe Russian intentions and understand emerging risks early.



ALLIANCE REASSURANCE

Shows allies the U.S. is actively monitoring threats and using every tool to protect them.



CRISIS SIGNALLING

Conveys messages clearly to reduce the chance of misreading or miscalculation.



ESCALATION MANAGEMENT

Keeps a channel open that can prevent incidents from spiraling into armed conflict.



TAKEAWAY

THE VISIT WAS IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT COMBINED WARNING, DETERRENCE, AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION AT A MOMENT OF HEIGHTENED NATO-RUSSIA TENSION.

FROM UKRAINE TO NATO

SCENARIO, NOT PREDICTION

HOW THE WAR COULD CROSS THE ALLIANCE BORDER



KEY IDEA

A DIRECT RUSSIA-NATO CLASH WOULD MOST LIKELY BEGIN WITH AN INCIDENT, MISCALCULATION, SPILLOVER, OR DELIBERATE LIMITED ATTACK RATHER THAN AN IMMEDIATE ALL-OUT INVASION.

POTENTIAL TRIGGERS



MISSILE OR DRONE
CROSSING NATO
AIRSPACE



STRIKE NEAR OR ON
A LOGISTICS HUB
SUPPORTING UKRAINE



AIR INTERCEPT
GONE WRONG



MARITIME CLASH
IN THE BALTIC OR
BLACK SEA



SABOTAGE CAUSING
DEATHS ON NATO
TERRITORY



ATTACK ON
SURVEILLANCE OR
COMMAND ASSETS



NATO HAS RECENTLY
CONDEMNED RUSSIAN
AIRSPACE VIOLATIONS
AND HAS STRENGTHENED
EASTERN-FLANK
DEFENSES WITH MORE
FORCES, AIR DEFENSE,
AND SURVEILLANCE.

PLAUSIBLE ESCALATION PATHWAY

1. INCIDENT



A TRIGGER EVENT
OCCURS NEAR OR
WITHIN NATO
TERRITORY.

2. ATTRIBUTION



INTELLIGENCE AND
EVIDENCE GATHERED
TO DETERMINE
RESPONSIBILITY.

3. ALLIANCE CONSULTATION



NATO MEMBERS
ASSESS FACTS AND
AGREE ON A
COMMON RESPONSE.

4. MILITARY RESPONSE



PROPORTIONATE
MEASURES TAKEN TO
DEFEND ALLIANCE
TERRITORY.

5. RUSSIAN RETALIATION



RUSSIA RESPONDS
WITH ESCALATORY
ACTIONS OF ITS
OWN CHOOSING.

6. DIRECT CLASH



CYCLES OF ACTION
AND COUNTERACTION
LEAD TO OPEN
CONFRONTATION.

ACCIDENT OR DELIBERATE TEST?

ACCIDENTAL SPILLOVER

- SYSTEM FAILURE
- LOST COMMUNICATION
- MISIDENTIFICATION
- UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

VS

INTENTIONAL PROBING

- TEST ALLIANCE RESOLVE
- EXPLOIT GREY ZONES
- GAIN INFORMATION
- CREATE DISRUPTION

WHY THE UNITED STATES GETS INVOLVED



ALLIANCE
COMMITMENTS
UNDER ARTICLE 5



COMMAND
AND CONTROL
LEADERSHIP



UNMATCHED
REINFORCEMENT
CAPACITY



DETERRENCE
CREDIBILITY AT
STAKE



A NATO-RUSSIA WAR WOULD MOST LIKELY BEGIN WITH A LIMITED TRIGGER THAT RAPIDLY CHANGES THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY CALCULUS.



THE BALTIC TEST

SCENARIO, NOT PREDICTION

COULD RUSSIA CHALLENGE NATO WITHOUT LAUNCHING A FULL-SCALE INVASION?



KEY IDEA

A LIMITED PROVOCATION ON NATO'S NORTHEASTERN FLANK COULD BE DESIGNED TO TEST ALLIANCE COHESION WHILE STAYING BELOW THE THRESHOLD OF FULL CONVENTIONAL WAR.

WHAT A LIMITED TEST COULD LOOK LIKE



BORDER INCURSION

Small unit crossing or airspace violation.



DRONE OR MISSILE STRIKE

Limited strike to test response and resolve.



SEVERE CYBERATTACK

Disrupt networks and critical services.



SABOTAGE

Damage to cables, rails, energy, or communications.



MARITIME HARASSMENT

Shadowing, blocking, or dangerous maneuvers.



ATTACK ON MILITARY INFRASTRUCTURE

Strike or intrusion on bases or logistics sites.

WHY A LIMITED TEST COULD APPEAL TO MOSCOW



PROBE ALLIANCE UNITY

Test political will and decision speed among Allies.



IMPOSE POLITICAL PRESSURE

Create fear, division, and demands for restraint.



EXPLOIT AMBIGUITY

Operate in the gray zone below the bar of Article 5.



AVOID IMMEDIATE LARGE-SCALE WAR

Seek gains at low risk while preserving escalation control.

WHAT ANALYSTS ARE WATCHING



UNUSUAL FORCE MOVEMENTS

Unexplained troop, equipment, or logistics shifts.



DISINFORMATION

Narrative campaigns to shape perception and doubt.



FALSE-FLAG RISK

Staged incidents to justify further action.



HYBRID ACTIVITY

Mix of cyber, information, political, and covert tools.



INFRASTRUCTURE INCIDENTS

Outages or disruptions with unclear attribution.



AIR AND SEA PRESSURE

Heightened patrols, incursions, and close approaches.

ESCALATION PATHWAY: A SMALL SPARK, A LARGER RESPONSE



LIMITED PROVOCATION

Gray-zone action to test limits.



DETECT & ASSESS

Early warning and intelligence collection.



CONSULT & DECIDE

Allied coordination and political decision-making.



ALLIANCE RESPONSE

Proportionate, coordinated measures.



DETER & REINFORCE

Strengthen deterrence and resilience to prevent recurrence.

NATO'S DILEMMA

RESPOND TOO WEAKLY



DETERRENCE SUFFERS

- Signals division or hesitation.
- Encourages further testing.
- Raises long-term costs.

RESPOND TOO STRONGLY



ESCALATION RISK RISES

- Miscalculation more likely.
- Crisis could spiral quickly.
- Higher risk of conflict.



ANALYSTS HAVE DISCUSSED THE POSSIBILITY OF RUSSIA SEEKING A LIMITED PROVOCATION TO TEST NATO COHESION, WHILE THERE IS NO PUBLIC EVIDENCE OF THE KIND OF MASSIVE FORCE BUILDUP THAT PRECEDED THE 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE.



TAKEAWAY

A LIMITED CHALLENGE COULD BE DESIGNED TO TEST NATO'S WILL, NOT TO WIN A LARGE WAR IN A SINGLE MOVE.



ARTICLE 4 TO ARTICLE 5

THE DECISIONS THAT COULD BRING THE UNITED STATES INTO A RUSSIA-NATO WAR

SCENARIO,
NOT PREDICTION



KEY IDEA

NATO'S MOVE FROM CONSULTATION TO COLLECTIVE DEFENSE IS A POLITICAL AND LEGAL PROCESS, NOT AN AUTOMATIC BUTTON.

HOW THE PROCESS FROM ARTICLE 4 TO ARTICLE 5 WORKS



HISTORICAL CONTEXT



ARTICLE 5 HAS BEEN INVOKED ONLY ONCE, AFTER THE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 ATTACKS.

MYTH



ARTICLE 5 MEANS AN IDENTICAL RESPONSE FROM EVERY ALLY.

VS.

REALITY



EACH ALLY CHOOSES THE FORM OF ASSISTANCE.

WHAT ARTICLE 5 ACTUALLY MEANS



AN ARMED ATTACK ON ONE ALLY IS CONSIDERED AN ATTACK ON ALL.



EACH ALLY ASSISTS USING ACTION IT DEEMS NECESSARY.



ASSISTANCE MAY OR MAY NOT INVOLVE ARMED FORCE.

POSSIBLE U.S. CONTRIBUTIONS



AIR AND MISSILE DEFENSE



INTELLIGENCE SUPPORT



LOGISTICS AND SUSTAINMENT



NAVAL FORCES



CYBER SUPPORT



TROOP REINFORCEMENT



THE UNITED STATES COULD ENTER A DIRECT CONFLICT THROUGH ALLIANCE DECISIONS MADE AFTER AN ATTACK, ATTRIBUTION REVIEW, AND POLITICAL CONSULTATION.

THE FIRST U.S.-RUSSIA EXCHANGE OF FIRE

SCENARIO,
NOT PREDICTION

WHEN DETERRENCE BECOMES DIRECT COMBAT



KEY IDEA

THE FIRST DIRECT EXCHANGE OF FIRE BETWEEN U.S./NATO AND RUSSIAN FORCES WOULD BE A MAJOR THRESHOLD, BUT IT WOULD NOT AUTOMATICALLY GUARANTEE ALL-OUT WAR.

HOW FIRST CONTACT MIGHT HAPPEN



MISSILE INTERCEPTION OVER NATO TERRITORY

A missile or drone is intercepted inside NATO airspace.



STRIKE ON A BASE OR SHIP

Russian forces strike a U.S. or NATO base, ship, or asset.



AIR-TO-AIR ENGAGEMENT

Russian and U.S./NATO aircraft engage in hostile contact.



ATTACK ON AIR DEFENSES

Russian fires on NATO air defenses or radars.



ESCALATION AFTER A BORDER INCIDENT

A territorial or maritime incident rapidly spirals out of control.

ESCALATION LADDER: THE PATH FROM FIRST SHOT TO FULL CONFLICT



1 RUSSIAN ACTION

Offensive act against U.S./NATO forces or assets.



2 NATO/U.S. DEFENSIVE RESPONSE

Force protects itself and its personnel.



3 CASUALTIES OR EQUIPMENT LOSSES

Losses on either side create pressure to respond.



4 RETALIATORY STRIKE

Proportional or punitive strike is launched.



5 U.S. COUNTERSTRIKE

Broader response targets military capabilities.



6 DIRECT ARMED CONFLICT

Sustained exchange across multiple domains.

CONTAINED CLASH VS SUSTAINED WAR

CONTAINED CLASH

- ✓ SHORT, LIMITED EXCHANGE
- ✓ LOCALIZED IN SPACE AND TIME
- ✓ CLEAR COMMUNICATION CHANNELS
- ✓ POLITICAL SPACE TO DE-ESCALATE
- ✓ DAMAGE CONTAINED
- ✓ RETURN TO DETERRENCE DYNAMIC

VS

SUSTAINED WAR

- ✗ PROLONGED, REPEATED STRIKES
- ✗ SPREAD ACROSS MULTIPLE DOMAINS (AIR, SEA, LAND, SPACE, CYBER)
- ✗ COMMAND AND CONTROL UNDER STRAIN
- ✗ ALLIANCES DRAWN DEEPER INTO FIGHT
- ✗ HIGHER CASUALTIES AND DAMAGE
- ✗ ESCALATION RISK SPIRALS HIGHER

WHY THIS THRESHOLD MATTERS



PUBLIC PRESSURE RISES
Casualties and attacks drive demands for decisive action.



COMMANDERS GAIN URGENCY
The need to act quickly increases the risk of mistakes.



ALLIANCE CREDIBILITY IS TESTED
Allies look for unity, resolve, and reliable commitments.



DE-ESCALATION BECOMES HARDER
Emotions, politics, and sunk costs reduce room to step back.



DIRECT COMBAT DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY MEAN WORLD WAR OR NUCLEAR WAR, BUT IT CREATES A MUCH MORE DANGEROUS ESCALATION ENVIRONMENT.



THE MOST DANGEROUS MOMENT MAY BE THE HOURS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE FIRST EXCHANGE, WHEN LEADERS DECIDE WHETHER TO CONTAIN OR EXPAND THE FIGHT.

THE WAR WOULD NOT STAY ON THE BATTLEFIELD

CYBER, SPACE, SEA, AND INFRASTRUCTURE WOULD BECOME PART OF THE FIGHT



KEY IDEA

A U.S.-RUSSIA WAR WOULD LIKELY EXPAND ACROSS MULTIPLE DOMAINS WELL BEYOND GROUND COMBAT.

SCENARIO,
NOT PREDICTION



LAND

- ✓ TROOP DEPLOYMENTS AND MANEUVERS
- ✓ ARTILLERY AND ROCKET STRIKES
- ✓ SUPPLY LINES AND LOGISTICS



AIR

- ✓ FIGHTER AND BOMBER OPERATIONS
- ✓ UNMANNED AIR SYSTEMS (DRONES)
- ✓ MISSILE DEFENSE AND ANTI-AIR WARFARE



SEA

- ✓ BALTIC, ARCTIC, AND BLACK SEA OPERATIONS
- ✓ SEALANE CONTROL AND CONVOY PROTECTION
- ✓ NAVAL STRIKES AND MARITIME BLOCKADES



CYBERSPACE

- ✓ ATTACKS ON MILITARY AND CIVILIAN NETWORKS
- ✓ DISRUPTION OF COMMUNICATIONS AND DATA SYSTEMS
- ✓ MALWARE, RANSOMWARE, AND DATA THEFT



SPACE

- ✓ SATELLITE COMMUNICATIONS DISRUPTION
- ✓ NAVIGATION AND PNT INTERFERENCE
- ✓ ISR AND MISSILE WARNING SYSTEMS TARGETED



UNDERSEA INFRASTRUCTURE

- ✓ SUBSEA CABLE CUTTING OR TAPPING
- ✓ OFFSHORE ENERGY PIPELINES AND CONNECTORS
- ✓ SEABED SENSORS AND SYSTEMS



ELECTROMAGNETIC WARFARE

- ✓ JAMMING OF RADAR, SATCOM, AND GPS
- ✓ DECEPTONE AND SPOOFING OPERATIONS
- ✓ ELECTROMAGNETIC PULSE (EMP) THREATS



NATO'S DETERRENCE POSTURE



NUCLEAR
CAPABILITIES



CONVENTIONAL
FORCES



MISSILE
DEFENSE



CYBER
CAPABILITIES



SPACE
CAPABILITIES

A CREDIBLE, MULTI-DOMAIN POSTURE DETERS AGGRESSION AND DEFENDS ALLIANCE TERRITORY AND INTERESTS.



WHY CIVILIAN SYSTEMS MATTER



BANKING AND
FINANCIAL
SYSTEMS



COMMUNICATIONS
AND MOBILE
NETWORKS



TRANSPORT AND
LOGISTICS
NETWORKS



ENERGY
PRODUCTION
AND GRID



INTERNET
CONNECTIVITY



PUBLIC
CONFIDENCE AND
SOCIAL STABILITY



MILITARY GOAL

STATES WOULD TRY TO DISRUPT THE OPPONENT'S AWARENESS, MOBILITY, AND COMMAND AND CONTROL—WITHOUT NECESSARILY OCCUPYING TERRITORY EVERYWHERE.



TAKEAWAY

A MODERN GREAT-POWER WAR WOULD SPREAD QUICKLY INTO NETWORKS, SATELLITES, SEALANES, AND SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE.

THE REINFORCEMENT RACE

HOW A LIMITED CLASH COULD BECOME A LARGER EUROPEAN WAR



KEY IDEA

ONCE FIGHTING BEGINS, DEFENSIVE REINFORCEMENT BY EACH SIDE CAN BE READ BY THE OTHER AS PREPARATION FOR A LARGER OFFENSIVE.



NATO

-  FORWARD FORCES REINFORCED
-  AIR AND MISSILE DEFENSES INCREASED
-  U.S. AIRCRAFT DEPLOY
-  NAVAL FORCES REPOSITION
-  ADDITIONAL TROOPS ARRIVE
-  RESERVES ACTIVATED



RUSSIA

-  WESTERN FORCES REINFORCED
-  MISSILE AND AIR ASSETS DISPERSED
-  KALININGRAD DEFENSES STRENGTHENED
-  STRATEGIC AVIATION READINESS INCREASES
-  ADDITIONAL FORMATIONS DEPLOYED
-  NUCLEAR SIGNALLING INTENSIFIES

FACTUAL NOTE



NATO HAS NINE MULTINATIONAL BATTLEGROUPS ON ITS EASTERN FLANK AS OF MID-2026.

WHY MOBILIZATION IS DANGEROUS

-  COMPRESSED DECISION TIME
-  FEAR OF SURPRISE ATTACK
-  LOGISTICS CONGESTION
-  POLITICAL PRESSURE
-  MISINTERPRETATION OF INTENT

OFF-RAMPS

-  MILITARY HOTLINES
-  PAUSE IN DEPLOYMENTS
-  CLARIFIED RED LINES
-  MEDIATION
-  CEASEFIRE TALKS



SCENARIO,
NOT PREDICTION



THE RACE TO REINFORCE CAN TURN A LIMITED CLASH INTO A WIDER WAR
EVEN WHEN BOTH SIDES SAY THEY ARE ACTING DEFENSIVELY.



A TWO-THEATER CRISIS

COULD RUSSIA EXPLOIT U.S. PRESSURE ELSEWHERE?



KEY IDEA

SIMULTANEOUS CRISES CAN STRAIN THE SPEED, CAPACITY, AND POLITICAL ATTENTION NEEDED FOR DETERRENCE.

COMPETING DEMANDS



AIR-DEFENSE
INTERCEPTORS



INTELLIGENCE
ASSETS



SURVEILLANCE
AIRCRAFT



TANKERS



NAVAL FORCES



LOGISTICS



PRECISION
MUNITIONS



POLITICAL
ATTENTION

EUROPE / NATO



HIGH-INTENSITY
CONFLICT RISK
WITH RUSSIA



AIR & MISSILE DEFENSE



GROUND FORCE READINESS



AIR OPERATIONS



ISR & CYBER OPERATIONS



SUSTAINMENT & LOGISTICS



RAPID REINFORCEMENT

U.S. STRATEGIC COMMAND & DECISION HUB



INDO-PACIFIC AND GLOBAL COMMITMENTS



FREEDOM OF
NAVIGATION



GLOBAL ISR
NETWORKS



GLOBAL
TANKER SUPPORT



PARTNER
ENGAGEMENT



HUMANITARIAN
& DISASTER RELIEF

MIDDLE EAST



INSTABILITY &
ESCALATION RISK
WITH IRAN PROXIES



AIR & MISSILE DEFENSE



MARITIME SECURITY



STRIKE & DETERRENCE



FORWARD BASING SUPPORT



SUPPLY CHAINS & LOGISTICS



CRISIS RESPONSE TIME

REPORTS & ANALYSIS



REUTERS REPORTED THAT
RATCLIFFE'S MOSCOW
DISCUSSIONS ALSO
TOUCHED ON RUSSIA'S
RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAN.



ANALYSTS CONSIDERED
WHETHER MOSCOW
MIGHT SEE OPPORTUNITY
WHEN U.S. FORCES ARE
BUSY ELSEWHERE.

SCENARIO, NOT PREDICTION

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR ESCALATION



SLOWER
REINFORCEMENT



HARDER
SIGNALLING



ALLIANCE
ANXIETY



ADVERSARY
OPPORTUNISM



RESOURCE
TRADE-OFFS

WHAT RESTRAINS ESCALATION



ALLIED BURDEN
SHARING



PREPOSITIONED
EQUIPMENT



EUROPEAN
READINESS



DIPLOMACY



INTELLIGENCE
WARNING



A MULTI-THEATER CRISIS CAN MAKE DETERRENCE HARDER BECAUSE THE SAME
HIGH-DEMAND MILITARY ASSETS ARE NEEDED IN MORE THAN ONE PLACE.

THE NUCLEAR SHADOW

HOW A CONVENTIONAL U.S.-RUSSIA WAR COULD APPROACH THE NUCLEAR THRESHOLD



KEY IDEA

NUCLEAR WEAPONS SHAPE EVERY STAGE OF A DIRECT U.S.-RUSSIA WAR, BUT NUCLEAR USE IS NOT AUTOMATIC.



FORCES PUSHING ESCALATION



FEAR OF DEFEAT



THREATS TO
COMMAND SYSTEMS



STRIKES ON
NATIONAL TERRITORY



MISINTERPRETATION



PRESSURE TO
ACT FIRST



NATO SAYS ITS DETERRENCE POSTURE IS BASED ON A MIX OF NUCLEAR, CONVENTIONAL, MISSILE DEFENSE, CYBER, AND SPACE CAPABILITIES.

1



POLITICAL NUCLEAR WARNINGS

LEADERS USE STATEMENTS, DOCTRINE, AND SIGNALS TO DETER AND DISCOURAGE ADVERSARY ACTION.

2



EXERCISES AND SIGNALS

NUCLEAR EXERCISES, TESTS, AND PUBLIC SIGNALS ARE USED TO DEMONSTRATE RESOLVE.

3



READINESS CHANGES

FORCES RAISE ALERT LEVELS, HARDEN FACILITIES, AND PREPARE SYSTEMS FOR POTENTIAL USE.

4



BOMBER OR FORCE MOVEMENTS

STRATEGIC ASSETS DEPLOY OR REPOSITION CLOSER TO THE CONFLICT THEATER OR LAUNCH ROUTES.

5



EXPLICIT THREATS

CLEAR WARNINGS THAT FURTHER ACTION WILL TRIGGER SEVERE OR NUCLEAR CONSEQUENCES.

6



POSSIBLE LIMITED NUCLEAR USE

A LIMITED NUCLEAR STRIKE MAY BE USED TO COERCE, PUNISH, OR BREAK AN ADVERSARY'S WILL.

7



RISK OF STRATEGIC ESCALATION

RETALIATION DYNAMICS COULD SPIRAL INTO RAPID EXCHANGE AND WIDER, STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WAR.



FORCES RESTRAINING ESCALATION



MUTUAL VULNERABILITY



SURVIVAL INCENTIVES



MILITARY-TO-MILITARY
COMMUNICATION



INTELLIGENCE CHANNELS



THIRD-PARTY DIPLOMACY

MYTH



THE FIRST MAJOR CLASH GUARANTEES NUCLEAR WAR.

REALITY



LEADERS STILL FACE CHOICES ABOUT SIGNALS, RESTRAINT, AND DE-ESCALATION.



TAKEAWAY

THE NUCLEAR SHADOW MAKES EVERY CONVENTIONAL DECISION MORE DANGEROUS, ESPECIALLY IF LEADERS FEAR THEY ARE LOSING CONTROL.

SCENARIO, NOT PREDICTION

HOW DOES IT END?

FOUR POSSIBLE END STATES OF A U.S.–RUSSIA CONFRONTATION



KEY IDEA

ESCALATION IS A CHAIN OF DECISIONS.

THE END STATE DEPENDS ON WHETHER LEADERS CONTAIN, PROLONG, OR INTENSIFY THE CONFLICT.

1

CONTAINED INCIDENT



LIMITED ENGAGEMENT,
RAPID COMMUNICATION,
MUTUAL STAND-DOWN,
RETURN TO DETERRENCE



TRIGGER

- ACCIDENT, MISIDENTIFICATION, OR BORDER INCIDENT
- LIMITED DAMAGE OR LOSSES



MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- IMMEDIATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION
- LIMITED MILITARY RESPONSE
- POLITICAL WILL TO DE-ESCALATE
- RAPID MUTUAL STAND-DOWN



OFF-RAMP OR OUTCOME

- PARTIES STEP BACK
- INVESTIGATION AND CLARIFICATION
- RETURN TO DETERRENCE POSTURE
- TENSIONS REMAIN, BUT STABLE

2

LIMITED REGIONAL WAR



REPEATED EXCHANGES,
REINFORCEMENT,
NEGOTIATED CEASEFIRE,
UNSETTLED AFTERMATH



TRIGGER

- ESCALATING BORDER FIGHTING OR STRIKES
- CROSS-BORDER RAIDS OR AIR CAMPAIGNS



MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- LIMITED GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE
- INCREASING FORCES AND FIREPOWER
- ALLIED SUPPORT AND REINFORCEMENT
- NEGOTIATIONS UNDERWAY



OFF-RAMP OR OUTCOME

- CEASEFIRE OR ARMISTICE AGREED
- PARTIAL WITHDRAWALS
- DISPUTED TERRITORY OR GRAY ZONE
- INSTABILITY LIKELY TO PERSIST

3

PROLONGED CONVENTIONAL WAR



MULTIPLE DOMAINS,
MAJOR MOBILIZATION,
HEAVY ECONOMIC AND
MILITARY STRAIN, LONG CONFLICT



TRIGGER

- WIDESPREAD STRIKES
- MAJOR OFFENSIVES
- FAILURE OF DIPLOMACY



MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- LAND, AIR, SEA, CYBER, AND SPACE
- LARGE-SCALE MOBILIZATION
- SANCTIONS AND ECONOMIC WARFARE
- HIGH CASUALTIES AND ATTRITION



OFF-RAMP OR OUTCOME

- EXHAUSTION DRIVES NEGOTIATIONS
- COMPLEX PEACE SETTLEMENT
- LONG-TERM MILITARIZATION
- HIGH COSTS FOR BOTH SIDES

4

NUCLEAR ESCALATION



COERCIVE SIGNALLING,
POSSIBLE LIMITED
NUCLEAR USE,
DANGER OF STRATEGIC EXCHANGE



TRIGGER

- EXISTENTIAL THREAT PERCEIVED
- CONVENTIONAL DEFEAT IMMINENT
- NUCLEAR COERCION OR STRIKES



MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

- NUCLEAR ALERTS AND SIGNALLING
- POSSIBLE LIMITED NUCLEAR USE
- RISK OF STRATEGIC EXCHANGE
- GLOBAL CATASTROPHIC CONSEQUENCES



OFF-RAMP OR OUTCOME

- SURVIVAL DRIVES CEASEFIRE TALKS
- NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION AGREEMENTS
- ARMS CONTROL EFFORTS (IF POSSIBLE)
- LASTING GLOBAL INSTABILITY

WHAT SHAPES THE END STATE



BATTLEFIELD RESULTS
GAINS, LOSSES, AND
MILITARY MOMENTUM



ALLIANCE COHESION
UNITY, SUPPORT, AND
BURDEN-SHARING



DOMESTIC POLITICS
PUBLIC PRESSURE AND
LEADERSHIP CALCULUS



COMMAND-AND-CONTROL
STABILITY
DECISION-MAKING UNDER
STRESS



COMMUNICATIONS
CRISIS CHANNELS AND
INFORMATION SIGNALS



OUTSIDE MEDIATION
THIRD-PARTY INFLUENCE
AND DIPLOMATIC SPACE



EVEN AFTER DIRECT COMBAT BEGINS, POLITICAL AND MILITARY DECISIONS
DETERMINE WHETHER THE CONFLICT IS CONTAINED OR EXPANDED.

SCENARIO,
NOT PREDICTION

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSE NOTICE

Copyright © 2026 NEWSPACEECONOMY.CA. Except where otherwise noted, the original content of this document is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. A copy of the license is available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

NO ENDORSEMENT

References to organizations, products, services, technologies, publications, or individuals do not constitute or imply endorsement, recommendation, sponsorship, or approval by the author or publisher. Reuse of this document must not be represented as endorsed by the original author, publisher, or any person or organization identified for attribution.

ACCURACY AND COMPLETENESS

The information in this document is provided in good faith and was believed to be accurate at the time of publication. The author and publisher do not guarantee that the information is complete, current, error-free, or suitable for every purpose. Readers should independently verify information that may affect important decisions.

Feedback and Suggestions

This document is revised as its material is corrected and extended. Corrections, omissions, and suggestions for what a future edition should cover are all welcome, and are read by the people who maintain it. The most useful feedback names the page or the figure it is about, says what is wrong or missing, and — where it is a correction — points at a source. Feedback about the document as a whole, including whether it answered the question you opened it with, is just as welcome.

[Share your feedback on this document](#)

