NEGOTIATION COUNCIL GENEVA

INSIGHTS

MASTERING CONFLICT DE-ESCALATION IN NEGOTIATION WITH THE SCHRANNER CONCEPT®

Pragmatic Strategies to Navigate and Resolve Deadlocks

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MASTERING CONFLICT DE-ESCALATION

IN NEGOTIATION WITH THE SCHRANNER CONCEPT®

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Part I: Understanding the Landscape: Contemporary Challenges in Negotiation and De-escalation

In this introductory section, we will briefly examine the pressing challenges facing negotiation and conflict de-escalation today.

International relations have never been as complex and multifaceted as they are in the current geopolitical climate. Contemporary international negotiation no longer relies solely on traditional, bilateral diplomacy; instead, it has evolved into a multidimensional process involving multilateral institutions and transnational actors. This expanded framework reflects the broader scope of global diplomacy, which now encompasses not only the prevention of inter-state wars but also the management of non-state violence, hybrid warfare, and global crises such as pandemics and climate change.[1] Additionally, in a time marked by transactional diplomacy,[2] it became increasingly clear that conventional, theory-heavy concepts of negotiation - are no longer sufficient. Today's negotiators must be prepared to operate in unpredictable, high-pressure environments that demand not only deep subject-matter expertise, but also flexibility, resilience, and the ability to engage assertively with tough negotiation styles.

These transformations have significantly complicated efforts at conflict de-escalation, which increasingly requires navigating a landscape where actors, motivations, and power structures are fluid and often ambiguous. In many cases, today's conflicts are not between clearly defined state actors but involve insurgent groups, militias, proxies, and cyber actors – each with different incentives and vulnerabilities.[3] As a result, de-escalation efforts can no longer rely on conventional diplomatic tools alone; they demand adaptive negotiation strategies that account for fragmentation, asymmetry, and the erosion of established rules and norms.

This shift is clearly reflected in the -

the current global conflict environment.

The international arena has experienced a profound trans-formation in the post-Cold War era. With the collapse of the bipolar world order, a new wave of democratization and the globalization of information and economic influence generated unprecedented optimism for a more just, democratic, and interconnected global system. Many envisioned a future marked by cooperation and peace; however, these aspirations were soon dissolved by a stark reality: violent conflict did not disappear, it evolved. Rather than large-scale wars between great powers, the global security landscape became increasingly defined by complex internal conflicts. While fears of a third world war decreased, intrastate violence (often involving non-state actors, civil wars, and insurgencies) emerged as one of the most pressing threats to international peace and security. This shift reflects a structural and conceptual metamorphosis in the nature of conflict.[4] Figure 1 illustrates the number of active state-based conflicts in 2024, highlighting the enduring and widespread nature of contemporary violence.

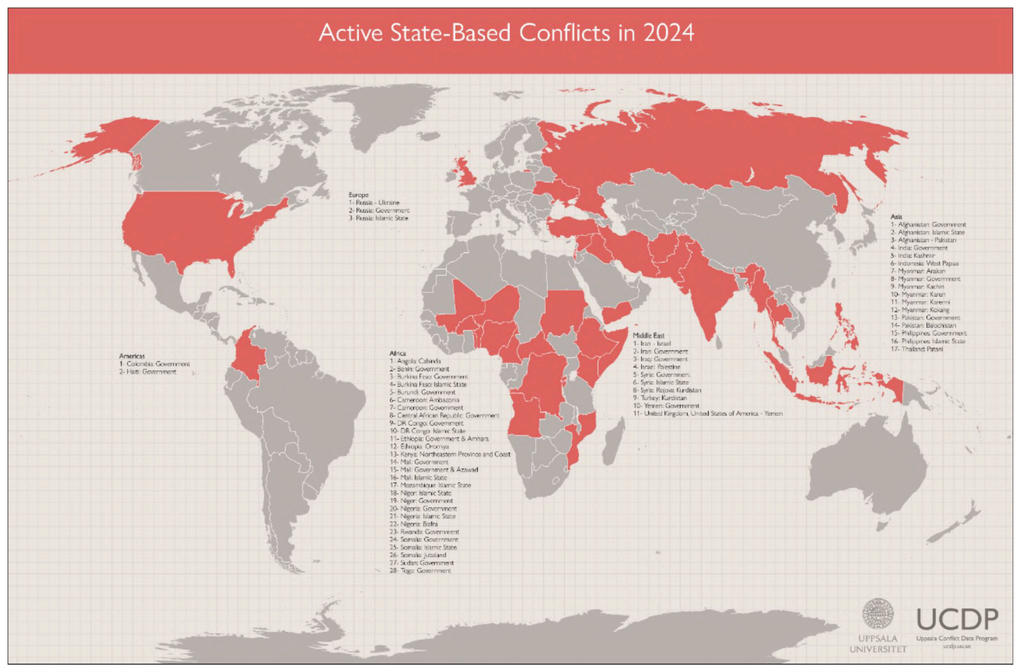

Fig 1

Furthermore, recent data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) underscores a marked deterioration in global security dynamics (Fig. 2).[5] Over the past five years, the number of active armed conflicts has doubled, with 2024 witnessing an estimated one in eight individuals globally exposed to conflict. Currently, more than 50 countries fall within categories designated as experiencing extreme, high, or turbulent levels of political violence, with Palestine, Myanmar, Syria, and Mexico registering among the most severely affected contexts. In the past twelve months alone, there has been a 25% increase in recorded incidents of political violence. Ukraine has emerged as both the most violent country, averaging over 790 events per week, accounting for 26% of all such incidents worldwide, and the most lethal, with over 37,000 conflict-related fatalities documented.

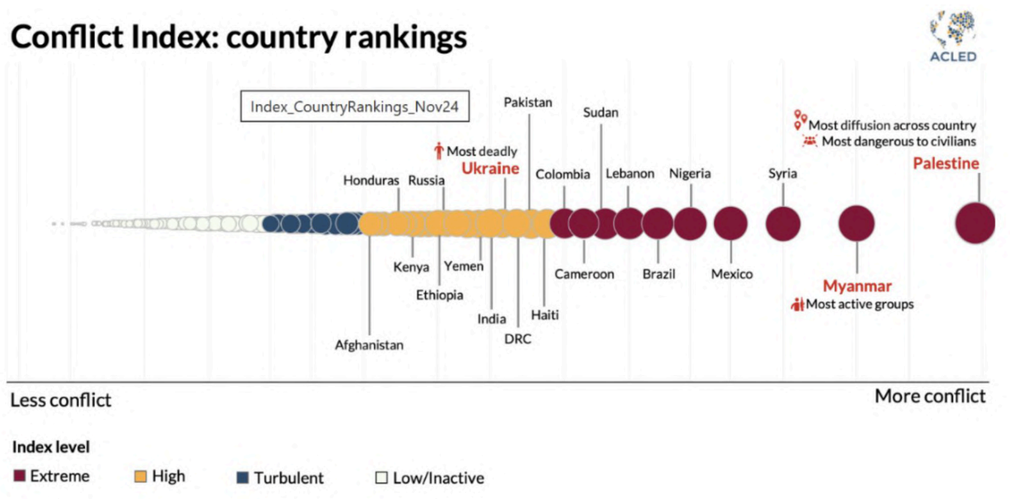

Fig 2

This sharp escalation cannot be understood in isolation from broader systemic drivers. The intensification of conflict is occurring in parallel with the effects of climate-induced shocks, which are placing increased strain on already resource-constrained comm-unities. These compounding stressors are not only amplifying the risk of violence but also undermining local -

resilience and governance. Forecasts suggest that, if current trajectories persist, political violence could result in up to 20,000 deaths per month by 2025.[6]

This short introduction helps us contextualize the current crisis landscape. The data suggest an urgent need for renewed commitment to conflict de-escalation.

Theoretical Foundations: Conflict Escalation and De-escalation in Contemporary Negotiation

1. Understanding Conflict Escalation

Rationalist approaches to conflict research in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies are generally characterized by their tendency to conceptualize conflicts as the outcomes of latent social structures that precede the conflict itself. In contrast, constructivist research understands conflict as a phenomenon deeply embedded in the social world, arising within the framework of discursively constructed realities. From this perspective, conflicts are not merely triggered by underlying structures but emerge through ongoing social interactions and the construction of meaning.[7]

These differing epistemological approaches have influenced how scholars interpret the origins and directions of a conflict. Over the course of the twentieth century, scholarly understanding of conflict has expanded significantly, yet, so too has the scale and complexity of violent conflict globally. This underscores the urgent need not only to deepen our knowledge of conflict dynamics, but to strengthen our practical capacities to de-escalate destructive conflicts.[8] Addressing this need forms the core focus of this study.

Before turning to the processes and strategies of conflict de-escalation, however, it is essential to first examine how conflicts escalate.

From domestic disagreements, such as a partner refusing to do the dishes, to collective actions like labour strikes demanding higher wages, or political disputes between governments and opposition groups, conflict is a pervasive element of social life. However, the nature and intensity of conflicts vary widely across these different domains. Most conflicts remain minor, superficial, and easily resolved. Only a small subset evolves into protracted or organized forms of collective violence, such as armed conflict. Understanding how and why certain conflicts escalate – transforming from everyday disagreements into issues of broader societal significance – is therefore critical. This transformation, commonly referred to as conflict escalation, broadly denotes a process of intensification: an increase in both the scale of the conflict and the severity of the methods used by the involved parties.[9]

On a similar note, ZeevWinstok pointed out that conflicts between intimate partners often emerge within a context of interpersonal discord; however, not all disagreements necessarily develop into full-blown conflicts. Many such tensions can be addressed through normative mechanisms, such as dialogue, mutual agreement, compromise, or concession. Yet, these methods are not always sufficient or employed. Conflict escalates into violence when one or both individuals consistently attempt to impose their will on the other through coercive means. Over time, this may lead to increasingly severe forms of violence.

Whether referring to the intensification of a single conflict episode or the cumulative escalation of recurring violent encounters, escalation denotes a direction marked by the progressive intensification of aggression.[10]

Understanding conflict escalation as a progressive intensification of disagreement (whether in inter-personal, social, or political settings) provides a crucial foundation for practical intervention. Hence, in this study we will observe when, in conflict escalation, we can find a "window of opportunity" to de-escalate. Before doing so, we will briefly introduce Glasl's escalation model, which offers a process-oriented framework for examining how conflicts develop over time. Glasl presents his nine-stage model conceptualizes escalation not as a linear outcome, but as a dynamic, downward trajectory in which parties gradually lose the capacity for constructive engagement. By iden-tifying distinct stages, from tension and miscommunication to open hostility and mutual destruction, Glasl provides a valuable tool for diagnosing conflict intensity and determining appropriate forms of intervention.

2. Glasl's Escalation Model: A Processual Framework for Intervention

Conflict escalation can be prevented by early detection and rapid response systems and by the establishment of ongoing structures to monitor and resolve conflicts as they arise.[11] One of the most widely used frameworks for diagnosing and responding to such conflict dynamics is Friedrich Glasl's nine-stage model of conflict escalation (fig. 3).[12]

Friedrich Glasl's nine-stage model of conflict escalation is commonly organized into three overarching phases, each reflecting a deepening severity in conflict dynamics and a corresponding decline in the potential for constructive resolution:[13]

- Stages 1–3 (Win–Win): In this initial phase, disagreements remain rational and manageable. Dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative problem-solving are still viable, with all parties recognizing the possibility of achieving shared outcomes.

- Stages 4–6 (Win–Lose): Emotions begin to dominate, leading to increased polarization. Parties seek to outmaneuver one another, communication deteriorates, and cooperative engagement gives way to strategic manipulation. The focus shifts toward winning at the other's expense.

- Stages 7–9 (Lose–Lose): The conflict enters a destructive spiral, where the original issues often become secondary to the goal of harming the opponent, even at personal cost. Rationality and empathy are largely eclipsed, and the potential for voluntary resolution diminishes significantly. At this stage, high-level diplomacy or external intervention is often required.

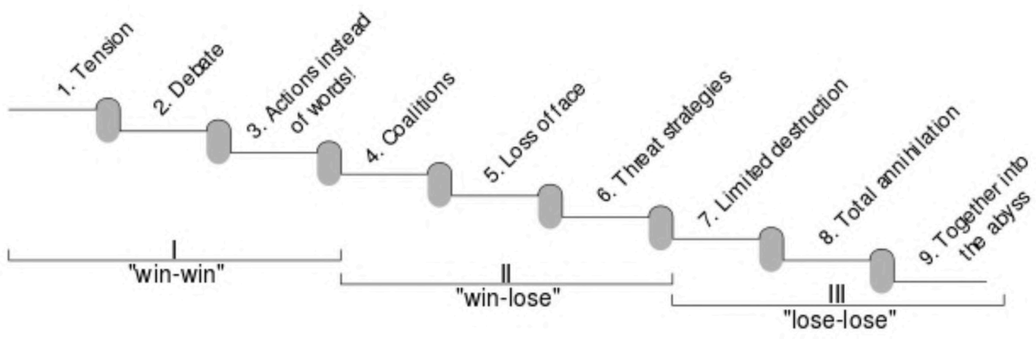

Fig 3

Let us spell this point out.[14] In the early stages of escalation, Glasl suggests that parties remain aware of emerging tensions yet attempt to manage them through rational, controlled interaction. Initial efforts at resolution are cooperative in nature and focus primarily on impersonal factors, e.g., organizational processes, structures, and procedures. However, as the conflict evolves, complexity increases while cognitive openness narrows, creating conditions for deeper polarization.

According to Glasl, Stage 1 is characterized by attempts at collaboration, intermittently disrupted by friction and miscommunication. Parties begin to adopt more rigid positions, and discourse becomes marked by attempts to persuade rather than to explore mutual interests. A psychological distancing process – what Glasl describes as "skin formation" – emerges, creating a perceptual barrier between the parties. By Stage 2, interaction becomes increasingly adversarial. Although cooperative intentions persist, they are increasingly mixed with competitive motives. Each party perceives itself as slightly superior, treating the other as less legitimate. Polarization intensifies as discussions devolve into ideological contests. Arguments are framed in binary terms (e.g., "either/or" dilemmas), and parties begin to deploy rhetorical tactics aimed at undermining the other's position rather than advancing understanding. Stage 3 marks the transition from words to action. Verbal engagement gives way to symbolic or material "deeds". In other words, communication shifts toward non-verbal signals – gestures, tone, and symbolic actions – which are highly susceptible to distortion. Mis-interpretation becomes wide-spread, reinforcing negative assumptions and fuelling escalation. Internally, group cohesion solidifies, spokespersons emerge, and social pressure increases for conformity and loyalty.

In the second main phase of escalation, the relationship between parties becomes the primary source of conflict. Mutual perceptions are increasingly shaped by stereotypes and "self-fulfilling prophecies", deepening psychological distance. Trust deteriorates, respect erodes, and overt hostility emerges. The conflict is no longer viewed as solvable through cooperation; rather, resolution is imagined only through the marginalization or exclusion of the other. At Stage 4, motives shift toward a zero-sum, win/lose orientation.

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Parties begin mobilizing support, not yet to overpower the other side, but to affirm their worldview and identity. Put differently, coalitions are formed not primarily for strategic dominance, but for symbolic solidarity. Each side seeks validation from third parties who share their values and grievances. These "affinity coalitions" reinforce polarized self- and enemy-images: the in-group is idealized, while the out-group is demonized. Perceptions are filtered through confirmation bias, reinforcing a rigid moral dichotomy between self and other. In Stage 5, misrepresentation and moral condemnation intensify. Uncontrolled incidents are interpreted as evidence of the opponent's fundamentally immoral nature. Parties now perceive the conflict as existential, framing it in terms of identity survival and legitimacy. Dehumanizing language and behaviour become more prevalent. The self is seen as the embodiment of virtue, while the adversary is cast as malicious or illegitimate. This binary moral framing locks parties into rigid, high-stakes confrontation, with little - room for empathy or compromise. By Stage 6, the conflict dynamic becomes dominated by threats and coercive pressure. Unlike earlier stages, where threats were sporadic, they now define the parties' strategic interaction. However, threats often provoke the very aggression they intend to deter. To maintain credibility, parties feel compelled to follow through on punitive threats, often escalating beyond initial intentions. This leads to "overdesign" and "overreaction", as each side prepares for worst-case scenarios. Threats become self-reinforcing, escalating the conflict further and reducing the space for constructive engagement.

In the final phase of escalation, confrontations reach a point of existential hostility. The opponent is no longer viewed as a human counterpart but as an objectified obstacle. Communication breaks down entirely, and destructive intent dominates. The conflict becomes self-perpetuating, with no pursuit of mutual gain, only the infliction of loss. Parties come to believe that total confrontation is inevitable. At Stage 7, the primary goal becomes inflicting tangible harm on the adversary's capacity to exert power. Attacks are directed at the infrastructure of influence, such as leadership, enforcement mechanisms, or reputational capital. While rational calculation is diminished, these actions offer psychological compensation for the perceived loss of control or dignity. Destructive strategies escalate into reciprocal retaliation, fuelling a tit-for-tat logic that rapidly accelerates conflict -

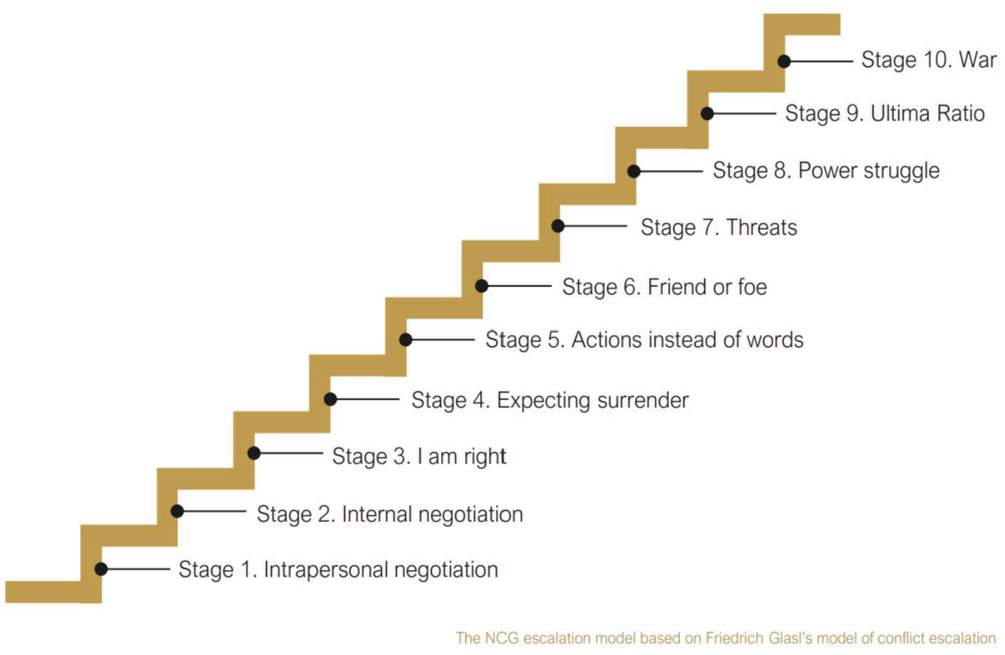
intensity. By Stage 8, the conflict enters a stage of strategic devastation. Rather than merely weakening the other side's capabilities, parties now aim to destroy core "power nerves", i.e., the trust, credibility, and legitimacy underpinning the opponent's existence. This might involve discrediting leadership, destabilizing institutions, or rupturing internal cohesion. Escalation becomes irrational: prestige and revenge override considerations of cost, outcome, or sustainability. In the final stage (Stage 9), all restraint vanishes. The conflict takes on a logic of annihilation, where parties seek total destruction of the adversary, even at the expense of their own survival. Violence becomes indiscriminate, and third parties or observers are forced to choose sides or risk being swept into the collapse. Echoing the metaphor of thermonuclear war, all destructive mechanisms are activated simultaneously. The conflict assumes a suicidal trajectory, where destruction itself becomes the only perceived resolution.

Mediation is defined as a voluntary process in which disputing parties engage a professional, impartial, and mutually accepted third party to facilitate dialogue. Importantly, Glasl's model also demonstrates that mediation is not universally applicable. Different stages of escalation require different forms of intervention. Mediation is particularly effective in the mid-range stages, when communication and recognition of mutual interests remain possible. However, once a conflict progresses into stages of entrenched hostility or open warfare (stages 7-9 in Glasl's model), mediation alone is insufficient. These higher-intensity phases necessitate high-powered diplomatic engagement, often led by state actors or international institutions capable of exerting leverage or managing large-scale negotiations.[15]

In the following section, we delve more deeply into this critical phase by introducing our reinterpretation of the escalation process. Building on Glasl's framework, we propose the existence of a window of opportunity, positioned between Stage 9 and what we conceptualize as a potential Stage 10. This transitional space, while narrow, may still offer opportunities for strategic intervention before full systemic collapse occurs. By identifying this opening, we aim to expand current understandings of when and how conflict de-escalation remains possible.

Part II: New Approaches in Negotiation and Conflict De-Escalation

Etymologically, the term "conflict" derives from the Latin verb confligere, meaning to "fight", "battle" or "struggle". The concept of "escalation", on the other hand, is rooted in the Latin noun scalae, which translates to "steps", "stairs", or "scaling", metaphorically suggesting a process of increasing intensity or height.[16] We have developed a comprehensive model of conflict escalation, which is inspired by the influential framework proposed by Friedrich Glasl (as presented above). This model delineates the progression of conflicts into ten distinct steps, providing a nuanced understanding of how conflicts, whether between individuals, institutions, organizations, or states, can escalate toward the extreme outcome of war (fig. 4).



The NCG escalation model based on Friedrich Glasl's model of conflict escalation

Fig 4

or one party may require something that the counterpart firmly opposes.[17]

Negotiation, in this context, begins with an introspective evaluation of whether or not to confront the conflict. This internal process is generally undertaken by the primary decision-maker, who must assess the relative advantages and disadvantages of taking immediate action. The decision-making process involves balancing a cost-benefit analysis: What potential gains may result from addressing the conflict immediately, potentially provoking a response from the counterpart? Alternatively, is it strategically more prudent to delay intervention, observing the situation's evolution before committing to a course of action?[18]

At this stage, the evaluation is inherently subjective, influenced by the decision-maker's prior experiences and perceptions of past conflicts. At the governance level, this intrapersonal negotiation extends beyond personal considerations, incorporating a broader historical and geopolitical framework. Decision-makers' assessments are guided not only by their immediate strategic objectives but also by their interpretations of past events, the broader historical context, and their long-term geopolitical ambitions.[19]

Stage 2: Internal Negotiations

Following the decision to address a conflict, the subsequent phase involves securing internal alignment and mobilizing support. This process, referred to as internal negotiations, -

is a critical step in preparing for any form of external engagement. It entails not only strategic planning but also the careful management of relationships, influence, and legitimacy within the actor's immediate political, institutional, or social environment. The literature suggests that the outcomes of internal negotiations have a significant impact on the trajectory and effectiveness of external negotiations.[20]

In political contexts, internal negotiations typically involve identifying and mobilizing key stakeholders who can reinforce the decision-maker's position. These may include institutional sponsors, loyal advisors, political allies, and bureaucratic actors whose backing is essential for legitimizing the escalation of the conflict or the pursuit of formal negotiations. This internal consolidation is both strategic and symbolic, signalling to external actors that the decision-maker is acting from a position of strength and unity.

The process is, however, inherently asymmetrical. Decision-makers frequently surround themselves with like-minded individuals or "yes-men" advisors, i.e., those who are more inclined to validate than to question the chosen course of action. While such supportive voices can help build momentum and coherence, the exclusion of dissenting perspectives can limit critical reflection, reducing strategic adaptability.[21] Nonetheless, constructive criticism remains crucial in this preparatory stage, as it contributes to refining objectives, identifying risks, and stress-testing - negotiation positions.

Furthermore, in international contexts, states often seek to strengthen their position by invoking legal norms and multilateral frameworks. Instruments such as the UN Charter, international human-itarian law, and international criminal law are frequently employed to legitimize positions and attract normative support.[22]

Internal negotiations are not exclusive to political arenas. In corporate or institutional settings, they may involve informal consultations with colleagues, senior managers, or board members whose interests align with the resolution of the conflict.[23] Therefore, across domains, individuals perceived as cooperative or supportive are typically involved early, while more critical or oppositional actors are engaged selectively, if at all.[24]

Stage 3: I Am Right

When the outcome of an intrapersonal negotiation is validated by support collected through internal deliberation, the decision-maker often experiences a heightened sense of confidence in the correctness of their position.[25] This internal affirmation typically paves the way for the next step: the selective gathering of external evidence that corroborates this interpretation and legitimizes impending actions.

In the political domain, for instance, a leader may ground their position in international law, engaging in selective

interpretation of legal norms. In fact, rather than existing as a fixed set of normative rules separate from international politics, international law often functions as a dynamic tool in hegemonic contestation, a framework through which political actors articulate their interests as legal rights and duties. Controversies in areas such as the law of peace, human rights, trade, and globalization further illustrate how international law is mobilized to make particular political preferences appear universal.[26] For instance, by invoking principles such as jus ad bellum (the right to war), political leaders may construct a legitimizing narrative that both rationalizes and facilitates the escalation of conflict, including the eventual use of force.[27]

A parallel dynamic can be observed in business negotiations. Once intrapersonal and internal alignment has been achieved, the decision-maker often seeks validation from trusted colleagues or internal stakeholders. This support increases the decision-maker's confidence in their choice. For example, prior to entering a contentious negotiation, a decision-maker might consult the organization's legal counsel. If the legal team concludes there is a "well over 50% chance" of prevailing, this preliminary assessment fortifies the negotiator's position. To further consolidate this confidence, a second opinion may be solicited from an external law firm. When this opinion aligns with the internal assessment, the decision-maker's conviction is further reinforced.[28]

Not only this multi-level validation – occurring at personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels – often strengthens an individual's position, but also this reinforced conviction can reduce willingness to consider other viewpoints. When opposing parties engage in similar internal justifications and become equally confident in their stances, the likelihood of stalemate or conflict escalation rises significantly.

Stage 4: Expecting Surrender

Asserting the correctness of one's own position implicitly entails a judgment that the opposing party is in error. Through processes of internal deliberation and selective interpretation of information, subjective evaluations are often elevated to the status of objective truths.[29] This transformation generates an expectation that the counterpart will ultimately acknowledge their alleged misjudgement, recognize the untenability of their position, and concede. Such assumptions are typically grounded in the belief that the legitimacy of one's stance is so compelling that it will exert persuasive or coercive pressure on the other party to surrender. [30]

However, this expectation is often too optimistic and strategically flawed. It assumes a quick and uncontested resolution, without considering that the other side may have gone through a similar process of internal justification, possibly with input from legal advisors or external validation. When both parties believe their positions are (legally and morally) justified, it becomes more -

likely that neither will be willing to back down. This dynamic is reinforced by overconfidence, a well-documented bias that has been linked to a wide range [31] of high-stakes failures, including wars, strikes, litigation, entrepreneurial collapse, and financial bubbles. As Plous notes, "No problem in judgment and decision making is more prevalent and more potentially catastrophic than overconfidence." [32] Therefore, when both sides enter a dispute convinced not only of the correctness but also the superiority of their stance, the potential for mutual intransigence significantly increases.

In short, underestimating how strongly the other side believes in their position – and the resources they have to defend it – can lead to serious misjudgements, rising the likelihood of conflict escalation rather than de-escalation.

Stage 5: Actions Instead of Words

As both parties hold firmly to their respective positions, each grounded in a perception of legitimacy, they often move from rhetoric to action (e.g., official statements to the opposing side or the public, reiterating positions and, for the first time, introducing [33] potential negative consequences. From a speech act theory perspective, the issuance of these documents constitutes a performative declaration that alters the relational structure between the parties involved. The conflict moves from the informal to the formal domain, where legal, diplomatic, or organizational procedures begin to constrain the room for maneuver.

At this stage, what was once a potentially manageable conflict becomes formalized and entrenched, reducing the likelihood of a straightforward resolution. This shift is often internally justified as necessary: "Enough talk. The other side must understand the seriousness of our position - even if they refuse to accept it. It's time for action."

Stage 6: Friend or Foe

As the conflict grows, it becomes visible to a wider audience. This increased attention changes the nature of the conflict. It is no longer a private disagreement but a public issue that others begin to take sides on. [34] The conflict starts to feel more legitimate and is often framed as a just cause that must be defended. [35]

At this point, the individual or group leading the conflict is often fully convinced of the rightness of their position. They are less open to criticism or warnings, which are seen as distractions or even signs of disloyalty. Talking to critics feels like a waste of time and energy. Instead, the focus shifts to surrounding oneself with people who agree and show support. This creates an inner circle of loyal allies, i.e., people who reinforce shared beliefs and reduce doubt. Those who disagree are no longer just offering alternative views; they are seen as opponents or even enemies.

This dynamic has been widely studied in intergroup and international conflict research. Perceptions during conflict are often biased: opposing sides tend to exaggerate the negativity or hostility

of each other's actions, while judging their own behaviour as reasonable or justified. In times of crises, individuals and groups also process information more narrowly, relying on stereotypes and simplified reasoning. As a result, adversaries often appear more threatening than they actually are, while one's own actions are seen as less aggressive and more legitimate than they may appear to the other side.[36] Thus, the group becomes more confident, united, and committed to winning. The sense of "us versus them" grows stronger.

This groupthink dynamic is also reflected in organizations. In leadership teams or executive environments, there is often a tendency to surround oneself with loyal supporters, those who validate decisions and avoid disagreement. Prendergast describes this as "yes-man" behaviour, where subordinates shape their responses to align with leaders' expectations, at the cost of honest and effective communication.[37]

A similar pattern happens in international politics. Alliances become crucial at this stage, ideally, a dominant force within one of the major global blocs.[38] Hence, states seek out partners, e.g., formal allies, strategic partners, or symbolic "friends", to strengthen their position. These relationships can be built on shared values, common goals, or short-term interests.[39] In today's international system, which is more multipolar and competitive, many alliances are transactional. This means they are based on practical needs rather than long-term loyalty.[40]

Two key features now define this stage of escalation:

1. The conflict is publicly recognized and treated as serious and legitimate.
2. The environment becomes polarized, dividing people into supporters and opponents, with little space left for neutral positions.

Stage 7: Threats

When initial efforts – such as formal statements or diplomatic signals – fail to produce the desired outcome, and both parties remain entrenched in their respective positions, the conflict often escalates. At this stage, each side is not only convinced of the legitimacy of its stance but also backed by allies who reinforce that belief. The confrontation intensifies and enters a more dangerous phase: the issuance of threats.

Threats represent a significant turning point. Unlike previous efforts that may have aimed at persuasion or clarification, threats are coercive by nature. According to Pruitt, a threat is "a communication of intent to punish the other if the other fails to concede."[41] In practice, effective threats usually involve three key elements:

1. A restatement of the original position and expectations,
2. A clear articulation of consequences if those expectations are unmet, and
3. An ultimatum, which often triggers a counter-threat in response.

For a threat to be taken seriously, it must be credible. This means the actor issuing the threat must have both the willingness and the capacity to follow through. Without these, the threat risks undermining the issuer's credibility not only in the eyes of the opponent but also among allies and observers. Galinsky and Liljenquist argue that successful threats should be strategic, clearly articulated, and designed to allow both sides to preserve dignity. Poorly constructed or emotionally [42] driven threats often produce the opposite effect, i.e., escalation without leverage.

Interestingly, research shows that when state leaders issue threats – particularly those involving the use of military force – they generally prefer not to carry them out, even if they are prepared to do so. Rather than signalling a desire for war, such threats are often aimed at influencing the opponent's behaviour through strategic signalling. Hence, according to costly signalling theory, a threat becomes credible when issuing it involves significant risk or political cost, i.e., factors that a bluffing or less resolved state would seek to avoid. Public commitments, reputational stakes, and visible military mobilizations serve as costly signals because only a truly resolved actor would be willing to bear these burdens. Thus, credible threats function less as a direct pathway to violence and more as tools to shift adversarial behaviour through calculated risk.[43]

Importantly, threats are not always directed solely at the opposing party. - Political leaders may also use threats to signal strength to domestic audiences or to enhance their reputation on the international stage. In such cases, the effectiveness of a threat depends as much on perceived resolve as on actual military or political capability.[44] This performative aspect plays a key role in shaping international perceptions of power and credibility. Military threats, in particular, carry high stakes. While they may serve to deter aggression or compel concessions, they also increase the risk of escalation and unintended conflict. The threat of nuclear weapon use, for instance, is especially alarming due to its catastrophic potential. However, it is also widely seen as symbolic – meant to intimidate rather than to be executed – precisely because its use would mark an irreversible and globally destabilizing act.

Ultimately, the transition to Stage 7 – i.e., threats–marks a major escalation in conflict dynamics.

Stage 8: Power Struggle

Power is often asserted through visible displays of strength, with dominance openly celebrated. In such contexts, individuals may become captivated by the instruments of conflict – whether military, political, or economic – as they anticipate an impending power struggle. When opposing sides are unable to reach an agreement, confrontation becomes unavoidable. At this point, any offer of cooperation may be perceived as a sign of weakness.[45]

In political arenas, power struggles often manifest through both hard and soft power. According to Joseph Nye, "hard power is the use of coercion and payment. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcome through attraction."[46] Put differently, soft power may involve shaping others' preferences through cultural influence, diplomatic engagement, and shared political values, such as democracy and human rights. Hard power, by contrast, relies on coercive strategies, including military intervention and economic pressure. During a political power struggle, actors may simultaneously promote ideological values, pursue international diplomacy, disseminate misinformation, and apply economic or military force to gain the upper hand.[47]

More broadly, power can be understood as a dynamic relationship in which one party holds greater influence due to control over resources that are valued by others. In negotiation contexts, Galinsky and Magee define power as "the probability that a negotiator will influence a negotiation outcome in the direction of his or her ideal outcome."[48] They identify several key sources of power in negotiations:[49]

- Information: Power is comparative, so knowing the strengths, weaknesses, and intentions of the other party can significantly improve one's bargaining position.
- Status: A negotiator's level of respect or prestige can affect outcomes: those with higher status are more likely to have their demands met.
- Social Capital: Strong networks and relationships can expand a negotiator's options and increase their overall influence.

In summary, power struggles are a central factor in the escalation of conflicts. When parties compete to assert dominance or protect their interests, displays of power often replace dialogue. Power struggles can intensify distrust, provoke defensive or aggressive responses, and close off opportunities for peaceful resolution. As each side seeks to strengthen its position – whether through military, economic, or political means – the conflict can spiral into a cycle of retaliation and heightened hostility. Ultimately, power struggles over influence and control tend to deepen divisions and prolong conflicts, making resolution more difficult to achieve.

Stage 9: Ultima Ratio

As power struggles deepen, conflicts tend to escalate with increasing intensity. Each side becomes more committed to asserting dominance, and preparations begin for what may ultimately become a war of annihilation. The objective shifts from achieving strategic advantage to -

As power struggles deepen, conflicts tend to escalate with increasing intensity. Each side becomes more committed to asserting dominance, and preparations begin for what may ultimately become a war of annihilation. The objective shifts from achieving strategic advantage to completely destroying the opposing side's capacity to resist. In this stage, rhetoric hardens, alliances are tested, and diplomacy gives way to militarization. Although efforts at negotiation may have occurred repeatedly, often initiated with the hope of "talking the other side down for good", these attempts frequently fail to produce lasting outcomes. The opposing fronts become entrenched, and mutual trust erodes.

This intensification reflects what conflict theorist Friedrich Glasl describes as the later stages of escalation, particularly stages 7 through 9, where the opponent is no longer seen as a partner in dialogue but as an existential threat.[50] In such stages, the logic of conflict becomes zero-sum: coexistence is no longer viewed as an option, and the goal becomes total victory.

Yet paradoxically, even in this seemingly irreversible phase of confrontation, a brief moment of introspection may arise. As parties approach the brink of full-scale war, there is often a pause, however momentary, during which decision-makers reflect on their position of power and the path ahead.[51] They may ask: Is it truly necessary to escalate further? Is conflict inevitable? What are the likely consequences of war, -

This moment represents what many scholars in conflict resolution refer to as a "window of opportunity", i.e., a temporary but critical opening in which actors may reconsider their strategies and potentially pursue de-escalation. Zartman's concept of the "ripe moment" further explains this phase as a point at which parties recognize a mutually hurting stalemate and the possibility of a way out.[52] During this window, reason may briefly reassert itself, enabling actors to step back from confrontation and entertain the possibility of a negotiated solution. It is a fragile phase in which rational evaluation can override emotion-driven escalation, but only if the parties are willing to recognize and act upon it.

Indeed, the international context also plays a key role in shaping decisions at this stage. According to structural realist theory, the architecture of the international system, whether bipolar or multipolar, constrains the choices available to states.[53] In a bipolar system, for example, states often require the tacit approval or support of one of the major powers before taking drastic actions. In a multipolar world, the calculus becomes more complex, involving a broader range of actors and less predictable alliance dynamics.[54] Thus, the decision to escalate or de-escalate is not only a matter of internal deliberation, but also a response to external structural pressures.

In conclusion, power struggles play a central role in escalating conflicts to dangerous levels (stage 8). However, even in the most extreme phases of -

confrontation (stage 9), a brief opportunity for reflection and reversal may exist. Recognizing and acting upon this window of opportunity is essential to de-escalate the conflict. If this opportunity is ignored, war can rapidly escalate into total devastation.

Stage 10: War

Whether in the form of a trade war or armed conflict, the underlying logic of power remains similar: actors who believe they can win through superior force are unlikely to pursue negotiation. As long as all parties maintain the belief that a decisive victory – military, economic, or otherwise – is achievable, there is little incentive to negotiate. The realist model, for instance, accounts for the fact that some wars are not unwanted but deliberately chosen. As reminded by James D. Fearon, most historians and political scientists reject the notion that war is always a tragic accident brought about against the will of those involved. Instead, many scholars argue that leaders have often viewed war as a costly but worthwhile gamble, with World War I sometimes cited as a partial exception. In these cases, war is not a failure to avoid a worse outcome, it is the preferred course of action, given the actors' strategic goals and perceived gains. These so-called "wanted wars" are often seen as Pareto-efficient, in the sense that no negotiated outcome exists that both sides would prefer over the potential benefits of military conflict.[55]

However, even when war is initially rational from the perspective of the - actors involved, its trajectory often changes over time. As conflicts become protracted, they are no longer driven solely by original political or strategic interests. Instead, new dynamics emerge that reinforce the cycle of violence. A Clausewitzian perspective famously describes war as the continuation of politics by other means, emphasizing the political nature of military conflict. Yet as warfare escalates, other forces – ideological, emotional, or structural – begin to dominate. Von Clausewitz, for instance, highlights the importance of morale, leadership, and the human element in warfare, arguing that these factors can significantly influence the outcome of conflicts.[56]

The emergence of Just War theory further illustrates this shift. As a normative framework, it seeks to justify war under certain moral conditions, such as self-defense or humanitarian intervention.[57] When applied in practice, Just War rhetoric (particularly jus ad bellum) often emerges in the later stages of conflict. By the time a conflict reaches Stage 10, it is frequently sustained not by strategic calculation, but by deeply entrenched identities, fears, and a desire for retribution. At this stage, actors often fight not for political gain, but for survival or recognition, and the possibility of returning to the negotiating able narrows significantly.

Nevertheless, opportunities for peace can still arise. Negotiations typically occur when actors perceive that the benefits of a peaceful settlement outweigh those of continued confrontation. In such cases, factors -

like military exhaustion, international pressure, or fear of total collapse may force a recalibration.[58] However, once stage ten has been reached, negotiations alone will not bring immediate peace. De-escalation becomes the first essential step, aiming to reduce tensions so that all parties can return to the table and engage in effective discussions toward lasting peace.

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