Why De-escalation Is Bad Policy

The United States has often shown restraint and sought de-escalation when provoked by adversarial regimes. For example, in 1968 North Korean naval forces attacked and captured the USS *Pueblo* in international waters. In 2001 a People's Liberation Army Air Force aircraft harassed and ultimately collided with a US Navy P-3 aircraft operating in international airspace, forcing it to land on Hainan Island. More recently, on 7 June 2019, the United States did not escalate when a Russian destroyer approached within 100 feet of a US Navy ship and the two almost collided. The latest event involved Iran downing a $130 million drone reportedly in international airspace. Given these incidents and many others, one has to wonder if de-escalation has come to hurt the nation and whether our de-escalatory tendencies have made even greater provocations inevitable.

Today, de-escalation seems to be the goal of US policy and the default position to such an extent that many policy makers, lawmakers, and pundits are self-deterred by the thought of military escalation. This kind of thinking is counterproductive for three reasons. It creates doubt about US credibility, undercuts assurance of allies, and precipitates adversarial actions against our forces and interests. The United States should instead embrace escalation as a policy of prevention, particularly for low-level provocations, and at the same time say what it means and mean what it says.

When leaders profess their desire to perpetually de-escalate provocations and crises, the message received by our adversaries is that the United States lacks credibility and fears confrontation. During the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the United States appeared too concerned about or fearful of escalation rather than showing conviction to solve a conflict on terms aligned with democratic interests and values. Recently, in response to Iran's provocation, a senior US lawmaker stated that we must "do everything in our power to de-escalate." The same sentiment was evident in former secretary of state John Kerry's response to Russian actions in Syria. This fear of escalation is also seen in interactions between US Navy ships in the South China Sea and the so-called China maritime fleet, which signals weakness in "respect based" cultures. Another example is the US reaction to the situation in Ukraine. While this scenario continues to unfold, our initial response was to limit assistance to nonlethal aid for fear of escalation. In each of these examples, and many others, adversaries have learned to prey on US de-escalatory tendencies and rely on our timid reactions.

The result is a slow, insidious decline in perceived US credibility and resolve when it is confronted with clear violations of international law and threats of direct aggression. Some scholars argue that states should avoid confrontations that attempt to preserve their credibility while others argue in favor of it, particularly during noncrises. A policy of escalation helps preserve credibility to avoid fighting wars. But US credibility is not the only casualty of de-escalation as policy; it also affects US alliances.

A policy of de-escalation sends a negative message to our allies about US assurances—even more so than some current political messages. Such assurances are critical to the American alliance system, and research suggests that reliable nations make better alliance partners. We have seen examples of negative assurances in the past, particularly whether the United States would live up to its nuclear commitments during the Cold War. Would we trade New York for Berlin? Without assurances from the United States, the system itself may well fracture, allowing for more of the types of aggression ongoing in the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe. To be sure, there remains a risk of entanglement in a crisis created by allies, but being willing to escalate seems more likely to help prevent its occurrence.

Without a willingness to escalate, alliances become meaningless commitments and the world becomes a more dangerous place. In a recent *Foreign Policy* article, Elbridge Colby writes about the key to Chinese and Russian success in a great power conflict. His prescription: restraint by Washington. De-escalation is the culprit in what Colby describes as the "fait accompli." Particularly in the Baltic States, de-escalation messages create doubt among our allies as to whether the United States considers escalation worth the risk, or cost. The same could be said for Chinese actions to forcefully reclaim Taiwan or control the sea-lanes of the Indo-Pacific.

Without question, the greatest problem with a policy of de-escalation is the impression it sends to our adversaries. Over the past few years, US policy makers have instinctively looked to de-escalate crises at all costs—from China to Syria to Iran. The result has been Russian aggression in Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine; Chinese island fortifications that threaten freedom of navigation; Iranian attacks in the Middle East; and North Korean threats in Southeast Asia. Thus, the very word *escalation* seems to have created fear among some US decision makers and scholars.

At the same time, Moscow has learned the value of escalation to a strategy of victory by incorporating it into its doctrine. Putin openly embraced escalation in 2014 during the invasion of Ukraine by warning against any outside intervention. This approach contrasts markedly with that of the United States. Likewise, China seems to have also learned the

lesson of escalation. Over the past 10 years, China has increased tensions with most of its neighbors over South Pacific territory.

It has violated international law by claiming sovereignty over and establishing military installations on reefs in international waters. These and other escalation disputes have gone relatively unanswered by the United States. Our de-escalation policy has precipitated many of these aggressive, unlawful actions by our adversaries. The more we rely on de-escalation as the default policy, the more our credibility is diminished, our assurances are weakened, and our adversaries are emboldened.

So what is a reasonable alternative? Thomas Schelling's ideas on deterrence are in a sense tangential to the argument, but they offer a useful insight. Schelling describes why deterrence works by using the analogy of driving down the center of a roadway, approaching your adversary from the opposite direction, and throwing the steering wheel out the window. In his words, this scenario creates a threat that leaves something to chance.

De-escalation leaves nothing to chance. It signals to the adversary that the goal in any provocation or crisis is nonconfrontation. This is the wrong signal. Our goal should be prevention and resolution on favorable terms—something a willingness to escalate may offer. The United States could enhance its credibility by eschewing de-escalation. It should not be the default position at the outset of adversarial challenges as seems to be the case today. Our declaratory policy should embrace escalation to the extent necessary to prevent crises, protect American interests, and support international law.

"Peace through strength" is a well-known mantra for maintaining US military power. But, to paraphrase former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, what good is a superb military if you don't use it? The United States must be willing to use its wonderful military along with other instruments of power to escalate crises if necessary. Doing so would require clearly stating our intentions to respond to military aggression with greater military aggression, to harassment with lethal force, and to military challenges with military defeat—no matter the domain. Aggression and harassment become the "red lines" and our escalatory response leaves something to chance. Declaring our intent to stand firm, with resolve and assurance, would unquestionably help prevent the lesser forms of insidious aggression and most certainly help deter the more explicit, dangerous provocations that could lead to war.

Just as de-escalation should not be the default position, neither should automatic escalation. The danger may well be an ally unjustly drawing the United States into a conflict or a scenario where US escalation would

unwittingly draw in a treaty ally. Such seems to be the case between the United States and South Korea with respect to North Korean aggression. Escalation would certainly be appropriate to support a treaty ally suffering from explicit aggression. It would also be appropriate as an immediate self-defense measure. Furthermore, it seems that escalation can be most useful as a long-term preventive action if used mostly against lower-level provocations. Such instances might include aggressive actions against US forces or US flagged assets operating within the confines of established international law.

Of course, any attempt to escalate a crisis or challenge scenario comes with risks of spiraling conflict and second-order effects including greater violence and carnage. However, in many cases, the risks stem from a lack of any response and increase thereafter. The greater risk is in allowing our adversaries to believe their unlawful provocations will succeed. Thus, escalation is sometimes the best prevention. The theory here is to use a policy of escalation to prevent lower-level provocations from expanding to larger issues with greater stakes. Adversaries should believe that their provocations will not be tolerated and their aggression will have serious implications.

To be fair, de-escalation might be appropriate in certain crises where the United States is challenged as a third party in a situation where it had no interest at stake. This scenario could arise in a dispute between two non-US allies or nonformal treaty states. Another case might be if escalation would adversely affect an immediate US response to save lives, prevent suffering, or mitigate great property damage. Then, the United States should not allow its position to drive out its interest.

Some believe that a de-escalation policy is the safest form of response to crises, and critics will surely decry the argument for escalation as the more dangerous option. However, the evidence from past decades indicates that such beliefs appear to be simply acquiescence to aggression rather than reliable prevention. Thus, a goal of de-escalation in one crisis begets the next. The key to long-term strategic stability is having the wisdom to decide when to escalate and when not to. Our adversaries should know and appreciate that the United States intends to say what it means and escalate as necessary to mean what it says. We should not make idle threats—we must make promises. Those who ruffle the eagle's feathers should expect to be squeezed by the talons and ripped by the beak. SSQ

W. Michael Guillot
Editor, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*