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Starting a war is easier than ending one

Militarily superior, yet still without victory. In Ukraine and Iran, escalation has exposed the limits of force — and the lack of an exit strategy

The Russian army has now been fighting in Ukraine for longer than Stalin's Red Army fought Hitler's *Wehrmacht* in the Second World War. Vladimir Putin and his military strategists were completely wrong about how long the conflict would last, having originally intended to bring it to an end in a blitzkrieg. The same applies to the current conflict between the United States and Iran. At the beginning of the war, President Donald Trump said that the operation would last 'four to five weeks'. These estimates changed several times, ranging from 'two to three weeks' and 'six to eight weeks' to vague formulations such as 'as long as necessary'. In both cases, there is no discernible exit strategy.

These examples are far from exceptional. Only around 30 per cent of all wars end in a military victory. Despite this, wars are started because at least one of the parties to the conflict is convinced that it can achieve a military victory. This is based on the assumption that escalation can force an adversary to back down.

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Military planners usually work out detailed plans for the beginning of a war. Yet they often lack the ability to bring wars to an end. Opponents frequently stumble into seemingly hopeless situations with entrenched front lines. The response is then to rely on escalation and on the belief that it can be controlled. More often than not, this triggers an uncontrollable spiral of action and reaction. Russia's war against Ukraine and the conflict between the United States and Iran follow this pattern. In both cases, the aggressors believed they could control escalation — what strategic studies refer to as escalation dominance. But in both cases,

this hope has so far gone unfulfilled.

The former US Deputy Secretary of Defence Fred Iklé wrote as early as 1971 that 'those with power to start a war frequently come to discover that they lack the power to stop it.' More military force is supposed to lead to victory, and victory to peace. Yet most wars do not go according to plan.

Escalation models are firmly established in strategic thinking. The best-known escalation ladder was developed by Hermann Kahn in the 1960s on nuclear conflicts. He and other strategists assumed that at every level of escalation there were options for decision-makers to control or limit further escalation. The militarily superior side assumes that it can impose greater costs on its adversary than the adversary can impose in return. How risky this assumption is can be seen in two historical events with contrasting outcomes: the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is perhaps the best-known example of how the risk of escalation can be limited through signalling resolve and restraint while also providing a way out. The Vietnam War, by contrast, followed a very different course: gradual but steady escalation culminated in a costly war that dragged on for more than two decades.

Escalation is not control

Escalation is therefore based on a number of assumptions whose practical value needs to be questioned. One is the assumption that escalation can be controlled. In practice, it often develops a momentum of its own, leading to undesirable outcomes on both sides. Another assumption is that the militarily superior side can achieve its objectives through escalation or use the threat of further escalation to force its adversary to back down. Yet escalation can reinforce misperceptions and trigger counter-reactions rather than bringing a conflict to an end. Nevertheless, even in desperate situations, it is often seen as a means of achieving military victory.

Neither in the war in Ukraine nor in Iran has the hope of achieving a military victory through escalation been fulfilled. Escalation dominance requires the ability to impose one's will on an adversary. Yet neither Russia's nor the United States' military superiority has been translated into victory. In purely quantitative terms, Russia is superior to Ukraine. Nevertheless, Ukraine has managed to respond to Russia's escalatory moves — albeit at a high cost. The trench war has escalated into an air war in which not only military targets but also civilian infrastructure, logistics centres, railway lines, refineries and residential buildings on both sides are being destroyed.

The United States is far superior to Iran militarily. Yet, contrary to the expectations of the US government, it has not succeeded in bringing Iran to its knees militarily. Iran has managed to establish a degree of symmetry: on the one hand, through its ability to attack US military bases and allies in the Gulf region and, on the other, through economic pressure via the Strait of Hormuz.

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One lesson can nevertheless be drawn from both wars: even militarily dominant powers cannot simply force smaller countries to surrender. De-escalation is hindered not only by the military situation and the economic and political environment, but also by the subjective and political conditions under which leaders operate. In both the war in Ukraine and the conflict with Iran, the two sides are trying to defeat their adversary according to the principle of 'an eye for an eye'. So far, however, there are no signs that further escalation is significantly weakening the other side's willingness to fight.

Escalation does not take place only on the battlefield, however. As both the war in Ukraine and the conflict with Iran demonstrate, propaganda and disinformation produce very different narratives about the causes and course of wars. While the Russian government justifies the war by arguing that it seeks to gain control over the country, the government in Kyiv describes the same war of aggression as a violation of international law. And while in the United States the focus is primarily on Iran's nuclear programme, Iran's destabilisation of the Middle East and the authoritarian regime's repression of its own population, the Iranian government pursues an ideological mission in which both Israel and the United States have been cast as arch-enemies for decades.

Escalation also takes place in rhetoric. In the final stages of an escalation, Friedrich Glasl argues in his escalation model, the parties to a war can deny their adversary's 'human quality', thereby making increasingly harsh measures morally justifiable. Trump has repeatedly threatened to wipe out Iranian civilisation — in violation of international law. In vulgar language, he even threatened: 'Open the f*ckin' Strait, you crazy bastards, or you'll be living in Hell — JUST WATCH!' Similarly, Putin has described the Ukrainian government as 'neo-Nazis' and declared the 'denazification of Ukraine' to be the goal of his military operation. The core problem therefore lies not only in the military situation, but also in how it is perceived.

Since both the Russian and American governments continue to believe that a military victory is possible, they have so far been unwilling to acknowledge that they have manoeuvred themselves into a stalemate.

From stalemate to negotiation

How can this difficulty be overcome? Experience from peace and conflict research and mediation suggests that involving a mediator or third party can help create the conditions for successful negotiations. So far, however, all attempts to negotiate in these wars have failed. A first round of negotiations between the United States and Iran, mediated by the Pakistani government, ended with a bilateral declaration of intent, but this was broken just a few days later.

In the war in Ukraine, numerous proposals have been put forward for negotiating a ceasefire or peace treaty — so far without success. The course of both wars leads to an extremely pessimistic assessment. Every war must eventually end, ideally through a negotiated settlement. But how can the conditions be created to prevent further escalation? War weariness is unmistakable in both conflicts. Yet it has not led to a decline in the belief that a military victory is possible.

Peace and conflict research shows that serious negotiations become more likely when both sides conclude that they cannot win militarily and that continuing the conflict is imposing ever greater costs on them. Such a deadlocked and mutually painful situation can make a conflict ‘ripe’ for negotiations. That point, however, is not currently in sight. At present, the parties to the conflicts instead appear determined to accept enormous human and economic costs in the hope that the next escalation will finally achieve what the previous one failed to deliver.



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