Escalators and quagmires: expectations and the use of force

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With the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, it became clear that the war for which Western military planners had so long prepared would never come. But with the Gulf crisis it became clear that the West did after all need to be able to make plans for conducting war in certain situations. Lawrence Freedman looks at the development in the 1960s and 1970s of ideas about the dangers of initiating any military action at all. He suggests that the danger described by both escalation and quagmire metaphors may have been overestimated and that they actually missed the point. The real danger to be guarded against in situations of war is not so much the uncontrollable development of war as the risk of distortion in political decision-making. He writes that the responsibility for the higher conduct of war must be political rather than military: that from now on, realistic and unambiguous political objectives, consistent with national values, must be elaborated by the West before any possible military involvement. Holding alliances together makes this task harder—which is one reason why the UN may be a better basis for Western crisis action in future than most analysts have thought.

It is probably unwise to address the question of the use of force in international politics when it is under such active consideration in all the world's capitals as we wait to see whether the formidable coalition confronting Iraq can sustain the pressure until Saddam Hussein, fearful of progressive destitution, withdraws peacefully from Kuwait. If he is clever, he may wriggle out of his predicament by offering some partial compromise in the guise of an 'Arab solution'. If he is foolish, he may offer nothing and so dare the international community to expel him by force.

But the possibility of war, and the need to face as a practical matter awkward questions of strategy and tactics, require a change of gear in thinking about the use of military force.¹ For years, defence studies in Britain have been focused on the problems of sustaining peace rather than conducting war. Indeed over the past year they have been moving further away from preparing for armed confrontation and towards realizing the great hopes of post-Cold War Europe.

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The challenge has been one of managing a peacetime demobilization following a peacetime victory. The Gulf crisis marks a break with both these trends.

Late 1990 should have been a time for serious debate in Britain and everywhere in the West on such matters as the nature and extent of future cuts, the reorganizing of the armed forces, revising NATO doctrine, stimulating European cooperation, reinforcing the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and advancing arms control. Nobody pretended that the collapse of the communist order in Eastern Europe would automatically usher in a golden age of peace and harmony. The potential for chaos and violence has been well understood. But it has been presumed that any serious disorder will be localized and containable. There may be good cause in the future for the use of force by NATO in Europe, but for the moment it is almost impossible to give a reasoned description of what form it might take. The main European agenda is now one of military contraction.

It was, of course, in the general floundering around for a new definition of strategic objectives, rather than in response to any specific events, that the question of Western security interests in the Gulf was first raised earlier in 1990. This came with the argument that with the Soviet threat evaporating, other threats to security could now be given their proper attention.

This proposition could easily be dismissed as having more to do with job protection than strategic analysis. There was no denying the potential for conflict in either the new Europe or the old Middle East; but at issue in both cases was whether there could be occasions where Western force could be usefully applied. Sceptics such as myself cautioned that in most instances the origins of the dispute would be complex, guilt would be widely spread, Western interests confused and the local military circumstances forbidding. All this was and remains fair. But we reckoned without a textbook case of aggression which posed a fundamental and overriding challenge to the international community.

The Gulf crisis is much more than a distraction from the urgent task of European reconstruction. It is both a watershed and a test-case, and it will shape attitudes and policies towards the management of international conflict for many years to come. Views on the credibility of the concept of collective security and the efficacy of non-military measures, the future willingness of the United States to accept global responsibilities and the range of capabilities required for a ‘balanced’ force structure, depend on the outcome of the current crisis. A debate was developing on all these issues prior to the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, but it cannot now make much progress until the fate of Saddam Hussein has been determined.

Which is why, for all the awkwardness of the topic, this is an appropriate time to reconsider the way we think about armed force. It is appropriate not only because of the demands of the current crisis, but also because defence studies require some perspective on war and on the forms it might take. It is impossible to talk seriously about the peacetime problems of defence without taking a view on the military and political contingencies to which it is geared.
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This is true even for arms control and confidence-building measures, which must be informed by a sense of the likely dynamics of conflict if only to assess how they can be dampened.

The war that never was

Up to the last 15 months, these views were based on an appreciation of the likely cause, course and consequences of a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. No war that actually happened was ever analysed as intensively as this war that did not. Up to the last moment when the Warsaw Pact could be judged a viable alliance, analysts were still busying themselves generating yet more complicated calculations on such matters as the mobilization potential of the two alliances, how this might affect the balance of forces during the first days of a conflict, and what difference it would make if NATO tried to cope with the onslaught by a static or mobile defence. As late as the summer of 1989, NATO was engaged in an intensive debate over the role of short-range nuclear forces in the event of a failure in deterrence.

These preoccupations had nothing to do with expectations of imminent conflict. Few of those involved actually believed that they were anticipating the form and content of a future war, that their computer printouts would ever spring to life on a battlefield. The analyses of weapons and doctrines and force levels took the shape they did because there was no other serious starting-point for purposes of force planning and arms control.

Armed forces made an important contribution to political stability in Europe, and this required that they be taken seriously. But that success in creating political stability, and the prominent position of nuclear threats in grand strategy, made the task of those responsible for designing, constructing and sustaining armed forces extremely difficult. There were three aspects to this.

First, it was hard to think through the circumstances that would trigger a war in the first place. So potent were the nightmarish images of a Third World War that there really was no good reason why any moderately sane leader would start one deliberately. So difficult did it become to generate credible scenarios for the outbreak of war that eventually nobody bothered to try. To have a good wargame it was unnecessary to do more than identify the belligerents and their military capabilities.

This separation of analysis of the likely course of a war from any assessment of its possible cause created artificial constructs. Omitting the great political uncertainties that mark times of crisis and transition to war—who is going to stay out, who is going to join in and on what conditions—undermined any claims to be able to predict outcomes. For form's sake, NATO had to assume that any war would be between two coherent alliances, but this was actually the least likely of all scenarios. At the start of hostilities at least one and possibly both alliances would have suffered a sharp drop in coherence.

Second, while working out why another great European war might start was problematic enough, consideration of how it might end threw up even more.
awkward questions. It was not that there were no ideas on the likely conclusion. On the contrary, a universal consensus postulated utter death and destruction. If that was the inevitable conclusion, what was the requirement for conventional military forces? The generals were not asked to devise plans for a decisive battlefield victory. Their task was largely to reinforce deterrence by creating conditions that would bring about an Armageddon engulfing them along with everyone else. The best that could be offered was an opportunity to hold a defensive line to allow sufficient time for second thoughts and active negotiations, and so to interrupt the powder trail before it reached its explosive climax.

The third problem for military planners resulted from the presumption that the main deterrent lay in nuclear rather than conventional forces. It was an uphill task to convince governments to provide the resources to mount a serious defence. Because the most likely source of chronic instability was judged to be a breakdown within the alliance, the role of Western armed forces became increasingly one of reinforcing the alliance by demonstrating commitments to mutual security, to burden-sharing and to a fair spread of rights and responsibilities.

In professional terms, the conventional military planner was in the position of a runner told to prepare for the middle leg of a relay race, without knowing whether his leg would be for 100 or 400 metres, whether he could expect to get the baton before or well after his competitors, or what was supposed to happen subsequently. He did not know whether the race would ever take place, there was nowhere to train properly, and his kit took ages to arrive. Still he was told to be ready to go at a moment’s notice, and while he was waiting he should spend his time reassuring his teammates that all was well.

Of course it was not quite as bad as this, because the nature of the fundamental political division in Europe was clear enough and because servicemen well understood how this conditioned their role. To take up the analogy again, at least in preparing for the race the competition was known, and so the preparations retained some authenticity. But now the opposing team has disbanded, and the whole exercise really does start to look like a waste of time and effort. Everybody insists that our team must stick together, but against whom are they going to race? Our runner does not know whether he will be competing against top-class athletes or amateurs, whether he is to prepare for a sprint or a marathon—or whether he will ever run again.

Neither academic analysts nor defence planners needed to look beyond the great war that never came. But now we know that this great war never will be, and so it can no longer serve as a focal point for analysis or planning. We do not expect a conflict-free Europe, but we have yet to identify the sort of European conflict that can serve as a legitimate basis for defence planning. Before, the basic problem was to sustain an apparently durable European status quo. Now the challenge is to influence the evolution of a new Europe which may not enjoy the stability of the old, which may never settle down into a predictable order, and which may confront us with regular upheavals resulting
from social and economic dislocation, ethnic rivalries and frustrated nationalism.

Meanwhile, outside Europe we are having to come to terms with the rise of a number of new regional powers boasting substantial military power and a capacity to influence events both locally and internationally, who feel no loyalties to Western values or interests. The Gulf crisis brings this home, and also the extent to which, whatever the appropriate economic or political definition of the new Europe, in strategic terms that definition must embrace the whole of the Middle East.

In this much more fluid situation, any attempt to fix on a specific contingency is likely to be futile and misleading. One way of approaching the intellectual and policy challenge the new situation poses is to consider its impact on the old NATO distinction between the area in which one prepared for major war, and everywhere else—‘out of area’—where one prepared for lesser contingencies. This distinction is now obsolete.

‘In’ and ‘out’ of area

The designation ‘out of area’ is comparatively recent. When NATO was founded many of Britain’s and France’s preoccupations were outside Europe, so that one of the reasons for the rather precise setting for NATO’s area of operations was an American desire not to get entangled in the death agonies of the old empires. Over time, as the communist challenge was seen to be global in scope, this restriction came to vex Washington as it sought to impress upon its allies that security in Europe was not an isolated matter. For the United States the ‘out of area’ category included conflicts that were extensions of the Soviet threat, and in the 1970s, with Cubans and East German advisers popping up in southern Africa and Ethiopia, this position gained in credibility.

Even then many in Europe were sceptical, suggesting that Washington was falling into the trap of over-interpreting every local dispute and popular uprising as yet another manifestation of the East–West conflict. They saw ‘out of area’ problems as unrelated to the central threat: as a matter of aid to friendly regimes, perhaps former colonies, for which there was still some lingering sense of responsibility, or of extracting nationals from hazardous local wars from which it was advisable to stay well clear. These were rarely alliance matters, except when it came to resounding declarations of political solidarity. Out-of-area operations would involve loose coalitions at best, and were often conducted by individual countries in pursuit of distinctive interests. These operations would be small-scale, employing lightly armed forces, and they could thus be handled using capabilities prepared for the much more substantial European contingencies. Their use was either symbolic or based upon a strict principle of limited liability.

Thus the West was prepared to commit large-scale forces ‘in area’, but their application was passive. They threatened rather than acted. Their very existence made opponents cautious. ‘Out of area’, commitments were less definite but,
equally, any application of force would probably be active. A series of examples of how unpleasant this might be, of which the most notable and scarring was Vietnam, encouraged the view that any commitments should be entered into with care. The passive application of force in Europe threatened massive casualties; in practice (and leaving aside questions of internal security), only the active application outside the NATO area actually generated casualties.

The consequent wariness with regard to the use of force beyond the areas covered by the formal NATO alliance could thus be seen to reflect a greater maturity in the behaviour of Western countries. They were no longer taking it upon themselves to sort out the generality of international problems and impose Western solutions on the Third World. On the other hand, their unwillingness to intervene meant that the locals would have to look after themselves. To the extent that the West was ready to help a worthy cause, it would only do so indirectly. The most ready form of support was advice, training and equipment.

At this point, however, commercial and political objectives began to get confused. For rather than simply equipping certain states as proxies, the tendency was to supply anyone who was prepared to buy so long as they were not self-evidently antagonistic. One might add that even when an attempt was made at political selectivity, the twists and turns of the states in question meant that formidable arsenals might easily fall into the wrong hands as the result of a revolution (as in Iran) or because of shifts in allegiance.

This, as we now see, has led to a transformation in the character of many Third World conflicts. A number of regional powers have the capacity to fight high-intensity conflict in and around their own borders. Meanwhile in Europe the long-standing threat of high-intensity war is evaporating, and for regional security we are looking increasingly to 'foreign aid' type solutions. So, curiously, there are now preparations out of area in the Gulf for the sort of armoured war hitherto expected only in area in Europe. At the same time, in Europe there is reason to fear the type of low-intensity conflict previously largely confined to the out of area domain.

This signals a move away from the distinction, adopted for the purposes of military planning, between a big problem close to home and lots of small problems further away. We must now anticipate small and medium-sized problems all over the place. Previously, substantial military deployments in the central area were tolerated because their application was passive in nature. Elsewhere, only limited efforts could be accepted, because any application of force was likely to be active. Now there is a serious possibility that forces will be retained in the Gulf for a long period on a largely passive basis, deterring future Iraqi attempts to solve its problems by force. Meanwhile limited force may become a much more active ingredient in European affairs.
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Escalators

This is the point at which to introduce escalators and quagmires. These are two familiar metaphors frequently summoned to challenge the very idea of limitations in war. They warn the apparently complacent of the potentially dangerous consequences of initiating direct military action on even the most modest scale. Both conjure up the image of one thing leading to another, a chain of events that will turn the most restrained first move into an unmitigated disaster. Step on the escalator and you are taken inexorably up the scale of violence until eventually the holocaust is reached. Step into the quagmire and you will soon be bogged down, thrashing about, unable to escape.

The original use of the escalator metaphor can be traced directly to a debate over whether a war in Europe would be anything other than total. While the precise origins of the quagmire metaphor are more obscure, it achieved prominence as the United States stepped up its involvement in Vietnam in the early 1960s. They are not necessarily alternative fates. If the mixed metaphor can be forgiven, one might escalate into or seek to escalate out of a quagmire.

Of the two concepts, escalation is the better known. Since the early 1960s it has become impossible to discuss any conflict, whether industrial, communal or international, without reference to escalation. To accuse an adversary of escalating is to point to provocative, reckless behaviour. Nonetheless, at least in its original formulation escalation was linked to general war, to a showdown between states or groups of states with access to weapons of mass destruction. Quagmires, on the other hand, have been associated with messy ‘out of area’ conflicts tending towards an inconclusive stalemate.

The arrival of thermonuclear weapons in the first half of the 1950s posed the question whether any East–West war, but especially one employing nuclear weapons, could be kept within any sort of tolerable limits. Could a distinction be drawn between nuclear weapons designed for mass destruction and those intended for more contained, battlefield use? The escalator metaphor was employed by those convinced that in practice there could be no such distinction, that the first use of nuclear weapons would carry the combatants relentlessly upward into ever more frightening and wider forms of destruction. It described a tragedy.

Although this argument lingered on into the 1980s, orthodox NATO doctrine soon sought to exploit the logic of escalation to achieve the maximum deterrent effect on the assumption that no rational leader would ever knowingly initiate an unlimited war. In this way, as Joseph Nye has argued, nuclear weapons could be credited with ‘a crystal ball effect’. If those who led the world into this century’s first great conflagration in 1914 had possessed a crystal ball showing them the world of 1918, with all its death, destruction and political upheaval, they would have held back. Now ‘an elementary knowledge of the physical effects of nuclear weapons serves as today’s crystal ball’. 2 If the

Third World War should end in a holocaust, no one could say they had not been warned.

There were two possible dynamics to the escalator. The first was reciprocal action—the tit-for-tat mentality that would mean that if one side upped the ante, the other would surely follow. This idea is not new. Consider Clausewitz: war is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory to extremes.9

The second possible dynamic was that of miscalculation, or accident. Everyone involved in war, from the soldier on the ground to the national leader, may be forced to make momentous decisions on the basis of incorrect or inadequate information and misguided intuition. As warfare became more automated, with enormous arsenals controlled by complex systems, the potential impact of such decisions widened. The most disturbing image was of a series of malfunctions setting the holocaust in motion without human intervention: of the end of the world resulting from the flick of the wrong switch. Such fears provided a fruitful source of inspiration to film-makers, from Fail-safe to Wargame.

These two possibilities were brought together in strategic theory brilliantly by Thomas Schelling, who developed the idea of a war getting progressively out of control by degrees, and suggested that because the process was not wholly automatic, acting to increase the risk of a mutual loss of control would put pressure on the enemy to pull back. In the nuclear age, war could not simply be a traditional struggle for military advantage, but it must be, in effect, a competition in risk-taking.4 It was a version of this approach that informed NATO’s strategy of Flexible Response, with the initial stage of direct defence, in itself signalling a degree of resolve, being followed if necessary by a more drastic signal to the enemy in the form of a limited nuclear strike, which would warn that things were going to get really nasty unless he ceased his aggression and withdrew.

Fortunately we never had to find out how persuasive such tactics might be, because the crystal ball effect worked so well. The nuclear powers were not inclined even to spar tentatively with each other. Political leaders in both superpowers peered into the crystal ball very successfully. If anything, the ball magnified the dangers they confronted. Take for example the most dramatic confrontation of the Cold War, the 1962 Cuba missile crisis.

President Kennedy was bothered throughout by the prospect of uncontrollable escalation. As a student he had read Barbara Tuchman’s account of the origins of the First World War, The guns of August, with its stress on the miscalculation of the great powers, and was fearful of a sequel, The missiles of October. Records of his thoughts during the crisis are full of references to the

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Retaliatory action he expected from Khrushchev in response to attempts to compel him to remove the missile bases he had surreptitiously inserted into Cuba. Robert Kennedy provides a moving account of his brother, waiting to see whether Soviet ships would attempt to test the blockade on the morning of Wednesday 24 October 1962.

I think these few minutes were the time of greatest concern for the President. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? Was it our error? A mistake? Was there something further that should have been done? Or not done? His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth. He opened and closed his fist. His face seemed drawn, his eyes pained, almost gray.

Or take the long, impassioned private letter received by Kennedy from Khrushchev two days later:

If people do not show wisdom, then in the final analysis they will come to a clash, like blind moles, and then reciprocal extermination will begin... we and you ought not to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut it, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose.

These anxieties had an undoubted influence on the resolution of the crisis. The Russians refrained from compounding the immediate problem by putting retaliatory pressure on Berlin, as Kennedy most feared; in seeking a settlement when he did, Khrushchev was fully aware of the local strengths enjoyed by the Americans in the Caribbean. For his part, Kennedy was anxious not to push Khrushchev too far.

Few now believe that the world really was close to nuclear war in 1962, though many participants and observers certainly thought so at the time. Even then the specialist advice received by Kennedy told him that the Soviet Union would not risk escalation to general war if he mounted an air strike or invaded Cuba. While such measures would have been disastrous for many reasons unrelated to escalation, it probably is the case that Khrushchev would not have dared or been able to respond in kind.

The reason why both Kennedy and Khrushchev were ready to compromise was in fact that the stakes were simply not high enough to warrant the most extreme action. Towards the end of the crisis, when Kennedy was debating whether to agree to Khrushchev’s proposal for trading US Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the Soviet missiles in Cuba, he mused that if war resulted because

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6 Kennedy, Thirteen days, pp. 80, 89, 182.
of a refusal to trade, ‘If that’s part of the record I don’t see how we’ll have a very good war’.7

The conclusion many drew from the Cuba confrontation at the time was that the escalator metaphor failed to recognize the potential for graduated moves, especially during the early stages of a conflict before serious battle has been joined—that the metaphor was over-drawn. Escalators can go down as well as up; they rarely go straight from the bottom to the top floor, but there are intermediate stages at which one can get off and consider where one is going.

In due course those strategic analysts who wished to reassert the potential for control—even of a nuclear war—stood the metaphor on its head and invented the notion of controlled escalation. The most notorious proponent of this idea was Herman Kahn, whose 1965 book On escalation popularized the concept. The organizing theme was the ‘escalation ladder’, with its 16 thresholds and 44 steps. For most, the striking feature of the book was the possibility of anyone coming up with almost 30 distinct steps after the stage when nuclear weapons had first been used at rung 15.

The idea of a controlled nuclear war was deemed offensive by many and, as one study after another demonstrated the hopelessness of command and communications at a time of nuclear exchanges, distaste was matched by incredulity. The risks of being wrong were so horrendous that few were prepared to argue for limited nuclear war as a prudent basis for planning, even though they might concede it as a remote possibility. Furthermore, for deterrent purposes the stress on the automaticity of escalation suited NATO: it was easier to threaten a situation getting hopelessly out of control than to threaten to initiate nuclear war as a rational decision. The imagery also suited anti-nuclear campaigners, for it underlined their fears of the irrationality of NATO strategy. In other words, for a variety of reasons the debate on a Central European war encouraged the idea of an escalation process so powerful that it would soon become virtually independent of strategic decision.

A further blow to ideas of controlled or graduated escalation came in Vietnam, where it was assumed that they were being put to the test. Those taking the crucial decisions in the 1963–5 period were definitely encouraged by the success over Cuba. This was a time of maximum American confidence in the exertion of military power in a nuanced and sophisticated manner. It was hoped to manipulate opponents’ behaviour through the calibrated use of force, as if steady increments of pain could be added until the enemy’s breaking-point could be found. Such an approach tended to underestimate the enemy’s capacity to adjust to steady increases in pressure, and overestimated the extent to which military action could serve as a political signal, especially when it was relied upon to speak for itself without a supporting diplomatic communication.

Although not specially written with Vietnam in mind, Kahn’s On escalation was seen as a guide to American policy in Vietnam. Luigi Nono, the radical Italian composer, used Kahn’s ladder as the theme for a musical composition.

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which he dedicated to the National Liberation Front of Vietnam, which moved from 'crisi manifesta' (rung 1) to 'spasmo o guerra insensata' (rung 44).\(^8\)

In one of the first and most eloquent statements of dissent from this by former insiders, James Thomson described how:

In quiet, air-conditioned, thick-carpeted rooms, such terms as 'systematic pressure', 'armed reconnaissance', 'targets of opportunity', and even 'body count' seemed to breed a sort of games-theory detachment.

He cites a moment in late 1964, during discussions of the imminent bombing campaign, when one senior policy-maker was attempting to describe the projected pattern of systematic pressure:

It seems to me that our orchestration should be mainly violins, but with periodic touches of brass.\(^9\)

The word 'surgical', as used in conjunction with the idea of a 'strike', has much to answer for. It conjures up the idea of removing a malignancy yet leaving the healthy parts of an organism unimpaired. As McGeorge Bundy, one of the architects of US policy in Vietnam, pointed out, if there is a comparison between a surgical and a military operation, it is because they are both bloody, messy and one normally needs to go back for more.

In practice much of the self-confidence and jargon of controlled escalation hid an awareness of the resilience of the enemy. The basic driving force behind American policy in Vietnam was less confidence in the United States' ability to impose its will than a determination not to renege on a commitment. President Johnson's formulations were simpler and somewhat less refined than those of his advisers. Here he is, two days after becoming president following Kennedy's assassination, having been briefed by the ambassador to Saigon. He reports Ambassador Lodge's briefing:

He says it's going to be hell in a handbasket out there... He says the Army won't fight. Says the people don't know whose side to be on. If we don't do something, he says, it'll go under—any day.

LBJ is determined to act:

So they'll think with Kennedy dead we've lost heart. So they'll think we're yellow and don't mean what we say.

When asked who, he explains:

The Chinese. The fellas in the Kremlin. They'll be taking the measure of us. They'll be wondering just how far they can go.

Later he adds: 'I'm not going to let Vietnam go the way of China.'\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Cited in Fred Iklé, 'When the fighting has to stop: the arguments about escalation', *World Politics*, July 1967, p. 693.


Situation reports and intelligence estimates continually confirmed the parlousness of the position of the anti-communist forces. Yet the Johnson administration persevered, because it could not face ‘losing’ Vietnam. At the same time, however, it was not prepared to go the whole way to ensure the defeat of the insurgency. In this, Johnson and his advisers were actually as influenced by fears of uncontrolled escalation as they were by the possibilities for control. Targets were chosen to ensure that neither communist China nor the Soviet Union would have any pretext to join in directly, again despite advice from the specialists that there was scant risk of such intervention.

The bombing campaign was designed to compensate for the anti-communists’ weakness on the ground, and to force North Vietnam to reconsider its support for the South. There is evidence that it did stimulate the North’s interest in a negotiated settlement. But the United States did not accompany the bombing with any serious parallel diplomatic initiative. As for compensating for weakness on the ground, this claim ignored the extent to which this was a total war for the Vietnamese, so that it was unlikely that any limited actions, however punitive in themselves, would turn the tide. In 1965 a deteriorating situation led the United States to initiate air strikes, but the strikes themselves could not stop the rot—which is why US ground troops were introduced, in an attempt to stabilize the situation, soon after.

Quagmires

This helped to create a quagmire—a situation in which a country with a high stake in the satisfactory resolution of a conflict suffers steady losses without making evident progress. The precise origins of the quagmire metaphor are obscure, but it can obviously be traced back to those grim pictures of the Western Front, of soldiers stuck in the mire. The sense of being bogged down was as much an accurate description of a physical condition as a telling metaphor. As a depiction of the quandary of a whole nation, as opposed to the lot of a soldier, it seems to have come into circulation after 1945. This was mainly in connection with colonial wars. In relation to Vietnam it had been used to describe the French Indo-China campaign, but it was given greatest prominence by the journalist David Halberstam in his Vietnam memoir, *The making of a quagmire.*

The metaphor was employed by those who argued that the United States had allowed itself to get sucked into an open-ended commitment by optimistic reports from the field to the effect that all that was needed was one more step. The promised victory was never delivered, but in agreeing to each magic ‘next step’ the United States became lured deeper and deeper into the morass.

This explanation of entanglement was challenged by others. The decisions had been self-conscious, they argued, and the politicians had been warned. The possibility, indeed the probability, of a quagmire had been spelled out in the analyses provided at each point of decision. American policy in Vietnam was

actually determined by the rigidity of the political commitment, which made it very difficult to withdraw gracefully. The exit to de-escalation and to escape from the quagmire was revision of the political commitment.

Thus in Cuba the drive to escalation was inhibited by keen awareness on both sides that the political stakes were simply not worth taking matters to a decisive showdown, while in Vietnam the quagmire resulted from a political stake incommensurate with the available military means, and eventually with the tolerance of the American political system. Other examples illustrate the central importance of realistic and unambiguous political objectives. President Sadat in October 1973 succeeded in prompting an active American interest in Middle Eastern peacemaking despite an anticipated battlefield failure. In the summer of 1982, Israel’s drive into Lebanon turned sour because its government allowed war aims to cascade during the course of the campaign. The hurried American pullout from Beirut in 1984 reflected the disarray surrounding the shifting role of the multinational force.

It seems axiomatic that in politically confused situations it is going to be difficult to set objectives with certainty and precision. That is why one tends to associate quagmires with the more politically confused parts of the world, although it is not the case that all Western involvements in Third World conflicts have led to quagmires. The Falklands War, for instance, was politically relatively straightforward. Britain’s successful Malaysian campaign in the 1960s is an example which influenced many in the Kennedy administration to believe that the right sort of counterinsurgency policy might work in Vietnam. All things being equal, there is something to be said for the proposition that victory is likely to go to the side best able to mobilize local nationalist sentiment, and this has normally been difficult for a Western power.

All this suggests that the intuitive dangers of escalators and quagmires are probably overstated. This is not to argue that things cannot get out of hand, for reasons quite unconnected with the clarity of political objectives—we can all think of plenty of examples at both micro and macro levels where the ‘fog of war’ has taken its toll. Military operations have a dynamic all their own, and this undermines all attempts to organize them for purposes of political signalling.

It is also the case that in total war—when defeat would mean the elimination of the state—there can be a grim readiness to up the ante if necessary; and this may reach terrifying levels of violence. Yet here it is worth remembering the extent to which NATO doctrine reflected inevitable doubts over whether the United States would accept the ultimate price when it was not at direct risk itself from enemy occupation. Stressing the automaticity of escalation reinforced deterrence by warning that the United States might be locked in to the defence of Europe even against its better judgement.

This warns against becoming mesmerized by prophecies of rapid and uncontrollable escalation once any hostilities anywhere begin. Talk of escalators and quagmires—of relentless, independent processes—encourages the view that after a point, considered strategic judgements which weigh available military
means against desirable political ends become irrelevant. Instead, I want to reassert political responsibility for the higher conduct of war. If military engagements are shaped by the logic of political commitment, then it must be governmental decisions, however flawed and misinformed, that are crucial when it comes to altering the scope and intensity of conflicts.

I am supported in this view by a study undertaken by Efraim Karsh and Philip Sabin on escalation during the Iran–Iraq War. An escalatory process was at work during what started (at least in Saddam Hussein’s judgement) as a limited war, lasted eight years, and came to include the use of poison gas, missiles, and the bombardment of civilians and attacks on merchant shipping. They also note that, as in all wars, there were accidental incidents that raised the temperature. Nonetheless they report that:

[most] military actions tended to be deliberate and measured initiatives, carefully weighed by the belligerent in terms of costs and benefits, and having definite thresholds and limitations. The war was not characterized by hasty and panicky responses to fast changing and unclear situations...

In most cases Saddam was responsible for the escalations, but by and large they resulted not from some irrational momentum of warfare but from the parlousness of Saddam’s position on the battlefield. So the good news is that Saddam does not lash out recklessly, but calculates. The bad news is that some of his calculations are terrible.

When the stakes became too high there was a readiness to de-escalate but, again, in the case of Iran this was influenced as much by continued failure to make progress on the ground as by the punitive raids by Iraq and American support for Baghdad.12

Away from graduated escalation

The process often described as escalation thus seems to be less one of war following in an uncontainable manner a predetermined path covering successive thresholds of violence, than of a growing risk of distortion in political decision-making, as conflicts become more complex, the military situation becomes more uncertain, and the political system itself comes under increasing strain.

In a limited war—that is, one where the future of the state is not itself in question—the problem for political leaders is that they must balance the military logic dictated by the formal commitment to protect friends and uphold international law, etc, against the military logic dictated by the needs of domestic political management, which requires attention to casualty levels, economic costs and the dangers of getting embroiled in a wider conflict. It was this tension that produced the strategy of graduated escalation in Vietnam. To the American armed forces, who were asked to make sense of it all, this approach seemed to reflect a deluded search for a way to use armed force to great effect but at minimum cost. One widely accepted critique of US policy

in Vietnam is that an ignominious defeat was suffered because civilian policy-makers insisted on attempting to dole out military power in discrete, small packages, rather than using it to inflict a decisive blow against the enemy.

The influence of this critique on contemporary American military thinking has been profound. General Alexander Haig warned of the danger of getting into a campaign by starting small and showing hesitation when he became Secretary of State:

If it is easier to escalate step by small step, it is easier for an adversary to respond to each step with a response that is strong enough to compel yet another escalation on our part. That is the lesson of Vietnam. If an objective is worth pursuing, then it might be pursued with enough resources to force the issue early.13

Since Vietnam, armed forces in the West have taken to spelling out the military requirements of meeting a particular commitment right at the start. One well-known British example was Admiral Sir Henry Leach’s intervention, on the news of the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands, that a task force could be sent but, if it was, it must be large enough to have military significance and not be a mere token. In the present Gulf crisis General Colin Powell, Chairman of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, overruled early proposals for only a moderate despatch of forces to Saudi Arabia in order to ensure a more formidable amount of firepower.14 The remarks that got General Dugan sacked as Chief of the US Air Force included a specific rejection of ideas of graduated escalation: and this was not considered the most controversial aspect of his remarks.

McGeorge Bundy has argued in relation to the current crisis that, given patience, the blockade against Iraq will work. He cautions against the ‘error that because it was wrong in Vietnam it is wrong now to use force in a limited and gradual way’. The basic problem in Vietnam, he contends, was that there was a ‘persistent and eventually fatal imbalance of effectiveness between the Communists and their opponents’. Now the anti-Iraq coalition enjoys superiority in every respect.15 But there is another difference, which is that the escalation that caused so much discord and distress in Vietnam was active. It involved seeking and taking on the enemy in combat. A blockade as a first step is less active. Though in principle it can involve boarding and sinking ships, casualties are likely to result only if the enemy attempts to break the blockade crudely and directly, and in circumstances in which he will almost certainly be rebuffed.

The problem with the blockade—in the Gulf at the moment and in other cases—is not the military practicalities nor the eventual vulnerability of the Iraqi economy, which at some point must break. At issue is the ability of the anti-Iraqi coalition to keep up the pressure, which is of course a function of political commitment and, particularly in the Arab world, the restlessness of the

population. If we move to the next step—direct military action—it will be because the blockade is not working fast enough for the inner coherence of the coalition. The judgement then becomes that of whether, taking into account its practicalities and risks, the prospect of direct military action will have the desired effect on Saddam’s calculations, or whether it will sow further division within the coalition.

Which brings us back to the fundamental importance of political commitment. Objectives must be defined both realistically and in a manner consistent with national values. This task becomes much more difficult when part of the strategy is to hold together a wide-ranging coalition.

That is why the United Nations is so important in these circumstances, for it creates the opportunity for international consensus-building which, by its very nature, helps in most Western states with domestic consensus-building. This was very evident in Britain during the Falklands conflict. In the context of the Gulf, it requires sorting out whether the objective is to liberate and gain recompense for Kuwait, or whether it can be extended to include compensation for plunder, disarmament of Iraq or the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

The importance of establishing the nature of political commitments is relevant to all future contingencies in which the use of force might be considered. In the past it was possible to take the political dimension of the central confrontation with the Soviet Union for granted. From now on this dimension must be addressed afresh at each new moment of crisis. The old distinction between an area within which the major powers might come to blows and one containing lesser problems that any serious power ought to be able to take in its stride is breaking down. In Europe there seems no good reason for the major powers to fight among themselves, but their confrontation may be replaced by the sort of turbulence previously confined to the Third World; while in the Third World many lesser powers are acquiring the attributes of major powers—including weapons of mass destruction.

Sorting out political interests in these circumstances will be exacting. First, there are now very few national interests that are both truly vital and truly unique. There will always be small-scale operations that a single country undertakes by itself in support of secondary interests, but the truly vital interests are collective, and they will require a collective response. With NATO, many of the problems of coalition warfare (such as finance and command and division of labour) were continually under consideration. But if new coalitions have to be forged with each new conflict, then we need to develop bodies of precedent and procedure to facilitate what can be a bruising and damaging process.

Second, we should not underestimate the widespread understanding of the basic principles of international order, the general stake in their enforcement, and the presumption that the United Nations is the key arbiter when these principles are challenged. It is now almost inconceivable that any major European country would take military action in defiance of the United Nations. This is worth bearing in mind if parts of Europe are becoming equivalent to the Third World, for it suggests that we should allow for a
greater role for the UN in European security arrangements. Why should a European ‘solution’ organized through the CSCE necessarily be any more credible than the sort of ‘Arab solutions’ proposed in the Gulf crisis that were supposedly to be arranged by the Arab League? The UN is better geared to crisis decision-making on an international scale than any prospective pan-European institution, and the West should not be so proud as to ignore this.

Third, while in the Gulf crisis Western interests include both the most elemental principle of international order and security of oil supply, closer to home, interests may become bound up with containing disorder within the former Soviet empire. The arguments that warned against stepping into a quagmire in the Third World may well apply here, yet the consequences of inactivity may be much harder to ignore. This reflects on the nature of the commitment of the more prosperous and orderly part of Europe to the security and welfare of those recovering from communist rule.

Finally, these political issues must be integrated with military planning as a matter of course—and this requirement also applies to academics working in this area. It is hard to think of a more inappropriate time to take a narrow view of defence as something concerned solely with budgets, organization, equipment, supply and tactics, even though these are matters that can never be ignored. Facing today’s complex regional and international scene, ‘defence’ must be considered in the broadest terms.