Incremental Escalation as a Cost-Avoidance Instrument in International Conflicts

Michael Becker

How do states involved in international conflict decide on the quality and quantity of force to use? Traditional understandings of military threats and force in international relations emphasise its quality as an instÂment for achieving victory in a dyadic dispute. However, changes in the international system in recent decades have attached heavy penalties to overt offensive action, obliging states to disguise their use of force. One common – but under-studied – way of doing so is the tactic of incremental escalation, whereby states increase the level and scope of force over time within a conflict, but in a gradual manner. Examining the cases of North Korea's nuclear program and the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2014-present), this article investigates the use of this tactic in international disputes, demonstrating that it is a widespread and effective way for offensive-minded states to avoid the costs associated with aggressive behaviour.

Keywords: incremental escalation, conflict studies, dyadic disputes, North Korea, Russia-Ukraine conflict, Crimea

Introduction

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How do states involved in international conflict decide on the quality and quantity of force to use? Traditional understandings of military threats and force in international relations emphasise its quality as an instÂment for achieving victory in a dyadic dispute.[1] In other words, according to the majority of scholarly analyses, state-initiated violence or the threat of violence is used to intimidate or subdue rival states in order to achieve material goals—acquiring resources, assuring regional security, and expanding territorial holdings. These goals, no doubt,

do in fact drive states' decisions to initiate hostilities. However, what it less clear is the extent to which they influence choices regarding the *quantity and quality* of force to use. This article argues that these decisions, at least in part, are determined by a series of intermediate concerns, which, broadly speaking, entail avoiding and minimising the costs associated with being labelled the aggressor in a given conflict. These intermediate goals have been largely neglected by scholars despite the fact that they shape in major ways how conflict is conducted in the modern era.

Cost-Avoidance in International Conflicts

Many international alliances, much of international law, and the vast majority of security policies have as their *raison d'être* the deterrence and prevention of aggressive behaviour by offensive-minded states. The result of this pervasive tendency in international stÂctures is that there are major costs – reputational, economic, and military – associated with initiating hostilities or acting provocatively. These costs have all but eliminated the overt use of offensive military force but, instead of doing away with it entirely, have simply transformed its form.[2] When achieving their goals requires the use of offensive military force, states do not typically announce their belligerent intentions, or escalate to full-fledged hostilities in the space of a day. Instead, most states rely on complex tactics of blame and cost avoidance, including misinformation as well as surgical uses of force. These tactics serve to disguise offensive states' intentions, justify offensive action, and avoid the local and international costs associated with being labelled the "aggressor" in a given conflict. To take one example, Russian military interventions in the 2000s and 2010s in Georgia and Ukraine made use of obfuscation and calculated use of covert and sub-state violence to provide a basis for Russia to plausibly deny direct involvement in the crises.[3]

In general, these cost-avoidance tactics range from the obvious – denying direct involvement in a given conflict, claiming to have been provoked by another state – to the more subtle—modulating the use of force to give the appearance of proportionality and to mask the offensive state's tÂe goals. One type of modulated force in particular, the tactic of incremental escalation, has characterised offensive behaviour by multiple belligerent states involved in recent conflicts, both "hot" wars and "cold" disputes. This tactic is defined as gradual, successive amplifications in the frequency, intensity and scope of military action on the part of an offensive state over an extended period of time. In-

dependent of its utility *within* a dyadic conflict, this article argues that incremental escalation – combined with tactical reductions in the use of force – has become a necessary instÂment for offensive-minded states as a means to avoid, or at least minimise, the significant, internationally-imposed costs related to being perceived as the instigator of a conflict.

This article examines the particular benefits a tactic of incremental escalation provides to offensive-minded states, as a first step toward understanding how international conflict has adapted to an era in which aggressive state action is heavily stigmatised. The import of this topic is obvious: without an awareness of the gambits and devices states use to avoid blame for aggressive behaviour, it will be impossible to identify definitively many instances of aggression, given that no state will openly claim responsibility for its offensive intentions or actions. The article proceeds as follows. The first section defines escalation in more detail and develops the concept and logic of incremental escalation in international conflict. The next section develops a theory of incremental escalation by considering the specific advantages the use of incremental escalation provides to offensive states, the better to predict when the tactic will be likely to be used. It argues that multiple benefits accÂe to states that use gradual, marginal escalatory tactics, including avoiding international opprobrium, extracting concessions, and averting defender states' retaliation. In the following section, the theoretical discussion is substantiated using qualitative data from the Russia-Ukraine conflict that began in early 2014 and from the ongoing dispute over Iran's nuclear program. Finally, new research directions are identified in light of this work's findings.

Escalation in International Conflict

Escalation in the context of international conflict can be defined as successive, visible, and significant increases over time in the vertical, horizontal, and political dimensions of a dispute.[4] Vertical dimensions refer to the intensity of tactics used in a conflict, horizontal to the geographic or temporal scope of a conflict, and political to more nebulous characteristics like the objectives of a conflict or the Âles of engagement.[5] Escalation, in general, can be defined either broadly or narrowly. A more narrow definition might be restricted to vertical and horizontal dimensions—the additional commitment of offensive

military resources and manpower to an ever more intense conflict. Alternatively, escalation considered broadly might include political dimensions: increases in belligerent rhetoric and threats, greater use of economic statecraft, or the severing of diplomatic relations. This article adopts the broader definition of escalation, as it offers a more complete picture of possible offensive actions used by states to intimidate and coerce concessions from their rivals.

The logic of escalation in general, as an instÂment of warfare, is well developed in the international security literature, yet the tactic of incremental escalation specifically remains under-studied. Many studies have examined when and why states escalate, but few have sought to investigate how they do so. According to the prevailing views on escalation, by advertising a nation's willingness to devote more and more resources and manpower to a conflict, it communicates resolve to challenger states that, themselves, are constantly weighing the costs and benefits of continuing to fight.[6] Furthermore, it signals to challenger states a certain willingness to appear reckless—to be willing to permit large consequences, including loss of life, in pursuit of certain goals, be they territorial, economic, or other objectives. This willingness to appear almost irrationally fixated on achieving these objectives, so the thinking goes, deters potentially antagonistic challenger states from engaging in conflict. This line of thought is related to the so-called "Madman theory" of military strategy that is frequently attributed to US President Richard Nixon during the Cold War, and it is also present in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli.[7]

Why, then, would a state use incremental escalation against another state, instead of relying on more dramatic manoeuvres to signal their commitment to the conflict? The logic of incremental escalation's use was first elucidated in a chapter in one of the seminal texts on international security, *Arms and Influence*.[8] In it, Schelling discusses how states make commitments to defend their territorial integrity and how other, hostile states seek to undo or circumvent those commitments. One way of doing so Schelling calls "salami tactics." In essence, a challenger state attempts an offensive manoeuvre against a defender state, but one so minor that retaliation would be absurd[9]—an "accidental" flyover of protected airspace, for example. The utility of doing so for the challenger state lies in breaking the sanctity of the defender state's commitment; the latter can no longer claim not to tolerate *any* violations of its territory. Once the defender state's commitment to de-

fend its territory is revealed not to be absolute, the challenger state is free further to "erode" it. In holding to a reasonable standard of retaliation, then, the defender state leaves itself vulnerable to subsequent aggressions—other "slices" of salami. By ensuring that each slice remains small, the challenger state avoids 'invoking the [defender state's] commitment, [while] simultaneously making the commitment appear porous and infirm.'

Schelling's arguments are characteristically insightful, but the international system has changed since the publication of his work. Today, states that initiate conflict, or that overtly seek offensive military capabilities,[10] not only Ân the risk of retaliation by the defender state, but also may incur economic, military, and reputational costs imposed by tertiary states and international bodies.[11] As a result, challenger states make use of a wide variety of tactics to avoid being blamed for their aggression, and, where blame is unavoidable, to avert the penalties associated with it. In the contemporary international system, the utility of incremental escalation largely lies in manipulating third-party and international bodies' reactions to escalatory behaviour. The concept and operation of incremental escalation as presented in this article are similar to what Schelling meant by the phrase "salami tactics," but differ in two important ways. First, the principal actors in Schelling's discussion are the parties to a dyadic conflict, and a specific kind of dyadic conflict: a face-off between nuclear-armed powers of comparable capability. This was an eminently reasonable choice for Schelling, given the book's time of writing. Yet the stÂcture of the international system has since changed, requiring an updated understanding of the nature of incremental escalation. This article, consequently, examines the dynamics between a pair of hostile states, but also takes account of the role played by tertiary actors like other states and international organisations.

Second, in Schelling's schema, states use incremental escalation in a simple two-player game. Their goal is to impose territorial costs on the enemy without triggering a military response—in other words, to perform offensive manoeuvres only to the extent that they are either deniable or excusable. In Schelling's schema, states sought to undo each other's territorial commitments using incremental escalation, but it is not clear to what end. Schelling does not quite call it a zero-sum game, but implies that each acts in the hope of eventually eliminating the

other. This article, by contrast, argues that states use incremental escalation to achieve much more limited objectives, including, *inter alia*, regional hegemony, access to natural resources, and political or economic concessions. Therefore, incremental escalation in this article is understood as an instÂment used for purposes at times peripheral to the actual conflict. It can be used to avoid costs and extract benefits from other states, and may only have an incidental relation to the conflict within which it takes place.

A Theory of Incremental Escalation

Under what circumstances can states be expected to use incremental escalation as a tactic in an international conflict? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand the benefits such a tactic provides to offensive-minded states. This section considers these benefits, including those identified by Schelling in his work, as well as those that have developed more recently following changes in the international system.

The Threshold of Reaction and the Paradox of Increments

Incremental escalation manoeuvres present a special dilemma to defender states and, hence, are useful for offensive states. By definition, each constituent part of an incremental campaign is minor. This implies that each instance of belligerence, on its own, very likely fails to cross the defender state's 'threshold of reaction,' meaning the level of aggression that would necessarily merit a military or diplomatic retaliation.[12] Furthermore, even in cases where minor violations of a defender's sovereignty do in fact meet or exceed the threshold, they are still likely too minor to justify retaliation. This is, in part, because there is a well-documented norm in international conflict concerned with proportionate retaliation—an accidental shooting ought not to be parried with a nuclear attack, say.[13] Such disproportionality would violate widely held fundamentals of fairness and restraint in conflict that many states have found it useful to adopt. Thus, in cases where a state's sovereignty is violated, but only to a minor extent, they are hamstÂng by the doctrine of proportional retaliation. How to respond to a violation of its airspace—by an equal violation of the offender's airspace?

Such a manoeuvre smacks of pettiness, and also leaves little room for excusing honest mistakes. Do nothing, then? Doing nothing potentially invites ever more intÂsive violations.[14]

In a conflict where incremental escalation has been used, it becomes clear to the defender state at a certain point that minor violations of its sovereignty have accumulated to a point where they cannot possibly be accidental. Even then, defender states face a bind on how to react. A full-scale retaliatory manoeuvre is risky – the defender may then wind up being labelled the aggressor – and a proportional response to each individual violation, as discussed above, is not an ideal choice, though it may be optimal in light of the alternatives. Thus the tactic of incremental escalation provides a significant within-conflict benefit to challenger states. Specifically, it constrains the reactive options of defender states by avoiding any excessively aggressive manoeuvres that meet the defender's threshold of reaction, and it permits a discrediting of the defender state's commitment to self-defence, thereby clearing the way for further aggression.

Third-Party Observers and the Reputational Costs of Conflict

As noted, engaging in conflict, especially in the role of the aggressor, is accompanied by serious reputational and material costs imposed by powerful third-party states and international institutions. The increasing significance of these costs in recent decades has rendered overtly offensive conduct all but obsolete.[15] Incremental escalation, when used appropriately, has the potential to allow states to circumvent the costs of aggression.

This is due to several reasons. First, in cases of an incremental escalation, the initial manoeuvres are so minor that it is often difficult to apportion blame, at least beyond a reasonable doubt. If the defender state retaliates, it too can be blamed by international observers unaware of the initial provocation by the offensive state. Furthermore, because the initial stages of an escalatory manoeuvre often appear either accidental, or at least not provocative, their aggressive character can be denied by offensive states. The stÂcture of a conflict that escalates incrementally also favours the offensive state because of the suboptimal range of options faced by defender states. As discussed above, the defender state can respond to an escalatory manoeuvre by doing nothing, by responding proportionately, or by escalating further

themselves. These options, besides being suboptimal military possibilities, are also not ideal for defender states in terms of the optics of a conflict. Doing nothing is often not a viable option, as domestic audiences demand retaliation. And, even in cases where doing nothing is possible it may play into offensive states' hands, as they can claim that there is no conflict to speak of; avoiding the international censure that they might otherwise receive. Responding proportionately is equally suboptimal for defender states, especially given the often innocuous nature of the offensive state's early manoeuvres, as it risks muddying the water regarding who is responsible in the eyes of the UN and other important observers. Further escalation, though a reasonable tactical choice, and perhaps even defensible on normative grounds, risks being seen by third parties as unproductive, aggressive, and confrontational.

Finally, incremental escalation benefits offensive states because it frequently attaches to disputes a "low-intensity," or "frozen" status, inuring media, state, and international observers to the conflict. Media demonstrate a well-known bias toward novel issues, and away from entrenched, intractable problems.[16] Consequently, conflicts of low intensity, even when geopolitically important, receive less media coverage, limiting tertiary states' ability to follow the conflict and to recognise offensive behaviour. Even when offensive behaviour is obvious, the conflict can acquire an "inevitable" image, which undermines condemnation of belligerent conduct.

Modulated Conflict and the Extraction of Concessions

A final advantage associated with the tactic of incremental escalation has to do with the manipulation and extraction of concessions from third-party states. It has frequently been remarked that pariah states such as Iran and North Korea 'game' the international system by periodically engaging in belligerent behaviour, and then backing down in order to extract concessions from states intent on insuring peace. What is less often noticed is that it is their use of incremental escalation and de-escalation that makes this strategy workable. These states carefully modulate their escalatory and de-escalatory manoeuvres, avoiding exceeding a level that could lead to military retaliation (though they do frequently incur economic sanctions and rhetorical condemnation), and never de-escalating to the point where an eventual reprise in belligerence would be too remarkable. This aspect of incremental escala-

tion, as well as its other utilitarian aspects, are illustrated in the next section, which addresses incremental escalation in practice.

Incremental Escalation in International Conflict

This section is devoted to illustrating the practical application of the tactic of incremental escalation. It compares two cases—the Russia-Ukraine conflict of 2014, and the ongoing dispute between Iran and Western powers over nuclear issues, regional stability and human rights concerns. The cases were selected with the intention not of providing a representative sample of all inter-state conflicts, but rather with the aim of demonstrating the widespread use of incremental escalation, and comparing its evolution in varying contexts. The three cases vary along multiple dimensions: intensity of the conflict, its duration, historical context, motivations, participants, outcomes, etc. The cases elucidate not only how the tactic of incremental escalation has become the standard for offensive states, but also how many diverse purposes it serves for those states.

The West-North Korea Dispute

Numerous observers of international affairs have remarked that the conflict between the West and North Korea has taken on something of a cyclical character: North Korea acts provocatively, the West threatens retaliation, eventually tensions calm, and in exchange for its relative docility, North Korea achieves concessions like the lifting of certain economic sanctions.

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As Table 1 illustrates, this recurring pattern of escalation and de-escalation is not a new phenomenon. And, given the benefits it yields to North Korea, it is unlikely accidental. On the contrary, many observers of North Korea have contend that its leaders carefully calibrate the timing and extent of their escalatory manoeuvres to maximise the likelihood of extracting concessions from other states and minimise the chances of a military intervention. As Snyder suggests, 'North Korea has routinely used crisis diplomacy, brinkmanship, and delay to play for time in unfavourable circumstances.'[17]

Several goals animate North Korean leaders' conduct in the international system, which are important to understand if one wishes to explain their behaviour. First, Kim Jong-un and the other leaders of

North Korea seek to maintain the political status quo and their hold on power.[18] Given the economic backwardness, pariah status and relative resource poverty of the country, this goal necessitates the extraction of aid from both sympathetic and adversarial states. Yet, under normal circumstances, neither group of states has much of an incentive to do so. Allies of North Korea (re: China) view it as something of a nuisance, tarnishing China's international image and contributing to volatility in the region. On the other hand, rivals, such as the US, do not wish to support what they view as an unethical, aggressive and unstable regime.

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How, then, does North Korea induce other states to provide aid and limit or lift sanctions previously applied against it? One possible way of doing so would be a permanent liberalisation of the state, but this would likely dislodge the Âling class from power as widespread international and local opposition to their Âle made itself felt. Therefore, the North Korean state extracts aid using the timing and nature of its military escalations. As the timeline above demonstrates, provocative action on the part of North Korea is predictably periodic. This action can range from missile tests, to the expulsion of international inspectors, to the prosecution of Western citizens, among other tactics. It is worth noting however, that rarely if ever do these actions reach the threshold of a *casus belli*. Missile tests indicate North Korea's ability to strike Japan, but Japan is not, in the end, stÂck. Westerners are sentenced to hard labour, but the sentence is ultimately commuted.

Incendiary action and rhetoric on the part of the North Korean state, therefore, frequently seem to skirt the edges of out-and-out conflict, but without ever actually reaching it. Doing so, besides stimulating internal nationalist sentiment among the North Korean people, also prepares the stage for an eventual de-escalation, which the North Korean state can tie to positive incentives like increased aid or decreased sanctions. If the provocations were too large, the option of a military retaliation would perhaps become too tempting for North Korea's adversaries. On the other hand, if the provocations were too small, the eventual de-escalation would not be noticed – or welcomed – to the same degree. A sizeable initial escalation also serves another goal that observers of North Korean politics point to: the Âling class's concern with saving face on the international stage.[19] It is the initial escalation that later gives North Korea the latitude to back down later without losing much face or appearing weak.

This pattern of behaviour has resulted in significant, tangible benefits for the North Korean regime, if not for its people. As Byman and Lind observe

> [s]ince the late 1990s, North Korea's 'nuclear extortion' has generated more than $6 billion in aid from not only South Korea but also the United States, China, and Japan. These countries gave hundreds of thousands of tons of food (explained to the North Korean people as 'tribute' to Kim Jong-il). The regime has also extracted outright cash payments (e.g., Kim Dae-jung's government paid Kim Jong-il to attend their much-heralded 2000 summit; Washington paid a fee to inspect one of North Korea's suspected nuclear facilities; a 2008 deal was accompanied by an announcement of 500,000 tons of U.S. food aid, along with the claim that the two were unrelated). Beyond outright aid, economic initiatives associated with South Korea's sunshine policy, such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Hyundai resort at Mount Kumgang, have provided Pyongyang with a significant revenue stream.[20]

Thus, the North Korean regime's policy of incremental escalation has garnered it material gains from tertiary states concerned about the maintenance of peace on the Korean peninsula. It is the incremental character of the escalation and de-escalation that has permitted the regime to avoid the two extremes of, on the one hand, failing to attract other states to the negotiating table, and on the other hand, incurring a military retaliation.

The Russia-Ukraine Dispute

While the previous case highlighted the use of incremental escalation in an asymmetric conflict in which overt hostilities have not broken out in decades, this section discusses a more typical, territory-based dispute between contiguous states – Russia and Ukraine – which engaged in a low-intensity conflict beginning in early 2014. While the conflict has dimmed in intensity in recent months, an examination of its historical unfolding is instÂctive, as it illustrates the extent to which threats, brinkmanship, and, especially, surgical escalation were used by Russia to enhance its position both tactically and reputationally.

As tension over Ukraine's growing ties with Europe began to mount in early 2014, clashes between Ukraine and Russia, over a customs un-

ion, territory in eastern Ukraine, and other issues, became more and more animated. Yet while conflict between the two states was in some sense obvious, in another important sense it was, at any given point in the crisis, difficult to determine exactly who was fighting whom, in what ways, and with what goals in mind. There was no declaration of war, no mass engagement of conventional forces, and only rarely did leaders of Russia even acknowledge the existence of a conflict in which they were taking part.[21]

This unusual "quasi-war" is difficult to evaluate in part because substate militias, with varying political sympathies and agendas of their own, are among the main participants in the conflict. They were not, however, alone, raising the question of why direct Russian and Ukrainian involvement in the conflict over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine has passed with so little discussion in the media and diplomatic circles. In significant measure, this question can be answered by understanding the timing and nature of the crisis's escalation. Measured along any of the three dimensions: vertical, horizontal and political, – that acts as an instance of escalation – this particular crisis has intensified slowly.

As Table 2 demonstrates well, Russia's offensive action in Ukraine, and in particular in the Crimea, proceeded incrementally, beginning with the Russian parliament's approval of the use of force in Crimea, a gradual build-up of forces on the Russian-Ukrainian border, initial clashes, and finally victory and annexation. This escalation of force was accompanied by Russia's rhetoric of denial until the moment it was no longer plausible. It was also justified by a claimed deterioration in security for ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine.[22] Tactically, as well, the intervention was well disguised: the initial massing of forces that preceded the Crimea incursion was depicted as a series of training exercises, and only gradually did Russian regular forces move to annex Crimea.[23]

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Through a concerted campaign of denials and diversions, but mostly through an incremental build-up of forces and engagement, Russia was able to disguise, to a large extent, its involvement in the conflict in Ukraine. Consequently, it was able to limit the backlash and negative repercussions that normally accompany offensive action. Under normal conditions, annexation, brinkmanship, and aggression of the sort practiced by Russia in 2014 would probably have led to significant economic sanctions, broad-based rhetorical condemnation, and potential military retaliation. In point of fact, there was significant condemnation of Russia's actions, but also calls for both sides to cease

hostilities; there were economic sanctions imposed, but many of them were symbolic and targeted toward the Russian leadership; and there was no serious consideration of military retaliation on the part of the only regional power capable of credibly initiating action, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

In part, the international community's failure to seriously deter or punish Russia for its offensive action stems from the latter's significant influence. Russia, as a massive, nuclear-armed military power, is a much less inviting military target than, say, Saddam Hussein's Iraq after it invaded Kuwait. Economically too, sanctions were less appealing in the case of Russia: much of Eastern Europe relies on Russian gas, oil and other goods, and depends on the Russian economy as a source of exports and imports.

Yet the role of incremental escalation in Russia's management of the crisis is not to be diminished. By taking Ukrainian territory in fits and starts, using rhetorical tools to deny involvement and deploying substate militias in addition to regular forces, Russia avoided triggering the West's "threshold of retaliation." This is tÂe despite the fact that in aggregate, the results of Russia's actions are the same as if it had taken Crimea in the space of a single day. While NATO, many observer states, and Ukraine itself would perhaps have liked to stop Russia's incursions, each incremental step that Russia undertook, on its own, was not worth risking a conflagration in the region. And, as Ukraine spoke out against Russia's actions, and used military force of its own, blame for the crisis began to be more difficult to apportion for many international observers. As it stands now, the international community has largely accepted the finality – if not the legitimacy – of Russia's possession of Crimea.

It is also worth noting that, by escalating slowly and deliberately, Russia was also able to avoid media attention to a large extent, as the conflict was overshadowed by other violence in the Middle East, and economic news. Admittedly, the conflict in Ukraine was not as bloody as, for example, the Syrian Civil War; yet media coverage, and the agendas of international bodies like the United Nations, focused on Ukraine to a surprisingly limited extent. Thus another benefit of incremental escalation in the Ukraine crisis for Russia has been that little energy has been devoted to understanding its causes, which party was at fault, and how best to exit the crisis.

Conclusion

This article highlighted the tactic of incremental escalation, demonstrated that it is widespread among offensive states, and argued that it provides numerous benefits to states willing to use it. It also contends that academic and policymakers' attention to the concept of escalation has largely focused on the *when* and *why* of state escalation, with little focus on an understanding of *how* they escalate. While traditional, massive, visible escalation may still be applicable in rare conflicts between states of equal capability that wish to demonstrate their resolve to fight, the contemporary international system heavily penalises overtly aggressive action, adjusting states' calculus about when, and how, to be belligerent.

As a result, many states that still wish to act aggressively must act more subtly, disguising their recourse to force through dissimulating rhetoric, non-traditional military tactics, and gradual, successive changes in the quality and quantity of force used—incremental escalation (and de-escalation). As it turns out, this pattern is far from being exclusively theoretical. It is a pattern observed in numerous conflicts, including, but certainly not limited to, those described in the above case studies. This article's illustration of the benefits that accÂe to offensive states that use incremental escalation suggests promising new research directions in the field of international security. For example, future research should attempt to locate in more detail the "threshold of retaliation." Where is it located? Does it depend on the nature of the parties to the conflict, the international environment, or other factors? Another current of research should investigate the effect of escalatory behaviour on the exact timing and nature of concessions offered by other states. What type of behaviour tends to maximise concessions? How can the international system use these lessons to disincentivise aggressive behaviour by pariah states? Future research in these areas – in addition to the findings of this article – contributes to a better understanding of what forms interstate aggression takes in the modern era, and provides insights as to what can be done to stop it.

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TABLE 1: Timeline of North Korean—West relations, 1994-2007[24]

- 1994
  North Korea and U.S. sign an agreement. North Korea pledges to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear weapons program in exchange for international aid to build two power-producing nuclear reactors.
- 1998
  August 31 - North Korea fires a multistage rocket that flies over Japan and lands in the Pacific Ocean.
- 1999
  FebÂary 27-March 16 - During a fourth round of talks, North Korea allows U.S. access to the site in exchange for U.S. aid in increasing North Korean potato yields.
  December - A U.S.-led international consortium signs a $4.6 billion contract to build two nuclear reactors in North Korea.
- 2000
  July - North Korea threatens to restart its nuclear program if the U.S. does not compensate it for the loss of electricity caused by delays in building nuclear power plants.
- 2002
  October 4 - U.S. officials, in closed talks, confront North Korea with evidence that they are operating a nuclear weapons program in violation of the 1994 nuclear agreement. North Korea admits that is has been operating the facility in violation of the agreement.
  December 31 - North Korea expels IAEA inspectors.
- 2003
  January 10 - North Korea withdraws from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.
  April 23 - Declares it has nuclear weapons.
- 2004
  August - North Korea offers to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for aid, easing of sanctions and being removed from the US's list of state sponsors of terrorism. The U.S. wants North Korea to disclose all nuclear activities and allow inspections.
- 2005
  September 19 - North Korea agrees to give up its entire nuclear program, including weapons, a joint statement from six-party nuclear arms talks in Beijing said.

- In exchange, the U.S., China, Japan, Russian and South Korea have 'stated their willingness' to provide energy assistance to North Korea, as well as promote economic cooperation.
- North Korean officials later state that their country would begin dismantling its nuclear program only if the U.S. provides a light-water reactor for civilian power -- a demand that could threaten a day-old agreement among North Korea, its neighbours and the United States.

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2006

October 9 - North Korea claims to have successfully tested a nuclear weapon.

October 14 - The UN Security Council approves a resolution imposing sanctions against North Korea, restricting military and luxury good trade and requiring an end to nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

2007

FebÂary 13 - North Korea agrees to close its main nuclear reactor in exchange for an aid package worth $400 million.

March - During six-party talks, the U.S. agrees to release approximately $25 million of North Korean funds frozen at a Macao bank, a sticking point in the negotiations. T

September 2 - U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill announces that North Korea has agreed to fully declare and disable its nuclear programs by the end of 2007.

September 30 - At six-party talks in Beijing, North Korea signs an agreement stating it will begin disabling its nuclear weapons facilities. North Korea also agrees to include a U.S. team of technical experts in the disabling activities.

December 31 - North Korea misses a deadline to declare all its nuclear programs.

TABLE 2: Timeline of the 2014 Ukraine—Russia Conflict

Dec 17: Russian President Vladimir Putin announces plans to buy $15bn in Ukrainian government bonds and a cut in cost of Russia's natural gas for Ukraine.

Feb 27: Pro-Kremlin armed men seize government buildings in Crimea. Ukraine government vows to prevent a country break-up as Crime-

an parliament set May 25 as the date for referendum on region's status. Yanukovich is granted refuge in Russia.

- *March 1:* Russian upper house of the parliament approves a request by Putin to use military power in Ukraine.
- *March 2:* A convoy of hundreds of Russian troops heads towards the regional capital of Crimea.
- *March 3:* Russia's Black Sea Fleet tells Ukrainian navy in Sevastopol in Crimea to surrender or face a military assault.
- *March 4:* In his first public reaction to the crisis in Ukraine, Putin says his country reserves the right to use all means to protect its citizens in eastern Ukraine. Russian forces fire warning shots on unarmed Ukrainian soldiers marching towards an airbase in Sevastopol.
- *March 18:* Putin signs treaty absorbing Crimea into Russia.
- *March 31:* Russian troops partly withdraw from Ukrainian border in the south region of Rostov.
- *April 17:* Putin acknowledges that Russian forces were deployed in Crimea during the March referendum on joining Russia, but says he hopes not to have to use his 'right' to send Russian troops into Ukraine. Lavrov announces in Geneva a deal has been reached with Ukraine, the US and the EU to 'de-escalate' tensions in Ukraine.
- *April 24:* Putin says deployment of military in east Ukraine by the Kiev authorities is a crime that will 'have consequences. The Russian army starts new exercises at the border with Ukraine.
- *April 29:* Russia denies it has troops in eastern Ukraine.
- *May 7:* Putin endorses Ukraine's planned presidential election. He says Russian troops pulled back from border. The new overall toll from Ukrainian military operations stands at 14 servicemen dead.
- *May 8:* Russia conducts military exercises, test-fires several missiles, and says nuclear capabilities are on 'constant combat alert.' NATO says there is no sign of a Russian troop pullback.
- *May 19:* Putin orders troop withdrawals from the Ukraine border following the 'completion of spring military training programmes.'
- *June 9:* Russia and Ukraine reach a 'mutual understanding' regarding a 'de-escalation of tensions.'
- *June 19:* NATO says it has evidence of a renewed Russian military build up along the Ukraine border.
- *June 22:* Putin makes a public announcement supporting Poroshenko's plans for a ceasefire, calling for a 'substantial and detailed' dialogue between Ukraine and the pro-Russian groups.

- *July 13:* Russia accuses Kiev of killing a Russian civilian in an artillery attack, promising 'irreversible consequences.' Ukraine denies the charges.
- *July 17:* Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 is shot down of eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board.
- *July 24:* The US accuses Russia of firing artillery across the border into Ukraine, but does not share its evidence. A Pentagon spokesman describes it as a 'military escalation.'
- *August 5:* Russia begins a build up of forces on the Ukrainian border, and continues a series of training exercises that have been held on and off since the start of the conflict.
- *August 12:* A Russian aid convoy of 280 tÂcks carrying 2,000 tons of food and supplies begins its long journey to the border to rising scepticism about the motives of the mission.
- *August 22:* Ukrainian authorities say about 90 tÂcks from a Russian aid convoy have crossed into Ukraine without permission, branding the act as 'direct invasion'.
- *September 20:* Participants in Ukrainian peace talks agree to create a buffer zone to separate government troops and pro-Russian fighters, as well as withdraw foreign fighters and heavy weapons from the area of conflict in the east.

Notes

1 For example, Lisa Carlson (1995), 'A Theory of Escalation and International Conflict,' Journal of Conflict Resolution, 39:3, pp. 511-534.

2 For a discussion of the effect of international law and alliances on states' propensity to declare war, see Tanisha M. Fazal (2012), 'Why States No Longer Declare War,' Security Studies, 21:4, pp. 557-593.

3 For an analysis of Russia's tactics in its 2014 conflict with Ukraine, see Michael Becker, Matthew Cohen, Sidita Kushi, and Ian McManus (2014), 'Reviving the Russian Empire: A Rationalist Model of State Intervention,' paper presented at the 2014 meeting of the Northeastern Political Science Association.

4 See Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff (2008), 'Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century,' Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, pp. 7-8, 18-19. For an analysis of the effect of the balance of power on the likelihood of a conflict's escalation, see Randolph Siverson and Tennefoss (1984), 'Power, Alliance, and the Escalation of International Conflicts,' American Political Science Review, 78:4, pp. 1057-1069.

5 Morgan (et al).

6 See Thomas Schelling (1960), The Strategy of Conflict, Harvard UP. See also James Fearon (1992), 'Threats to Use Force: Costly Signals and Bargaining in International Crises,' Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, James Fearon (1997), 'Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs,' Journal of Conflict Resolution, 41:1, pp. 68-90.

7 Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri (2003), 'The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969,' International Security, 27:4, pp. 150-183; Niccolò Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy, Book III, Chapter II.

8 Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence (1966), Yale UP.

9 This is especially tÂe because threats of overwhelming force seem less credible to deter minor aggressions.

10 Such as nuclear or chemical weapons.

11 Many states and international organisations explicitly disparage aggression between sovereign nations, the United Nations being one prominent example. Its charter references 'suppression of acts of aggression' in Article 1, and devotes an entire chapter to provisions invoked when 'international peace' is threatened by inter-state aggression. See 'Charter of the United Nations,' available at http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/.

12 The precise nature of a threshold of reaction varies significantly from state to state and across time, and is therefore difficult to specify. For the purpose of this article, it is, however, important to note that it is less likely to be triggered by small, though repeated aggressions, than by ostentatious, visible maneuvers.

13 Proportionate response is a widely acknowledged norm in international conflict. For discussions of its applicability, see Randy W. Stone, 'Protecting Civilians during Operation Allied Force: The Enduring Importance of the Proportional Response and NATO's Use of Armed Force in Kosovo,' Catholic University Law Review, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2001), pp. 501-537; Judith Gail Gardam, 'Proportionality and Force in International Law,' The American Journal of International Law, Vol. 87, No. 3 (July 1993), pp. 391-413.

14 In Arms and Influence, Schelling identified several of these within-dyad benefits to aggressor states.

15 Tanisha Fazal, 'Why States No Longer Declare War.'

16 For evidence of this bias, see Herbert Gans, Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time (New York: Pantheon, 1979); and Lee Wilkins and Philip Patterson, 'Risk Analysis and the ConstÂction of News,' Journal of Communication, Vol. 37, No. 3 (1987), pp. 80-92.

17 Scott Snyder, 'Negotiating on the Edge: Patterns in North Korea's Diplomatic Style,' World Affairs, Vol. 163, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 3-17. Snyder's argument in this case drew significantly on the work of In Young Chung, 'North Korea's Negotiating Behavior Toward the United States,' Social Science and Policy Research, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995), pp. 301-320.

18 Kim Do-tae, 'Change and Continuity in North Korea's Negotiating Behavior in the Post-Cold War Era,' Social Science and Policy Research, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995), pp. 277-300.

19 Snyder, 'Negotiating on the Edge: Patterns in North Korea's Diplomatic

Style'; Don Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), p. 278.

20 Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, 'Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,' International Security, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 44-74.

21 'Russia denies bringing troops into southeast Ukraine to support the rebels,' RTE News, August 29, 2014; 'Russia denies reports that it invaded Ukraine,' Haaretz, August 28, 2014.

22 Kathy Lally and Will Englund, 'Putin says he reserves right to protect Russians in Ukraine,' The Washington Post, March 4, 2014.

23 Matthew Chance and Holly Yan, 'Russia says it's pulling 17,000 troops from near Ukrainian border,' CNN.com, October 14, 2014.

24 Adapted from 'North Korea Timeline Fast Facts,' CNN Library, March 31, 2014. Available at http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/29/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-timeline---fast-facts/.

25 Adapted from 'Timeline: Ukraine's political crisis,' Al Jazeera, September 20, 2014. Available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2014/03/timeline-ukraine-political-crisis-20143114372285465 2.html.