

# Escalation of a Foreign Policy Crisis

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### Escalation of a Foreign Policy Crisis: Why Do Some Crises Escalate Into Violence?

#### Section I: Literature Review

##### *Introduction*

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the world came to the very brink of a third world war between the United States and the Soviet Union. The leader of the United States at the time was President John F. Kennedy, and throughout the crisis he was faced with one of two options: to use violence to end the conflict or to pursue a diplomatic resolution. When the crisis came to an end, the results were a diplomatic agreement that led to the easing of tensions and prevention of violence between the two countries. However, at no point during the crisis was the choice between escalation and reduction of tensions a sure thing. There are countless examples throughout history where diplomatic outreach failed and an international crisis escalated into violence. A perfect example of this is the outbreak of the Second World War, where appeasement and diplomacy failed completely to prevent the outbreak of violence. Despite giving Germany nearly everything that was demanded and then some more, the situation still escalated. So the question then becomes, why do some international crises escalate into violence while others do not?

This is a very important question to answer because only with a full understanding of the variation between crises, can escalation possibly predict how current or future international emergencies may develop. This research will seek to answer that critical question. The dependent variable of this project is the escalation of a crisis into violence. The purpose of this project is to explore the research that has already been done on this topic and discover the independent variables that correlate to our dependent variable. Much research has been done that explores what leads to the outbreak of violence, what makes a decision maker pursue violence over diplomacy, and what domestic and international conditions will lead a country to pursue peace in one situation and violence in another. This paper will review and build on these completed research projects with a consideration for both current and historical events.

##### *Literature Review*

As has been noted above, many studies show what causes a crisis to escalate into violence or to de-escalate into peace and diplomacy. With the creation of internet databases and freedom of information, we now have access to an enormous wealth of knowledge concerning what goes on behind the scenes with decision making. We will use these resources to try and get into the minds of the decision makers in these crises. One variable that makes an impact on the outbreak of violence may be the influence of the United States, a historical superpower and a current global hegemon.

##### *I: United States Involvement*

One theory in international politics states that the presence of a global hegemon will reduce the instability of the international system, and thus reduce the instances of violence that are present in a foreign policy crisis. This theory has been mentioned by scholars such as Franz Kohout and Michael Webb and has been labeled the Hegemonic Stability Theory (Kohout, 2003; Webb, 1989). Considering this, the involvement of the current hegemon, the United

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States, might very well reduce the likelihood of violent escalation in a confrontation. Furthermore, Michael Brecher built on this theory when he stated that great power involvement in a crisis will increase the survival-risk of an aggressor, limiting the possibility of an open conflict (Brecher, 1996). Since the United States was considered a great power in the first half of the twentieth century, a superpower for the second half, and currently reigns as the international hegemon, it stands to reason that U.S. involvement will help to stabilize a potential outbreak of violence in foreign affairs.

**H1:** United States involvement will prevent a foreign policy crisis from escalating into violence.

## *II: Polarity in the International System*

In international relations, there is a general theory that ties the polarity of the international system to the amount of conflict present in that system (Mesquita, 1975; James, 1988). This theory states that the fewer dominant states there are vying for control in foreign policy, the more stable the global community will be. Michael Brecher and Kenneth Waltz supported this viewpoint by stating that a bipolar world will see less outbreaks of violence than a multipolar world (Brecher, 1996; Hopf, 1991). Franz Kohout and Thomas Volgy went on to state that a hegemonic system will be more peaceful than a bipolar one (Kohout, 2003; Volgy, 1995). Taken together, these men support the belief that the less polarity there is, the less violence there will be. Grace Scarborough built on this when she listed international polarity as a variable when examining violence in the international order (Scarborough, 1988). These viewpoints and statements can only lead us to one conclusion: that the polarity in the international system is a very significant variable in terms of violence present in a foreign policy crisis. It is an easy concept to swallow, since the more centralized power is, the fewer opportunities there will be for competition.

**H2:** Fewer Great Powers in the International System will reduce the likelihood of a foreign policy crisis escalating into violence.

## *III: Government Type*

Whether or not a crisis escalates into violence also depends on perceived differences between the two parties. These differences can take the form of government type, ideology, or even religion. The democratic peace argument supports this theory by stating that two democracies are unlikely to ever go to war with each other while war between a democracy and autocracy are not unheard of (Henderson, 1999). This means that two states with different government types are more likely to go to war with each other. Kelly Kadera supports this hypothesis; her study concluded that systemic war is more likely when there is a strong power difference between the democratic and autocratic communities with an autocratic advantage (Kadera, 2003). The theory is additionally supported by another study by David Sobek in 2003, who concluded that differences between government types made it more likely for the Italian City-States to go to war with each other (Sobek, 2003). However, this hypothesis is not restricted to solely differences between government types; it also includes cultural differences such as religion between two states. A study by John Ferejohn in 2008 concluded that a strong difference between the religions of two states will also motivate them to go to war with one another (Ferejohn, 2008). These studies all suggest that a crisis between two groups is more likely to escalate into violence if there are strong perceptions of the differences between them.

**H3:** A non-democratic state is more likely to use violence in a foreign policy crisis.

## *IV: Threat to the Crisis Actor*

The greater the threat to your survival, the more likely you are to use violence to defend yourself. This holds true for the individual, but is no less relevant in regards to foreign relations. It makes sense that a state will be more willing to use force to defend its own survival than if its territorial integrity were not a factor. The study by Grace Scarborough mentioned earlier in this review listed risk as a factor in international violence in addition to polarity (Scarborough, 1988). Another study in support of this theory was done by Blema Steinburg, who quoted the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense as saying that one reason that the U.S. did not invade Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis was because it was not perceived by ExComm as increasing the threat to the United States (Steinburg, 1991). These studies imply

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that a major factor in whether or not a crisis actor will use violence in a foreign policy confrontation is the perceived threat to the actor's survival.

**H4:** A crisis actor is more likely to use violence in a foreign policy crisis as the threat to itself becomes greater.

## *IV: Distance of the Crisis from the Crisis Actor*

Imagine that you are a crisis actor, and a foreign policy crisis were taking place on another continent. You would feel less compelled to escalate, because it does not make sense to face the potential consequences from a crisis that is not very relevant to you. However, what if the crisis were taking place only a few miles from you? You would likely be much more nervous about the possibility of an emergency right off of your shores, and you would probably be willing to use stronger options in order to stabilize the situation. This scenario demonstrates the likelihood that the distance of a crisis is a variable in regards to crisis escalation. This idea was supported in a study by Michael Brecher, who stated that a closer proximity between two adversaries makes the use of violence more likely (Brecher, 1996). A perfect example of this exists in the Cuban Missile Crisis. As Blema Steinburg pointed out, the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba was not generally believed to alter the military situation (Steinburg, 1991). Despite this, the Soviet Union and United States still came closer to nuclear war during this crisis than at any other point in history (Scott, 1994). Why did this happen? Marcus Pohlmann stated in a study that the reaction was a result of the Soviet incursion into the United States' sphere of influence (Pohlmann, 1989). What these statements suggest is that a crisis actor will be more prepared to use violence within its own region than if it were located elsewhere around the globe.

**H5:** A crisis actor is more likely to use violence if the crisis occurs closer to its territory.

## *Conclusion*

There is a substantial amount of research that examines why some international crises escalate into the use of force while others do not. I have learned that the influence of the United States may have a considerable impact on the level of violence employed in an emergency. I have also learned that the polarity of the international system may determine the likelihood of violence in said system. There has been strong research that suggests that two groups are more likely to use violence against one another when there are perceived irreconcilable differences between them, most notably if they crisis actors possess different government types. Another variable may be the gravity of the threat that a crisis actor faces, with the actor being more likely to use force to enforce its own survival. Finally, the distance of the crisis from the crisis actor may help to determine what measures the actor is prepared to implement. Since the literature that I have reviewed has identified a clear set of variables, the next step is to perform my analysis.

## **Section II: Data Analysis and Conclusions**

Table 1: The Effects of United States Involvement, International Polarity, Government Types, Threat to the Crisis Actor and Distance of the Crisis from the Crisis Actor on the Use of Violence in a Foreign Policy Crisis.

**Variable**

**Unstand. B**

**Standard Error**

**Standardized B**

**Significance**

Constant

1.351

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0.170

0.000

USA Inv. (IV #1)

0.277

0.055

0.178

0.000

Polarity (IV #2)

0.040

0.034

0.043

0.235

Government Types (IV #3)

0.262

0.089

0.103

0.003

Threat Level

(IV #4)

0.271

0.054

0.172

0.000

Distance (IV #5)

0.031

0.046

0.024

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0.499

1. Dependent Variable: Use of Violence in a Foreign Policy Crisis

1. R2 = 0.074

2. N = 823

## *I: United States Involvement*

The results of this project's regression analysis produced some very surprising results on the relationship between United States involvement in a foreign policy crisis and the escalation of said crisis into violence. The significance level between the two variables (0.000 significance level) indicates the presence of a significant relationship, which was not surprising. What was astonishing, however, was the form that the relationship took. The unstandardized regression coefficient (0.277) indicated a positive relationship between this independent variable and the dependent variable. These results imply that the more involved the United States is in a crisis, the more likely it is that the crisis will erupt into violence. This association rejects my hypothesis that the more involved the U.S. is in a conflict, the less likely it is that violence will be introduced to it.

As if the positive relationship itself were not enough, the standardized coefficient (0.178) was the strongest of all of the independent variables explored in this project. Considering that the results imply not only that United States' involvement will escalate an international conflict, but also that it will do more to introduce violence than the involvement of any other power, regardless of the differences between the two conflicting parties. In other words, the United States has a negative impact on global events because its inclusion in any form will make it more likely that violence will occur. My hypothesis stated the opposite because it was based on Hegemonic Stability Theory, which concludes that the existence of a unipower, or hegemon, will create a more peaceful international society. I believe that the reason the United States emerges as a variable for an increase in violence is because it includes data ranging from 1918 until 2002, the majority of which takes place before the United States became the sole superpower in the international system. These results could also be explained by stating that the U.S. would only feel compelled to intervene if violence had already escalated in the crisis. Alternatively, the intervention of the U.S. itself could also be the violence that the analysis is reading. To account for this, I looked at my analysis of how the polarity of the international community affects the dependent variable.

## *II: Polarity in the International System*

The results of my analysis in regards to the effect of international polarity on violence employment in a foreign policy crisis did not turn out how I thought it would. The regression analysis indicated that there is not a significant relationship (0.235 significance level) between the polarity of the international system and the dependent variable. This was surprising because I expected the instances of violence that results from a crisis to decrease as the world became more unipolar. These results refute my hypothesis that the fewer dominant powers there are in the international community, the fewer instances of violence will be born from a foreign crisis.

I did not expect this outcome because, as with the United States, I based my hypothesis on Hegemonic Stability Theory, which states that the fewer dominant powers there are in the international system, the more peaceful that system will be. However, when looking at my results on the United States and international polarity, this theory seems to be called into question. A possible explanation for this development is that the data is coded based on the state of polarity in the international, instead of the number of powers present. In other words, the data states that the system was multipolar, but it does not state exactly how many dominant powers existed at the time. Perhaps with a more detailed analysis of the system, one that examines the numerical value of dominant powers, will we see different results.

## *III: Government Types*

The regression analysis' results on the relationship between the regime type of the crisis actor and the introduction of violence into the conflict went as expected. The results revealed a significant relationship exists between the two

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variables (0.003 significance level), which was not at all surprising. On top of that, the unstandardized regression coefficient (0.262) revealed that the relationship is in fact a positive one. When interpreted, this means that the less free the citizens of the crisis actor are, the more likely it is that the crisis itself will escalate into violence.

The results listed here support my hypothesis that when a state is less democratic, it will resort to using violence to resolve a foreign policy crisis more often than it would have if it were more democratic. I based this hypothesis on the Democratic Peace Theory, and this research implies that the theory is in fact a plausible one. The Democratic Peace Theory states that democratic states will be less inclined to fight against one another (Kadera, 2003; Sobek, 2003). In other words, a state that is less free will be more willing to employ the use of violence to solve its problems than a state that is freer. This may be because the average human being is not a violent person, and when a state allows for the input and support of its people, the people will traditionally choose the route to a peaceful resolution. Alternatively, a non-democratic state does not answer to its people and is typically led by a single person who will answer to nobody but himself. When faced with a crisis that needs to be resolved, this man will not be held back by popularity polling, such as a public referendum, and he may not even care about the lives of his own people, much less their feelings. It stands to reason that a man such as this will find it more acceptable to choose violence, the easy way out, to solve his problems. At the very least, the leader of an authoritarian state will have much less to fear from overreaching his authority than a democratic one who must answer to his people for each and every decision that he makes.

## *IV: Threat to the Crisis Actor*

Like the results of the analysis on the relationship between different regime types and the dependent variable, the results of the regression analysis performed as expected for the threat to the crisis actor variable. With a significance level below 0.05 (0.000 significance level), the relationship between the threat level and the dependent variable is in fact a significant one. Also as expected, the relationship is a positive one with an unstandardized coefficient of 0.271. This means that as the threat to the crisis actor increases, so too do the chances of the crisis escalating into violence.

These results make perfect sense; it stands to reason that a crisis actor will feel more compelled to respond to an emergency with violence if his own survival is at stake. If the choice was literally to kill or be killed, then it is not much of a choice to begin with. Therefore, the results of the regression analysis in relation to this particular variable support the hypothesis that a crisis actor whose survival is at stake will use violence to resolve a foreign policy crisis.

## *V: Distance of the Crisis from the Crisis Actor*

The results produced by the analysis for this independent variable were shocking. The significance level for the relationship between the distance of the crisis from the crisis actor and the likelihood that the crisis would erupt into violence indicated that there is no significant relationship present (0.499 significance level). This is very surprising because the closer a crisis is to the crisis actor, the more likely the actor will take action in order to defend his territorial and regional integrity. One possible explanation is that a state will see open hostility closer to its borders as a deeper threat than the crisis itself. In addition, this variable is already possibly represented in the perceived threat to the crisis actor. Regardless of the reasons, the evidence refutes my hypothesis that a crisis that occurs near the crisis actor will escalate into violence. In a future study, scholars can combine the distance and threat level variables to see how closely they are related in terms of the dependent variable.

## *VI: Conclusion*

The greatest challenge of this research project was finding independent variables that possessed a significant relationship with the dependent variable. My regression analysis reveals that a significant relationship exists between the use of violence in an international crisis and U.S. involvement, crisis actor regime type, and threat to the crisis actor. Surprisingly, American involvement in a crisis increases the likelihood of violence in a foreign crisis, implying that the United States is a negative variable in the international community. Future research on this variable should, therefore, examine the United States' impact on foreign policy crises based on the country's position in the international system—great power, superpower, and hegemon—to see if this made any difference. Furthermore, my

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analysis supports the Democratic Peace Theory, revealing that a country that is less democratic is more likely to resort to violence on a conflict. Surprisingly, there does not appear to be any significant relationship between the employment of violence in a crisis and the distance of the crisis from the crisis actor. I found the same results in terms of international polarity and suggested that this variable should be explored further through analysis of the specific number of dominant power in the international system at any given time.

In international politics, because a crisis actor juggles with so many variables in every decision, it is near impossible to pin down them all. Even though three out of the five variables I analyzed have significant relationships with the dependent variable, R-squared only clocked in at 0.074. This means that only 7.4% of the variation in the use of violence in a foreign policy crisis is explained by the independent variables that I have analyzed. This project shows then that while my analysis is successful, and because I was able to identify several significant variables, I have just barely begun to breach the surface of my research question. In order to answer the question of why some foreign policy crises escalate into violence while others do not, analysts will have to identify more independent variables with a significant relationship with the dependent variable. Based on this project's value of R-Squared, a comprehensive answer will require many more variables than the constraints of this project allow.

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