

Briefing Memo

Limited War and Escalation

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1. Foreword

Under the Cold War structure between the East and West, the U.S. developed a limited war theory in the early stages of the Cold War focused on limiting the ends and means of the use of force and controlling military escalation from the perspective of managing a regional conflict so as to avoid an all-out nuclear war between the superpowers.

After that, when a nuclear balance between the U.S and the U.S.S.R was stable and the use of nuclear weapons became an unrealistic option, the mainstream discussion turned to the perspective of how to effectively employ conventional forces in Third World military interventions including the escalation inherent in conflicts in general. In this way, the limited war theory whose focus transitioned from the intrinsic concept of avoiding a direct confrontation between superpowers to that of an asymmetrical conflict between a superpower and a medium or small (non-nuclear) power has received attention again as a form of risk management or use of force toward regional nuclear armed superpowers against a background of recent international crises (the Ukraine Crisis and the movements in the South China Sea).

In this paper, I would like to examine some U.S. cases, focusing attention on the relationship between limited war and escalation and in accordance with my awareness of the issues of whether or not the control of escalation or the success or failure of the response after escalation occurs is a major factor controlling the outcome (performance) of limited war.

2. What is a limited war?

Robert E. Osgood, who is a pioneer of limited war theory, specified that the substance of a limited war was a restriction of ends and means, and defined it as “a conflict in which adversaries would bargain with each other through the medium of graduated military responses, within the boundaries of contrived mutual restraints, in order to achieve a negotiated settlement short of mutual destruction”. In the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur was dismissed due to his insistence on using an atomic bomb in the north-east area of China. This symbolizes that war is controlled by inherent dynamics which escalate toward “absolute” forms once a war starts. The potentiality of such escalation is the most striking characteristic of a limited war which is distinct from a major war or a small war.

The escalation of an armed conflict is not limited to the unique phenomenon of the Cold War structure. Richard Smoke observed cases such as the Crimean war, the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War in the 19th century, and the Spanish Civil War in the 20th century, etc. in which great powers were involved and pointed out that “Limited war and escalation are coextensive: neither is ‘larger’ as an idea, or encountered more frequently in reality, than the other. But limited war is the

static term; escalation is the dynamic term. From this perspective, summarizing respective research including that of Osgood's and Smoke's which was studied in recent times, the forms of escalation can be divided into the following three types: (1) "Vertical" (the intensity of a battle), (2) "Horizontal" (the extension of the number of combatants and geographical range by a third party's intervention) and (3) "Durational" (the period of a conflict).

In addition, the definition of a victory in a limited war may become vague, which is different from a major war in which a decisive victory is clear due to the defeat of enemy armies or the occupation of the enemy's territory. This being the case, in the field of strategic research, the degree of achievement of the political aims decided by the state have been used as a way to measuring the performance of limited war. That is to say, cases such as the Gulf War in which the political aims put forward by an administration are achieved are regarded as successes. On the contrary, cases such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War in which a cease-fire agreement was concluded without accomplishing its political objective or cases such as the Military Intervention in Lebanon(1982-84) and the Somalia Operation(1993) in which unilateral withdrawal became unavoidable have often been regarded as failures of military intervention.

3. Escalation and limited war performance

When we overlap the three expressions of escalation mentioned above with the examples of limited wars in which the U.S. has been involved since World War II, certain co-relations between the control of escalation and performance emerge (c.f. the table below).

For instance, in the Korean War, although the U.S. repelled the North Korea Army north of the 38th parallel and cornered them close to the Chinese border, this led to a large-scale of intervention by China, and afterwards the war was locked in a stalemate until 1953 (Occurrence of (2) and (3)). In the Vietnam War, a full-scale intervention by China was prevented due to meticulous intelligence and diplomatic activities (Avoidance of (2)). However, while the step-by-step expansion of operations from bombing the North to the additional dispatch of ground troops increased war expenditure and casualties, the U.S. failed to suppress the Vietcong and the conflict continued at length (Occurrence of (1) and (3)). In the case of the 1982 Lebanon Intervention, the initial peacekeeping objectives were achieved: the monitoring of the civil war cease-fire and securing the deportation of PLO leaders, however, the political purpose was transformed to an ambitious diplomatic policy to mediate a peace process between Israel and Lebanon. As a result, the conflict was prolonged and horizontally extended to a conflict with armed groups backed by Syria, and the U.S. Marine Corps were forced to withdraw (Occurrence of (1), (2) and (3)).

Table: The control of escalation and the results of a limited war

	(1) Vertical (intensity)	(2) Horizontal (combatants and geography)	(3) Durational (period)	Performance
Korean War	○	●	●	Failed
Vietnam War	●	○	●	Failed

Lebanon Intervention	●	●	●	Failed
Gulf War	○	○	○	Succeeded
Somalia Operation	●	●	●	Failed
Iraq War	○	●	●	Failed

Legends: ○ Escalation avoided (Control succeeded) ● Escalation occurred (Control failed)

Source) The present writer

In the Gulf War, not only the military purpose of Iraqi force's withdrawal from Kuwait but also the diplomatic purpose of organizing a large-scale multinational force was pursued in order to draw support from major powers including the U.S.S.R and Arab nations in the region. In addition, Saddam Hussein's plan to change the conflict to a confrontation of Arabs vs. Israel was prevented to block the escalation of the conflict (Avoidance of (1), (2) and (3)). In Somalia, an initial limited intervention for the purpose of humanitarian assistance changed to a mission to enforced peace aimed at nation-building by means of the diplomatic objectives of disarmament and democracy. As a result, the operation transformed to a fierce battle with local armed factions, and the U.S. forces withdrew from Somalia (Occurrence of (1) and (2)). In the Iraq War, though the diplomatic purpose of building a democratic Iraqi nation as well as defeating the Hussein regime was pursued at the same time, only the latter was achieved. And, after a military victory in a conventional battle at the beginning, the U.S. was drawn into the suppression of emerging rebels (the Sunnis faction) and sectarian wars, so that the operation was prolonged beyond the initial expectation (Occurrence of (2) and (3)).

In this way, the expansion of an operation is transformed greatly revolving around escalation showing that political-strategic objectives are not always achieved by military victories on the battlefield. To begin with, what early theorists of deterrent such as Maxwell D. Taylor and Herman Kahn advocated was that a conflict might be deterred or controlled if initiatives were able to be held at respective ladders of "vertical" escalation whose final ladder would be nuclear war. The condition that such "escalation dominance" is viable is to maintain superior military balance at every ladder. But, as seen in the above mentioned cases of the U.S., the development of a real conflict cannot be viewed by only "vertical" escalation.

Even though an ongoing operation develops favorably while controlling the intensity of a fight, if unexpected "horizontal" escalation occurs due to the misunderstanding of the third party's intention, the original purpose will unavoidably change and the performance of the operation would deteriorate. Also, modern democratic nations are highly sensitive to the legitimacy of the use of force and human casualties. Even if people overwhelmingly support a political leader's decision at the beginning of a war, if "prolongment" leads to increased military casualties and costs, the variable "support by national consensus" will exert great influence on the outcome of a military operation.

Additionally, in asymmetric warfare between a great power and a small or med-sized power, while a small power fights a war as an all-out war at the risk of its survival, for the great power, the war is not a direct threat to the its existence and it is difficult for a great power to realistically

mobilize all of its national resources. Under such asymmetric interests and motivation, it is natural that differences will arise in the cost tolerance to the escalation of violence between the targeted country and the intervening country from outside. For example, as the U.S. marines experienced in Somalia, a military operation which started initially with the aim of humanitarian assistance and peace keeping changed to fierce fighting with local armed groups before anyone was aware of it. This came to be called “The Mogadishu Line” and thrust forth a new problem as one pattern of escalation lurking in post Cold War peace operations.

4. The revival of a limited war ?

Among strategic theorists in the West, taking account of the recent Ukrainian crisis, discussions are on the rise that Russian military actions and the strategic thought behind it should be re-evaluated from a limited war perspective. Russian action which dominated the eastern Ukraine using minimum military force in a short time without causing the fear of a Russian invasion to the other areas including Kiev, the capital city, was a practical example of a strategic doctrine (called the Gerasimov Doctrine or Hybrid Warfare) which had a limited purpose and discipline and proved the effectiveness of the doctrine.

In the background of such action, military balance regarding both limited nuclear and conventional armed force in Central and Eastern Europe was advantageous to Russia. It was therefore said that President Vladimir Putin had made a full prediction regarding NATO’s reaction and judged that Russia had “escalation dominance” in the military field. Jakub Grygiel insists that a posture relying on retaliatory powers and extended deterrent provided by the U.S. is insufficient to confront a speedy and controlled “jab and pause” strategy which is applied to part of a limited area, and therefore a “preclusive strategy” is required, which elevates the offense’s perceived risk and can impose a certain cost at the early stage of attack in the case of a real battle. Otherwise, while the offence gains “escalation dominance”, NATO not only allows the offence to entrench the state of affairs as a *fait accompli*, but also is forced to make a highly risky decision which would trigger a large-scale military confrontation.

Turning our attention to Asia, the Air-Sea Battle Concept assumes the making of an early attack on missile launchers, radar and command and control centers deployed in mainland of China in order to disable China’s Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capability. However, there is fear that China will be strongly tempted to make a preemptive attack before being neutralized by an attack by the U.S. Armed Force and this will escalate the crisis rapidly.

Thus, where regional superpowers armed with nuclear weapons are concerned, the anxiety of “vertical” escalation including the risk of nuclear retaliation becomes suddenly serious. On the other hand, what has been practiced in the Ukraine Crisis or the South China Sea are so called Salami Tactics, by which a faction intending to change the status quo tries to achieve its objects through a *fait accompli* while avoiding the outbreak of a conventional war between nations. Lawrence Freedman represents a new type of limited war by a regional power intending to change the status quo in an age when no apparent armed aggression is likely to happen as “a trial to secure core interests without resorting to a major war”. It is also a strategic thought reflecting an awareness of the times that a hybrid method combined with both conventional and unconventional warfare affects the outcome of foreign policies in the gray zone where it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between war and peace.

While the strategy of a limited war was introduced due to the strategic imperative that *the objectives and means of the use of force could not help but be limited* in order to avoid escalation to a nuclear war in the Cold War era, we are now seeing an age where a political objective is easily achieved *by limiting the objectives and means of the use of force*.

Conclusion

This paper considered the relation between the performance and the escalation of limited wars the U.S. involved since the World War II, and studied how escalation management exerted influence on total performance in a limited war with purposes and means restricted. In particular, it seems to be significant to some extent to analyze the development process of a limited war from multiple viewpoints including “horizontal” and “durational” as well as “vertical” escalation which was a premise in initial escalation theories.

In addition, when considering military reactions to recent new development by Russia and China which can be called revival of limited war, the only thing we can say is that a simple recurrence to a conventional “vertical” escalation management is not enough against nations which recognize a strategic advantage on the restraint of purposes and means. This is because outside powers are forced to make a difficult judgement which may cause the risk of a full-scale war, while regional great powers can easily take an initiative to determine the intensity of a conflict, geographical range and timing if that regional power gains an advantage over the local military balance in its adjacent theater.

A limited war has been regarded as a factor restricting the performance of the U.S. due to the nature of limitation and multiplicity of escalation. Therefore, it was evaluated that “As for the U.S., a limited war is synonymous with failure (Hew Strachan)”. Even in the 21st century, however, as seen in the military operations toward Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and currently the Islamic State, it is an invariable reality that “a limited war is an indispensable option in a military toolbox (Dominic Tierney)” for the U.S. A limited war must be executed while controlling escalation which shows various kinds of forms in response to the development of a situation. For this reason, a prudent statecraft is required as a nation.

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