Chapter 6

Of Wars and Rumors of Wars:

Extra-factual Information and (In)Advertent Escalation

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> People who understand how crises escalate . . . [know] it is absolutely alarming that the president uses [Twitter] . . . [and that] perhaps we would stumble into a nuclear conflict with North Korea. . . . He's got one finger on Twitter, one finger on the nuclear weapon. I think most Americans walk around in the ignorant but secure belief that somehow there's a considered way to launch a nuclear weapon. And that's not the case. [Trump] has immediate access to this awesome destructive power and he loves to emote reckless bravado, and it makes this scenario that much more likely.
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> —*Former CIA operative Valerie Plame Wilson on US President Donald J. Trump*, Newsweek, *August 24, 2017*

President Donald Trump's declarations on Twitter that North Korea could face "fire and fury the likes of which the world has never seen" and that "if Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran" have been widely interpreted as threats backed by the uniquely destructive power of the US nuclear arsenal.[1] But what should one make of these very public and singularly apocalyptic escalatory threats? Are they part of a visionary, if unconventional, bargaining strategy destined to generate unprecedented payoffs, or a dangerous, even potentially catastrophic, folly that could catalyze a costly war or wars neither side really wants?

Trump supporters assert that his inflammatory rhetorical bellicosity is calculated and has the potential to create diplomatic openings

and beget more fruitful negotiations with longtime adversaries than those more sober, tempered, and private approaches have been able to achieve.[2] Indeed, the argument goes, Trump may simply be following the precepts of the so-called madman theory, which posits that looking a "little crazy" may be an effective way to induce an adversary to concede or stand down in a crisis.[3] The issuance of dramatic threats may also, it has been suggested, provide clarity about US intentions and red lines, both of which can be hard to discern and easy to misinterpret.[4]

Many nuclear and diplomatic experts are skeptical, however, and far less sanguine about Trump's resort to apocalyptic escalatory rhetoric. They fear that whatever his underlying motives, Trump does not fully appreciate or possibly even understand the dangers inherent in so cavalierly threatening to annihilate other states.[5] When asked about the risks of openly talking about the use of nuclear weapons during the 2016 presidential campaign, for instance, Trump responded: "Then why are we making them? Why do we make them?"[6] This response—as well as the policies subsequently adopted, and rhetoric since brandished, by his administration—suggests to many close observers of international politics that Trump does indeed believe there is, as Plame Wilson put it, "a considered way to launch a nuclear weapon."[7]

Ultimately, whether those threatened believe Trump thinks it is possible to use nuclear weapons in a considered way matters at least as much as whether he actually believes it himself. Even then, however, whether such beliefs would give rise to the desired results is far from a foregone conclusion. The strategy of appearing to be crazy enough to start a war (nuclear or otherwise) in order to get one's way is a risky strategy with a mixed record of success.[8] Indeed, escalatory moves infused with dramatic, arguably unhinged, and hyperbolic bravado may be just as likely to provoke an adversary, generating resistance and catalyzing further escalation rather than concession and compliance.[9] Under such conditions, parties can end up stumbling into costly and even catastrophic conflicts that neither side desired or intended.

This chapter explores how and why these escalation dynamics can emerge. After providing basic background on the concept and varia-

tions of escalation, the chapter focuses in particular on the role that unverified and unverifiable information, such as rumors, propaganda, so-called fake news, and other forms of what I collectively call *extra-factual information* (EFI) can play in heightening the risk of conflict escalation. I explore EFI's double-edged influence on rhetorical escalation dynamics and the material effects thereof.

The crux of the argument is as follows: on one hand, public EFI-imbued rhetorical escalation can be a powerful, nonviolent method of simultaneously mobilizing support among audiences at home and signaling resolve to adversaries abroad—the joint consequences of which should be to make unwanted wars *less likely*. On the other hand, however, infusing rhetorical escalation with EFI-laden messages is risky and can backfire, making both inadvertent and accidental escalation *more likely*. This is because, by publicly stoking fear, hostility, and distrust of adversaries, states, and other actors may inadvertently transform previously unresolved adversaries into committed and resolved enemies while at the same time potentially making face-saving de-escalation by both sides more difficult. Furthermore, these selfsame double-edged behaviors concomitantly create conditions whereby even wholly unsubstantiated rumors and other kinds of threatening EFI are more likely to be believed and then acted upon. While these dynamics are not remotely new, the very public and reiterative nature of modern communications arguably magnifies the potential effects of escalation dynamics and their incumbent dilemmas. The issues raised herein are perhaps particularly salient given the unusually volatile dispositional traits of certain world leaders today.

Escalation: A Primer

Following political scientist Forrest Morgan et al., I define escalation as an increase in the intensity or scope of a crisis or conflict that crosses a threshold or thresholds considered significant by one or more of the participants. Such increases in conflict scope and intensity can

be intentional, inadvertent, or accidental. As such, escalation is both a strategic bargaining tool to be employed (or deterred) and a potential risk to be managed (and defused).[10]

As its name suggests, intentional escalation refers to situations when a state or actor crosses an escalatory threshold in a conflict or a confrontation more or less deliberately. Intentional escalators knowingly undertake threshold-crossing actions to gain advantage, send a signal, obtain information about an adversary, or avoid defeat.[11]

Inadvertent escalation refers to situations when an actor or state's actions are unintentionally escalatory. This kind of escalation usually occurs when an actor crosses a threshold that matters to an adversary but seems insignificant or invisible to the initiator.[12] This is to say, the initiator may recognize that his behavior is sending a signal, but does not intend—and may not even recognize—that said behavior has crossed what is viewed as a threshold by the other side.[13]

Accidental escalation refers to undesirable consequences of actions or events that were never supposed to happen in the first place, such as bombing unintended targets or inadvertently straying into another state's sovereign territory—be they understood or foreseeable ahead of time or not. Such actions may be real or they may simply be perceived to be real—i.e., actors or states may counterescalate in response to rumors rather than verified facts.

Escalation can take both violent (kinetic) and nonviolent forms. In terms of kinetic manifestations, employing different classes of weaponry or attacking new kinds of targets in the midst of ongoing military operations is referred to as "vertical escalation" while expanding the geographic scope of a conflict is known as "horizontal escalation." The term "political escalation," in contrast, refers to nonmilitary shifts in scope and intensity whereby states or actors adopt more aggressive rhetoric, articulate more expansive war aims, or announce decisions to relax or otherwise shift the prevailing rules of engagement.[14]

Not every increase or expansion of threats or use of force is escalatory, however. Escalation only transpires when at least one of the actors or states perceives there to have been a substantive change as a result

of a kinetic or rhetorical shift in scope or intensity. While some actions will appear escalatory to virtually any observer, actions perceived as escalatory by one actor are often not understood to be thus by others.[15] Initial perceptual asymmetries become irrelevant, however, if the party that infers escalatory intent counterescalates, thus initiating a conflict spiral that begets war. Unfortunately, such situations are all too common. The inherently subjective nature of escalation, and particularly the difficulty of accurately inferring the intent of one's adversary, have been enduring challenges for those seeking to control and to manage escalation, whether to prevent it from occurring or to use the threat of it as an instrument of coercion.[16] Indeed, uncertainty has long been understood to be a major cause of war. Uncertainty about relative resolve has frequently led states, and actors within them, to stumble or even sprint into wars that neither side initially wanted.[17]

Signaling Resolve through the Tying of Hands

One method by which states or actors seek to attenuate resolve-related ambiguity is to employ what economist Thomas Schelling called the "tying-hands mechanism."[18] Loosely speaking, the tying of hands refers to situations in which states or actors seek to increase the credibility of their threats and demands by taking actions that would increase their costs of backing down should an adversary counterescalate but which would otherwise entail few or no costs. A common method of hand tying is for an actor or state to "go public" with its threats and demands. Doing so directly engages relevant (foreign and domestic) audiences, raises the salience of the conflict, and, at least in theory, places the personal and national prestige of the implicated actors on the line. It demonstrates a state or actor's political commitment to the issue in dispute and, in turn, reveals meaningful information to its allies as well as its adversaries.[19]

Like escalation more broadly, public hand tying can take multiple forms. It can be physical and kinetic—e.g., mobilizations, deployments,

shows of force. It can also be nonphysical and political—e.g., rhetorical threats of punishment, whose primary objective is to probe or erode an adversary's will to fight while also building domestic support for war.

In contemporary twenty-first-century politics, these kinds of publicly conveyed threats are instantaneously transmitted around the globe. They are then further disseminated in print and on television, radio, and the internet. Simultaneously, they are frequently repeated (and retweeted) via social media. Thus, in today's globally interconnected, 24/7 information ecosystem, hand-tying signals in international crises are more than just publicly transmitted; they are in effect "shouted" through worldwide megaphones. How and why this might matter for international conflict-escalation dynamics is explored in the sections that follow.

Extra-factual Information and Rhetorical Escalation

In theory, rhetorically escalatory moves may take the form of sober, tempered, no-nonsense communications designed to signal commitment and, by extension, to deter or compel an adversary.[20] In practice, however, this flavor of rhetorical escalation constitutes the exception rather than the rule. This is because to be effective, escalatory pronouncements have to accomplish multiple disparate objectives simultaneously: they must not only signal credible willingness to fight to the adversary but also build support at home for costly military operations while at the same time convincing the adversary that such support will be forthcoming. This is an ambitious undertaking.

To ask one's population (and one's allies) to bear the financial, human, and psychological costs of war and to contribute muscle, mind, and money to the successful prosecution of the war is no small feat. But, at the same time, it is also "an arena no government can afford to ignore" in the midst of crisis escalation that may well result in a costly war.[21] To generate necessary support to expend blood and treasure, leaders need to mobilize hostility toward the adversary; convince their publics of the justness and necessity of the cause; build material and

political support for that cause; and bolster the support of allies.[22] In order to accomplish these tasks, states and actors often invoke mythical representations of real or fictional national figures and material symbols of nationhood to strengthen feelings of national identity and promote patriotism at home. At the same time, they employ similar tactics in order to harden in-group versus out-group attitudes and prejudices to delegitimize, dehumanize, and heighten grievances against an adversary.[23] As former US defense secretary William J. Perry put it: "You don't go to war with people unless you demonize them first."[24]

To activate audience emotions and galvanize support, rhetorical escalation tends to be couched in terms of "us versus them" narratives, characterized by dramatic and emotive flourishes, and frequently peppered—or even larded—with language and information that is not strictly (or at all) factual, but rather "extra-factual." Extra-factual information (EFI) is information that is either unverified or unverifiable at the time of transmission using secure standards of evidence, but which nevertheless can serve as an actionable source of knowledge about the world both for those who believe it to be true and for those who exploit the fact that others believe it to be true. In other words, EFI is composed of a variety of types of claims that transcend widely accepted facts. Common sources include, but are not limited to, rumors, conspiracy theories, myths, propaganda, and so-called fake news.[25]

Like other influence operations, EFI-infused communications are intended to change or to reinforce and bolster the opinions and behavior of their audiences and to help mobilize support for policies that promise to be costly in both financial and human terms and for which fact-based appeals fail to muster sufficient backing. Methods used to affect audience behavior include a wide array of what might be usefully thought of as "cognitive hacking" techniques—i.e., the use of tools designed to manipulate audience perceptions and emotions by exploiting psychological proclivities and vulnerabilities. These include but are not limited to priming, strategic framing, and fear appeals.[26]

Whether meant as bluff or in earnest, such "plussed-up" rhetorical signaling can be efficacious as a straightforward signaling device and as a tool of deliberate, intentional escalation. Under conditions of

incomplete information, signaling via hand-tying rhetorical escalation can allow states or actors to update their assessments of each other's levels of resolve and make more informed decisions about whether to concede the stake in question, to back down, or to further escalate, even without firing a shot. Thus, to paraphrase the old saw, a tweet may be mightier than a sword.

These kinds of public actions and the rhetorical embroidery that often accompany them can also backfire, making inadvertent escalation and unwanted war more likely. This is because making public threats carries domestic political consequences for defenders as well as for challengers, both of whom have domestic political audiences who observe how crises play out and evaluate the performance of their leaders.[27] Political scientist Jim Fearon has observed, for instance, that when a state "public declaration creates [political] costs for the opponent as well, the state is risking provocation."[28] Also consider the following observation made in *The Economist* as this book was going to press:

> Neither Mr Trump, nor America's allies, nor Iran wants a big new war in the Middle East. Yet Mr Trump's strategy of applying "maximum pressure" on Iran is making the prospect more likely—because each side, issuing ever-wilder threats, could end up misreading the other's red lines. The president's room for manoeuvre is shrinking. As Iran turns more belligerent, calls for action will grow, not least from his own party. . . . [President] Rouhani has suggested that the White House is "mentally handicapped"—after which Mr Trump threatened "obliteration."[29]

Of course, war is not inevitable, and, as *The Economist* went on to note: "When he is not threatening to annihilate the mullahs, Mr Trump is offering to talk without preconditions and to 'make Iran great again.'"[30] Nevertheless, while bringing in the public via rhetorical hand tying can facilitate information transmission that convinces less resolved actors to back down or concede the stakes under dispute, it also has the potential to catalyze significant escalatory effects, especially if EFI comprises a

component of the signaling: adding insults and EFI to threats of injury may intensify enemy hostility and suspicions, generate resolve where it did not previously exist, and spur counterescalation.[31] Once provoked, and after personal animus, countercommitment, and national honor and prestige are all activated and engaged, de-escalation in turn can become more difficult, albeit not impossible—and indeed rhetorical de-escalation is easier to actualize than action-based counterparts.[32] Still, as Morgan et al. note, rhetorical brinkmanship is potentially escalatory in a crisis, particularly, but not exclusively, "one with a conventionally inferior adversary who may feel that its nuclear [as well as conventional] capability is vulnerable to a disarming first strike."[33] In the section that follows, I explain why.

Problematic Provocations

Provocations are actions or incidents believed to be relatively insignificant by one actor or state, but which are construed as escalatory by the other and which stimulate resolve to defend and retaliate against perceived transgressions.[34] They may thus be thought of as a very particular kind of inadvertent escalation: not only has a threshold been unintentionally crossed by an initiator but also the defender—now angry, insulted, or agitated by the provocation—decides that he cares about something about which he previously possessed little or no resolve and decides to counterescalate.

Provocations can stem from what are known as dispositional factors, situational factors, or an interaction of both.[35] Dispositional characteristics are internal, individual traits, like personality, temperament, and genetics, that influence a leader's behavior and actions, such that different dispositions can lead to radically different styles of leadership and crisis management. (Presidents Obama and Trump, as has frequently been observed, are in many ways dispositionally polar opposites, for instance.[36]) In contrast, situational factors are external and derive from the environment in which leaders operate. They include anticipated

domestic and international reputational and political costs of backing down and anticipated costs and potential benefits of war.[37]

On the individual level, provocation can heighten anger, which, in turn, can raise risk tolerance, intensify impatience, and increase the perceived reputational costs of backing down. Political scientists Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing, for instance, warned of the dangers of "emotionally provoking an opponent's leadership into rash behavior."[38]

At the state level, provocation may increase resolve by raising the (perceived) public costs of backing down as well as by reducing the political costs of war—either by creating a pretext to escalate or by triggering a "rally 'round the flag" effect.[39] The aggregate and interactive effects of these two sets of factors can be to turn even a previously unresolved adversary into a committed actor ready for war.[40]

On the societal level, the very public (and inflammatory) nature of EFI-infused rhetorical escalation—and its further transmission and broad dissemination—can also anger, insult, and provoke populations who view their country's reputation and honor as impugned.[41] EFI-laden threats and exchanges do not of course make conflict inevitable, nor do they make flip-flopping or backing down impossible—as Trump has demonstrated on numerous occasions—but they are unlikely to be particularly peace-inducing either. As US diplomat and former ambassador to South Korea (as well as Iraq, Poland, and Macedonia) Christopher Hill put it, when engaging with potential adversaries, "avoid the personal invectives" because "they never help. . . . My sense from four years of those talks [with the North Koreans] is that getting personal is not helpful."[42]

Of course, these sorts of crisis dynamics and their potentially deadly consequences are not new or unique to the Twitter era. It is widely understood, for example, that a history of provocations and pre-activated stereotypes of the enemy helped finally push Europe over the brink and into war in 1914, a conflict that destroyed four empires, resulted in the deaths of nearly twenty million people, and was—even in a pre-radio, -TV, and -internet era—chock full of dramatic, emotive, and largely fact-free atrocity propaganda.[43]

Moreover, then as now, elites who engage in EFI-laden rhetorical escalation may also come to believe—or drive those around them to believe—the rumors, conspiracy theories, and other forms of EFI they are peddling, even in cases in which they knew the information was unverified, embroidered, or even false when first introduced, if actors come to believe the worst about the intentions, motives, and characters of those with whom they need to negotiate a stand-down.[44] Thus, even if both sides in a conflict are unresolved at the outset, public provocations that result from inflammatory and insulting EFI-laden escalation could inadvertently "tie the hands" of one's adversary and potentially, but not inevitably, lead to war.[45]

Thus, echoing security dilemma logic—wherein steps that states take to enhance their security leave both sides less secure—we might conceive of analogous and equally problematic "escalation dilemmas."[46] The logic is as follows: states or actors might attempt to increase their security by signaling and testing resolve via rhetorical escalation, with the expectation that adversaries will concede to articulated demands or back down from their own demands, leaving them better off. But if rhetorical escalation instead catalyzes resolve in an adversary that did not previously exist, escalation can make war more, not less, likely, and both sides less secure. As nonproliferation expert Jeffrey Lewis put it at the height of the heated and tense late-2017 war of words between the United States and North Korea:

> I think [Trump administration officials] are bluffing. They are, to borrow a Soviet phrase, just trying to "rattle the pots and pans," hoping to frighten North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and China's Xi Jinping. Of course, they may still get us all killed.[47]

Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed, and war, whether it had been threatened as a madman's bluff or in earnest, was averted. However, eighteen months on and several summits later, North Korea has not given up its nuclear weapons, nor has it agreed to give up its nuclear weapons, nor has it even indicated willingness to surrender a single nuclear

warhead or missile. This situation could most certainly change, but as of this writing, while the dangers and potential consequences of escalation in late 2017 appeared very clear and real, the ultimate sagacity and potential payoffs are far more opaque.[48]

Nevertheless, as noted at the outset of this chapter, Trump appears to have drawn different conclusions about the consequences of the 2017 escalatory exercise with North Korea and to have drawn from the same playbook when issuing his analogous May and June 2019 threats of total destruction to Iran.[49] While it is too early to tell how either of these specific cases will ultimately play out, history makes clear that provocation can, but need not, alter actors' and states' incentives and strategic calculations and, in turn, influence crisis dynamics in dangerous ways. What ultimately determines how escalation dynamics play out is explored in the next section.

Cognitive Complications and De-escalation Difficulties

Actors' ultimate ability to successfully navigate escalatory dynamics is largely determined by how well they understand the situations in which they find themselves. A history of hostility, abetted by EFI-infused information campaigns, makes it more likely that a climate of distrust will prevail, further contributing to inaccurate perceptions of crisis dynamics. When individuals grow anxious, as is a normal response to an escalating international crisis that may result in a costly war, they are motivated to seek out information that will either confirm their fears about potential dangers (the default mode) or, in the face of mounting disconfirming evidence, help them change their minds.[50] Higher levels of threat perception increase attention both to the source of the threat and to sources of information about it.[51] However, this information-seeking tendency can backfire when facts are in short supply and the only available information is unverified. While anxiety can motivate fact finding, extreme anxiety stymies individuals' capacities to engage in a rational assessment of the knowledge they have gathered,

which in turn can lead to a heightened susceptibility to threatening interpretations of otherwise ambiguous events or data.[52] Moreover, the instinct to seek information tends to be suppressed when anxiety reaches very high levels.[53]

Under such circumstances, individuals are not only potentially more open to persuasion but also less likely to interrogate the logic or plausibility of rumors and other EFI.[54] Moreover, in seeking to alleviate anxiety and risk, they may also be more willing to err on the side of caution and accept the costs of type I (false positive) rather than type II (false negative) errors.[55] (A false positive finding erroneously accepts a claim as true or correct while a false negative erroneously rejects a claim as false or wrong.) Emotions such as distrust and anxiety influence the kinds of evidence that people seek out, remember, or reject. As a result, anxiety and fear can influence how people assess capabilities and dangers and how they respond to perceived threats.

Thus, it is also far more likely that EFI that imputes bad intentions or actions to the adversary in the midst of a crisis will be taken seriously and not questioned. It is similarly more likely that worst-case scenarios will be viewed as plausible. These tendencies could in turn make both inadvertent and accidental escalation much more likely, especially if actors opt to respond and counterescalate before or absent verification of alleged hostile actions. As has been observed regarding North Korea, specifically, Julie Hirschfeld Davis wrote in the *New York Times*:

> Veterans of diplomacy and national security and specialists on North Korea fear that, whatever their intended result, Mr. Trump's increasingly bellicose threats and public insults of the famously thin-skinned Mr. Kim could cause the United States to careen into a nuclear confrontation driven by personal animosity and bravado.
>
> "It does matter, because you don't want to get to a situation where North Korea fundamentally miscalculates that an attack is coming," said Sue Mi Terry, a former intelligence and National Security Council specialist who is now a senior adviser for Korea at Bower Group Asia. "It could lead us to stumble into a war that nobody wants."[56]

Deadly missteps, such as described in the feared scenario above, may be particularly likely if said rumors are also being widely disseminated via social media and other modern communications conduits, which should perhaps engender further concern in light of reportage that both Kim and Trump get a good deal of their information from open-source intelligence (read media outlets and social media).[57]

Furthermore, although the context is radically different, the deadly effects of unverified rumors spread in India via WhatsApp as well as in Rwanda via radio and in Kenya via SMS are sobering in this regard, particularly when actors with access to nuclear codes are not always known for cautious, measured, evidence-based decision making.[58] False claims spread via WhatsApp in India in the summer of 2018 led to mob violence and a spate of killings and lynchings. Fabricated claims of ethnically motivated attacks that were spread via SMS in the lead-up to, and shortly after, the 2008 presidential election in Kenya served first as a trigger (and later as a justification) for violence that caused more than one thousand deaths and the internal displacement of between three hundred thousand and five hundred thousand people. Utterly specious rumors spread via radio in Rwanda in the early 1990s helped catalyze and then rationalize the genocide of between five hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand Rwandan Tutsis and moderate Hutus in the spring of 1994.[59]

Once reputation and honor are perceived to be on the line, whether as a consequence of an EFI-inflected provocation or otherwise, a state's or leader's ability to concede or back down may also be impeded, as such actions could be domestically politically or reputationally costly.[60] An array of historical and some recent experimental evidence, for instance, suggests that publics strongly disapprove of government inaction in the face of provocative actions.[61] (At the same time, however, the evidence on how publics respond when their leaders back down—and what scholars make of this evidence—is decidedly mixed.) So while not determinative, the proposition that EFI can further interfere with de-escalation is intuitively straightforward and comports with conflict-escalation models that take issues of rhetoric, language, and

so-called othering of the adversary into account, as well as models that focus on the importance of misperceptions and other psychological mechanisms.[62]

Consistent with the discussion of "us versus them" and in-group versus out-group dynamics above, conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl, for instance, argues that once escalation is under way, "stereotypes, clichés, image campaigns and rumors are all employed. . . . The opponent is to be annihilated in his identity by means of all kinds of allegations [and] the like . . . [through] public and direct personal attacks."[63] Moreover, as conflicts escalate, EFI-infused stereotypes and images of the adversary developed before escalation tend to become more manifest, especially among those who are receptive to the EFI on offer.[64] For instance, reported behaviors that, before activation, might have been viewed as neutral are construed as suspect, dangerous, or hostile, while rumors that previously would have been treated as unverified information until or unless corroborated and verified are assumed to be true.

In general, stereotypes are defined both by their substantive content and by the out-group to which they are attached. While "us versus them" is a nearly universal feature of violent conflict, the relevant out-groups and the stereotypes assigned to them will be context-specific and influenced by the particular worldviews and threat perceptions of individual audience members.[65] In the case of North Korea, for instance, Americans are often "depicted as sadistic, war-mongering barbarians," while in the United States, North Koreans are stereotyped as "a monolithic, brainwashed population in thrall to a demagogic madman."[66]

A further and potentially dangerous consequence of "chumming the waters" with EFI in the midst of crisis escalation is the creation of an environment of heightened anxiety, distrust, and fear, in which additional (even rather dubious) EFI about one's adversary is more likely to be treated as fact, making de-escalation more difficult and politically costly. Paradoxically, by attempting to signal resolve and reduce the likelihood of conflict by painting an adversary in the worst light and similarly interpreting his behaviors—whether instrumentally or earnestly—actors may create self-fulfilling prophecies and heighten

the probability of war.[67] It bears recalling, for instance, that it was an array of EFI-laden arguments—founded on rumors about nuclear programs, conspiracy theories about cooperation with al-Qaeda, and lies about responsibility for 9/11—coupled with stereotypes of an "irrational, illogical and unpredictable" "undeterrable enemy" that helped justify the ill-fated invasion of Iraq.[68] This war at the time of its launch was even cast as a preemptive war, suggesting the Bush administration viewed itself as on a much higher rung on the escalation ladder than many outside observers understood to be the case.

Conclusion

It has been hypothesized that shifts in the global information ecosystem—and particularly the advent of social media—have changed international conflict dynamics. In theory, the transparency (due to enhanced capabilities to "fact check" in real time, for instance) and reach of the internet and other technological advances in communications *could* permit radical reductions in the kind of uncertainty that have led states and actors to start unwanted wars. However, as Kurizaki notes, citing the observations of Louis XIV centuries ago (still true today), "Public diplomacy feeds bargainers with incentives for manipulative political 'posturing': 'Open negotiations . . . incline negotiators to consider their own prestige and to maintain the dignity . . . with undue obstinacy and prevent them from giving way to the frequently superior arguments of the occasion.'"[69] Thus, crisis bargaining on the world stage may not always be the peace-inducing phenomenon it is theorized to be. This is especially the case when the rhetorical escalation techniques employed by the states and actors involved rely on derogatory, provocative, and inflammatory EFI directed toward the adversary. Thus, while public rhetorical escalation can have salutary, peace-inducing effects and lead to the successful settlement of crises short of war, it can just as likely have destabilizing, escalatory effects,

especially in the hands of actors inclined to provoke, insult, and dehumanize their adversaries abroad to gain support at home, whether willfully or simply cavalierly ignorant of the dangers of inadvertent and accidental escalation.

In sum, EFI-infused rhetorical escalation is a double-edged sword. It can be enormously effective at mobilizing domestic audiences (and at signaling active and latent resolve to potential adversaries). But it does so at the risk of antagonizing, insulting, and generating newfound resolve by said adversaries (and their publics) as well as generating blowback within one's own society, thereby heightening the risk of creating self-fulfilling prophecies.[70] This may be especially, albeit far from uniquely, true in today's global information ecosystem. While these propositions are firmly grounded in existing literature and supported by my earlier research, further theorizing and fine-grained case-study research is necessary to more finally hone and then test the propositions outlined herein.

Notes

1. Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, "Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S.," *New York Times*, August 8, 2017; Donald Trump, "If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!" Twitter, May 19, 2019, 1:25 p.m., https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1130207891049332737.

2. See, e.g., Tom O'Connor, "Donald Trump Needs 'Similar' North Korean Diplomacy with Iran, Says Expert Praised by the President," *Newsweek*, July 1, 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/us-korea-north-iran-trump-1446935; Fred Fleitz, "Trump Knows His Iran Strategy Is Working. Now the Ball Is in Tehran's Court," *FoxNews*, June 25, 2019, https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/fred-fleitz-trump-iran-drone-jcpoa-middle-east.

3. Herman Kahn, *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962). To be clear, Kahn did not advocate the use of the madman strategy, he just noted that it was important to recognize that it might be employed by others. Trump himself has suggested, at least after the fact, that this was his plan all along when dealing with North Korea. See, e.g., James Hohmann, "Trump Suggests

His Embrace of the 'Madman Theory' Brought North Korea to the Table," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2019/02/26/daily-202-trump-suggests-his-embrace-of-the-madman-theory-brought-north-korea-to-the-table/5c7422741b326b71858c6c33/?utm_term=.599d2b416b07.

4. See, e.g., Alex Ward, "Trump Vows to Bring About 'the Official End of Iran' If It Threatens the US Again," *Vox*, May 20, 2019, https://www.vox.com/2019/5/20/18632247/trump-iran-end-threat-twitter-north-korea.

5. See, e.g., interviews conducted with (nuclear) policy expert in Greg Sargent, "Could Trump Help Unleash Nuclear Catastrophe with a Single Tweet?" *Washington Post*, December 26, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/12/26/could-trump-help-unleash-nuclear-catastrophe-with-a-single-tweet/?utm_term=.7227ca8857b7.

6. Quoted in Anthony Zurcher, "Donald Trump's Nuclear Fixation—From the 1980s to Now," BBC News, August 10, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40879868.

7. On the question of Trump's understanding of nuclear weapons, see, e.g., Zach Beauchamp, "Donald Trump's Very Confusing Thoughts on Nuclear Weapons, Explained," *Vox*, January 18, 2017, https://www.vox.com/world/2017/1/18/14310168/trump-nuclear-policy-inauguration-explained; and on the question of how and for what nuclear weapons may be used (and how significantly the Trump administration has departed from the last four Republican and Democratic administrations), see, e.g., Lynn Rusten, "The Trump Administration's 'Wrong Track' Nuclear Policies," *Arms Control Today*, March 2018, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-03/features/trump-administrations-wrong-track-nuclear-policies.

8. For instance, in 1969, in the midst of negotiations with North Vietnam, then US president Richard Nixon sent a squadron of nuclear-armed B-52s toward Moscow and initiated a global nuclear readiness alert in an attempt to appear sufficiently unhinged that the Soviets would pressure North Vietnam to cave to Washington's demands. "I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war," Nixon reportedly told chief of staff H. R. Haldeman. Did Nixon's ploy work? The answer depends on how one defines success. As Jonathan Stevenson recently put it, "The Soviet Union was taken aback, but then again the American role in the war lasted three and a half more years." Quoted in Jonathan Stevenson, "The Madness Behind Trump's 'Madman' Strategy," *New York Times*, October 26, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/opinion/the-madness-behind-trumps-madman-strategy.html.

9. Consider, for instance, the Iranian regime's public response to Trump's threats to destroy Iran: Foreign Minister Javad Zarif wrote on Twitter "@realdonaldTrump hopes to achieve what Alexander, Genghis & other aggressors failed to do. Iranians have stood tall for millennia while aggres-

sors all gone. EconomicTerrorism & genocidal taunts won't 'end Iran'. . . NeverThreatenAnIranian. Try respect–it works!" Later that same day, President Hassan Rouhani added that, while he favored talks and diplomacy, they would be impossible in the current environment: "Today's situation is not suitable for talks and our choice is resistance only." Quoted in Patrick Wintour, "Iran Hits Back at Trump for Tweeting 'Genocidal Taunts,'" *The Guardian*, May 20, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/iran-trump-tweet-genocidal-taunts.

10. Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the Twenty-First Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

11. Ibid., chapter 2; see Robert J. Art and Kelly M. Greenhill, "Coercion: An Analytical Overview," in *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, ed. Kelly M. Greenhill and Peter Krause (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11–12, for a discussion of why challengers may choose to deliberately escalate crises.

12. See, e.g., Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risk* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

13. For instance, in the midst of heightened tensions between NATO and the Russian Federation, actions taken to shore up NATO's deterrent posture in Eastern Europe could be inadvertently interpreted by Moscow as the start of a military offensive, which then triggers counterescalation by Russia. For additional information and other examples, see, e.g., "Three Escalation Scenarios," in Ulrich Kuhn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/28/three-escalation-scenarios-pub-75882.

14. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, chapter 2.

15. Michael Brecher, "Crisis Escalation: Model and Findings," *International Political Science Review* 17 (2) (1996): 215–30.

16. Ibid.; Art and Greenhill, "Coercion."

17. On uncertainty as a cause of war, see, e.g., Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988). On uncertainty about resolve—which is to say, the willingness of an actor to bear costs (Art and Greenhill, "Coercion," 10)—as a cause of war, see, e.g., Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (January 2006): 169–203.

18. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

19. See, e.g., James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests, Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 68–90; Bahar Levenotoğlu and Ahmer Tarar, "Prenegotiation Public Commitment in Domestic and International Bargaining," *American Political Science Review* 99,

no. 3 (August 2005): 419–33; Shuhei Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy: Public versus Private Threats in Crisis Diplomacy," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (August 2007): 543–58; see also Paul G. Lauren, "Coercive Diplomacy and Ultimata: Theory and Practice in History," in *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, 2nd ed., eds. Alexander L. George and William E. Simons (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379–415.

20. See, e.g., Art and Greenhill, "Coercion."

21. Ben D. Mor, "Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2, no. 2 (April 2006): 157; see also Kelly M. Greenhill, "Public Mobilization and Opinion Management," in *Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, ed. Ronald Krebs and Thierry Balzacq (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

22. David Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: From World War I to Wikileaks* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013); Kelly M. Greenhill, *Fear and Present Danger: Extra-factual Sources of Threat Conception and Proliferation* (forthcoming).

23. Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion*.

24. Quoted in Cynthia Schneider, "The Sound of Music in Pyongyang," Brookings Institution, February 28, 2008, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-sound-of-music-in-pyongyang.

25. Greenhill, *Fear and Present Danger;* Kelly M. Greenhill and Ben Oppenheim, "Rumor Has It: The Adoption of Unverified Information in Conflict Zones," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2017).

26. See, e.g., Kelly M. Greenhill, "Scary Stories: Threat Narratives, Extra-factual Information and Foreign Policy," *Swedish Institute for International Affairs* (May 2014); Kelly M. Greenhill, "How Trump Manipulates the Migration Debate: The Use and Abuse of Extra-factual Information," *Foreign Affairs* (July 5, 2018), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-07-05/how-trump-manipulates-migration-debate; Greenhill, *Fear and Present Danger*.

27. Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy."

28. James Dana Fearon, "Threats to Use Force: Costly Signals and Bargaining in International Costs" (PhD thesis, UC–Berkeley, 1992), 173.

29. "As America and Iran Inch Closer to War, New Talks Are Needed," *The Economist*, June 29, 2019, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/06/29/as-america-and-iran-inch-closer-to-war-new-talks-are-needed.

30. Ibid.

31. See also Todd Hall, "On Provocation: Outrage, International Relations, and the Franco-Prussian War," *Security Studies* 26, no. 1 (2017): 1–29.

32. See, e.g., Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy"; and the excellent Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Trump's de-escalation of the crisis with North Korea in early 2018 is a case in point of how de-escalation is of course possible.

33. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 105.

34. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics*; Joshua D. Kertzer, "Resolve, Time, and Risk," *International Organization* 71, Supplement S1 (2017): S109–36.

35 Ibid.; also see Hall, "On Provocation."

36. See, e.g., Mark Murray, "Analysis: Contrast Between Obama and Trump Is 'Unprecedented,'" NBC News, January 19, 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/inauguration-2017/analysis-contrast-between-obama-trump-unprecedented-n708456; Dan McAdams, "The Mind of Donald Trump," *The Atlantic*, June 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/the-mind-of-donald-trump/480771.

37. Hyun-Binn Cho, "Provocation, Crisis Escalation, and Inadvertent War" (paper presented at Harvard International Security Conference, Cambridge, MA, October 14–15, 2017, 3 and passim).

38. Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 235.

39. See, e.g., John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

40. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests"; Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy"; Hall, "On Provocation."

41. See, e.g., Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1999).

42. Quoted in Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Is Trump All Talk on North Korea? Uncertainty Sends a Shiver," *New York Times*, September 24, 2017.

43. Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion.*

44. See, e.g., Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Greenhill, "How Trump Manipulates the Migration Debate"; Greenhill, *Fear and Present Danger*; and Jeffrey Lewis, chapter 8 in this volume.

45. Alexander L. George, ed., *Avoiding War: Problems of Crisis Management* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

46. The term "security dilemma" refers to a situation in which actions by a state that are intended to heighten its security, such as increasing its military strength, committing to use weapons, or founding alliances, can lead other states to respond in kind, producing increased tensions that create conflict, even when no party actually desires it. See, e.g., Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–74.

47. Quoted in Daniel W. Drezner, "This North Korea Business Will Get Out of Control," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2018.

48. See, e.g., Kori Schake, "What Total Destruction of North Korea Means," *The Atlantic*, September 19, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/north-korea-trump-united-nations-kim-jong-un-nuclear-missile/540345.

49. See Hohmann, "Trump Suggests."

50. David P. Redlawsk, Andrew J. W. Civettini, and Karen M. Emmerson, "The Affective Tipping Point: Do Motivated Reasoners Even 'Get It'?" *Political Psychology* 31, no. 4 (August 2010): 583–93; Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz, and John Cook, "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13, no. 3 (2012): 106–31.

51. See, e.g., George E. Marcus, Michael MacKuen, and W. Russell Neuman, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

52. Prashant Bordia and Nicholas DiFonzo, "Psychological Motivations in Rumor Spread," in *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, ed. Gary A. Fine, Veronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007); see also Colin D. MacLeod and Ira L. Cohen, "Anxiety and the Interpretation of Ambiguity: A Text Comprehension Study," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 102, no. 2 (May 1993): 238–47.

53. See, e.g., Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Charles Taber, and Gallya Lahav, "Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (July 2005): 593–608; Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain: From Spiritual Faiths to Political Convictions: How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012).

54. See, e.g., Ted Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Shana Kushner Gadarian, "The Politics of Threat: How Terrorism News Shapes Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (April 2010): 469–83; Mark V. Pezzo and Jason W. Beckstead, "A Multilevel Analysis of Rumor Transmission: Effects of Anxiety and Belief in Two Field Experiments," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 1 (April 2006): 91–100.

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56. Davis, "Is Trump All Talk."

57. See, e.g., Tom O'Connor, "Like Trump, North Korea's Kim Jong Un Gets His News from TV and Twitter," *Newsweek*, November 3, 2017.

58. See, e.g., Sargent, "Could Trump Help Unleash Nuclear Catastrophe."

59. See Greenhill and Oppenheim, "Rumor Has It."

60. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests"; Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy."

61. See, e.g., Jessica Chen Weiss and Allan Dafoe, "Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric and Propaganda in International Crises: Evidence from China," *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (December 2019): 963–73; Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics*.

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63. Friedrich Glasl, *Confronting Conflict: A First-aid Kit for Handling Conflict* (Gloucestershire, UK: Hawthorn Press, 1999).

64. Ibid.; Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions*.

65. John Sides and Kimberly Gross, “Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror,” *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 3 (July 2013): 583–98.

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67. See Jervis, *Perceptions and Misperceptions*, on fundamental attribution bias and other psychological predispositions

68. Ewan MacAskill, “Irrational, Illogical, Unpredictable—24 Years On, the World Awaits Saddam’s Next Move,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2003; Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002).

69. Quoted in Kurizaki, “Efficient Secrecy.”

70. See, e.g., Greenhill, *Fear and Present Danger*; Greenhill, “Public Mobilization.”