

# *Mutually Assured Survival:*

## **Detering Inadvertent Conflict Escalation Through Strategic Restraint Signaling**

**by Travis Zahn**

The ability to understand escalation dynamics around foreign military interventions vitally interests any major power that believes it will intervene in a foreign war in the future. Major powers, which often take part in risky military interventions on the periphery of their empire, want to avoid escalating war with other major powers. This paper explores the dynamic of restraint signaling as a means of avoiding conflict escalation while demonstrating four restraint signals present in the case studies that potentially helped reduce the risk of an inadvertent escalation. They are: restraining weapons shipments and other military aid, restraining the timing of arms shipments, restraining what type of military forces, advisor versus combat soldier that were deployed, and placing geographic and/or targeting restraints on forces. A theory that avoids escalation is useful as a tool for policymakers and strategic planners to understand the impact that foreign military interventions have on the possibility of an inadvertent conflict escalation. It also allows those charged with planning an intervention to develop a strategic plan that uses the appropriate level of support of clients without escalating the conflict.

### **Background**

More than a dozen conflicts erupted globally during the two decades following the rise of decolonization and nationalism across the globe in the mid-twentieth century. Most of these conflicts took place in what was, at the time, referred to as the Third World. Places like Angola, the Middle East, Central America, and Afghanistan become the hotbeds of the final phase of the Cold War—interventions and conflicts more about East-West ideological dispute than anything else. As contemporary strategic competition heats up so does the likelihood of future foreign military interventions. How can the U.S. avoid escalation during interventions? The Cold War offers a snapshot of how major power avoided conflict escalation during the foreign military interventions

**Major Travis Zahn is a U.S. Army Strategist and previously served as an Art of War Scholar at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He holds degrees from both the U.S. Military Academy and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).**

of the 1970s.

Within these Cold War conflicts major powers saw opportunities to support individual sides while trying to preserve global peace. In the grand scheme of the US-Soviet competition, the Cold War was remarkable for the stability that was a four-decade-long struggle of ideological and geopolitical differences. Viewed from twenty-thousand feet, the Cold War was very much the “long peace” it appeared to be.<sup>1</sup>

In the Third World, it was less the “long peace” and was more like the “long war.” Despite the alleged existence of a stable period between major powers, the Cold War in the Third World was far from peaceful. Nuclear parity, the threat of mutually assured destruction, and the belief that war by proxy was the “cheapest insurance in the world” drove belligerents to achieving geopolitical aims through the indirect use of foreign forces.<sup>2</sup>

While there was no true major power conflict, there were several asymmetric low-level conflicts in which the major powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, interfered. In the decades following the 1940s, nearly three dozen African and Asian nations found themselves throwing off the yoke of colonialism and embracing their own freedoms. Washington D.C. and Moscow prepared to contest for power in almost all of them.<sup>3</sup> During the Cold War, foreign military intervention and war by proxy were key strategies of the indirect conflict between the major powers, all done to change the balance of power in the only place they could—outside of Europe. Within Europe, the competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union had become almost predictable: rhetoric exchanged, but little physical space moved. But, within the developing nations of the Third World, major power expansion among post-colonial states was anything but predictable. The decades of the 1970s represented the peak of major power efforts to provide military support to Third World regimes at war.<sup>4</sup>

## The Literature

Earlier escalation work does not adequately address the interaction of major powers that choose to intervene in a conflict. Instead, much of the previous literature has focused on escalation as it relates to nuclear war. As Austin Carson points out in *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics*, it is appealing to control escalation in conflict.<sup>5</sup> Prior work has helped to explain how control happens at a nuclear weapon level. How major powers control escalation during more conventional wars is not. Even less explored is escalation control during indirect foreign military interventions. While limited war theory literature offers important lessons, it does not adequately trace the importance of controlling escalation at a more conventional level.

**During the Cold War, foreign military intervention and war by proxy were key strategies of the indirect conflict between the major powers...**

Much of what is known about contemporary limited war theory evolved from a desire to understand how escalation in war happens, as well as a need to understand ways of controlling escalation to ensure that war did not evolve to total war. Limited wars are those which are “vital but not existential” and do not require the utilization of all resources in pursuit of victory.<sup>6</sup>

Limited war theorists like Bernard Brodie, Thomas Schelling, Robert Osgood, Henry Kissinger, and others all had to contend with a new reality: that the political aims they had previously fought wars for were not worth the cost of total destruction due to nuclear weapons. Nuclear parity with the Soviets meant that total war would be catastrophic. Cold War thinking on escalation and mutually assured destruction centered on the eventuality that a conventional

war was bound to go nuclear. These new theories on limited war were counter to the earlier focus on destroying the military will power of an adversary. This was no longer tenable once your enemy could use a nuclear weapon to “destroy the destroyer.”<sup>7</sup>

A major contribution to the literature on limited war was the role tacit bargaining played in communications between sides. A limited war requires establishing limits.<sup>8</sup> To achieve limits in war, belligerents have to bargain (formal, informal, tacit) to prevent escalation, as noted by Henry Kissinger in *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*.<sup>9</sup> Schelling identified a similar phenomenon, calling them focal points—a solution to a coordination problem that somehow stands out as the natural answer even if the participants don’t arrange it beforehand—that could coordinate two people’s actions.<sup>10</sup> Scholars have noted that the Korean War offers a few examples of focal points that limited the conflict. Natural terrain-based boundaries, as well as man-made separations, were used to separate combatants throughout the war. The Korean

**...the acute fear that an escalation would spiral into a larger conflict helps leaders prioritize actions that signal restraint.**

War also saw a delineation between weapons that could achieve strategic effects (in this case nuclear weapons) and conventional weapons. The Korean War offered limited war theorists an understanding of the role that tacit bargaining and mutual recognition could play in limiting war.

The research uses the concept of competitive foreign military intervention. As presented earlier, the author defines competitive foreign military intervention as the provision of combat and non-combat related aid by major powers to

a state or non-state participant actively engaged in an intrastate or interstate conflict, hoping to influence the outcome of the conflict.<sup>11</sup> Interventions are competitive because interveners share “competing, rather than shared interests in the outcome of [the war].”<sup>12</sup> Competitive foreign military interventions, therefore, involve two states competing to support opposite sides, not two states competing to be the sole supporter of the same side of an inter or intrastate war. To fall within the definitions previously presented, combatants need to be opposed to each other and receive external support from two opposed major powers.

To capture interventions correctly, one must adopt a broad definition of external aid. Noel Anderson correctly notes that narrowing the scope of aid to only the deployment of combat forces misses many third-party interventions.<sup>13</sup> Anderson’s definition involves combat or advisory forces, as well as support with weapons and ammunition, non-lethal aid, or logistical support. Throughout this research, the broader approach to the treatment of external aid is used to assess interventions that involve more than just combat forces.

The work anchored the theory in the nature of escalation within limited wars. It is also grounded in the fear that the decisions major powers make are bound by their individual fears over the vulnerability they feel during an intervention.<sup>14</sup> Restraint signaling helps to explain how major powers could control conflict escalation. As introduced previously, nuclear parity made large-scale major power conflict less likely, yet did not prevent conflict outright. In fact, the acute fear that an escalation would spiral into a larger conflict helps leaders prioritize actions that signal restraint. While overt interventions are risky, leaders can prioritize escalation controls and embrace restraint signals that communicate a constrained intervention is taking place. This logic makes sense of the initial choice to intervene in a foreign conflict and the

dynamics that prevent the acute escalation risk stemming from the intervention.

## The Risk of Escalation

During an intervention, major powers often face a dilemma concerning how they intervene in a conflict; clients want victory and often ask for more sophisticated supplies to accomplish that goal. Major powers, which use foreign military interventions as a way to achieve goals without escalating a conflict, are often in a bind. Clients need or demand intervening states provide increasing amounts of military aid in order to gain advantages over their enemy, even if that advantage is brief.<sup>15</sup> Major powers often provide this increased amount of aid, so the conflict does not escalate because of major power involvement. This increased aid creates a secondary security dilemma that indirect foreign military intervention was meant to avoid. As greater quantities of weapons, regardless of sophistication, or greater quantities of intervener aid or presence flows into a country, the risk of an intervener escalation naturally increases. The requirement of victory for a client or intervener often encourages an expansion of the conflict into an area previously unaffected by the fighting. This goes counter to the fundamental appeal of war by proxy, the avoidance of a large-scale escalation response by other actors.

Conflict escalation often equals an expansion of the scope or scale of the conflict, typically tied to an increase in the magnitude of the destruction as well.<sup>16</sup> Expansion occurs during a conflict in two forms: the expansion of intervener involvement, which Kahn terms vertical escalation, or an expansion in the physical space, or horizontal escalation.<sup>17</sup> Conflict escalation can also mean an escalation of the conflict between the intervening major powers, the focus of this work, and what the author calls Intervener Escalation. Intervener Escalation is a secondary conflict that arises directly between two intervening major powers

that feature a direct, large scale, and publicly acknowledged conflict. The intervening major powers find themselves in direct conflict with each other in the peripheral area of a conflict.

**When major powers decide to increase their military support to a client, they risk entering an escalation/counter escalation dynamic...**

When major powers decide to increase their military support to a client, they risk entering an escalation/counter escalation dynamic, similar to the dynamic action-reaction cycle found within the security dilemma. Each intervener would observe the increased support, subsequently increasing their support to their respective client. The escalation/counter-escalation dynamic is open-ended since there is no visible limit to the actions. As one intervener escalates, the other responds at a greater level, and so on. Since limits of the escalation are not clear to observers, there is a spiral towards conflict: intervener actions drive an increased reaction by the other intervener. Thomas Schelling called this classic case of brinkmanship—both sides continuously escalating actions—the “threat that leaves something to chance.”<sup>18</sup> Since major power interveners are unaware of the level of escalating support their opposite is providing, they respond with their own unmediated increases in support. These escalatory actions purposely exploit the new security dilemma present, and inevitably raise the risk of escalation.

A 2008 Rand study, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, describes inadvertent escalations as occurring when:

...combatant’s intentional actions are unintentionally escalatory, usually because they cross a threshold of intensity or scope

in the conflict or confrontation that matters to the adversary but appears insignificant or is invisible to the party taking the action. Such a failure to anticipate the escalatory effects of an action can result from a lack of understanding of how the opponent will view the action, it may result from incorrectly anticipating the second- or third-order consequences of the action in question, or both.<sup>19</sup>

**The central challenge of an intervening major power, therefore, is to intervene in a way that does not cause their adversary to escalate the conflict.**

Major power interveners risk escalation when they increase their support to their clients with no visible restraint. The central challenge of an intervening major power, therefore, is to intervene in a way that does not cause their adversary to escalate the conflict. Major powers cannot deter or prevent all inadvertent escalations. This is because escalation is often a result of decision makers failing to choose the best actions during an intervention.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, to reduce the risk of an inadvertent escalation and prevent a wider conflict, interveners must be “enlightened” through restraint signaling. This is primarily a coordination challenge in which the major powers must signal their interventions limits to avoid potential intervener escalation. Once a major power can accomplish a level of coordination, they can now achieve their intervention’s political goals while avoiding the possibility of widening hostilities.

### ***Restraint Dynamics in Competitive Foreign Military Interventions***

The dynamics of how third-party major powers approach avoiding inadvertent escalation while engaging in a foreign military intervention is best modeled using a conceptual discussion of

game theory. Game theory is useful because a game can serve as a formal model of a strategic situation. Strategic situations are those in which the player’s actions depend on those of their opponent.<sup>21</sup> The scenario in question is one of strategically interdependent behavior, in that what one player does affects the outcomes of the other and what the other player does affects outcomes of the first player. Simply put, what Player A does affects Player B and vice-versa. It is not just about winning and losing. By looking at the theory of interactive behavior through the lens of game theory, the reader can more quickly draw parallels between one situation of intervention and another, and more closely draw a generalizable theory of escalation restraint in foreign military interventions.

To visualize a possible scenario, envision two major powers, the United States and Soviet Union, intervening in some local situation that falls within Third World Cold War dynamics. As noted in the thesis above, each side views the situation in terms of relative gains (domino theory) as well as within the security dilemma, that the actions of one decreases the security of the other.<sup>22</sup> Both sides in this scenario exist under a status quo of the desire to avoid conflict between the major powers. Intervening powers must figure out a way to coordinate their interventions in such a way and such a manner as to not escalate the conflict past the bounds that it started in. Neither the Soviets or the U.S. wanted a limited regional war to escalate into an unlimited global war.

### **Coordination**

The challenge for major power interveners is coordinating their decision of restraint in order to avoid a conflict escalation. When actual communication between opposition interveners is unlikely or impossible, interveners must communicate the decision of restraint through actions that establish limits. To do this successfully, major powers also must overtly

communicate these limits in recognizable and verifiable ways. This verifiable coordination signals to other interveners that the major powers do not wish to escalate the conflict. Tacit coordination is one way to communicate the intervener limits that convey restraint.

Schelling introduced tacit coordination in 1960 to describe communication through deeds over words.<sup>23</sup> A sequenced pattern of behavior allows intervening nations to find limits and regulate the competition in a way that avoids escalation. Limits are different for each conflict and dependent on intervener interests and the strengths and weaknesses of the client. These verifiable limits show the restraint that a major power is displaying. Limits, according to Schelling, need to be “objective,” in that both sides are aware of them, and “unique,” in that they are easily identifiable.<sup>24</sup>

Once major powers identify limits, they can signal intervener restraint through their actions or by behaving in predictable patterns that are verifiable. Major powers can measure intervener restraint by evaluating the verifiability of the following credible restraint limits. They are: types of arms and equipment shipped, the timing of arms agreements and shipments, the difference between deployed forces as advisor or combat forces, and the use of geographic boundaries.

### ***Weapons Shipments and Other Aid***

Weapons and military aid transfers from intervener to client have been a usual hallmark of most interventions in the time period in question. Two types of distinctions regarding weapons systems are important: quantitative and qualitative. The volume and types of weapons and military aid passed to clients can show the level of support provided by the intervener, as well as communicate any restraint the intervener is taking.<sup>25</sup> Quantitative transfers, such as large amounts of small arms, including rifles, ammunition, rocket launchers, and even tanks

and some aircraft do not seem to be useful as a restraint signal. For example, during the interwar years, 1930-1939, between the World Wars, the Soviets made up just 6% of the world arms trade.<sup>26</sup> By the 1970s, the Soviets made up a third of all arms transfers worldwide, with 31% of all Soviet arms transfers being sold to the Third World, much of it to Africa.

**Once major powers identify limits, they can signal intervener restraint through their actions or by behaving in predictable patterns that are verifiable.**

Interveners communicate restraint through the qualitative distinction between weapon systems as well. Interveners can signal levels of restraint through the type of weapons shipped. Even though volume and sophistication may increase as the conflict continues, shipping only weapons not capable of delivering strategic effects tacitly signals restraint. The provision on non-strategic weapons brings with it less escalation risk since adversary interveners may not view their shipments as raising a security risk in the intervention. This security risk comes from the nature of the weapons effects the shipped weapons are capable of achieving.

Interveners tacitly communicate restraint through the types or mix of weapons shipped and their level of sophistication and capability. This qualitative distinction between weapon types, lethal effects (strategic vs tactical) and non-lethal, can signal restraint. Small arms, such as rifles and ammunition, differ from bombers or missiles capable of deep strikes against population centers or against strategic targets, thus inflicting strategic effects.<sup>27</sup> Advanced weapons transfers come with a security risk. The transfer of some types of sophisticated weapons, those capable of an increased destructive power or those that change the strategic outlook of

the conflict, can increase the risk of intervener escalation. For example, the United States understood this predicament in Afghanistan as it approached supplying the Stinger missile system to the Afghan Mujahedin. Shipping more than what the client needed to harass the Soviets, and the risk of the “pot boiling over” into intervener escalation, was too great.<sup>28</sup>

Non-lethal military aid occupies another class of distinction that can signal restraint. Lethal aid is used to destroy the enemy while non-lethal aid, such as radars, medical, or communication equipment, is used to preserve or help friendly forces, not directly destroy the enemy. Delineating a distinction between lethal aid and non-lethal aid helps identify the scope of an intervention and helps prevent an intervener escalation scenario.

**Non-lethal military aid occupies another class of distinction that can signal restraint.**

The Yom Kippur War is an example of the Soviets’ and Americans’ misunderstanding of the dynamic of restraint signaling and its role in controlling escalation. Conversely, the Angolan Civil War is an example of both sides understanding the restraint dynamic that arms shipments held in controlling escalations.

***Timing of Arms Agreements and Shipments***

The types of weapons or military aid shipped from intervener to client are important, but so is the timing of those agreements and shipments. Timing of agreement or shipments can take a few different forms. They could look like transfers before or after key regional dynamics have occurred (war or peace outbreaks), western power involvement or withdrawal, or they could be delayed around key major power negotiations. The key negotiations do not need to be concerned with the conflict at hand. They

could be negotiations on other issues related to the major power relationship.<sup>29</sup> Rapid shipments may show a firm intervener commitment, while leisurely shipments may show a level of uncertainty surrounding the success of the client in the intervention.<sup>30</sup>

The consideration of arms agreement timing and shipments shows an appreciation for the consequences of how these shipments might be interpreted. Arms shipment agreements could serve as an instigator of escalation if not carefully managed. Arms shipment timing also reveals policy ideals centered on establishing tacit limits to the intervention, bounding the scope in an easily verifiable way. For example, in the Nigerian Civil War, the Soviet Union held off signing an arms agreement with the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG) until after the United States had declared neutrality in the conflict.<sup>31</sup>

Both Washington D.C. and Moscow risked escalating the conflict during the Yom Kippur War through a mismanagement of arms shipment timing. Neither side was particularly concerned with controlling when arms shipments flowed into their client since the conflict was so short and appeared, at least in the beginning, existential for Israel. The Soviets seemed the most cognizant of the timing of shipments, but even their usual restraint was absent during this conflict.

Soviet airlifts to both Egypt and Syria began on October 10, 1973, four days after the conflict started and four days before the U.S. sent its first shipments. The Soviets shipped over seventy flights of supplies a day, totaling an immense amount of supplies. The only indication the Soviets delayed any shipments was the large sealift that contained the possible nuclear weapon on October 23, the day after UN resolution 338 called for a joint ceasefire.

Washington D.C. okayed Operation Nickel Grass, the U.S. resupply of Israel, on October 12, 1973, and the first airlift loaded with

supplies departed the U.S. on October 14. From the start to the end, the U.S. resupply of the Israelis was stable and constant, occurring daily. There seemed to be little regard for any of the negotiations concurrently taking place during the resupply. The sole focus seemed to be on preventing the overwhelming defeat and collapse of the Israeli military. U.S. shipments to Israel peaked on October 21, only a day before the UN passed Resolution 338, indicating that shipments were undertaken during the lead up to the first ceasefire.<sup>32</sup>

The timing of arms shipments to Angola, a conflict that didn't come close to escalating, was done differently. There is no evidence that the Soviets withheld or delayed arms shipments from the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) to coerce their clients' actions during the civil war. There is, however, a level of significance in the timing of Soviet arms shipments as they related to the involvement of the United States in Angola. The first two arms shipments, August 1974 and March 1975, took place before the United States became involved in Angola. The U.S. 40 Committee set aside just \$300,000 for American political action for Angola in January 1975, hardly an amount that would make the Soviet Politburo think the U.S. government was interested in the region.<sup>33</sup> These shipments were in line with Soviet practices of heavy involvement before or after the U.S. got involved, timing their shipments so as not to antagonize the U.S. and possibly escalate the conflict.

The U.S.' timing of arms was less predictable. The first \$300,000 discussed above had no discernable connection other than the fact that it was very close to the signing of the Alvor agreement. This shipment seems to have been a bid to help the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) secure a better bargaining position going into the Alvor negotiations. In July and August 1975, the 40 Committee would authorize a total of \$24.7 million dollars in aid

and arms, all before signing the Helsinki CSCE Final Act that the Soviets avoided shipping arms around. The Tunney amendment, signed into law on December 19, 1975, curtailed CIA covert appropriations for the FNLA, but not before the CIA made two more appropriations, one on November 14 and a second on November 21. Only the final amount of all aid is unclassified, both November aid amounts remain classified, but the author was able to calculate the total to be around \$6.7 million between the two appropriations.<sup>34</sup> Both of these monetary allotments and arms purchases occurred before Ford proposed peace through Dobrynin in December 1975.

**...timing of arms shipments plays a role in controlling the escalation dynamic.**

The instances discussed in both wars shows how timing of arms shipments plays a role in controlling the escalation dynamic. The Yom Kippur War demonstrates a case of not monitoring timing while the Angola case is an example of monitoring timing. Both cases also show the value of timing as a restraint signal, both in a positive and a poor way. By comparing the two case studies, the value is clear. Without controlling timing, intervening nations risk escalating the conflict regardless of other restraint dynamics used.

### *Advisor versus Combat Troops*

Within competitive interventions, major powers often provide combat forces to their clients. Interveners accomplish this in many ways. It might be for an advise/train or advise/assist role, where clients are provided strategic advice, campaign planning, guidance during field operations, and training. This is exemplified by the provision of U.S. help to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. It can also occur in a surrogate

or direct combat role, where clients are provided covert or overt forces to augment or fight on their client's behalf.

It is often the case that when one major power deploys maneuver forces in support of a client, the other does not. That was evident in Korea, Vietnam, and the Soviet-Afghan Wars. The 1967 Six-Day War is another example of an aversion by major powers to introducing combat forces. In May 1964, Deputy Undersecretary of State Raymond L. Garthoff met with KGB officer and Second Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Boris N. Sedov, who passed on to Garthoff the message that if the "United States were to become directly involved militarily in the escalating Middle East Conflict, the Soviet Union, too, would have to become involved."<sup>35</sup> While "become involved" was ill defined, it is reasonable to assume that the Soviets meant a widening of the conflict.

**Often deployed as part of an intervention...are non-combat military advisors.**

Often deployed as part of an intervention, and not accounted for in the previously outlined scenarios, are non-combat military advisors. As Anderson has pointed out, this appears to be because they fill a "non-combat" role.<sup>36</sup> So, even though major powers supply personnel, direct conflict between interveners in an intervention is rare.

The Soviet military, for example, often deployed combat personnel abroad within Warsaw Pact countries, but not as maneuvering ground forces outside of Europe. They would sometimes deploy fighter pilots or anti-aircraft missile operators, but their contribution to Third World conflict was marginal.<sup>37</sup> Often, Soviet military contributions were with military advisors, those capable of conducting routine technical assistance, intelligence support,

transportation, distribution of weapons, or combat advisor roles.<sup>38</sup> For the Soviets, advisors did not mean frontline combat troops. Neither the Soviets nor the Americans ever committed ground forces to the Angolan or Yom Kippur conflict. As seen in other Cold War hotspots, the risk of escalation from direct confrontation informed major powers that sending forces that filled a combat role would shift the balance of power in the Third World. Both sides recognized that deploying large amounts of military forces could shift the escalation calculus of all interveners and change the limited nature of the conflict.

The Soviets maintained a healthy advisor presence in Egypt prior to the outbreak of hostilities in October 1973, even with the thorny relationship between Cairo and Moscow. Muhammad Anwar Sadat, then president of Egypt, was growing wearisome over Egypt's survival, singularly tied to the Soviets.<sup>39</sup> Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, 3,000 to 4,000, and up to 10,000 to 20,000, Soviet military advisors and technicians were present in Egypt and Syria.<sup>40</sup> The Soviets also flew in advisors once the fighting started in a bid to keep the Egyptian and Syrian military afloat.<sup>41</sup>

There is little to no evidence that the Soviets took part in front line conflict on either the Suez or Golan Heights front. Soviet advisors were present in command posts of both the Egyptians and Syrians, as well as accompanying ground units that were away from the front line of combat.

In Angola, the Soviet Politburo feared that client forces were incapable of handling the influx of weapons. The same fears existed in the U.S. as John Stockwell showed when he explained the CIA's fear that domestic forces "were not able to organize the logistical systems necessary to deploy [weapons] or to develop the communications, maintenance, combat leadership, and discipline to organize an effective military effort."<sup>42</sup> In the case of the Soviets,

the Politburo considered troop deployments but feared that such a brazen escalation would damage the revitalized policy of détente between Moscow and Washington.<sup>43</sup> Both Moscow and Washington now faced a dilemma: how to provide their African clients with needed support, while not committing their own forces and preventing an inadvertent escalation of the conflict.<sup>44</sup> That solution was the stark distinction between those forces sent as advisors and those sent for a combat mission. Advisors were present to train local forces, while combat forces would directly take part in the fighting. As others have noted, distinguishing between advisors and combat forces has long been a way to “communicate restraint—ostensibly because of the ‘non-combat’ role played by advisers.”<sup>45</sup>

Despite the amount of communist manpower present in Angola, the Soviet Politburo prohibited their advisors from participating in frontline combat missions. Soviet and Cuban advisors were intended to support their MPLA client in ways that did not risk intervenor escalation. The Soviet military separated their advisors from combatants to signal their role in the intervention, a non-direct combat role. Sergey Kolomnin, a senior member of the Soviet military mission in Angola, wrote “as a rule, our advisers in the Angolan brigades moved to the rear when there were military operations.”<sup>46</sup> Another Soviet officer serving in Angola echoed the same when he wrote that Soviet advisors were told that they “should only instruct, train and advise... but not fight.”<sup>47</sup> Similar to the Soviets, Cuban advisors took steps to distance themselves from direct combat as a means of preventing escalation. Drawing a strong distinction between Soviet and Cuban forces serving as advisors to MPLA forces versus combat forces established a visible limit that could help prevent escalation: advisors were acceptable, combat troops were not.<sup>48</sup>

The U.S. seemed to have been more judicious with its advisors. As the case studies show, American advisors often avoided the front

lines, choosing to do their advising from the safety of bases far from the front or from another country. This allowed the CIA to accomplish a similar separation by using a different means—they avoided being on the front lines at all. The CIA oversaw the advising mission for the U.S. choosing to operate outside Angola. Former CIA Director William Colby outlined that the CIA’s training mission between 1975 and 1976 occurred outside of Angola “as no CIA officers were permitted to engage in combat or train there.”<sup>49</sup> Stockwell similarly backed this up when he outlined CIA restrictions that prevented

**...distinguishing between advisors and combat forces has long been a way to “communicate restraint...**

any staffers from being killed in Angola, and that they had no “discomfort worse than malaria.”<sup>50</sup> The CIA, Stockwell explained, allowed others to run the serious risk in the country while they conducted training from outside Angola.<sup>51</sup> This dynamic is most noticeable directly around the time of the Alvor agreements when the CIA hired western mercenaries, South African Officers, and CIA paramilitary officers to embed with FNLA forces. This was done in a bid to help Western clients achieve a better negotiating position prior to the start of negotiations.<sup>52</sup> With the passage of the Clark Amendment, Congress barred further U.S. money and involvement in Angola, permanently affecting CIA operations in the country. Drawing a distinction between fighter and advisor seems to have prevented escalation: once again, advisors were acceptable, combat forces were not.

## **Conclusion**

This article examined the role of strategic restraint signaling between the United States and the Soviet Union during competitive foreign military interventions between the years 1973

and 1980. Based on the research, the answer is that signals of strategic restraint were present in the time period in question. This research examined two cases with differing results. In the case of the Yom Kippur War, the lack of signaling on the part of the Soviets led to a conflict escalation. In the case of the Angolan Civil War, the presence of signaling prevented the escalation of the conflict.

**Foreign military interventions within inter and intra state wars are an effective way to shape the outcome of the conflict.**

Foreign military interventions within inter and intra state wars are an effective way to shape the outcome of the conflict. They were an especially effective, and greatly practiced, strategy used by both sides in the Cold War. Ostensibly, these wars offered major power interveners a less risky alternative to engaging in conflict themselves. Instead, these interventions bore the risk of escalation—a local war could become a global war. Yet, in the two instances of foreign military intervention explored here, the wars never became global, even if the threat of an inadvertent escalation existed. Instead, through the calculated display of strategic restraint, both the United States and the Soviet Union were able to conduct their intervention without eliciting a major escalatory response by the other major power.

As foreign military interventions continue, the American and Soviet experience offers four generalizable lessons that may be impactful in contemporary foreign military interventions.

First, major powers who intervene in wars do not necessarily want to go to war with other interveners. They are interested in seeing their client win and their prestige grow but may try to limit their interventions to both achieve victory and prevent any escalation.

Second, interventions by major powers carry inherent risks. Both the U.S. and Soviet Union believed that interventions during the time period of this study were worth the potential risk of escalation, even if they didn't actually want that escalation to occur. Understanding what risks are worth taking in regard to escalation, and what risks are not worth taking is key to any future intervention scenario.

Third, open and direct communication between major power interveners is not always possible. Instead, as both major powers demonstrated, interveners may choose to communicate their limits tacitly—communication through deeds over words. Intervenors do not need direct communication to signal a desire to constrain intervention to prevent escalation. Instead, the act of restraint is the signal. Equally important is the receptiveness of receiving a signal. When interveners are unable to see the signal, or worse, unreceptive to the signal of strategic restraint, there is a high possibility of intervener escalation.

Fourth, strategic restraint signaling can take many forms. In the case studies presented, four restraint signals were readily visible in all or some of the wars. They are: restraining weapons shipments and other military aid, restraining the timing of arms shipments, restraining what type of military forces, advisor versus combat soldiers deployed, and placing geographic and/or targeting restraints on forces. There are most likely other restraint factors that could be used to expand the theory.

In the future, foreign military interventions in inter- and intrastate wars will continue. The research presented in this paper will help to draw clear distinctions around conflict escalation and hopefully help to prevent escalation wars between major powers. Major power interveners, armed with an understanding of limits and the power of strategic restraint, may be more apt to identify the necessary signals and avoid future intervener escalations. In the future, research

applying strategic restraint to foreign military interventions is necessary. The prevalence of war is not diminishing. Major powers are bound to intervene in wars on opposing sides of a foreign military intervention. To avoid conflict escalation in interventions in the future, the research presented in this work is worth expanding to other examples outside those presented within this work. **IAJ**

## Notes

- 1 Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.
- 2 Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 1st edition. (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 100.
- 3 Tim Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945–2020* (S.I.: Holt Paperbacks, 2022).
- 4 Bruce D. Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts: Soviet Arms and Diplomacy in Local Wars 1945–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 6.
- 5 Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 11.
- 6 Spencer D. Bakich, *Success and Failure in Limited War: Information and Strategy in the Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq Wars*, Illustrated edition. (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 5.
- 7 Todd C. Flynn, “Limited War and Regional Conflict Escalation” (Stanford University, 1994), 4.
- 8 Thomas C. Schelling, “Bargaining, Communication, and Limited War,” *Conflict Resolution* 1, no. 1 (1957): 20.
- 9 Kissinger felt that nuclear threats were a meaningful method of restraint, but that the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) would lead to catastrophic destruction. Kissinger pursued a more strategic limited nuclear plan that Nixon would support in 1974.
- 10 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Reprint edition. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- 11 Carson points out in *Secret Wars* that there are multiple different definitions of what a foreign military intervention includes. Patrick Regan defines third-party intervention as “the supply or transfer of troops, hardware, or intelligence and logistical support to the parties in a conflict. My definition closely aligns with Regan’s. See Noel Anderson, “Competitive Intervention, Protracted Conflict, and the Global Prevalence of Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 692–706; Carson, *Secret Wars*; Patrick M. Regan, “Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 2.
- 12 Noel Anderson, “Competitive Intervention and Its Consequences for Civil Wars” (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016), 24.
- 13 Anderson, “Competitive Intervention, Protracted Conflict, and the Global Prevalence of Civil War”.
- 14 Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.
- 15 Anderson, “Competitive Intervention and Its Consequences for Civil Wars,” 46; William W. Kaufmann, ed., “Limited Warfare,” in *Military Policy and National Security*, (Center of International Studies: Princeton University Press, 1956), 112.

- 16 Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York, N.Y.: Frederick A. Prager, Publishers, 1965); Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).
- 17 Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*.
- 18 Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*.
- 19 Forrest E. Morgan et al., “Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century” (July 8, 2008): 23, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG614.html>.
- 20 Ibid., 24.
- 21 Burkhard C. Schipper, “Discovery and Equilibrium in Games with Unawareness | Elsevier Enhanced Reader,” *Journal of Economic Theory*, no. 198 (2021): 1, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0022053121001824?token=3E0771DFF0A1DFF74CA7C2130186B3294C4C8C99DF089E68F1B179833A67C00F25D8F86838692B2FB2654D875B037B14&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20220223200226>.
- 22 Richard W. Maass, “Salami Tactics: Faits Accomplis and International Expansion in the Shadow of Major War,” *Texas National Security Review* 5, no. 1 (November 9, 2021): 21.
- 23 Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 53.
- 24 Ibid., 57–58.
- 25 Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts*, 63.
- 26 Ibid., 37.
- 27 These classes of weapons differ from nuclear weapons, even the tactical kind, whose shipment to a client would undoubtedly cause an intervener escalation.
- 28 Alan J. Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (1999): 225.
- 29 Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts*, 64.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid., 106–109.
- 32 Ibid, 136.
- 33 Nathaniel Davis, “The Angola Decision of 1975: A Personal Memoir,” *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 1 (Fall 1978).
- 34 “183. Letter From Director of Central Intelligence Bush to the Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense (Mahon)” (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, Box CL 104, Geopolitical File, Angola Chronological File. Secret; Sensitive., March 18, 1976), accessed April 7, 2022, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v28/d183>.
- 35 Isabella Ginor, “The Russians Were Coming: The Soviet Military Threat in the 1967 Six-Day War” 4, no. 4 (December 2020), accessed March 14, 2022, [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria00\\_gii01.html](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria00_gii01.html).

- 36 Noel Anderson, “Competitive Intervention and Its Consequences for Civil Wars” (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016), 52.
- 37 Bruce D. Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts: Soviet Arms and Diplomacy in Local Wars 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 217.
- 38 Ibid., 229.
- 39 Central Intelligence Agency, “Intelligence Memorandum: Soviet-Egyptian Relations: An Uneasy Alliance” (Central Intelligence Agency, March 28, 1972), 3, Central Intelligence Reading Room, accessed February 22, 2022, [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000309640.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000309640.pdf).
- 40 William B Quant, *Soviet Policy in the October 1973 War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, May 1976), 6, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R1864.pdf>; Central Intelligence Agency, “Intelligence Memorandum: Soviet-Egyptian Relations: An Uneasy Alliance,” 6.
- 41 Plainclothes Russian air force technicians reassembled the MiG-21s that were shipped to Syria in the airlift; Russians drove tanks. . .; air traffic controllers flew to Egypt and Syria to operate radar equipment that was flown in; Soviet engineers repaired military equipment damaged in the fighting. See Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts*, 134.
- 42 John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (W. W. Norton, 1978), 176.
- 43 Many notable academics have written on the fear that escalation played in relation to the Détente period. See Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 231; Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts*, 163; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 232–233.
- 44 Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, 176.
- 45 Anderson, “Competitive Intervention and Its Consequences for Civil Wars,” 105.
- 46 Sergey Kolomnin, *Russkii Spetznaz v Afrike* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), 13.
- 47 Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 187.
- 48 Noel Anderson, “Competitive Intervention, Protracted Conflict, and the Global Prevalence of Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 692–706.
- 49 William Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA*, First Edition. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 78.
- 50 Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, 177.
- 51 Ibid., 247.
- 52 Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 350–354.

# Contributors Wanted!

**The Simons Center is looking for articles that involve contemporary interagency issues at both the conceptual and the application level.**

The *InterAgency Journal* is a refereed national security studies journal providing a forum to inform a broad audience on matters pertaining to tactical and operational issues of cooperation, collaboration, and/or coordination among and between various governmental departments, agencies, and offices. Each issue contains a number of articles covering a variety of topics, including national security, counterterrorism, stabilization and reconstruction operations, and disaster preparation and response.

The *InterAgency Journal* has worldwide circulation and has received praise from various military, government, and non-government institutions, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.



**We're also looking for book reviews!**

**Submit a book review or suggest a book to review to  
[editor@TheSimonsCenter.org](mailto:editor@TheSimonsCenter.org).**



THE SIMONS CENTER

**Contact the Simons Center  
for Ethical Leadership and Interagency Cooperation**

[www.TheSimonsCenter.org](http://www.TheSimonsCenter.org) • [editor@TheSimonsCenter.org](mailto:editor@TheSimonsCenter.org)  
[www.facebook.com/TheSimonsCenter](https://www.facebook.com/TheSimonsCenter)

**Location: 655 Biddle Blvd., Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027**

**Mailing Address: CGSC Foundation, 100 Stimson Ave., Suite 1149, Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027  
913-651-0624 - office • 913-651-4519 - fax**



The Simons Center is a major program of the CGSC Foundation, Inc.

The ***InterAgency Journal (IAJ)*** is published by the Command and General Staff College Foundation Press for the Simons Center for Ethical Leadership and Interagency Cooperation. The *InterAgency Journal* is a national security studies journal providing a forum for professional discussion and the exchange of information and ideas on matters pertaining to operational and tactical issues of interagency cooperation, coordination, and collaboration.

The articles published in the *IAJ* represent the opinions of the authors and do not reflect the official views of any United States government agency, the Department of Defense, the Department of the Army, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the Command and General Staff College Foundation, the Simons Center, or any other non-government, private, public or international organization.

***Contributions:***

The Simons Center encourages the submission of original articles based on research and/or which stem from lessons learned via personal experiences.

***Copyright:***

Publications released by the Simons Center are copyrighted. Please contact the Simons Center for use of its materials. *InterAgency Journal* should be acknowledged whenever material is quoted from or based on its content.

***Copyright Transfer Agreement:***

By virtue of submitting a manuscript, the author agrees to transfer to the Simons Center for the Study of Interagency Cooperation full ownership of all rights, titles, and interests, including the copyright in and to the work submitted.

Acceptance of this agreement further signifies the author represents and warrants that he/she is the sole author and sole proprietor of all rights in and to any portion of the work; that the work is original and not in the public domain; that it has not been previously published; that it does not violate or infringe on any personal or property rights of others; that it contains nothing libelous or contrary to law; and that he/she has full power to enter into this agreement.

For additional information visit the Simons Center website at

**[www.TheSimonsCenter.org/publications](http://www.TheSimonsCenter.org/publications)**



**The Simons Center**  
**Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027**  
**ph: 913-651-0624**  
**[www.TheSimonsCenter.org](http://www.TheSimonsCenter.org)**  
**[facebook.com/TheSimonsCenter](https://facebook.com/TheSimonsCenter)**



**CGSC Foundation, Inc.**  
**100 Stimson Avenue, Suite 1149**  
**Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027**  
**ph: 913-651-0624**  
**[www.cgscfoundation.org](http://www.cgscfoundation.org)**  
**[facebook.com/CGSCFoundation](https://facebook.com/CGSCFoundation)**  
**[twitter.com/CGSCFoundation](https://twitter.com/CGSCFoundation)**  
**[LinkedIn.com >>CGSC Foundation, Inc.](https://LinkedIn.com/CGSCFoundation)**

