
White Paper

Defense Implications for
U.S. and NATO Policymakers
and their Staffs



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THE NEAR CRISIS PROJECT:

Defense Implications for U.S. and NATO Policymakers and their Staffs

Paper prepared for the “Near Crisis Project: Why What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You” workshop, in partnership with the Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, January 27, 2023.

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Abstract: NATO leaders unveiled a new Strategic Concept during the Madrid Summit in June 2022, the first update to this important document since 2010. Despite the dramatic changes in the strategic environment over the past twelve years, NATO’s three core tasks remain essentially the same. One important update is a new focus on “crisis prevention and management,” rather than simply “crisis management.” This paper argues that in an era of proliferating and increasingly complex threats, crisis prevention is more important than ever. However, the concept of “crisis” is woefully underdeveloped in NATO documents. To address this shortfall, the paper presents the concept of “near crisis,” situations that sit on a lower rung of the escalation ladder but that haven’t yet tipped into full-blown crisis or armed conflict. This concept offers practitioners at the strategic and operational levels early warning and enhanced opportunities to initiate policy steps that could manage potential dangers before full crises emerge.

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In 2010, leaders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) approved a Strategic Concept that articulated three core tasks for the trans-Atlantic alliance: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. A lot has changed in the strategic environment over the intervening twelve years – major power competition has reemerged as a defining feature of the international system; Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its confrontational behavior more broadly has generated concerns about complex threats that cut across domains, from cyber and grey zone conflict through conventional war and nuclear escalation; civil war and humanitarian disasters across NATO’s southern periphery have stoked mass refugee flows and military intervention; the terrorism threat has morphed; new technologies threaten domestic political stability within member states while changing the character of warfare; and an assertive China creates a strategic gravitational pull that must be treated as a global priority. Despite these profound changes, when NATO leaders gathered for the annual summit meeting in Madrid in June 2022, they reaffirmed the continuing value of these three specific core tasks, with some minor adjustment in language (NATO, 2022a, pp. 6-9).

The NATO staff is careful to note that its Strategic Concepts are meant to serve as a broad outline for confronting threats and meeting alliance objectives. But as one of the outside advisory groups created by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg argued in its final report of November 2020, the “content related to the core tasks” must be strengthened to better anticipate threats, prioritize among the threats NATO might face, and generate common understanding and political support for confronting them (Reflection Group, 2020, p. 23). This paper picks up on the advisory group’s call for strengthening the Strategic Concept’s content by focusing on “crisis management,” which notably is now

labeled “crisis prevention and management” and is one of NATO’s three Core Tasks.

A quick scan of NATO documents related to crisis management reveals that the word “crisis” is treated as a grab bag concept that can refer to any significant problem that could somehow pose a security threat and that seems to demand some type of action. In this grab bag approach “crises” seem to take multiple forms, from the purely political or economic to situations already caught up in full-scale armed conflict. This is not surprising; the word “crisis” is highly adaptable, and our common understanding of what might constitute a national, regional, or global “crisis” can certainly cover a huge number of scenarios that might impose a wide range of perceived costs or pain. The “climate crisis” might bring devastating floods and inundation from rising sea levels; a “humanitarian crisis” might bring wide-spread starvation to a particular population; cyber attacks targeting major financial institutions or a central bank might spark “economic crisis”; a spiraling arms race might generate a “preventive war crisis” among regional rivals. Each scenario is indeed a crisis, each might be a crisis that NATO leaders feel compelled to respond to, and each would demand radically different policy tools to meet the specific nature of the threat.

But if NATO’s new Strategic Concept is to provide more concrete insight into this Core Task, it would be helpful to know what it is, specifically, that NATO is trying to prevent and manage.¹ Is there a way to understand the concept of an international crisis that could help NATO generate greater insights into disputes that might escalate to full-blown crises, that would improve the understanding of how crises develop, and shed light on the variables that might impact the likelihood of escalation or de-escalation in order to prevent crisis in the first place or better manage them when they do occur? Without conceptual clarity on what we mean by “international crisis,” it is im-

possible to identify which specific situations fall within the purview of NATO's crisis prevention and management objectives, and, importantly, how to prevent an international crisis from occurring in the first place. Drawing from decades of academic research on international crises, and more recent innovative work on the concept of "near crisis" by a multi-university research team supported by the U.S. Department of Defense's Minerva Research Initiative and the Office of Naval Research, this White Paper offers: (1) a more granular framework to understand crises and the process of crisis escalation and (2) some preliminary findings. In this White Paper we open up the concept to look closely at the various attributes that define a crisis, treating these features as layers that, as they accumulate, build toward the dangers of armed conflict. When we lay out these features as layers, it creates opportunities for policy measures that temper those dangers or at least provide early warning to help NATO members prepare to meet them. As important, a more granular approach to international crises will help illustrate that it is essential to understand and pay closer attention to the pre-crisis space rather than treat it as an asterisk or after-thought; as NATO's crisis management website points out, when it comes to crisis management, the 2022 Strategic Concept places a strong "emphasis on crisis prevention" (NATO, 2022b). The only way to prevent crisis is to manage disputes in the pre- or near-crisis space.

After explaining the new concept of near crises, one path to crises, the following sections of the paper will discuss two cases of near crisis involving NATO – the Russia-Georgia conflict of 2008, which escalated through the near crisis stage to full crisis then war (or what we term the full escalation cycle), and the so-called Black Brant Norwegian missile case of 1995, which for the Russian government flared dangerously as a one-sided near crisis, but then de-escalated before reaching the full crisis stage. The details of each case provide an oppor-

tunity to tease out operational and strategic level policy insights into the escalation and de-escalation processes of near crises. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the concept of near crisis can be operationalized to offer strategic analysts a tool for risk assessment and early warning of potential crises and international conflict in spots around the world, with the Arctic region as an example that will increasingly impact NATO in the years to come.

A More Granular Framework for the Concept of International Crisis

For the purposes of precision, this paper focuses on the more traditional notion of international crises that might lead to inter-state armed conflict. This form of crisis has generated extensive academic research for nearly four decades, since it was first introduced by the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) Project in 1975 (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 1997; Asal and Beardsley, 2007; Brecher et al., 2000; James, 2018), and it dovetails with the most pressing security concerns raised during recent NATO summits: "systemic competition from assertive and authoritarian powers," the "state and non-state actors" that "challenge the rules-based order," and the horizontal and vertical "proliferation of weapons of mass destruction" (Brussels Summit Communiqué, 2021). The academic literature on these types of crises provides a rigorous framework for exploring their characteristics and for understanding escalation and de-escalation dynamics at different stages. It also includes violent non-state actors (VNSAs) as key players that can influence inter-state crisis escalation in important ways. Finally, this framework has been used more recently for work on pre-crisis situations that are called "near crises," a concept that helps us better understand the origins of full-blown crises and why some disputes do not escalate, and to examine poli-

cy responses along a longer escalatory ladder (Iakhsis & James, 2019; Chong, et al., forthcoming; Braithwaite and Lemke, 2011).

We can consider this work on crises and near crises to be a contribution to what Alexander George famously called “bridging the gap” between the academic and policy communities. George’s advice for academics was that “Instead of a focus primarily on the prescriptive utility of theory for policy making,” what is “more immediate and feasible is the contribution that theory and generic knowledge can make to diagnosis of the specific situations that [practitioners] must make before they decide how to deal with that situation” (George, 1994, p. 155). In other words, “give more attention to the contribution [policy-relevant knowledge] can make to the diagnosis of problem-solving situations than to its ability to prescribe sound policy choice” (p. 167). To extend the medical metaphor: accurate diagnosis can lead to more effective prognosis and implementation of policy treatments that are more likely to produce good outcomes.

With this in mind, it seems that a more granular framework for understanding the concept of crisis and near crisis, the features that define these policy problems, and the conditions that increase or decrease the likelihood of escalation, not only enhances practitioners’ situational awareness, but might also serve as a form of “early warning” that triggers prioritization for intelligence collection and the process of thinking through alternative measures to shape the situation (Grabo, 2002). Being sensitive to crisis and near crisis conditions would help decrease uncertainty and prod analysts toward the development of probabilistic judgments about the risks that a full crisis might emerge in an area of importance, what Betts (1998) calls “con-

tingent political warning” (p. 27). And with greater contextual warning comes greater opportunities for management at lower and less dangerous rungs on the escalation ladder. “Near crisis management,” it seems, is preferable to “crisis management,” and the concept dovetails nicely with crisis prevention as a NATO Core Task. If near crises are managed well, then some crises can be prevented outright. Near-crisis management might also help NATO better safeguard its interests in those crises that still erupt.

According to the standard definition in the literature, a foreign policy crisis has three key features, based on perceptions of the foreign policy elite within a state: 1) a threat to basic values; 2) finite time to react to this threat; and 3) the potential for the use of military force among the key actors involved (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 1997).² It is useful to think of these three features as discrete “layers” that, as they accumulate in a given situation, push toward full crisis and potential war. It is also important to note that these layers offer two de-escalatory offramps rather than one, which is the focus of most research. We want to examine each of these layers in turn, to then make the case for the importance of understanding and monitoring the pre-crisis space.

Layer 1: Perceived Threat to Basic Values

The baseline feature of a foreign policy crisis is a perceived threat to basic values. It is no surprise that the term “threat,” or synonyms like “challenge,” are ubiquitous in NATO parlance, infused in every document and public statement about the current strategic environment. According to NATO 2030 (p. 64), threats are “growing,” they are “more complex,” and even unpredictable (see also Gilli et al., 2022). But “threat” alone does not equal “crisis.” Many perceived threats, of varying severity, are persistent; they are problems that animate the daily work of governments and alliances without presenting as a crisis. For NATO, consider the decades-long persistent threat posed by the Soviet Union. For the vast majority of the individual days that added up to over forty years of Cold War, the Soviet threat served as the fundamental security problem that focused the alliance’s efforts, but on only a small number of those individual days did the Soviet threat actually provoke crisis in the minds of NATO leaders. The same can be said about the perceived Russian threat in recent years, before President Putin’s decision to mass troops around Ukraine’s periphery and then launch a full-scale invasion. A second condition, or layer, was needed to push persistent threat along a path toward crisis.

Layer 2: Limited Time to Respond

Perceptions of time pressure can change everything. Whether a particular threat is emerging for the first time or has endured over years, when key leaders believe that they have limited time to respond, the implications of the threat take on new meaning for political and military leaders responsible for mitigating threats and who ultimately might be held accountable to the chain of command or their broader society for success or failure. This perception of finite time to respond could be generated by discrete actions, public statements, or signals from others – adversaries, allies, neutrals, non-state actors – that cannot be ignored. Most importantly, time pressure compels action, and the choices key leaders make (or do not make) can escalate or de-escalate the dangers this new situation presents. But there is one more condition, or layer, to add before a particular problem is considered a full crisis.

Layer 3: Potential for the Use of Military Force

According to the standard framework for identifying international crises, a problem will reach this stage when key leaders believe that armed conflict could erupt out of the situation. This conclusion might emerge in reaction to specific indicators, such as threats issued by crisis actors, by military force movements, changes in military readiness levels, logistical operations that would support the use of force, or military exercises that indicate preparation for military action. This condition might also appear simply because the perceived threat to basic values and time pressures are considered so severe that foreign policy elites quickly move to discussions of military options in response. The Cuban missile crisis is a classic example of an international crisis that meets all three criteria for the state actors involved: threat to basic values, limited time to respond, and potential for military conflict.

Strategic/Policy Implications of the Granular Approach to International Crisis

The International Crisis Behavior Project's framework has been used by scholars for decades to build datasets and explore crisis escalation dynamics and war for cases that reach back to 1918. But the value of this framework is not limited to academic study. It also offers planners, analysts, and policy makers more precision as they work to identify just what it is they are trying to "prevent" or "manage" when it comes to NATO's Core Tasks. Just as important, recent research suggests that it is possible to identify situations that sit at a pre-crisis stage, specifically, situations in which key leaders perceive a threat to basic interests and a limited time to respond to this threat, but they do not (yet) see the potential for military force. Ongoing research into such "near crises" is providing insight into the factors that increase or decrease the likelihood that these situations will tip into full crises. As noted above, even when Layers 1 & 2 have emerged – when key leaders perceive a threat and a limited time-frame to respond – we still have not pushed a foreign policy problem to the full crisis stage, which would require a belief that there is a heightened risk of military conflict. Nonetheless, the pre-crisis space must not be ignored. For policy makers, perceptions of limited time generated by a near crisis will likely drive an imperative for action, but this also becomes a window of opportunity to control the risk of escalation or an early warning indicator to prepare in case the near crisis escalates to full

crisis or war. This research begs an important question: is it possible to prevent or manage potential crises before they hit the full crisis stage?

The near crisis concept was pioneered by a multi-university team of international relations scholars funded by the Minerva Research Initiative in the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Office of Naval Research.³ While the academic literature on full crises and the data collected to support this research is voluminous, as one recent paper points out, the previous literature takes a truncated approach toward understanding the full crisis escalation process. Simply put, "where do crises come from in the first place (Lakshmi & James, 2019, p. 255)?" By breaking out the three basic conditions that define international crises, as already discussed, and then highlighting near crises as distinct situations, we gain greater insight into the extended or full crisis escalation process. Figure 1 below depicts the features of international crises as a series of accumulating layers that escalate toward full crisis and possible armed conflict, and it highlights two potential off-ramps in the escalation process rather than the single off-ramp identified by most scholars and practitioners.

Treat international crises as a series of layers

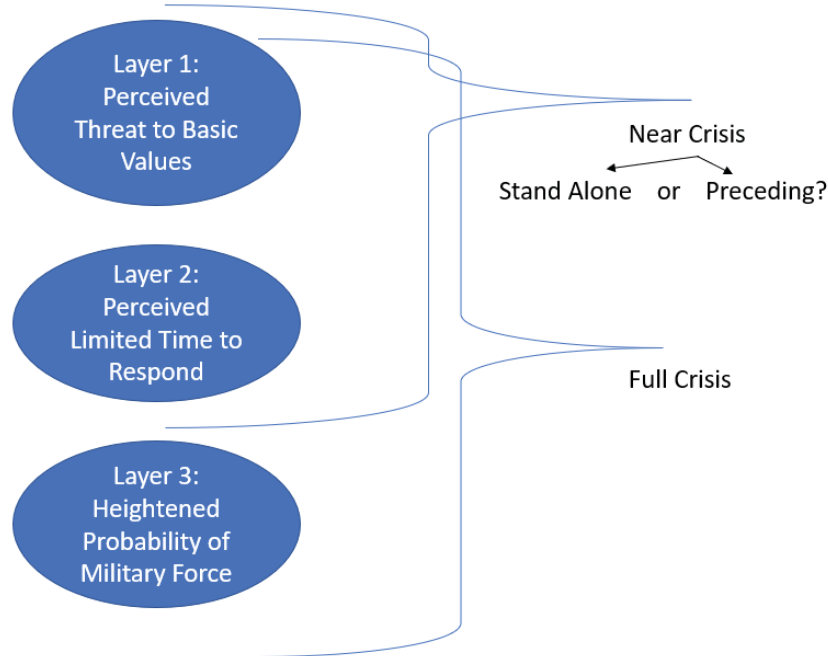


Figure 1. Defining Characteristics of Near Crisis

Early findings from this research show that near crises come in two forms. Some cases appear as so-called Stand-Alone Near Crises (SANICB), sitting on the “knife’s edge” as key leaders perceive a threat to basic values and limited time to respond, but the cases fade away and never tip into full crisis. These cases are often buried in the back of newspapers, if reported at all, especially in certain regions of the world. Other cases, so-called Preceding Near Crises (PNICB), tip into full-blown crisis (ICB) within six months when the prospects of military force emerge (Lakshmi & James, 2019; Chong et al., 2022), making them easier to identify. Through ongoing research that examines different variables and the strategic interaction between key actors in the cases of near crisis, we hope to uncover which factors and which types of foreign policy DIME moves – diplomatic, military, economic, informational – raise or lower the risk of escalation to full crisis and war.⁴ A graphic depiction of the full crisis escalation cycle is in Figure 2.⁵ Note, there are two off-ramps: SANICBs that do not escalate to ICBs and ICBs that do not escalate to War.

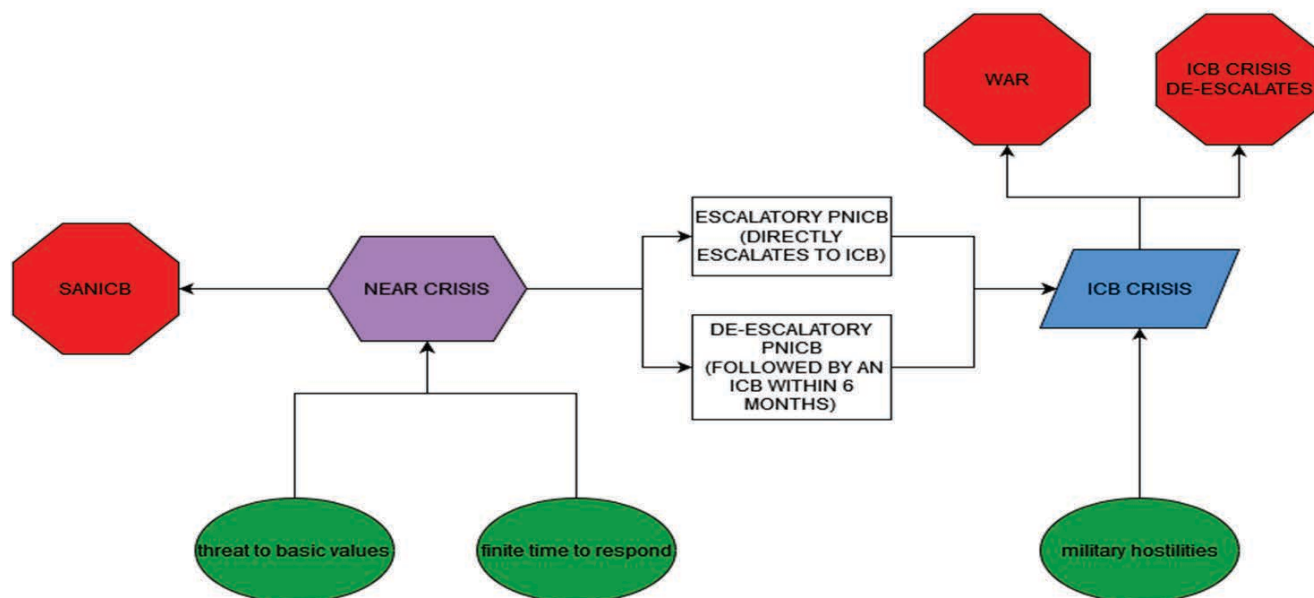


Figure 2. From Near Crisis to War: The Complete Escalation Cycle

Strategic Lessons from Near Crisis Cases

Two NATO-relevant cases from recent decades will help illustrate these concepts and their strategic value as the alliance and its member states grapple with the increasingly complex character of crisis prevention and management as a core function.

Russia-Georgia Near Crisis 2008 (PNICB)

Perhaps the best illustration of the near crisis concept and its strategic value for NATO is the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia. Here we have a case that went through each of the discrete steps in the escalation process, from dispute to war: it began as a near crisis that seemed to de-escalate about a month after it appeared, to then reemerge as a full-blown crisis that led to war several months later. The near crisis conditions emerged quickly on April 20, 2008, after the Georgian government released a video that it claimed depicted a Russian Mig-29 fighter shooting down a Georgian reconnaissance drone, over Georgian territory, that had been monitoring Russian military movements near the separatist region of Abkhazia (video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BypnhF17HGY&t=70s>). At the time, key leaders in both Russia and Georgia believed that they faced the two conditions that define a near crisis.

Russia: just weeks before, during the NATO summit meeting in Bucharest in early April, American President George W. Bush called for putting both Ukraine and Georgia on the path to eventual membership. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was in Bucharest for the summit, reacted bluntly on 4 April: continued expansion of NATO territory to the borders of Russia, he said, “would be taken in Russia as a direct threat to the security of our country (Evans, 2008).” In other words, potential NATO expansion was perceived as a threat to a basic value by the Russian leadership. While NATO did not yet endorse the initiation of a Membership Action Plan for Georgia, the Russian government perceived limited time to take action to derail this American initiative before it picked up political steam in the alliance.

Georgia: the destruction of the Georgian reconnaissance drone was a clear threat to its sovereignty, and Georgian leaders believed there was limited time to respond to the incident, otherwise the Russians would sense that they had a green light to continue with similar or more severe provocations. Although the Russian threat took the form of an armed attack, at this time Georgian leaders, including President Mikheil Saakashvili, did not believe they faced the risk of a near-term Russian invasion. American and NATO analysis supported the assessment that Russian military forces were not prepared for major armed conflict, so without official perceptions that there was a heightened risk of military force, the incident did not rise to the full crisis stage.

To deal with the time pressures the incident created, the Georgian government appealed for action from the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, and the United States. After a UN inspection mission issued a report on 26 May affirming Russian responsibility for the attack on the drone, the Georgian government was satisfied that significant action had been taken, and in turn this international support relieved Georgian anxieties over the threat and the sense of time pressures it had faced. In the immediate aftermath, then, the near crisis seemed to fade for Georgian leaders, and on its face, would meet all the requirements to be considered a Stand-Alone Near Crisis and a success story for “near crisis management” by Georgia’s international supporters.

But clearly, from the Russian side of the near crisis, the perception of the threat to its basic values and the time pressures for action to derail Georgia’s Membership Action Plan had not been resolved. By July, as indicators of impending Russian military action in support of separatists in the South Ossetia region began to quickly accumulate, the problem erupted into a full crisis that escalated to war by early August. As a result, the Russia-Georgia drone case is coded as a Preceding Near Crisis in the dataset, because the key factors that initially created the near crisis in April and May continued to percolate and created the conditions for crisis escalation in the months that followed the first appearance of the near crisis conditions.

Russia-Georgia 2008: Lessons for Policymakers

While there is ongoing research by the near crisis team to provide insights into what made the Russia-Georgia drone case a Preceding Near Crisis that eventually escalated to war, there are a few lessons that NATO policymakers can draw from the case study above that demonstrate the value of the near crisis concept as an analytical tool.

First, the pre-crisis space is critical for early warning and war-gaming that can forecast the possibility of escalation. Analysts are often wary of “crying wolf”: predicting a full crisis that does not come to fruition. Two dynamics are at play here. The first is the fact that policymakers’ actions taken after the early warning is provided may change an adversary’s calculus and behavior, thus de-escalating a knife’s-edge near crisis into a Stand-Alone Near Crisis. The analysts’ early warning is then perceived as being in error, as the predicted full crisis did not emerge. Understanding this dynamic can relieve analysts’ anxiety by allowing them to show their prediction of a full crisis was not in error: their predictions simply helped move the near crisis onto a different path towards de-escalation. In this way, the language of near crisis allows analysts to more clearly articulate their predictions, demonstrate the effects of their warning to policymakers on the resulting dynamics of the emergent crisis.

The second “crying wolf” dynamic is analysts’ concern over desensitizing policymakers by repeatedly warning about an action an adversary has not yet taken. This problem is exacerbated by adversary’s use of conditioning, or the “habituation of key activities or deployments to create in the target’s mind a new sense of normalcy.” Prior to the outbreak of conflict in Georgia, Russia held a military exercise in July 2008 named Kavkaz 2008 in the North Caucasus Military District for several weeks, leaving troops in place near the border

after the exercise had concluded. Russia had previously increased the number of peacekeepers in Abkhazia in May, along with the deployment of railroad troops and an airborne battalion in June. This months-long, gradual increase of assets created a new normal in the region, but it should have been understood by intelligence analysts and strategic leaders as moving from a near crisis to a full crisis through the heightened probability of military force. Thus, the framework of near crisis avoids the twin issues of repeated warnings desensitizing policymakers or analysts falling prey to conditioning by focusing on the pre-crisis space as a distinct entity, where it is understood a full crisis has not yet happened, but an adversary’s escalatory actions may be leading to one.

A second overall lesson for analysts and policymakers is that understanding the perceptions of threat and time pressure on both sides is of vital importance. For NATO analysts, the lack of a timeline for Georgia’s eventual admission to NATO made it difficult to understand the urgency behind Russia’s moves. The Bush administration, along with NATO, seemed more focused on preventing Georgian provocations than deterring what should have been understood as a highly likely, with or without pretext, Russian annexation of Georgian territory. As Fiona Hill argues, NATO leadership routinely ignored Putin’s declaration that any indication, even without a formal Membership Action Plan, of Georgian membership in NATO was a redline (Draper, 2022). Obviously, denying Russia the ability to misuse the information space by avoiding provocative actions was important (as it was again important in Ukraine in 2022). However, this mindset displayed a one-sided bias of viewing crisis prevention and management as simply restraining Georgia and President Saakashvili, while ignoring the months of Russian actions that demonstrated the underlying nature of the time pressures and

perceived threat on the side of Russia. Like full crises, near crises can come in a “one-sided” form, when only one party perceives this situation (Hewitt & Wilkenfeld, 1999). Remaining attuned to this possibility could provide analysts and policymakers with advanced warning about the dangers of escalation they might still face.

A near crisis lens would have offered analysts a more well-developed view of Russian actions. Specifically, the focus in the first two layers on non-military aspects of emergent near crises and full crises would have helped correct an analytical bias towards military indicators such as troop movements and logistics build ups. Instead, analysts using a near crisis lens would have focused on Russian political and diplomatic actions that demonstrated their sense of time pressure and perception of threat. After the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Russia increased the number of Russian passports issued to South Ossetians and

Abkhazians, while Putin recognized businesses, leaders, and government documentation in the breakaway regions and promised them support. Thus, the myopic focus of military analysts and policymakers on the signals of possible military action of the full crisis space can cause them to miss the less proximate, but unresolved drivers of the near crisis space. It is also possible, as in the Georgia case study, that as military indicators return to normal after a full crisis is avoided, policymakers may believe that the near crisis has become a Stand-Alone Near Crisis. However, without resolution of the underlying perceptions of threat and time pressure, the near crisis remains and still holds the potential for a future, full crisis. A focus on diplomatic, economic, legal, or social indicators of the near crisis space can help prevent these issues.



Norwegian Black Brant Missile Launch 1995 (SANICB)

While the Russia-Georgia case of 2008 is classified as a Preceding Near Crisis, since it ultimately tipped into full crisis and escalated to war within six months of the first emergence of the near crisis, the second case discussed here is a Stand-Alone Near Crisis, because it ended without tipping into full crisis. While the Norwegian Black Brant missile case is little known, it is worth studying closely because of the potentially catastrophic consequences if it had. And given the intensifying dangers of nuclear conflict since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a better understanding of why this particular near crisis emerged and quickly terminated peacefully will help NATO manage the pre-crisis space more effectively and prevent crisis.

The Black Brant missile case is a one-sided near crisis; while Russian political and military leaders were on high alert for just under thirty minutes as they faced a potentially severe threat to basic values and limited time to respond, other key actors in the case – the Norwegians and the Americans – were unaware of the brewing near crisis until after it was over. It began in a flash on the morning of 25 January 1995, when Russian air defense radars linked to its Military Attack Warning System (MAWS) picked up the signature of an unidentified missile, seconds after it was launched from what appeared to be the Norwegian Sea. As watch officers scrambled to identify the type of missile, its trajectory, and likely target, they observed that it was a four-stage rocket roughly the size of the Trident II missile carried by American nuclear ballistic missile submarines that routinely patrolled the Norwegian and Barents Seas. In the first few minutes it was impossible to pinpoint the launch site or target, but the watch officers did determine that the missile was rising through a vector that was the most likely flight path for the opening salvo in a surprise attack that could

put enemy warheads on Russia's key strategic targets in ten minutes or less. With this information in hand, the MAWS operations center issued a missile threat warning, and for the first time in history, including the Cold War, the Russian General Staff activated the nuclear briefcases controlled by the Russian President, the Defense Minister, and the Chief of the General Staff. These officials watched incoming information that might tell them whether or not this event presented the real prospects of military attack, and they discussed whether to launch an antimissile interceptor against the still unidentified rocket (Pry, 1999).

The near crisis ended just minutes later, when analysts informed President Boris Yeltsin that they determined the missile posed no threat to Russia. In fact, the missile – the Black Brant XII – was on a Norwegian research mission to gather data on the Earth's magnetic field.

Norwegian Black Brant Missile Launch 1995: Lessons for Policymakers

As international security scholars have long recognized, uncertainty can lead to unnecessary disaster when leaders face potential threats without the kind of information that can help them distinguish between the benign and deadly intentions of other states (Jervis 1976; Yarhi-Milo, 2013). In the Black Brant case, the Norwegian government had recognized the importance of transparency, so it notified the Russian embassy in Oslo and the Foreign Ministry in Moscow weeks before the scientific launch. It also issued a safety notice to airmen and mariners who might be in the launch zone during the designated time window. The Norwegian's notification, however, never reached the Russian Defense Ministry. If it had, the near crisis would probably not have emerged in the first place, as Russian personnel manning the attack warning system would have recognized that the missile did not pose a threat

to any of their country's basic values. But in the face of uncertainty and ambiguous information, with the minutes ticking by as the missile traveled along its ballistic trajectory, Russia's political and military leadership would rely on preexisting cognitive frameworks, biases, and expectations to determine the likelihood that this was a Western attack.

What made the uncertainty of this near crisis so dangerous was Russian military sensitivities to the continuing, rapid decline of Russian power relative to the United States and its NATO allies in the mid-1990s. As one former CIA Russia analyst has noted, the risk of escalation to full crisis and potential war was magnified by Russian perceptions of vulnerability and a fear of foreign aggression, which was particularly acute within upper echelons of the Russian military (Pry, 1999, p. 234). A year before the missile launch Poland had joined NATO's new Partnership for Peace program, which was treated as a pathway to ultimate membership. This meant that NATO territory would soon expand to the border of Russia's Kaliningrad territory. Just two months before the missile launch, President Yeltsin delivered an angry speech during the December 1994 summit meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, accusing the United States of a "domineering" ploy to "split the continent again (National Security Archive, 2021)." In the meantime, in December 1994 and January 1995, the Russian army's war to subdue the breakaway province of Chechnya had turned into a disastrous, high casualty operation that put its incompetence on full display, while stoking an internal leadership crisis and the brutal destruction of the region's capital city of Grozny.

To help explain why this near crisis did not tip into full crisis and war, despite Russian perceptions of vulnerability and fear, we should once again consider

the role of information. Specifically, how the extent of information available to senior leaders about the strategic situation helped keep the escalation risk in check and did not shorten the decision-making time frame. As Russian leaders were grappling with the uncertainty problem as the Norwegian missile raced upward, they had one vital piece of information which told them they were not witnessing the opening shot in a large-scale American/NATO attack. Despite the severe budgetary constraints the Russian government was suffering in the mid-1990s, it had maintained a fleet of reliable early warning satellites that maintained constant watch over missile silos in North America, and on the morning of 25 January 1995, the Russian President and the Chief of the General Staff knew that the United States was not preparing for a wider missile attack against their country (Forden et al., 2000). The next day President Yeltsin himself explained during a press conference that this information allowed him to refrain from making quick and worst-case assumptions that might lead to a preemptive strike with Russian missiles. This information helped ease the sense of time pressure that might spark dangerous escalatory action and allowed Russian leaders to focus on whether to order a more limited antimissile launch against the rocket over the Norwegian Sea. A Russian antiballistic missile launch alone, whether successful or not, would have stoked a major full crisis between Russia and NATO, but before any such decision was made, the Russian attack warning system delivered the next vital piece of information Russian leaders needed to step back from this near crisis, when it confirmed that the missile was not heading for Russian territory (Pry, 1999, p. 229).

How to Operationalize the Near Crisis Framework

The case studies and lessons learned above reveal that the pre-crisis space is critical. Retrodiction reinforces the value of understanding enough about near crises to derive the benefits of early warning and the possibility of escalation, and to assess the risks that a particular near crisis will escalate to full crisis and war or de-escalate without upsetting the status quo. The next logical steps are to operationalize this information and to prepare strategic leaders and operational-level commanders to recognize them. Building a dashboard of “near crisis zones” in the geostrategic environment will allow policy makers and political risk analysts to monitor, over the long-term, potential near crises and build out de-escalation courses of action as indicators of a near crisis flip on or off.

It might be common to consider Chinese military escalation in the South China Sea or East China Sea as today’s highest potential near-crisis zone. The South China Sea and East China Sea easily fall into the two layers of a near crisis, and analysts regularly monitor this environment. This is a known “near crisis zone.” There are, however, other geostrategic areas of the world that have the potential, for great powers in particular, to come into conflict over a perceived threat to their values. The escalatory process could ignite when there is an action, policy- statement, new or emergent technology, or signal that shortens the response time of another actor in that near crisis zone, and when the zone has the potential for perceived threats to basic values and the use of military force, given either militarization of the region or the presence of actors with military capability.

The next few paragraphs seek to operationalize the layers of a near crisis framework, with the intent to identify “near crisis zones” not currently considered

short-term hotspots, and then identify a list of events that could propel the zone into a near crisis. By determining zones and events, analysts can then monitor changes in these variables that serve as early warning of a near crisis, and to build out de-escalation courses of action according to the situation.

1) Perceived threat to basic values. Analysts should identify geostrategic regions where great powers perceive a threat to their basic values both at home and abroad, in both the short and long run. For example, while the notion of “Arctic exceptionalism” may have previously understood the Arctic to be immune from conflict, the Arctic now has three great powers, and several smaller partner states, pursuing national interests in the region (Tallis, 2020). Russia is the largest Arctic littoral state, and the Arctic is essential to Russian economic and military survival: it is responsible for nearly 20 percent of Russia’s GDP, including 75 to 95 percent of its proven oil and natural gas reserves, and President Putin seeks to make the Arctic the “Suez Canal” of the north, given the potential for new trans-Arctic shipping routes that cut shipping times by approximately two weeks (Conley, et al., 2020, p. 9). To secure these resources, Russia often imposes limits on ships transiting Arctic passageways, even though these restrictions run counter to international maritime law. Russia has also increased its military presence in the region by creating a new strategic command for the Arctic under the Northern Fleet, and it has built out strategic nuclear submarine capabilities and conventional forces to protect its interests.

Meanwhile, in 2013 China became a permanent observer in the Arctic Council and declared itself a near-Arctic state. While Russia asserts its own sovereignty over transit routes across the Arctic, China describes the Arctic as having “undetermined sovereignty (Conley et al., p. 18).” The Arctic is of particular value to China as

it looks to secure new energy resources and fisheries—China’s growing food security concerns can be offset with the potential of protein from Arctic fisheries.

The United States in 2019 published its first Department of Defense Arctic strategy, acknowledging a shifting balance of power in the Arctic with this Russian and Chinese presence (Department of the Army, 2021). Not as reliant as China on the potential economy of the Arctic, or as reliant as Russia on the military advantages of the Arctic, the United States is concerned with the Arctic given its status as one of the five Arctic-littoral states, and its NATO partners Norway, Denmark, and Canada making up three of the other littoral states. The Arctic represents an opportunity for military and economic gain for states that operate there, and it represents the future of international law and norms regarding sovereignty. Therefore, a relative power advantage of any one of the three great powers in the Arctic represents a threat to basic values of the other states.

2) Limited Time to Respond. After determining near crisis zones, analysts should identify actions, public statements, new and emergent technology, and signals from adversaries, allies, neutrals, and non-state actors that could change the status quo in the environment and provoke escalation toward near crisis by shortening the time to respond. Per the Arctic case study, there are three (among likely more) examples of events that could increase time pressures on key actors in the Arctic to respond to protect their national interests.

First, in June 2021, China, the United States, Russia, the EU and five other countries signed the Agreement to Prevent the Unregulated High Seas Fisheries, an agreement that prevents commercial fishing in the Arctic Ocean for 16 years, until 2037, to support more time for scientific research (European Commission, 2021). As 2037 draws near, analysts should look for indicators of

great powers in the Arctic attempting to gain a relative power advantage related to fishing in particular, one of China’s prime national interests in the Arctic.

Second, since 2001, Russia has lodged submissions with the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), proposing to extend its continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean which would increase its exclusive economic zone in the region (Hossain, 2021). In 2015 and again in 2021, Russia submitted further requests to the UNCLCS. The UN has not made a determination at this time, but indicators that the UN will decide in favor of or against the Russian submissions could change the status quo in the region and lead to state reactions that produce a near crisis situation as others perceive limited time to protect their own interests in response.

Third, the changing climate will affect the three primary trans-Arctic shipping routes—the Northwest Passage, the Northern Sea Route, and Transpolar Sea Route. In 2019 there were only 37 ships that transited the Northern Sea Route (compared with 71 in a single day for the Suez Canal). If the number of ships increases to match the traffic through the Suez Canal, this will increase the potential for near crises in the Arctic by intensifying national interests in the region, which in turn will increase the potential for threats to those interests that could be put at risk by the behavior of the other key actors (Burke, 2020).

These three scenarios are just a few examples of the types of events that analysts can focus on to observe potentially dangerous changes in the status quo that might in turn stimulate state actions, statements, or other signals that could be an indicator that the near crisis zone is getting “hotter.” As a near crisis zone becomes hot, analysts can inform policy makers of the need to develop courses of action to respond.

3) Potential for use of military force. Once near crisis zones are identified, analysts should determine the potential for military force in the zone. Again per the Arctic case study, Russia is militarizing the Arctic, the United States is increasing its strategic emphasis on the Arctic, and China is beginning to increase its Arctic military presence, particularly in the context of joint Sino-Russian exercises that began in 2018 (Conley et al., 2020). As a result, each of these actors has the potential to use military force in the region. Armed with the framework offered by the Near Crisis Project, analysts should be following doctrinal military intelligence assessments of state behavior at this time, knowing that this particular geographic area has the potential to create near crisis conditions that could ultimately escalate toward full crisis.

The above example from the Arctic attempts to operationalize how analysts can use research from the near crisis project to inform policy makers in the fu-

ture. By understanding the variables that make up near crises, analysts can then predict near crisis zones and begin to identify potential indicators of changes in the status quo within each of these zones that present the risk of escalation through each of the layers toward near and full crisis. In turn, analysts will be better prepared to make recommendations for de-escalation based on an understanding of perceived threats to vital interests and perceptions of time pressures faced by each of the key actors operating in the near crisis zone. While this is helpful for near-term hotspots, the near crisis project can also inform our understanding of long-term (2050 and beyond) zones of concern. Identifying long-term near crisis zones may help U.S. policymakers who can allocate minimal resources early on to set the conditions for defusing potential near crises in the future.



Unpacking the Full Pre-Crisis Space: High Risk Episodes (HREs) and Bolt-from-the-Blue (Bolt)

In conducting research on NICBs, our research team discovered two additional paths to full-blown crisis. At the moment, though, there is no data or policy about these alternative paths. Our next step is to pursue funding to collect, manage, and evaluate data on what we term *High Risk Episodes (HREs)* and *Bolt-from-the-Blue (Bolt)* cases to better understand the entire pre-crisis space. Besides near crises, we posit that some crises begin as a different form of lower-level conflict, a Heightened Risk Episode (HRE). We define an HRE as a situation in which leaders perceive a threat to basic values and a heightened probability of military hostilities, but do not (yet) perceive finite time to respond to the threat. Unlike NICBs, there is often time for conflict resolution and management strategies to create opportunities for de-escalation. NICBs, in contrast, are not stable events - they declare themselves very quickly. For example, the US and China have clashed over the PRC's disputed artificial islands in the South China Sea, with the US military flying over and sailing in what China considers its territorial waters. This dispute has the potential for escalation, but to this point has been managed, despite condemnations from both sides. Thus, HREs and NICBs are not a single set of pre-crisis, but are likely to have different escalation dynamics and require different conflict management strategies and tools.

There is a third path to crisis, where actors skip the NICB and HRE stages completely, escalating directly from challenge to full-blown crisis – a so-called “Bolt-from-the-Blue” international crisis (Bolt crises). Bolt crises are of great concern. Unlike NICBs and HREs, which are often gradual and even expected, Bolt crises are sudden and unforeseen.

In order to understand the complete escalation process to crisis and even war, as well as the best management strategies, it is essential for us to explain why some challenges escalate more slowly, with an initial NICB or HRE, while others escalate rapidly and unexpectedly to the crisis stage. Furthermore, we need to know whether these Bolt crises are more likely to escalate to war than more slowly escalating NICB and HRE crises, as well as whether they require different strategies to manage and de-escalate them. Bolt crises are especially dangerous in a world of peer states, violent non-state actors, rising military powers and rogue states with power projection and WMD capabilities because they present the risk of rapid escalation to high intensity conflict.

Final Thoughts

As noted above, the entering condition for a near crisis or full crisis is perceived threat, which means that the NATO staff and its member states must be braced to face what the Secretary General's Reflection Group noted will be a serious challenge in the years to come: "divergent threat perceptions." The challenge of dealing with the proliferation of threats highlighted by NATO 2030 and the 2022 Strategic Concept is made even more complex by the sheer geographic and political scale of the alliance. Crisis prevention and management, as the Reflection Group acknowledged bluntly, will be "harder in the coming decade than it was in previous eras, not least because of the way different Allies prioritize multiple threats." As a more granular understanding of international crises will point out in turn, not only will different member states perceive the severity of each threat differently, but they will also disagree on whether particular threats come with time pressures, and then disagree over the likelihood that the use of military force could erupt out of any near crisis situation. This multi-layer set of potential disagreements will arise even before discussion begins on whether NATO should take action and of what kind. The degree of unity within NATO in reaction to large-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine must be considered an exception to the internal political disputes that will normally divide NATO when it comes to other types of near crisis/crisis scenarios the alliance might face.

There is no easy fix to this multi-layer challenge, this fact merely emphasizes that several of the Reflection Group's suggestions should be taken seriously as NATO puts the new Strategic Concept into practice. NATO must certainly reinforce a "culture of proactive political consultations" – these consultations must focus not only on threat, but the question of time pressures and the likelihood of military force as well. If NATO creates an office of net assessment to help generate a common operating picture within the staff and among member states, it would benefit from thinking through threats using the layers that define escalation from pre-crisis to crisis to war, and future wargaming that included near crisis as well as full crisis scenarios would better prepare NATO leaders to collaborate and act when necessary.

Endnotes

- 1 To be clear about NATO's priorities, its three Core Tasks are: 1. Deterrence and Defence; Crisis Prevention and Management; and Cooperative Security (*NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29, June 2022).
- 2 See also the Correlates of War Project for related concept formation such as the militarized interstate dispute, accessible at <https://correlatesofwar.org/>.
- 3 More information on this project can be found on the Minerva Research Initiative website at <https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Funded-Projects/Article/2040927/power-projection-deterrence-strategies-and-escalation-dynamics/>
- 4 Papers prepared to date by the Near Crisis Minerva team are available on request: "Defense Policy Implications of Near Crisis Findings"; "The Dynamics of Near Crises: What Happens and Why Does It Matter?"; "Near Crises and Escalation Processes in World Politics: A Systemist Exposition"; An Exploration of Terrorist and Insurgent Organization Participation in Near Crises"; Predicting Tipping Points in International Crises: Surmountable and Insurmountable Challenges"; "Israel's Decision to Escalate: From Near Crisis to the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War"
- 5 The notation in Figure 2, in brief, is as follows: green oval – starting point (initial variable); blue parallelogram – point of confluence (convergent variable); purple hexagon – pathways converge and diverge in turn (nodal variable); and red octagon – endpoint (terminal variable). Lower and upper case lettering in a diagram, respectively, distinguishes the micro from macro levels; in Figure 1, those correspond to individual actors and interactions among them. For a more detailed presentation of this "systemist" notation, see Patrick James, *Systemist International Relations* (San Diego: Cognella, 2022).

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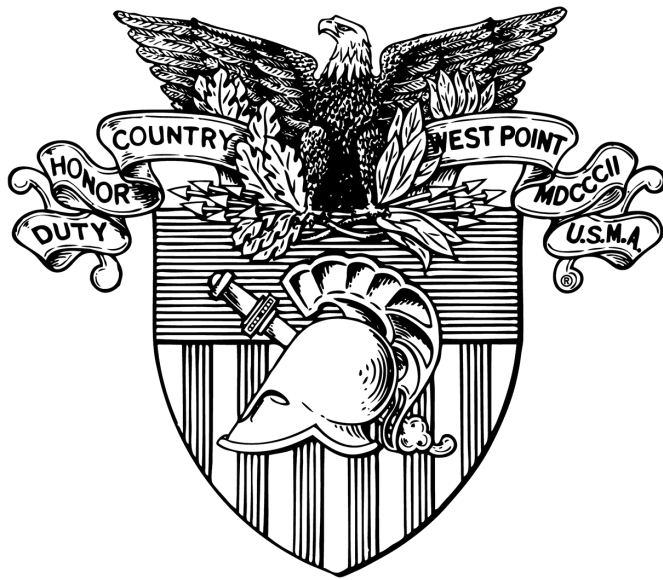
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