

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS, DETERRENCE AND THE
ESCALATION OF ARMED CONFLICTS IN GLOBAL
POLITICS: GATEWAY-TO-POWER SHIFT FROM THE
WEST TO THE EAST AND THE THIRD WORLD WAR IN
THE 21ST CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT: The emergence of nuclear weapons has fundamentally reshaped global politics, influencing power dynamics, security paradigms, and conflict behaviours in the 21st century. This study explores the relationship of nuclear weapons, deterrence theory, and the escalation of armed conflicts within contemporary global politics. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including deterrence theory, balance of power theory, and conflict alleviation theory, the research investigates the mechanisms of nuclear deterrence, factors contributing to conflict escalation, and potential implications of a third-world war - being an eclectic approach that covers the major area. Case studies such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and various regional conflicts are analysed to underscore the challenges and risks posed by nuclear arsenals in international security. Utilising a qualitative approach with secondary data from existing literature and historical analyses, the study reveals that while nuclear deterrence can prevent direct military confrontations, the presence of nuclear weapons complicates global stability, necessitating robust crisis management and diplomatic interventions. The findings underscore the importance of effective arms control and disarmament efforts to mitigate nuclear risks. Accordingly, policymakers are urged to prioritise diplomatic initiatives, enhance crisis management strategies, renew commitments to arms control agreements, foster international cooperation, and address underlying socio-economic factors driving conflict dynamics.

Keywords: Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, Escalation of Armed Conflict, Global Politics, Third World War

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the nuclear age marks a crucial moment in human history. It introduced capabilities and complexities that have significantly influenced global politics (Futter & Zala, 2021). The creation of the first atomic bombs during World War II transformed international affairs, shifting power, security, and conflict dynamics on a global scale (Sterger & James, 2019). Since then, nuclear arsenals have become a key feature of the international system, affecting countries across borders and ideologies (Kristensen, 2015).

The concern of this study is that the proliferation of nuclear weapons has led to heightened tensions and altered strategic calculations for nations worldwide. This proliferation influences

the behaviour of states and reshapes international relations in our increasingly interconnected world (Wan & Solingen, 2023). Understanding the impact of nuclear weapons on global security is essential, especially in the context of contemporary politics. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How effective are nuclear deterrence strategies employed by major powers?
2. What factors contribute to the escalation of armed conflicts in regions with nuclear capabilities?
3. What are the implications of a potential third world war involving nuclear weapons?

The paper's objectives read thus:

1. To analyse the mechanisms and effectiveness of nuclear deterrence strategies used by major powers in various geopolitical contexts.
2. To explore the factors contributing to the escalation of armed conflicts where nuclear capabilities intersect with political tensions, ideological rivalries, and territorial disputes.
3. To assess the plausibility and implications of a potential third world war in contemporary global politics, considering the role of nuclear weapons as both deterrents and catalysts for conflict escalation.

Nuclear weapons have significantly reshaped global politics, introducing unique challenges and risks. These include maintaining strategic stability and preventing catastrophic conflict. Existing research often focuses on historical precedents or specific regional conflicts, leaving a gap in understanding the broader implications of nuclear deterrence and conflict escalation in the 21st century. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of nuclear deterrence strategies, conflict escalation factors, and the potential for a third world war. It contributes to knowledge by offering insights and implications for policymakers and stakeholders invested in international security and stability, amidst the power shift from the West to the East and the looming threat of a third world war in the 21st century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a comprehensive review of the literature on nuclear weapon deterrence and the escalation of armed conflict in global politics. It covers the conceptual framework, defining nuclear deterrence's role in international relations, an empirical review examining historical examples, and a theoretical exploration of diverse perspectives on nuclear politics and conflict escalation.

Conceptual framework

This study on the effects of nuclear weapons, deterrence, and the escalation of armed conflicts in global politics is grounded in several key concepts: Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), Second-Strike Capability, Nuclear Proliferation, and Regional Dynamics. This conceptual framework provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the complex interplay between nuclear deterrence, conflict escalation, and global security dynamics.

Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD)

Mutual assured destruction (MAD) is a principle of nuclear deterrence based on the understanding that if two or more nuclear-armed adversaries were to engage in a nuclear conflict, the result would be catastrophic for all parties involved (Sokolski, 2004; Anderson, 2013). The concept posits that because the consequences of a nuclear exchange would be so devastating, with both sides suffering immense destruction and loss of life, neither side would initiate a nuclear attack for fear of inevitable retaliation (Ludvik, 2016; Mälksoo, 2020). In essence, MAD serves as a deterrent against nuclear aggression by making it clear to potential adversaries that any nuclear attack would lead to their own destruction. This creates a state of strategic stability, as neither side has an incentive to launch a first strike, knowing that they would face annihilation in response (Kang & Kugler, 2022; Khuhro, et al, 2023). MAD played a significant role during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, where both superpowers possessed massive nuclear arsenals capable of causing widespread devastation (Kroenig, 2013; Schubert, 2021). The fear of MAD helped prevent direct military confrontation between the two nuclear giants, leading to a policy of deterrence through nuclear parity (Mälksoo, 2020)).

Second-Strike Capability

Second-strike capability refers to a nation's ability to retaliate with a nuclear strike after absorbing an initial attack. This ensures that even if a country is targeted with a nuclear assault, it still possesses enough surviving nuclear weapons and infrastructure to deliver a devastating counterattack (Willis, 2023). This capability serves as a crucial component of nuclear deterrence by dissuading potential aggressors from initiating a nuclear strike, as they know they will face severe retaliation, regardless of their initial attack's success (Buzan, n d). By maintaining a robust second-strike capability, nations create a scenario where both parties suffer unacceptable consequences in the event of a nuclear conflict, thereby enhancing deterrence and promoting strategic stability (Colby, 2013).

Nuclear Proliferation

Nuclear proliferation refers to the spread of nuclear weapons capabilities to additional states beyond the original nuclear powers. This expansion increases the number of actors with nuclear capabilities, altering deterrence dynamics and potentially heightening the risk of conflict (Anderson, 2013; Kristensen, 2015). As more countries acquire nuclear weapons or the ability to produce them, the global nuclear space becomes more difficult and unpredictable. Proliferation can lead to regional arms races, as neighbouring states seek to counterbalance perceived threats, thereby increasing tensions and the likelihood of conflict (Salami & Kpae, 2022). Additionally, the proliferation of nuclear weapons introduces new challenges for non-proliferation efforts, as controlling the spread of nuclear technology and materials has become increasingly difficult (Anderson, 2013; Chinyere, 2020).

Regional Dynamics

Regional dynamics refer to the delicate relationship between local factors, such as historical tensions, territorial disputes, security dilemmas, and nuclear capabilities within specific

geographic regions (Kim, 2015; Jebb, 2023). These factors influence deterrence strategies and conflict dynamics, shaping the stability and risk of escalation in regional conflicts involving nuclear-armed states. Understanding regional dynamics is crucial for assessing the potential for conflict and the effectiveness of deterrence measures in maintaining peace and security within a particular area (Beckley, 2018; Winkler, 2023). By examining how historical rivalries, unresolved territorial disputes, and security concerns interact with the presence of nuclear weapons, policymakers and analysts can better anticipate potential flashpoints and develop strategies to mitigate the risk of nuclear escalation in regional conflicts (Khan, 2020; Bloor, 2022).

Theoretical framework

In this section, we employ three key theoretical perspectives on nuclear deterrence and its implications for the risk of global conflict: deterrence theory, balance of power theory, and conflict escalation theory. Each approach is unique in its attempt to explain nuclear deterrence and its role in shaping international relations and conflict dynamics.

Deterrence theory

Deterrence theory, primarily developed by scholars such as Thomas Schelling and Bernard Brodie, emerged during the Cold War period, with significant contributions from the 1950s onwards. Deterrence theory posits that the threat of retaliation with nuclear weapons can prevent adversaries from initiating hostile actions (Kang & Kugler, 2022; Khuhro, et al, 2023). It rests on the principle of mutual assured destruction (MAD), wherein the prospect of catastrophic consequences acts as a powerful deterrent against aggression (Anderson, 2013). According to deterrence theory, the credibility and ability to inflict unacceptable damage on an adversary serve as the foundation of effective deterrence. States seek to maintain a robust nuclear arsenal and communicate their willingness to use it in defence of vital interests, thereby deterring potential adversaries from challenging their security. Deterrence theory emphasizes the importance of clear communication, credible threats, and a demonstrated resolve to uphold deterrence commitments in preventing conflict escalation (Sweijts et al, 2016).

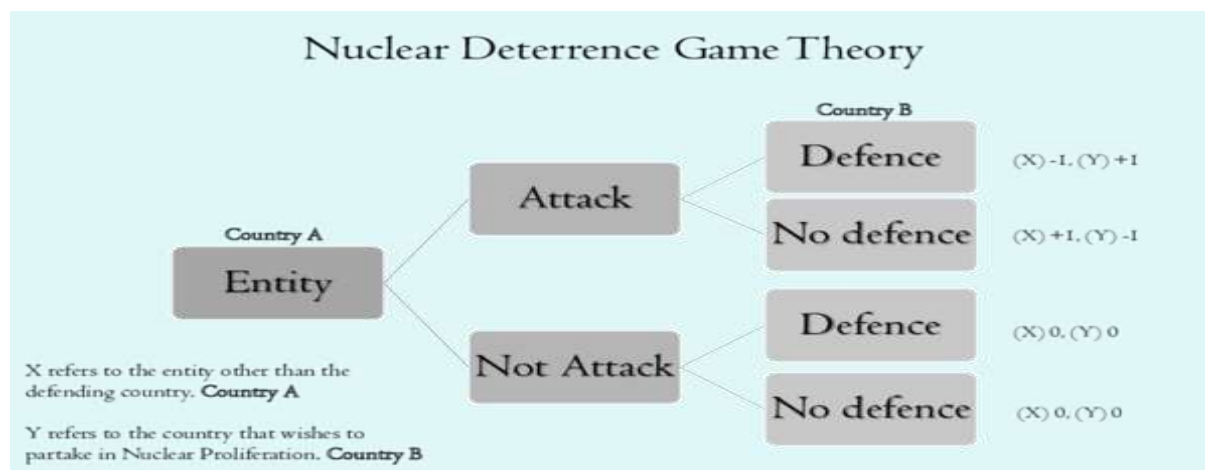


Figure showing the model for Deterrence Game Theory. Source: Hounib, 2024.

Balance of Power Theory

The concept of balance of power has roots in ancient political philosophy, but modern formulations were developed by scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. The modern formulation of the balance of power theory gained prominence in the 20th century, with significant contributions from the mid-20th century onwards (Giri, 2016). The balance of power theory suggests that stability in international relations is maintained when power is distributed among states in a manner that prevents any single actor from dominating others (Yang, 2013). In the context of nuclear weapons, the possession of nuclear capabilities by multiple states contributes to a balance of power, as each actor seeks to deter potential aggression and maintain its security against rivals (Bloor, 2022). The presence of nuclear weapons can serve as a stabilizing force by creating a state of mutually assured destruction, wherein the risk of catastrophic consequences deters states from engaging in aggressive actions that could upset the balance of power (Kroenig, 2013; Arbatov, 2021). However, the balance of power theory also raises concerns about the risk of arms races and instability if power becomes concentrated in the hands of a few dominant actors.

Conflict Escalation Theory

Conflict escalation theory has been developed by various scholars in the fields of international relations, conflict studies, and psychology. The key contributors included Morton Deutsch, Louis Kriesberg, and Johan Galtung. Conflict escalation theory has evolved over time, with significant contributions made throughout the 20th and 21st centuries as scholars have sought to understand the dynamics of conflict escalation (Sweijs, Usanov, & Rutten, 2016). Conflict escalation theory explores how conflicts, including those involving nuclear-armed states, can escalate from low-intensity disputes to full-scale warfare. In the context of nuclear weapons, escalation dynamics are influenced by factors such as the perceived credibility of nuclear threats, the presence of crisis stability mechanisms, and the role of third-party actors (Bösch, 2017). Conflict escalation theory emphasizes the importance of managing crises effectively to prevent unintended escalation to nuclear conflict. This includes efforts to maintain clear lines of communication, establish crisis management protocols, and utilize diplomatic channels to de-escalate tensions (Sweijs, Usanov, & Rutten, 2016). Understanding the mechanisms of conflict escalation is crucial for assessing the risks and implications of nuclear deterrence strategies in international relations.

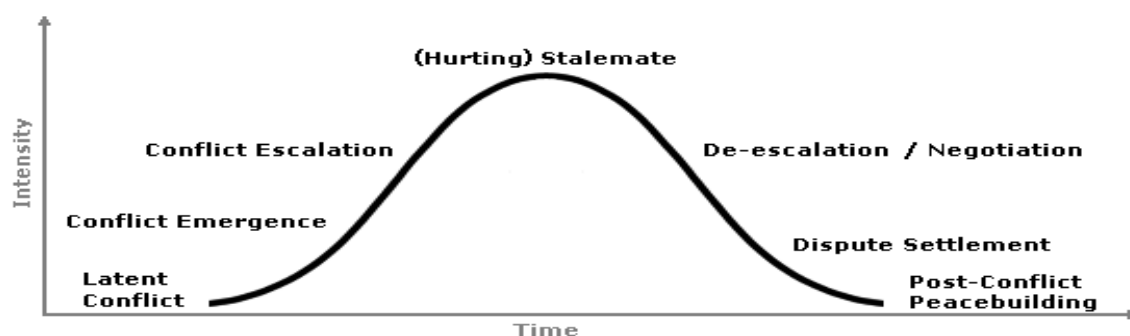


Figure 2 shows the relationship between conflict escalation and de-escalation. Source: Bösch, 2017.

Empirical Review

The crisis arose from the discovery of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, intensifying Cold War tensions. The threat of nuclear escalation shaped decision-making, emphasizing the need to avoid triggering a nuclear conflict (James, 2021). Backchannel communications and negotiations, coupled with a naval blockade, led to a peaceful resolution, highlighting the importance of effective crisis management (Idham, 2022). The possession of nuclear weapons influenced the dynamics of each conflict by introducing the concept of deterrence. The fear of facing devastating retaliation in a nuclear exchange influences decision-making and behaviour, shaping the strategies and actions of the parties involved (Wan & Solingen, 2017; Johnson, 2023). During these conflicts, crisis stability mechanisms were critical in preventing unintended escalation to nuclear war. These mechanisms included protocols for communication and crisis management aimed at reducing the risk of misunderstandings or miscalculations that could lead to nuclear conflict. Understanding the effectiveness of these mechanisms provides insights into the dynamics of nuclear deterrence and conflict management (Sweijts et al, 2016). This involves examining how superpower rivalry, such as between the United States and the Soviet Union, manifested in proxy conflicts worldwide (Veebel, 2021). These conflicts, such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars, were arenas for ideological and strategic competition. This entails evaluating how the presence of nuclear weapons affects the intensity and duration of proxy conflicts (Kim, 2014; Lee, 2023). The awareness of nuclear capabilities added complexity, as both sides aimed to avoid actions that could lead to direct nuclear confrontation (Sadiq & Alli, 2022; David & Bennett, 2022). This involves analysing measures taken to manage escalation and prevent direct nuclear conflict during proxy conflicts. Diplomatic initiatives, crisis management strategies, and communication channels were utilised to mitigate the risk of unintended nuclear war (Kuszevska-Bohnert, 2017; Ogunoiki, 2018). Understanding these efforts sheds light on nuclear deterrence and crisis management dynamics. Scholars have examined the challenges posed by nuclear proliferation and its impact on regional stability, considering factors such as the spread of nuclear technology and increased tensions (Kang & Kugler, 2022; Sadiq & Alli, 2022). Zarkachi (2022) assessed the effectiveness of global initiatives to address proliferation and prevent conflict escalation, including non-proliferation treaties and diplomatic negotiations (Schubert, 2021; Johnson, 2023). Arbatov (2021) analysed strategies employed in contemporary regional nuclear crises, such as diplomatic negotiations and crisis communication, to de-escalate tensions and prevent nuclear conflict outbreaks (Kuszevska-Bohnert, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on the analysis of secondary data through case studies from previous research. The research design is structured into several key sections: introduction, literature review with conceptual and theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, presentation of findings, discussion of findings, and conclusion covering implications and recommendations.

This qualitative research design focuses on the effects of nuclear weapons, deterrence, and conflict escalation on global politics, with an emphasis on historical and contemporary case studies. The study utilizes secondary data from historical documents, academic literature, and

reports from international organizations. Data analysis techniques include thematic analysis, content analysis. The findings will be presented through narrative descriptions, followed by a comprehensive discussion of their implications. The study concludes with practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to maintain international security and stability in the 21st century.

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

Cuban Missile Crisis: The threat of nuclear escalation effectively prevented direct military conflict through deterrence, supported by successful crisis management strategies like backchannel communications, negotiations, and a naval blockade (Rajagopalan, 2000; James, 2021; Idham, 2022).

Cold War Era: The policy of mutual assured destruction (MAD) maintained strategic stability by ensuring that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union initiated a nuclear attack due to the fear of devastating retaliation (Kang & Kugler, 2022; Khuhro et al., 2023).

Superpower Rivalries and Proxy Conflicts: In conflicts such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the presence of nuclear weapons led both sides to avoid actions that could result in direct nuclear confrontation, showing how nuclear capabilities add complexity to conflict dynamics (Sadiq & Alli, 2022; David & Bennett, 2022).

Regional Dynamics: Historical tensions, territorial disputes, and security dilemmas significantly influence conflict escalation. The proliferation of nuclear weapons can lead to regional arms races, increasing tensions and the likelihood of conflict (Kim, 2015; Jebb, 2023).

Catastrophic Consequences: The potential for regional conflicts to escalate into a global nuclear war underscores the need for effective crisis management and diplomatic efforts to prevent such outcomes (Kang & Kugler, 2022; Sadiq & Alli, 2022).

Global Initiatives: Non-proliferation treaties, diplomatic negotiations, and confidence-building measures are crucial in mitigating the risks associated with nuclear weapons and preventing conflict escalation (Schubert, 2021; Johnson, 2023).

Historical Lessons: The Cuban Missile Crisis and other historical conflicts highlight the importance of proactive measures to manage nuclear tensions and prevent escalation in a nuclear-armed world.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

How effective are nuclear deterrence strategies employed by major powers?

The findings from the Cuban Missile Crisis and other historical conflicts underscore the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence strategies employed by major powers. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the threat of nuclear escalation played a crucial role in shaping decision-making processes and ultimately avoiding a nuclear conflict (James, 2021). The successful resolution of this crisis through backchannel communications, negotiations, and a naval blockade

demonstrates the efficacy of deterrence combined with robust crisis management strategies (Idham et al, 2022).

Moreover, the Cold War era's policy of mutual assured destruction (MAD) between the United States and the Soviet Union significantly contributed to preventing direct military confrontation. The fear of devastating retaliation ensured that neither side initiated a nuclear attack, maintaining strategic stability (Kang & Kugler, 2022; Khuhro et al., 2023). The presence of crisis stability mechanisms, such as clear communication protocols, further enhanced the effectiveness of deterrence strategies by reducing the risk of miscalculations that could lead to nuclear conflict (Sweijts et al., 2016).

What factors contribute to the escalation of armed conflicts in regions with nuclear capabilities?

Several factors contribute to the escalation of armed conflicts in regions with nuclear capabilities, as illustrated by the historical and contemporary case studies. The presence of nuclear weapons introduces a heightened level of complexity to conflicts, influencing the strategies and behaviours of the involved parties. In superpower rivalries and proxy conflicts, such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the awareness of nuclear capabilities led both sides to exercise caution to avoid actions that could result in direct nuclear confrontation (Sadiq & Alli, 2022; David & Bennett, 2022). Regional dynamics, including historical tensions, territorial disputes, and security dilemmas, also play a significant role in conflict escalation. The proliferation of nuclear weapons can lead to regional arms races, increasing tensions and the likelihood of conflict (Kim, 2015; Jebb, 2023). Measures to manage escalation, such as diplomatic initiatives, crisis management strategies, and communication channels, are critical in mitigating the risk of unintended nuclear war and maintaining stability (Kuszewska-Bohnert, 2017; Ogunoiki, 2018).

What are the implications of a potential third world war involving nuclear weapons?

The implications of a potential third world war involving nuclear weapons are catastrophic, with far-reaching consequences for global security and stability. The findings highlight the dangerous nature of regional conflicts, particularly when nuclear capabilities are involved. The potential for regional conflicts to escalate into full-blown global crises underscores the critical need for effective crisis management and diplomatic efforts (Kang & Kugler, 2022; Sadiq & Alli, 2022).

The research also emphasizes the importance of global initiatives aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation and managing regional tensions. Nonproliferation treaties, diplomatic negotiations, and confidence-building measures play crucial roles in mitigating the risks associated with nuclear weapons and preventing conflict escalation (Schubert, 2021; Johnson, 2023). The lessons learned from historical conflicts, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, underscore the need for proactive measures to prevent the escalation of conflicts in a nuclear-armed world.

General, if anything and by way of summary, the findings from the reviewed cases provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence strategies, the factors contributing

to conflict escalation, and the implications of a potential third world war involving nuclear weapons. Effective crisis management, diplomatic initiatives, and strategic communication are essential in maintaining global security and preventing catastrophic outcomes. The research highlights the need for continued efforts to address nuclear proliferation, manage regional tensions, and promote international cooperation to ensure stability in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Nuclear deterrence is crucial in shaping international relations, as demonstrated by the Cuban Missile Crisis. The credible threat of nuclear retaliation significantly influences decision-making during crises, highlighting the importance of avoiding nuclear conflict. The presence of nuclear weapons complicates conflicts, as seen in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, necessitating cautious actions to prevent direct confrontation. Effective crisis management strategies, including diplomatic initiatives and communication channels, are essential in reducing misunderstandings and preventing unintended nuclear wars.

This study shows that nuclear weapons have profoundly reshaped global politics, introducing unique challenges and risks. These range from maintaining strategic stability to preventing catastrophic conflict. The analysis of nuclear deterrence and armed conflict escalation provides valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders invested in international security. This is particularly relevant amidst the shifting power dynamics from the West to the East and the looming threat of a potential third-world war in the 21st century.

In summary, the findings emphasise the importance of deterrence, crisis management, and international cooperation in maintaining global security. Addressing the risks associated with nuclear weapons and preventing conflict escalation are critical for ensuring stability in today's interconnected world. This study contributes to understanding these complex dynamics, offering guidance for making sense of the challenges of nuclear deterrence in contemporary global politics.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers to mitigate the risk of a third-world war in the 21st century:

1. **Prioritize Diplomatic Initiatives.** Given the importance of diplomatic efforts in resolving crises, as evidenced by the Cuban Missile Crisis, it is crucial to foster dialogue, build trust, and seek peaceful resolutions to conflicts.
2. **Invest in Robust Crisis Management Strategies.** The study highlights the need for effective crisis management strategies, including clear communication channels and crisis de-escalation protocols, to prevent misunderstandings and unintended escalations.
3. **Renew Commitment to Arms Control Agreements and Disarmament Efforts.** To address the challenges posed by nuclear proliferation, a renewed commitment to arms control agreements and disarmament efforts is essential to limit the spread of nuclear weapons and reduce global tensions.

4. Foster Dialogue and Cooperation Among Major Powers. The complexity of conflicts involving nuclear weapons underscores the importance of dialogue and cooperation among major powers to address common security challenges and build mutual trust.
5. Address Underlying Causes of Conflict. The study emphasizes the need to tackle the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, and political instability, which can exacerbate tensions and lead to escalation.
6. Support and Strengthen International Institutions. The role of international institutions, such as the United Nations and regional organizations, in facilitating conflict resolution and promoting collective security should be reinforced to ensure effective management of global conflicts.
7. Intensify Efforts to Prevent Nuclear Proliferation. Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and technologies is crucial for maintaining global stability, as highlighted by the challenges identified in the study related to nuclear proliferation.
8. Emphasize Multilateral Cooperation in Addressing Global Challenges. Multilateral cooperation is vital in addressing broader global challenges, including climate change, pandemics, and terrorism, which can contribute to overall security and stability.

Limitations of the Study

This study on nuclear deterrence and conflict escalation has several limitations. The reliance on secondary data from existing literature and case studies means it may not capture recent developments or local perspectives, lacking the immediacy of primary data collection.

The focus on historical conflicts, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and Cold War-era proxy wars, may limit the applicability of lessons to contemporary scenarios given the evolving nature of international relations and technological advancements in nuclear weapons. The findings are also heavily influenced by the geopolitical contexts of the major powers involved, potentially overlooking regional variations, particularly in non-Western or emerging nuclear states.

The absence of primary data, such as interviews with policymakers, restricts the depth of analysis and context-specific insights. Additionally, the study's conclusions are drawn from a limited number of high-profile case studies, which may not fully represent the diversity of nuclear deterrence strategies globally.

Lastly, the reliance on published literature introduces potential biases based on the authors' perspectives, which could skew the interpretation of historical events and theoretical analyses. Acknowledging these limitations puts the study's findings within a precise scope and highlights areas for future research to address gaps and enhance understanding of nuclear deterrence and conflict escalation.

Priority Areas for Further Research

1. Contemporary Case Studies: Study recent conflicts involving nuclear-armed states like North Korea and India-Pakistan for insights into nuclear deterrence and crisis management.

2. Primary Data Collection: Conduct interviews with policymakers and military officials for context-specific insights into nuclear strategy.
3. Technological Advancements: Investigate the impact of cyber warfare, missile defence, and AI on nuclear deterrence and conflict escalation.
4. Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Control: Assess the effectiveness of international treaties and agreements in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.
5. Multilateral Approaches: Explore frameworks for nuclear security and crisis management that emphasize global cooperation and stability.

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