

Rethinking Escalation: A Multi-Stage Model of Asymmetric Conflict in U.S.–Iran Relations

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Abstract:

In the field of International Relations, escalation is conventionally treated as a trajectory toward war. Yet a growing number of contemporary conflicts reveal something different: escalation that persists, sometimes for decades, without ever arriving at a decisive confrontation. The theoretical tools available to explain this phenomenon remain, for the most part, fragmented. They also tend to give insufficient weight to asymmetry.

What this article proposes is a dynamic model of escalation built around asymmetry, one that treats escalation as multi-stage and non-linear rather than sequential. Central to the model is the concept of Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance — the set of indirect and carefully measured strategies through which weaker actors adapt to, regulate, and ultimately sustain escalation on their own terms.

The core argument is that escalation, rather than being a linear path toward war, can function as a persistent and managed form of interaction.

The U.S.–Iran conflict is used throughout as the primary empirical case, precisely because it exemplifies how escalation can remain controlled, continuous, and unresolved over extended periods.

Keywords: International Relations; Escalation; Asymmetry in Escalation; Escalation Dynamics;

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1. Introduction

Escalation occupies a central position in the study of conflict within International Relations (IR). How scholars conceptualize it shapes, in turn, how they make sense of strategic interaction among states. The standard view has long treated escalation as progressive intensification — a process that, left unchecked, leads toward large-scale confrontation or outright war. What contemporary conflict patterns increasingly suggest, however, is that this linear, outcome-oriented reading misses something important. In case after case,

escalation does not behave like a temporary phase. It behaves more like a **persistent condition**, one that unfolds over time without ever culminating in a decisive outcome.

The existing theoretical landscape has produced valuable, if partial, explanations. Jervis (1978, pp. 167–171) showed how misinterpretation and uncertainty feed self-reinforcing action-reaction cycles. Schelling (1966, pp. 3– 9, 124–125), approaching the problem from a strategic angle, conceptualized escalation as communicative: actors manipulate risk and deploy calibrated actions in order to signal resolve. Fearon (1995, pp. 379–390) grounded his account in incomplete information and commitment problems, while Waltz (1979, pp. 105–107) located escalation within the systemic constraints imposed by the distribution of capabilities.

Each of these frameworks captures something real. But they operate through **relatively isolated analytical lenses**, and none of them, taken individually, accounts for the full complexity of escalation as an evolving, relational process. The consequence is that escalation gets conceptualized either as a bounded instrument of strategy or as a transitional phase — not as what it increasingly appears to be: a structured and durable form of interaction in its own right.

This observation gives rise to the central question of the article:

How can the persistence of escalation be explained as a sustained and structured form of interaction, rather than a transitional process toward war or resolution, particularly in contexts where power and strategic capabilities are distributed asymmetrically?

The question carries special weight in the current international environment. A large share of ongoing conflicts are fundamentally asymmetric (Arreguín-Toft, 2005, pp. 17–23), and in such settings escalation obeys no single logic. It does not necessarily converge toward resolution. What it does, instead, is evolve — through

continuous adaptation, differentiated strategies, and iterative exchanges between structurally unequal actors. This calls for an analytical framework that is both more integrated and more dynamic than what the existing literature offers.

The article responds to this need. It puts forward a **dynamic and asymmetric model of escalation** in which the process is conceptualized as multi-stage, non-linear, and structured by the interaction of distinct theoretical mechanisms across time. Existing theories are not treated here as rival explanations. They are integrated within a **sequential and relational framework** in which each escalation phase corresponds to a different analytical logic.

The organizing concept at the heart of the model is **Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance**: the capacity of disadvantaged actors to regulate, redirect, and sustain escalation through adaptive and indirect strategies. Because it cuts across all phases of the model, this concept functions as a **cross-phase mechanism** — it is what explains how escalation can persist in the absence of decisive outcomes.

What this reconceptualization offers, in concrete terms, is a way of addressing a problem that has long troubled the literature: why does escalation persist when full-scale war does not materialize? The U.S.–Iran conflict, where confrontation has endured for years through cycles of controlled hostility rather than decisive resolution, provides the empirical ground on which the model is tested.

2. Escalation in International Relations: A Theoretical Review

Within the study of conflict in IR, escalation retains an outsized analytical importance — particularly where strategic interactions between states are concerned. Yet the way it actually unfolds rarely matches the textbook image of a linear progression toward war. A more defensible reading treats escalation as a complex process, one that is shaped simultaneously by signaling, perceptual dynamics, and the conditions under which decisions get made. The major theoretical contributions in this area, most notably those of Schelling, Jervis, and Fearon, have each added substantially to our understanding. The problem is that they remain, in important respects, analytically separate from one another, and they tend to treat escalation as a more or less static phenomenon. This limits what they can tell us about how escalation hardens into a persistent, structured interaction — especially under conditions of asymmetry.

Classical escalation theory is rich but partial. The literature tends to zoom in on one mechanism at a time. Schelling (1966, pp. 3–9, 124–125) treated escalation

primarily as strategic communication: actors signal resolve through calibrated action and the deliberate manipulation of risk. Jervis (1978, pp. 167–171) moved the focus to the perceptual dimension, and in particular to the security dilemma — the idea that uncertainty about an adversary’s intentions can set off self-reinforcing escalatory cycles, even in the absence of aggressive intent.

Fearon (1995, pp. 381, 386–390) approached the question from a rationalist direction, locating the persistence of conflict in bargaining failures, informational asymmetries, and the inability of states to make credible commitments. Waltz (1979, pp. 105–107, 131–135), for his part, situated

escalation within the structural logic of the international system, where the distribution of material capabilities conditions how states behave.

What these perspectives collectively reveal is that escalation has multiple dimensions — signaling, perception, systemic structure, strategic calculation. Constructivism adds still another layer by drawing attention to how ideas, identities, and shared meanings shape the way actors interpret and react to escalatory pressures. The theoretical picture, then, is one of complementary but incomplete accounts: each illuminate’s part of the process, but none captures the whole.

A growing body of recent work has turned its attention to asymmetry as a variable that matters independently. Many of the conflicts that occupy policymakers today involve actors with sharply unequal power, resources, and strategic reach (Arreguín-Toft, 2005, pp. 17–23). Signaling, perception, and bargaining cannot, by themselves, explain how escalation works in these settings. What also matters is how actors’ function under radically different structural and strategic circumstances.

And asymmetry, understood properly, is about more than just a gap in material power. It extends to differences in the way power is organized, mobilized, and applied. Mack (1975, pp. 177–180) made this point decades ago: actors facing stronger opponents tend to relocate the confrontation, choosing arenas and methods where conventional superiority counts for less. Arreguín-Toft (2005, pp. 30–34) builds on this insight, showing that asymmetric conflicts vary enormously in their conduct, organization, and underlying strategic logic.

3. The Role of Asymmetry in Escalation Dynamics

3.1. Conceptualizing Asymmetry in Conflict:

In the context of international escalation, the concept of asymmetry refers to structured inequalities that go well beyond material capability gaps. It covers

differences in strategic positioning, how threats are perceived, what operational doctrines are in use, and how credible each actor's coercive instruments actually are. Asymmetry, viewed this way, is woven into the fabric of conflict itself — into the choices actors make between productive and appropriative resource allocation under competitive pressure (Lacomba et al., 2013, p. 1).

There is also a strategic dimension. Asymmetry surfaces in the credibility of threats and in deterrence architectures, both of which condition how actors read and respond to escalation. Formal deterrence models show that when credibility

is distributed unevenly between two actors, equilibrium outcomes can shift in fundamental ways, creating incentives for one side to deviate from established patterns (Zagare, 1990, pp. 250–252).

One point that contemporary scholarship has been right to stress is that asymmetry is not a purely objective condition. It has a perceptual and relational dimension as well. Escalation can be triggered when one actor reads a change as significant — even if the other actor does not perceive it that way at all (Mazarr et al., 2025, pp. 1–2). Material and cognitive asymmetries, in other words, operate in tandem.

3.2. Core Characteristics of Asymmetry:

A- Structural and Strategic Inequality:

The most obvious feature of asymmetry is an uneven distribution of capabilities and strategic options. But the effects of this unevenness are not straightforward. Rather than simply conferring dominance on the stronger party, capability gaps often push the weaker actor toward indirect or unconventional strategies. The result is that the nature of the interaction itself changes (Arreguín-Toft, 2005, pp. 17–23).

This observation is consistent with earlier work on conflict as a resource-allocation problem, in which actors weigh productive against appropriative uses of their resources to maximize relative advantage (Hirshleifer, 1991a, as cited in Lacomba et al., 2013, p. 1).

B- Asymmetry of Credibility and Deterrence:

A second defining characteristic has to do with differences in threat credibility, which can be decisive in shaping how escalation unfolds. Deterrence theory posits that stability requires both parties to possess believable retaliatory capabilities.

Where credibility is distributed unevenly, the actor whose threat is more convincing enjoys a strategic edge — and may face incentives to press that advantage by challenging the status quo (Zagare, 1990, pp. 254–258).

The result is a dynamic sometimes referred to as “escalation dominance”: asymmetric credibility shapes where the conflict goes and how it ends.

C- Nonlinearity and Perceptual Dynamics:

Third, escalation under conditions of asymmetry is inherently nonlinear and subjective. There is no predictable or uniform trajectory. What emerges instead is a product of perceptions, signals, and contextual variables that interact in contingent ways. Recent analytical frameworks have reinforced this point, identifying multiple factors — geopolitical setting, perceived threat levels, the involvement of third parties — that make escalation outcomes difficult to predict in advance (Mazarr et al., 2025, pp. vi–vii).

The implication is worth stating directly: asymmetry shapes escalation not just through material imbalances but through the different ways in which actors make sense of what is happening around them.

3.3. The Analytical Role of Asymmetry in Escalation:

Far from being a mere constraint, asymmetry plays a constitutive role in shaping how escalation dynamics unfold. Its influence can be traced across several dimensions.

To begin with, asymmetry diversifies the pathways that escalation can take. Instead of moving in a straight line toward large-scale confrontation, conflicts frequently develop through indirect, incremental, or fragmented forms of interaction — proxy engagements, limited strikes, symbolic gestures calibrated to communicate resolve without crossing into full-scale war.

Asymmetry also structures the back-and-forth between action and response. In sequential decision-making environments, actors adjust their moves continuously on the basis of anticipated reactions. The “theory of moves” captures this well: escalation proceeds through iterative choices and counter- choices, with each actor weighing long-term consequences over immediate payoffs (Zagare, 1990, p. 252).

There is, in addition, a temporal effect. Rather than pursuing rapid resolution, actors in asymmetric settings may opt for strategies of endurance, graduated pressure,

or calibrated signaling. Experimental evidence points in the same direction: repeated interaction tends to dampen direct confrontation over time, as both sides learn to steer away from costly escalation (Lacomba et al., 2013, pp. 2–3).

Finally, asymmetry is bound up with the production of escalatory risk. Actors who perceive threats, interests, and acceptable thresholds differently can, through even limited actions, trigger responses that are disproportionate to what was intended. This is the mechanism behind inadvertent escalation — outcomes that neither side planned for (Mazarr et al., 2025, p. 2).

The U.S.–Iran relationship brings these dynamics into sharp relief. The United States relies on advanced military technology and global power-projection capabilities; Iran, by contrast, gravitates toward indirect methods — proxy networks, plausibly deniable operations, and responses that are carefully calibrated to avoid triggering a direct military confrontation.

The asymmetry is legible across multiple dimensions. Escalation between the two countries proceeds mainly through indirect and hybrid channels. Each side communicates resolve differently, shaped by distinct strategic cultures. And their objectives point in different directions: one side prioritizes deterrence and dominance; the other seeks endurance and expanded influence. None of this eliminates escalation. What it does is reshape how escalation works — producing dynamics that are complex, adaptive, and, above all, prolonged.

4. Actor-Centered Dynamics of Escalation

4.1. The Role of the Dominant Actor:

Strategic Pressure and Signaling When one actor in an asymmetric conflict possesses overwhelming military, economic, and technological advantages, it occupies a position from which it can set the initial terms of escalation. Schelling’s framework is especially

relevant here: escalation, in his account, is a form of strategic signaling through which an actor conveys resolve, bolsters credibility, and tries to shape how the adversary reads the situation (Schelling, 1966, pp. 3–9, 124–125).

In practice, the dominant actor draws on a range of instruments:

- direct military force
- coercive diplomacy

- calibrated escalation deployed specifically as a signaling device The objective behind these instruments is not always, or even primarily,

battlefield success. It is to alter the opponent's cost-benefit calculations — to make the price of resistance look higher. Schelling (1966, p. 2) made this point memorably: the capacity to hurt is often wielded not to destroy, but to bargain. Realism offers a structural explanation for this behavior: in an anarchic system, states project power to preserve credibility and sustain deterrence (Waltz, 1979, pp. 105–107). Rationalist theory adds a further dimension, suggesting that escalation can function as a device for extracting information and demonstrating commitment when uncertainty prevails (Fearon, 1995, pp. 381–383).

What these accounts share, however, is an assumption that escalation can be directed and controlled. That assumption holds up less well in asymmetric settings, where the adversary operates under entirely different constraints and may respond in ways the dominant actor did not anticipate.

4.2. The Role of the Asymmetric Actor: Adaptive Resistance:

Actors facing asymmetric constraints do not, as a rule, pursue escalation dominance. Their strategic orientation is different: it revolves around adaptation, endurance, and managing how intense the escalation becomes. The

term proposed here for this behavioral pattern is asymmetric escalatory resistance — the ability to participate in escalation while steering clear of direct confrontation and retaining control over how far things go.

The literature on asymmetric conflict supports this characterization. Mack (1975, p. 178) observed that actors in disadvantaged positions tend to relocate the fight — to shift it into domains where the opponent's superiority matters less. Arreguín-Toft (2005, pp. 32–33) makes a related argument: what determines outcomes in asymmetric conflict is strategic adaptation, not capability parity.

The repertoire available to such actors typically includes:

- indirect and irregular strategies
- proxy warfare and delegation of operations
- distributed, low-cost retaliation

By relying on these methods, the weaker actor can remain within the constraints that asymmetry imposes while still exercising agency over the escalation

process. In strategic-interaction terms, this amounts to a form of cost-imposition and signaling tailored to limited resources (Schelling, 1966, pp. 124–125).

Asymmetric escalatory resistance, as defined here, comprises three core capacities:

- absorbing and diffusing external pressure
- imposing calibrated and dispersed costs on the stronger actor
- sustaining escalation below the threshold at which large-scale war becomes likely

4.3. Relational Dynamics: Escalation as Co-Produced Interaction:

The theoretical payoff of this framework is that it reframes escalation as something other than the product of one actor's decisions. Escalation, in this account, is relational. It is co-produced. It results from the interaction between actors who occupy structurally different positions and play structurally different roles.

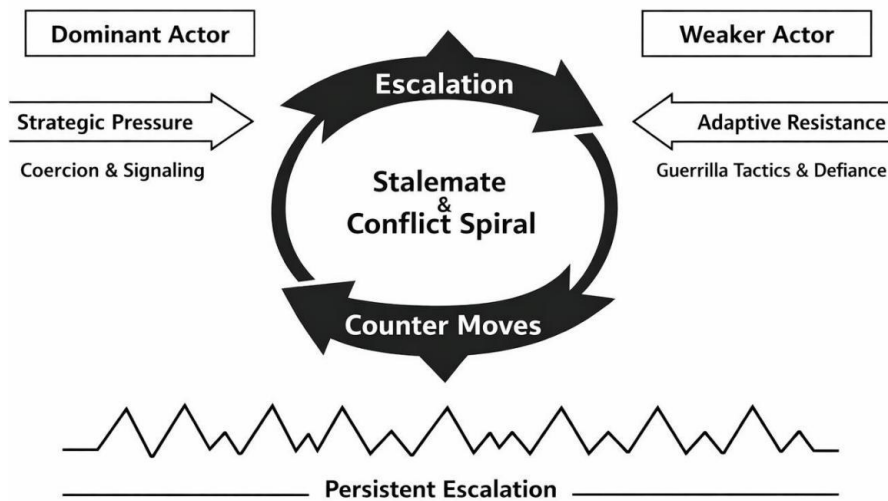
The relationship can be schematized as follows:

- Strategic Pressure (Dominant Actor)
 - Adaptive Resistance (Asymmetric Actor)
- = Persistent Escalation

One side pushes toward intensification through signaling and coercion. The other simultaneously works to contain, redirect, and recalibrate. Neither side gets the outcome it would prefer unilaterally, and the result is distinctive: escalation that persists without arriving at decisive war.

This resonates with the concept of equilibrium under anarchy — structural constraints that prevent any single actor from dictating a final outcome (Waltz, 1979, pp. 105–107). It also reflects the emphasis on interactive strategic behavior found in rationalist and game-theoretic scholarship (Fearon, 1995, p. 381).

Dynamics of Asymmetric Escalation



Source: The schematic is created by the author.

5. A Multi-Stage Model of Asymmetric Escalation

Escalation in asymmetric conflicts is best understood as a multi-stage, interactive process. Different theoretical mechanisms come into play at different moments, and the process does not follow a strictly linear trajectory.

The analytical model developed here attempts to pull these mechanisms together into a coherent structure. It does not propose a new theory of escalation. What it does is reorganize existing theoretical contributions into a single framework, one that clarifies how different mechanisms interact as escalation unfolds over time.

The concept of Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance sits at the center of this framework. It is not confined to any single phase. Instead, it runs through the entire process, regulating escalation by influencing its intensity and direction, and in so doing it accounts for why escalation persists without giving way to full-scale war.

Phase 1: Interaction and Perception Dynamics :

Interaction: The Emergence of Reciprocal Escalation

The process typically begins with reciprocal interaction. Conflict develops through iterative action-reaction cycles between the two sides. At this early stage, what drives escalation is not a clearly formulated strategic plan but something more

reactive — each actor responding to the last thing the other did. Schelling (1966, pp. 6–7) recognized this pattern: conflicts often start with small, incremental moves that provoke counter-moves, without either side following anything that could be called a coherent escalation strategy. Lake (2010, pp. 10–12) develops this further, treating escalation as an endogenous process that arises from the interaction itself, with each move altering the strategic landscape and generating its own set of responses.

In practice, the actor with superior capabilities tends to initiate some form of pressure — economic, military, or symbolic — intended to demonstrate resolve and bolster deterrence. But these actions do not go unanswered. The weaker actor responds cautiously, adapting as it goes. It does not disengage; rather, it participates in escalation through limited and tightly controlled responses, maintaining its strategic presence while keeping well clear of direct confrontation.

Even at this early stage, the logic of Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance is discernible. Escalation is not absent, and it is not out of control. It proceeds through contained, reciprocal exchanges — regulated, already, by the asymmetry between the two parties.

The early phase of U.S.–Iran tensions in 2019 fits this pattern well. Washington tightened economic sanctions in May 2019. What followed was a series of incidents: attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman on June 13, Iran’s shootdown of a U.S. surveillance drone on June 20, and then, on June 21, the

U.S. decision not to retaliate militarily. Both actors were engaged in reciprocal escalation, but neither crossed the line into full-scale conflict.

Perception: Escalation through Misinterpretation and the Security Dilemma Interaction may initiate escalation, but perception is what amplifies and sustains it. At this point in the process, actions cease to be evaluated purely on their material content. They are read through the lens of uncertainty and strategic suspicion.

The dynamic is well described by Jervis (1978, pp. 167–171). The security dilemma arises because states cannot distinguish reliably between offensive and defensive intentions. Steps taken to improve one’s own security may be read by the other side as threatening, setting off cycles of mistrust and retaliation.

What results is self-reinforcing: each actor views its own behavior as defensive, and the other’s as aggressive (Jervis, 1978, pp. 169–170).

The broader point is that escalation can be fueled by perception independently

of any actual hostile intent. Defensive measures can generate unintended escalation, simply because they are interpreted as something other than what they are (Jervis, 1978; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023).

Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance remains operative within this perceptual environment. The weaker actor calibrates its responses carefully, absorbing pressure without letting escalation spiral past the point of control. The dominant actor, meanwhile, fails to achieve decisive results, because its actions are refracted through the other side's interpretive framework — read differently than they were intended.

The Soleimani episode is a case in point. The U.S. drone strike of January 3, 2020 was presented by Washington as defensive and preemptive. Tehran read it as a drastic escalation and responded on January 8 with missile strikes against

U.S. positions in Iraq. Each side saw its own actions as justified. Each read the others as provocative.

The security dilemma was operating in textbook fashion:

- deterrence was perceived as threat
- threat generated response
- response deepened threat perception

The result was an escalatory cycle driven by perception, not by any deliberate decision to escalate toward war (Jervis, 1978, pp. 169–170).

Phase 2: Strategic Escalation as a Process of Signaling:

A qualitative shift occurs when escalation moves from the reactive-perceptual register into the realm of deliberate strategy. At this point, escalation is not something that happens to actors; it is something they do, intentionally, as a means of communication. Schelling (1966, pp. 2–3, 124–125) argued that force in international politics is not just coercive — it is communicative. Actors use it to shape expectations, to demonstrate resolve, and to alter the adversary's calculations. Rationalist theory complements this view: escalation can be a mechanism for revealing private information and improving one's bargaining position when uncertainty is high (Fearon, 1995, pp. 386–387).

What changes at this stage is the intentionality behind the action. The dominant actor deploys coercive diplomacy and visible military signals to impose costs and establish credibility. But these moves do not go uncontested. The weaker actor

responds with actions that are calibrated, indirect, and strategically

bounded — designed to demonstrate capability and resolve while denying the stronger side the escalation dominance it seeks.

Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance becomes more visible and more structured here. The weaker actor is not passively continuing the conflict; it is actively managing its intensity. Engagement stays below critical thresholds. The dominant actor's signaling efforts fail to produce a decisive result because they are absorbed and redirected through adaptive counter-moves. Escalation at this phase is measured and strategic, not chaotic.

The Soleimani strike (January 3, 2020) again provides the empirical reference point, this time viewed through the signaling lens. The U.S. Department of Defense (2020) framed the strike as a defensive measure against imminent threats. Most analysts, however, read it as a deliberate signal of American willingness to escalate (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2020).

Iran's January 8 missile strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq have been widely characterized as calibrated to make a point — demonstrate military reach — without inflicting the kind of casualties that would compel a massive U.S. response (BBC News, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020). The International Crisis Group (ICG, 2020, pp. 3–5) documented how both sides, in the period that followed, engaged in a series of measured, tit-for-tat actions — signaling deterrence while carefully managing the risk of losing control.

Phase 3: Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance and the Regulation of Escalation

A qualitative transformation occurs in the third phase. Asymmetry, which has been present throughout, now becomes the dominant variable. Escalation is no longer driven principally by interaction, perception, or signaling. It is being actively shaped — managed, redirected — by actors operating under asymmetric conditions and adapting their strategies accordingly.

The weaker actor does not try to match the stronger one. That would be futile. Instead, the aim is to control the intensity and direction of the conflict. Mack (1975, p. 178) identified this dynamic early on: structurally disadvantaged actors tend to shift the confrontation into domains where the opponent's superiority counts for less. Arreguín-Toft (2005, pp. 32–33) develops the point further, showing that indirect strategies — those that prolong the conflict while imposing costs without direct

engagement — are what drive outcomes in asymmetric wars.

The stronger actor, for its part, continues to apply direct pressure: military action, coercive diplomacy, economic sanctions. But none of it proves decisive.

The weaker actor absorbs, redirects, and responds through indirect, distributed, and calibrated action. Direct confrontation is avoided. Pressure is sustained nonetheless.

This is where Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance becomes fully operational. It structures the conflict by enabling the weaker party to absorb pressure, redistribute costs across multiple channels, and keep escalation below the threshold where it might tip into all-out war. Escalation is neither stopped nor allowed to run unchecked. It is managed — held in a range that both sides can, for the time being, tolerate.

The empirical record of U.S.–Iran relations after early 2020 tracks this dynamic closely. Iran moved away from symmetrical responses. Instead, it relied on proxy networks, indirect strikes, and deniable operations. Between 2020 and 2022, Iran-backed militias carried out numerous attacks on U.S. positions in Iraq — a way of imposing costs while maintaining distance from the violence itself. The International Crisis Group (ICG, 2021, pp. 4–6) documented this pattern in detail.

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR, 2021) reached a similar assessment: Iran’s strategy depended on calibrated, indirect responses designed to communicate resolve without crossing the line into a confrontation it could not win.

This pattern has not abated. Through 2023 and into 2024, renewed regional tensions — proxy engagements, limited exchanges — continued to reflect the same combination of strategic restraint and indirect escalation (ICG, 2023).

Escalation in this conflict is not being dictated by the stronger party alone. It is being co-regulated — structured in large part by the adaptive strategies of the weaker one.

The theoretical implication is significant. Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance explains why escalation persists without producing full-scale war. It enables actors to stay engaged, to impose costs, and to remain strategically relevant — all without the risks that come with direct confrontation. Escalation, under these conditions, is not a phase that leads somewhere else. It is itself the enduring form of the conflict.

Phase 4: Structural Constraints, Uncertainty, and Constrained Escalation:

At this stage, the dynamics of escalation are no longer explained principally by the actions and perceptions of the actors themselves. Systemic factors — the structural architecture of the international order and the informational limits

under which states operate — take on a more prominent role. Escalation continues, but within boundaries that are set, in part, from outside the dyad. Structural realism offers one account of why this happens. In an anarchic system where capabilities are distributed unevenly, there are systemic limits on how far any actor can push — or be pushed (Waltz, 1979, pp. 105–107).

Rationalist theory provides a complementary explanation: uncertainty about the adversary's intentions, combined with the impossibility of making fully credible commitments, keeps both sides locked in a cycle of limited escalation (Fearon, 1995, pp. 379–381, 386–390).

Neither side is pursuing decisive victory at this point. Full-scale war looks too costly. But backing down entirely looks risky too, because it might be read as weakness. Incomplete information compounds the problem: each side escalates in limited ways partly to probe the other's thresholds, partly to signal its own resolve, and partly to improve its bargaining position.

The result is a persistent but bounded condition — a kind of dynamic equilibrium:

- full-scale war is avoided because the structural costs are too high
- interaction continues because the strategic incentives remain
- uncertainty sustains limited escalation as a tool of mutual probing

Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance continues to operate within this equilibrium. The weaker actor's indirect and calibrated responses allow it to absorb pressure while keeping escalation in a manageable range. What is reinforced, over time, is a pattern of sustained conflict without resolution — escalation that neither ends nor explodes.

The U.S.–Iran case after 2020 conforms to this description. Despite multiple escalation cycles, full-scale war has not occurred. Both sides appear to recognize the costs that direct confrontation would entail. Reports by the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2021, pp. 2–4) indicate a mutual interest in avoiding uncontrolled escalation even while continuing to apply pressure.

Between 2021 and 2023, the role of uncertainty was especially visible. Iran-

backed groups attacked U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria; the U.S. responded in limited fashion. The pattern resembled mutual probing — each side testing where the other's limits lay without actually crossing them (ICG, 2022, pp. 5– 7). The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2023) characterizes the overall dynamic as one of persistent ambiguity about thresholds and intentions.

The picture that emerges is one in which escalation continues, confrontation stays limited, and decisive outcomes remain elusive. The conflict settles into a constrained equilibrium, sustained by structural pressures and reproduced through uncertainty and asymmetric adaptation.

Phase 5: Normalization and the Stabilization of Escalation:

In the final phase, something counterintuitive happens: escalation becomes normal. Conflictual interaction ceases to be an exceptional disruption and instead becomes a recurrent, structured feature of the relationship — characterized by stable expectations and predictable responses.

What changes is not the presence of conflict, but its character. Escalation becomes embedded in a stable framework of interaction, one in which both actors have adapted to ongoing confrontation and factored it into their long-term strategic calculations. Schelling (1966, pp. 92–97, 124–125) anticipated this: repeated strategic interaction generates expectations about the adversary's likely behavior, which in turn allows both sides to operate within understood limits.

Rationalist approaches add that repeated interaction, even when it does not eliminate uncertainty entirely, does reduce some informational gaps — enough to allow escalation to continue in a controlled, semi-predictable fashion (Fearon, 1995, pp. 390–392).

By this point, escalation has been regularized. Exchanges are limited, calibrated, and largely predictable. The dominant actor maintains pressure through deterrence and signaling. The weaker actor responds adaptively and indirectly.

But the interactions are no longer exploratory. They follow established scripts. Both sides operate within thresholds that have, through repetition, become known.

Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance, at this point, is no longer simply a constraint on escalation. It has become a stabilizing force — a mechanism that reproduces escalation as a sustainable mode of interaction. Continuous but controlled responses keep the conflict going without tipping it into war or allowing it to de-escalate entirely.

The U.S.–Iran relationship since 2020 has evolved in precisely this direction. After the major escalation events of 2019–2020, both sides settled into a pattern of

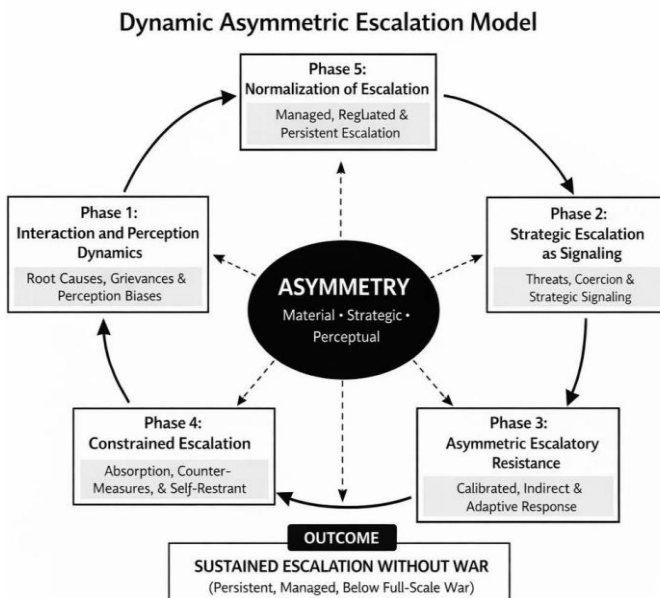
repeated, anticipated confrontation. Between 2021 and 2024, indirect attacks, proxy operations, and limited retaliatory strikes became standard features of the conflict environment.

The International Crisis Group (ICG, 2022, pp. 6–8; 2023, pp. 4–6) documents the emergence of a routinized deterrence pattern — ongoing, controlled

confrontation as a stable state rather than a temporary condition. Analyses by CSIS (2023) observe that escalation now operates within recognized thresholds, which suggests that both sides have internalized the condition of persistent but managed hostility.

The pattern is visible in the details: indirect attacks followed by limited retaliation, calibrated responses designed to avoid mass casualties while preserving the signaling function. Over time, these patterns have become institutionalized — not formally, but in the sense that they now shape expectations and guide behavior on both sides.

The conclusion that follows from this phase is important. Escalation has not ended; it has been absorbed into the structure of the relationship. It persists not because the actors cannot adapt, but because they have adapted — to escalation itself. Repetition and strategic learning have turned conflict into a stable, if unresolved, system of managed hostility.



Source: This diagram is created by the author.

5. Conclusion

What the analysis presented here demonstrates is that escalation in asymmetric conflicts cannot be treated as a temporary or transitional phenomenon — not without missing its most important features. Escalation, as examined through this model, is structured, adaptive, and persistent. It is shaped by asymmetry, strategic behavior, and systemic constraints, and it takes on a life of its own.

The article offers three contributions to the study of escalation in International Relations.

The first is conceptual. Escalation is reframed here not as a linear process that leads to war or peace, but as a stable and durable pattern. The analysis demonstrates that escalation can persist indefinitely without resolution, functioning as a regulated form of interaction.

The second contribution is the concept of **Asymmetric Escalatory Resistance** itself, which names and describes a pattern of strategic behavior observed in actors who operate under structural constraints. Rather than seeking escalation dominance or direct confrontation, these actors engage in controlled, indirect, and adaptive escalation — constraining the opponent, redistributing costs, and preserving their own strategic position.

Third, the article develops a multi-stage model explaining how this pattern is produced and reproduced over time. The five phases identified here — interaction, perception, strategic signaling, structural constraint, and normalization — are interconnected. Each generates the conditions that enable the next, and the cumulative result is a self-sustaining escalation dynamic.

The U.S.–Iran case supports these findings empirically. Escalation in that conflict is not random, nor is it uncontrolled. It is structured by the interaction between hegemonic pressure on one side and asymmetric

adaptation on the other. The dominant actor seeks to maintain deterrence; the opposing actor operates within structural constraints and adapts. The result is escalation that continues without ever reaching the threshold of full-scale war.

The broader implication is that escalation in contemporary asymmetric conflicts should not be understood as a failure of deterrence or as a prelude to war. It is, instead, a distinct and stable mode of interaction — one that is embedded in, and reproduced by, the structure of international politics itself.

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