

PASCC

Research in Progress

FY19

UNDERSTANDING THE ESCALATORY DYNAMICS OF NUCLEAR CRISES

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ABSTRACT:

How should policymakers think about nuclear crises? How likely is nuclear escalation and what determines who will prevail? As North Korea acquires increasingly sophisticated nuclear capabilities, and as US-China and US-Russia relationships become increasingly adversarial, these questions are of significant importance. Despite this importance, academic scholarship offers confusing and contradictory interpretations of nuclear crises. We develop a typology of nuclear crises that shows how they vary. Specifically, we argue that nuclear crises vary substantially based on two dimensions: the extent of incentives for deliberate first nuclear use, and the extent to which escalation is controllable by the leaders of the countries involved. These dimensions lead to a conceptual typology of crises with very different dynamics underlying them. We aim to examine the extent to which these factors vary across and within crises—providing guidance and conceptual tools for US decision makers seeking to assess how dangerous crises with different nuclear-armed adversaries might be, and how best to shape policy to secure US national security interests.

Research in Progress describes ongoing PASCC research. For more information please contact INSS@usafa.edu.