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Nuclear Risks Rise as Great-Power Conflict Goes On

Great-power competition has historically imposed devastating consequences when powerful nations seek armed conflict with one another. In the modern era, great powers also possess nuclear weapons, which exacerbates the potential destruction of any war among them. Although causes can be interpreted in hindsight and applied to current international relations, the decision to use nuclear weapons is often about the psychology of the senior leadership as much as it is contemporary geopolitical conditions. These decisions must be considered within the context of how protracted warfare produces declining ethical conduct among its participants. Deteriorating ethical standards can in turn bias decision-making, as themes of revenge and domination become prominent.¹ The practical consequence is that previously irrational or unthinkable courses of action could seem more reasonable as war progresses.

Given the potential devastation on civilian populations or environmental damage, the use of nuclear weapons is a particular concern. A critical question is: how could the willingness of great powers to use nuclear weapons change, depending upon when during the war these decisions are made?

The central thesis proposed in this paper is that the probability of nuclear weapons use escalates the longer great-power conflict continues. Given several psychologically protective factors at the outset of conflict, there is a minimal chance of nuclear weapons being deployed during the opening stages of war.

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In other words, the old fear of a “bolt from the blue” attack is not a big concern. However, protracted great-power conflict produces declining ethical standards due to a combination of moral injury and cognitive dissonance. Significantly, late-stage warfare decisions are fundamentally different from early-stage warfare

Moral injury and cognitive dissonance can change the standard for ethical decisions

decisions because they are weighed against different contextual factors and different ethical standards. This paper explores several frameworks from both international relations and psychology when considering this idea: 1) phenomena that discourage the use of nuclear weapons for psychological reasons; 2) declining ethical standards resulting from protracted warfare; 3) psychological theory pertaining to moral injury and rational decision-

making; and 4) two historical great-power conflict case studies involving the actual or proposed use of nuclear weapons. Taken together, changed decision-making throughout great power conflict creates an escalating chance of nuclear weapons use such that a nuclear attack is more likely at the end of a war than at its outset.

Theories about Nuclear Psychology

Nuclear weapons have only been used twice in the history of warfare—and then only days apart in 1945. In the decades since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no

Two psychological phenomena reduce the desirability of using nuclear weapons

nuclear-armed power has elected to deploy their atomic strength in an act of war. This has created something of a military paradox: namely, why do nations develop extremely powerful weapons that they may never use? Nuclear armament is a costly endeavor in terms of development, sustainment and diplomacy. Although a nation might seek to develop nuclear weapons for reasons of perceived security and/or domestic politics, the incentive to develop nuclear

weapons does not explain why nations then become restrained in their use.² Two complementary ideas—the hard reality of mutually assured destruction, and the norms created by the nuclear taboo—represent psychological phenomena that reduce the desirability of using nuclear weapons.

Mutually assured destruction is a pivotal reason for great powers to avoid resorting to nuclear conflict.³ Specifically, the concurrent use of nuclear

weapons by both nations would result in such widespread devastation that all parties involved would be annihilated, so neither leader makes the decision to do so in the first place. Mutually assured destruction presumes that use of a tactical nuclear weapon in a given combat engagement would not remain limited. An overwhelming nuclear first strike becomes the only viable course of action in this context because any limited first strike would invite nuclear counterattack. The classic example of this is the Cold War. Given the prospect of destroying an enemy at the cost of also destroying all domestic interests, mutually assured destruction imposes a tenuous peace.

While mutually assured destruction predisposes militaries against nuclear weapons use, the nuclear taboo provides an argument that it would be normatively indefensible.⁴ Essentially, nuclear weapons impose such destruction that both the intended damage and collateral damage make their use practically unthinkable. The taboo arises from multiple factors, including the global anti-nuclear movement and various attempts to de-legitimize nuclear weapons through either public perception or international policy.⁵ Because the taboo is based largely on perception, however, the taboo can shift as the political landscape does. Geopolitical tensions and brinkmanship can weaken the nuclear taboo to a point where the unthinkable can become more palatable.⁶ Still, the nuclear taboo theorizes that a psychological component underlies decisions, thereby making it less likely that nuclear weapons would actually be used in armed conflict.

Whether mutually assured destruction or nuclear taboo, these ideas both make an assumption common to nuclear weapon discussions: that the first use of nuclear weapons would likely occur early in a conflict, or at least quickly after its escalation. First use of nuclear weapons is thus typically theorized during the opening salvo of hostilities.⁷ Examples could include a preemptive strike intended to eliminate enemy capabilities or responding to a brutal conventional attack with nuclear weapons. But it is possible that any taboo becomes eviscerated by the first mushroom cloud.⁸ Ostensibly, the unthinkable could become acceptable, if not outright justified, since one nation would only be responding in kind to an act of nuclear aggression—or, put another way, turnabout is fair play. Nonetheless, first use assumes different prospects if posited at the beginning of a war than toward the end of conflict. Early casualty projections are hypotheticals, whereas casualties during a war are facts. This difference could change ethical perceptions about the acceptability of nuclear weapons. There is no guarantee that other assumptions and rationale underlying key strategic and tactical decisions would also

First use of nuclear weapons is typically theorized during the opening salvo of hostilities

remain the same after a decade of conflict. As such, it becomes important to examine the assumptions of nuclear weapons use after protracted war in great-power competition.

Another principle to consider would be the possibility of “escalate to de-escalate.”⁹ This idea suggests that a nuclear power, if losing, may resort to using these weapons as a last-ditch war termination strategy. A nuclear strike thus becomes a warning to force the adversary to the negotiation table. Unlike the nuclear taboo or mutually assured destruction, this idea posits the decision to use nuclear weapons late during the war and following a conventional conflict. The premise also assumes a limited strike rather than committing to mutually assured destruction. The winning side would supposedly be encouraged to seek less favorable, but still overall positive terms for war termination to avoid an unlimited nuclear conflict. This idea encapsulates how nuclear weapons use may be limited following a conventional war.

Psychological Change through the Thucydides Trap

Another way of understanding the nature of great-power conflict is through the Thucydides Trap, as inspired by Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*.¹⁰ This theory argues that a rising power will likely come into conflict with a ruling power when they compete for dominance within the international system. This idea is related to power transition theory and focuses upon the intersection of rising and declining powers to explain the rationale behind great-power conflict.¹¹

Although the premise of the Thucydides Trap is relatively straightforward, it is possible to expand upon it in a way that both enhances the trap metaphor and builds upon overlooked arguments from Thucydides. Specifically, the Thucydides Trap typically focuses upon the outbreak of war, but there are consequences arising from great powers choosing armed conflict. Separate components are warranted to compartmentalize factors that bait nations into conflict as opposed to the consequences arising from protracted warfare. This re-conceptualization considers the Thucydides Trap to have three components: 1) structure; 2) lure; and 3) ensnarement. The setup posits “structure” and “lure” as early-stage components related to the outbreak of war, whereas “ensnarement” explains how the conflict could escalate, even to a nuclear war, in the modern era.

Structure is most often debated with respect to the Thucydides Trap, as it identifies the geopolitical conditions likely to produce war. Ruling powers may attack rising powers to preserve their dominance, whereas rising powers lash out at ruling powers if their growth becomes stagnant or otherwise restricted. Essentially, the structural difference involves whether the nations involved seek to preserve or disrupt the status quo.

Meanwhile, the lure component represents one of the most hotly contested elements, as substantial deliberation has explored whether warfare should be considered inevitable within the Thucydides Trap.¹² Rather than debate the inevitability or probability of warfare, lure suggests that the perception of war as inevitable is a central component of the trap. Nations may engage in preparatory courses of action that set them on a path they believe to be inevitable, where their actions become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Perceptions leading to these actions can also be biased by emotion. A prime example would be a military leader convinced an enemy will attack, who in turn becomes angry at political leaders, who in turn refuse to authorize action. Bias arises from conflicting ideas related to optimal strategy, feelings about the enemy, frustration at not being believed, or frustration at politicians who refuse to believe what the military leader sees as obvious. This combination could predispose the military leader to advocate or conduct aggressive behavior as a means of overcoming disagreement in decision-making. Moreover, a central theme of Thucydides involves the role of emotion and moralization in wartime decisions, especially when normative institutions are weakened by conflict.¹³ Thus, through a lure component, the Thucydides Trap can be interpreted as baiting nations into conflict both through the perception of war as inevitable and in terms of how emotions disrupt otherwise rational decision-making.

Structure and lure discussions generally posit nuclear weapons use within early-stage decisions. Rising and ruling powers create geopolitical friction which easily spills into international competition, but mutually assured destruction and the nuclear taboo continue to function optimally under these conditions, making the outbreak of a nuclear conflict unlikely. Instead, sustained geopolitical friction creates a persistent potential for smaller scale conflict to emerge, such as proxy warfare or even an accident which sparks an international incident. The pivotal concern is not a massive and preemptive nuclear strike, but rather small-scale conflicts that begin a conventional war between great powers.

Amidst the current geopolitical conflict, a particular scenario seems most likely to bait nations into such a trap: China seeks unification with Taiwan by force, if necessary, and the scenario of fait accompli could involve a Chinese attempt at an overwhelming invasion before American forces could intervene. Scenario results ultimately hinge upon how quickly ground control could be achieved. More importantly, these factors represent the structure and lure components for both China and the United States. Structure outlines the geopolitical friction creating the potential for conflict. A conventional invasion of Taiwan,

The pivotal concern is a small-scale conflict sparking a conventional great-power war such as Taiwan

especially given the desire not to use nuclear weapons as the Chinese seek unification and not destruction, creates a lure scenario. China could be motivated to invade quickly, before the United States could respond, but no invasion of Taiwan would end quickly. (Russian aggression in Ukraine echoes that point.) A failed *fait accompli* scenario would give American forces opportunity to intervene and escalate into conventional armed conflict. As such, the invasion of Taiwan scenario represents a threatening possibility for how China and the United States could begin a non-nuclear war.

But the third potential component—ensnarement—has the most potential for nuclear warfare in the trap metaphor. Specifically, in addition to luring prey into a trap, the construct also keeps them contained, which in the context of great power conflict means that great powers succumbing to the trap cannot easily escape war and return to a peaceful state. People may argue that a quick and decisive victory would be possible, but protracted warfare with enormous casualties should be the expectation when two competing great powers seek armed conflict with one another. Great powers are, implicitly or explicitly, peer opponents with substantial political influence and formidable access to military resources. The potential for protracted struggle evokes one of the most important lessons of Thucydides, which explores deteriorating ethical standards as the conflict continues. Actions that might have been unthinkable early in the war become more acceptable as it drags on. In his original writings, Thucydides included the Melian Dialogue as a classic example: Athens destroyed a largely neutral party that offered little or no military threat to them.¹⁴ Such previously unthinkable conduct had been made more plausible after a decade of war and the accompanying uncertainty as to how the conflict might end.

Potential changes in ethical decision-making throughout the progression of armed conflict can be explained by two particular components of psychological theory. Among the many challenges faced by actors engaged in warfare, “moral injury” represents a severe threat to ethical behavior and mental health.¹⁵ A moral injury arises when someone witnesses an act or behaves in such a way that the actions go against core moral beliefs held by the individual. The consequences can involve severe changes to psychological health and social interactions. In the case of individuals who must continue fighting a war, they may experience cognitive dissonance and revisit those moral beliefs.¹⁶ That is, when moral injury causes an individual distress because some actions directly contradict their moral code, the individual may seek to change either their actions or moral code until their thoughts and actions become logically consistent once again with what they have experienced. Moral injury and cognitive dissonance thus become a vehicle which facilitates declining ethical standards throughout protracted warfare—the longer the war, the greater chance of exposure to moral injury, and the stronger the need to rationalize increasingly

unethical actions for self-preservation. This mechanism helps explain how the previously unthinkable becomes tolerable or even outright acceptable as war grinds into its later stages.

For the individual, several obvious connections will spring to mind. Soldiers will have to kill on the battlefield while risking their own lives. These situations pose any number of opportunities for moral injury as the individual must face sometimes horrific choices that may not align with their values, and afterward may attempt to rationalize those actions. In World War II, American warfighters in the Pacific theater would have been exposed to the brutal militarism of the Japanese empire that would, among other things, regularly impose physical abuse on prisoners of war.¹⁷ American personnel would subsequently be accused of similar war crimes, ranging from rape to firing on unarmed people from downed transport ships.¹⁸ Exposure to war crimes could inflict moral injury upon the individual even if they only witnessed the events rather than committed them, forcing cognitive dissonance to justify otherwise unacceptable actions in the context of the horrors of war. Furthermore, exposure to conflict could raise the potential for moral injury even without direct combat. The evolution of US interrogation tactics after the 9/11 terrorist attacks became increasingly ruthless to the point that even some non-combat personnel who worked with detainees suffered post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁹ Although each individual will process events differently, and not all will succumb to ethical decline, cognitive dissonance becomes a mechanism to justify these actions after exposure to moral injury as a means of self-preservation in war. The result is a changed individual standard against which ethical decisions are made.

A Case Study in Contrasts: To Use or Not to Use

For modern great-power conflict, the most important implication of ethical decline involves the use of nuclear weapons. Modern great powers like the United States, Russia and China have technologically advanced military assets including nuclear weapons. Factors such as mutually assured destruction and the nuclear taboo are at play in the early stages of conflict. However, perhaps the greater concern should come as ethical standards decline throughout a protracted conflict involving one or more great powers. Decision-making later in a war will be affected by fundamentally different factors. In particular, political and military leaders will have to consider many previously unthinkable and exceptionally challenging decisions while being exposed again and again to the horrors of war. Their changed ethical standards must be considered as once hypothetical casualties become increasing tangible funerals honoring fallen soldiers.

At the outset of a war, people will present projections and hypotheticals, whereas after being ensnared in a protracted war for years, casualties could number in the hundreds of thousands or even millions. These factors become the new context in which nuclear decisions must be made. In such scenarios, the nuclear taboo—a largely normative phenomenon—can be eroded by ethical deterioration and altered moral codes of conduct. Some ideas may also seem more palatable for the losing side after a protracted conflict, such as the “escalate to de-escalate” option. Therefore, there are fewer psychological protections discouraging the potential use of nuclear weapons later on in a protracted war, and an escalating chance of leaders choosing to deploy nuclear weapons.

Two important case studies related to the potential use of nuclear weapons further support this premise. They are: 1) the United States and Japan during World War II; and 2) the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. One instance resulted in protracted great power conflict and the use of nuclear weapons, whereas the other case of great-power competition did not result in war—at least not a direct or nuclear conflict. The theoretical discussion above can be applied to both cases to consider how the timing of nuclear weapon decisions influenced their outcomes.

Arguably, the best example of a Thucydides Trap—and only example of nuclear warfare—is that of the United States and Japan during World War II. Japan represented a rising power against the ruling power of the United States,²⁰ and American intelligence indicated that the Japanese people would rather fight than yield if their empire were threatened by embargo or other limitations imposed by the United States.²¹ A critical inflection point occurred when the United States imposed just such an oil embargo in 1941.²² This energy restriction severely threatened Japanese imperial power, as its naval forces depended upon American oil imports to sustain their trade and military superiority over nearby adversaries. With its economic and political growth threatened, Japan chose to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor with the intent of devastating the US Pacific Fleet and thereafter securing enough resources to establish dominance throughout the Pacific Ocean. In other words, the rising power attacked the ruling power when threatened with stagnation in its economic and military growth. Japan could not compete against the industrial capability of the United States, but if it could conduct a limited war and wipe out the US Pacific fleet quickly, it could subsequently build an empire with a perimeter strong enough to discourage American intervention.²³ Perceptions of quick victory and emotional decisions in reaction to the oil embargo made war seem inevitable, defining the lure component.

As for the ensnarement component, there is ample evidence that numerous atrocities and declining ethical standards in World War II preceded the use of nuclear weapons. Japan had already conducted the Zhejiang-Jiangxi campaign,

which led to the deaths of approximately 250,000 people in response to American pilots landing in mainland China after attacking the Japanese home island.²⁴ This campaign also followed the Nanjing Massacre in 1937,²⁵ and even if these actions could be argued to be in keeping with normative military conduct for Japanese forces, American personnel could be exposed to moral injury through a conflict with a brutal enemy. Now consider nuclear weapons use compared to the alternative of invading mainland Japan to end the war. Millions of Allied casualties during the operation were a reasonable assumption, and American military forces had already suffered more than one million casualties between dead and wounded personnel.²⁶ In this scenario, after years of brutal warfare and given projected casualty estimations, nuclear weapons—no matter how devastating—become more acceptable.

After years of brutal warfare and projected casualty estimates, nuclear use became more acceptable in WWII

Granted, the context at the time should be considered, given existing standards of military conduct and the novelty of nuclear weapons. Carpet bombing remained a viable option to ensure destruction of the target, and so high civilian casualties during World War II were an expected result of bombing campaigns. A nuclear taboo had also not yet been established, since there was no anti-nuclear movement or international attempt to de-legitimize nuclear weapons use. Rather, several critical factors supported the use of nuclear weapons at the time, including protracted warfare, previous heavy casualties, and declining ethical standards due to an extended, bloody conflict. The US decision to use nuclear weapons occurred amidst this confluence of circumstances, at a late stage of great-power conflict.

Conversely, the Cold War demonstrated that warfare between nuclear great powers need not be inevitable. Several incidents brought the US and Soviet Union close to nuclear conflict, most especially the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, but direct war (of any kind) never broke out.²⁷ Of course, there is an argument to be made that both nations engaged in proxy warfare throughout the wider conflict even if the two parties never directly engaged one another.²⁸ Still, the analysis of nuclear weapon decisions always posited using these weapons at the outset of conflict. Late-stage warfare decisions would have only been possible if the US and Soviet Union had actually begun a drawn-out conventional war. An early-stage warfare decision allowed psychologically protective factors to counteract the desire to use nuclear weapons. Both mutually assured destruction and the nuclear taboo worked in tandem to prevent either nation from engaging in the first use of nuclear weapons, even if they chose to engage in proxy warfare. Eventually, the Cold War ended with the fall of the Soviet

Union and without kinetic engagement, nuclear or conventional, between the competing great powers.

The key point here is that the timing of the nuclear decision proved to be an influential factor. That is, mutually assured destruction and the nuclear taboo are most pronounced at the outset of conflict, rather than subject to the altered ethics of late-war decisions. Proxy warfare against other nations, even when inflicting heavy casualties, created enough of a psychological partition so as to not attribute those casualties to a direct conflict between the United States and Soviet Union. Certain individuals may have been more likely to propose a nuclear strike if they considered previous casualties to be part of an ongoing conflict rather than a previous conflict. Furthermore, the prospect of mutually assured destruction kept emotional decision-making in check by forcing rational decision-making to the fore. Emotional decisions, especially revenge-oriented motivations, remained limited since deaths and casualties were hypothetical possibilities or the result of indirect actions (not the other great power's), rather than the tangible outcomes of prior military action. With regard to the Thucydides Trap, the two nations never succumbed to the bait or the lure and therefore never faced the ensnarement component most likely to contribute to nuclear risks. Without the mechanisms to erode ethical standards, decision-making retained enough moral fiber and strategic rationale for psychologically protective concepts to inhibit the first use of nuclear weapons.

Implications for Future Nuclear Conflict

The ideas enumerated here posit an escalating chance of nuclear weapons use during the later stages of great power conflict, as late-stage decisions suffer from mechanisms which impose deteriorating ethical standards upon combatants in protracted conflict. This central thesis can be applied to assess the prospect of nuclear weapons use by a great power against a non-nuclear adversary or of a war between the United States and China.

According to the Thucydides Trap, the conflict would begin for different reasons depending upon the aggressor. The ruling power, the United States, could theoretically seek armed conflict to prevent the rising power, China, from asserting its role in the region. Such a tipping point would seem to have already passed today without the United States initiating armed conflict, and while passing a tipping point does not preclude the possibility of future conflict, the situation suggests another possibility to be more likely.²⁹ Instead, the rising power may seek conflict to reinvigorate stalled economic, political or military growth. This possibility would make any stagnation or decline in Chinese political power a potential inflection point that leads to war.³⁰ The metaphorical lure

would be comprised of the perception that war between these nations is inevitable, and so international messaging about inevitability could be an indicator of the prospect for an armed conflict. China could likewise be provoked to war if economic sanctions or other restrictions threatened to cripple its growth, paralleling the oil embargo imposed on Japan by the United States in World War II. The CHIPS and Science Act would be the modern parallel, with the United States seeking to counter Chinese expansion and limiting access to advanced microchips.³¹

As for nuclear weapons use, duration of any potential conflict could be the determining factor. Early-stage decisions would parallel scenarios of the Cold War, and in turn benefit from international perceptions that discourage first use of nuclear weapons. A more concerning scenario would be a small-scale, conventional incident that sparks a wider conflict, as in the Taiwan example described previously. This setup would engage the third component of the Thucydides Trap—ensnarement—and create the escalating potential for declining ethical standards. Conventional warfare would proceed with a growing possibility of nuclear weapons use as casualties begin to mount on both sides. Still, nuclear weapons would likely be withheld until one side had lost a strategic advantage and the hope that conventional victory was possible.

In other words, conditions of defeat are critical to possible nuclear weapons use. Defeat while managing to preserve the nation's government might be enough to prevent nuclear weapons use, as the governing body would remain partially intact, albeit weakened. "Escalate to de-escalate" would remain an option, although this scenario would only prompt a limited nuclear strike to begin negotiations. The more troubling possibility would be a nuclear power facing total defeat, or unconditional surrender, and collapse of their government. This possibility emphasizes the importance of context in leading to nuclear war. Ethical decline would result from protracted warfare, and there would be a new standard of ethical behavior against which decisions were made. Still, this scenario or a similar one could provide context to justify a new threshold for what would be considered ethical/unethical, and in that context of total defeat, a nation might be willing to deploy nuclear weapons for multiple reasons. Faced with seemingly inevitable loss, enormous casualties, and altered ethical standards, the use of nuclear weapons could become an acceptable option. These conditions underscore how nuclear weapons use could be influenced by the emotions and ethical standards of senior leaders. The nuclear taboo would no longer be viable as any international reputation concern would be superseded by the desire for revenge—that is, if the government were about to collapse anyway, then international

Stagnation or decline in Chinese political power could be a potential inflection point

perceptions about the next governing body would not be a strong motivating factor for decisions among the crumbling incumbents. Likewise, mutually assured destruction would no longer be a deterrent as the perception would be that the nation's government would be destroyed anyway. Mutual destruction might then become appealing. Ethical decline, meanwhile, represents another mechanism that would increase the likelihood of nuclear weapons use. Whereas the nuclear taboo and mutually assured destruction represent prohibitive factors in nuclear weapons use, their psychological protections erode throughout a conflict while declining ethical standards increase the acceptability of nuclear weapons. Taken together, these conditions provide the most likely scenario for nuclear weapons use in warfare between the United States and China.

Another prominent scenario would be the potential for nuclear weapons use in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The context would indicate that any threat of nuclear weapons use early in the conflict represented only saber-rattling intended to discourage outside intervention. If the conflict progressed to such a point that the collapse of the Russian government seemed imminent, that scenario would be the most likely to result in deployment of a nuclear weapon in Ukraine. A different discussion could arise around how other nations might perceive nuclear weapons use if getting involved late in the conflict, but most importantly, those perceptions could differ by combatant. For example, future direct US military intervention in Ukraine would place the United States in an early

Another scenario would be the potential for nuclear weapons use in Ukraine

warfare decision-making frame of mind, whereas Russian forces would be in late warfare decision-making after years of fighting already. The different stages would predispose each side to make decisions about nuclear weapon use against a different ethical standard. Of course, this scenario evokes a debate about the nature of proxy warfare. Dollars invested supporting one side in a conflict may not immediately cause the investor to perceive

themselves as directly involved; lives lost would be the more salient factor. So, the issue becomes one of perception. Proxy warfare creates a scenario where decision-makers of the third party could perceive themselves to be directly or indirectly involved, and this perception could determine the extent of moral injury suffered in exposure to the conflict.

Ultimately, despite the apparent success of nuclear deterrence and/or the nuclear taboo in the Cold War, nuclear weapons use remains a concerning possibility for great-power war in the modern era, particularly if a conventional conflict were to emerge. A core implication is that nuclear war becomes more likely at the end of a conflict. This consideration should cause leaders to consider the

possibility of nuclear use later in great power conflict, even if their initial decisions may only include conventional ordinance and interventions. It is principally early-stage warfare decisions that may benefit from psychological inhibitors that discourage nuclear conflict, whereas late-stage warfare decisions are shaped by fundamentally different contextual factors. A primary concern is the potential for eroding ethical standards from a feedback cycle of moral injury and cognitive dissonance throughout a protracted conflict between great powers—and the potential deterioration of initial protective factors to the point that the prospect of using nuclear weapons shifts from taboo to tacitly accepted. As such, nuclear weapons use may become more likely in the later stages of any great-power conflict, rather than at the opening stages of hostilities, which is not how we have been trained to think.

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