

# **Beyond Deterrence: Norms, Coordination, and the Possibility of Restraint in a Multipolar World**

## **Executive Summary**

The contemporary strategic environment is increasingly characterised by forms of interaction that cannot be adequately explained through traditional models of international conflict. The 2026 confrontation between the United States, Israel, and Iran illustrates how modern crises resemble a fragmented form of brinkmanship, unfolding across overlapping domains and involving a complex interplay of state and non-state actors. In such settings, the limitations of formal legal constraints and purely strategic models become increasingly apparent. This paper argues that stability in these environments depends not only on deterrence or institutional design, but on the presence of shared expectations that allow actors to recognise limits and coordinate restraint under conditions of uncertainty. These expectations, understood as norms, operate as informal constraints on behaviour, and instead of replacing strategic calculation, they shape it by guiding how signals are interpreted, how risks are assessed, and how responses are calibrated, even in the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms.

By situating contemporary dynamics within a broader analytical framework, the paper draws on insights from the Cuban Missile Crisis to demonstrate that escalation, even in highly adversarial contexts, can be moderated through tacit understandings, backchannel communication, and the willingness of actors to prioritise the preservation of the system over immediate strategic advantage. This argument is further reinforced through a conceptual illustration drawn from the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, where, in the absence of formal authority, behaviour remains structured through socially embedded norms that substitute for legal enforcement. The paper also highlights how the transition from a bipolar to a multipolar world complicates the conditions under which such coordination occurs. Contemporary interactions are marked by fragmented authority, the proliferation of proxies, and the growing influence of domestic socio-political considerations. These dynamics increase uncertainty and make the interpretation of signals more difficult, thereby increasing the risk of unintended escalation. At the same time, system-preserving actors, operating across formal and informal domains play a critical role in maintaining communication, reducing ambiguity, and preventing crises from crossing critical thresholds.

The central implication is that stability in international politics cannot be understood solely in terms of the prevention of conflict. It depends on the preservation of the conditions under which conflict can remain bounded. Where shared expectations weaken, the ability of actors to coordinate restraint diminishes, and the risks associated with strategic interaction increase, not necessarily because actors seek escalation, but because they are less able to avoid it. A stable norm-based order in a fragmented multipolar world, therefore, does not emerge by default. It depends on the continued recognition of shared limits and the capacity of actors to sustain restraint under conditions of uncertainty.

## Introduction

The 2026 conflict between United States-Israel and Iran represents an inflection point in the history of the Middle East in the twenty-first century. The American strategy of '[Peace Through Strength](#)', which emphasises the demonstration of military power over diplomatic engagement, formed the basis for '[Operation Epic Fury](#)', during which coordinated U.S.–Israeli strikes were launched against Iran. The conflict escalated rapidly, spreading across the region as Iran launched retaliatory strikes targeting Israel-U.S. bases and assets across the region, along with asymmetrical escalation by mobilising proxies, closing the Strait of Hormuz and targeting the economic infrastructure in the Gulf region. This approach by Iran aims to escalate the conflict [horizontally by expanding the geographic arena and vertically by striking targets beyond US and Israeli sites](#). In doing so Iran seeks to impose a higher cost of war on its adversaries by stretching defensive capabilities and creating political and economic strain.

The unfolding dynamics between US-Israel and Iran and its allies resemble a '[game of chicken](#)', in which actors seek to demonstrate resolve while avoiding outcomes that could prove mutually disastrous. As compared to the earlier instances of geopolitical rivalry, this particular game of brinkmanship, is no longer confined to clearly delineated bilateral contests, but it unfolds across overlapping domains involving state and non-state actors, proxies, and domestic pressures. This complexity is further amplified in a multipolar world, where coordination becomes more difficult and the risk of miscalculation correspondingly greater, and the limitations of legal constraints are increasingly evident. From the standpoint of [international law](#), the U.S.-Israeli strikes have been [widely contested](#), with many legal scholars arguing that the absence of a clearly demonstrable imminent threat or United Nations authorisation places such actions in tension with established international legal principles. Thus, this raises a fundamental question: what constrains escalation when formal legal mechanisms are weak or ignored?

This paper argues that stability in such settings depends not only on rational deterrence or institutional design, but on the presence of shared expectations about acceptable limits. These expectations, commonly understood as [norms](#), operate as informal constraints on behaviour, guiding decision-making even in the absence of enforceable rules. Rather than replacing strategic calculation, they shape it, influencing how actors interpret signals, assess risks, and anticipate the responses of others. In doing so, norms help structure interactions in environments characterised by uncertainty, multiple possible outcomes, and competing incentives to escalate.

By situating contemporary geopolitical tensions within a broader analytical framework, this paper examines how such norms emerge, persist, and influence strategic outcomes. Drawing on historical insights from the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#), as well as conceptual perspectives from game theory and [social norm theory](#), it explores the mechanisms through which escalation is moderated in the absence of effective legal enforcement. In doing so, it highlights the role of

actors and institutions, that at critical moments, work to prevent escalation and preserve systemic stability.

### **Historical Comparison: From Cold War Bipolarity to Contemporary Multipolar Risk**

The strategic situation of the [Cold War](#) differed significantly from that of the contemporary global order. Defined by bipolarity, the Cold War was structured around the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union, whose rivalry, though intense, was comparatively legible and constrained by stable channels of signalling and a relatively clearer understanding of escalation risks. In contrast to this, the present international system is multipolar and more diffuse with several actors operating across overlapping theatres of competition. This diffusion of power complicates coordination, increases uncertainty, and heightens the risk of miscalculation, as states must interpret not only adversaries' actions but also those of partners, proxies, and domestic socio-political considerations.

Dynamics of the cold war are distinctly illustrated by the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the U.S. and the Soviet Union came close to a [nuclear confrontation](#). The crisis emerged from the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba and the American response in the form of a naval quarantine, creating a classic crisis of deterrence and resolve. Yet the resolution of the crisis was shaped not only by public signalling and military pressure, but also by a secret bargain in which the United States agreed to remove its [Jupiter missiles](#) from Turkey, and in practice from Italy as well, in exchange for Soviet withdrawal from Cuba. The situation embodied a classic case of brinkmanship, in which each side sought to pressure the other without triggering an irreversible escalation.

From a strategic perspective, the crisis can be understood through a ['Hawk-Dove'](#) or a 'game of chicken' framework, where each actor faced a choice between escalation and restraint. Mutual escalation would have led to catastrophic consequences, while unilateral restraint risked strategic disadvantage and would have been interpreted as weakness. As per the standard game-theoretic reasoning, the most likely outcomes in such a scenario would involve one side backing down, while the other maintains its position. But the outcome to this scenario did not follow a simple winner-loser logic and an escalation was avoided. Instead, it involved [reciprocal concessions](#), [tacit understandings](#), and a [negotiated settlement](#) that preserved face on both sides. This divergence between theory and the historical outcome highlights a limitation of purely strategic models: they capture the incentives for brinkmanship, but not fully the norms, back channels, and implicit limits that helped prevent escalation from tipping into catastrophe.

### **Strategic Dynamics: From Bipolar Games to Multi-Actor Complexity**

Unlike the bilateral contest of brinkmanship, the contemporary strategic environments are defined by a greater degree of complexity. In a multipolar world these interactions are no longer confined to just two primary actors, rather they unfold across a network of states, proxies, and regional and global stakeholders. Therefore, escalation is a product of the

interplay of multiple actors operating simultaneously across different domains, rather than bilateral strategic choices. The actions taken by one actor may trigger indirect responses from others, thus making escalation difficult to anticipate or control. As a result, the logic of brinkmanship becomes more fragmented, and the [risks](#) associated with misinterpretation and unintended escalation increase significantly. Additionally, the internal composition of the states further compounds the complexity, as [crisis decision-making](#) is not driven by a single entity, but by the interaction of multiple components within the state, each with their distinct incentives and priorities. Political leadership often operates under pressures to demonstrate resolve, maintain credibility, while military institutions, in turn, may prioritise operational effectiveness, deterrence credibility, and the maintenance of strategic advantage. These incentives can, at times, align in ways that favour escalation, particularly in high-stakes environments where perceptions of weakness carry significant costs.

Alongside these forces, there also exist institutions and individuals whose primary role is not to maximise immediate strategic gains, but to prevent catastrophic outcomes and ensure the continuation of strategic interaction. Their objective is not victory in a single confrontation, but the preservation of the broader system within which such interactions take place. These 'system-preserving actors', which may include [diplomatic backchannels](#), [informal interaction between the intelligence agencies](#), and even transnational and societal forces like academia and civil society movements, play a critical role in moderating escalation, as they shape the normative environment within which states operate. By maintaining communication, reducing uncertainty, and facilitating indirect coordination, they help prevent crises from crossing critical thresholds. Their influence is often less visible than that of political or military actors, but it is nonetheless essential in sustaining stability under conditions of extreme tension. Collectively, these dynamics suggest that escalation in contemporary conflicts is often structurally incentivised, while de-escalation depends on the presence and effectiveness of mechanisms that can moderate or redirect these pressures. In a multipolar system characterised by fragmented authority and overlapping spheres of influence, the challenge of maintaining such stabilising mechanisms becomes significantly more complex.

### **Limits of Legal Constraints**

Despite the existence of an extensive body of international law designed to regulate state behaviour, its effectiveness during moments of [crisis](#) remains limited. Legal principles that govern sovereignty and the use of force provide a formal framework for action, yet they are frequently subject to selective interpretation, specifically when core strategic interests are at stake. This limitation is particularly pronounced in high-stakes environments characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. In these conditions, strategic imperatives are often prioritised over compliance with formal rules, and the [lack of formal enforcement](#) mechanisms further weakens the constraining power of law. Thus, even where the legality of actions is widely contested, such contestation rarely translates into immediate [behavioural restraint](#).

The persistence of strategic interaction under these conditions suggests that formal constraints alone cannot account for the observed patterns of restraint in international politics. If legal frameworks are insufficient to prevent escalation, yet catastrophic outcomes are often avoided, then alternative mechanisms must be at work. This raises a critical question: what enables coordination and restraint among actors when formal rules lack the capacity to enforce compliance?

### **Coordination, Focal Points, and Norms**

The limitations of both legal constraints and purely strategic models point toward a deeper issue in understanding international crises: how actors coordinate under conditions of uncertainty. Traditional approaches in international relations often assume that stability is the result of rational deterrence, where actors weigh costs and benefits and avoid actions that may lead to catastrophic outcomes. While this framework is useful in explaining why certain thresholds are not crossed, it does not fully account for why restraint persists even when incentives to escalate are strong and formal enforcement mechanisms are weak. This becomes particularly evident in situations of brinkmanship. In such scenarios, the actors are aware of the risks associated with escalation, yet this awareness solely does not determine the outcome. Multiple possibilities remain open: one side may back down, the other may do so, both may continue to escalate, or both may arrive at some form of compromise. The central issue, therefore, is not simply deterrence, but coordination. The problem is not just avoiding the worst outcome, but understanding how actors converge on a particular path when several alternatives are available. In many strategic environments, the problem is not the absence of equilibrium, but the existence of multiple possible equilibria. Under such conditions, instability may arise because different actors attempt to coordinate around different outcomes, creating uncertainty about which path will ultimately prevail. It is in this context that the idea of focal points becomes important. When one possible outcome acquires particular salience or becomes mutually recognisable to all involved actors, it can serve as a point of coordination toward which all the agents converge. Once this occurs, actors have little incentive to deviate, allowing a stable pattern of interaction to emerge even in the absence of formal enforcement.

As Schelling argues, when actors are faced with multiple possible outcomes, they often rely on shared expectations to guide their behaviour. These focal points are not necessarily formal rules or explicitly negotiated agreements. Rather, they emerge from what is mutually recognisable and acceptable to all parties involved, i.e., they are salient. They provide a basis for coordination in situations where strategic reasoning alone does not produce a clear solution. In the context of international crises, such focal points may take the form of implicit limits on escalation, understandings about what constitutes an unacceptable action, or expectations about the need to preserve communication channels. These shared reference points help actors interpret each other's actions and signals within a common framework. In doing so, they reduce uncertainty and make restraint a more viable and intelligible outcome.

However, while focal points help explain how coordination occurs in specific moments, they do not fully explain how such patterns of behaviour persist over time. This requires a broader understanding of how shared expectations become stabilised. It is here that the concept of [norms](#) becomes central.

Drawing on the work of [Kaushik Basu](#), norms can be understood as self-enforcing patterns of behaviour sustained by mutual expectations. Actors follow norms not only because of formal rules or external enforcement, but because they believe that others expect them to do so, and that deviation carries consequences. These consequences may not always be legal in nature; they can take the form of strategic isolation, reputational loss, or the risk of triggering an unintended escalation. In this sense, norms function as informal constraints that operate even in the absence of effective legal enforcement. They shape how actors interpret situations, what they perceive as acceptable or unacceptable behaviour, and how they respond to the actions of others. Importantly, norms do not replace strategic calculation; they influence it. They determine which options appear viable and which are seen as too risky to pursue. The relationship between focal points and norms can therefore be understood as a progression. Focal points help actors coordinate in specific situations of uncertainty, while norms represent the stabilisation of such expectations over time. What begins as a shared understanding in a particular context can evolve into a more enduring pattern of behaviour that guides future interactions. This perspective helps explain why restraint is often observed in international politics even when formal constraints are weak. Actors do not operate in a vacuum of pure rationality. Their decisions are shaped by the shared expectations about limits, by implicit understandings of acceptable conduct, and by the recognition that certain actions may trigger consequences that go beyond immediate strategic gains. At the same time, these norms are dynamic in nature. Since, they are based on shared expectations, they can weaken when those expectations begin to diverge. In a multipolar system, where the number of actors increases and interests become more fragmented, the basis for such coordination becomes [less stable](#). Different actors may interpret the same situation differently, leading to inconsistencies in behaviour and a greater risk of miscalculation.

This makes the current strategic environment particularly fragile. The challenge is not only that legal constraints are insufficient, but that the informal mechanisms that enable coordination may themselves be under strain. When shared expectations weaken, the ability of actors to interpret signals and maintain restraint becomes more uncertain, increasing the likelihood of unintended escalation. The key implication, therefore, is that stability in international politics cannot be explained by rational deterrence or legal frameworks alone. It also depends on shared expectations about acceptable behaviour, with norms helping states coordinate their actions under conditions of [uncertainty](#). These norms help explain why catastrophic outcomes are often avoided even in highly adversarial environments. To understand how such norms operate in the absence of formal authority, it is useful to turn to settings where behaviour remains structured even without legal enforcement. Such contexts

provide insight into how shared expectations alone can govern interaction, and how order can emerge even in the absence of formal rules.

### **Norms Without Law: A Conceptual Insight**

To understand how norms operate in the absence of formal authority, it is useful to examine contexts in which behaviour remains structured even when legal or institutional frameworks are entirely absent. Such settings provide insight into how shared expectations can govern interaction independently of formal enforcement. A compelling illustration of this dynamic can be found in Pietro Mascagni's famous one-act opera '[Cavalleria Rusticana](#)', composed in 1890, and it explores themes of love, jealousy, betrayal, and revenge within a tightly knit Sicilian village. The narrative unfolds on Easter morning and revolves around four central characters, namely, Turiddu, Lola, Alfio, and Santuzza. Turiddu and Lola, once deeply in love and engaged to be married, are separated when Turiddu leaves the village for military service. During his absence, Lola breaks off the engagement and marries Alfio, a cart driver. Upon returning, Turiddu is confronted with this betrayal, and his rivalry with Alfio becomes the central force driving the narrative. In an attempt to move on, he forms a relationship with Santuzza (another woman in the same village). However, this new arrangement triggers further instability, as Lola, driven by jealousy and lingering desire, rekindles her relationship with Turiddu despite her marriage to Alfio. When Santuzza, rejected and emotionally distraught, reveals this affair to Alfio, the situation escalates rapidly, culminating in a duel to death between Alfio and Turiddu.

At first glance, the sequence of events appears to be driven by irrational impulses, jealousy, emotional betrayal, and revenge. Yet, despite this apparent disorder, the conflict does not unfold arbitrarily. Instead, it follows a structured and recognisable pattern. The decision to resolve the conflict through a duel is not spontaneous or chaotic; it reflects an implicit and collectively understood [code of honour](#). In the absence of any formal legal authority, the actors adhere to a socially embedded norm that defines how such disputes are to be addressed. The duel, therefore, functions as a focal point, a recognised mechanism through which conflict is escalated and resolved. This becomes particularly significant when examined through the lens of Just War Theory, an ethical framework that seeks to regulate both the justification for and conduct of conflict. Traditionally, this framework is divided into three components: [Jus Ad Bellum](#), which governs the justification for entering into conflict; [Jus In Bello](#), which regulates conduct within conflict, including proportionality and restraint; and [Jus Post Bello](#), which addresses the requirements of post-conflict justice and reconciliation. These principles are typically upheld by a central authority that ensures their implementation, an authority that is entirely absent in the world of Cavalleria Rusticana.

In the opera, all three dimensions of Just War Theory are systematically violated. The initiation of conflict lacks any legitimate justification, as Alfio's decision to challenge Turiddu is driven purely by personal revenge, representing a violation of *Jus Ad Bellum*. The conduct of the duel itself, fought to the death over a private grievance, disregards the principle of proportionality,

thereby violating *Jus In Bello*. Finally, the aftermath offers no possibility of reconciliation or restoration; Turiddu's death resolves the immediate confrontation but leaves broader emotional and social fractures unaddressed, constituting a violation of *Jus Post Bello*. Yet, despite these violations, the behaviour of the actors remains structured and predictable. This apparent contradiction is central to the argument. The absence and even the violation of formal ethical and legal principles does not result in complete disorder. Instead, behaviour is governed by an alternative system of norms, rooted in honour and social expectation. This reflects a broader insight found in Václav Havel's [\*The Power of the Powerless\*](#), where social order persists not solely through formal authority, but through socially embedded expectations and collectively reproduced norms of behaviour. The norm of duelling acts as a substitute for formal authority, providing a framework that defines how conflict is to be conducted and resolved. Both participants recognise its legitimacy, and the community implicitly validates it, allowing the conflict to unfold within a socially accepted structure. It also reflects a broader argument advanced by Robert Ellickson in [\*Order Without Law\*](#), where social order emerges through informal norms and mutually recognised expectations rather than through formal legal enforcement.

This insight is critical as it demonstrates that even in the absence of formal institutions order can emerge, and that norms can function as effective mechanisms of coordination under conditions where legal enforcement is absent. The duel does not represent the breakdown of order, but rather the operation of a different kind of order, one that is informal, socially embedded, and collectively sustained. The relevance of this extends directly to international politics. As discussed earlier, formal legal frameworks are often insufficient to constrain behaviour during high-stakes crises. Yet, escalation does not always result in catastrophic outcomes. This suggests that, much like in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, actors operate within a set of shared expectations that shape their behaviour even when formal rules are weak or absent. The parallel is instructive as states, like the characters in the opera, do not act in a vacuum. Their actions are guided by implicit norms that define acceptable conduct, establish thresholds that should not be crossed, and structure the ways in which conflict unfolds. These norms may not prevent confrontation, but they influence its trajectory, making certain outcomes more likely while constraining others.

At the same time, the example also highlights the [limitations](#) of such norms. While they provide structure, they do not guarantee just or optimal outcomes. The duel resolves the conflict, but it does so through violence and without reconciliation. Similarly, in international politics, norms may prevent escalation beyond certain limits, yet they do not eliminate conflict or ensure fairness. They constrain behaviour, but they do not resolve underlying tensions. The key implication, therefore, is that norms function as practical mechanisms of order in environments where formal authority is weak or absent. They operate through shared expectations rather than enforcement, enabling coordination and predictability even under conditions of uncertainty. In doing so, they help explain how restraint can emerge in the

absence of effective legal constraints, an insight that is central to understanding stability in contemporary strategic environments.

### **Contemporary Dynamics of Escalation and Restraint**

The U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict illustrates that the primary concern in contemporary crises lies not merely in the existence of rivalry, but in the weakening of the shared expectations that once kept escalation within recognisable bounds. These conflicts are no longer defined by a single axis of confrontation, but by a shifting interaction between conventional and asymmetric engagements. Under such conditions, the meaning of escalation itself becomes less stable. An action intended as a warning may be interpreted as preparation for a broader offensive; a calibrated response may be perceived as weakness by one audience and provocation by another. The result is a strategic environment in which signals are more difficult to interpret and restraint becomes harder to coordinate. This leads to a narrowing of the space between pressure and breakdown. In more structured settings, adversaries could rely on a rough understanding of limits even while contesting one another intensely. In more complex environments, however, these limits are less clearly shared. This does not imply that norms have disappeared, but rather that they have become uneven, contested, and increasingly vulnerable to reinterpretation or even misinterpretation. Where such expectations are unstable, crisis management becomes less a matter of controlling force and more a matter of preventing ambiguity from escalating into unintended outcomes.

A further implication is that stability depends less on formal declarations and more on whether implicit boundaries continue to be recognised across different layers of conflict. This includes not only state-to-state interactions, but also the conduct of proxies, the handling of symbolic actions, the protection of certain categories of targets, and the preservation of channels, formal or informal, through which intentions can still be inferred. As these underlying expectations erode, the risk shifts from deliberate escalation to escalation driven by cumulative misinterpretation. The broader implication is that the challenge in international politics extends beyond the immediate prevention of conflict. It lies equally in preserving the conditions under which conflict can remain bounded. The erosion of these conditions does not render catastrophic outcomes inevitable, but it does make strategic order more fragile. In such environments, effective crisis management depends increasingly on whether actors can recognise and adhere to limits that are no longer firmly anchored in legal frameworks or universally shared normative expectations.

### **Way Forward: Rebuilding Stability Through Shared Expectations**

Stability in international politics depends not only on the distribution of power or the presence of formal rules, but on the preservation of shared expectations that allow actors to recognise limits and coordinate behaviour under conditions of uncertainty. In a multipolar environment, where these expectations are increasingly fragmented, the challenge is not simply to prevent conflict, but to sustain the conditions under which conflict can remain bounded. This requires

renewed attention to the mechanisms through which such expectations are formed, maintained, and interpreted.

A first pathway lies in the re-establishment of focal points that can serve as reference markers in moments of strategic ambiguity. Where multiple outcomes are possible and signals are difficult to interpret, the presence of commonly recognised points of coordination becomes essential. These need not take the form of formal agreements; they may emerge through practice, precedent, or tacit understanding. What matters is their ability to provide a shared frame of reference that allows actors to align expectations and avoid unintended escalation. This needs to be accompanied by the strengthening of communication norms. In complex strategic environments, stability depends not only on the actions taken, but on whether those actions are understood in a consistent manner across different theatres and by various actors. Under conditions of heightened risk, there is often a shift toward greater clarity and information sharing, as the costs of misinterpretation increase. The preservation of both formal and informal channels of communication, as well as practices that enhance the legibility of signals, becomes critical in reducing uncertainty. Where communication weakens, even limited actions may generate disproportionate responses, not because of intent, but because of misreading.

Another consideration to be taken into account is the role of system-preserving actors in maintaining the continuity of strategic interaction. These actors operate across formal and informal domains and are not always oriented toward immediate strategic gains. Instead, their function is to prevent the breakdown of the system itself. By sustaining communication, facilitating indirect engagement, and reducing the risks associated with escalation, they help to ensure that strategic interaction remains bounded rather than terminal. Their influence becomes particularly significant in high-risk environments, where the objective is not victory in a single confrontation, but the preservation of the conditions under which interaction can continue. Also, an overlooked dimension relates to the management of narratives, as strategic behaviour tends to be interpreted within broader narratives that shape perceptions of intent, legitimacy, and risk. Competing narratives can amplify mistrust, reinforce adversarial positions, and make restraint appear as weakness. Conversely, narratives that emphasise limits, mutual vulnerability, and the consequences of escalation can help sustain the conditions for coordination. The stability of expectations, therefore, depends not only on actions, but on how those actions are framed and understood across different audiences.

Taken together, these pathways highlight that stability in international politics is not a fixed condition, but an ongoing process. It depends on the continuous reproduction of shared expectations through practice, communication, and interpretation. In the absence of such reinforcement, the informal foundations of restraint become increasingly fragile. A durable strategic order, therefore, cannot be assumed. It must be sustained through mechanisms that preserve coordination, maintain clarity in signalling, and reinforce a common understanding of limits. Where these conditions weaken, the risks associated with strategic interaction

increase, not necessarily because actors seek escalation, but because they are less able to coordinate on restraint.

## **Conclusion**

The conventional explanations of stability in international relations rely primarily on deterrence, institutional design, or formal [legal constraints](#). While these frameworks remain important, they are often insufficient to explain why, even under conditions of intense rivalry, weak enforcement, and high uncertainty, escalation does not always culminate in catastrophic [outcomes](#). Instead, stability frequently emerges from the presence of shared expectations that allow actors to recognise limits and coordinate restraint, even in the absence of formally binding rules. The central implication is that restraint is not simply a product of rational calculation, nor is it guaranteed by formal constraints. It is a function of coordination under uncertainty, sustained by norms that define acceptable behaviour and establish implicit limits. These norms do not eliminate conflict, but they structure it, making certain outcomes less likely while enabling actors to avoid crossing thresholds that could lead to irreversible escalation. Their effectiveness, however, depends on their continued recognition across actors and contexts, a condition that becomes increasingly fragile in complex strategic environments.

It is within this context that leadership assumes particular significance. The resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates how, even in moments of acute danger, the trajectory of conflict is not predetermined. The crisis revealed multiple pathways to escalation, including pressures from hardline positions and the presence of uncertainty that could have triggered unintended outcomes. Events such as the downing of the U-2 spy plane over Cuba, in which the pilot [Rudolf Anderson Jr](#) died, illustrate how easily escalation could have crossed critical thresholds. That such outcomes were avoided cannot be explained by deterrence alone. The decisions taken by [John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev](#) should not be understood as instances of individual heroism, but as examples of leadership aligning with a broader system-preserving logic. Under conditions of extreme pressure and uncertainty, both leaders chose to prioritise the avoidance of catastrophic escalation over immediate strategic advantage, reinforcing implicit limits that enabled coordination through tacit understanding and reciprocal adjustment. The challenge for international politics, therefore, is not only to manage individual crises, but to sustain the underlying conditions that allow restraint to emerge. In a multipolar world, stability depends on whether actors can continue to recognise limits, maintain channels of understanding, and act in ways that reinforce rather than undermine the informal frameworks within which strategic interaction takes place. Thus, a stable norm-based order in a fragmented multipolar world needs to be consciously sustained; otherwise, it will emerge only in the shadow of crisis.

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