International Crisis: An Analytical Approach to the Concept and Dynamics

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Abstract:
This article examines the multiplicity of definitions of international crises and the differences among scholars in identifying their constituent elements. It does so within an inquiry into the significance of crisis in international interactions. The article addresses the main aspects associated with international crises. It begins with detecting indicators of their emergence and anticipating possible developments. It then examines their nature, elements, and dynamics. It also considers how crises can be managed, how the risk of escalation can be reduced, how they can be brought to an end, and what lessons can be drawn from them. The article aims to contribute to the cumulative theoretical and applied knowledge on international crises. This can improve understanding of their different stages and dynamics, support the development of more appropriate approaches to managing them, and facilitate the use of lessons learned to prepare for subsequent crises and reduce their effects and repercussions.
Keywords: international crisis; international crisis management; dynamics of international crises; learning from international crises.

Introduction

The concept of crisis is widely used across many fields of scientific research. It is generally employed to describe complex and unstable situations that require intervention. In political science and international relations, the concept has acquired a central place. International relations are based on continuous interaction among diverse actors. Such interaction may be cooperative and peaceful, or it may involve tension and conflict. Within this setting, crisis has become a central subject in the study of international relations. Crises are associated with tension, instability, and threat. They also require the actors involved to adopt policies, strategies, and patterns of behavior aimed at managing the situation and limiting its effects.

The use of the crisis concept has evolved over time. It moved from fields in which it was first developed, especially medicine and biology, into the social sciences and humanities. In these disciplines, it came to describe and analyze situations marked by disturbance, instability, and threat. This wider use has produced multiple meanings and dimensions. These meanings vary according to the phenomena under examination.

Changes in the international system have also placed international and transboundary crises higher on the international agenda. In the nuclear age, the risk of crisis escalation has created major security concerns. Economic and financial crises have added further challenges. Human health, environmental pollution, climate change, and, more recently, the rapid development and use of artificial intelligence have also created risks to security, stability, and well-being at both regional

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and international levels. These issues matter because their effects can spread across national borders and affect large numbers of actors and communities. This makes it necessary to deepen the study of crisis causes, the factors that shape crisis development, the mechanisms used to manage crises, and the means of reducing escalation and its consequences.

Against this background, scholars have extensively debated how international crises should be understood. Many have developed theoretical and conceptual frameworks to explain their nature, dynamics, and stages of development. Despite the many definitions of an international crisis, no single definition has gained general scholarly agreement. Debate also concerns the elements that constitute a crisis and the factors that influence its emergence and evolution. It extends to crisis termination and to the outcomes and effects that follow. As a result, several models of international crisis analysis and management have emerged. They differ in how they divide, name, and order crisis stages. Yet they share a number of basic elements and functions related to understanding a crisis, managing it, and limiting escalation and adverse effects.

International crisis management is a dynamic and interactive process. It changes continuously as the crisis develops and as the actors involved adjust their behavior. It is also shaped by the availability and flow of information, time pressure, the level of threat, and the uncertainty facing decision-makers. Crisis management therefore does not follow a fixed path that can be applied in the same way to every case. Responses must be adapted to the specific crisis, its context, and the actors involved. International crisis management can thus be viewed as an interactive process formed through the continuing relationship between crisis developments, decision-makers' perceptions, available information, and the options permitted by the existing context.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following question: What key variables and elements can be used to understand the nature and dynamics of an international crisis? What general stages can guide international crisis management in ways that make it possible to manage the crisis, reduce the risk of escalation, and achieve as many of the objectives of the parties concerned as possible?

This question can be examined by first clarifying the concept and characteristics of an international crisis. The analysis then considers the main variables and factors that influence its emergence and development. It proceeds to identify the principal stages through which a crisis passes. Finally, it explains how an understanding of crisis dynamics can inform the choice of appropriate management responses, reduce escalation risks, and support the management of the crisis's effects and outcomes.

I. The Concept and Characteristics of International Crisis

The concept of international crisis cannot easily be confined to a single scientific framework. It is connected to a broad range of approaches and disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, including psychology, sociology, political science, strategic studies, and economics. The concept itself has also undergone significant development. It moved from early uses in fields such as biology and medicine into the social sciences, where it became a tool for analyzing situations marked by disturbance, threat, uncertainty, and limited response time. An examination of international crisis therefore requires attention to its meaning, the dynamics of its emergence and development, and the main characteristics that distinguish it from other international phenomena.

A. International Crisis: Concept, Emergence, and Development Dynamics

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Although the term "international crisis" is used frequently, its precise definition remains problematic[1]. The concept is applied in different contexts and carries a range of meanings. Even so, several basic indicators can help identify an international crisis. These include a threat to fundamental values, actions that demonstrate determination and resolve, and the emergence of open hostility. International crises are especially important in the study of international relations because they are closely associated with periods of disruption and tension between states. Historical cases illustrate this point. Threatening statements and military mobilization by the great powers during the June-August 1914 crisis brought Europe to the brink of war. In 1948-1949, the threat by the Western powers to integrate their occupation zones in Germany was followed by the Soviet closure of land access to West Berlin and the United States' organization of an airlift. These developments marked a major turning point in the crisis between East and West. In 1962, the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba and the U.S. naval quarantine of ships heading toward the Caribbean produced a confrontation that nearly led to a direct clash between the two superpowers. During the October/Yom Kippur War crisis of 1973, Moscow's threat of unilateral military intervention, together with Washington's decision to raise its nuclear alert level, generated a relatively brief but highly intense U.S.-Soviet crisis. These cases are only some of the most dramatic examples among the 390 international crises recorded between the end of 1918 and the end of 1988. They help explain the continuing interest in understanding international crises as major expressions of instability in relations among nations. Statesmen themselves often portray their periods in office as a continuous encounter with crisis[2].

The concept of "crisis" itself carries a wide variety of meanings. It is used in medicine, economics, public administration, communications, history, psychology, political science, and international relations. The concept originally emerged in medicine. Georges Canguilhem defined a crisis as a change during an illness that is signaled by certain symptoms and that determines whether the patient's life will be saved. Webster's Dictionary, in turn, defines it as a turning point for better or worse in a serious disease or dysfunction, or as a radical change in an unstable human condition.

It is therefore unsurprising that the medical field provided the early background for the crisis concept. Bryan Turner observed that "the body is the most powerful metaphor for society." Mary Douglas likewise argued that the formal structure of social relations often relies on analogies with the natural world, allowing institutions to be legitimized through structural comparisons drawn from the body. The concept later moved into social and political analysis. It came to describe chaotic conditions affecting individuals, states, governments, organizations, and other actors. In this sense, a crisis is a condition of disturbance or an abnormal and unstable situation[3]. The term can also refer to an emergency that arises suddenly, produces unpredictable consequences, creates tension in the perceptions of the actors concerned, and disrupts the routine functioning of a system[4]. Crisis is also closely associated with the concept of chaos. Pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis periods are therefore

[1] Olsson, E.-K., & Verbeek, B. A. (2013). International organizations and crisis management. In B. Reinalda (Ed.), Routledge handbook of international organization. Routledge, p. 325.

[2] Brecher, M. (1993). Crises in world politics: Theory and reality (1st ed.). Pergamon Press, pp. 2-3.

[3] Isyar, O. G. (2008). Definition and management of international crises. Perceptions, pp. 1-2.

[4] Close, P. M. (1976). L'incertitude structurelle des crises internationales: Une étude analytique. Études Internationales, 7(3), p. 342.

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sometimes described as chaotic processes. Chaos may produce temporary disruption. The word itself has Greek roots associated with the idea of creating gaps or voids. According to Thomas Schelling, chaos is a "metaphysical unity of latent forces." In this sense, chaos is not simply the absence of order. It is a condition in which multiple latent forces or influences accumulate within a dynamic system. Their interaction may generate a nonlinear path that is difficult to predict[1].

In the same vein, the Heritage Dictionary defines a crisis as a decisive time or decision, or as an unstable condition involving an expected decisive change, as in political affairs. It may also be understood as a critical period or unstable situation that produces consequential outcomes. Such situations are usually marked by rapidly unfolding events and by threats to the values and goals of the actors affected[2].

These meanings suggest that a crisis is not defined only by the existence of an objectively disturbed situation. It also depends on whether the actors involved define that situation as a crisis. Decision-makers' perceptions and interpretations therefore matter. The external environment of a state may change significantly because of actions taken by other states. Decision-makers may then interpret the new situation as a crisis and adopt exceptional measures in response. Once a situation is perceived as a crisis, political management may shift from ordinary routines to crisis-management procedures. Such procedures require rapid response, concentrated decision-making, and action under uncertainty and severe time constraints. Charles Hermann's approach to foreign-policy crises illustrates this perspective. For Hermann, a foreign-policy crisis is a situation that threatens the basic goals of a political unit and restricts the time available for thought, planning, and response. It therefore encourages action that may influence the future course of events. His conception identifies three central dimensions: a threat to fundamental goals, limited time for decision and response, and surprise. The significance of these dimensions does not lie only in the objective threat. It also lies in how governmental units perceive the situation and the pressures it creates. The nature of a crisis is therefore shaped to a large extent by decision-makers' perceptions of the threat and of the time available to address it[3].

Within this broad understanding, several types of crises may arise between states. International political crisis is among the most important because it is directly connected to interstate relations, strategic balances, and the vital interests of the parties concerned. Such a crisis may develop when conflict between two or more states intensifies because one party seeks to alter the existing strategic balance. This can create a serious threat to the other party's values, goals, and interests and can prompt resistance. The resulting condition may last for a relatively limited period. It may also take the form of a serious deterioration in relations following a change in the external or domestic environment. Tension then increases and relations move into a crisis phase. This deterioration can create a perception among decision-makers that core foreign-policy values and objectives face an external threat. It can also increase their expectation of possible military hostilities and heighten awareness of the limited time available for response. International crisis is therefore linked not only

[1] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 2.

[2] Alshammari, A. A. K. (July 17, 2025). Strategic analysis and international crisis management: Theoretical study. Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies. Accessed April 27, 2026. https://h1.nu/1drs0

[3] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., pp. 5-6.

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to escalating conflict but also to decision-makers' perceptions of the threat, the time available to manage it, and uncertainty about the course and consequences of events.

William Comte defines an international crisis as a situation that, by its nature, destabilizes prevailing perceptions and beliefs, especially among political decision-makers. It is characterized by imminent danger and an inability to determine what will happen next. This definition captures an important feature of international crisis: decision-making takes place under pressure and uncertainty because the danger is immediate and the course of events is unclear[1]. Five common components of crises in international politics can be identified from this perspective. First, national military activity often increases sharply during critical periods, especially when crisis-management operations continue. Second, unexpected events at either the international or domestic level cause many crises. Decision-makers must therefore be capable of acting quickly and making urgent decisions. Third, crises can harm the real or perceived interests of governments. Fourth, because crises represent major threats to government interests, they are difficult to assess or predict. Fifth, crises are inherently associated with unexpected events[2].

International crisis should also be distinguished from global crisis in terms of scope. A global crisis is broader because it affects most countries. The 2008 financial crisis and the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are clear examples. Their consequences extended far beyond relations between two or more states. International crisis, by contrast, is primarily associated with interactions among states or other international actors. Global crisis is wider in its geographical reach and effects[3]. Yet international crisis cannot be reduced to deteriorating relations or rising conflict. It can also be understood through the development of the system in which it occurs. In dynamic systems, crises show that development is not necessarily linear. Changes in certain inputs may alter the system's trajectory. Both chaotic and non-chaotic systems may first pass through a period of relative stability and equilibrium. A phase of "bifurcation" begins when the system moves away from stability under the influence of change or pressure. It may then adopt new trajectories or patterns of behavior. As instability deepens, bifurcation and disorder may increase. The number of possible paths and interactions grows, making the system more complex and less predictable. These conditions can therefore be viewed as stages in systemic development, from stability to initial bifurcation and then to greater bifurcation and chaos, depending on the interactions and changes occurring within the system.

In a chaotic system, initial inputs become especially important. Their type or quantity may affect the system's trajectory. Even small changes in input values can produce structural transformations, while the future of the system remains difficult to predict. This point is particularly relevant to international crises because events can develop quickly and the factors affecting them are often interdependent. Small changes at the beginning of a crisis may therefore produce much larger shifts later. The study of international crisis should not be limited to visible disturbances in relations between states. It should also examine the internal transformations of the system in which the crisis develops.

[1] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.
[2] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 10.
[3] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.

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Nonlinear interactions may move that system from stability to bifurcation and then toward higher levels of chaos and uncertainty[1].

International crises differ in the disturbances they produce, the speed of their development, and the clarity of their beginning and end. A distinction can therefore be made between "regular crises" and "creeping crises." A regular crisis exists when decision-makers perceive a threat to a society's core values and/or to the systems that sustain life. The threat requires urgent action under conditions of profound uncertainty. The main feature of this type is that it is an exceptional situation with a clear beginning and end. Another definition links a regular crisis to a sudden, negative, and time-limited change within a system. Such a change threatens to produce a broad and unexpected transformation in some of the system's defining characteristics and creates an urgent need for new approaches and solutions. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis is a well-known example because the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union brought the world close to nuclear war. Creeping crises differ because they do not have clearly defined starting and ending points. They may remain unnoticed for long periods, while also giving policymakers time to address a potential threat before it escalates. Global warming and climate change are examples. Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius define a creeping crisis as a threat to widely shared societal values or life-sustaining systems that develops across time and space, is foreshadowed by precursor events, receives varying levels of political and/or societal attention, and is not addressed adequately or impartially by the authorities. Regular and creeping crises therefore share the presence of a threat to basic values or systems. They differ mainly in the way the crisis develops, especially in the clarity of its beginning and end, the speed with which the threat emerges, and the extent of the response[2].

This classification focuses on the nature and developmental path of a crisis. Defining an international crisis, however, also requires attention to interactions among states and their effect on the stability of international relations. The International Crisis Behavior (ICB) Project provides a useful approach. Since its establishment in 1975, the project has studied international crises and has spent more than four decades collecting and analyzing crisis data and developing tools for classification and analysis. Its historical coverage begins with the period following the First World War because the project focuses on state-level decision-makers' perceptions, which became more suitable for systematic study, measurement, and coding as variables during this period. Between December 1918 and 2015, the ICB Project collected data on 1,052 foreign-policy crises, including 476 international crises. The project identifies two basic conditions for an international crisis. The first is a change in the nature and/or an increase in the intensity of destabilizing interactions, meaning hostile verbal or physical interactions between two or more states, to a level that increases the likelihood of military hostilities. The second is that these interactions destabilize interstate relations and challenge the structure of the international system, whether global, hegemonic, or subregional[3]. From this perspective, an international crisis rests on two connected elements. Hostile interstate interactions intensify to a level that raises the likelihood of military force, and this intensification destabilizes

[1] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., pp. 2-3.

[2] Kushnir, I., & Yazgan, N. (2025). Conceptualising the international phenomenon of crises. In Chapter 2. Emerald Publishing. Accessed May 14, 2026. https://h1.nu/1ehof

3 Iakhnis, E., & James, P. (2019). Near crises in world politics: A new dataset. Conflict Management and Peace Science, p. 3.

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existing relations and challenges the prevailing structure of the international system. An international crisis is therefore more than ordinary tension between states. It involves a change in destabilizing interactions, or an increase in their intensity, sufficient to threaten the stability of international relations.

A change or escalation in such interactions is usually triggered by a particular act or event. The trigger may be a verbal or written threat, a political action such as breaking diplomatic relations, an economic measure such as a trade embargo, a nonviolent military act such as troop movement, an indirect violent act against an ally or dependent state, or a direct military attack. An international crisis may also begin with an internal challenge to a ruling regime, whether verbal or material, or with an action designed to strengthen the position of those in power. Technological or geopolitical change may also create a crisis if it weakens a state's ability to protect vital interests, including its independence. Whatever the trigger, it generates a perception of threat among the decision-maker or decision-makers in State A. That state's response can then produce further disruptive interactions with State B and perhaps with other states as well, accompanied by the possibility of violence. In short, an international crisis involves a level of tension, disruption, and imbalance that exceeds the normal level in interstate relations. It combines an escalation of hostile interactions, increasing the probability of military force, with destabilization of existing relations and a challenge to the prevailing international order. Thus, a crisis is not simply tension between states. It arises when destabilizing interactions change in nature or intensity to a level that threatens the stability of international relations[1].

After the end of the Cold War, two main trends became associated with changes in international crises. The first concerned the nature of large-scale crises. Many became linked to the role of the United States as the superpower with the broadest global influence. While some of these situations could be understood as foreign-policy crises for the U.S. administration, the wider international community increasingly treated them as crises with international dimensions because of their broad consequences for international relations. The second trend concerned the distribution of power among crisis actors. Cold War crises were generally symmetrical, often involving two parties or blocs with roughly comparable capabilities. Later crises increasingly became asymmetrical and involved actors with clearly different capabilities and power positions[2]. More recently, scholars have debated whether globalization has transformed the character of crises. This view argues that modern crises differ from earlier ones because they are nonlinear, cross-sectoral, transboundary, and connected to unknown sources and solutions[3]. Examples include climate change, economic crises, the rise of authoritarianism and populism, wars, and pandemics, particularly COVID-19. These developments have affected human security, well-being, and the stability of states and societies. The financial crisis that began in the United States in 2007 led to the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and to the European debt crisis in 2009. The European Union responded with structural adjustment programs in countries including Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain. The crisis had social, economic, and political consequences. It weakened public trust in European institutions, while adjustment policies and the limited progress of European integration contributed to growing

[1] Brecher, M., Op. Cit., pp. 3-4.

[2] Brecher, M., Op. Cit., p. 8.

[3] Pursiainen, C. (2018). The crisis management cycle. Routledge, p. 3.

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opposition to the European Union. The war in Syria likewise produced a large humanitarian crisis and drove millions of people toward neighboring countries and Europe. After 2015, the European Union experienced major refugee flows that placed particular pressure on first-entry countries such as Greece and Italy. These movements were accompanied by loss of life and inhumane conditions in refugee camps. Populist discourse also made migration a major issue in European political debate. At the same time, the rise of populist and authoritarian forces created challenges for democracy and legitimacy, as reflected in the 2016 Brexit referendum. The COVID-19 pandemic produced a different type of global shock. It began as a health crisis but rapidly generated economic and social consequences. Climate-related risks also intensified, including drought, famine, and forced migration, especially in vulnerable regions. Other developments, such as the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, added further dimensions to challenges involving democracy and legitimacy[1].

The diversity of crisis sources, the breadth of their consequences, and the interaction among their different dimensions have made the study of international crises almost as complex as the phenomena being analyzed[2]. Contemporary crises are global, interconnected, and politically contested. They develop within multilevel systems of governance in which authority is dispersed, prospects for cooperation remain fragile, and institutional legitimacy is repeatedly tested[3]. An international crisis can therefore be understood as a dynamic process in which several variables interact. These include surprise, threat, disruption, time pressure, and uncertainty. They operate in a context shaped by fear of losing acquired values and interests, by efforts to preserve them, and sometimes by attempts to secure new gains when crisis conditions create opportunities. An international crisis thus tests the strength of the actors involved. It also tests their ability to perceive developments, understand them, and make suitable decisions. Effective decisions must respond to immediate crisis demands while also taking account of long-term effects and outcomes.

B. Dynamics and Core Characteristics of International Crisis

Despite the many definitions and approaches to crisis, a substantial part of the literature associates international crisis with several core characteristics. These include the emergence and perception of threat, surprise, limited response time, and difficulty in making sense of the situation. These characteristics are not fully separate. They interact. Perception of threat places the decision-maker in a situation that requires a response. Surprise and time pressure can intensify the crisis, while sensemaking becomes more difficult as events develop[4].

1. Threat Perception in International Crisis

The concept of "threat perception" is frequently used as a causal variable in theories of international relations and foreign-policy decision-making. The literature uses it to explain phenomena such as the outbreak of war, crisis behavior, coercion, and alliance formation[5]. In the context of international

[1] Kushnir, I., & Yazgan, N., Op. Cit.

[2] Harvey, H. V., Galecio, A. B., & Rubilar, A. G. (2016). The concept of international crisis in the national defense .books of Chile. Revista Ensayos Militares, 2(1), p. 146

[3] Bilhim, J. (July 12, 2026). Crisis management in the new ecology of uncertainty: An international relations perspective. IntechOpen. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://h1.nu/1y0hn

[4] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.

[5] Landau-Wells, M. (2024). Building from the brain: Advancing the study of threat perception in international relations. International Organization, 78(4), p. 627.

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crises, a threat consists of actions or behavior by an individual, group, or system. These may take the form of signals, statements, or concrete actions. They arise in relation to demands or conditions that one party seeks to impose on another and may include an implied use of force if those demands are not met. A crisis may begin at this point[1]. Threat perception is therefore central to explaining the emergence of an international crisis. The mere existence of material capabilities or intentions on the part of another actor does not automatically create a threat for a decision-maker. What matters is how those capabilities and intentions are interpreted as a source of danger.

Traditional approaches in international relations often treat threat perception as the result of a deliberate process in which an actor assesses an opponent's capabilities and intentions. Rationalist accounts assume that threats are perceived through inference based on evidence. Yet this view does not fully explain how decision-makers select, combine, and interpret incoming information as signs of danger[2]. Understanding the emergence of threat during an international crisis therefore requires more than an examination of the objective characteristics of an actor or event. It also requires attention to how decision-makers perceive and interpret those characteristics.

Threat perception has become even more important in contemporary international crises because threats are increasingly described as transboundary and multidimensional. Their forms and sources vary widely. Nevertheless, they can be placed on a broad continuum of threats and hazards that includes earthquakes, epidemics, cyberterrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

From a crisis-management perspective, a crisis takes shape when an existential threat facing an international actor is seen as justification for exceptional measures. These measures are intended to manage the situation and its consequences. Drawing on Ole Wæver's work in security studies, a crisis may be understood as a moment in which securitization occurs. Once an issue is securitized and presented as an existential threat, emergency measures are considered necessary. This framing can also justify actions that go beyond the normal boundaries of political practice and conventional political procedures[3].

The emergence of threat in an international crisis therefore depends not only on the objective features of the actor or event. It also depends on how the decision-maker processes relevant information. Psychological approaches and foreign-policy analysis have emphasized several prior dispositions that shape threat perception. These include tension and mistrust, previous experience, shifts in the balance of power, the strategic importance of particular regions, feelings of vulnerability, ideological distance, contingency planning, personal anxiety, and the personality of the decision-maker. Threat assessment is also influenced by beliefs, mental images, biases, identity, theories, and emotions. Attention has consequently shifted from the characteristics of the opponent or event to the way decision-makers process and interpret information about them. Threat should not be treated as a fixed condition once an international crisis begins. It is a perception that can intensify, decline, or change form as events unfold. An analytical distinction can therefore be made between threat perception as an enduring state and threat perception as an immediate experience of

[1] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.

[2] Oren, E. (January 24, 2025). How leaders perceive security dangers: The neglected dimension of unfolding experience. Cambridge University Press. Accessed May 28, 2026. https://h1.nu/1z8ZP

[3] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 37.

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danger. The first reflects a relatively stable belief that a particular actor is dangerous. The second is tied to a specific moment and to the information, events, and actions surrounding it. Mao Zedong's view of the Soviet Union in the late 1960s illustrates this distinction. Mao may have consistently regarded the Soviet Union as a major threat to China. Yet his immediate experience of Soviet danger was not necessarily equally intense at all times. It could rise when new information or actions suggested a possible Soviet attack, decline when circumstances changed or certain measures were taken, and later reappear in a different form. A belief in a threat may therefore persist even while the felt experience of danger changes in intensity and content. This distinction helps explain how a threat develops and escalates during an international crisis. Threat emergence is also connected to the mental content associated with danger. The study of threat perception is not limited to identifying the actor viewed as dangerous. It also asks how danger is experienced and represented in the decision-maker's consciousness. It may appear through inner speech, mental images, or imagined future events. Understanding threat emergence therefore requires attention to the process by which information or an indicator becomes a conscious experience of danger. This issue becomes especially important when the danger is new or inconsistent with earlier expectations. When Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin perceived a new danger from Russia following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the process involved more than the arrival of new information. Russia's behavior was reinterpreted and reclassified in light of the military action, and the new information was incorporated into prior conceptions of danger. This example shows that threat emergence is not determined by information alone. It also depends on how information is organized within the decision-maker's mental framework and transformed into a conscious experience of danger. The experience of danger may also be affected by the salience and vividness of an event, its clarity and interpretability, and the degree to which it conflicts with expectations. A sense of reality, will, control, and emotional involvement also matter. These features help explain why the same event may be perceived as more or less dangerous by different actors, and why the same actor's threat perception may change as events and information change. Threat emergence in an international crisis can therefore be understood as a developing cognitive and experiential process. Information about an opponent or event interacts with the decision-maker's dispositions, beliefs, mental images, and expectations. The result is a conscious experience of danger. That experience is not necessarily stable. Its intensity and content may change as information, actions, and events change, making threat perception a dynamic element of international crisis[1].

2. Surprise in International Crisis

Surprise has received considerable attention in the literature on international crises. It is discussed both as part of crisis definition and as a factor affecting decision-making and foreign-policy behavior. Hermann was especially influential in placing surprise among the core dimensions of crisis, alongside a threat to basic values and limited time for response[2]. Surprise, however, does not take a single form. It may be spatial or temporal. An actor that seeks to use surprise may plan carefully in order to exploit its consequences and ensure the rapid execution of measures prepared in advance.

[1] Oren, E., Op. Cit.

[2] Yang, Y. J., & Bakaki, Z. (n.d.). A review of international organizations and international crises. In Chapter 12. Project MUSE. Accessed June 08, 2026. https://h1.nu/1err9

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Spatial surprise occurs when a crisis begins or escalates in an unexpected geographical location. This can reduce the ability of the parties concerned to prepare in advance or to respond with the required speed and effectiveness. Temporal surprise, by contrast, involves selecting a moment for action or decision that the other party does not expect. Such timing may disrupt the opponent's calculations and affect the speed and effectiveness of its response[1].

Surprise should not, however, be treated as universally appropriate for defining every crisis. International crises involve high levels of uncertainty, especially concerning their direction, future development, and the extent to which they can be controlled[2].

Including surprise in the definition of crisis therefore raises the question of whether it is a necessary condition. Scholars have not reached agreement on this point. Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, for example, identify three defining elements of an international crisis: a perceived threat to basic values, limited time for response, and an increased probability of military hostilities. Surprise is not among these three elements. A distinction should therefore be made between surprise as a characteristic of some crises, or as a factor that affects how decision-makers perceive and manage a situation, and surprise as a necessary condition for the existence of an international crisis. From this perspective, the absence of surprise does not mean the absence of crisis. Some crises develop after earlier indicators and warnings have given decision-makers time to observe developments and prepare for possible escalation. Surprise can thus be treated as an important variable in explaining crisis response without making it a necessary definitional requirement.

Historical cases make this distinction particularly clear. Some international crises are preceded by indicators and information that make it possible to monitor the likelihood of escalation. Others involve a much greater degree of surprise for decision-makers. The existence of prior warning does not eliminate the crisis character of a situation. Likewise, surprise alone is not sufficient to define a crisis. It can, however, affect the level of uncertainty and the degree of preparedness that decision-makers experience when responding[3].

3. Time Pressure and the Capacity to Understand and Make Sense of the Situation in an International Crisis

Time pressure in an international crisis is linked to the nature of the threat and the speed of events. Decision-makers have a limited period in which to adopt appropriate measures before the crisis worsens or the effectiveness of a decision declines. A sudden crisis can further reduce the time available for an effective response. Yet the threat to national interests often requires rapid action. Prior preparation may not be sufficient. Decision-makers are also aware that delay can make an otherwise suitable decision ineffective.

These conditions place decision-makers under severe psychological pressure and may create confusion[4]. Sensemaking becomes more difficult when information is excessive, communication channels are fragmented, and events develop rapidly. Decision-makers must also deal with contradictory signals, a fast-changing political environment, and complex interdependencies that

[1] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.

[2] Close, P. M. (1976). L'incertitude structurelle des crises internationales: Une étude analytique. Études Internationales, 7(3), p. 323.

[3] Yang, Y. J., & Bakaki, Z., Op. Cit.

[4] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.

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obscure causal relationships. Under such conditions, the ability to maintain a shared understanding of the situation becomes a key determinant of effective crisis response.

Resilience engineering therefore emphasizes structures and organizational cultures that support rapid interpretation, decentralized decision-making, and continuous updating of mental models as new information emerges[1]. It also stresses continuing training, crisis anticipation, and the preparation of multiple scenarios and assumptions[2]. These requirements highlight the importance of continuous learning, organizational flexibility, and adaptive capacity under conditions of high uncertainty. Time pressure does more than shorten the period available for a decision. It also affects the decision-maker's ability to organize information, interpret it, and form a coherent picture of the situation. The concept of sensemaking explains how individuals and organizations interpret ambiguous events and coordinate action. Failures in this process can contribute to crisis escalation and expansion at the level of the international system[3].

The amount of time considered short or sufficient during a crisis varies from one decision-maker to another. It also depends on the nature of the crisis. More complex and interconnected crises require more time to understand, assess, and manage. Less complex crises may allow effective decisions and responses within a shorter period[4].

Combining resilience engineering with an international-relations perspective shows that sensemaking is not merely an internal organizational process. It is also relational and political. States, international organizations, and transnational networks must align their interpretations of developing threats in order to coordinate responses, negotiate responsibilities, and avoid escalation. Divergent understandings among actors may produce policy inconsistency, diplomatic friction, and operational delay. These problems are particularly likely in multilateral settings where authority is dispersed and the legitimacy of exercising authority or making decisions is contested. Building resilience therefore requires more than technical and organizational reform. It also requires shared interpretive frameworks that enable actors to manage uncertainty collectively and consistently[5].

II. Stages in the Development of International Crisis and the Dynamics of Crisis Management

Effective international crisis management requires a clear understanding of the stages through which a crisis develops and of the characteristics of each stage. This is especially important because crises are complex and involve overlapping processes. Decision-makers need a coherent view of the crisis trajectory, from the appearance of early indicators through response and confrontation to recovery, management of consequences, and the extraction of lessons[6]. From this perspective, the general course of an international crisis can be divided into three main stages.

A. The Pre-Crisis Stage: Preparedness and Readiness to Confront the Crisis

The pre-crisis stage precedes the full emergence of an international crisis. During this period, indicators and conditions that may lead to crisis begin to appear and take shape. They can be detected

[1] Bilhim, J., Op. Cit.
[2] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.
[3] Bilhim, J., Op. Cit.
[4] Alshammari, A. A. K., Op. Cit.
[5] Bilhim, J., Op. Cit.
[6] Mitroff, I. I., Shrivastava, P., & Udwadia, F. E. (1987). Effective crisis management. The Academy of Management Executive, 1(4), p. 291.

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through monitoring and analytical systems, early-warning mechanisms, diplomatic and intelligence information, reports from international and regional organizations, and other relevant sources. A crisis may develop gradually as tensions and disagreements accumulate among the parties. It may also take shape rapidly after a sudden development, depending on the surrounding circumstances[1].

This stage is also a warning phase because attention is directed toward early signals that may reveal a developing crisis. The central problem is not always the absence of signals. It is often the way they are perceived, interpreted, assessed, and acted upon. Decision-makers may fail to respond to early indicators when they do not regard them as a direct threat to the state's core interests. They may also interpret them through established patterns of relations among the parties. Decisions can remain tied to familiar assumptions and routine practices for managing international disagreements. This can delay the shift from monitoring to preventive or diplomatic action. As the nature of the crisis becomes clearer and tension increases, the need to move toward active response becomes more urgent[2].

Detecting crisis signals and providing early warning are therefore central to the pre-crisis stage. Ian I. Mitroff argued that a crisis sends repeated and continuous warning signals long before it fully occurs. These signals may be detected while prevention or mitigation is still possible. Other scholars have questioned whether such signals always exist or whether they can be identified accurately in advance. Their concern is linked to "hindsight bias," the tendency after an event to overestimate the amount of information that had been available about the threat when decisions were made. The literature nevertheless treats warning signs of an emerging crisis, or of developments that may lead to one, as potentially useful for identifying tension before it worsens. Several terms are used for such indicators, including "weak signals," "wild cards," "early indicators," "early warnings," and "emerging issues."

The importance of these signals reflects the fact that international crises do not always appear suddenly. They may emerge through a gradual process in which tension and warning indicators accumulate. The Crisis Management Institute has similarly noted that many crises develop over time and are preceded by signs that can be detected before the situation becomes a full crisis. Such signals give actors an opportunity to identify changes that may indicate worsening tension. Their existence, however, does not make precise prediction possible. Some indicators may be clear, while others are weak or difficult to distinguish from routine developments in the international environment. They may also be detected too late or assigned the wrong significance. The challenge is therefore not simply to recognize that possible warning indicators exist. It is to detect and interpret them in time and to convert them into assessments that can support appropriate decisions before the crisis intensifies.

Pre-crisis management therefore focuses on identifying signals that may indicate a possible crisis and distinguishing them from ordinary developments in the international environment. This makes it possible to detect changes that point to rising tension or an approaching crisis. Effective early-warning mechanisms must combine technical tools with human capabilities. Technical systems can monitor developments and track relevant changes. Human analysts collect information, assess its

[1] OECD. (2015). The changing face of strategic crisis management. OECD Reviews of Risk Management Policies. OECD Publishing, p. 21.

[2] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 15.

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meaning, connect it to the political, security, and strategic context, and communicate relevant assessments to decision-making centers[1].

Once initial signals are detected, the next task is to estimate the likelihood that they will develop into an international crisis. This requires moving from simple monitoring to analysis of the risks associated with the indicators. Probability can be estimated through several factors, including historical data and time series on events that are similar in type and scale. Risk identification is important because it provides the basis for analyzing the likelihood of an event. Such analysis should take account of geographical and temporal dimensions, as well as the overall scope of the event. Relevant factors include location, range or extent, frequency, duration, magnitude, and intensity.

The likelihood of an event can be analyzed or expressed in several ways. Quantitative measures are often preferred. One simple method is to use the frequency with which a particular event occurs, such as daily, monthly, every six months, every ten years, every fifty years, every hundred years, or every thousand years. More advanced quantitative approaches use historical data, testing, probability techniques, modeling, and simulation. They can also incorporate multiple sets of relevant variables. When the required data are unavailable, a simple qualitative description of the likelihood of an incident is often insufficient, especially when several risks must be considered at the same time. Such descriptions do not provide a clear basis for comparing identified risks or establishing priorities.

Qualitative scales can be used in these situations. They are among the most common methods for estimating risk likelihood. A typical scale includes five categories: very low, low, medium, high, and very high probability. Agreement among experts, supported by survey findings where available, can help assign a risk to one of these categories or estimate an average level. This can support more informed decisions about which risks should receive attention and priority. The method nevertheless remains relatively ambiguous and leaves substantial room for interpretation. The problem is especially clear when cascading effects and interdependencies are involved. The probability of one risk may change because another risk has occurred, or because the vulnerability of the system has changed. Multiple forms of interaction and dependence also mean that historical data alone are not sufficient. Future events may follow causal paths and relationships that differ from those observed in the past.

These difficulties are particularly evident in cybersecurity and critical infrastructure, where real operational testing of existing infrastructure may be difficult. Modeling and simulation therefore provide practical methods for studying interdependencies and testing possible cascading effects. The likelihood of any event is also not fixed. It may change over time as social, environmental, demographic, technological, and other conditions change. Risk analysis should therefore identify the main drivers of change, monitor accelerating trends, and define the time horizon of the assessment clearly. It should also acknowledge uncertainty in the evidence on which probability estimates are based. Such uncertainty can be addressed through methods such as sensitivity analysis, the precautionary principle, and probabilistic models, depending on the type and quality of available data[2].

[1] Paraskevas, A. (n.d.). Mitroff's five stages of crisis management. SAGE. Accessed June 16, 2026. https://h1.nu/1e5hi

[2] Pursiainen, C., Op. Cit., pp. 20-21.

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Risk assessment during the pre-crisis stage is therefore not limited to estimating the probability of a particular event. It also requires an understanding of possible threats, their interactions, and their cascading effects. This is particularly important when the crisis is novel and/or transboundary. A broader approach is then needed. It should develop a shared view of the nature of threats and their possible trajectories. A multi-hazard and multi-threat framework can include new and emerging threats as well as existing vulnerabilities. Assessments should also be updated regularly to reflect changes in the international environment. They should identify interdependencies, possible cascading effects, and critical tipping points that could influence the course of the crisis.

A comprehensive approach also requires the exchange of information and risk assessments among the relevant actors. This can create a broader picture of potential threats and their direction of development. It can also strengthen coordination and cooperation, particularly at the international level and with neighboring states. Building such a shared understanding requires cooperation across disciplines and institutions. Available data, information, and specialist expertise on hazards and threats should be combined with knowledge of the relevant political, security, economic, and technological contexts. The goal is to produce integrated risk analysis and to identify emerging threats and the factors that may intensify them.

Decision-making bodies must also understand the results of risk analysis and incorporate them into strategies for preparedness, prevention, and response. Coordination mechanisms at national and international levels are therefore essential. They support information exchange and the integration of efforts among the relevant parties. They also strengthen the ability to detect crisis indicators and address them before they develop into a large-scale international crisis[1].

B. The International Crisis Response Stage: Confronting the Crisis and Managing Its Course

The response stage is the second stage of an international crisis. At this point, the crisis has moved beyond the pre-crisis phase and has become an immediate situation confronting decision-makers. From this point onward, the crisis has effectively begun[2]. In some cases, identifying the crisis is straightforward. In others, its existence or nature may be ambiguous and contested, which makes perception and classification more difficult[3].

During this stage, the existing situation directly shapes decision-making. Events accelerate and may depart from normal routines. The leader's role expands and expectations increase, turning the crisis into a clear test of leadership[4]. This is particularly true when core values are threatened, decision time is limited, and uncertainty is high. Yet these conditions do not automatically create a sense of crisis. That also depends on how the actors perceive and interpret the situation[5]. Once the situation is recognized as a crisis, a sequence of related events begins to develop. Decision-makers must then establish appropriate mechanisms for controlling and managing it.

[1] OECD. (2015), Op. Cit., p. 24.
[2] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 15.
[3] Pursiainen, C., Op. Cit., p. 97.
[4] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 15.
[5] Pursiainen, C., Op. Cit., p. 97.

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In some international crises, decision-makers seek to establish a central point of control[1]. This helps coordinate the response and manage the interactions generated by the crisis according to its scale and severity. It does not necessarily mean the immediate use of force. Crisis management may instead require a political-strategic approach that combines different forms of power, pressure, and deterrence. It may also involve using the other party's vulnerabilities at an appropriate moment in order to protect state interests and reduce the risk of escalation. Chile's 1997 National Defense Book reflects this political and limited understanding of crisis conflict. It gives negotiation priority over the use of force. Force, when necessary, is treated as an instrument that supports deterrence and pressure. It also states that the interests at stake in a crisis should have a value that allows compromise. This distinguishes crisis from forms of conflict in which the contested interests cannot be settled or conceded. Crisis management therefore cannot be reduced to the military dimension. It is primarily concerned with managing political and strategic interaction among the parties, while military instruments may be used within that framework when the situation requires them.

This form of management requires arrangements that can translate political and strategic decisions into coordinated action. The form of those arrangements depends on the crisis and the actors involved. When a crisis includes a military dimension, a "crisis cell" may lead the response and coordinate operational maneuver. The forces involved can then receive the instructions and training needed to apply rules of engagement, which in some contexts are known as "critical-event cards". These arrangements support disciplined implementation and reduce the risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation.

A crisis is not always initiated by one of the two direct parties in order to obtain a specific advantage. A third party may attempt to create a crisis between two other actors for its own benefit. It may do so when its interests cannot be achieved by other means or when achieving them without a crisis would be more costly. Analysis of international crisis dynamics must therefore consider the wider network of interactions among the parties. Crisis management may extend beyond the direct relationship between the two principal actors.

Uncertainty and risk remain inherent in the crisis stage because its trajectory is not predetermined. Escalation or de-escalation depends on the decisions and interactions of the parties. Structures and mechanisms are therefore needed to influence the direction of the crisis. Their purpose may be to keep it within manageable limits or to create the conditions for movement toward another stage, whether war, settlement, or peace. Management must be rapid, timely, coordinated, and deliberate[2]. This allows decision-makers to respond to new developments, assess available options, and adjust their actions as the balance of interaction changes. The identification of an international crisis therefore depends not only on the threat or the events themselves. It also depends on how decision-makers define and frame the situation.

A situation may be presented as a crisis in order to emphasize urgency and justify exceptional measures or new policies. Conversely, because the term "crisis" carries negative implications, decision-makers may prefer other labels and may keep the situation within ordinary political and strategic procedures. The media, political opposition, and public opinion can also shape crisis perception and place pressure on decision-makers to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation.

[1] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 15.

[2] Harvey, H. V., Galecio, A. B., & Rubilar, A. G., Op. Cit., p. 137.

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Media coverage may influence both official and public assessments of severity and urgency. The initial framing of a problem therefore affects how the situation is described and how its seriousness is evaluated. It can consequently shape later political and strategic responses. Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell describe such disagreement as a "framing contest." The dispute may concern the importance of the crisis, its causes, responsibility for it, or the most appropriate response. This dimension is especially important in international crises because parties may interpret the same event differently and disagree about whether it threatens their interests, security, or international standing. Karl E. Weick's concept of sensemaking is relevant here. Weick argues that crises are not always perceived as clear and self-contained facts. Their meaning is also produced through actors' interpretations, assumptions, and efforts to make sense of surrounding developments.

A decision-maker in an international crisis cannot know in advance exactly what they will face or what consequences will result from their decisions. Decisions therefore rely on assumptions and interpretations that may themselves affect the development of the crisis. Actions do not simply respond to an existing situation. They can also reshape that situation and alter its trajectory, especially under uncertainty. Weick argues that it is a mistake to assume that a situation automatically determines the appropriate action. The actions and decisions of the decision-maker also help define the nature and direction of the situation[1].

International crisis management thus becomes an interactive process. Managing developments and intervening in them occur at the same time. Management is not limited to responding to existing threats. It also involves coordinating the decisions and actions taken in relation to them. This becomes even more important when a crisis crosses national borders and involves multiple institutions and actors. Effective management then depends on the ability to exchange information and coordinate responses. Such coordination can create a more integrated understanding of crisis developments and reduce conflicting assessments and actions.

In transboundary international crises, it becomes increasingly important to involve central government and higher-level authorities from the early stages. Mechanisms are also needed to allow a rapid shift from local to national response when the scale of the threat increases or when developments require it. Clear institutional and legal frameworks should define the relationship between local response and national strategic involvement. Effective mechanisms for information exchange, policy coordination, and timely decision-making are equally important, especially when information is incomplete and possible outcomes remain uncertain.

International crisis management also requires leadership that can coordinate a broad network of actors with different roles, interests, and forms of expertise. This requires sufficient authority and flexibility to use the capacities of different institutions within a coordinated response. When many parties are involved, crisis-management centers and operations rooms become particularly important for organizing decisions and information flows. Transparent information sharing and an integrated picture of crisis developments can support agreement among the actors concerned. They can also help determine appropriate intervention strategies and coordinate the allocation of resources.

International crisis management is therefore not limited to direct action against a threat. It also includes coordination across institutions and expansion of response capacity when the scale of the

[1] Pursiainen, C., Op. Cit., pp. 97-99.

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crisis exceeds initial estimates. Successful management depends on mechanisms that can mobilize additional resources and capabilities when needed. It also requires mutual assistance among regions and institutions and interoperability among resources and equipment. These arrangements strengthen the capacity to manage transboundary crises in a coordinated and effective manner[1].

This perspective includes several factors that affect how the situation is interpreted and how the response is selected. These factors include decision-makers' perceptions of other actors' intentions, available information about their motives and calculations, the influence of public opinion on political positions, and the psychological dimensions of perception and interaction during the crisis. Once a situation is defined as a crisis, decision-making shifts from ordinary political routines to a more concentrated and urgent form. The need for speed arises from limited time and uncertainty about how the situation may develop. Crisis management therefore begins not only with action against a threat but also with the definition of the situation, assessment of its seriousness, and identification of response requirements. This view is consistent with Hermann's analysis of foreign-policy crises. It confirms the importance of threat perception, limited decision time, and surprise in shaping a crisis and directing decision-makers' responses. These dimensions become particularly important under conditions of high pressure and uncertainty about possible developments[2].

C. Crisis De-escalation and the Post-Crisis Stage: Recovery and Reconstruction

The de-escalation and post-crisis stage is a central part of the crisis-management cycle. Attention shifts from containing the crisis and controlling its immediate consequences to addressing its effects and restoring normal conditions. This stage also involves evaluating the experience and drawing lessons for the future. A government's inability to manage a crisis and its negative consequences may damage its credibility and political standing. It may also create difficulties in relations with other governments. Effective management, by contrast, can reduce actual damage and may even create certain advantages. The experience should therefore be evaluated so that each crisis contributes to better management of future crises[3].

International crises do not end suddenly simply because their intensity declines. They are often followed by extended processes that involve assigning responsibility, addressing the effects of the crisis, and taking measures to resolve issues that caused the crisis or worsened during it[4]. Decision-makers should use the post-crisis period to evaluate the experience and identify capacities that need to be strengthened for future crises. This includes the ability to determine critical thresholds, assess worst-case scenarios, and examine alternative solutions. It also requires identifying the principal crisis trigger, whether an event, an actor, or a government, identifying parties that may benefit from the crisis, and anticipating the situation that may emerge after it ends. Learning from crisis therefore goes beyond drawing general lessons. It requires evaluation of preparedness, response, and control measures, identification of weaknesses, and development of the capacities needed for future crisis management[5].

[1] OECD. (2015), Op. Cit., p. 33.
[2] Pursiainen, C., Op. Cit., pp. 5-6.
[3] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., pp. 15-16.
[4] Olsson, E.-K., & Verbeek, B. A., Op. Cit., p. 333.
[5] Isyar, O. G., Op. Cit., p. 16.

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Crisis learning remains a complex, multilevel strategic process because many parties and actors are involved. Different actors may draw different lessons from the same crisis according to their interests, perceptions, and experience. In line with the concept of crisis exploitation, a crisis may create an opportunity to revive or strengthen certain reforms. Other actors may resist changes that conflict with their interests. Institutional reform or change does not, however, necessarily demonstrate genuine learning. Meaningful learning requires openness, trust, and a willingness to reconsider earlier decisions and policies. These conditions can be difficult to achieve when political contestation is intense, interests conflict, and actors exchange blame and responsibility[1].

The post-crisis stage is also concerned with responsibility for outcomes and with accountability, especially when the crisis causes major political, economic, or humanitarian losses. Trust among the parties may be affected by decisions taken during the crisis or by uncertainty about responsibility for its development and consequences. The transition to the post-crisis stage can also become more difficult when one party is perceived as having acted without transparency, concealed important information, or failed to explain its decisions and positions adequately. Clear explanation of how decisions were made and visible accountability are therefore important elements of this stage. They can reduce continuing political tension and help create conditions for rebuilding trust among the parties.

Clear communication that a crisis is ending is also important. A reduction in tension does not necessarily mean that the underlying causes have disappeared or that the issues that produced the crisis have been resolved. A crisis may move from escalation to negotiation or de-escalation while sources of tension remain. It may also re-emerge if core issues are left unresolved or if the parties send inconsistent messages about their intentions and future positions. Political and diplomatic communication should therefore make de-escalation clear. This can reduce uncertainty and anxiety about future outcomes, bring the emergency-response phase to an end, and support a transition toward settlement and management of the crisis's effects. In turn, this helps create the conditions for restoring stability.

Recovery from an international crisis is an extended process that goes beyond the end of escalation. It includes managing the effects left by the crisis, resolving issues that remain unsettled, and rebuilding damaged conditions and relationships. Depending on the nature and scope of the crisis, recovery may address humanitarian, economic, political, and security consequences, as well as damage to infrastructure or institutional capacity. Recovery is therefore not completely separate from crisis management. It is an extension of it, during which the parties move from containment to the management of long-term consequences and effects[2].

Recovery becomes more difficult when a crisis is international or transboundary because many actors are involved, their interests differ, and the effects are interconnected. Recovery may therefore require coordination among states, international and regional organizations, and other relevant bodies. Such coordination can support common assessments of damage and needs, establish intervention priorities, and reduce duplication or conflict among different efforts. Early planning for the post-crisis stage is also important because it allows a gradual and organized transition from containment to recovery and reconstruction.

[1] Olsson, E.-K., & Verbeek, B. A., Op. Cit., p. 333.

[2] Pursiainen, C., Op. Cit., p. 128.

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In the recovery context, the joint role of the European Union, the United Nations, and the World Bank can be highlighted in helping states recover from crises related to conflicts and natural disasters. Their work includes understanding crisis causes, assessing damage and losses, and identifying recovery needs and priorities. This cooperation aims to avoid multiple and disconnected assessment and planning processes. It also seeks to improve coordination between national efforts and international support through shared methodologies. Two prominent examples are Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments (RPBAs) and Post-Disaster Needs Assessments (PDNAs).

These methodologies have been applied to situations arising from earthquakes, storms, droughts, conflicts, and epidemics. Their use reflects the broad scope of international cooperation in assessing crisis effects and identifying recovery requirements. RPBAs focus on identifying and sequencing priorities for recovery and peacebuilding, supporting dialogue and stakeholder participation, and coordinating international assistance. The process consists of connected stages that begin with pre-assessment, continue through the assessment itself, and conclude with validation of the results. The outcome is a set of recovery priorities, estimated costs, and an appropriate framework for implementation and financing.

A Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) focuses on analyzing the effects of crises and disasters, estimating damage and losses, identifying recovery and reconstruction needs, and developing an integrated recovery framework and mobilizing the necessary resources. The three partner institutions have also developed the Disaster Recovery Framework (DRF). It supports prioritization, sequencing, and planning by defining a recovery vision, principles, policies, and institutional, financial, and implementation arrangements[1].

The move beyond an international crisis is not limited to physical and institutional recovery. It also involves learning. This learning should not be confined to the post-crisis stage. It is an extended process that overlaps with all phases of the crisis-management cycle. Experience from earlier crises can influence risk assessment and preparedness, while knowledge accumulated during and after a crisis can improve later response and management. Learning is therefore directly related to risk assessment, which relies on historical data and experience to identify risks and estimate their likelihood. Failure to record, document, and preserve such experience creates a weakness in the learning process. This can reduce the quality of future risk assessment and crisis management. An earlier crisis may also reveal new risks or previously overlooked dimensions of existing risks. Such experience can then be incorporated into future assessments[2].

Careful analysis of past experience, including what worked and what failed in a particular context, can provide useful lessons for states, international organizations, and other actors involved in crisis management. It can also facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience among them. Information collected during the crisis and lessons drawn from it should therefore be organized, documented, systematized, preserved over the long term, and disseminated. These practices support mutual learning, improve methods of international crisis management, and strengthen the use of scientific advice in decision-making and crisis response.

[1] European Commission. (n.d.). Post-crisis assessments and recovery planning. European Commission. Accessed June 22, 2026. https://h1.nu/1edt6

[2] Pursiainen, C., Op. Cit., pp. 146-147.

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Recording and sharing previous experience is especially important for rare or unusual international crises, where accumulated expertise may decline over time. Cross-border networks for knowledge and experience exchange can help preserve it. States and international organizations can also build institutional memory among decision-makers, crisis managers, and advisers. Mutual learning may form part of shared strategies for producing and using scientific advice in crisis management, especially among interconnected states or countries facing similar challenges and crises.

Learning is therefore not limited to drawing lessons after an international crisis has ended. Accumulated knowledge and experience can be used to assess risk, improve preparedness, strengthen coordination and response mechanisms, and increase the capacity to manage future international crises[1]. The de-escalation and post-crisis stage is therefore more than the end of crisis response. It is a transition toward recovery, reconstruction, reform, and learning. This transition can address weaknesses revealed by the crisis, improve management mechanisms, and strengthen the ability of states and international institutions to confront future crises.

The three-stage model used here should not be treated as the only suitable model for analyzing the development of international crises. Some crises may require more detailed frameworks, while others may be better examined through simpler ones. The choice depends on the characteristics, complexity, and multidimensional nature of the case under study. The value of the present model lies in its coherent analytical structure. It brings together major elements needed to understand an international crisis, makes it possible to trace its stages, and supports analysis of the factors that influence its trajectory. It can therefore assist in anticipating possible directions of development.

CONCLUSION

International crises are an inherent feature of the international-relations environment. They are also a central subject for understanding interaction among international actors. The way decision-makers confront, contain, or de-escalate crises is therefore an important part of foreign-policy decision-making. The manner in which a crisis is managed can affect a state's interests, international standing, and both its domestic and external relations.

The analysis of the international crisis concept shows that multiple definitions and different theoretical approaches do not prevent the identification of several recurring elements in the literature. The most important are the perception of a threat to basic values or interests, limited time for response, and high levels of pressure and uncertainty. Surprise is also important in explaining some crises and can affect how decision-makers perceive and respond to them. It should not, however, be regarded as a necessary condition in every case.

The analysis of crisis stages and crisis management also shows that the diversity of international crises does not prevent the construction of a general theoretical framework for management stages. Such a framework should not be presented as the only valid model or as universally applicable. It is better understood as an analytical structure that helps trace crisis developments and connect one stage to another. This can support a more integrated understanding of the crisis, the selection of suitable responses, the limitation of its effects, and the extraction of useful lessons.

[1] OECD. (2018). Scientific advice during crises: Facilitating transnational co-operation and exchange of information. Report. Accessed June 29, 2026. https://h1.nu/1yopw

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An international crisis should therefore not be understood as a fixed and linear path. It is a dynamic and interactive process that changes with the level of threat, the development of information, the behavior of the actors involved, decision-makers' perceptions, and the options available to them. Effective management requires stronger capacities for monitoring warning indicators, collecting and analyzing information, developing scenarios for possible trajectories, and adapting to changes that may occur across different stages.

Cumulative knowledge is therefore essential to the study of international crises. It supports not only conceptual understanding of their characteristics and dynamics but also the development of approaches and models adapted to the specific features and context of each case. Better understanding of crisis causes, indicators, and possible trajectories can improve response and reduce the likelihood and scope of escalation. The broader objective is to strengthen the capacity to manage international crises in ways that reduce the risk that they develop into wars or prolonged conflicts. Experience gained from previous crises can also be used to support peace, stability, and security at regional and international levels.

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