



Escalation Dominance Is a Flawed Framework

By

Katerina Canyon

The argument for “escalation dominance” as a cornerstone of US deterrence policy, presented in Joe Buff’s recent *Global Security Review* article, relies on outdated Cold War logic that fails to address the complexities and ethical considerations of today’s global security environment. While the premise of maintaining deterrence is essential, the emphasis on overwhelming military capability as a panacea for geopolitical challenges is both dangerous and counterproductive.

Buff asserts that the US must invest heavily in full-spectrum military capabilities to deter adversaries. However, history shows that militarization alone often escalates tensions rather than resolving them. For instance, the Cuban Missile Crisis—a frequent example in escalation dominance arguments—was resolved through diplomacy, not military action.

President John F. Kennedy and Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev’s willingness to negotiate behind the scenes prevented catastrophe. This underscores the need for diplomacy as a primary tool of deterrence, rather than relying solely on military might.

The concept of escalation dominance inherently invites an arms race. If the Americans aim for superiority at every “rung” of the escalation ladder, adversaries will predictably respond by developing their own capabilities, leading to a dangerous spiral of militarization.

This is evident in the ongoing nuclear arms race with Russia and China, where both nations responded to American advancements with their own. Far from ensuring security, this creates an unstable environment where miscalculation or miscommunication can lead to catastrophic conflict.

Buff’s advocacy for relentless dominance neglects the immense human and ethical costs of prolonged conflict. The destruction in Ukraine serves as a stark warning of the devastation that unchecked militarization can bring. Escalation dominance does not account for the millions of civilians who suffer in war zones, the refugees who flee their homes, or the global economic and environmental impacts of sustained conflict. A more humane approach prioritizes conflict prevention through diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and economic development.

The article frames restraint as synonymous with appeasement, a reductive argument that misrepresents modern security strategies. Restraint does not mean inaction—it means carefully measured responses that avoid unnecessary escalation while maintaining credibility.

The assumption that adversaries only understand brute force disregards the nuanced motivations behind their actions. Engaging adversaries through dialogue and understanding, rather than confrontation, is often a more effective way to address their concerns and reduce hostilities.

The push for escalation dominance ignores the domestic consequences of prioritizing military spending over critical needs like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Buff argues that America’s survival depends on overwhelming military capability, yet the true strength of a nation lies in the well-being of its people. Allocating resources to address systemic inequalities and bolster resilience at home is a more sustainable approach to national security than pouring trillions into the Pentagon.



Rather than focusing solely on military dominance, the US should adopt a balanced approach to deterrence. It should incorporate four major objectives.

First, diplomacy should always be the first option. Prioritizing dialogue and international cooperation to resolve conflicts must always precede conflict and escalation.

Second, arms control is a necessary component of national strategy. Reinvigorating arms control agreements to reduce the risk of catastrophic war and rebuilding trust with adversaries is a must.

Third, humanitarian engagement is core to American foreign policy. Addressing root causes of instability, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change, through global partnerships, can prevent conflict.

Fourth, smart defense spending is critical to an affordable defense. Invest in modern, cost-effective defense strategies while reallocating excess military funds to domestic needs is important for the nation.

Buff's call for escalation dominance reflects a worldview that prioritizes power over pragmatism and ignores the interconnected realities of the 21st century. True security comes not from the constant threat of overwhelming force, but from fostering global stability through cooperation, understanding, and sustainable policies. The US must resist the temptation to revert to Cold War thinking and instead embrace strategies that build a more peaceful and equitable world.

Katerina Canyon is the Executive Director of the Peace Economy Project. The views expressed are her own.