



By

Brandon Toliver

Katerina Canyon's op-ed, "From Deterrence to Diplomacy: Why Nuclear Dominance Is a Dangerous Illusion," calls for restraint and diplomacy rather than a robust nuclear arsenal. While her concerns over escalation risks and humanitarian impacts have merit, her critique mischaracterizes the robust, empirical arguments in "[From Deterrence to Dominance: Strengthening US Nuclear Posture in a Shifting World](#)."

Peace in international affairs is not a natural state; it is actively maintained through strength. As [Winston Churchill](#) famously noted, true peace is achieved not by retreating from power, but by wielding it wisely.

Today, with China rapidly modernizing its conventional and nuclear forces and Russia pursuing territorial ambitions backed by nuclear threats, a kinder and gentler approach risks inviting greater aggression. Only a credible deterrence posture—grounded in empirical evidence and historical lessons—can secure strategic stability.

Reinforcing American nuclear dominance is not about favoring conflict over diplomacy; it is about ensuring that American deterrence is strong enough to compel respect and maintain global order in an increasingly volatile world.

First Things First

American nuclear weapons serve as a cornerstone of deterrence, preventing strategic attack and reassuring allies. This element of deterrence is under pressure as China and Russia rapidly expand their arsenals, and North Korea advances its capabilities, creating a complex, multipolar threat environment.

The primary point in the original article was the need to reestablish American nuclear dominance—not as a provocation but as a stabilizing force. In an era of rising threats and eroding deterrence, a more robust and flexible nuclear posture is essential to prevent conflict, assure allies, and preserve global security.

Misreading the Nature of Nuclear Dominance

A primary claim presented by Canyon is that advocating for nuclear dominance is tantamount to seeking advantage through expansion, thereby increasing the risk of catastrophe. This is a misrepresentation of evidence. The call for dominance is not about reckless arms racing or seeking victory in nuclear war. Rather, it is about ensuring that the United States' nuclear posture is credible, flexible, and resilient enough to deter adversaries in a world where the old rules no longer apply.

The Cold War's doctrine of [mutually assured destruction \(MAD\)](#) worked because both sides fielded survivable second-strike capabilities and clearly communicated those capabilities to the other. Today, China and Russia are modernizing and diversifying their arsenals at a pace not seen since the 1980s. [China's warhead stockpile](#) surpassed 600 in 2025 and is projected to double by 2030. Russia, meanwhile, maintains the world's largest [inventory of non-strategic](#)

[nuclear weapons](#)—estimated at 2,000 warheads—many of which are integrated into conventional military operations, as seen in Ukraine.

Dominance in this context means closing critical gaps—like the absence of credible theater-range nuclear options—and ensuring that American extended deterrence is not just theoretical, but practical and adaptable to new threats.

Historical Lessons: Arms Races and Escalation

Invocation of the Cold War arms race is erroneously used as a cautionary tale, suggesting that any move toward dominance will inevitably provoke adversaries and increase the risk of miscalculation. History is more nuanced.

The most dangerous moments of the Cold War—Berlin (1961) and Cuba (1962)—were not the result of American dominance but of [perceived weakness, ambiguity, and miscommunication](#). The 1980s nuclear buildup, while expensive, ultimately contributed to the Soviet Union’s willingness to negotiate arms reductions (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)) from a position of mutual strength. As former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger noted, “[Deterrence is not about parity; it’s about credibility and resolve.](#)”

Moreover, the post–Cold War era of American nuclear restraint did not prevent Russia’s annexation of Crimea, China’s militarization of the South China Sea, or North Korea’s nuclear breakout. A senior research professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee, asserting that “[adversaries exploit perceived gaps](#) in US resolve and capability, not its strength.”

The Risks of a Passive Posture

Canyon argues that modernizing or expanding American nuclear capabilities—such as the SLCM-N or space-based interceptors—will only accelerate a global arms race. Yet, the data show that adversaries are already racing ahead, regardless of American action.

[Nearly 95 percent of Russia’s nuclear triad is modernized](#), with new hypersonic and dual-capable systems. [China](#) is rapidly fielding road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), ballistic missile submarines, and hypersonic glide vehicles. [North Korea bolsters over 50 nuclear weapons](#) with growing missile survivability and regional reach.

Iran was advancing toward a nuclear threshold, with uranium-enrichment activities previously nearing weapons-grade levels. In response, the United States launched a preemptive strike targeting Iran’s key nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. American officials framed the operation as a limited, precision action designed to neutralize an imminent threat and prevent a larger, more destructive regional war.

By acting before Iran could cross the nuclear threshold, the US aimed to avoid a future scenario in which multiple states—particularly Israel—might engage in broader, uncoordinated military campaigns. The strike also sent a calibrated message intended to deter further escalation while leaving diplomatic channels open.

Iran’s ballistic missile arsenal remains one of the largest in the region, and its proxy network, coordinated through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force, continues to operate across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

The US, by contrast, faces delays and budget overruns in its own modernization efforts and lacks credible theater-range nuclear options in both Europe and Asia. This is not dominance; it is vulnerability.

Diplomacy and Arms Control: Not Mutually Exclusive

Canyon calls for a return to arms control and diplomacy, citing the expiration of New START in 2026. Diplomacy is essential, but history shows that arms control only works when backed by [credible deterrence](#).

The most successful arms control agreements (Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT), INF, START) were negotiated when the US held a position of strength. The collapse of the INF Treaty and the uncertain future of New START are not the result of American intransigence but of Russian violations and China's refusal to join trilateral talks. As the Congressional Research Service notes, "Arms control is not a substitute for deterrence; it is a complement to it."

Alliance Cohesion and Forward Deployment

The suggestion that forward-deploying nuclear assets makes allies "targets, not safer" is textbook pacifist propaganda. This ignores decades of alliance management and empirical research. Extended deterrence—backed by visible, credible, American capabilities—has prevented proliferation in Japan, South Korea, and NATO for generations.

A [2023 RAND study](#) found that allies are more likely to pursue their own nuclear options if they doubt American commitments. Forward deployment, joint planning, and regular consultations are essential to alliance cohesion and nonproliferation. The United States' nuclear umbrella extends to over 30 allied and partner nations, primarily within [NATO](#), but also including countries like Australia, Japan, and South Korea. These nations are assured of American protection, including potential nuclear response, in case of attack.

Economic Trade-offs: Security and Prosperity

Context is key. Canyon points to the \$1 trillion cost of nuclear modernization over 30 years, suggesting these funds would be better spent elsewhere. This figure represents less than 5 percent of projected defense spending over that period, and less than 0.1 percent of gross domestic product annually. The cost of deterrence is dwarfed by the potential costs of conventional war should deterrence fail. Small conflicts like Afghanistan and Iraq cost over \$7 trillion. The cost of a war against China would be far higher.

National strength is not a zero-sum game between security and social spending. The credibility of US leadership—and the stability it underwrites—enables the very prosperity and global order that supports education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

Public Opinion and Global Norms: A Reality Check

Canyon's claim that "most Americans and the global community favor arms reduction" lacks empirical rigor. Sweeping generalizations like this demand robust, replicated data across diverse populations. Without that, such assertions are more rhetorical than factual.



In contrast, multiple credible surveys reveal consistent public support for deterrence and defense. For example, a November 2022 poll found that 60 percent of Americans believe the military's primary role is to deter attacks on the US. A national survey showed that a vast majority of voters view nuclear deterrence as critical to national security, with nearly three-quarters supporting modernization efforts.

The 2023 NATO Annual Tracking Survey found that 61 percent of allied respondents believe NATO membership reduces the likelihood of foreign attack, and 58 percent see it as a deterrent. In Germany, 64 percent support a European nuclear deterrent independent of the US, reflecting growing concern over strategic autonomy.

Another poll reported that 69 percent of Americans feel defense spending increases their sense of security. These data points underscore a clear trend; public opinion, in the US and Europe, favors credible deterrence over disarmament, especially amid rising threats from China, North Korea, and Russia. This is the factual foundation that reinforces the case for maintaining and strengthening American nuclear capabilities, not as a provocation, but as a stabilizing force in an increasingly volatile world.

The Real Existential Threats

Extreme weather events, natural disasters, pandemics, and mass displacement are among today's gravest challenges. Yet, using these non-nuclear crises to justify a softened stance on nuclear deterrence is like comparing apples and oranges. Even the most intelligent and well-informed individuals sometimes fall into the trap of an "either-or" debate, mistakenly assuming it is only possible to address one threat or the other.

Multiple risks demand simultaneous attention. Credible nuclear deterrence is not an overreaction; it is a precise, vital response to a threat that, if unleashed, would compound other crises and shatter global stability.

Conclusion: Dominance as Responsible Leadership

Canyon's critique is a masterclass in wishful thinking, a dangerously naive philosophy that would lead the free world to ruin if ever implemented. It stems from a misplaced comfort with notions of restraint and diplomacy, ignoring the hard reality that security is founded on military strength. History, from the catastrophic failures of appeasement in the 1930s to the isolationism preceding Pearl Harbor, teaches that weakness only emboldens tyrants. Each concession, whether to Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland or to modern-day aggressors, proves that diplomacy without credible force is nothing more than indulgence.

The current global landscape is dominated by adversaries who respect only strength. Russia, under its neo-imperialist regime, wields its vast nuclear arsenal to bolster conventional aggression. China's unprecedented military modernization is reshaping the balance of power in Asia, and Iran continues its relentless march toward nuclear capability while sponsoring proxy terror. To imagine that these regimes would respond to soft words or empty promises is akin to believing that a repeatedly misbehaving child will learn simply by being put in timeout. Real change is forced change.

American strength, particularly through a robust nuclear deterrent, is not a provocation; it is the only language these adversaries understand. It ensures that any aggressive action exacts a price too steep to consider. In an increasingly perilous world, where the stakes are nothing less



than the survival of global stability, a commitment to maintaining unparalleled military dominance is both pragmatic and essential. Ignoring this reality is not idealism, it is willful blindness that invites disaster.

Brandon Toliver is a Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies.