

## The Escalation Trap: Robert Pape's Perspective on What Great Powers Should Be Concerned About

Nazmul Islam Mahmud<sup>1</sup>



Escalation Trap/Robert A. Pape/Image/X

***Some Great Powers fall into the Escalation Trap, and it costs them.***

This lens on escalation, from the perspective of UChicago Professor Robert A. Pape, focuses on the denial-versus-punishment dynamic, the logic of asymmetric resolve, and the constructed nature of credibility. That signals when and how escalation goes off the rails, and what conditions decision-makers must also pay attention to before they take any escalatory step.

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<sup>1</sup> Nazmul Islam Mahmud is a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). He is an International Relations graduate from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). His research interest revolves around in the critical and interpretive aspects of the political discourses focusing on state security and sovereignty.

This framework of great power behaviour follows a pattern. That is the escalation of a conflict, having convinced the involved state that it possesses the instruments of decisive coercion to make even a limited goal into a commitment to survival.<sup>2</sup> This ends up hardening the resistance of enemies, provoking third-party opposition, pushing back against the nation's society, and using resources faster than one can sustain. This is the escalation trap; that is not merely the danger of mistaken calculations, which is mentioned briefly in the international relations discourses, but a characteristic feature of great powers' thinking about the use of force when they perceive themselves to be in a position of strength.<sup>3</sup>

The escalation issue isn't that it's always bad. In history, it's strong rhetoric or the threat of it worked towards the compliance of an opponent. But the situations in which it does work are much more limited than the talk of escalation assumes. A lack of these fails to occur, and great powers that don't simply fail to do well, they create new instabilities. They invite counter-escalation.<sup>4</sup> They establish precedents that undermine the credibility of subsequent threats. They generally arouse the nationalistic sentiments in the nations that are unable to unite for political purposes. And often find that what they received was an existential provocation, that what they thought they received was a calibrated signal.

It is the presupposition in practice to determine what political methods are likely to serve political ends, and what ones are not. Over the course of a long career of empirical and theoretical research, covering decades of time, Professor Robert Pape has assembled the appropriate and comprehensive set of tools available to make the distinction.

### **Pape's Framework: Coercion & Denial**

Professor Robert Pape's key claim to strategic coercion literature is an argument that is, at first glance, surprisingly straightforward, but has profound and significant consequences. According to Pape, there are three ways military (and, in particular, air power) is supposed to get the targets to comply with punishment, risk, and denial.<sup>5</sup> Capital punishments, sanctions, and attacks on economic infrastructure have been aimed at civilian populations and the civilian economy in order to increase the price that these populations or leaders must

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<sup>2</sup> Prof Robert Pape, "The Escalation Trap Goes Mainstream," Substack newsletter, *Escalation Trap*, May 13, 2026, <https://escalationtrap.substack.com/p/the-escalation-trap-goes-mainstream>.

<sup>3</sup> Prof Robert Pape, "What the Escalation Trap Actually Means," Substack newsletter, *Escalation Trap*, March 19, 2026, <https://escalationtrap.substack.com/p/what-the-escalation-trap-actually>.

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Pape, "Empire Falls," *The National Interest*, no. 99 (2009): 21–34.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Cornell University Press, 1996), <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=xHZnTAPQFc8C&oi=fnd&pg=PP11&dq=info:VvkfgiCivOEJ:scholar.google.com&ots=IM05zMhLm-&sig=AFMiaSIfskWUyghLUJkuCA0RBas>.

pay to sustain the struggle until their governments fall.<sup>6</sup> Risk strategies include a progressive approach that moves to a punishment, with a view to getting concessions, using the threat of future harm. The denial strategies aim to attack the enemy's military power and to stop or destroy the enemy's military instruments for achieving the objectives of the enemy's war. Based on data from actually used strategic attacks from World War II to the Gulf War, Pape draws a conclusion that directly goes against current assumptions that underlie great power escalation doctrine. Punishment strategies are the most intuitive form of escalatory pressure, which is the least effective.<sup>7</sup> To the extent that their populations are being overrun or their economies are being devastatingly asymmetric, such societies do not urge their leaders to hand over. They are much more likely to embrace their leader, to put down dissent, and are more likely themselves to fuel action in the national resistance. This is a familiar pattern in the history of Allied bombing in Germany, the American bombing of North Vietnam, and many other subsequent instances. If great powers take it upon themselves to inflict pain on civilian targets in the name of political gain, the fact is that the evidence does not support their presumption of human psychology.

What succeeds with the denial mechanism is the exact reverse of what fails on the other mechanism. Denial strategies force an opponent to fight on a pliant platform or to simply continue to fight. Denial strategies do not leave the opponent an option, because to keep fighting, it would be a futile or militarily difficult path. The price of fighting isn't too high, but the goal of gaining from the conflict is no longer attainable. There is a direct implication of this for the decisions on whether to escalate made by great powers. Great powers that escalate to make it easier for them to punish their enemy are not just wasting resources, but they are making a worse political settlement.<sup>8</sup>

Pape's subsequent writings on suicide terrorism bring in a complementary argument relevant in other respects to the escalation trap on a different level. Suicide terrorism has not much to do with religious extremism, but instead is a result of foreign military occupation.<sup>9</sup>

When a group feels that they are being strongly opposed by a military force, their way of

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<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Pape, "Coercion and Military Strategy: Why Denial Works and Punishment Doesn't," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 15, no. 4 (1992): 423–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399208437495>.

<sup>7</sup> Pape, "Coercion and Military Strategy"; Robert A. Pape, "Contributor: Killing an Enemy Leader Often Escalates Conflict and Chaos," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2026, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2026-03-01/iran-khamenei-assassination-strategy-tactic-warfare>.

<sup>8</sup> Pape, "Coercion and Military Strategy"; Arham Online, "Inside the 'Escalation Trap': What Robert Pape's Theory Reveals about the Iran War - Region - World," *Ahram Online*, accessed May 17, 2026, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/564051.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), <https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=17992221962070692178&hl=en&oi=scholar>.

trying to get them to leave is to cause as many casualties as they can within the group and thereby involve the military in the deaths of civilians.<sup>10</sup> It is imperative for the military that domestic casualties do not occur, so if it does, it is a rational way by which they try to force their adversary to withdraw. Its implication for the escalation is so deep that when great powers escalate (into further territory, or into military consolidation over populations who perceive it as an occupation), the conditions for the growth of asymmetric retaliatory capacity arise. The plan for the escalation is to make it a victory; it leaves the ground ready for long-term and expensive insurgency.

### **Variables used in Escalation Decision**

Based on Pape's analysis, an analysis of the dynamics of escalation would have to model a series of independent variables and intervening variables that would affect whether escalation indeed would have the intended coercive effect. The dependent variable, coercive success, has to be precisely defined as well. But according to Pape, a definition based on political results is that coercion works when someone coerces their opponent to make a concession that the coercer would also prefer in advance of them obtaining a total military triumph.<sup>11</sup> This is important because it distinguishes between those situations where a great power is victorious in battle, but at costs (in terms of lives, natural resources, etc.) that outweigh the strategic importance of the victory, and those in which the use of force or threat of force altered the enemy's behaviour in a manner that ensured the maintenance of the controlling states' political position.

The remaining variables are independent and critical. Both of them in the first place, related to the coercion mechanism that is used. Therefore, as detailed above, in a comparison of outcomes by case history (which is always relevant for any subject), denial strategies will outperform punishment strategies.<sup>12</sup> Construction of such a study to test escalation decisions would therefore require coding of each escalatory decision made on the basis of whether the decision was primarily military or civilian/civil economic, and recording its result.

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<sup>10</sup> Pape, *Dying to Win*; Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=qZuXdUgb1gsC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=info:syaz3fZVcOsJ:scholar.google.com&ots=gpnWSURYaB&sig=n-cYV09KhEAGw39W1\\_sfl9TmZIM](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=qZuXdUgb1gsC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=info:syaz3fZVcOsJ:scholar.google.com&ots=gpnWSURYaB&sig=n-cYV09KhEAGw39W1_sfl9TmZIM).

<sup>11</sup> Pape, *Bombing to Win*; Robert A. Pape, "The Limits of Precision-guided Air Power," *Security Studies* 7, no. 2 (1997): 93–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419708429343>.

<sup>12</sup> Pape, "Coercion and Military Strategy."

The second is the enemy's reaction, which is handled by Pape as a function of how much the defending party's 'stakes' are perceived.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the inequality of interests that is often the subject of great power contact and confrontation with smaller powers comes to the study center of interest. The opponents of the great powers tend to be the ones where the stakes are greater, in that the conflict is existential, dealing with the survival of the nation, the survival of their territory, or the survival of the regime. The great power may be engaged in the same relationship but for different reasons, such as its reputation, alliance credibility, or resource stakes. This imbalance of risk generates a built-in imbalance in determination; that is, the other side will bear expenses that are not commensurate with the big power's determination. Study of the decisions to escalate should include a measure of this spread before an estimate of the likelihood of coercive success can be made.

The third factor is the organisation of the opposition's political system, in relation to its ability to bring civilian pain to the political arena.<sup>14</sup> This is because democracies are faced with coercive punishment at a higher rate than authoritarian regimes. Because their citizens are held accountable by a population that has to pay the costs of the war. Thus, the punishment mechanism is even less likely to work when there is a national level of suffering of the people, and the escalation against an authoritarian state grouping is not met with political consequences for the leadership. It can deflect these consequences by claiming that this escalation demonstrates the external threat and thus helps bind society into its loyalty. For instance, although it might seem counterintuitive, violence in response to authoritarian regimes and their leaders will help to reinforce the very regimes and leaders to which great powers wish to impose.

The fourth variable is third-party behaviour. That is the behaviour of the states that are not directly involved in the conflict, but whose decisions will have an impact on the strategic environment.<sup>15</sup> There is a strong argument that great power escalation most often will not happen in a geopolitical void. An escalatory threshold is crossed by a great power; allied powers must determine how to continue their support for the power, neutral powers must determine whether they can serve as a haven or offer any assistance to the opponent, and rival great powers must determine whether or not they will use the situation to their own advantage. This escalation may have local rational effects in the perception of the escalating

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<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Pape, "When Duty Calls: A Pragmatic Standard of Humanitarian Intervention," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 41–80.

<sup>14</sup> Pape, "When Duty Calls"; Pape, "Contributor."

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Pape, "It's the Occupation, Stupid," *Foreign Policy* 18, no. 18 (2010): 447–56; Pape, "When Duty Calls."

power, but have systemic effects that alter its strategic balance against it. While selecting the target of the escalation assessment, a thorough study of the escalation should be conducted that considers the likely response of important third parties.

Finally, the domestic political power base of the escalating great power itself to bear the burden of a protracted confrontation has been largely overlooked.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, a consistent focus on the limits to what might be possible both from a resource dynamic and thus in the political logic of using coercive force, and subsequently, a different approach to military force, which is the presence or fighting by the sea, but an approach that would not extend any limits. Escalation traps are particularly likely for great powers that must overreact to ensure their actions gain global attention against the adversary, but not strong, lasting support at home to ensure that their force is strong enough to deny an opponent's military capability.<sup>17</sup> The suffering ends, and the deadlock becomes intractable, and both sides continue to suffer, with neither side gaining an outright victory nor a rout.

### **How Great Powers Fail to Read Escalation Threshold**

A critical development that Pape's framework provides is not only one he doesn't express but one that he does express. The strategic understanding is not to be taken for granted anymore. But it must be built up out of a series of separate elements of information, rather than from first principles or inherited form. It is no coincidence that they are feeling this way; rather, it is actually a form of methodological preference. It is a statement informing about the nature of knowledge, providing assessments for escalation decisions, and explaining why this knowledge often fails.

The transition from one step to another in the drive to escalate isn't quite as methodical as it sounds. They see them as institutions within institutional cultures, doctrine, and history, which bring a predisposition to them towards certain views of the operation of force. For an example of how a doctrine may persist despite the lack of empirical support, in the U.S. Air Force, there were long-term doctrinal commitments to strategic bombing that seemed to have been discredited by empirical evidence of World War II, but were still hung on the wall decades later because the Air Force's identity, budget, and bureaucratic position had been built around them.<sup>18</sup> There was no institutional setting for discussing punishment bombing as an open empirical question as to whether or not it modified the behaviour of

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<sup>16</sup> Pape, "When Duty Calls"; Robert A. Pape, "The True Worth of Air Power," *Foreign Aff.* 83 (2004): 116.

<sup>17</sup> Pape, "Contributor"; Pape, "What the Escalation Trap Actually Means."

<sup>18</sup> Pape, "The True Worth of Air Power"; Pape, "What the Escalation Trap Actually Means."

any adversary. Pape's criticism of punishment policy, therefore, is also a criticism regarding the authority and the abilities of great powers. He asserts that what they know, which could mean knowing very little or even nothing, but only re-performing what is conveniently held in their institution.<sup>19</sup>

The intersubjective nature of deterrence itself is also socially constructed, building on and in continuity with institutional bias. In international conflict, a threshold is not an actual line or fixed point, but rather a perception shared, more or less tacitly, that is always debatable and that allows the expectation of a qualitatively different reaction if crossed.<sup>20</sup> Such understandings are established through precedent, by signaling, by commitments of alliance, and by the ongoing and ever-unfulfilled efforts of diplomats, intelligence agencies, and political leaders to understand what is happening in real time in the midst of uncertainty. Successful strategies rely inevitably on some degree of reading each other's signals. That means, actors are reading each other. And as he finds, the signals great powers believe they're sending, and those their adversaries are reading are often different.

This miscommunication mismatch, which occurs when the sending party is unclear about the part of the receiving party, is one of the most critical parts of the escalation trap. One of the great powers that grows out of and signifies strength may really indicate weakness. Strike action, thought to be a measured warning, can be interpreted as the beginning of a campaign of annihilation.<sup>21</sup> A threat that appears to make acquiescence unworthy of the effort could also leave the adversary with the sense that they will ultimately be ruined if they don't concede, boosting the pressure on them not to enter into a negotiation any longer. Both sides are reading each other in ways that are not necessarily due to faulty intelligence or bad luck. They are predictable results of each side's reading of the other's behavior in the context of each culture's strategies, experiences, and politics.

This recognition is directly methodological with respect to a study that is intended to evaluate the decision of escalation, because it can no longer limit the analysis to the intentions and possibilities of the escalating power. It must also put together the clock reading or game sense of the other side. That is a grasp of its own interest, how it reads signals of the growing power, and how much external pressure is needed to produce tangible political concessions rather than electrical and accommodation concessions of a tactical

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<sup>19</sup> Pape, "Coercion and Military Strategy."

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 7-45; Arham Online, "Inside the 'Escalation Trap.'"

<sup>21</sup> Pape, "The Escalation Trap Goes Mainstream"; Pape, "Contributor."

nature, followed by further resistance. One way this can be done is in the comparative historical approach implemented by Pape and the process tracing approach, which can be applied to individual cases. But the key is to demonstrate that escalation is a process of communication in a socially-organized context and not a one-way use of physical body power.