

THE ESCALATION LADDER

*Ten Levels of Strategic Coercion to Influence,
Constrain and Compel Before Conflict*

THE TWO MASTERS

Sun Tzu built his art around a single elegant proposition: compel submission before a siege or a blockade becomes necessary. His hierarchy is famous: defeat the enemy's strategy; break his alliances; defeat his army in the field; and only as a last resort, besiege fortified cities. That fourth step carries a judgement, not merely a sequence. For Sun Tzu the siege is the point where art ends and ordinary human brutality begins: the thing he despised. His ladder is therefore also a scale of cost: the more coercive the instrument, the greater the strategic price paid by the one who wields it.

Clausewitz arrives at the same terrain from the opposite direction. He never set out a formal ladder of coercion, because avoiding battle was not his subject. War, for him, is an act of force intended to compel the enemy to do our will, and the commander's task is to concentrate pressure on the adversary's centre of gravity. Blockades and sieges appear in his work as operational tools: force-consuming, justified only when the political object demands them.

Between the two lie the poles of the argument. Sun Tzu: winning without fighting remains the highest form of strategy. Clausewitz: coercion is employed to compel political will, whatever the issue is for either side. Contemporary competition requires both propositions at once: the first as an aspiration, the second as a description of what actually happens when the first fails.

THE ESCALATION LADDER

TEN LEVELS OF
STRATEGIC COERCION
TO INFLUENCE,
CONSTRAIN, AND COMPEL
BEFORE CONFLICT

ESC-1 | DETERRENCE

ESC-2 | STRATEGIC SIGNALING

ESC-3 | SURVEILLANCE

ESC-4 | HARASSMENT

ESC-5 | INTERDICTION

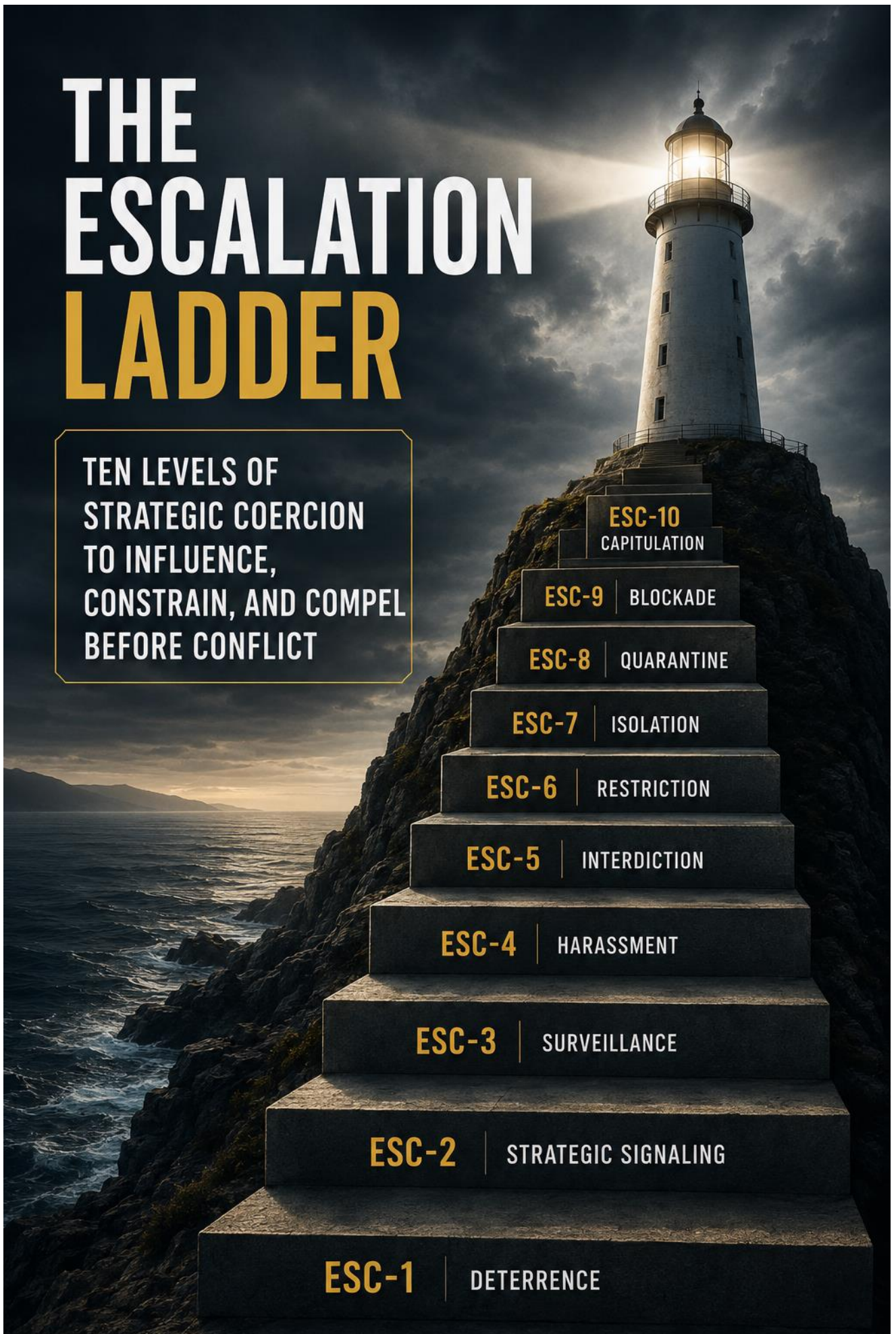
ESC-6 | RESTRICTION

ESC-7 | ISOLATION

ESC-8 | QUARANTINE

ESC-9 | BLOCKADE

ESC-10
CAPITULATION



THE GREY ZONE

The twenty-first century has widened the space they were arguing over. Between peace and war there now exists a broad grey zone in which states compete continuously through sanctions, cyber operations, naval presence, information campaigns and pressure on chokepoints without crossing the threshold of open conflict. We possess a precise vocabulary for declared war and almost none for this, which is a practical problem and not merely a semantic one: an instrument that cannot be named cannot be calibrated, and a rung that has no number is difficult to agree not to climb. That is what the framework proposed here is meant to supply: Strategic Coercion Escalation, or ESC.

FROM DEFCON TO ESC

DEFCON 5, normal readiness; DEFCON 4, increased vigilance; DEFCON 3, increased military readiness; DEFCON 2, one step below nuclear war; DEFCON 1, maximum readiness and imminent nuclear conflict

DEFCON measures our own military readiness. ESC measures the degree of coercion imposed upon an adversary.

One is an inward-facing posture a thermostat, describing a condition rather than an act. The other is directed outward: it is the strategic and tactical instrument that decides whether a confrontation climbs toward war, and therefore onto the DEFCON scale, or is settled below it, with the adversary laying down his weapons before ever using them. The two scales also run in opposite directions, which is worth noting for anyone tempted to conflate them.

DEFCON descends toward danger; ESC ascends toward it. A state can sit at DEFCON 4 while imposing ESC-8 on another, and frequently does — which is precisely the condition the grey zone describes.



THE ESC LADDER

ESC	STRATEGIC COERCION	TYPICAL OBJECTIVE	INTENSITY
ESC-1	Deterrence	Prevent action	■
ESC-2	Strategic Signalling	Demonstrate resolve	■■
ESC-3	Surveillance	Collect intelligence & exert pressure	■■■
ESC-4	Harassment	Increase operational cost	■■■■
ESC-5	Interdiction	Interrupt selected movements	■■■■■
ESC-6	Restriction	Limit access to infrastructure or trade	■■■■■
ESC-7	Isolation	Separate politically and economically	■■■■■
ESC-8	Quarantine	Control all authorised access	■■■■■
THRESHOLD OF WAR <i>below: coercion</i> <i>above: acts of war</i>			
ESC-9	Blockade	Deny movement almost entirely	■■■■■
ESC-10	Capitulation	Achieve political submission	■■■■■

ESC-1 — Deterrence

Deterrence is the only rung that succeeds invisibly. Its objective is to prevent an action before it is seriously contemplated, and its evidence is a negative: the thing that did not happen. Cold War nuclear deterrence between NATO and the Warsaw Pact remains the reference case. Neither bloc fired, because both had correctly priced the consequence and crucially each believed the other's pricing. That is the hidden requirement of this rung. Deterrence is not a function of capability but of credibility: a capability the adversary does not believe you will use deters nothing, while a modest capability backed by demonstrated willingness deters a great deal. It is therefore the cheapest rung and the hardest to hold. It costs almost nothing while it works, and it is impossible to prove that it is working; each quiet year tempts the deterring power to economise, and each economy erodes the credibility on which the rung rests.

ESC-2 — Strategic Signalling

Signalling begins the moment prevention requires demonstration. The objective is to communicate resolve without initiating hostilities to make a commitment legible. The American and allied naval deployments across the Indo-Pacific in 2021 and 2022, with carrier strike groups operating alongside partner navies and freedom-of-navigation operations transiting contested waters, are the clean example: nothing was fired, no cargo was stopped, and the message was nonetheless unambiguous. Presence is the one language that is rarely misread. The difficulty of the rung lies in its symmetry. A signal must be visible enough to be received and calibrated enough not to be read as preparation for attack; the same carrier that reassures an ally threatens an adversary, and the sender controls only half of that. A signal that is ignored is worse than none at all, because the coercing power must then either climb or quietly forfeit its position on ESC-1.

ESC-3 — Surveillance

Surveillance is the first rung on which the instrument does two jobs at once. Persistent ISR collects the intelligence that every rung above it requires, and its visibility exerts pressure by itself: an adversary who knows he is watched continuously must assume his movements, communications and routines are known. The sustained American effort around Venezuela through the second half of 2025 illustrates both functions. It ran alongside strikes and seizures against vessels off the Venezuelan coast, and on 3 January 2026 it culminated in the capture of Nicolás Maduro and his wife in Caracas by more than two hundred special operations personnel an operation made possible only by months of pattern-of-life collection, and one whose legality under international law remains contested. Surveillance is thus the quiet rung

on which the violent ones depend, and the one whose escalatory significance is most consistently underestimated by its target.

ESC-4 — Harassment

Harassment raises the adversary's operational cost without engaging him. Nothing is denied outright; everything simply becomes slower, dearer and less certain. Russia's campaign against Ukraine between 2014 and early 2022 is the textbook case: cyberattacks against power grids and government systems, GPS interference degrading civil and military navigation, maritime pressure in the Sea of Azov and around the Kerch Strait, and cyclical troop concentrations on the border that compelled repeated mobilisation at ruinous cost. Each element was individually deniable and collectively corrosive. This is the rung on which the grey zone is most fully exploited, because harassment is engineered to remain below the threshold at which allies feel obliged to respond. Its characteristic failure is habituation: a campaign sustained long enough ceases to be read as escalation and begins to be read as background — which is precisely how February 2022 caught so many observers unprepared.

ESC-5 — Interdiction

Interdiction interrupts selected movements rather than all of them. Its distinction from the rungs above is legal and political as much as operational: a specific cargo, a specific hull, a specific transaction is stopped, and everything else proceeds. Baltic inspections and the tracking of sanctioned shadow-fleet tankers work on this principle: states board or detain individual vessels on grounds of registration, insurance or safety documentation, without asserting any claim over the sea lane itself. The advantage is precision and deniability of intent: the coercing power can insist it is enforcing law rather than imposing coercion. The disadvantage is that selectivity is exhausting. Every

interception demands evidence, legal grounds and physical assets, while an adversary with enough hulls can absorb the losses as an operating expense. Interdiction pressures at the margin; it rarely decides.

ESC-6 — Restriction

Restriction narrows the conditions of access rather than the fact of it. Movement remains possible, but only on terms the coercing power sets and the terms tighten. Large-scale PLA exercises around Taiwan operate on exactly this logic: declared closure areas, live-fire zones, rerouted air corridors, and insurance premiums that climb with each announcement. No blockade is declared and no vessel is turned away, yet civil and commercial movement is progressively conditioned. The elegance of the rung is that it transfers the decision to the target's commercial actors: shipping lines and airlines withdraw of their own accord, and the coercing power obtains partial closure without accepting responsibility for it. It also functions as rehearsal. Each exercise normalises a degree of interference and establishes the procedures for the next, so that the step to ESC-8 requires no new capability — only a decision.

ESC-7 — Isolation

Isolation separates the target politically and economically rather than physically. North Korea is the clearest modern case: decades of diplomatic exclusion, removal from correspondent banking and dollar clearing, technology export controls, and layered United Nations and national sanctions. What the case demonstrates is that the instrument is slow and its political yield uncertain. Pyongyang has been isolated for a generation and has not modified the behaviour the isolation was designed to change; it has instead constructed an economy, and a political identity, around the condition itself. This is the characteristic

risk of the rung. Isolation imposes real costs on a population while handing a regime both an explanation for its failures and a justification for consolidating control. It works best as pressure applied toward an available exit, and worst when no exit is offered.

ESC-8 — Quarantine

Quarantine controls all authorised access. Kennedy chose the word deliberately in October 1962, precisely because a blockade is an act of war under international law and a quarantine, as a term of art, is not a distinction that gave Moscow room to withdraw without formally submitting. Cuba illustrates the rung again in 2026, though the instrument has changed entirely. Following the intervention in Venezuela, Washington moved to cut the island's oil supply, threatening tariffs and sanctions against any country selling or transporting oil to Cuba; Mexico suspended its shipments in January. The result has been the effect of a quarantine achieved without a cordon of warships: diesel and fuel-oil stocks exhausted by May, sustained blackouts, rationed transport, aviation fuel suspended. Financial and commercial chokepoints have replaced the destroyer line. The rung is unchanged; only the instrument has been dematerialised and with it, much of the political cost of climbing.

ESC-9 — Blockade

Blockade denies movement almost entirely, and 2026 removed it from the realm of scenario. On 28 February, following American and Israeli strikes on Iran and the killing of Ali Khamenei, Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz; the Revolutionary Guard confirmed on 2 March that passage was barred to unfriendly states and permitted only to Iran-approved vessels, enforcing it with radio warnings, boardings, attacks on merchant shipping and sea mines. A strait that had carried roughly a quarter of the world's seaborne oil and a fifth of its LNG emptied within

days. Two features deserve attention. First, the rung was climbed by the weaker party: blockade belongs to whoever controls the geography, not to whoever commands the larger fleet. Second, it was answered in kind the United States opened an air campaign to reopen the strait on 19 March and imposed its own naval blockade of Iranian ports on 13 April. Blockade against blockade produced submission on neither side, only a shared and compounding cost. That is the ladder's central warning made literal.

ESC-10 — Capitulation

At the final rung the objective is no longer to influence behaviour but to obtain political submission. It is also the rung at which the coercing power ceases to act upon a situation and begins to inherit it. Venezuela shows the inheritance: having removed Maduro, Washington announced it would run the country until a transition could be arranged, thereby assuming responsibility for essential services, security and the shape of any durable settlement. Iran shows the alternative failure. In early March the American president declared there would be no deal except unconditional surrender capitulation named as the explicit objective and five months later the strait remains contested, negotiations intermittent, and submission no nearer. ESC-10 is the most expensive rung on the ladder and the least reliable. Which is precisely Sun Tzu's point about the siege: arriving there is not the culmination of strategy but the admission that strategy has run out.

CONCLUSION

The Strategic Coercion Escalation framework illustrates that modern power competition rarely begins with missiles or tanks. It begins with signals, surveillance, restrictions and isolation and most confrontations are settled on those lower rungs, before anyone reaches for a weapon.

Three consequences follow. The ladder is not a staircase one is obliged to climb: each rung is a decision, and each carries a cost that rises faster than its coercive yield. It can be climbed from both ends at once, as Hormuz demonstrates, in which case escalation ceases to be an instrument and becomes a condition that neither party controls. And its instruments are dematerialising: a quarantine that once required destroyers is now imposed through tariffs, insurance and correspondent banking, which lowers the threshold for climbing while making the climb far harder to read from the outside.

The state that best manages escalation applying sufficient pressure to compel political change while avoiding uncontrolled conflict will most often achieve Sun Tzu's highest objective: to prevail before the first shot is fired. The state that climbs without a plan for descending discovers Clausewitz's: that force, once committed, obeys a logic of its own rather than the political will that released it.

F R A N K

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