Forceful Persuasion

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Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War

Alexander L. George

Foreword by Ambassador Samuel W. Lewis

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Foreword

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, most of the world condemned the invasion but few nations recommended immediate military action to redress the situation. Instead, the major powers, acting through the United Nations, concluded that the best approach would be to pursue a policy that combined diplomatic efforts with the threat of force. Accordingly, the UN Security Council passed several resolutions that first imposed economic sanctions and then authorized the use of military force to roll back the Iraqi aggression.

Such a policy, called coercive diplomacy by eminent political scientist Alexander George, refers to a defensive strategy that attempts to persuade an opponent to stop or undo an aggressive action. This strategy involves the threat of force or a limited exemplary use of force as a means of restoring peace in a diplomatic crisis. The hope is that these measures will lead to a diplomatic solution that will save lives in the long run by avoiding a much greater use of force later.

In the case of the Gulf crisis, unfortunately, coercive diplomacy did not succeed; Saddam Hussein did not withdraw from Kuwait and the U.S.-led coalition eventually decided to launch a full-scale war against Iraqi forces. But coercive

diplomacy has had its successes, most notably during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. And it continues to be an alluring strategy for policymakers because it offers the possibility of avoiding war (if it is successful).

In discussing coercive diplomacy, George distinguishes it from both blackmail—the use of threats to persuade an opponent to give up something without resistance—and deterrence—the use of threats to dissuade an opponent from taking an action not yet initiated. And the efficacy of coercive diplomacy can be enhanced by offering positive inducements along with punitive threats, as President Kennedy did towards the end of the Cuban missile crisis by secretly offering to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

In this cogent analysis, George first briefly describes the theory of coercive diplomacy and then examines seven examples of U.S. diplomacy that span the globe. In addition to the cases mentioned above, he discusses the oil embargo imposed on Japan just before Pearl Harbor, the threats of military intervention during the Laos crisis of 1961–62, the use of limited air strikes against North Vietnam in 1965, efforts to undermine the Sandinista government in the 1980s, and the April 1986 air attack on Libya. He concludes by analyzing the usefulness and limitations of coercive diplomacy.

It should be emphasized that coercive diplomacy is only one of several tools that nations can employ in seeking to restrain or resolve international conflict. It works well in some situations; in others it is ineffective or inappropriate. *Forceful Persuasion* should better enable us to distinguish the former situations from the latter.

Samuel W. Lewis, President
United States Institute of Peace

Preface

Coercive diplomacy, as it is defined in this study, is a strategy that is sometimes employed by policymakers in the hope of securing a peaceful resolution of a serious dispute. Because some readers may regard "coercive diplomacy" as an infelicitous and unfortunate term, it may be useful to explain that it is employed here because it does convey that threats are sometimes employed as an instrument of peaceful diplomacy and that the strategy of coercive diplomacy offers an alternative to reliance on military strategy in a dispute with other states. It may strike some readers as incongruous that coercion could contribute to maintaining or restoring peace in a diplomatic crisis. But it must be recognized that sometimes threats can be combined with diplomatic efforts to persuade an opponent to stop or undo his effort to alter a status quo situation that itself endangers the peace or, as in the case of the recent Persian Gulf crisis, already involves naked military aggression.

The response of the United States and the Security Council to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait has aroused new interest in coercive persuasion as a possible way of achieving diplomatic objectives without having to resort to war. The employment of economic sanctions against Iraq, strongly reinforced in

November 1990 by a threat to engage in military action if necessary, qualifies as an example of the strategy of coercive diplomacy. In the end, coercive diplomacy failed and war followed. The possibility that the strategy of coercive diplomacy could provide a peaceful alternative to war was stretched to the limit in the Gulf crisis. A better understanding of why this was so can be gained by viewing the effort to employ coercive diplomacy in the Gulf crisis from the perspective of the analytical framework provided in this monograph and by comparing the Gulf crisis with previous crises in which the strategy of coercive diplomacy was employed.

My interest in studying coercive diplomacy precedes the Persian Gulf crisis by twenty-five years. It was aroused in the early spring of 1965 when I was asked by the president of the RAND Corporation, Frank Collbohm, to comment on a thesis advanced by an Air Force general which held that U.S. air power had not succeeded in intimidating North Vietnam's leaders in March-April of that year because it had not been properly employed. In this connection the general objected to the limited use of air power as part of a weak strategy of graduated escalation, but, it seemed to me, he conveyed no understanding or appreciation of the political and diplomatic constraints that had led President Johnson to rule out bolder use of air power in a stronger variant of coercive diplomacy. The general's thesis appeared dubious to me also because I sensed that conditions for a stronger, possibly effective type of coercive persuasion had not existed in this case. To test my hunch I compared the effort to use limited U.S. air attacks against North Vietnam as a means of trying to persuade its leaders to accept the demand that they cease support for the Viet Minh in South Vietnam with President Kennedy's successful use of threats of force in 1962 to persuade Nikita Khrushchev to remove his missiles from Cuba. Comparing the two cases helped me to identify a number of conditions present in the Cuban missile case that seemed to have contributed to successful coercion on that occasion. The

absence of the same conditions in the Vietnam 1965 case seemed to be part of the explanation for the failure of coercive persuasion on that occasion. However, the conclusions I drew from the comparison of the two cases were highly provisional, because both the conceptualization of coercive diplomacy and the methodology that I employed were rudimentary.[1]

While at RAND I became interested in improving methodology for studies of this kind. The task was a challenging one: How can one study past crises in order to draw useful lessons? And how can one aggregate and cumulate the findings of such case studies into a form of policy-relevant theory, or what some prefer to call "generic knowledge," about the uses and limitations of strategies such as deterrence and crisis management as well as coercive diplomacy? Over a period of years I eventually developed a set of methodological procedures for this purpose that I call the "method of structured, focused comparison."[2] (I mention this here because I have employed a version of this method in the present study.) To this end in 1966, while still at RAND, I initiated a research program, "Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy." I continued and expanded this program of studies after I joined the faculty at Stanford University in 1968.

At Stanford I soon undertook, with two collaborators, a somewhat more systematic study of coercive diplomacy, this time elaborating a fuller, more satisfactory conceptualization of the abstract theory of coercive diplomacy. We studied the Cuban missile crisis and Vietnam cases in much more detail than in my initial effort at RAND, and we added a third case on President Kennedy's use of coercive persuasion in the Laos crisis of 1961–62.[3] It would have been desirable, but was not possible on that occasion, to have included additional historical cases in which coercive diplomacy was attempted. Still, comparing two cases in which the strategy succeeded (Laos and Cuba) with one case in which it did not (Vietnam

1965) gave us a good start in identifying various conditions which, if present in a particular case, favored successful persuasion and which, if absent, contributed to its failure. Also, the marked differences among the three cases enabled us to identify several different variants of the strategy of coercive diplomacy (the "try-and-see" and the "ultimatum") and to identify various constraints on the choice and implementation of a particular form of the strategy.

Finally, and perhaps most important, this early study enabled us to see the need to make a sharper distinction between an abstract theory and various strategies of coercive diplomacy, a distinction that is more fully developed in the present study. The 1971 study emphasized particularly the difficult task that policymakers face in trying to formulate a strategy of coercive diplomacy that fits the peculiar configuration of each situation in which it is to be employed. In discussing this task of "operationalizing" the general model of coercive diplomacy we called attention to some of the risks and uncertainties of the strategy.

Since it was published in 1971, this treatment of coercive diplomacy has withstood reasonably well the test of time and the critical scrutiny of other investigators, some of whom have drawn upon it, and others who have made helpful suggestions for improving the understanding of strategies of coercive persuasion. For some years, however, I have felt the need to update the 1971 study and increase the number of historical cases included. A brief update of the earlier study is offered in this slender volume because, as the recent Persian Gulf crisis indicates, interest in the uses and limitations of the strategy of coercive diplomacy is by no means confined to academic specialists but can at any time unexpectedly become a preoccupation and priority for policymakers. A study of the failure of coercive diplomacy against Saddam Hussein is included in this volume and can be better understood, I believe, by the comparison provided with other cases in which that strategy was successful.

Although the present study builds to a considerable extent on the 1971 volume, the inclusion of four additional cases and the opportunity to reconsider, refine, and elaborate both the abstract model of coercive diplomacy and generic knowledge regarding conditions affecting the efficacy of this strategy should make it more useful both for scholars and policymakers than the 1971 study. In the present study a much sharper distinction is drawn between abstract theory and generic knowledge. Additional variants of the strategy are identified and a richer body of generic knowledge is provided.

Finally, several caveats must be stated. First, generic knowledge of coercive diplomacy remains provisional and incomplete. It will and should continue to be refined with the study of additional historical cases and further reconsideration of the seven included in the present study. Second, to study coercive diplomacy and to refine knowledge of it is not to advocate its use. As will be seen, this strategy is highly context-dependent; not only are many variables imbedded in any particular situation that influence the results, but policymakers can expect to encounter important uncertainties and risks in attempting to use it. It is hoped that this study will assist policy analysts to make a more discriminating and accurate diagnosis of situations in which coercive diplomacy might be employed so that they can judge whether it is likely to be a viable option in a particular situation. It must be recognized that coercive diplomacy is a beguiling strategy insofar as it offers an attractive possibility for achieving one's objective without having to rely on force. However, the very act of engaging in coercive diplomacy strengthens one's commitment on behalf of the objective, engages further one's reputation and prestige, and makes it difficult not to take additional action if the effort to intimidate the opponent fails.