

The United States and Coercive Diplomacy

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edited by Robert J. Art
and Patrick M. Cronin



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Foreword

ALEXANDER L. GEORGE

Coercive diplomacy (or *compellence*, as some prefer to call it) employs threats of force to persuade an opponent to call off or undo its encroachment—for example, to halt an invasion or give up territory that has been occupied. Coercive diplomacy differs, therefore, from the strategy of deterrence, which involves attempts to dissuade an adversary from undertaking an action that has not yet been initiated.

Coercive diplomacy is also different from use of military force to reverse an encroachment. Coercive diplomacy seeks to persuade the adversary to cease its aggression rather than bludgeon him with military force into stopping. In coercive diplomacy, one gives the opponent an opportunity to stop or back off before employing force against it. Threats or quite limited use of force are closely coordinated with appropriate diplomatic communications to the opponent. Important signaling, bargaining, and negotiating components are built into the strategy of coercive diplomacy.

Coercive diplomacy is an attractive strategy insofar as it offers the possibility of achieving one's objectives economically, with little if any bloodshed, and with fewer political and psychological costs than warfare exacts and with less risk of conflict escalation. There is all the more reason, therefore, to take sober account of the difficulties this strategy encounters.

The concept of coercive diplomacy is converted into a specific strategy tailored to a particular situation only when the policymaker decides four important questions: (1) what to demand of the adversary; (2) whether—and how—to create in the opponent's minds a sense

of urgency to comply with the demand; (3) how to create and convey a threat of punishment for noncompliance with the demand that is sufficiently credible and potent enough in the adversary's mind to persuade the adversary that compliance is more in its interest than facing the consequences of noncompliance; and (4) whether to couple the threatened punishment with positive inducements—a "carrot"—to make it easier for the adversary to comply.

It should be obvious that the more far-reaching the demand on the opponent, the stronger will be its motivation to resist—and the more difficult the task of coercive diplomacy. Depending on the answers the policymaker gives to the second and third questions, there will be significantly different variants of the strategy. The three major variants are (1) the *ultimatum*, explicit or tacit, in which a deadline is given for compliance backed by a credible threat of strong punishment; (2) the weaker *gradual turning of the screw*, in which a sense of urgency for compliance is diluted and backed only with the threat of incrementally severe punishment over time; and (3) the even weaker *try-and-see* variant of the strategy that lacks both urgency for compliance and a clear threat of strong punishment for noncompliance.

On many occasions during the Cold War and since, U.S. policymakers have attempted coercive diplomacy against different adversaries. The present study analyzes and compares eight important post-Cold War cases. The editors, Patrick Cronin and Robert Art, have produced an exemplary study that adds significantly to our understanding of the uses and limitations of this strategy. They recruited exceptionally talented scholars to undertake each case study and these individuals responded by producing incisive, sophisticated analyses.

In the opening and closing chapters, Robert Art produces a major elaboration and refinement of the theory and practice of coercive diplomacy. He finds that the eight new case studies generally support the major findings of earlier research on the Cold War cases. In addition, many important new insights are offered that greatly enrich understanding of the complex challenges and limitations as well as the uses of this strategy under different circumstances.

Among the many important contributions of this new study sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace, only a few will be mentioned here. Art provides an incisive, multisided analysis of the difficulties that may undermine the target's willingness to comply with demands made by the coercing state. Thus, the case studies show that the target may be quite concerned about the effect of allowing itself to be coerced on its credibility and its power stakes. If it gives in to the coercer's demand, the target may worry whether this will be the last demand or only the first in a series of demands. Moreover, accepting the coercing power's demands is seldom cost-free in terms of its implications for the target's remaining power. For example, when the United States attempted to set up representative councils in Somalia in March 1993, Mohammed Farah Aideed, the most powerful of the local warlords, realized that to agree would mean a loss of territory under his control and hence a reduction in his power. Similarly, Iraq and North Korea both faced a considerable weakening of their power position if they complied with U.S. demands to stop programs for acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

This volume emphasizes that it becomes more difficult to achieve coercive diplomacy when there is more than a single state employing that strategy and more than a single target. In five of the cases examined (Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Somalia, and North Korea), the coalition engaging in coercive diplomacy may have been united in its goal but often divided on the means to achieve it. In such cases, as Steven Burg notes in his case study of Kosovo and Bosnia, the actions to hold a coalition together can degrade the effectiveness of its effort. In Somalia, the faction led by Ali Mahdi Mohammed cooperated more with the United Nations than did the stronger faction led by Aideed, who viewed the United Nations' actions as hurting his interests and benefiting Mahdi's. This set the stage for the armed confrontation between the UN forces and Aideed's supporters that led to the collapse of the UN mission in Somalia.

The United States and Coercive Diplomacy highlights the fact that the targets of coercion often develop "countercoercion" techniques that constrain the coercing power's ability to pursue a strong course

of action. One device that Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic hit upon was to hold back use of his surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). This tactic forced NATO pilots to fly at higher altitudes to avoid possible attack by those SAMs held in abeyance, thereby reducing their ability to take out Serb armored tanks.

Four of the cases—Haiti, Bosnia, Somalia, and Kosovo—illustrate how difficult it is to use coercive diplomacy on behalf of humanitarian goals.

Earlier research on coercive diplomacy had already focused on the importance of adding meaningful positive incentives in a combined “carrot-and-stick” variant of the strategy. The present study adds to this by noting that, in general, positive inducements should not be offered before undertaking coercive threats or limited military action. This echoes an earlier finding that during an early stage of the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy rejected advice to offer Premier Khrushchev concessions, saying that option should be put off until the United States had succeeded in impressing the Soviet leaders with actions and statements that unmistakably conveyed U.S. resolve to get the missiles out of Cuba.

Robert Art also provides an excellent, badly needed discussion of the difficulty of deciding whether coercive diplomacy was successful in many cases. Some of the eight cases, he finds, are difficult to code as either successes or failures. Two (Kosovo and North Korea) are clear cases of failed coercive diplomacy—although, as Art notes, “failure in the Korean case did not become apparent until eight years after a seemingly successful outcome.” Bosnia and Haiti can be regarded as successful but might well be regarded as at the border between coercive diplomacy and full-scale military coercion. Somalia, Iraq, and the response to terrorism are complex cases of coercive diplomacy. There were two separate instances of the strategy in Somalia between 1992 and 1994, six in Iraq between 1990 and 1998, and three in response to terrorism between 1993 and 2001. Although there were both successes and failures within each case, Art concludes overall that all three have to be judged as failures. Art finds the China case the hardest to code as either success or failure because U.S. actions were a response to China’s own coercive diplomacy directed at Taiwan and

the United States whereas Washington's response was as much an exercise in deterrence as coercive in nature. (As William Drennan points out in the subtitle of his chapter, the question "Who's Coercing Whom?" arises also in the case of North Korea.)

The task of assessing the success or failure of coercive diplomacy is further complicated when it is chosen as a "default" option by policymakers because the alternatives of doing nothing or using force are rejected, at least for the time being. On several occasions the United States has resorted initially to coercive diplomacy even though it did not expect it to be effective. In some instances, coercive diplomacy was undertaken because policymakers thought it politically necessary to do so prior to undertaking necessary military action. This was the case in the events leading to the Gulf War in 1991 because U.S. leaders believed that alliance partners, including the United Nations, as well as domestic U.S. opinion would not support an immediate military response to Iraq's aggression unless diplomatic efforts, including sanctions and coercive diplomacy, were tried first and shown to be ineffective. By doing so, the legitimacy required for the military response could be better achieved. Again in the crisis that began in the latter part of 2002 over Iraq's noncompliance with UN resolutions and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, those in the Bush administration dubious of the worth and relevance of inspections in Iraq appear to have reluctantly accepted an effort at coercive diplomacy in order to build support eventually for military action.

Art concludes the study with a set of important general guidelines for policy. One of them may be noted here: "Do not resort to coercive diplomacy unless, should it fail, you are prepared to go down the path of war or you have prepared a suitable escape hatch." This sage advice has been heeded on some occasions—witness, for example, the readiness to respond with an air war to coercive diplomacy's failure in Kosovo in 1999—but not on others—as in Somalia in 1994, when the failure to prepare a political escape hatch resulted in the humiliating withdrawal of U.S. forces.

There are other dangers, too, in pursuing coercive diplomacy if the target opts not to comply with the coercer's demands. In the first

place, the target may reject the ultimatum as a bluff, presenting the coercer with Art's stark options of entering war or exiting either through a modestly dignified escape hatch or through a comprehensively humiliating climb-down. In the second place, the target may take the ultimatum very seriously indeed and decide to act preemptively—as the Japanese did at Pearl Harbor—inflicting heavy losses on the coercer or its allies. In the third place, the target may regard the ultimatum as credible and likely to be enforced with military action but refuse to back down for reasons such as honor and prestige and/or because it feels that it can tolerate the damage from the impending war. Finally, the target may indicate conditional or equivocal acceptance of the ultimatum in a way that would erode the willingness or ability of the coercer or the coercer's allies to pursue their declared course and enforce the ultimatum. This fourth danger was much on the minds of U.S. policymakers in the first Gulf crisis of 1990–91, once the United States had issued a specific ultimatum with January 15 as the deadline for Saddam Hussein's compliance. As the deadline approached, however, policymakers became increasingly concerned that Saddam might announce a partial or conditional withdrawal from Kuwait, thereby defusing the impact of the ultimatum and the threat of a war. This possibility was referred to by well-informed journalists as Washington's "nightmare scenario," and very detailed contingency plans were made to deal with such a contingency and were discussed with coalition partners. In the event, and much to the relief of administration officials, Saddam failed to do so, making it easier for the allied coalition to initiate war immediately after January 15.

In short, coercive diplomacy may sometimes promise substantial rewards at relatively modest cost but it is always fraught with difficulties and potential dangers. As this volume confirms, it often fails, and when it fails it presents U.S. policymakers with hard choices between war and political retreat. In those comparatively rare cases when coercive diplomacy is employed chiefly to legitimize subsequent U.S. military action, its failure may not be entirely unwelcome in Washington. But in most instances, failure exacts a heavy price. Hence the importance of policymakers being well schooled not only in the capabilities

but also in the complications and limitations of coercive diplomacy. Hence, too, the value of this volume, which offers policymakers as well as scholars a remarkably broad-ranging and unusually insightful assessment of the recent history and the enduring advantages and drawbacks of coercive diplomacy.

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