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Understanding coercive nuclear reversal dynamics: a comparative case study of US coercive diplomacy against the nuclear programs of Iran, Libya, and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims at identifying the conducive conditions of coercive diplomacy in the context of nuclear proliferation. Drawing on the US experience with Iran, Libya, and South Africa, we examined the driving factors behind US coercive diplomacy's divergent and paradoxical results or outcomes in these countries. We chose our case studies based on two factors: the different stages or levels of their nuclear programs when confronted by the US and the nature of the demands formulated by the coercer in relation to the bilateral relations of the parties involved.

We hypothesized that two conditions could compel a target subjected to coercive diplomacy to abandon its nuclear (weapons) program: if the coercer's strategy exploits the target's vulnerabilities and if the coercer demonstrates the motivation to have a sustained campaign to compel its target to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The interactions between the US and each of the targets mentioned above provide insights into improving coercive diplomacy, both theoretically and practically.

The interplay between domestic politics and international pressures theoretically inspires our approach. We emphasized the critical role of domestic actors in alleviating or increasing systemic pressure related to the targets' nuclear programs. We used neoclassical realism and process tracing to describe these dynamics and unravel the causal relationships between the coercer's demands and the targets' responses. Using the structured-focused comparative methodology, we reinforced our findings' relevance and triangulated our primary and secondary sources.

Our findings support the hypothesis of the driving effect of domestic variables in relation to external pressures. Hence, we identified similar and diverse mechanisms in our three cases, which helped us verify the validity of our initial hypotheses and confirmed the relevance of our research strategy regarding the complexity of coercion dynamics in the non-proliferation domain.