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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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INTRODUCTION





Why do the United States and its allies so often find themselves unable to force lesser adversaries to change behavior?" This question highlights the core issue of a famous article published by Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman.¹ These authors aimed to solve a major paradox regarding the overwhelming power capabilities of the US and its inability to compel minor powers to comply with its demands. As they noted, "despite the lopsided US edge in raw power, regional foes regularly defy threats and ultimatums. (...) The US record of coercion has at best been mixed. Even when threats are carried out, adversary resistance often actually increases rather than decreases."² Robert Art and Patrick Cronin dwell on this as they argue that "Washington's coercive diplomacy gambits have failed more often than they have succeeded."³ Several authors shared the same goal with Byman and Waxman and provided different explanations to the repetitive failures of the US coercive strategies. For instance, Phil Haun argues that the nature of the demands formulated by the coercer and the impact of the concessions on the target in case it complies explain the success or failure of the US coercive strategies. More precisely, he argues that "the survival concerns of weak States and their leaders provide a better explanation for coercion failure. (...) The survival argument proposes that a weak State will resist the demands of a great power because concession would result in the loss of the State's and/or the regime's sovereignty."⁴

1.1 Background of the study.

Our interest⁵ in coercive diplomacy is twofold: from a political and theoretical standpoint. From a political perspective, coercive diplomacy gained a greater interest in international politics and academia after the Cold War. This is not to say that there was no diplomatic coercion during the Cold War, for the Cuban missile crisis is always referred to as a prominent example of coercive diplomacy during that era.⁶ Yet, the imperatives of the Cold War and the related strategic balance between the former two Great Powers (the USA and USSR) led to a greater political and academic interest in the

1 BYMAN Daniel and WAXMAN Matthew, **Defeating US coercion**, *Survival*, Vol. 41, N.2, p.107

2 BYMAN Daniel and WAXMAN Matthew, **Defeating US coercion**, *Ibid.*, p.107

3 ART J., Robert and CRONIN M., Patrick (Eds): **The United States and coercive diplomacy**, Washington, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003, p.475. (Accessed online)

4 HAUN, Phil: **Coercion, survival, and war: why weak States resist the United States**, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015, p.8. (1st ed. - Accessed online)

5 The personal pronoun "we" should not mislead the reader into thinking that the thesis is co-authored. This research was written only by the PhD candidate under the guidance of his supervision team. "We" is merely used here for humility purposes (French academic tradition.)

6 NATHAN, James, **The heyday of the new strategy: The Cuban missile crisis and the confirmation of coercive diplomacy**, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 1992, Vol. 3, N.2, pp.303-342. Read also BYMAN L, Daniel., WAXMAN C., Matthew, and LARSON Eric, **Explaining success or failure: the historical record**, in BYMAN L, Daniel., WAXMAN C., Matthew, and LARSON Eric: **Air power as a coercive instrument**, Santa Monica, California, RAND Corporation, 1999, pp.29-56 (1st ed.)

notion of deterrence – one of the two versions of coercive diplomacy as we will see in the next chapter. Coercive diplomacy logically gained impetus in political and academic milieu following the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1990.

As Sayde-Hope Crystal confirms it, “since the end of the Cold War, coercive diplomacy has become a prominent tactic of crisis management. The exploitation of potential force to induce an adversary to comply with one’s demands is an attractive alternative to traditional military strategies in the contemporary post-Cold War international environment.”⁷ Several recent examples demonstrate the relevance of Crystal’s argument; for example, the US threatened to impose economic sanctions on Turkey in 2018 to obtain the freedom of the American Pastor Andrew Brunson. Even key partners like the EU “conducted outreach to the US administration to reiterate its concerns at the growing use of sanctions, or the threat of sanctions, by the United States against European companies and interests.”⁸ With respect to the nuclear proliferation issue, President Trump pulled-out from the 2015 Iranian deal (JCPOA) in 2018 and launched a mixed result “maximum pressure” campaign to compel Iran to re-negotiate the terms of a new agreement over its nuclear program.⁹

1.2 Research puzzle.

A widely accepted belief suggests that targets should be prepared to acquiesce to the wishes of more influential actors to avoid harm or adversity. Branislav Slantchev asserts in this regard that “the stronger an actor is, the worse the expected war outcome for the adversary, and the more that adversary should be willing to compromise to avoid it.”¹⁰ However, this conventional wisdom is challenged by empirical evidence. For instance, Todd Sechser’s analysis of compellent military threats made by major powers against weaker targets from 1918 to 2001 reveals that coercive actors achieved their objectives in only 36% of cases.¹¹ Similarly, in the context of 22 US coercion cases,

⁷ CRYSTAL, Sayde-Hope, **Coercive diplomacy A theoretical and practical evaluation**, Glendon Journal of International Studies, 2015, Vol. 8, N.1-2, p.3

⁸ PAYNE, Adam, **24 EU countries complained to the Trump administration about its use of sanctions, taking US officials by surprise, according to a report**, Business Insider Nederland, 14 August 2020. Accessed on May 26, 2022 from the link <https://www.businessinsider.nl/report-twenty-four-eu-states-complain-to-trump-administration-about-us-sanctions-2020-8/>

⁹ NURUZZAMAN, Mohammed, **President Trump’s ‘maximum pressure’ campaign and Iran’s endgame**, Strategic Analysis, 2020, Vol.44, N.6, pp.570-582

¹⁰ SLANTCHEV L., Branislav, **Feigning weakness**, International Organization, 2010, Vol. 64, N.3, p.360

¹¹ SECHSER S., Todd, **Militarized compellent threats, 1918–2001**, Conflict Management and Peace Science, 2011, Vol 28, N.4, 24 pages.

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Robert Art and Patrick Cronin found a success rate of only 32%.¹² These poor records can be explained by specific issues related to coercive diplomacy as a crisis management tool and foreign policy instrument. Peter Viggo Jakobsen grouped them into two categories: *inherent difficulties* and *practical problems*. On the one hand, Inherent difficulties mainly encompass psychological factors like the necessity for the coercer to *frighten and reassure the adversary at the same time*,¹³ or to refrain from formulating demands with humiliating consequences for the target. Practical problems on the other hand refer to the necessity for the coercer to understand its adversary's mindset, motivations, interests, behavioral style, decision-making process, and military strategy.

This thesis focuses on the application of coercive diplomacy in the specific realm of nuclear proliferation and this choice is not empty grounded. As a foreign policy tool, coercive diplomacy has been applied in other areas like terrorism, economics or even migration.¹⁴ But what's the specificity of the nuclear proliferation area? According to Nah Liang Tuang: "with their unmatched deterrence capabilities, nuclear arms are both shunned for their horrific destructive potential and desired as a strategic equalizer to convince adversaries not to threaten the nuclear proliferator's security."¹⁵ It's important to note that the results of the research cannot be easily duplicated to other domains due to the specificity of the nuclear weapons domain (actors, rationality, interests etc.) Logically, in the specific realm of nuclear proliferation, the US extensively relied on coercive diplomacy to pursue its nuclear non-proliferation goals, although with mixed outcomes, as exemplified by the Iranian case, among others. This thesis primarily arises from the observation of a prior political anomaly or paradox: the stark contrast between the overwhelming power capabilities (political, economic, and military) of a coercing entity (in this case, the U.S.) and the mixed results of its coercive policies against weaker States (such as Iran, Libya, and South Africa). Its objective is to outline the fundamental components of a successful coercive strategy in the context of nuclear proliferation.

¹² ART J., Robert and CRONIN M., Patrick: **The United States and coercive diplomacy**, *Op. Cit.* Cited by TÜRKCAN L., Muhammed, **The (In)Effectiveness of coercive diplomacy: The US maximum pressure campaign on Iran**, TRT World Research Centre, December 2019, 21 pages. (Report)

¹³ JAKOBSEN V., Peter, **Coercive diplomacy** in COLLINS, Alan (Ed): **Contemporary Security Studies**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp.251-251 (3rd ed.)

¹⁴ GREENHILL Kelly and KRAUSE, Peter: **Coercion. The power to hurt in international politics**, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, 384 pages.

¹⁵ TUANG L., Nah: **Security, economics and nuclear non-proliferation morality: keeping or surrendering the Bomb**, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2017, p.1

1.3 Research goal, question, and argument of the thesis.

This PhD thesis aims to identify the conditions of successful coercive strategies in the nuclear realm in general and that of the US specifically. However, as we will see later in the literature review chapter, several scholars, including Alexander George, identified contextual variables and operational conditions for successfully implementing a coercive strategy. Thereof, this thesis' research goal is to humbly identify the **essential or core conducive conditions**¹⁶ of a coercive diplomacy strategy in the context of nuclear proliferation. In this regard, our research question is the following: **what are the conditions under which coercive diplomacy can compel a State to abandon its nuclear weapons program?** We hypothesized that coercive diplomacy could be effective under two conditions: first, **when the coercer's strategy exploits the vulnerabilities of its target**, and second **if the coercer demonstrates a motivation to have a sustained campaign to compel the target. Furthermore, this motivation could be rooted in the vital threats posed by the target's nuclear program to the coercer's strategic interests, or in the support of domestic/international constituencies for the coercive or counter-coercive strategy.**

The vulnerabilities of the target and the motivation of the coercer will be measured by specific variables. The **changes in the target's domestic politics and economic settings** following the sender's coercion will account for the former, while the **escalation dominance**¹⁷ will account for the latter. The previous hypotheses will be tested out of the US coercive strategy against the nuclear (weapons) programs of three States: Iran, Libya, and South Africa. That is, we will analyze the coercive dynamics between the US and Iran, Libya, and South Africa against the backdrop of our hypothesis, by always asking ourselves whether the US coercive strategy exploited the vulnerabilities of its targets and if the US demonstrated a motivation to have a sustained campaign to compel the target. But more precisely, in essence, does the target's response to US demands stem from the coercive-based domestic (political and economic) changes or the fear of heightened threats?

This thesis asserts that coercive diplomacy hinges on the coercer's prowess in crafting a good strategy comprising four crucial elements:

¹⁶ This thesis uses the notion of *conductive conditions* interchangeably with Alexander George's notion of *favoring conditions*.

¹⁷ These two variables related to our hypotheses will be substantially analyzed in the theoretical framework of thesis.

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- **the crafting by the coercer of a strategic empathy-based coercive strategy.**
- **the formulation by the coercer of clear and acceptable demands by the target.**
- **the display by the coercer of a stronger resolve than the target to achieve its objectives.**
- **the offer of convincing incentives to the target as a reward for its compliance.**

In other words, the likelihood of a State's coercive diplomacy to compel another State to abandon its nuclear program depends, among other on first, its ability to formulate acceptable demands based on the importance of the nuclear program for the target; that is when crafting their coercive strategies, the State policymakers should primarily ask a simple question: how important is the nuclear program for the target and what are the drivers of the building of the nuclear program? Second, the coercer must formulate demands that are not politically costly to the target. Third, the coercer must have the edge regarding the escalation dominance by effectively having recourse to all its power capabilities, including political, economic, and military force (cyber, air strikes and ground soldiers), to demonstrate his/her greater motivation to achieve his/her political goals than the target. Lastly, the coercing State should propose a credible exit gate to its target if his/she complies with his demands. These incentives must meet the target State's domestic demands and international position. It's important to highlight that while the favorable conditions mentioned apply to both parties involved in the conflict, the sender, who initiates the coercive strategy, bears a greater responsibility in ensuring the success of his strategy by gathering these conditions effectively.

1.4 Research gap and added value of the thesis.

Several previous PhD theses investigated the conditions under which US coercive diplomacy could successfully change the nuclear course of particular States. For instance, Seunghoon Paik analyzed the US coercive diplomacy against the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea¹⁸ while Robbie W. Baillie investigated the effectiveness of the US coercive diplomacy against Libya and North Korea against the backdrop of Peter Viggo Jakobsen's ideal policy. Robin Markwica's PhD thesis argues that the emotions of target leaders can help to explain why compellence succeeds in some cases but not in others. One should also consider Ebrahim Mohseni-Cheraghloo's PhD thesis which investigated the effectiveness of US coercive diplomacy against Iran. A common feature among the previous PhD theses is their choice of cases based on the contestation of the US-led international system. It is also worth highlighting that apart

¹⁸PAIK, Seunghoon: **Taming the Evil: US Non-proliferation coercive diplomacy and the counter-strategies of Iran and North Korea after the Cold War**, PhD thesis, Durham University, Durham, 2017, 380 pages.

from Ebrahim Mohseni-Cheraghlo's thesis, the other three theses apprehended the principal belligerents as unitary actors. That is, they did not consider the input of domestic factors in the nuclear decision-making of the target States; These three previous factors affected the power of their findings despite their relevant theoretical insights concerning their research goals. This thesis aims to humbly fill a research gap by offering fresh insights on the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy, notably by shifting from the traditional State-centered to a non-State perspective.

This thesis's main contribution to the advancement of coercive studies lies in the humble identification of the core conducive conditions of coercive diplomacy, hence the formulation of a new theoretical model of diplomatic coercion. This was achieved thanks to two main factors: the choice of our case studies and our methodological and theoretical stances. Regarding the sampling of our cases, unlike the previous PhD research which chose their case studies based on the perception of the unjust US-led international system, we opted for cases not restricted to a contestation-driven foreign policy of the international system. This approach allowed us to gauge the sincerity of US efforts in compelling potential proliferators and bolstering the nuclear regime. Additionally, our case selection was based on the advancement of their nuclear programs, a pivotal factor in determining a state's readiness to comply or resist coercive demands, thus significantly shaping the dynamics of coercive diplomacy. A state's evolving security and strategic interests, influenced by its nuclear progress, dictate its response to external pressure. Grasping these dynamics is paramount for policymakers and diplomats to craft effective strategies dealing with varying nuclear-capable states.

In addition, the nature of the bilateral relations between the coercer and the target State is a critical factor that deeply influences the target's readiness to comply or defy the coercer's demands. The quality or nature of these relations can either facilitate cooperation or exacerbate resistance, making it an essential aspect of coercive diplomacy; indeed, the nature of bilateral relations between the coercer and the target is a multifaceted and dynamic factor that significantly shapes a state's readiness to comply or defy coercive demands. Hence, a nuanced understanding of these relations, combined with a careful assessment of other contextual factors (like the nature of the coercer's demands or threats), is also essential for effective coercive diplomacy and nuclear reversal.

Regarding our methodological and theoretical choices, the rarity of PhD theses that undertake a comprehensive analysis of U.S. coercion in nuclear reversal by integrating methodological and theoretical approaches from multiple and to some extent contradicting schools of thought is also noteworthy. This approach combines insights from constructivism, (classical and neo) realism, and domestic politics, resulting in a

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holistic framework that sheds light on the intricate dynamics of how coercion can effectively lead to the reversal of a State's nuclear policies. The eclectic approach's major explanatory power lies in its ability to offer complex and diversified insights into why and how coercion can succeed in reversing a State's nuclear course. By considering a State's emotional and historical context, alongside (domestic and regional) structural factors, this approach unveils the intricate web of motivations, calculations, and perceptions that drive a State to change or maintain its nuclear policies in response to external pressure. Hence, it offers a nuanced grasp of when coercion can genuinely reshape a state's strategic course in the nuclear domain, making a substantial contribution to international relations and security studies.

But more importantly, this thesis emphasizes how systemic pressures are translated by domestic variables in the target's decision to comply or defy the coercer. Such an approach allowed us to identify better *the pulling and hauling of various forces within the target State*¹⁹ that explain the nuclear resistance or compliance of the State. In other words, our thesis shifted from the classic State-centric perspective to a non-State-centric one. This strategy unveiled hidden actors in target state nuclear decision-making and revealed the causal mechanisms driving their responses to external pressures. Hence, we pinpointed the target State's vulnerabilities and the flaws in US coercive strategies against resistant nuclear states. Additionally, our sampling, while quantitative weak, offered qualitative strengths, providing valid theoretical insights for policymakers when dealing with similar cases in the future.

1.5 Structure of the thesis.

This thesis is composed of seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter is the chapter on the literature review. The third chapter will elaborate on the theoretical framework and methodology, and the fourth chapter, which focuses on analyzing the American coercive dynamics with Iran, will inaugurate our analytical chapters. The fifth chapter focuses on the Libyan nuclear issue and the sixth' on the South African case. It is worth noting that each analytical chapter comprises five sections which, in line with our structured-focused comparison approach, includes the following structure: an analysis of the nature of the relations between the target State and the Great Powers (section I), then the context of the emergence of the nuclear program for the target State (section II), followed by an analysis of the political system and decision-making of the target State (Section III). We will then dig into the coercive dynamics between the US and the target State (section IV) and draw theoretical conclusions from the previously

¹⁹ MOHSENI-CHERAGHLOU, Ebrahim: **When coercion backfires: the limits of coercive diplomacy in Iran**, PhD thesis, *Op. Cit.*, p.2

analyzed coercive dynamics (section V). The seventh chapter will conclude the thesis and comprises two sections: the first will present the result of our empirical investigation and discuss the related-theoretical findings; the second will present the theoretical lessons of the research and practical advice for policymakers. In line with the previous information, the next chapter will focus on the literature review.