

Is Coercive Diplomacy a Viable Means to Achieve Political Objectives?

Written by Ilario Schettino

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1. Introduction

Coercive diplomacy is one of the most intriguing and common practices of conducting inter-state relations and embodies the essence of the art of diplomacy: achieving political objectives and fostering a state's national interest without waging a war.

The present essay will first offer a theoretical framework on the notion of coercive diplomacy, outlining its most prominent features and the aims it can obtain; secondly, it will analyse the variables that affect this kind of diplomacy and have a look at Kenneth Schultz' s approach, which upholds that the use of coercive diplomacy has its own peculiarities in democratic regimes; thirdly, it will test the framework provided through the analysis of two case-studies, one of which accounts for the success of coercive diplomacy, while the other for its failure; in conclusion, it will be argued that this variant of diplomacy is a viable instrument to obtain foreign policy objectives under specific circumstances, provided that the coercing power is aware of the limits of this practice and adheres to strict principles of crisis management, in order to avoid the opposed outcome of the escalation of a crisis.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 *Alternative to Military Action and Plurality of Objectives*

You can claim to be really successful not when you obtain one hundred victories in one hundred battles, rather when you seize your enemy without even fighting[1].

This aphorism pronounced by the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu (VI-V cent. B. C.) summarizes perfectly the meaning and the aim of coercive diplomacy, that is to make an enemy stop or undo an action without resorting to military action, but through issuing a specific demand backed by a threat of punishment for non-compliance with it[2]. Clearly, the threat must be credible and potent enough to persuade the opponent that it is in his interest to comply with the demand.

A state can coerce its adversary threatening political consequences, such as the expulsion from an international organization, economic sanctions, such as an embargo and the suspension of an economic agreement, or the use of force.

It should be remarked that coercive diplomacy offers an alternative to reliance on military action; it is based on the threat of force rather than the use of force in order to get other actors to comply with one's wishes[3]. If force is used at all, it takes the form of an exemplary or symbolic use of military action, to demonstrate motivation and resolution to escalate to high levels of military action if necessary. Hence, in coercive diplomacy, force is not employed as part of conventional military strategy, but as a component of a political-diplomatic strategy aimed at persuading the adversary to back down. It is a more flexible, psychological instrument in contrast to the 'physical, quick and decisive' use made in military strategy[4].

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Furthermore, unlike conventional military strategy, the threat and use of force in coercive diplomacy is coupled with clear communication, signalling and bargaining in order to make the opponent aware of one's intentions, motivation and credibility at every step of the ongoing crisis.

Interestingly, the notion of coercive diplomacy can be distinguished by other related concepts[5].

First of all, coercive diplomacy is regarded as a *defensive* strategy, thus distinct from *blackmail* – an *offensive* strategy – which occurs when a threat is employed to coerce a subject to give up something of value without putting up resistance.

Coercive diplomacy has also to be distinguished from *deterrence*, i. e. a strategy that makes use of threats to dissuade an opponent from undertaking an encroachment of one's interests not yet initiated. On the contrary, coercive diplomacy is directed at stopping an action already undertaken.

The term *compellence* (strategy that employs threats to make an opponent stop an action already undertaken) is often used to encompass coercive diplomacy as well. George and Simons, however, suggest a difference between the two concepts, arguing that the use of “compellence” entails an exclusive reliance on military threats to wear down the enemy's resistance. Rather, states employing coercive diplomacy have a broader range of threats to employ and, above all, may couple threats of punishment with positive inducements and assurances in order to influence the adversary; this variant of coercive diplomacy is referred to as “carrot and stick” approach[6]. This approach greatly enhances the flexibility of the strategy, as long as the inducements and assurances offered are credible as well. This variant was famously employed by J. F. Kennedy in the Cuban Missiles Crisis, unlike, for example, G. Bush in the First Gulf War.

The strategy of coercive diplomacy can take a variety of forms along a continuum and pursue very different objectives. At the extremes of the spectrum of available strategies are the “try-and-see” approach and the ultimatum. The former occurs when the coercing power takes one threatening step at a time, waiting for the reaction of the adversary before making additional threats. This strategy avoids putting pressure on the counterpart and, thus, prevents the crisis from escalating sharply[7]. The latter consists in making a specific and detailed request backed by a rigid time limit. The conditions included in the ultimatum are presented as *final* and require unconditional and categorical acceptance by the opponent[8]. The terms of compliance can range from several days to only a few hours: for instance, the Italian ultimatum to the Ottoman Empire in 1911, with regard to the surrender of Libya, had a deadline of twenty-four hours, while the U.S. ultimatum to Germany in 1916 demanded compliance ‘immediately’[9].

A state employing coercive diplomacy can achieve a wide range of objectives. The most limited one is to make the enemy stop an action already undertaken; a more ambitious one is the reversal of what has been already accomplished, namely the opponent is forced not only to stop its enterprise, but also to give up the advantages that its action had previously gained[10]; finally, the most difficult one, as Bruce Jentleson notes, is the cessation of the opponent's hostile behaviour through a change in the composition of his government or in the nature of the regime[11]. It could be argued, however, that this last variant stretches coercive diplomacy at its outer limits as it closely resembles the practice of blackmail: the use of threats is made in an offensive rather than defensive fashion, while the request of the coercing power exceeds what would be sufficient to protect its national interest.

2.2 Risks of Coercive Diplomacy and Key-variables

Coercive diplomacy is, in fact, an attractive strategy because it offers the possibility of achieving political objectives without resorting to the use of traditional military force and with less bloodshed and political costs. In the history of international conflict, it has proved to be particularly efficient to intimidate, with little risk, weaker adversaries[12]. Nevertheless, it is also a dangerous option as it can backfire, quicken the escalation and lead to an unanticipated war. This happens when the coercing power boxes into the corner a highly motivated adversary which is inclined to escalate the crisis in order to avoid a humiliating defeat. Moreover, the opponent can reject the request thinking it is a bluff, and challenge the coercing power, especially in the case of ultimatum. Thus, two key-variables of coercive diplomacy are the magnitude of the demand made on the opponent and his motivation not to comply with it; these two

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variables are strictly connected as the strength of the adversary's reluctance to comply with the request is deeply sensitive to the magnitude of the request advanced by the coercing power[13].

Overall, it is possible to identify a number of conditions that favour the successful use of coercive diplomacy in a dispute between two states[14]: clarity of the objective, efficient communication of intentions and signalling of interests at stake, symmetric information about each side's willingness to escalate[15], strength of motivation, strong leadership, asymmetry of motivation in favour of the coercing power, sense of urgency, adequate domestic and international support, unacceptability by the adversary of the threatened escalation, unilateral coercive diplomacy[16], isolation of the adversary. In my opinion, a key-variable that underpins all these is, however, a balance of power in favour of the coercing state: its availability of massive material capabilities is more likely to persuade the counterpart to back off, as it will perceive the threat as sufficiently credible and potent. These conditions rest, obviously, on the assumption of a "rational" opponent who correctly evaluates whether the danger and risks of not complying outweigh the costs and gains to be expected from yielding to the demand of the coercing power[17].

3. Democracies and Coercive Diplomacy

In his contribution to the debate, Kenneth Schultz upholds that democracies have their own peculiarities in the use of coercive diplomacy, due to their institutional bonds[18]. First, he rejects Quincy Wright's argument that democracies are 'ill-adapted to the successful use of threats and violence as instruments of foreign policy' as governments are susceptible to domestic opposition[19]. Indeed, he contends that the two most important features of democratic states, open political competition and public debate about governments' policies[20], can have a twofold effect on the use of coercive diplomacy: restraining and confirmatory[21]. The former occurs when there is domestic dissension about the use of coercive diplomacy: the credibility and efficacy of the threats are undermined as the government may not be willing to pay high political prices in order to carry them out. The latter, instead, occurs when there is a strong domestic consensus about the decision of employing coercive diplomacy: free (as opposite to coerced) support from opposition parties in democracies can send a signal of resolve that is much more effective than the one sent by a non-democratic government serving as the only voice of the state. The threat made by the government proves to be very credible as the opposition generally has little incentive to collude in a bluff [22]. Schultz concludes that, due to their institutional constraints, democracies are very selective in making threats: however, it makes them more credible and, thus, less likely to be resisted. He estimates that, if a state switches from a non-democracy to a democracy, the probability that it will initiate a crisis which escalates to war decreases by 40-60 per cent[23]. It should be noted, in conclusion, that Schultz's arguments seem to be closely related to the so-called "democratic peace" theory.

4. Case Studies

We shall analyse now two case-studies that put to an empirical test the theoretical framework provided about the use of coercive diplomacy, namely the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the First Gulf War in 1990/91. We shall take for granted the main events that constitute the mentioned crises, focusing instead on the variables and the specific circumstances that produced the success, in the first case, and the failure, in the second case, of coercive diplomacy.

4.1 Cuban Missile Crisis (15-28 October 1962)

In front of the Soviet deployment of medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba, U.S. President Kennedy decided to avoid the option of military intervention and adopted coercive diplomacy ordering a naval blockade that, in his intentions, would demonstrate his strong resolution to order an invasion of Cuba and induce Khrushchev to remove the missiles[24]. The U.S. President adopted a "try-and-see" approach as he slowed the implementation of the naval blockade and of the build-up of military forces, waiting for the reaction of the opponent. Throughout the crisis, both Kennedy and Khrushchev adhered to strict principles of crisis management and gave clear signalling of their interests at stake and their preference for a peaceful settlement of the crisis. Following dramatic events that could potentially lead to war, such as the shooting down of a US U-2 spy plane over Cuba, Kennedy decided to exert a stronger

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pressure on the USSR, conveying the equivalent of an ultimatum to the Soviet Ambassador; at the same time, however, he adopted a “carrot and stick” approach accepting in secret the removal of U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey[25]. Khrushchev accepted Kennedy’s formula and put an end to the crisis.

The strategic environment and the policies of both leaders made the use of coercive diplomacy – hence a pacific solution of the crisis – possible in this case. On the one hand, Kennedy limited his objective and the means he employed on its behalf: e.g. he rejected the option of using the crisis for toppling Castro or eliminating Soviet influence in Cuba. He gave the Soviet leader enough time to evaluate costs and risks of non-compliance and coupled his threats with positive inducements. On the other hand, Khrushchev clearly understood the asymmetry of interest in favour of the United States and its resolution to achieve its objective: it was more important to the United States to remove the missiles from Cuba than it was to the USSR to keep them there[26]. Thus, he backed off accepting the *quid pro quo* before the crisis escalated to war.

4.2 The First Gulf War (August 1990-February 1991)

The First Gulf War represents a tough case for scholars of coercive diplomacy. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the USA summoned Saddam Hussein to back off. The USA, together with the UN, took all the steps deemed as necessary in order to make their threats credible: they were successful in constructing a multilaterals sanctions regime (economic embargo) and in putting together a massive coalition of thirty-five states; U.S. President Bush deployed military forces to Saudi Arabia and, in October, threatened the use of force against Iraq; finally, in November, U.N. Resolution 678 issued an ultimatum which called on Iraq to comply with the request of withdrawal from Kuwait by 15th January 1991[27]. Notwithstanding all these measures, Saddam refused to comply and Iraqi troops retreated from Kuwait only after being defeated in a ground military campaign in February 1991.

Different reasons can account for the failure of coercive diplomacy in this case.

Even though the U.S. and the UN gave clear signalling of their intentions since early August, their threats were not considered to be credible by Saddam: he underestimated the international resistance that annexing Kuwait would generate and believed that even if the USA embarked on a war, it would not be able to sustain domestic support in case of heavy casualties suffered by U.S. troops[28]. He was also convinced that, in case of war, all the Arab countries would come to his support against the American enemy[29]. Furthermore, Saddam’s motivation and interests at stake were extremely high in the dispute: he had depicted Iraq as the emerging Middle Eastern power after the end of the Cold War and himself as the undisputed Arab leader; backing off in front of U.S. threats would have irreparably damaged his public image as champion of Arab interests[30]. He believed that the risks to his personal power from surrender without fighting outweighed the risks of defeat in war; accordingly, he decided not to back off and escalated the crisis to war.

5. Conclusion

The practice of coercive diplomacy is widely employed by states in the international system as it proves to be a viable means to achieve political objectives without resorting to war, which is costly also for the winner. However, its successful use is conditional to a favourable strategic environment and to the presence of a number of circumstances for the coercing power, such as higher interests at stake than the opponent, clear communication of its intention to escalate and availability of material capabilities in order to make its threats credible, as showed by our two case-studies.

In conclusion, I would argue that the art of coercive diplomacy could be defined as one of ‘brinkmanship’, i. e. the ability to coerce an adversary through a constant management of the common risks, showing enough resolution to persuade him to back off, but at the same time stopping its coercion on the “brink” before the crisis escalates into war.

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[1] Sun Tzu (1971).

[2] George (1994), p. 2.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

[5] George (1994), pp. 7-8.

[6] George (1991a), pp. 10-11.

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[7] Lauren (1983), pp. 31-64 and George (1994), p. 25.

[8] See Lauren (1972), pp. 131-65.

[9] George (1994), p. 27.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[11] Jentleson (1994), pp. 175-200.

[12] George (1994), p. 9.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 14-5.

[14] See *Ibid.*, pp. 273-85.

[15] Schultz (2001), pp. 4-5.

[16] George and Simmons focus their analysis on two-states coercive diplomacy; they contend that coercive diplomacy is more difficult to carry out when it is employed by a coalition of states rather than by a single state ('unilateral use') as the unity of the coalition may be fragile and undermine the credibility of its threats. Jakobsen argues, however, that this approach is anachronistic in the post-Cold War, as coercive diplomacy has been mostly employed by UN-led coalitions against *failed nation-states* or *quasi-states* (e. g. Bosnia, Haiti). Accordingly, he works out a new theoretical framework that suits better the new international order. See Jakobsen (1998), pp. 25-50 and Freedman, ed., (1998), pp. 60-85.

[17] George (1994), p. 13.

[18] See Schultz (2001), *passim*.

[19] Wright (1965), p. 842.

[20] Dahl (1971), *passim*.

[21] Schultz (2001), pp. 8-10.

[22] Schultz provides clear examples of the two different cases. During the Anglo-French Fashoda crisis (1898), the support by the Labour opposition party to the UK government's threats convinced France that war would be inevitable unless it backed down; instead, during the Suez Crisis (1956), the strong opposition of the Labour Party and public opinion to the government's decision to take military action against Egypt provided a stimulus for Nasser not to comply and to escalate the crisis. See *ibid.*, pp.175-96, 216-23.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[24] George (1991a), p. 31.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 32-5.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[27] George (1994), pp. 229-46.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 255.

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[29] In fact, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference condemned Iraq's aggression while countries such as Egypt and Morocco promised to send troops to protect Saudi Arabia.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 234-5.

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