

Assumption #2: Strategies of Coercion are Effective

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SUMMARY

An important assumption of US foreign policy is that strategies based on coercion are effective—that is, that the threat or use of military or economic instruments of power can change a state’s behavior in the desired direction. However, not only is this assumption largely unspoken, but policymakers also avoid describing coercion strategies as such. Instead, they depict US strategy in terms of deterrence—so much so that, even though much of post-Cold War US foreign policy rests on coercive approaches, coercion has become a taboo term in reference to US strategy. This has led to a mismatch between how the United States describes its grand strategy and foreign policy, and how it often conducts them. Moreover, coercive strategies have a limited track record of success. They often fail because the United States does not take into account the asymmetry of interests between it and the state it is trying to coerce. Coercive strategies are also risky, raising the chance of blowback and conflict. Taken together, this analysis suggests four policy implications:

- Policymakers should be more realistic in their appraisals of the likelihood of success of strategies based on coercion, and limit coercive threats to instances in which US interests at stake are high;
- Policymakers should commit to assessing the true costs of failures of both deterrence and coercion, including their second- and third-order implications, up front;
- As the relative balance of international power is changing, coercion is becoming increasingly difficult; therefore, policymakers should consider investing more in capabilities for deterrence; and
- Policymakers should avoid confusing language and clearly communicate strategy to domestic and international audiences.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion that coercion works underlies much of US grand strategy. The basic premise of coercion is that, by threatening or applying military force or imposing economic costs, the United States can get other states to change their behavior in a way that aligns with US preferences. For instance, in the past few years, the United States has applied economic and military pressure to attempt to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear-weapons program, to get Iran to stop malign activity in the Middle East, to change China's trading practices, and to alter Russian behavior in Ukraine. While coercion is usually associated with military power, economic instruments—such as sanctions, export controls, investment restrictions, and other measures—can also serve coercive purposes. This paper focuses on the military aspects of coercion, and a subsequent paper will explore the economic aspects.

The assumption that coercive strategies are likely to succeed is largely unspoken. Policymakers typically use the language of deterrence, rather than coercion, to describe US grand strategy in general, or specific foreign policy decisions. This is the case even though, in practice, the United States often carries out coercive policies, or ones that combine elements of both deterrence and coercion. Given that deterrence is oriented around maintaining the status quo, the reticence to describe a policy as coercive may stem from policymakers' desire to conceive of the United States as a status quo power. Whether that is actually the case—especially more recently in an environment of “great-power competition” in which the balance of power is shifting in a way that many policymakers find unacceptable—is not clear.

In this sense, coercion has become something of a taboo concept, and is almost exclusively used to describe the behavior of US adversaries. However, this has given rise to a situation in which there is a significant mismatch between how US policymakers describe their foreign policy and how they actually implement it—the proverbial “say-do” gap. Moreover, a central challenge of the assumption that coercion works is that the empirical record suggests otherwise. More often than not, coercive strategies fail to achieve the desired objectives and can also generate negative unintended consequences. In the military realm, these may include the exacerbation of security dilemmas or increasing the risks of inadvertent escalation. In the

economic realm, coercive actions such as economic sanctions may drive adversaries (and potentially even allies and partners) to take measures to shield themselves from their effects that, over the long term, threaten to erode US dollar dominance. The negative effects of coercion should prompt policymakers to consider whether the assumption that coercion works was ever valid. Moreover, they should propel policymakers to critically examine whether the United States should remain reliant on coercive strategies—especially as other states are increasingly able to pose credible military and economic challenges to US supremacy.

WHAT IS COERCION? WHAT IS DETERRENCE?

Coercion and deterrence are deeply related strategic concepts. Though they are often erroneously used interchangeably, they are characterized by distinct desired end states. At a basic level, coercion and deterrence both aim to shape a target's behavior using either the threat of force or, in the case of coercion, its limited application. This is meant to affect the target's perception of the overall balance of costs, benefits, and risks of taking a given action. In Thomas Schelling's words, “[i]t is the threat of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply.”¹ Therefore, they are meant to operate below the level of full-scale conflict. Both concepts rest on carefully shaping the perception of a target to induce it to change its behavior (in the case of coercion), or dissuade it from taking unwanted actions (in the case of deterrence), rather than applying brute force to simply impose one's will on the target.

Coercive and deterrent strategies can be implemented in different forms. The two most common are punishment and denial.² A punishment strategy involves threatening to retaliate or impose costs, typically against the target state's civilian population or economy. The logic of punishment is that the costs imposed against the target are significantly higher than the value of whatever objective it may have been seeking, making achieving it unpalatable. In contrast, a denial strategy is focused on the adversary's ability to achieve military objectives on the battlefield.³ Denial strategies usually work through a combination of improving one's own defenses to make an assault inordinately costly to the attacker, and engaging in measures that reduce or attrit the would-be attacker's offensive capabilities.

1 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

2 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Deterrence and Dissuasion in Cyberspace,” *International Security* 41, 3, Winter 2016/2017, 44–71.

3 For a discussion of the different forms of coercion and deterrence, see: Robert J. Art, “To What Ends Military Power?” *International Security* 4, 4, Spring 1980, 3–35. For denial versus punishment, see: Michael J. Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” *RAND*, 2018, 2–3. For deterrence by denial, see: John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 14–15. Also see: Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

For coercion or deterrence to work, several factors need to be present—and some of these factors may be in inherent tension with others. First, the coercive or deterrent threat must be clearly communicated so that the target understands what the threatening state expects of it, as well as the potential consequences of cooperation or defection. Second, the threat should be linked to the target’s cost-benefit calculus, such that the application of force makes the costs appear to outweigh the benefits. Third, the target must find the threat to be credible (put simply, believable), which is a function of the threatening state having both the capability and willingness to carry out the terms of the threat. Finally, perhaps counterintuitively, the threat should also include some element of reassurance. Reassurance is the notion that compliance will be rewarded and, importantly, that the target believes that the threatening state will not simply carry out its threat regardless of the target’s behavior.⁴ One challenge is that the actions a state may take to communicate reassurance can undermine things it does to enhance credibility, and vice versa.

There is a significant mismatch between how US officials describe US foreign policy, and how they actually implement those policies—producing the proverbial “say-do” gap.

However, there are also important differences between coercion and deterrence. The critical difference lies in the ultimate objective. Deterrence seeks to preserve the status quo and prevent a target from taking some unwanted action that it has not yet taken. However, coercion aims to change behavior that is already ongoing. Another important difference is that deterrence is anchored in the threat of force, so that its use is a sign that deterrence has failed. In contrast, coercion often requires the limited application of force.⁵ Taken together, these differences mean that cases of successful deterrence are difficult to observe because they represent cases in which nothing actually happens; in other words, the continuation of

the status quo. Conversely, while successful coercion is easy to observe because it involves a demonstrable change in behavior, it is precisely its public nature that can make it challenging to induce, because it generates reputational costs for the target state in appearing to capitulate to the coercing state.

DETERRENCE AND COERCION IN US GRAND STRATEGY AND FOREIGN POLICY

While the United States has historically implemented policies based on both coercion and deterrence, it almost never depicts these as coercive except by way of vague euphemisms. This has led to a mismatch between how the United States describes its foreign policy and how it often conducts it. Specifically, since the end of the Cold War, most US strategy documents are organized around a deterrence framework and repeatedly invoke the language of deterrence. In the documents reviewed for this paper, the term “coercion” is never explicitly mentioned—unless it is in reference to the actions of an adversarial state. This effectively ascribes normative associations to these strategic concepts, such that deterrence is seen as “good” and coercion as “bad.” However, in practice, many US foreign policies are based on strategies that are actually coercive (intending to “induce change” or “force action”), rather than deterrent (“preventing change”), even as they are depicted and communicated as the latter.

Moreover, there is a discernable trend across these documents: their use of coercive language becomes increasingly prominent over time (even as they continue to depict US strategy as one of deterrence). In the first two presidential administrations of the post-Cold War era, core strategy documents were primarily characterized by the use of deterrence language, and were explicitly grounded in the reality of the new international balance of power, in which the United States found itself in a position of unparalleled global primacy in both the economic and military realms.⁶ However, beginning during the George W. Bush administration, the language used to depict US strategy became increasingly coercive—even as policymakers avoided using that specific term and continued to find ways of describing the United States’ approach as one based on deterrence. This has generated the proliferation of a range of awkward phrases, such as “re-establishing” or “restoring” deterrence, that connote coercion in everything but name.

4 Erica D. Borghard and Shawn W. Lonergan, “The Logic of Coercion in Cyberspace,” *Security Studies* 26, 3, 2017, 454–455.

5 For a review of the traditional coercion literature, in addition to Schelling, see: Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1996); Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Alexander George, David Hall, and William Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Laos, Cuba, Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).

6 Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, 1, 1990/1991, 23–33.

The George H.W. Bush administration's 1992 Defense Planning Guidance informed its strategic approach. It articulates four goals: "deter or defeat attacks from whatever source, against the United States," "strengthen and extend the existing system of defense arrangements," "preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests," and "[encourage] the spread and consolidation of democratic government and open economic systems."⁷ This is mostly deterrence language—"deter," "preclude"—and deterrence is said to be implemented, in part, through maintaining US primacy.

Similarly, the Bill Clinton administration's strategy was largely articulated in deterrence terms. In September 1993, Anthony Lake, President Clinton's national security advisor, gave a speech spelling out a new strategy of engagement and enlargement, which was based on the premise that a "feature of this era is that we [the US] are its dominant power."⁸ The Clinton administration's 1996 National Security Strategy expands on this concept, emphasizing the role of US leadership and postulating that: "[a] strategy for deterring and defeating aggression in more than one theater ensures we maintain the flexibility to meet unknown future threats, while our continued engagement presented by that strategy helps preclude such threats from developing in the first place."⁹ Again, the language was largely about deterrence. Implementing this strategy was said to demand a forward-deployed force structure that could decisively win two major regional contingencies.¹⁰

There is a notable shift in discourse during the George W. Bush administration. The 2002 National Security Strategy posits that US forces "will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."¹¹ This is classic deterrence logic: to prevent states from taking some action that has not yet come to pass. However, the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (which details a force structure that supports that strategy) called for a force construct that could: "Defend the United States; Deter aggression and coercion forward in critical

regions; Swiftly defeat aggression in overlapping major conflicts while preserving for the President the option to call for decisive victory in one of those conflicts—including the possibility of regime change or occupation; and Conduct a limited number of smaller-scale contingency operations."¹² Here, coercion is explicitly mentioned, but it refers to the actions of US adversaries (e.g., "coercion forward").¹³ Nevertheless, the explicit threat of regime change represented more obviously coercive language than in previous strategy documents.

Barack Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy similarly advocates for the United States to, "maintain the military superiority that has secured our country, and underpinned our security, for decades."¹⁴ This is echoed in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review which, while moving away from the "major regional conflicts" framing, nevertheless calls for the United States to have a force structure that can "conduct multiple concurrent operations, including large-scale combat operations, in disparate theaters."¹⁵

The Budget Control Act, which set limits on the growth of military spending, shaped the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review. This review moved away from the two-war construct. Nevertheless, it identifies strategic goals that include "build security globally" and "project power and win decisively." The force to accomplish this must be "capable of simultaneously defending the homeland; conducting sustained, distributed counterterrorist operations; and in multiple regions, deterring aggressing and assuring allies through forward presence and engagement. If deterrence fails...US forces will be capable of defeating a regional adversary in a large-scale multi-phased campaign, and denying the objectives of—or imposing unacceptable costs on—a second aggressor in another region."¹⁶ While distinct from the Bush administration's approach, these strategy documents also more prominently included more directly coercive language (e.g., "if deterrence fails") rather than solely about deterrence (e.g., "maintain... superiority," "deterring aggression").

7 "Defense Planning Guidance, FY1994-1999," National Security Council, 1–2.

8 "The Four Pillars to Emerging 'Strategy of Enlargement,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 1993.

9 "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," White House, July 1994, 14.

10 Secretary of Defense Les Aspen, "Report on the Bottom-Up Review," US Department of Defense, October 1993; and "Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review," US Department of Defense, May 1997.

11 "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," President of the United States, September 2002, 30.

12 "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," US Department of Defense, September 30, 2001, 17.

13 Coercion forward is not a term of art and does not appear to be clearly defined. A reader might infer that coercion forward refers to adversarial coercive strategies that occur forward of their own territory.

14 "National Security Strategy," President of the United States, May 2010, 3.

15 "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," US Department of Defense, February 2010, 41–42. Nevertheless, this was criticized by some as being insufficient. See, for example: "The US military is already too small and its equipment already too old to fully answer the nation's call today, much less tomorrow." Mackenzie Eaglen and James Talent, "Shaping the Future: The Urgent Need to Match Military Modernization to National Commitments," Heritage Foundation, 2010, 4.

16 "Quadrennial Defense Review 2014," US Department of Defense, V–VI.

It may seem to be splitting hairs to draw a distinction between military forces to support deterrence objectives and the use of force if deterrence fails. If a state employs force to change a status quo it finds unacceptable—which, by definition, is the case in a situation where deterrence has failed—then those actions are coercive in nature. Moreover, this difference matters because it raises questions about why deterrence would fail in the first place. If deterrence fails despite the threat by the more powerful state to use military force, this suggests other factors were at play—likely, the adversary’s own political interests and willingness to bear costs to achieve them. This has implications for the viability of both coercive and deterrent strategies.

The brief interlude of limits on defense spending ended during the Trump administration, with then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper remarking that “years of insufficient budgets and sequestration caused significant damage to our readiness—until 2017.”¹⁷ Indeed, the Donald Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy articulates a strategy of “principled realism” that recognizes the “competitive world” in which the United States now finds itself.¹⁸ The overarching framework for this strategy is the notion of great-power competition, although the nature of the competition and what the United States aims to achieve within it are not clearly articulated. The ambivalent relationship between a competitive environment and satisfaction with the status quo is echoed in calls within the document for the United States to “[rebuild] our military” for the purposes of “ensur[ing] that regions of the world are not dominated by one power.”¹⁹ Following this, the 2018 National Defense Strategy called for a force size that can “defeat enemies and achieve sustainable outcomes...Our aim is a Joint Force that possesses decisive advantages for any likely conflict, while remaining proficient across the entire spectrum of conflict.”²⁰

The notion of competition in itself may imply a move away from deterrence because, depending on how great-power competition is defined, it could suggest that the current status quo is not acceptable and, by extension, needs to be changed. The fact that this supposition is so heavily caveated reflects the ambiguous way in which policymakers talk about what competition means. Clarifying this point, therefore, will be essential in helping to address the unanswered question about whether the United States currently conceives of itself as a status quo power.

COERCION VIA MILITARY POWER IN PRACTICE

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has consistently applied military power for coercive purposes—to change the prevailing status quo—across a range of areas. This includes direct military intervention, and sometimes regime change (e.g., the Persian Gulf War, Kosovo, Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria), or limited applications of force (e.g., cruise-missile strikes, the drone program). The purposes of coercion have also been quite diverse, ranging from respecting human rights and promoting democracy to forcing an adversary to give up conquered territory or weapons programs. Of course, the United States has also applied military power for deterrent ends, particularly in terms of routine demonstrations of force (e.g., freedom-of-navigation operations, NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence).

Significant US military interventions during this time period were almost universally preceded by a coercive threat, ostensibly intended to induce the targeted state to comply with some US (or coalition) demand. However, these threats often failed to produce the desired change in behavior, which then precipitated military action to carry out their terms. Given the United States’ preponderant and, often, overwhelming military advantage over states it seeks to coerce, unsuccessful outcomes raise questions about how useful or effective US coercive threats are in the first place. In other words, if coercive threats do not work in these instances, then what (if any) are the conditions under which they do? There is a distinct pattern across these cases: the United States issues a threat, the target does not comply, and then the United States (sometimes in conjunction with coalition partners) conducts some military action.

The Persian Gulf War was inherently coercive because it entailed a threat to use force, followed by the application of military power, to reverse what had become an unacceptable status quo: Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. The objective of Operation Desert Storm was to expel Hussein’s forces from Kuwait. However, there was also a deterrent element to that conflict, in that the United States and its coalition partners also sought to deter Iraqi military action against Saudi Arabia. On November 29, 1990, the United Nations Security Council presented Saddam Hussein with a coercive threat, authorizing the use of “all necessary means” unless Iraq withdrew from Kuwait “on or before 15 January 1991.”²¹ Following the passing

17 “Secretary Esper Discusses Readiness and Modernization at the Heritage Foundation,” US Department of Defense, October 15, 2020.

18 “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” President of the United States, December 2017, 1–2.

19 2017 National Security Strategy, 4.

20 “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” US Department of Defense, 5.

21 “Resolution 678 (1990) / adopted by the Security Council at its 2963rd meeting, on 29 November 1990,” 27.

of that deadline, President George H.W. Bush announced on January 17 that the United States and its allies were conducting military operations against Iraq because, after much diplomatic effort, “[we] have no choice but to drive Saddam from Kuwait by force.”²² Indeed, the United States led an international coalition to follow through on this threat and expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait in one hundred hours.

Similarly, when the United States intervened in Kosovo during the Clinton administration, a coercive threat to change the status quo was followed by military action. In a speech to the nation in March 1999, President Clinton explained that he had “sent Ambassador Dick Holbrooke to Serbia to make clear to [Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic] again on behalf of the United States and our NATO allies that he must honor his own commitments and stop his repression or face military action. Again, he refused. Today, we and our 18 NATO allies agreed to do what we said we would do, what we must do to restore the peace.”²³ Ultimately, following a NATO bombing campaign, the conflict ended with the signing of an international agreement to end it, the withdrawal of Milosevic’s forces from Kosovo, and the introduction of an international peacekeeping force.

President George W. Bush’s language around the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were also coercive threats followed by war. During Bush’s September 20, 2001, address to Congress, he issued a number of demands to the Taliban that, if not carried out, would be followed by the use of force. These included a litany of actions, such as, “Deliver to United States authorities all of the leaders of Al Qaeda who hide in your land...Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. And hand over every terrorist and every person and their support structure to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating.”²⁴ The Taliban did not comply with these demands. Less than three weeks after this speech, the US military commenced an intervention that continues to the present.

A similar pattern ensued in the leadup to the 2003 Iraq invasion. In October 2002, President George W. Bush laid down a threat to the Iraqi government that contained a range of demands. Specifically, Bush stated: “The time for denying, deceiving, and delaying has come to an end. Saddam Hussein must disarm himself—or, for the sake of peace, we will lead a coalition to disarm him.” Bush issued a number of demands on

the Iraqi government, including dismantling its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, stopping support for terrorism and the persecution of its civilian population, and releasing US military personnel. The threat concluded: “By taking these steps, and by only taking these steps, the Iraqi regime has an opportunity to avoid conflict.”²⁵ Unlike prior examples, this coercive threat was unique in that it did contain an implied—albeit highly tenuous—element of reassurance; Bush’s statement conveyed that Iraq could avoid the threatened punishment if it complied with all of the United States’ demands. Saddam Hussein, of course, did not comply. A particularly glaring issue with one element of this threat was that it was simply impossible for Hussein to comply with the demand that he declare and destroy all of Iraq’s WMD—because there was no active Iraqi WMD program. Nevertheless, the United States led a coalition to intervene with military force, conduct regime change, and maintain a military presence in Iraq for more than a decade.

This pattern continued into the Barack Obama administration. Prior to the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, during a press conference in early March, President Obama stated that, “Colonel [Muammar al-Qaddafi] needs to step down from power and leave. That is good for his country, that is good for his people, and that is the right thing to do.” He followed by noting that the United States “is looking into every option out there.”²⁶ Obama’s implied coercive threat did not succeed; Qaddafi did not step down from power. The initial United Nations Security Council resolution, implemented by NATO forces, was meant to stop Libyan government attacks against civilians and enforce a no-fly zone. Nevertheless, during the course of the NATO intervention, Libyan rebels located and killed Qaddafi.

The Obama administration employed a mix of coercive and deterrent threats to address the Syrian policy challenge. After concerns that President Bashar al-Assad might employ chemical weapons, Obama issued a direct deterrent threat in August 2012, ostensibly to prevent the Syrian government from doing so. During a question-and-answer session with the White House press corps, Obama stated that Assad’s use of chemical weapons would cross a critical threshold: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”²⁷ During this time period, Assad was also operating under an implicit

22 “War in the Gulf: The President; Transcript of the Comments by Bush on the Air Strikes Against the Iraqis,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1991.

23 “Transcript: Clinton addresses nation on Yugoslavia Strike,” CNN, March 24, 1999.

24 “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001.

25 “President Bush’s Speech on the Use of Force,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2002.

26 Howard LaFranchi, “Obama to Pentagon: Give Me a List of Options to Protect Libyans,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 2011.

27 “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, August 20, 2012.

risk of regime change, particularly after Obama, in joint remarks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in March 2013, stated: “I believe that the Assad regime has lost all credibility and legitimacy. I think Assad must go—and I believe he will go.”²⁸ While not an explicit threat, the implications of Obama’s statement, coupled with the recent overthrow of Qaddafi, were suggestive of regime change to the target audience—even if not directly meant as such by the United States.

The US deterrent threat failed when Assad used chemical weapons in August 2013. At this point, Obama shifted to a coercive response—even though it was described in deterrence terms. When deterrence does not work and a state chooses to threaten or apply force to change the new status quo, that action is, by definition, coercive. Put simply, a state cannot deter something that has already happened. In an address to the nation in September 2013, Obama stated: “that is why, after careful deliberation, I determined that it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike. The purpose of this strike would be to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, to degrade his regime’s ability to use them, and to make clear to the world that we will not tolerate their use.”²⁹ This particular instance starkly reveals the gap between how US officials talk about strategy and how they act. Obama justified the threat of military force in decidedly deterrence terms (“to deter Assad from using chemical weapons”). However, this was not deterrence, by definition, because Assad had already done so. Deterrence had failed. Military action to restore the status quo ante—in other words, change the existing situation—is a textbook example of coercion.

Similarly, the Trump administration’s decision to launch airstrikes against the Assad regime in the spring of 2017, following another instance of the government’s use of chemical weapons, repeated the same deterrence logic even though it was also inherently coercive. This example differs from prior ones because Trump did not issue a coercive threat prior to employing military power. Instead, Trump explained the logic of the strike after it already occurred. In an April speech, Trump stated, “Tonight I ordered a targeted military strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched. It is in the vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical

weapons.” While Trump explicitly used deterrence language in this statement, the implication of his depiction of the issue was, in fact, an acknowledgement that deterrence has failed: “[y]ears of previous attempts at changing Assad’s behavior have all failed and failed very dramatically.”³⁰

Finally, the Trump administration’s killing of Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani also displayed a gap between language and action. In Trump’s remarks to the nation about the killing in January 2020, he articulated a preventive logic to justify the decision: “We took action last night to stop a war. We did not take action to start a war.”³¹ Yet, shortly thereafter, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a speech titled, “The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example,” in which he presented the administration’s goals as “re-establishing deterrence—real deterrence—against the Islamic Republic of Iran.”³² If deterrence needs to be restored, then (again), this means it has failed and the United States is, in fact, engaging in coercion, though it is not acknowledged as such.

PREVENTIVE WAR AS A MANIFESTATION OF COERCION

Another manifestation of the relationship between deterrence and coercion is in the context of preventive war. On the surface, it may seem that preventive-war logic is related to deterrence, because it aims to maintain the status quo. However, in implementation, preventive war is more closely aligned with coercion. Indeed, the underlying assumption of implicit or explicit threats to wage preventive war is that deterrence is simply not possible. Preventive war involves the use of military power in anticipation of over-the-horizon threats, which is a longer timeframe than preemptive war. Indeed, similar to coercion and deterrence, these concepts are also often confused. This idea was particularly prominent during the Bush administration, and was part of the justification for the 2003 Iraq War. Even some detractors of that intervention have described preventive war as a “useful tool” and a “legitimate tool for dealing with new security threats.”³³ During both the Obama and Trump administrations, the implied (and sometimes explicit) fallback option in the event of diplomatic failures with respect to the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs was not deterrence but, rather, preventive war.³⁴ The implication is that deterrence is impractical or unlikely to succeed. Advocates for preventive war have argued that strikes against Iran are

28 “Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Conference,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 20, 2013.

29 “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 10, 2013.

30 “Full transcript: Trump Statement on Syria Strikes,” *Politico*, April 6, 2017.

31 Zachary Cohen, et al., “US Drone Strike Ordered by Trump Kills Top Iranian Commander in Baghdad,” CNN, January 4, 2020.

32 Humeyra Pamuk and Jonathan Landay, “Pompeo Says Soleimani Killing Part of New Strategy to Deter US Foes,” Reuters, January 13, 2020.

33 Ivo H. Daalder and James B. Steinberg, “Preventive War, A Useful Tool,” Brookings Institution, December 4, 2005.

34 Peter Beinart, “How America Shed the Taboo Against Preventive War,” *Atlantic*, April 21, 2017.

“the least bad option” and that “[a]ddressing the threat now will spare the United States from confronting a far more dangerous situation in the future.”³⁵

These arguments rhyme with similar calls for conducting military operations for the purposes of strengthening US credibility. In the context of the Syrian conflict, this manifests itself in response to the purported failure of the Obama administration to enforce red lines in Syria. In 2017, Senator Tom Cotton, writing in support of the Trump administration’s decision to launch a military strike against Syria, argued: “[t]he world now sees that President Trump does not share his predecessor’s reluctance to use force. And that’s why nations across the world have rallied to our side.”³⁶ The broad assumption linking these arguments is that these regimes cannot be deterred, and therefore must be coerced.

THINKING MORE CLEARLY ABOUT DETERRENCE AND COERCION

A central problem with the assumption that coercive strategies are generally more effective than deterrence is the actual historical record of coercion. Put simply, the claim is belied by the facts. Indeed, it appears to be difficult to change foreign actors’ behavior by threat, and it may be particularly difficult for the United States to do so. Of the examples reviewed in this paper, nearly every instance of a coercive threat was followed by the use of military force after the target resisted or refused to comply—with the one exception being Obama’s threat to Assad. In that example, Obama did not follow through on his threat. However, that wasn’t because the threat worked but, rather, due to other domestic and international political considerations.

One challenge with coercive strategies is that assumptions about their success typically do not take into account the asymmetry of interests between the coercing and target states. While the United States often has an advantage, if not a preponderance, of military capability to carry out coercive threats, it is the target that almost always has more salient interests at stake and is, therefore, willing to absorb a good degree of pain. For instance, Assad assuredly has more at stake in the ultimate outcome of the civil war in Syria than the United States, so he will weigh implied, or even direct, coercive threats against the value he places on that outcome.

On a related note, assumptions about coercion ignore nationalism and rally-around-the-flag effects that are often

Strategies of coercion and maximum pressure downplay the risks of blowback, inadvertent escalation, security-dilemma dynamics, and asymmetric responses.

triggered given the public nature of coercive demands. For example, Vladimir Putin may have calculated that standing firm, rather than backing down in the face of US (and European) protestations about aggressive Russian actions in Ukraine, would enhance his domestic support.³⁷ Additionally, the frequent use of force by the United States may undermine any attempts at reassurance. The perception—regardless of its veracity—that the United States supported regime change in Libya after successfully convincing Qaddafi to give up Libya’s WMD program may, for instance, complicate subsequent efforts to reassure North Korea and Iran that abandoning their nuclear programs (and weapons) will not result in a similar outcome.

Further complicating the outcomes of both deterrence and coercion strategies is the say-do mismatch; that is, the difference between how the United States communicates its strategies and the reality of how it actually implements them. Policymakers are often reluctant to describe US strategy as anything other than deterrence, even though there is a clear and consistent history of the United States using the military instrument of power for coercive objectives.³⁸ Moreover, the same specific policy (e.g., increasing sanctions against Iran) is used to achieve both coercive and deterrence outcomes. This raises questions about how this mismatch, in addition to using the same instrument for a variety of purposes, may serve to undermine the efficacy of both deterrence and coercion. While US policymakers may find the language of deterrence more agreeable, imprecise communication can distort how adversaries (and allies) perceive US strategy.

Moreover, strategies of coercion and maximum pressure downplay the risks of blowback, inadvertent escalation, security-dilemma dynamics, and asymmetric responses. Beyond failing

35 Matthew Kroenig, “Time to Attack Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2012.

36 Tom Cotton, “A Strike in Syria Restores Our Credibility in the World,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2017.

37 Adam Taylor, “Is There a Link between Putin’s Approval Rating and Aggressive Russian Foreign Policy?” *Washington Post*, November 26, 2018.

38 There is also a long history of the United States using economic instruments, especially sanctions, for coercive purposes, which will be explored in a subsequent paper.

to achieve the desired objectives, the record of US attempts at coercion is littered with unintended negative consequences that may ultimately have more deleterious effects than the initial issue at hand—such as the more than 180,000 Iraqi civilians killed since 2003, or the long-term strategic consequences for US-Russian relations in the wake of the NATO intervention in Libya.³⁹ And, US military dominance may drive other states to seek asymmetric means of countering and undermining the US position where it is more vulnerable, such as in cyberspace.

In an environment of great-power competition, as the international balance of military (and economic) power shifts, other states may prefer to hedge against, rather than bandwagon with, the exercise of US power. This is especially important with respect to the rise of China. And, as emerging peer and near-peer competitors become increasingly able to pose a credible military challenge to US military capabilities, the already limited efficacy of coercive strategies is further undermined. Therefore, notwithstanding concerns about whether coercion works, changes in the overall balance of military power raise questions about the sustainability of coercive strategies that rely on an overwhelming US military advantage. The above trends suggest that the United States should not assume it will be able to conduct military coercion in the same way as in the past, and a default to coercive strategies may drive the United States to choose escalation when (more capable) adversaries do not comply with coercive threats. Over time, this may accelerate the relative decline of the very military advantage that many see as essential to the United States' strategic edge.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In a time of transition from a post-Cold War world to a multipolar one, striving to maintain a status quo ante in which the United States possesses unparalleled economic and military advantage is likely to both be impossible and significantly increase the risk of great-power conflict. This reality, coupled with limited evidence for both the efficacy of coercive strategies in general and the United States' track record in implementing them in particular, suggests four critical policy implications.

- First, policymakers should cultivate more realistic expectations about the likelihood that their coercive threats will work as intended. The relatively meager record of success of coercive threats in the post-Cold War era demands policymakers seriously reconsider the frequency with which they issue these types of threats in the first place, and reserve them only for a limited set of circumstances in which the national security stakes are truly high.
- Second, in evaluating the outcomes of US strategy and deriving lessons from these outcomes for future strategy development, policymakers should weigh the full costs against the benefits. Examples of the former not only include consequences of both deterrence and coercion failures—which have led to costly military interventions that, in many cases, do not achieve the desired objectives—but also the total costs of the second- and third-order implications of these interventions.
- Third, several dynamics of international politics strongly suggest that coercive strategies are likely to become even more difficult for the United States. The growing military capabilities of near-peer or peer nation-state rivals and competitors not only makes it harder for the United States to use its comparative military advantage to conduct coercive strategies against those states, but it also makes coercion against third-party states more difficult as those actors may increasingly enjoy support and backing from rising powers. Therefore, policymakers should close the say-do gap, and consider investing more in capabilities that support deterrence and defense, rather than coercion.
- Finally, policymakers should avoid using imprecise or confusing language. How policymakers communicate about strategy—to the American people, allies, partners, and adversaries alike—is as important as the strategy itself.

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39 Hollie McKay, "More than 180,000 Iraqi Civilians Killed Since 2003, Report," Fox News, June 18, 2017.

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