Costly Signals, Coercion, and the Use of Force in U.S. Foreign Policy[1]

Todd S. Sechser
University of Virginia

Coercion and threats are core pillars of U.S. foreign policy. In just the last year, the United States has turned to coercive bargaining in an effort to: (1) convince Iran to renegotiate the 2014 nuclear deal, (2) persuade North Korea to relinquish its nuclear weapons, (3) compel China to adjust its trade stance, and (4) obtain international support for all of these gambits. Notably, none of these attempts has yet succeeded. How can the United States become better at coercive diplomacy?

Academic research has grappled with the problem of coercive diplomacy for decades. Scholars have long observed that coercive diplomacy is difficult, and that coercive threats must meet a variety of conditions in order to succeed.[2] Yet, in recent years scholars have noticed that powerful states, especially the United States, have a surprisingly poor record of success in coercive diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy is always difficult, but why does it seem to be more difficult for states with the greatest military advantage? Scholars have offered a range of explanations. Examples include:

- *Byman and Waxman*: The United States is too averse to civilian casualties, allowing adversaries to hamper U.S. military operations by putting civilians in harm's way.[3]

- *Sechser*: Coercive targets fight to defend their reputations, hoping to deter future challenges from powerful states that cannot credibly

[1]This commentary is part of a *H-Diplo/ISSF* roundtable on Dianne Pfundstein Chamberlain's book *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

[2]For example, see Blechman and Kaplan (1978); George and Simons (1994); Jakobsen (1998); Byman and Waxman (2001); Art and Cronin (2003); Sechser (2011); Greenhill and Krause (2018).

[3]Byman and Waxman (1999, 2001).

commit to self-restraint.[4]

- *Allen and Fordham*: Powerful states make demands that are too large.[5]
- *Jakobsen*: U.S. practitioners have a poor understanding of coercion theory.[6]
- *De Wijk*: The United States fails to understand its adversaries' resolve and is overconfident in its military superiority.[7]
- *Haun*: The United States makes demands that are too large, often demanding regime change or valuable homeland territory.[8]

Beyond these explanations, the literature offers a lengthy list of additional reasons that coercive threats sometimes fail, including asymmetric information about capabilities and resolve,[9] loss-aversion,[10] and even emotional affect.[11]

Dianne Pfundstein Chamberlain hopes to add to this list with her valuable book *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States*.[12] Chamberlain begins with the same observation that has vexed scholars for more than a decade: the end of the Cold War left the United States alone atop the global hierarchy, but this status bump did not translate into more coercive success. U.S. military operations against Afghanistan, Serbia, Libya, Iraq (twice), and Syria in the past two decades all originated, in part, from failed compellent threats.[13]. How can we understand this disconnect?

The puzzle is familiar, but Chamberlain offers a surprising explanation. Her argument starts with a reasonable premise: toward the end of

[4]Sechser (2007, 2010, 2018a,b).
[5]Allen and Fordham (2011).
[6]Jakobsen (2011).
[7]De Wijk (2014).
[8]Haun (2015).
[9]Fearon (1995)
[10]Davis (2000); Schaub (2004).
[11]Markwica (2018).
[12]Chamberlain (2016).
[13]Schelling first highlighted the distinction between deterrent and compellent threats; see Schelling (1960, 195–99) and Schelling (1966, 69–91).

the Cold War, the United States began to take steps to minimize the human, political, and financial costs of using military force. These include: adopting an all-volunteer force; relying more on military contractors; using advanced technology such as precision airpower and unmanned aerial systems; enlisting allies to share the burden of military operations; and paying for wars with deficit spending rather than taxes.[14] Whether by design or by accident, these measures "render the use of force relatively cheap for the United States."[15]

But there is a hidden downside to America's shrinking costs of war. Costs, Chamberlain reminds us, can actually be useful in coercive bargaining.[16] If issuing a compellent threat were costless, then anyone would be willing to do it, and the act of making a threat would convey nothing about one's credibility. But if there is "some cost or risk" involved, as Schelling argued, then less-serious coercers will avoid making threats.[17] Pretenders will be filtered out, allowing the truly resolved to differentiate themselves. Threats become meaningful signals of intent. In short, signals derive their meaning from the costs and risks one incurs by sending them. Costly signals are more credible than cheap ones.

The problem, Chamberlain argues, is that compellent threats no longer entail significant costs or risks for the United States. The danger that a compellent threat will fail and escalate to an armed conflict is less worrisome today, given that the United States can enlist unmanned drones, private contractors, or allies to do its dirty work. But by minimizing the costs of war, the United States has inadvertently rendered its threats meaningless as signals of resolve. The very fact that its threats are cheap makes them uninformative and therefore ineffective. Chamberlain writes: "it may be relatively easy for the unipole" – that is, the United States – "to employ cheap instruments, but that is precisely why cheap instruments do not signal that the unipole is highly motivated to defeat the target state and why the threat to employ them does not induce compliance."[18]

[14]The best exegesis of the broader trend of cost-minimization, especially in modern democracies, is Caverley (2014).

[15]Chamberlain (2016, 47).

[16]A rich literature in economics and political science centers on this idea. The foundational work of costly signaling theory is often considered to be Spence (1973).

[17]Schelling (1966, 150). Other examples include Fearon (1994, 1997); Morrow (1994); Slantchev (2005); Lektzian and Sprecher (2007); Fuhrmann and Sechser (2014); Post (2018).

[18]Chamberlain (2016, 36).

By contrast, she argues, "costly threats are ultimately credible."[19]

This is a book ostensibly about U.S. foreign policy, but the stakes are in fact considerably larger. *Cheap Threats* challenges us to rethink the dynamics of military power in international relations. It suggests that military superiority has countervailing effects: stronger states can more easily win wars, but may be less able to avoid them. The implications are jarring. If the cost-minimizing effects of military superiority impede a state's ability to send credible signals of resolve during coercive diplomacy, powerful states may find themselves having to resort to force more often. Measures to minimize the costs of military force may prove self-defeating in the long run, lowering the price of military operations but increasing their frequency.

While the argument is compelling, the book's evidence nevertheless raises some doubts. Chamberlain aims to demonstrate that U.S. compellent threats were more successful during the Cold War, before the United States adopted its low-cost model of warfare.[20] If true, this would suggest that compellent threats are indeed more effective when force is costly to use, as Chamberlain asserts. Examining the widely-used International Crisis Behavior dataset, she argues that U.S. threats succeeded at a much higher rate during the Cold War (55%) than afterward (25%).

Yet this pattern rests on a sample of just 19 cases of U.S. compellence (eleven during the Cold War and eight afterward) – too small to draw any firm conclusions.[21] Moreover, Chamberlain is sometimes too generous in her assessment of U.S. compellent threats during the "costly threat" period of the Cold War, leading her to overstate the degree to which U.S. threats succeeded during that era. For instance:

- Chamberlain argues that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made a secret nuclear threat against China in May 1953, successfully compelling the Chinese government to accept U.S. terms for an armistice to end the Korean War.[22] Yet there is actually no evidence that Dulles' rumored ultimatum was ever transmitted to Chinese officials[23] – and even if it was, it did not coerce China

[19] Chamberlain (2016, 25).

[20] Chamberlain (2016, 76–78).

[21] A χ^2 test of this correlation yields $p = 0.198$, falling short of conventional thresholds of statistical significance.

[22] Chamberlain (2016, 85).

[23] Dulles made the threat to Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, apparently hop-

into making any concessions that it had not already agreed to.[24]

- The United States deployed naval forces to the Mediterranean in 1970, which Chamberlain argues coerced Syria into terminating its armored invasion of Jordan during the "Black September" conflict.[25] But the purpose of this deployment was deterrence, not compellence: the Nixon administration sought to prevent Soviet interference in the event that Israel joined the war against Syria. If U.S. leaders also hoped that the move might intimidate the Syrians, it failed: Syria's tanks were halted not by fear of American force, but by widespread mechanical breakdowns and ferocious Jordanian resistance.[26]

- Chamberlain points to the 1972 Linebacker II bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, which were intended to coerce North Vietnam into accepting U.S. terms for a cease-fire.[27] The North Vietnamese did indeed sign the Paris Peace Accords shortly thereafter, promising not to annex or invade South Vietnam. But the agreement was virtually identical to one they had already accepted three months earlier,[28] and Hanoi vitiated it altogether two years later when it invaded and conquered South Vietnam.[29] Furthermore, it is diffi-

---

ing that he would convey it to the Chinese. Yet Nehru denied that he ever passed it along. See Foot (1988, 104). One scholar calls Dulles' supposed ultimatum a "fable." See Friedman (1975, 90). Chamberlain acknowledges that such skeptics exist but includes the case nonetheless.

[24]See Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017, 174–80).

[25]Chamberlain (2016, 86).

[26]See Mobley (2009).

[27]Chamberlain (2016, 87).

[28]Indeed, Pape (1990, 140) argues that the bombings "made no substantial difference in the terms of the agreement."

[29]Bratton (2005, 112) nicely summarizes the view that Linebacker II should not be considered a coercive success:

> It is true that in the short term the Linebacker strikes disrupted the North Vietnamese offensive and guaranteed the independence of South Vietnam during the American withdrawal. However, what the North could not accomplish in 1973 it accomplished in 1975, when Saigon fell. It seems a stretch to list the Linebacker campaign with the surrender of Japan in 1945 or the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 as a successful example of coercion. To do so would lower the standards to endorse policies that at best only buy time or save face, rather than secure desired outcomes.

cult to see how this case constitutes a successful compellent threat, given that the United States had to execute it to achieve its objectives.[30]

Reclassifying these three cases revises the U.S. success rate during the Cold War down to 27%, nearly identical to its post-Cold War success rate of 25%. In short, Chamberlain's theory of "costly compellence" does not square well with the historical record: American threats were no more successful when U.S. costs for using force were high. To be clear, I do not mean to argue that these cases are unambiguous compellence failures – they are anything but unambiguous. But their very ambiguity suggests that we should be skeptical that there was ever a golden age when U.S. compellent threats were more credible. The grim reality is that compellence has always been difficult for the United States.

More generally, there is something odd about the notion that low costs for war undermine U.S. credibility. If using force were truly cheap and easy for the United States, then why would an adversary ever doubt America's willingness to do it? To be sure, Chamberlain takes pains to emphasize that it is America's *long-term* resolve that adversaries doubt: in a series of case studies, she shows that Saddam Hussein (1991 and 2003) and Moammar Qaddafi (2011) believed that the United States might use limited force at first, but then "drop a few bombs and go home," as she puts it.[31] But this does not fully resolve the puzzle: why would adversaries believe the United States lacks staying power, if military force is genuinely cheap for it to use? What would prevent the United States from seeing its threats through to the end, if the costs of doing so are trivial?[32]

Chamberlain's case studies point to an answer, but one that is somewhat at odds with her theory. She argues that it is so inexpensive for the United States to use force that it cannot credibly signal its resolve, even

---

[30]As Chamberlain (2016, 283) indicates, the target's response to a threat should be classified as "concede" only if "the target modified its behavior in accordance with the United States' demands, stated or implied, after the threat was issued and *before the threat was executed*." Indeed, Pape (1990) argues that the strikes were effective not because they foreshadowed future punishment, but because they blunted North Vietnam's conventional strategy with brute force.

[31]Chamberlain (2016, 208).

[32]Zegart (2018), for example, argues that the low costs and high sustainability of drone warfare make U.S. coercive threats more credible rather than less.

when its resolve is high. But the book's case studies demonstrate that the problem for the United States is not that military force is too cheap to use; rather, it is not cheap enough. It remains prohibitively costly to conduct the kinds of long-term ground operations that would allow the United States to impose its will on most stubborn adversaries. The reason coercion failed against Libya in 2011, for example, was not that the U.S. was unable to communicate its willingness to kill civilians, endure casualties, and occupy Libya in order to compel Qaddafi to accept U.S. demands. Rather, it was that the United States was never willing to do these things in the first place, and Qaddafi knew it. Indeed, President Obama himself declared that "the United States is not going to deploy ground troops into Libya," removing any doubt about the limits of U.S. resolve.[33] America's signals were hardly muddled; rather, they were too clear.

This suggests that U.S. doctrine has a rather different signaling effect than the one Chamberlain asserts. She argues that America's cost-minimization measures "erode the signaling properties of its compellent threats," making it harder for the United States to reveal when its resolve is high.[34] The evidence, however, shows just the opposite: U.S. signals have actually become increasingly clear over time. The problem is that the signal is one that the United States would like to avoid sending.[35] When the United States goes out of its way to shield the public from the costs of war, avoid inflicting collateral damage, and mitigate risks to its own soldiers, it may inadvertently advertise to its adversaries that it is sensitive to these costs and that its motivation to prevail is weak.[36] The issue, then, is not that U.S. signals have become "uninformative" and reveal too little – it is that they reveal too much.[37]

As Chamberlain rightly notes, even if these cost-minimization tactics have adverse effects on U.S. credibility, that is no reason to abandon them.[38] Avoiding civilian casualties and protecting U.S. soldiers are

[33]Chamberlain (2016, 124).

[34]Chamberlain (2016, 47).

[35]We might more properly call these actions "indices" of U.S. resolve rather than signals, as they reflect a revealed preference rather than a claimed one. See Jervis (1970), especially chapter 2.

[36]Indeed, Byman and Waxman (1999) argue that U.S. cost-minimization efforts inadvertently give adversaries a playbook for how to outlast the United States.

[37]Chamberlain (2016, 35).

[38]Chamberlain (2016, 225).

important endeavors in their own right.[39] Yet *Cheap Threats* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of coercion, highlighting the complex nature of signaling and military power in international confrontations. Chamberlain has written an essential reminder that in coercive diplomacy, even seemingly straightforward policy choices can have unexpected and multifaceted consequences.

[39]Though she does suggest reinstating the draft and financing military operations with current revenues only. Chamberlain (2016, 222–23).

References

Allen, Michael A. and Benjamin O. Fordham. 2011. "From Melos to Baghdad: Explaining Resistance to Militarized Challenges from More Powerful States." *International Studies Quarterly* 55(4): 1025–45.

Art, Robert J. and Patrick M. Cronin, eds. 2003. *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace.

Blechman, Barry M. and Stephen S. Kaplan. 1978. *Force without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Bratton, Patrick C. 2005. "When Is Coercion Successful? And Why Can't We Agree on It?" *Naval War College Review* 58(3): 99–121.

Byman, Daniel and Matthew Waxman. 1999. "Defeating U.S. Coercion." *Survival* 41(2): 107–120.

Byman, Daniel and Matthew C. Waxman. 2001. *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Caverley, Jonathan D. 2014. *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Chamberlain, Dianne Pfundstein. 2016. *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Davis, James W., Jr. 2000. *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

De Wijk, Rob. 2014. *The Art of Military Coercion: Why the West's Military Superiority Scarcely Matters*. 2nd ed. Amsterdam University Press.

Downes, Alexander B. and Todd S. Sechser. 2012. "The Illusion of Democratic Credibility." *International Organization* 66(3): 457–89.

Fearon, James D. 1994. "Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests: An Empirical Test of a Crisis Bargaining Model." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38(2): 236–269.

———. 1995. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49(3): 379–414.

———. 1997. "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41(1): 68–90.

Foot, Rosemary J. 1988. "Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict." *International Security* 13(3): 92–112.

Friedman, Edward. 1975. "Nuclear Blackmail and the End of the Korean War." *Modern China* 1(1): 75–91.

Fuhrmann, Matthew and Todd S. Sechser. 2014. "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4): 919–35.

George, Alexander L. and William E. Simons. 1994. *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*. 2nd ed. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

Greenhill, Kelly M. and Peter M. Krause, eds. 2018. *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*. Washington, D.C.: Oxford University Press.

Haun, Phil. 2015. *Coercion, Survival, and War: Why Weak States Resist the United States*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Jakobsen, Peter Viggo. 1998. *Western Use of Coercive Diplomacy After the Cold War: A Challenge for Theory and Practice*. New York: St. Martin's.

———. 2011. "Pushing the Limits of Military Coercion Theory." *International Studies Perspectives* 12(2): 153–70.

Jervis, Robert. 1970. *The Logic of Images in International Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lektzian, David J. and Christopher M. Sprecher. 2007. "Sanctions, Signals, and Militarized Conflict." *American Journal of Political Science* 51(2): 415–31.

Markwica, Robin. 2018. *Emotional Choices: How the Logic of Affect Shapes Coercive Diplomacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mobley, Richard A. 2009. "U.S. Joint Military Contributions to Countering Syria's 1970 Invasion of Jordan." *Joint Force Quarterly* 55(4): 160–67.

Morrow, James D. 1994. "Alliances, Credibility, and Peacetime Costs." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38(2): 270–97.

Pape, Jr., Robert A. 1990. "Coercive Air Power in the Vietnam War." *International Security* 15(2): 103–146.

Post, Abigail. 2018. "Flying to Fail: Costly Signals and Air Power in Crisis Bargaining." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (forthcoming).

Schaub, Gary. 2004. "Deterrence, Compellence, and Prospect Theory." *Political Psychology* 25(3): 389–411.

Schelling, Thomas C. 1960. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

———. 1966. *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sechser, Todd S. 2004. "Are Soldiers Less War-Prone Than Statesmen?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48(5): 746–774.

———. 2007. "Winning without a Fight: Power, Reputation, and Compellent Threats in International Crises." Ph.D. diss., Stanford University.

———. 2010. "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power." *International Organization* 64(4): 627–60.

———. 2011. "Militarized Compellent Threats, 1918–2001." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28(4): 377–401.

———. 2018a. "A Bargaining Theory of Coercion." In *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, edited by Kelly M. Greenhill and Peter M. Krause. Washington, D.C.: Oxford University Press.

———. 2018b. "Reputations and Signaling in Coercive Bargaining." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62(2): 318–45.

Sechser, Todd S. and Matthew Fuhrmann. 2017. *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Slantchev, Branislav L. 2005. "Military Coercion in Interstate Crises." *American Political Science Review* 99(4): 533–47.

Spence, Michael. 1973. "Job Market Signaling." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 87(3): 355–74.

Zegart, Amy. 2018. "Cheap Fights, Credible Threats: The Future of Armed Drones and Coercion." *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming).