

## Coercive Diplomacy Recalibrated: Evaluating Effectiveness, Risks, and Modern Challenges.

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## Abstract

Coercive diplomacy, the strategic use of threats or limited force to compel an adversary, remains a persistent instrument in international relations despite its contentious history and uncertain outcomes. This article argues for a necessary "recalibration" of our understanding and application of this tool, critically evaluating its effectiveness, inherent risks, and viability amidst the complexities of the 21st century. It addresses the central question: To what extent can coercive diplomacy be considered an effective and responsible instrument of statecraft today, given its profound risks and the evolving strategic landscape?

The analysis proceeds in two parts. Part I evaluates the foundational elements influencing coercive diplomacy's success or failure. It finds that effectiveness is highly conditional, hinging on elusive factors like demonstrable credibility, perceived legitimacy (often enhanced by multilateral support), and conducive context. Simultaneously, it highlights the significant inherent risks of unintended escalation, counter-productive radicalization, and regional destabilization, alongside the constraining force of ethical dilemmas and international legal norms regarding proportionality and legitimacy.

Part II shifts to application and future perspectives. Examination of key historical case studies (Iraq, Iran, Cuba) reveals a spectrum of outcomes, from perceived success under extreme duress to costly failures, underscoring the strategy's unpredictability. The analysis then confronts critical modern challenges: the sophisticated evolution of economic coercion beyond traditional sanctions, the ambiguity and escalatory potential of the cyber domain as a coercive instrument, and the disruptive influence of non-state actors complicating traditional state-centric models.

The article concludes that the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy in the 21st century is highly questionable and its viability as a reliable tool is significantly diminished by both inherent risks and modern complexities. It should be viewed not as a default policy option but as a high-risk instrument of last resort. This study contributes by systematically integrating these factors, urging policymakers towards greater caution and emphasizing the need to prioritize conflict prevention, robust crisis management, multilateral cooperation, and integrated statecraft grounded in international law.

**Keywords:** Coercive diplomacy, Crisis management, Escalation, International law

## 1. Introduction

In the complex and often contentious landscape of international relations, states perpetually navigate the spectrum between peaceful cooperation and open conflict. Central to this navigation is the enduring challenge of influencing adversaries and protecting national interests without resorting to the immense costs of full-scale war. Among the most potent, enduring, yet perilous instruments wielded in this pursuit is coercive diplomacy: the strategic employment of threats or the limited application of force – now encompassing a wide array of tools including military posturing, economic sanctions, cyber operations, and other forms of pressure – to compel a target state or actor to alter its behavior against its will.<sup>1</sup> It represents a deliberate attempt to achieve political objectives by manipulating the adversary's calculation of costs and benefits, making resistance seem more painful than compliance.<sup>2</sup>

While a seemingly permanent fixture of statecraft, the practice and relevance of coercive diplomacy face renewed scrutiny and present acute dilemmas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This renewed focus stems from several converging factors. Its history, a complex tapestry woven with threads of apparent successes and conspicuous failures, offers ambiguous lessons at best. Furthermore, the contemporary strategic environment – characterized by shifting power dynamics, novel technologies, and increased interdependence – arguably magnifies both the potential reach and the inherent dangers of coercive measures. Successfully executing a coercive strategy demands a precarious balance of capability, credibility, clear communication, and astute psychological understanding. However, applying these principles effectively today is complicated by contested normative frameworks, the difficulty of signaling intent in domains like cyberspace, and the potential for rapid, uncontrolled escalation across multiple domains (economic, military, informational). The stakes remain exceptionally high: failure can result not only in the immediate non-achievement of objectives but also in damaged reputations, emboldened adversaries, spiraling escalation, and long-term regional instability.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the conditions under which coercive diplomacy might succeed or fail, and the profound risks it entails, is therefore a critical imperative for contemporary international security.

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<sup>1</sup> Schelling, Thomas C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. Yale University Press, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> George, Alexander L. (1991). *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*. United States Institute of Peace Press, p.3-11.

<sup>3</sup> Jakobsen, Peter Viggo. (2000). "Coercive Diplomacy: Frequent Use, Frequent Failure". *International Studies Association Annual Convention*.

These evolving complexities and heightened risks bring into sharp focus a pivotal question that motivates this article: To what extent does coercive diplomacy remain a viable and effective instrument of statecraft in the 21st century, considering its inherent dangers, ethical dilemmas, and the transformations brought by new technologies, actors, and forms of interdependence?

In response to the critical need for clarity highlighted above, the primary objective of this article is to conduct a comprehensive and critical examination of coercive diplomacy. Specially, it aims to evaluate its underlying dynamics, conditions for effectiveness, inherent risks, and evolving application in light of contemporary challenges. This article moves beyond simplistic notions of threat and response to explore the intricate interplay of factors that shape coercive encounters. The ultimate goal is to provide policymakers and analysts with nuanced understanding of why this tool of statecraft remains both persistently attractive to policymakers and notoriously difficult to wield successfully and responsibly in the current global landscape. To achieve this objective, the analysis unfolds in two main parts. Part I lays the essential groundwork by systematically evaluating the effectiveness and risks intrinsically associated with coercive diplomacy, addressing fundamental questions about its operational logic and limitations. It begins by dissecting the critical factors often cited as determinants of success or failure, focusing on the interplay of the coercer's credibility (capability and resolve), the legitimacy of the demands and actions, and the shaping influence of the broader geopolitical and historical context (Section A). Subsequently, it confronts the significant ethical dilemmas and legal limits that constrain coercive actions, scrutinizing issues of just cause, proportionality, and adherence to international law and humanitarian principles (Section B). Finally, Part I directly addresses the omnipresent dangers of escalation and unintended consequences, exploring how coercive pressure can inadvertently trigger military, economic, or political spirals, fuel radicalization, and contribute to wider regional destabilization (Section C). This foundational assessment is crucial for understanding the inherent challenges before examining specific applications.

Building upon this foundational evaluation of core dynamics and risks, Part II shifts the focus to the frameworks of application and future perspectives for coercive diplomacy in the contemporary era. This part directly confronts how coercion operates in practice and how it is adapting – or failing to adapt – to 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. It first draws concrete lessons from historical precedent by examining key case studies – including the protracted engagement with Iraq, the multifaceted approach towards Iran's nuclear program, and the acute confrontation of the Cuban Missile Crisis – highlighting the practical complexities and varied outcomes of

coercion in action (Section A). Following this historical grounding, the analysis confronts the emerging challenges posed by the 21st-century strategic environment, assessing the impact of sophisticated economic coercion beyond traditional sanctions, the disruptive potential of cyberspace as a new domain of conflict, and the analytical and operational difficulties presented by influential non-state actors (Section B). Building upon these insights, the article concludes with recommendations and future orientations, exploring pathways towards more responsible and potentially effective strategies through strengthening multilateralism and international law, prioritizing conflict prevention and crisis management, and promoting integrated, whole-of-government approaches (Section C).

By integrating theoretical evaluation with empirical analysis and forward-looking perspectives, this article seeks to provide a thorough answer to the central question regarding the viability and responsible management of coercive diplomacy, aiming to offer critical insights for policymakers, analysts, and students of international security navigating its complexities in today's intricate global landscape.

Methodologically, this article adopts a primarily qualitative and analytical approach to investigate the complexities of coercive diplomacy. Epistemologically, the research aligns with a critical realist perspective; it acknowledges the existence of coercive statecraft as a real phenomenon with identifiable mechanisms, but emphasizes that its effectiveness and consequences are highly contingent upon specific historical, geopolitical, and perceptual contexts, rather than being governed by universal, deterministic laws. The mode of reasoning employed is therefore multifaceted: it combines deductive elements, applying established theoretical frameworks of coercion to structure the analysis, with inductive and abductive insights drawn from the examination of historical case studies to identify patterns, learn lessons, and infer the most plausible explanations for varying outcomes.

## **2. Evaluation of the effectiveness and risks of coercive diplomacy**

Coercive diplomacy, the strategic practice of employing threats or the limited application of force to compel an adversary to alter its behavior, stands as a central, albeit highly contentious, instrument in the toolkit of international statecraft. It represents an attempt to achieve political objectives without resorting to the full scale of warfare, navigating the delicate space between passive diplomacy and open conflict. However, the allure of achieving goals through pressure is shadowed by significant complexities and dangers. The success of such strategies is far from

guaranteed, and their implementation carries profound risks that can potentially outweigh any intended benefits.<sup>4</sup>

This first Part undertakes a critical evaluation of coercive diplomacy, moving beyond a simple description to analyze its fundamental dynamics, constraints, and potential pitfalls. We begin by dissecting the factors that determine its success or failure (A). This involves examining the crucial elements of the coercing actor's credibility—both its capability and perceived willingness to act—the legitimacy of the demands being made and the actions threatened, and the indispensable role of the broader geopolitical, historical, and cultural context in shaping outcomes.

Subsequently, the analysis confronts the vital ethical dilemmas and legal limits (B) that frame any use of coercion. State actions, even short of war, are not undertaken in a normative vacuum. We will scrutinize the inherent tensions surrounding the legitimacy of coercive actions themselves, the critical principle of proportionality in the means employed relative to the ends sought, and the necessary adherence to the frameworks of international law, including humanitarian considerations.

Finally, this Part directly addresses the inherent dangers of escalation and unintended consequences (C). Coercive measures, by their very nature, risk triggering dynamics that spiral out of control. We will explore the potential for military, economic, and political escalation, the possibility that pressure tactics might inadvertently fuel radicalization within the target state or society, and the broader risk of contributing to regional destabilization with cascading negative effects.

By systematically examining these core dimensions—the conditions influencing effectiveness, the normative constraints, and the inherent dangers—Part I aims to provide a foundational understanding of the complexities, challenges, and high stakes involved in the theory and practice of coercive diplomacy. This critical assessment is essential before exploring its specific applications and future trajectory in Part II.

### **2-1- Failure and success factors: analysis of credibility, legitimacy and context in coercive strategies**

Coercive strategies, either implemented by states, international organizations or non-state actors, aims to influence the comportment of other actors by threat or use of power. However,

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<sup>4</sup> Freedman, Lawrence. (2004). "Strategic coercion". In Lawrence Freedman (Ed.), *Strategy: A History*. Oxford University Press, p.139.

the efficacy varies considerably in function of several factors, in particular the credibility and legitimacy of actors, as well as the context in which these strategies are applied. In this section we will analyze these elements in order to better understand why some strategies succeed while others fail.<sup>5</sup>

### **2-1-1- The credibility of actors: a determinant factor**

When involved in coercive strategy, the credibility refers to other actors' perception of a state or organization's ability and willingness to implement and carry out its threats. If the actor is perceived as credible, he'll be more likely supported and will win the compliance of its targets. This perception is influenced by multiple factors, such as the military and economic resources, the clarity of the signals it sends and the reputation of resolution 'has it used force in the past?'.<sup>6</sup>

- Military and economic resources: A state with a significant military power and a robust economy is generally perceived as more credible. For example, the economic sanctions imposed by the United States against Iran were more effective because of America's economic power and accompanying military capability.<sup>7</sup>

- Political will: Credibility is also linked to an actor's political will to act. If a state has demonstrated its determination to use force in the past, it is more likely to be taken seriously. Conversely, an actor who has shown a reluctance to act may find its credibility called into question. The failure of the American "red line" in Syria in 2013, concerning the use of chemical weapons, illustrates this point: the lack of reaction to the crossing of this line considerably eroded the credibility of American threats in the region. An actor whose credibility is low (due to a lack of resources, a history of backsliding, or ambiguous signals) will find it hard to coerce its target.<sup>8</sup>

### **2-1-2- The legitimacy of coercive strategies: a moral and legal issue:**

The legitimacy refers to the recognition and acceptance of an actor's actions by the international community and by the actors concerned.<sup>9</sup>

- International law: Coercive strategies that respect international law, notably United Nations Security Council resolutions, are generally perceived as more legitimate. For example,

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<sup>5</sup> George, Alexander L., & William E. Simons (Eds.). (1994). *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*. Westview Press, p.15.

<sup>6</sup> Schelling, Thomas C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*, p.45.

<sup>7</sup> Pape, Robert A. (1997). "Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work". *International Security*, 22(2), pp.90-136.

<sup>8</sup> Brands, Hal. (2016). "Obama's 'Red Line' Dilemma: Syria and the Perils of Coercive Diplomacy". *Parameters*, 46(1), pp 87-99.

<sup>9</sup> Franck, Thomas M. (1990). *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations*. Oxford University Press, p.21.

the military intervention in Libya in 2011 was widely supported due to its authorization by the Security Council, which reinforced the legitimacy of the action.<sup>10</sup>

- Acceptance by local actors: Legitimacy is also enhanced when coercive strategies are perceived as just by local populations. Interventions that appear to uphold universal values, such as human rights, may win popular support, while those perceived as acts of aggression may provoke resistance.

- The legitimacy of the request refers to the perception, both by the target state and by the international community, of the validity of the request formulated by the coercive actor. A request perceived as unjust, excessive or contrary to international law is less likely to be accepted. Legitimacy can be reinforced by the support of international organizations (such as the UN) or by regional consensus. Conversely, coercive action taken unilaterally, without clear justification or international support, is likely to be perceived as illegitimate and to provoke increased resistance. The case of the 2003 intervention in Iraq, carried out without a clear mandate from the UN Security Council, is an example of the loss of legitimacy that contributed to the bogging down of the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

### **2-1-3- Context: an essential analytical framework:**

The context in which a coercive strategy is implemented encompasses geopolitical, historical, cultural and social factors. The geopolitical context includes alliances, regional rivalries and global power dynamics, plays a decisive role in the success or failure of coercive diplomacy.<sup>12</sup>

- Geopolitical context: International relations and alliances influence the dynamics of coercive strategies. For example, a coercive strategy implemented in an environment of geopolitical tension may be perceived as escalatory, while a similar approach in a cooperative context may be more readily accepted.<sup>13</sup>

- Historical and cultural factors: Historical antecedents between the actors involved can also influence the perception of coercive strategies. Past conflicts or historical injustices can exacerbate tensions and make coercive strategies less effective. For example, military intervention in regions with a history of colonialism may be viewed with suspicion and resistance.

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<sup>10</sup> Bellamy, Alex J. (2011). *Global Politics and the Responsibility to Protect: From Words to Deeds*. Routledge, p.170.

<sup>11</sup> Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. (2003). "An Unnecessary War". *Foreign Policy*, (134), 52.

<sup>12</sup> George, Alexander L. (1991). *Forceful Persuasion*, p.71.

<sup>13</sup> Jervis, Robert. (1976). *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton University Press. Part III

## **2-2- Ethical dilemmas and legal limits: discussing issues of legitimacy, proportionality and respect for international law:**

Ethical dilemmas and legal limits are at the heart of contemporary debates on the use of force and coercive strategies in international relations. As states and international organizations seek to respond to complex crises, they face fundamental questions about the legitimacy of their actions, the proportionality of the means employed and respect for international law. The tension between the need to influence the behavior of other states and respect for fundamental legitimacy, proportionality and respect for established norms. This section aims to explore these issues, highlighting the tensions that exist between ethical imperatives and legal constraints.<sup>14</sup>

### **2-2-1- Legitimacy: a moral and political imperative:**

The legitimacy of actions undertaken by States and international organizations is a central issue in coercive interventions. It is based on recognition by the international community and the actors concerned of the rightness and necessity of such actions.<sup>15</sup> The legitimacy of coercive action depends on a number of factors:

- Moral legitimacy: interventions are often justified by moral considerations, such as the protection of human rights or the prevention of genocide. For example, intervention in Libya in 2011 was widely supported on the basis of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a principle aimed at preventing mass atrocities. However, this moral legitimacy can be challenged if the actions undertaken do not correspond to expected results, or if they lead to negative consequences for the local population.<sup>16</sup>

- Legal legitimacy: The legitimacy of coercive action is also rooted in international law. Interventions must comply with the standards established by United Nations treaties and resolutions. The absence of a clear authorization from the Security Council can call into question the legitimacy of coercive action, while unilateral action without clear justification risks being perceived as illegitimate.

### **2-2-2- Proportionality: a fundamental principle of international law:**

The principle of proportionality is a key element of international humanitarian and human rights law. It requires that the means employed in a coercive intervention be proportionate to the objectives pursued, in order to minimize human suffering and collateral damage. In other words,

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<sup>14</sup> Welsh, Jennifer M. (Ed.). (2004). *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations*. Oxford University Press, p.3.

<sup>15</sup> Franck, Thomas M. (1990). *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations*.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, Gareth. (2008). *The Responsibility to Protect*. Brookings Institution Press, P.49.

the damage caused by coercive action must not be excessive in relation to the expected benefits.<sup>17</sup>

- Assessment of means and ends: proportionality requires a rigorous assessment of the means used in relation to the objectives pursued. For example, a disproportionate military response to a threat can result in massive civilian casualties and undermine the legitimacy of the action. If aerial bombardments cause significant civilian casualties may be perceived as violations of international law. The assessment of proportionality is often subjective and depends on the perspective of each actor: what may be considered reasonable by the coercive actor may be perceived as unjust punishment by the targeted state and its population.<sup>18</sup>

- Unintended consequences: coercive interventions can often have unintended consequences that call into question their proportionality. Efforts to destabilize a regime can lead to a power vacuum, the rise of extremist groups and a deterioration in living conditions for the population. These results can lead to criticism of the legitimacy and proportionality of the actions undertaken.

### **2-2-3- Respect for international law: a binding framework:**

Respect for international law is essential to ensure that coercive actions are carried out legally and ethically. This legal framework imposes obligations on states and international players, but is often confronted with practical challenges. Respect for international law is *q sine qua non* for the legitimacy of coercive diplomacy, and includes respect for the principle of sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of states and the peaceful settlements of disputes.<sup>19</sup>

The norms of international humanitarian law: International humanitarian law lays down clear rules for the conduct of hostilities and the protection of civilians. Violations of these norms, such as indiscriminate attacks or the use of prohibited weapons, can lead to criminal prosecution and damage the reputation of states. Allegations of war crimes in Syria, for example, have raised questions about the compliance of parties to the conflict with international law.

Challenges in applying international law: although international law imposes obligations, its application often remains problematic. States might act outside established norms, invoking reasons of national security or humanitarian urgency. This flexibility can lead to abuses and an erosion of confidence in the international legal system. Cyber-attacks, for example, raised

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<sup>17</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Customary IHL Database. Rule 14: Proportionality in Attack. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/customary-international-humanitarian-law/proportionality-in-attack-rule-14/3EE547E907E3D67C8B843B563E43D9F8>

<sup>18</sup> Walzer, Michael. (2006). *Just and Unjust Wars*, P. 127.

<sup>19</sup> Shaw, Malcolm N. (2017). *International Law* (8th ed.). Cambridge University Press, (Chapter 3 &4)

complex questions about their conformity with international law, particularly when their attribution is difficult and their effects transboundary. The use of force, however limited, must be justified under international law, and should only be considered as a last resort, when all other diplomatic options have been exhausted.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, the ethical dilemmas and legal limits associated with coercive interventions raise complex questions concerning legitimacy, proportionality and respect for international law. International actors must navigate between moral comparative and legal constraints, while taken into account, the consequences of their actions. The use of coercive diplomacy requires careful consideration of the ethical dilemmas and legal limits involved. Legitimacy, proportionality and respect for international law must be at the heart of any decision to take coercive action. Neglecting these considerations risks compromising the effectiveness of the action, damaging the reputation of the coercive actor, and undermining the rules-based international order.

### **2-3- Escalation and unintended consequences: examining the risks of escalation, radicalization and regional destabilization:**

While coercive diplomacy is a foreign policy instrument designed to influence the behavior of a target state through the threat or limited use of force, its application is rarely free of risks and unintended consequences. Over and above its stated objectives, the use of coercion can trigger complex dynamics with potentially devastating effects, ranging from conflict escalation to the radicalization of populations, not to mention the destabilization of entire regions. That's why it's essential to take a close look at the risks of escalation, radicalization and regional destabilization associated with coercive diplomacy. By highlighting the unintended consequences that can arise from the use of force and coercive strategies, this section aims to offer nuanced analysis of the issues and challenges posed by this controversial instrument of international relations.<sup>21</sup>

#### **2-3-1- Risks of escalation: a complex dynamic:**

While coercive diplomacy is a foreign policy instrument designed to influence the behavior of a target state, its application is rarely without risk. One of the major dangers lies in the potential for escalation, the progressive intensification of conflict. This risk is inherent in the very nature of coercion, which involves pressure, threats and even the limited use of force. Escalation can

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<sup>20</sup> Idem, p.3.

<sup>21</sup> Jervis, Robert. (1978). "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma". *World Politics*, 30(2), 167-214.

transform an initially controlled situation into an open conflict with unpredictable consequences.<sup>22</sup>

The risks of escalation in coercive diplomacy include uncertainty and high costs, which can lead to open conflict. The dynamic between cooperation and conflict is complex, requiring careful management to avoid unforeseen consequences. Coercive actions can generate unpredictable reactions from target states, increasing the risk of misunderstanding and conflict. The target state may misinterpret the signals sent by the coercive actor, or overestimate its own ability to resist pressure. This strategic uncertainty can lead to miscalculations and unintentional escalation.<sup>23</sup>

What's more, sanctions and other coercive measures can damage the economies not only of the target countries, but also of the countries imposing the measures, leading to internal and international tensions. Companies may face pressure from interest groups. These economic and political costs can make it difficult to maintain a coercive policy in the long term.<sup>24</sup> Coercive diplomacy can also intensify rivalries between states, particularly in already unstable regions such as the Middle East, where regional players may react aggressively. Each actor seeks to defend its interests and counter the influence of its rivals, which can lead to an escalation of tensions and an increased risk of conflict. Similarly, efforts to contain the nuclear ambitions of one state may paradoxically encourage other countries to develop their own nuclear capabilities, thereby increasing the risk of armed conflict.<sup>25</sup>

Nuclear proliferation is a major risk associated with coercive diplomacy. The use of coercion can lead to a breakdown in communication channels, making it more difficult to resolve disputes peacefully and increasing the risk of military escalation. Without dialogue, it is difficult to defuse tensions and find mutually acceptable solutions. Coercive actions can also affect states' allies, who may find themselves caught up in conflicts or tensions as a result of their association with coercive policies. The impact on allies is an important consideration when planning and implementing coercive diplomacy.<sup>26</sup> Escalation can occur when both sides adopt increasingly rigid positions, making any form of compromise difficult and increasing the risk

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<sup>22</sup> Schelling, Thomas C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*, p.92.

<sup>23</sup> Kahneman, Daniel, and Amos Tversky. (1979). "Prospect Theory". *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263-291.

<sup>24</sup> Drezner, Daniel W. (1999). *The Sanctions Paradox: Economic Statecraft and International Relations*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Jervis, Robert. (1978). "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma".

<sup>26</sup> Snyder, Glenn H. (1984). "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics". *World Politics*, 36(4), 461-495

of armed conflict. The dynamics of escalation are complex and can be difficult to control. Careful management of coercive diplomacy is essential to avoid unforeseen consequences and to maintain international peace and security.

### **2-3-2- Radicalization: a phenomenon with lasting consequences:**

Coercive diplomacy, while used to achieve foreign policy objectives, can paradoxically fuel radicalization within targeted populations. Radicalization refers to the process by which individuals or groups adopt extreme ideologies, often in response to perceived injustice or violence. Coercive interventions can exacerbate this phenomenon, creating fertile ground for militant recruitment and reinforcing feelings of injustice and marginalization.<sup>27</sup>

The impact of violence on populations is a key factor. Military interventions, particularly those that result in civilian casualties, can fuel resentment and anger among affected populations. This resentment can lead to radicalization, as individuals seek avenge injustices suffered and oppose what they perceive as external aggression. For example, interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have been associated with an increase in recruitment by extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Stories of victimization, often amplified by the media and social networks, can also play a crucial role in the radicalization process. Individuals exposed to narratives of suffering and injustice may be more inclined to join radical movements, seeking to oppose those they perceive as their oppressors. The dissemination of these narratives can create a sense of common identity and strengthen cohesion within radical groups. Economic sanctions, by impoverishing populations and limiting their access to essential goods and services, can also encourage radicalization. Feelings of frustration and despair can lead some individuals to turn to extreme ideologies as a solution to their problems.

Coercive diplomacy can also create a political and security vacuum, which can be exploited by radical groups to extend their influence and recruit new members. Weakened state institutions and a lack of future prospects can create an environment conducive to the spread of extremist ideologies. It is therefore essential to consider the risks of radicalization when planning and implementing coercive diplomacy, and to put in place measures to mitigate these risks. This can include efforts to protect civilian populations, provide humanitarian assistance, promote good governance, and support de-radicalization initiatives.

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<sup>27</sup> Crenshaw, Martha. (1981). "The Causes of Terrorism". *Comparative Politics*, 13(4), 379-399

### 2-3-3- Regional destabilization: a domino effect:

Beyond the direct consequences for the target state, coercive diplomacy can lead to regional destabilization, with lasting and unpredictable effects. Coercive interventions can create a domino effect, where problems and conflicts spread beyond the initial borders, affecting the stability and security of an entire region.<sup>28</sup>

The spread of conflict is a major risk. Local conflicts can quickly turn into regional crises, due to ethnic, religious or political alliances that transcend borders. For example, the intervention in Libya in 2011 led to destabilization not only of Libya, but also of its neighbors, such as Mali, where armed groups took advantage of the power vacuum to seize territory. These conflicts can also lead to external intervention, with regional or international players siding with different factions, exacerbating tensions and prolonging the crisis.<sup>29</sup> Refugee flows and social tensions are another consequence of regional destabilization. Conflicts and humanitarian crises can lead to massive population movements, with people seeking refuge in neighboring countries. These refugee influxes can put considerable pressure on the resources and infrastructures of host countries, and can also exacerbate social and political tensions. Host countries can find themselves facing economic and social challenges, which can fuel nationalist and xenophobic sentiments. The Syrian refugee crisis in Europe is a striking example, where the influx of refugees has led to political and social tensions in several European countries.

Regional destabilization can also create a power vacuum, which can be exploited by non-state actors such as terrorist groups or criminal organizations. These actors can take advantage of the weakness of state institutions and the absence of border controls to extend their influence and carry out illegal activities, such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling and human trafficking.<sup>30</sup> Regional destabilization can also encourage the proliferation of weapons, including weapons of mass destruction. States that feel threatened may seek to acquire weapons to protect themselves, which can trigger a regional arms race. It is therefore essential to take into account the risks of regional destabilization when planning and implementing coercive diplomacy, and to put in place measures to mitigate these risks. This can include efforts to strengthen state

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<sup>28</sup> Lake, David A., and Donald Rothchild (Eds.). (1998). *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*. Princeton University Press, p.4.

<sup>29</sup> Lecocq, Baz & Schrijver, Nico. (2013). "The War in Mali and the Responsibility to Protect." *Netherlands International Law Review*, 60(2), 271-291.

<sup>30</sup> Clunan, Anne L., and Harold A. Trinkunas (Eds.). (2010). *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Stanford University Press. p .9.  
<https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2cce9f9c-2a08-47e3-b1f4-d2e7fa1d824c/content>

institutions in neighboring countries, to promote regional cooperation, and to combat terrorism and transnational crime.<sup>31</sup>

### **3- Frameworks of application and perspectives for coercive diplomacy in the 21st century:**

Moving beyond the foundational principles and theoretical risks inherent in coercive diplomacy, Part II delves into the complex realities of its application and its evolving trajectory in the 21st century. Understanding coercion requires more than abstract models; it demands engagement with historical precedents, a clear-eyed assessment of contemporary challenges, and forward-looking considerations for its future use. This Part, therefore, undertakes a multi-faceted exploration aimed at providing a comprehensive perspective on coercive diplomacy in practice.<sup>32</sup>

First, we will turn to historical case studies (A), examining pivotal instances where coercive strategies were employed. By analyzing the dynamics of crises involving Iraq, Iran's nuclear program, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, we aim to extract tangible lessons about the factors contributing to success or failure, the interplay of different coercive tools, and the often-unpredictable nature of state interactions under pressure.<sup>33</sup>

Second, the analysis confronts the emerging challenges (B) that fundamentally reshape the landscape of coercion today. The globalization of finance and technology has spawned new forms of economic pressure far exceeding traditional sanctions. The rise of cyberspace introduces a volatile new domain for confrontation, characterized by ambiguity and rapid escalation potential. Furthermore, the increasing influence and agency of non-state actors disrupt traditional state-centric models of coercion, complicating targeting, attribution, and strategy design.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, building upon the insights from past experiences and present challenges, this Part concludes with recommendations and future orientations (C). Recognizing the significant dangers and ethical quandaries associated with coercion, we explore pathways to mitigate risks and enhance responsibility. This includes strengthening multilateral frameworks and international law as sources of legitimacy and constraint, prioritizing robust conflict prevention

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<sup>31</sup> Fuhrmann, Matthew. (2009). "Spreading Temptation: Proliferation and Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Agreements." *International Security*, 34(1), 7-41.

<sup>32</sup> Greenhill. K.M. (2018). "Coercion: An Analytical Overview." In *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*, p.3. Or, Freedman, L. (1998). "Strategic Coercion." In *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases*, pp. 15-36.

<sup>33</sup> George, Hall, and Simons, (1994). *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*. Westview Press.

<sup>34</sup> Greenhill. K.M. (2018). "Coercion: An Analytical Overview." pp.3-32.

and crisis management strategies to reduce the perceived need for coercion, and promoting integrated, whole-of-government approaches to ensure coherence and effectiveness when pressure is deemed unavoidable.<sup>35</sup>

Collectively, this Part seeks to bridge theory and practice, offering a nuanced understanding of coercive diplomacy's past legacies, present complexities, and potential future pathways in an increasingly intricate global environment.

### **3-1- Case studies: lessons from past experience:**

Analysis of specific case studies is essential to understanding coercive diplomacy. By examining past experiences, it is possible to draw valuable lessons that can inform future decisions. The cases of Iraq, Iran and the Cuban missile crisis offer contrasting perspectives on this foreign policy instrument. Each case illustrates different aspects of coercive diplomacy, from its most obvious failures to its most often cited successes. By analyzing these experiences in detail, we can better understand the conditions that foster the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy, as well as the risks and limitations associated with it. The following subsections will explore these studies in greater depth, highlighting the most important lessons for the practice of coercive diplomacy in the 21st century.<sup>36</sup>

#### **3-1-1- The case of Iraq (1990-2003): A failure of Coercive Diplomacy?**

The case of Iraq, from the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to the military intervention of 2003, represents an oft-cited example of the failure of coercive diplomacy, despite a long and costly series of measures taken by the international community. The initial objective was to force Saddam Hussein's regime to withdraw from Kuwait, disarm and comply with UN Security Council resolutions on the destruction of his weapons of mass destruction. To achieve these objectives, a combination of coercive instruments was used, including economic sanctions, weapons inspections, military threats and, finally the use of armed force.<sup>37</sup>

- Economic sanctions: immediately after the invasion of Kuwait, the UN Security Council imposed a near-total trade embargo on Iraq (Resolution 661). These sanctions were intended to deprive Saddam Hussein's regime of the resources needed to maintain its occupation of Kuwait and pursue its weapons program. However, the sanctions had devastating effects on the Iraqi

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<sup>35</sup> Viggo Jakobsen, P. (2020). Coercive Diplomacy as Crisis Management. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics.

<sup>36</sup> Levy J.S. (2008). Deterrence and Coercive diplomacy: The contributions of Alexander George. *Political Psychology*, 29(4), 538.

<sup>37</sup> George, Hall, and Simons, (1994). *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, p.226.

civilian population, leading to shortages of food, medicine and other essential goods. The Oil-for-Food program, set up in 1996, was intended to mitigate the humanitarian effects of the sanctions, but was marred by allegations of corruption and embezzlement.<sup>38</sup>

- Weapons inspections: in parallel with economic sanctions, the Security Council set up an arms inspection regime, entrusted to UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission). UNSCOM was tasked with verifying the destruction of Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, as well as long-range missiles. However, UNSCOM inspectors encountered limited cooperation from the Iraqi regime, which sought to conceal prohibited activities and equipment. These obstructions led to constant tensions between UNSCOM and Iraq, and justified threats of military action.

- The use of Force: In 1991, an international coalition led by United States launched Operation Desert Storm to liberate Kuwait. This military intervention was a swift success, but failed to resolve the issue of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. In 1998, faced with persistent Iraqi obstruction of weapons inspections, the United States and the United Kingdom launched Operation Desert Fox, a series of air strikes against Iraqi military targets. Finally, in 2003, a new US-led coalition invaded Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

### **3-1-2- The Case of Iran (Nuclear Program): Coercive diplomacy and negotiation:**

The case of Iran's nuclear program illustrates an approach of coercive diplomacy combined with negotiation, aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear ambitions and guaranteeing the peaceful of its program. Unlike the case of Iraq, where coercion ultimately led to military intervention, the Iranian case shows how sustained economic and political pressure, combined with diplomatic overtures, can lead to an agreement, even if it remains fragile and contested.<sup>40</sup>

- Economic sanctions: Faced with growing concerns about Iran's nuclear program, the United States, the European Union and other countries imposed a series of economic sanctions on Iran. These sanctions were aimed at limiting Iran's ability to finance its nuclear program, by restricting its oil exports, freezing its assets abroad, and limiting its access to international financial system. The impact of these sanctions on the Iranian economy has been considerable, leading to high inflation, currency devaluation and falling living standards.

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<sup>38</sup> Pape, (1997). "Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997), p.106.

<sup>39</sup> Pape, R. A. (1996). *Iraq, 1991. In Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (pp. 211–253). Cornell University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1287f6v.10>

<sup>40</sup> Elliot. K, (1998). *The Sanctions Glass: Half Full or Completely Empty?*, *International Security*, 23(1), p.56.

- Multilateral negotiations: In parallel with economic sanctions, the world powers (USA, UK, France, Germany, Russia and China) entered into negotiations with Iran, within the framework of the so-called '5+1' group. These long and difficult negotiations were aimed at finding an agreement that would guarantee that Iran's nuclear program would not be diverted to military purposes. In 2015, these negotiations culminated in the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a landmark agreement that provided for the gradual lifting of economic sanctions in exchange for strict, verifiable limitations on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>41</sup>

- The JCPOA: The JCPOA was hailed by most members of the international community as a victory for diplomacy and a means preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. However, the agreement was strongly criticized by some actors, notably in the United States and Israel, who considered that it did not include sufficient guarantees to prevent Iran from eventually developing nuclear weapons. In 2018, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA, reinstating economic sanctions against Iran. This decision jeopardized the agreement and led to an escalation of tensions in the region.

The Iranian case illustrates the complexity of coercive diplomacy and the need to combine pressure with negotiation. Economic sanctions can be an effective instrument for encouraging a state to negotiate, but they must be used with caution and as part of an overall diplomatic strategy. The success of an agreement depends on the credibility of commitments, mutual trust and the political will of all parties involved.

### **3-1-3- The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962): A Model of successful Coercive diplomacy:**

The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 is often seen as a paradigmatic example of successful coercive diplomacy. It illustrates how a combination show of force, clear communication and secret negotiation channels can resolve a major international crisis without resorting to war. However, it is important to qualify this success and take into account the considerable risks that were taken at the time.<sup>42</sup>

- The missile discovery and the American response: in October 1962, aerial photographs taken by U.S. reconnaissance aircraft revealed the construction of Soviet nuclear missile launch pads in Cuba, just a few kilometers off the U.S. coast. This discovery created a major international crisis, directly threatening US security and altering the Cold War balance of

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<sup>41</sup> Jenkins, P. (2018). Trita Parsi. Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy. *Asian Affairs*, 49(3), 519.

<sup>42</sup> George, Hall, and Simons, (1994). The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy.

power. U.S. President John F. Kennedy reacted by ordering a naval blockade of Cuba, aimed at preventing the arrival of new Soviet military equipment on the island. This action was a clear show of force and an implicit threat of wider military action if the missiles were not removed.<sup>43</sup>

- **Communication and Secret Negotiation:** Alongside the naval blockade, Kennedy sent a firm message to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, demanding the withdrawal of missiles and warning that the United States was prepared to use any means necessary to protect its security. However, Kennedy also maintained open channels of communication with Khrushchev, through exchanges of letters and secret contacts between the two governments. These secret negotiations led to a compromise that defused the crisis.

- **The Compromise and the Withdrawal of the Missiles:** in the end, Khrushchev agreed to withdrawal of the American Jupiter missiles based in Turkey, close to Soviet border. This compromise enabled the two superpowers to emerge from the crisis without losing face, and to avoid direct military confrontation.

- **A Nuanced Success:** the Cuban missile crisis is often considered a success of coercive diplomacy, as it achieved the American objective (the withdrawal of the missiles) without resorting to war. However, it is important to stress that this success was achieved at considerable risk. The crisis almost degenerated into a nuclear conflict, and the compromise involved major concessions on the part of the United States. Moreover, the secret withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey remained confidential for a long time, which may have fueled criticism of Kennedy.<sup>44</sup>

### **3-2- Emerging challenges: New Instruments and players:**

While the fundamental logic of coercive diplomacy—leveraging threats or the limited use of force to alter an adversary's behavior—endures, the 21st-century strategic landscape presents profound transformations. The traditional toolkit, often centered on overt military threats and comprehensive economic blockades, must now contend with a far more complex, interconnected, and technologically advanced environment. This evolution introduces not only novel instruments of pressure but also diversifies the range of relevant actors capable of wielding or being targeted by coercive measures. This section delves into these critical emerging challenges that are reshaping the theory and practice of coercive diplomacy. We will

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<sup>43</sup> Allison, Graham T., and Philip Zelikow. (1999). *Essence of Decision*.

<sup>44</sup>Wagner, R. H. (2000). Bargaining and war. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 470. And Yates, J. F. (Ed.) (1992). *Risk-taking behavior*. New York: Wiley.

explore the increasing sophistication and weaponization of economic interdependence beyond traditional sanctions (B.1), analyze the rise of cyberspace as a distinct and disruptive domain for coercive signaling and disruption (B.2), and assess the significant analytical and operational difficulties posed by the growing influence and varied nature of non-state actors (B.3). Understanding these dynamics is essential for navigating the complexities and risks inherent in applying coercive strategies effectively and responsibly today.

### **3-2-1- Economic coercion: Beyond traditional sanctions:**

Coercive diplomacy, aimed at influencing a state's behavior through the threat or limited use of force, has considerably broadened its panoply in the 21st century, incorporating increasingly sophisticated economic instruments. While traditional economic sanctions (broad trade embargoes, global asset freezes) are still employed, the time has come for more targeted, diversified forms of economic coercion, adapted to the interdependencies of the globalized economy. This development raises new challenges, particularly in terms of the legal framework and the players involved.<sup>45</sup>

- From global sanctions to targeted and sectoral measures: in the face of criticism of the humanitarian impact and limited effectiveness of global sanctions, the trend is towards "smart" sanctions (aimed at specific individuals or entities) and targeted trade measures. These include selective tariffs, quantitative import/exports restrictions on specific products (e.g. steel, aluminum, technology), or measures targeting key economic sectors (energy, finance, arms). The aim is to maximize pressure on the target state's decision makers or critical capabilities, while minimizing, in theory, the effects on the civilian population. The justification for these measures may invoke various legal bases (national security, response to commercial practices deemed unfair), raising questions of capability with WTO rules.<sup>46</sup>

- Financial leverage and extraterritoriality: the centrality of certain currencies (US dollar) and international financial systems (SWIFT) is exploited as a powerful tool of coercion ('Weaponization' of finance). The use of secondary sanctions threatening to penalize 3rd party actors (companies, banks from other countries) who maintain economic links with the target, multiplies the pressure and raises important questions of sovereignty and international law, due to their extraterritorial scope.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Farrell, Henry, and Abraham L. Newman. (2019). "Weaponized Interdependence". *International Security*, 44(1), 42-79.

<sup>46</sup> Drezner, Daniel W. (2015). *The System Worked: How the World Stopped Another Great Depression*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>47</sup> Farrell & Newman (2019).

- Investment and technology control: Restrictions on inward foreign direct investments (FDI) in sectors deemed strategic (technology, critical infrastructure) are used to limit a state's access to capital or know-how. Conversely, export controls on sensitive technologies (semiconductors, AI, biotechnologies, dual-use goods) are aimed at curbing the economic or military development of a competitor or adversary. These measures interfere with international investment law and bilateral treaties, which often protect investors.
- Pressures on global supply chains: the interconnection of global value chains offers new vulnerabilities. Pressuring Key companies to change their suppliers, relocate production or cease trading with entities in a target country is an emergent form of coercion. This poses complex legal challenges in terms of international trade law and corporate liability.<sup>48</sup>
- The players beyond states: while states remain the main initiators of economic coercion (navigating between their political objectives and the constraints of international law and institutions such as the WTO), their action is increasingly interfaced with other actors.
- Non-state actors: Multinational companies can be targets, instruments (forced to comply with sanctions, sometimes under pressure from their own governments or public opinion) or even autonomous actors indirectly influencing economic relations. NGO's and civil society can exert moral or reputational pressure to encourage divestment or boycotts.

In conclusion, modern economic coercion is a dynamic field, characterized by a wider and more precise range of tools than traditional sanctions. It exploits the interdependencies and financial, technological and commercial flows of globalization. While it offers potentially less costly alternative (in human lives) than military action, its effectiveness remains conditional on the classic factors of coercive diplomacy (credibility, perceived legitimacy, clarity of objectives), and it generates considerable legal, ethical and political challenges, notably in terms of proportionality, unintended consequences and respect for the multilateral framework.

### **3-2-2- Cybersecurity: Strategic analysis of a new domain of coercion:**

The emergence of cyberspace as a theater of confrontation not only represents the addition of a new instrument to the arsenal of coercive diplomacy; it also potentially transforms its nature and logic. Analyzing cybernetic coercion requires going beyond the description of its tools to grasp its profound strategic implications.

- a- Challenging the key concepts of coercion:

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<sup>48</sup> Idem.

- Credibility and attribution: classical coercive diplomacy (according to Schelling or George) relies on the coercive actor's ability to clearly communicate a credible threat (ability + willingness) and to attribute responsibility for it. Cyberspace undermines these foundations. The difficulty of formal and rapid attribution enables action below an obvious response threshold, but undermines the clarity of the coercive signal. If the target is unaware, or can feign ignorance, of the origin of the pressure, the incentive to yield is weakened. The credibility of the threat of cyber escalation is also complex to establish, due to the often invisible and uncertain nature of actual capabilities.

- Thresholds and proportionality: cyberspace blurs traditional thresholds for the use of force and aggression. When does a cyberattack (data theft, service disruption, industrial sabotage) amount to an 'armed attack' justifying a strong, potentially kinetic response? This ambiguity complicates the calibration of coercive pressure and the application of the principles of proportionality and distinction, creating a permanent risk of misinterpretation and unintended escalation.<sup>49</sup>

b- Modification of coercive calculation:

- Asymmetry and the reduction of the entry threshold enable state (and non-state) actors with limited conventional capabilities to exert significant pressure. This potentially democratizes coercion, but also makes it more diffuse and unpredictable.

- The ability to conduct persistent low-intensity operations (continuous espionage, digital harassment, targeted disinformation) offers new forms of infra-conflict coercion, aimed at wearing down the adversary or destabilizing it from within without triggering an open crisis. This represents a challenge for traditional response strategies.

c- Complex interaction with other coercive tools:

Cyber coercion is rarely used in isolation, its effectiveness is often analyzed in synergy with other means (economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, military threats). For example, a cyberattack may aim to amplify the impact of economic sanctions by targeting the financial system, or to prepare the ground for military intervention by degrading command and control systems. Analysis must therefore focus on these hybrid coercive strategies.

d- Analytical and normative limits:

The lack of transparency on actual capabilities and doctrines of employment, coupled with the speed of the technological evolution, makes strategic analysis particularly arduous. The absence

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<sup>49</sup> Nye Jr., Joseph S. (2017). "Deterrence and Dissuasion in Cyberspace". *International Security*, 41(3), 44-71.

of a robust and universally accepted international normative and legal framework for cyberspace creates a “gray zone” conducive to ambiguous coercive actions and increases systematic risks. Efforts to establish norms of responsible behavior (UN GGE, OEWG) are important, but are making slow progress in the face of divergent state interests.<sup>50</sup>

Cyberspace is not just another tool but a field that challenges the fundamental principles of coercive diplomacy (clarity, credibility, attribution, thresholds). While it offers new, asymmetrical options, its use is fraught with strategic ambitious difficulties and normative uncertainty. Its effective and controlled integration into a global coercive strategy represents a major analytical and practical challenge for decision-makers in the 21st century.<sup>51</sup>

### **3-2-3- Non-state Actors (NSAs): An analytical and Operational challenge for coercive diplomacy:**

The classical architecture of coercive diplomacy was conceived and analyzed in a Westphalian world, largely dominated by interactions between sovereign states. The growing influence of a diversity of Non-State Actors (NSAs) – ranging from terrorist organizations and insurgent groups to multinational corporations (MNCs), influential NGOs and even hacktivist groups – profoundly challenges this stato-centric framework and poses major analytical and operational challenges.

- The fragmentation of the target actor and the coercive actor: NSAs as Targets attempts to apply traditional coercive logic (credible threat of costs > benefits of resistance) to NSAs such as terrorist or insurgent groups runs up against fundamental obstacles. Their often-decentralized structure, their sometimes apocalyptic or non-negotiable ideology, their lack of tangible graspable assets (comparable to a state), and their establishment within civilian populations make conventional tools (targeted economic sanctions, conventional military threats) difficult to apply effectively and without disastrous humanitarian or political consequences (risk of increased radicalization, loss of legitimacy). The very notion of “rational calculation” can differ radically from that of a state.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> UN GGE 2013 Report, para. 20; UN GGE 2015 Report, paras. 27, 28(a).

<sup>51</sup> Schmitt, Michael N. (Ed.). (2017). *Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the international law applicable to Cyber operations*, p.312.

[https://ilmc.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/p\\_ilmc/Bilder/Bewerbung/Case\\_2/Michael\\_N.\\_Schmitt\\_-\\_Tallinn\\_Manual\\_2.0\\_on\\_the\\_International\\_Law\\_Applicable\\_to\\_Cyber\\_Operations-Cambridge\\_University\\_Press\\_2017\\_.pdf](https://ilmc.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/p_ilmc/Bilder/Bewerbung/Case_2/Michael_N._Schmitt_-_Tallinn_Manual_2.0_on_the_International_Law_Applicable_to_Cyber_Operations-Cambridge_University_Press_2017_.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> Gauthier.D, (1984). “Deterrence, Maximization, and Rationality,” *Ethics* 94, no. 3 (1984), pp. 486. And, Haun, P. (2015). *Coercion, Survival, and War: Why Weak States Resist the United States*.

- NSAs Coercive Agent: conversely, some NSAs (terrorist groups through violence and fear, MNCs through investment/ divestment blackmail, cyber groups through disruptive attacks) develop their own capacity for coercion, aimed at influencing state's response complex. Their legitimacy as interlocutors or coercive actors is virtually non-existent under conventional international law.
- Proxy warfare: The frequent use of NSAs as proxies by states is one of the most significant challenges. A state may fund, arm or support an insurgent group, militia, or even cybercriminals to exert coercive pressure on an adversary while maintaining official distance and plausible deniability. This dramatically complicates the attribution of responsibility, weakens deterrence mechanisms (who to threaten in return?) and undermines efforts at peaceful conflict resolution, while enabling the proxy state to avoid the direct costs (political, economic, human) of open confrontation.<sup>53</sup>
- Implications for coercive analysis and strategy: The models of coercion developed by Schelling, George and others, focusing on the interaction between rational states, are proving insufficient to fully grasp the complexity introduced by NCAs. New analytical frameworks are needed to understand the motivations, decision-making structures and specific vulnerabilities of different types of NSA.
- Adapting tools: Coercive strategies need to be adapted. This may involve more sophisticated financial tools to track illicit flows, information operations to counter NSA propaganda, counter-insurgency strategies combining pressure and dialogue, or efforts to delegitimize these actors in the eyes of their potential supporters.
- Legal and ethical challenges: Coercive action against NSAs, or the response to their actions, raises acute legal and ethical questions concerning the application of international humanitarian law, respect for human rights, the proportionality of the response, and the legitimacy of intervention on the territory of another state (even if that state is failing to act). The omnipresence and growing influence of non-state actors in international relations are fragmenting the landscape of coercion. They complicate the identification of targets, the definition of objectives, the choice of instruments, the allocation of responsibilities and the evaluation of effectiveness. To remain relevant, the theory and practice of coercive diplomacy must imperatively integrate this new situation, by developing more nuanced, adaptive and often indirect approaches, while navigating an increasingly complex legal and ethical environment.

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<sup>53</sup> Byman, Daniel. (2005). "Confronting Passive Sponsors of Terrorism". *Survival*, 47(3), 115-141.

### 3-3- Recommendations and Future Directions

Having analyzed the historical record through key case studies (II.A) and grappled with the profound challenges posed by new instruments and actors in the contemporary strategic environment (II.B), it becomes clear that the practice of coercive diplomacy demands careful consideration and continuous adaptation. The preceding analysis highlights not only the potential utility of coercion in specific circumstances but also its significant inherent risks, ethical complexities, and frequent propensity for failure or unintended negative consequences. Therefore, moving forward requires more than just acknowledging these difficulties; it necessitates a proactive approach aimed at refining strategies, strengthening normative frameworks, and potentially prioritizing alternative policy tools. This concluding section offers recommendations and future orientations designed to navigate the troubled waters of 21st-century coercive diplomacy more effectively and responsibly.<sup>54</sup>

#### 3-3-1- Strengthen Multilateralism and International Law: Anchoring Coercion within a Legitimate Framework:

Facing the inherent risks and ethical dilemmas of coercive diplomacy, a fundamental future orientation lies in a renewed and sincere investment in multilateralism and the scrupulous respect for international law. This is not some disconnected idealistic aspiration irrelevant to the realities of power; rather, it's a pragmatic approach aimed at making the management of international crises more predictable, legitimate, and, potentially, less dependent on raw power politics.

- The Quest for Collective Legitimacy: Coercive diplomacy, especially when involving severe measures like harsh economic sanctions or the credible threat of force, is intrinsically problematic. Its acceptability (and often its long-term effectiveness) is significantly enhanced when it operates within a recognized multilateral framework. Securing a mandate from the UN Security Council, or acting in close coordination with relevant regional organizations (such as the African Union, OSCE, ASEAN...), confers a legitimacy that unilateral action cannot claim. This not only helps share the political and sometimes material burden of the action but also serves to dispel suspicions of hegemonic intentions or purely national interests, making the pressure on the target state harder to ignore or denounce as illegitimate.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> George, Hall, and Simons, (1994). *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*.

<sup>55</sup> Franck, Thomas M. (1990). *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations*.

- International Law as a Safeguard and Benchmark: International law, though imperfect and sometimes bypassed, provides the only universally (or near-universally) accepted set of rules and principles governing relations between states. In the context of coercion:

a- It defines thresholds (even if debated, such as the use of force in self-defense or humanitarian intervention).

b- It imposes requirements of proportionality and distinction (essential for limiting collateral damage and escalation risks).

c- It offers mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes (negotiation, mediation, arbitration, ICJ) which constitute the preferable alternatives to coercion.

Strengthening respect for these rules, including by the most powerful states, is crucial to prevent coercive diplomacy from becoming the norm rather than the exception and to maintain a semblance of international order based on shared principles.

- Beyond Constraint: Prevention and Dialogue: Dynamic multilateralism is not limited to framing or legitimizing coercion; it is primarily an instrument for conflict prevention and continuous dialogue. Functional multilateral institutions offer permanent communication channels, forums for de-escalating tensions before they spiral, and platforms for building trust and cooperation. Investing in these capabilities (preventive diplomacy, mediation, observation missions) reduces the likelihood that states feel cornered into coercive options.

- The Realistic Challenges: Of course, this orientation clashes with political realities: diverging national interests, institutional blockages (like the Security Council veto), lack of political will, and attempts by some actors to actively undermine the multilateral order. Acknowledging these obstacles does not diminish the relevance of the goal. On the contrary, it underscores the urgent need for constant engagement to defend and reform these institutions, and to reaffirm the primacy of law over force.

In sum, advocating for the strengthening of multilateralism and international law is not about abandoning the defense of one's interests. It is about recognizing that long-term security and stability, even for the most powerful, are better served by a predictable and legitimate international order. This implies systematically prioritizing collective approaches, subjecting one's own actions to the same legal and normative standards expected of others, and viewing coercive diplomacy as a last resort, strictly framed by law and collective legitimacy, rather than as an ordinary tool of foreign policy.

### **3-3-2- Develop Prevention and Crisis Management Strategies: Moving Beyond Reactive Coercion:**

While coercive diplomacy often presents itself as a necessary response to an existing crisis or unacceptable behavior, a forward-looking strategy must prioritize shifting the focus from reactive coercion to proactive prevention and robust crisis management. Relying on coercion as a primary tool implicitly accepts a degree of failure – the failure to foresee, avert, or de-escalate tensions before they reach a point demanding high-risk pressure tactics. Building stronger prevention and management capabilities is not merely about avoiding conflict; it's about creating a strategic environment where the perceived need for coercion is significantly diminished.

- Investing in Foresight and Early Action: Effective prevention starts long before a crisis erupts. This requires:

a- Enhanced Early Warning: Strengthening intelligence gathering and analytical capabilities (both governmental and non-governmental) to identify potential flashpoints, understand underlying grievances, and monitor escalating rhetoric or actions. This isn't just about collecting data, but about interpreting signals accurately and overcoming institutional biases that might downplay emerging risks.

b- Proactive Preventive Diplomacy: Empowering and resourcing diplomatic tools like mediation, good offices, fact-finding missions, and special envoys to engage before positions harden and conflicts intensify. This demands political will to act on early warnings and engage even in seemingly low-priority situations before they metastasize.

c- Addressing Root Causes: Recognizing that many crises amenable to coercive pressure stem from deeper issues – poor governance, economic inequality, resource scarcity, historical grievances, or human rights violations. Long-term prevention involves strategic investments in sustainable development, inclusive governance, and rule of law assistance, tackling the conditions that breed instability and conflict.<sup>56</sup>

- Strengthening Crisis Management Mechanisms: When prevention fails and crises emerge, robust management tools are essential to avoid immediate recourse to coercion or uncontrolled escalation:

a- Reliable De-escalation Channels: Maintaining and utilizing dependable lines of communication (hotlines, dedicated military-to-military channels, established diplomatic

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<sup>56</sup> Hamburg, David A., and Cyrus R. Vance (Eds.). (1999). *Pathways to Peace*.

contacts) is critical for clarifying intentions, preventing miscalculations, and managing incidents before they spiral. Trust in these channels needs to be built during calmer times.<sup>57</sup>

b- Designing Off-Ramps and Face-Saving Options: Effective crisis management often involves creating pathways for adversaries to de-escalate or comply without suffering unacceptable political humiliation. This requires diplomatic creativity and understanding the adversary's domestic constraints and core interests – elements crucial before applying pressure, not just during.<sup>58</sup>

c- Readiness for Mediation and Negotiation: Having established frameworks, trusted third-party mediators, or pre-agreed processes for negotiation can provide immediate alternatives to coercive threats when tensions spike.

- The Strategic Rationale: Investing in prevention and crisis management is directly relevant to coercive diplomacy because:

a- It reduces the frequency with which policymakers feel compelled to resort to high-risk coercive measures.

b- Should coercion become unavoidable, having demonstrably exhausted preventive and diplomatic options can enhance the legitimacy of subsequent pressure tactics.

c- Robust crisis management tools provide crucial alternatives to escalation during a coercive standoff, offering ways to defuse the situation or find negotiated solutions even under pressure.

- Acknowledging the Hurdles: Implementing this requires overcoming significant challenges: securing consistent funding for long-term prevention efforts that lack immediate political payoff, generating the political will for early diplomatic intervention, and the inherent difficulty in accurately predicting and influencing complex socio-political dynamics.

In essence, developing robust prevention and crisis management strategies is a strategic imperative. It reframes the policy challenge away from simply 'how to coerce better' towards 'how to create conditions where coercion becomes a truly exceptional measure'. It acknowledges that the most successful outcome is often the crisis averted, not the coercive

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<sup>57</sup> Viggo Jakobsen, P. (2020). Coercive Diplomacy as Crisis Management.

<sup>58</sup> Leng, R. J. Interstate crisis behavior, 1816–1980: Realism versus reciprocity. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1993.

campaign won, recognizing the inherent costs and dangers associated with compelling an unwilling adversary.

### **3-3-3-Promote Integrated and Coordinated Approaches: Towards Holistic Statecraft**

The complexities of 21st-century international relations, involving diverse actors and utilizing an expanding array of influence tools (economic, cyber, informational, etc.), render single-instrument or disjointed coercive strategies increasingly inadequate. Simply applying sanctions, issuing threats, or launching cyber operations in isolation often fails to achieve desired outcomes and can even be counterproductive. Therefore, a crucial orientation for the future is the promotion of genuinely integrated and coordinated approaches, moving towards a more holistic form of statecraft where various levers of national power work in concert towards clearly defined objectives.

- **The Imperative of Synergy:** The different instruments of coercion and influence do not operate in separate vacuums. Economic sanctions can be undermined by illicit financial flows enabled by weak cyber defenses, or their impact amplified by targeted information campaigns. Diplomatic overtures may lack credibility without the implicit backing of potential costs (economic or military), while military posturing without clear diplomatic "off-ramps" can lead to unintended escalation. An integrated approach seeks to deliberately orchestrate these various tools to create synergy, where the combined effect is greater than the sum of its parts. This requires a deep understanding of how these instruments interact and how they might be perceived by the target state.

- **Breaking Down Silos (Intra-governmental Coherence):** Effective integration begins at home. Often, different government agencies (foreign ministry, defense, treasury, intelligence agencies, commerce departments) pursue their mandates with insufficient coordination, leading to mixed signals, bureaucratic friction, or policies that inadvertently work at cross-purposes. Promoting integration requires:

a- **Shared Strategic Understanding:** Developing a common assessment of the problem, clear objectives for the coercive strategy, and agreement on the desired end-state across all relevant parts of the government.

b- **Centralized Coordination Mechanisms:** Utilizing or strengthening bodies (like National Security Councils or equivalent structures) empowered to oversee the development, implementation, and adaptation of the overall strategy, ensuring different agency actions align.

c- Cross-cutting Expertise: Fostering personnel and processes that bridge traditional bureaucratic divides, enabling experts in economics, cyber, diplomacy, and military affairs to collaborate effectively.

- Aligning with Allies (Inter-state Coordination): In an interconnected world, unilateral coercion is often less effective and less legitimate (linking back to C.1). Coordinated approaches extend beyond the national level to include close consultation and joint action with allies and like-minded partners.<sup>59</sup> This involves:

a- Building Consensus: Working to achieve common strategic objectives and agreement on the means to be employed.

b- Burden-Sharing: Distributing the costs and responsibilities of implementing coercive measures (e.g., enforcing sanctions collectively).

c- Harmonizing Policies: Ensuring that allies' actions do not inadvertently provide loopholes or relief to the target state. While complete alignment is often difficult due to differing national interests, consistent efforts towards coordination significantly amplify pressure.

- The Challenge of Complexity: Achieving true integration and coordination is inherently difficult. It demands sophisticated analysis, sustained political will to overcome bureaucratic inertia and rivalries, nimble adaptation to changing circumstances, and delicate management of alliance politics. There is always a risk of strategies becoming overly complex or brittle.

Ultimately, promoting integrated and coordinated approaches is about recognizing that coercive diplomacy, when deemed necessary, is not merely a technical exercise in applying pressure but a complex strategic undertaking. It requires moving beyond fragmented efforts towards a coherent application of national and collective power, carefully calibrated and constantly reassessed. While challenging to implement, such holistic statecraft offers the best prospect for increasing the potential effectiveness of coercive measures while simultaneously managing the significant risks and complexities involved.

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<sup>59</sup> Matlary, Janne Haaland. (2009). European Union Security Dynamics.

#### 4- Conclusion

The enduring appeal of coercive diplomacy as a tool to achieve foreign policy goals without initiating full-scale war stands in stark contrast to the findings of this comprehensive analysis. Our exploration through historical precedent, contemporary challenges, and inherent risks reveals that its effectiveness is profoundly limited and its viability as a reliable instrument of 21st-century statecraft is deeply questionable. While states continue to resort to coercion, its successful and responsible application faces immense, and arguably growing, obstacles.

The evaluation in Part I underscored that success hinges precariously on a confluence of factors – notably coercer credibility, perceived legitimacy often bolstered by multilateral consensus, and a conducive geopolitical context – conditions that are frequently difficult to achieve in practice. More critically, the strategy is inherently fraught with significant risks, including unintended escalation, the counter-productive fueling of radicalization, and the potential for wider regional destabilization. Ethical and legal constraints, particularly concerning legitimacy, proportionality, and adherence to international law, further circumscribe its application, acting not merely as theoretical ideals but as practical factors influencing international support and long-term outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

Part II demonstrated how these challenges are amplified in the contemporary era. Lessons from historical case studies confirmed the unpredictable and often costly nature of coercive endeavors. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted how the 21st-century landscape – characterized by the sophisticated weaponization of economic interdependence, the ambiguous and volatile domain of cyberspace, and the complicating influence of diverse non-state actors – disrupts traditional models and adds layers of complexity and unpredictability to coercive strategies.

Therefore, reflecting on the central question motivating this study regarding its contemporary utility, this article concludes that while coercive diplomacy has not disappeared, its standing as an effective and reliable instrument is significantly diminished. It is far from a dependable solution; rather, it remains a high-risk, often blunt tool with a propensity for failure and dangerous side effects.

The value of this analysis lies in its systematic integration of theoretical evaluation, historical evidence, and contemporary challenges. By highlighting the stringent conditions for success alongside the manifold risks and the compounding complexities of the modern era, this work

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<sup>60</sup> George, Hall, and Simons, (1994). *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*.

underscores the critical need for extreme caution among policymakers. It reinforces the arguments for prioritizing robust conflict prevention, crisis management, and traditional diplomatic avenues, strengthened by multilateral cooperation and a firm grounding in international law. Ultimately, understanding the deep limitations and potential costs of coercive diplomacy, as detailed herein, is essential for fostering a more prudent, informed, and ethically grounded approach to international security and conflict resolution in our intricate global environment.

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