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William G. Pierce

Douglas G. Douds

Michael A. Marra

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Understanding Coercive Gradualism

William G. Pierce, Douglas G. Douds, and Michael A. Marra

ABSTRACT: Over the past few years, Russia and China have expanded their influence using a step-by-step strategy of coercive gradualism. This article explores the characteristics of coercive gradualism, the factors that affect its execution, and potential counters. It also examines current US policy with respect to other states' employment of coercive gradualism.

Over the past few years, Russia and China have expanded their influence, if not control, over others' sovereign territories or international waters. Affected states and the international community's efforts to counter such aggression have largely failed, or are in doubt. It appears both Russia and China will continue their expansionist aims using a step-by-step strategy - one of coercive gradualism.

Gradual approaches to executing policy or strategy have always existed. Policy changes and decision-making are often evolutionary and progress by "baby steps" or by "muddling through." President Franklin Roosevelt put it in practical terms when he said, "It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another."¹ The corollary to this proposition is when one finds a strategy that works, to build upon it successively and cumulatively.

Gradualism is by definition the "principle or policy of achieving some goal by gradual steps rather than by drastic change."² Likewise, we may gain some insight by looking at "incrementalism" which is "a policy of making changes, especially social changes, by degrees."³ We can combine these with the Department of Defense's definition of strategy and arrive at one for coercive gradualism "a state employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve national or multinational objectives by incremental steps."⁴ These steps can be cooperative or coercive.

Cooperative gradualism is found in almost every nation's approach to achieving its national interests. It tends to be non-confrontational. It is predicated on finding common ground between nations – shared values, economic benefit, improving governance, or mutual security. However, this article is about coercive gradualism.

1 Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address at Oglethorpe University," public speech, May 22, 1932, <http://newdeal.feri.org/speeches/1931d.htm>.

2 *The Dictionary.com Home Page*, <http://www.dictionary.com>.

3 *Ibid.*

4 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02 (Washington, DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 8, 2010, as amended through June 15, 2015).

Coercive gradualism is simply a step-by-step pursuit of one nation's interests against other nations' interests. It is a form of aggression. Moreover, as all strategies are, it is a choice made within a context. In particular, it is a choice usually made by relatively powerful states. A state may have the capability and capacity – the ways and means – to achieve its ends, yet it might choose to do so in incremental moves as opposed to a single *coup de main*.

Characteristics of Coercive Gradualism

Coercive gradualism is recognizable when three large aspects are in play. First, a state (an “aggressor”) advances its interests at the expense of those of another. This aggression may be accompanied by threats and intimidation which, as Thomas Schelling wrote, are “avoidable by accommodation.”⁵ This intimidation defines the strategy's coercive nature. Next, using a step-by-step process makes it gradualist in character. This process is chosen within a specific context. An aggressor state may own the ways and means to achieve its ends in a single move, but after assessing the environment determines the risk of doing so are too great. The risk assessment thus suggests a choice. In this case, the aggressor chooses a gradualist approach because it determines the real or perceived reaction to incremental moves will not entail unacceptable costs. Thus, choice is the third characteristic of coercive gradualism. These three characteristics warrant further examination.

Motivation

Interests provide the motivation for employing any strategy, and in particular, one of coercive gradualism. The pursuit of national interests implies a rational calculation.

David McClelland's human motivation theory also provides insight into the motivations of national leaders. McClelland argues everyone has a need for achievement, affiliation, and power.⁶ An extension of this theory could apply to people, states, or cultures that share common identities. Such groups may have a need for collective achievement, affiliation, and power.

Coercive gradualism is not normally a tool for weak states. A weak state may lack the ways and means to achieve its ends in a single move. Its gradualist approach to achieving its interests are dictated to it by forces beyond its control: it has no choice. Strength is always relative and that principle holds true when considering coercive gradualism. Likewise, the relative strength of a targeted state's allies may also be part of the calculation. Although an aggressor state may be stronger than the targeted state, it could be the anticipated reaction of the targeted state's allies that lead the aggressor state to choose coercive gradualism.

An aggressor state may assume the first step of its gradualist approach has a high likelihood of success. Perhaps the object of the aggressor state's action (the targeted state) is unwilling to contest the initial aggression. The targeted state may decide the risks of contesting the aggressor's step will outweigh its costs, or have a low likelihood of

5 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 4.

6 “McClelland's Human Motivation Theory,” <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/human-motivation-theory.htm>.

success. Likewise, targeted states that depend on critical resources from an aggressor may be hesitant to counter aggression. As examples, Western Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas, and Japan's electronics industry's dependence on China's rare earth elements impact European and Japanese support of, and participation in, sanctions against Russia and China respectively. Perhaps, the targeted state is unable to contest the initial aggression due to insufficient ways, means, or other resources such as time to support a defense. In a military sense, a study of conventional deterrence concluded the importance of an aggressor achieving a "quick military victory and political fait accompli."⁷

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors might also motivate a state to engage in coercive gradualism. One such factor is precedence. A lack of effective response by the international community to other state-on-state aggression, resulting in a belief that a state can "get away with aggression," may encourage it to consider coercive gradualism. Correlating lack of past inaction to future inaction is problematic. Nonetheless, inaction may indicate a lack of capability or will, especially if the target state or its allies have interests similar to those affected by previous aggression.

Also, believing an aggressor state could withstand or mitigate anticipated reactions by the international community could encourage a state to assume the risks of coercive gradualism. This ability supports the notion that coercive gradualism is an option of the relatively strong. Regardless of an aggressor or target state's ability to execute or to counter coercive gradualism, there will always be justifications for their respective actions and reactions.

Justification is not unique to coercive gradualism, but it may provide insight into an aggressor's will and ultimate intentions. Several such justifications exist. The first is an historical claim to land or sea areas (e.g., Iraq and Kuwait in August 1990). A second is an aggressor's claims of the oppression of citizens with similar ethnic backgrounds in contested areas. Russia utilized this justification in Crimea and Ukraine. Ambiguous or nonexistent international laws also enable states to engage in aggression without clearly violating international norms (e.g., China and South China Sea).

Aggressor actions themselves may provide evidence of coercive gradualism. A state may initially move into contested territories under the guise of humanitarian assistance or as an organization supporting disaster relief. This could be legitimate support of organizations or paramilitary forces (police, border guards, coast guards, indigenous forces or organizations sympathetic to the aggressor) to set conditions or provide opportunities for military aggression. Another initial move may be under the guise of economic development (e.g., off-shore oil platforms) requiring targeted states to decide between using force on "civilians" to roll back the move, or to accept it and use other instruments of power to affect change. These initial steps to establish a foothold may be misconstrued based on the lack of engagement by aggressor military forces. Another technique an aggressor could employ is to hide the identity (state of origin) of elements deployed to set conditions for subsequent

7 Edward Rhodes, "Conventional Deterrence," *Comparative Strategy* 19, no. 3 (2000): 222.

military operations (e.g. military forces and criminal organizations). In this case attributing aggression to a specific state may be difficult to prove.

National policy documents referring to unfulfilled aspirational interests beyond current sovereign claims may signal potential future moves. When resources, acquisition programs, and people are focused on achieving those claims, evidence of coercive gradualism is usually present. We see this problem today with China's naval investment presumably focused on fulfilling its claims in the South and East China seas.

Finally, the availability of time and space to maneuver instruments of power could encourage an aggressor to adopt a strategy of coercive gradualism. Largely, this is a matter of strategic patience: is the aggressor willing to play "the long game?" Making this calculation is another choice. The aggressor's government must identify the interest and assess the environment to include international and domestic wills. Does the international environment provide an opportunity to allow multiple steps to achieve an objective? Simultaneously, is the aggressor's domestic will patient and unified enough to allow a more gradual approach in the face of a contested national interest? Time is agnostic. It favors neither the aggressor nor the targeted state. Time between aggressor moves is available to consolidate gains, react to counters, and prepare for subsequent moves. Concomitantly, time is also available for the targeted state and its allies to develop a strategy to counter or roll back initial moves.

Examples of Coercive Gradualism

Perhaps the best known example of a strategy of coercive gradualism was Nazi Germany's efforts to expand its territory prior to WWII through a combination of the instruments of national power. In the late 1930's, Germany annexed Austria (March, 1938) and shortly thereafter, Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland (October, 1938) with ineffectual reactions from English, French, and Czech leaders. Germany took control of the remainder of Czechoslovakia five months later despite the diplomatic redline Chamberlain established in the Munich Agreement. The September 1939 invasion of Poland ended Britain's, France's, New Zealand's, and Australia's acceptance of Germany's incremental land grab. On the same day, these states declared war on Germany. One can understand the acceptance of German coercive gradualism. The risk and potential cost to counter the initial German moves were perceived to be too high. The ghosts of World War I with its millions of casualties were only two decades old.

Outside acceptance of Russian coercive gradualism has been mixed. To date, Moscow's assessment of that acceptance has led to its retention of all the territory and influence it has seized. Russia has done this in spite of a UN General Assembly vote that passed by a wide margin calling on states, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize any change in the status of Crimea or Sevastopol, and to refrain from actions or dealings that might be interpreted as such. However, General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, and Russia can veto any Security Council Resolutions.

In response to Russian aggression, Western nations have placed economic sanctions on Russia. In a recent article on the effects of those sanctions, Anders Aslund, a former economic advisor to the Russian and Ukrainian governments stated, “The Russian economy is now in a serious financial crisis, which is, to a considerable extent, caused by the financial sanctions.”⁸ Russia’s choice to implement coercive gradualism as strategy manifested itself in multiple domains. From 2008 to 2015, Russia has expanded its influence into Georgia, Ukraine, the Arctic, western European airspace, western European maritime areas, and in regional/global cyberspace with a well-orchestrated series of operations coordinating multiple elements of strategic power.⁹ Time will tell if sanctions and international pressure will convince Russia’s President Putin to reassess his coercive gradualism, to refrain from future steps, or to return to the status quo ante bellum.

China’s claims and presence in the South and East China seas is growing and seemingly permanent, much to China’s neighbors’ chagrin. On the sea, the Chinese have occupied Scarborough Shoals in the face of Philippine resistance. In the Spratly Islands, early actions at sea such as their denial of access to Vietnamese engineers in 1988 have led to exploits on land with China constructing six artificial islands.¹⁰ In the air, the 2013 issuance of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in airspace claimed by South Korea and Japan reveals not only the extent of Chinese claims of sovereignty, but Beijing’s versatility in employing incremental steps to achieve them.¹¹ This is not lost on China’s neighbors. Narushige Michishita, an associate professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, offered a summary of China’s actions: “China has been creating a gradual fait accompli, step by step, . . . We make a big deal of this now, but we’ll forget about it [ADIZ] after a while.”¹² The Chinese have a name for this approach—cabbage strategy: “an area is slowly surrounded by individual ‘leaves’—a fishing boat here, a coast-guard vessel there—until it’s wrapped in layers, like a cabbage.”¹³

Chinese claims, naval defense investment, and recent release of a map showing nearly the entire South China Sea as Chinese territory

8 Priyanka Boghani, “What’s Been the Effect of Western Sanctions on Russia?,” January 13, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/putins-way/whats-been-the-effect-of-western-sanctions-on-russia>.

9 This statement consolidates views from a number of sources. Douglas Mastriano and Derek O’Malley, *Project 1704: A US Army War College Analysis of Russian Strategy in Eastern Europe, an Appropriate US Response, and the Implications of US Landpower* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, March, 2015). Uri Friedman, “The Arctic: Where the US and Russia Could Square Off Next: A Closer Look at Moscow’s Claims in the Northern Seas,” *The Atlantic*, March 28, 2014. Elizabeth Kreft, “Multiple Incidents of Russian Aggression in the Air and on Sea Prompt NATO Warnings,” *The Blaze*, December 2014. Richard Balmforth and Pavel Polityuk, “Ukraine’s President Tells Military To Prepare For ‘Full-Scale’ Russian Invasion,” *The World Post*, July 6, 2015. Vladimir Socor, “Minsk Two Armistice Rewards Russia’s Aggression, Mortgages Ukraine’s Future,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 20 2015. Clayton Browne, “Russian Military Aircraft Continue To Encroach On European Airspace,” *Value Walk*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.valuewalk.com/2015/03/russian-military-aircraft-on-european-airspace>.

10 Seasresearch, “China’s Artificial Island Building: Fiery Cross Reef,” November 10, 2014 <https://seasresearch.wordpress.com/2014/11/10/chinas-land-reclamation-fiery-cross-reef>.

11 The Week Staff, “China’s Audacious Territory Grab,” June 21, 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/561324/chinas-audacious-territory-grab>.

12 Chico Harlan, “China’s Gradual Expansion in East China Sea Poses Challenge for Japan,” *Washington Post*, November 30, 2013.

13 Howard French, “China’s Dangerous Game,” *The Atlantic*, October 13, 2014.

inflamed its neighbors, and confirmed their fears of Beijing's aggressive intentions.¹⁴

Risks

While there are opportunities to employ coercive gradualism, there are also potential risks. By setting a series of sequential intermediate objectives short of the ultimate strategic objective, targeted states may acquire a clearer picture of the intentions and the value the aggressor places on the ultimate objective. In this case, perhaps time favors the targeted state. The step-by-step process provides time to develop effective counters to the initial thrust potentially driving the costs of continued aggression to unacceptable levels.

A significant risk in employing coercive gradualism is conflict escalation. Neither the aggressor nor the targeted state or its allies have control over what the other side is willing to do to achieve or counter the initial step, or even the last step. Efforts to halt, or roll back aggression by force could result in an escalation of armed conflict well beyond what either side believed possible.

Another risk is the aggressor might miscalculate its ability to control populations and effectively govern in newly acquired territory. Populations in occupied areas may be unwilling to succumb to foreign control. This could fuel an insurgency against the aggressor resulting in a long and costly occupation that precludes the possibility of subsequent moves.

Finally, states with multi-lateral or bi-lateral agreements with the aggressor may void those agreements after the first hostile move.

Transparency

Transparency is a reality of 21st century information environment: one's actions will be observed. As a general rule, transparency hinders aggressors. The more time the international community has to prepare (based in observed behaviors and actions) for what it perceives as impending aggression, the more time it will have to mobilize. The international community may mobilize to deter, or if necessary, defeat the aggression. Moreover, contested aggression may generate civilian casualties with the proximate cause of the collateral damage tied directly to the aggressor and transparent to all.

Transparency works for and against the targeted state (and its allies). On the plus side, transparency in the policy realm enables state and international organization leaders to convey the consequences of aggression and the benefits of restraint to any potential aggressor. In the military realm, transparency provides clarity on the capabilities available to counter the aggression – a crucial aspect of conventional deterrence.

Targeted states can also suffer from transparency. When the world hears of a policy to deter or defeat an aggressor, any failure to implement that policy can establish a precedent encouraging other states to consider aggression. Additionally, transparency is a necessary component of conventional deterrence – sharing capability and capacity in an effort

14 Edward Wong, "China Unveils New Map of South China Sea," June 25, 2015, <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/25/china-unveils-new-map-of-south-china-sea>.

to signal cost imposition to an aggressor. However, revealing capability and capacity enables an aggressor to develop counters and workarounds to them.

Mitigating and Countering Measures

States can take any number of activities to prevent or counter the first move by a state contemplating coercive gradualism. One way to counter potential aggression is to satisfy the needs of the aggressor's decision-maker through alternative means. As an example, if Mr. Putin's actions in Ukraine are driven by need for achievement and power, are there diplomatic solutions that would have satisfied these needs as an alternative to territorial expansion? There is a cost to this approach. The international community's diplomatic efforts to meet an aggressor's needs could be viewed as appeasement. Ultimately, there is no guarantee such diplomatic efforts would prevent coercive gradualism. Nonetheless, it is an avenue worth considering when the alternative may be armed conflict.

State borders on the world map are not necessarily permanent. Over the past two decades a number of state borders have changed. Examples include the creation of South Sudan, the transfer of Bakassi Peninsula from Nigeria to Cameroon, the dissolution of Serbia and Montenegro into two states, East Timor's independence, and the transfer of the Panama Canal Zone to Panama. Diplomatic efforts to change state borders do not always work, but a peaceful transfer of territory is not a rare occurrence in the 21st century.

A key to countering coercive gradualism is recognizing measures that could set conditions for a state considering aggression. These measures include economic development in contested waters, non-military aid to disaffected populations in a target country (without target country concurrence) or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. As stated, they also include more recognizable measures like the reiteration of historic claims, justifications, and investment in equipment and people that might support a future move. For any nation attempting to counter coercive gradualism, understanding the environment, defining the problem set, and developing multiple approaches is a vital starting point.¹⁵

In the face of an aggressor state employing coercive gradualism, other states will weigh their interests. If deemed appropriate, deterrence may be an acceptable approach to counter potential aggression. Military conventional deterrence may prevent states from taking the first aggressive act. Unfortunately, there are limits to conventional deterrence. Deterrence theory takes into account the costs and benefits of proposed actions by an adversary as weighed against the costs and benefits of restraint. Expert Edward Rhodes concludes some adversaries are, "at times, undeterrable."¹⁶ Robert Pape explains convincing the aggressor that the benefits of inaction have greater value than the benefits of aggression is the difficulty. The aggressor determines the value of the strategic

15 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operation Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0 (Washington, DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 11, 2011), III-1.

16 Rhodes, "Conventional Deterrence," 221.

objective, which leaves the targeted state and international community only two choices: impose costs or emphasize the benefits of restraint.¹⁷

States can take a number of specific actions prior to or during the first aggressive move. All are well known and individually, may not achieve the deterrent effect. However, in combination, these efforts could deter a state that is considering coercive gradualism:

- Increase the volume and legitimacy of open-source information to make an aggressor's action transparent.
- Build a reservoir of domestic will to counter current and potential aggressor moves.
- Establish mutual or bilateral security agreements with allied nations potentially affected by aggression.
- Increase intelligence activities to include entering into intelligence-sharing agreements; such activities could provide indications and useful warnings.
- Seek cooperative security efforts with allied states; a demonstration of support could have a significant deterrent effect.
- Seek international arbitration to settle disputes in the case of ambiguous or unclear international laws.
- Threaten aggressors with targeted and allied state economic sanctions.
- Counter the aggressor's anticipated first move with the threat of force (coercive diplomacy).¹⁸

One of the challenges of the above actions is that most of them take time to execute – potentially more time than it would take an aggressor to mobilize and execute the first move of its coercive gradualism strategy.

If deterrence fails and an aggressor achieves a successful first move, many of the actions above are still appropriate. The target nation and international community have additional actions available to reverse or halt an aggressor's moves. International condemnation through UN resolutions may help build coalitions in support of the target state. Likewise, UN resolutions may legitimize the use of force to counter aggression. Unfortunately, given the veto power of the permanent Security Council members, especially if the offender is a permanent member, states may find significant difficulty in building effective coalitions against specific acts of aggression.

Another obvious countermove to coercive gradualism is sanctions. Economic sanctions are by now a customary response on the part of the international community to aggression. Based on Peter Steen's recent Special Report on Sanctions, the "endowment effect"

17 Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), Kindle Edition location 395.

18 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 36. For further readings on coercive diplomacy, see Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin, eds., *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2003), vii; Bruce Jentleson, "Coercive Diplomacy: Scope and Limits in the Contemporary World," December 2006, <http://stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pab/pab-06CoerDip.pdf>; and Sam Brannen, "The Return of Coercive Diplomacy," September 12, 2013, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2013/09/return-coercive-diplomacy/70284/>.

and the “availability heuristic” may reduce the effectiveness of sanctions.¹⁹ Accepting the imposition of sanctions to punish aggression is predictable; thus, the aggressor may take steps to mitigate or reduce the effectiveness of those sanctions. For example, aggressors may move financial resources, establish alternative essential materials sources or services, or offer inducements to states to prevent their participation in any sanctions regime.

Other target state actions could also prevent additional aggression. Target states and their allies could provide covert support to indigenous forces in occupied areas to contest the aggression. Finally, the least desirable, but arguably the most definitive way to halt and (or reverse) the situation would be to compel the aggressor to return to the status quo antebellum.²⁰ An example is Desert Storm. The US-led coalition halted Iraqi aggression into Saudi Arabia and reversed the initial incursion into Kuwait. Kevin Woods, principal author of the *Iraqi Perspectives Project* stated that pre-Desert Storm, Iraq had plans to invade Saudi Arabia in three stages with the final stage ending at Saudi Aramco’s Ras Tanura major oil port. While not part of the initial Iraqi plan during its invasion of Kuwait, Woods offered:

Of course if the coalition or Saudi Arabia had reacted as Saddam hoped (stood down, withdrew in the face of Iraqi intimidation)... in my estimate Saddam’s personality was such that I have no doubt within time – he would have been tempted to threaten, if not execute, the next phases as a way to achieve his original purposes and even his grand historic vision of breaking the Gulf Arabs as a part of the plan to restore Arab (Iraqi led) greatness.²¹

In this case, the international community contested the initial aggressive move and ultimately, through compellence, restored Kuwaiti sovereignty.

Countering a strategy of coercive gradualism once initiated requires continuous pressure using the instruments of power in a synchronized manner, and strategic patience. Regrettably, state leaders may not have the ability or desire to apply this pressure for prolonged periods of time. The strategic environment is constantly changing and other crises can emerge which might deflect leader attention. Consistent with Mr. Michishita’s comment above, absent sustained will and attention, unchecked aggression over time leads to acceptance of a “new normal.”

President Barrack Obama recognized this reality and addressed strategic patience in his 2015 State of the Union address when he stated, “We’re upholding the principle that bigger nations can’t bully the small, by opposing Russian aggression, supporting Ukraine’s democracy, and

19 Peter Steen, e-mail message to author, January 7, 2015. Mr. Steen is an economist and Special Advisor to the Principal Deputy Director, Joint Staff, J5. Every week he does a Special Report on economics and national security and his distribution list includes numerous senior leaders and flag officers in the Pentagon. “The ‘endowment effect’ leads people and decision makers to inflate the cost of giving up a ‘held’ program (or peninsula). The ‘availability heuristic’ shows that decision makers both amongst the sanctioning and sanctioned may miss information or very likely misconstrue the new information due to habits of the mind.”

20 For a detailed look at deterrence and compellence, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 74. For further readings on compellence, see Edward Ifft, “Deterrence, Blackmail, Friendly Persuasion,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 23, no. 3 (September 2007), and Mary Kaldor, “American Power: From ‘Compellence’ to Cosmopolitanism?” *International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January 2003).

21 Kevin Woods, e-mail message to author, January 15, 2015. Dr. Woods is the author of the *Iraqi Perspectives Project*.

reassuring our NATO allies.” He then added, “That’s how America leads — not with bluster, but with *persistent, steady resolve* [authors’ emphasis].”²²

Coercive Gradualism and US Foreign Policy

The current National Security Strategy (NSS) states US policy regarding aggression, and the section “Build Capacity to Prevent Conflict,” includes language applicable to countering coercive gradualism.

American diplomacy and leadership, backed by a strong military, remain essential to deterring future acts of inter-state aggression and provocation by reaffirming our security commitments to allies and partners, investing in their capabilities to withstand coercion, imposing costs on those who threaten their neighbors or violate fundamental international norms, and embedding our actions within wider regional strategies.²³

The United States has a role in shaping the global security environment proactively and in enforcing it should coercive gradualism be observed. Under a section titled “International Order” the NSS states, “We have an opportunity - and obligation - to lead the way in reinforcing, shaping, and where appropriate, creating the rules, norms, and institutions that are the foundation for peace, security, prosperity, and the protection of human rights in the 21st century.”²⁴

The National Military Strategy (NMS) also contains language on countering aggression. “Should deterrence fail to prevent aggression, the US military stands ready to project power to deny an adversary’s objectives and decisively defeat any actor that threatens the US homeland, our national interests, or our allies and partners.”²⁵ This section reinforces the expectation that force can, and will, be used to counter acts of coercive gradualism when American national interests are at stake.

US strategic documents clearly state the United States will work to counter states that violate international norms through aggression. However, theory and practice do not always align. In an article evaluating Philip Bobbitt’s book *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History*, Dennis Patterson states, “We do not choose our values: we make choices and in doing so, exhibit our values.”²⁶ Here is the dilemma for the United States. Will its words match its deeds? In *Joint Force Quarterly* article in 2009 Admiral Mullen addressed this issue:

We hurt ourselves more when our words don’t align with our actions. Our enemies regularly monitor the news to discern coalition and American intent as weighed against the efforts of our forces. When they find a “say-do” gap—such as Abu Ghraib—they drive a truck right through it. So should we, quite frankly. We must be vigilant about holding ourselves accountable to higher standards of conduct and closing any gaps, real or perceived, between what we say about ourselves and what we do to back it up.²⁷

22 Barack H. Obama, “State of the Union,” public speech, United States Capitol, January 20, 2015.

23 Barack H. Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2015), 10.

24 *Ibid.*, 23.

25 Martin E. Dempsey, *The National Military Strategy of United States of America 2015* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, June 2015), 7.

26 Dennis Patterson, “The New Leviathan,” *Michigan Law Review* 101 (May 2003): 1731.

27 Michael G. Mullen, “Strategic Communications: Getting Back to Basics,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 55 (4th Quarter 2009): 4.

Conclusion

Coercive gradualism offers both opportunities and consequences to states seeking to expand their influence, if not control, over others' sovereign territory. Once an aggressor makes the first move, rolling it back may prove very difficult. There are no simple solutions.

Key to countering a strategy of coercive gradualism is preventing the initial aggressive move using all instruments of power. Ultimately, Clausewitz's dictum regarding the relationship between the value of the political object and the price (sacrifice) the state is willing to pay for that object will define how much a state is willing to invest in pursuing or countering coercive gradualism.²⁸

William G. Pierce

William G. Pierce, PhD, retired after thirty years of active duty as an officer in the Army Corps of Engineers. He is on the faculty at the US Army War College in the Department of Military Strategy, Planning and Operations. His current role in the department is the Director of the Advanced Strategic Art Program (ASAP).

Douglas G. Douds

Colonel Doug Douds is a Marine fighter-attack pilot. He has served as an aviator, staff officer, and commander. He has also served on Joint Staff as a member of the Chairman's Action Group for Admiral Mullen and General Dempsey. Currently, he is a US Army War College faculty member in the Department of Military Strategy, Planning and Operations teaching the Advanced Strategic Art Program (ASAP).

Michael A. Marra

Col Mike Marra, USAF (Retired) is an Associate Professor of the United States Army War College. He retired as a colonel with 27 years of experience serving in various capacities in command, staff, and faculty duties at the theater-strategic, operational, and tactical levels as a commander, staff officer, faculty, and Air Force One Advance Agent. He is the director of Security Force Assistance Studies, and is the current General Hoyt S. Vandenberg Chair of Aerospace Studies. He is a primary faculty instructor for the Theater Strategy and Campaigning Course.

²⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 92.

