

## Coercing Fluently: The Grammar of Coercion in the Twenty-first Century

C. Anthony Pfaff

Following the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, many have raised concerns that the United States has lost its competitive edge and it will soon be displaced by China, with the help of Russia, as the global superpower both of whom will work with Iran to diminish, if not displace, US influence in the Middle East. Eventually, these relationships will displace US influence closer to home, such as Central and South America. Such an outcome is not inevitable. To the extent the United States can seize the initiative, it has political, economic, and military advantages against which adversaries cannot compete. Put simply, the United States remains a more attractive partner to most other states than any of its adversaries. Leveraging that attraction effectively, however, requires clarity regarding interests, careful calibration of demands, and relentless opportunism in the pursuit of advantage while maintaining the right balance between cooperation and confrontation.

Such leveraging, however, depends on an adequate understanding of the logic and grammar of coercion. To provide that understanding this analysis will rely on decision-theoretic methods, like game theory, that emphasize decision making processes and their associated logic and the attributes—rational or not—of the decision makers themselves. The intent here is not to offer predictive models of rational actor behavior. Models are rarely accurate enough to make reliable predictions and actors frequently are not rational. However, by understanding the underlying logic of how various actors, sometimes playing different roles, determine and act on preferences, one can

generate general “rules of thumb” that can act as a grammar for better using the tools of international competition.

Coercion is the ability to get actors to do something they would not otherwise want to do. Thus its logic is more about hurting than seizing. It also comes in two forms: compellence and deterrence. Compellence refers to efforts to convince an adversary to act whereas deterrence seeks to prevent an adversary from acting. Both are essentially two sides to the same coin and rely on credibility and capability to be effective. How they function, however, is not always straightforward. Credibility is less about the perception of one’s resolve as it is whether it is in one’s interest to carry out a particular threat. Capable threats are those that not only hurt, but they also leave the adversary worse off than if it had not acted. Moreover, the adversary has to believe these things about one’s threat as well for coercion to be effective.

Whatever adversaries believe shapes their preferences and it is in the interaction of those preferences with one’s own that a grammar emerges. To begin to develop that grammar, this study will examine six competitive interactions: arms races, ultimatums, mutual deterrence, unilateral deterrence, three-party crisis, and asymmetric escalation. The rules that emerge are not intended to be comprehensive, but robust enough to account for competition and suggest better ways to calibrate one’s threats, demands, and capabilities to achieve better outcomes. The study will then apply these rules to US competitive relationships with China, Russia, and Iran to suggest a better way forward.

\*\*\*\*\*

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and US Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute’s home page at <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>.

\*\*\*\*\*

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at [usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@mail.mil](mailto:usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@mail.mil). All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, US Army War College.”

