

Conclusion

The True Sources of Coercive Leverage

Successful coercion requires credible coercive assurance that pain is conditional upon the behavior of the target. Coercers must make both credible threats and assurances at once. Threats of punishment should be contingent on noncompliance; assurances of withheld punishment should be contingent on compliance. Effective threats do not make targets think that they are “damned if they do and damned if they don’t.”

This book has explained why coercers struggle to make credibly conditional threats. Coercers confront an assurance dilemma, whereby the actions they take to bolster the credibility and severity of their threats undermine their corresponding assurance. Threats are not truly avoidable if insincere coercers pursue brute force policies under the guise of coercion. But even sincere coercers can wind up applying unconditional punishments.

First, coercers can entangle multiple demands and punishments, such that concessions to one demand do not relieve pain. Multiple issues are entangled if they are tied to the same threatened punishment(s); disentangled issues are independently contingent on separable threatened punishments. If the issues are entangled, a target may rationally calculate that it cannot avoid punishment by conceding to one demand while the other demand remains unsated. Second, coercers can lose control over international or domestic coalitions, within which spoilers with greater demands and an independent capacity to punish can take it upon themselves to carry out threats. Targets will not concede to *you* if *others* are going to punish them anyway. Third, coercers may stand to lose control over themselves when they learn new information from their target’s concessions that expands their demands. A target that thinks that conceding will only self-incriminate and enable or encourage the coercer to punish will defy. Targets of coercion therefore fear unconditional punishment and look for signals that their coercers are being sincere and retain control over the choice to

punish. They take bigger risks to avoid more severe pain, but some assurance must always remain. Variation in the credibility of coercive assurance thus affects whether coercion succeeds or fails.

Three corresponding signal types stand out in theory and empirics to mitigate the assurance dilemma. First, coercers can disentangle multiple demands of targets and tie each to separable punishments that can be independently lifted. Disentangling demands can also take the form in practice of abandoning a maximalist demand, such as for regime change. In such cases coercion is again made more likely to succeed but not because of coercive assurance. Another body of theory describes how the magnitude of demands can impede coercion; this alternative explanation for coercion failure finds some support in this book as well. Second, coercers can manage spoilers to try to convince targets that they are bargaining with the right coercer who will be able to control whether and when any punishment is carried out. Demonstrating coercive control can take the form of co-opting, compensating, or freezing out potential spoilers. Third, coercers can share knowledge to communicate how much they already know about a target's misdeeds to assure them that concessions will not reveal novel information. It helps to know what you are asking for.

Overall, the assurance dilemma helps to explain why targets defy coercive demands backed by credible and severe threats and therefore elucidates broader patterns of coercion success and failure in international politics. To concede, targets must believe they face a real choice and that their own behavior will determine their fate.

Nuclear Proliferation Cases

The history of coercive counterproliferation of nuclear weapons programs bears out these ideas. In coercing South Africa, Iraq, Libya, and Iran, assurance was more often the sticking point of coercive bargaining than threat credibility. Before proliferators made concessions, coercers tended to have to communicate which punishments applied to which demands, manage potential spoilers, and share what they already knew of the target's clandestine misdeeds. Sometimes these signals even overcame reputations for past duplicity.

Primary evidence from South African leaders and archives unveils how Pretoria refused to sign the NPT in the 1970s and 1980s because it perceived that its coercers had entangled nuclear demands with demands to abandon the brutal practice of apartheid. Acquiescence on the nuclear issue, they believed, would provide no relief from the pain of economic sanctions.

Recordings of meetings between Saddam Hussein and his advisers also reveal how Iraq made concessions in the 1990s with an eye toward never revealing more than what they thought their coercers already knew about

their WMD programs. And as the decade proceeded, the concessions ceased when Saddam concluded that no amount of compliance would lift sanctions. He perceived no escape, so he defied.

Signals of coercive assurance were also critical to closing a 2003 coercive bargain with Libya. While the US invasion of Iraq had primed Muammar Qaddafi to explore taking a concession gamble, he was still suspicious that his coercers intended to disarm him and attack anyway. Washington and London overcame this perception over many months by freezing out spoilers and privately sharing intelligence already gleaned from their penetration of the A. Q. Khan proliferation network. Both the Iraq and Libya cases show how targets of coercion are loath to make concessions that would reveal capabilities or intentions they believe to be secret. That both Saddam and Qaddafi acquiesced after updating their beliefs about how much their coercers already knew of their secret capabilities shows that their concerns stemmed less from reputational anxieties about being known as coercible leaders and more from assurance fears that concessions would convey new information to their coercers and make them more inclined to punish.

Finally, Iran accepted limits on its nuclear program in 2015 after the Obama administration disentangled nuclear demands and punishments from those tied to missiles and foreign policy, after legislation bounded congressional oversight over sanctions relief, and after Israel decided at the time against independent air strikes. Documents from Iran's "atomic archive" matched to IAEA reports also reveal how much coercers already knew about Iran's past nuclear weapons program.

These findings make no judgments about which tools of statecraft are best to check proliferation—sanctions, military threats, security guarantees, sabotage, or brute force—only that if enforcers select coercion, they must consider the credibility of their coercive assurances. Increases in the perception of assurance credibility, not just threat credibility, are most proximately associated with acquiescence.

This book also sheds light beyond proliferation cases and should elevate assurances in the minds of policymakers as they engage in coercion over any issue in international politics. Conceiving of the coercer's tool kit only in terms of "carrots and sticks" needlessly narrows and papers over the important role of coercive assurance. The key to coercive leverage is in making any tool credibly conditional upon the behavior of the target.

Extensions beyond the Nuclear Domain

For as long as there have been humans, there has been coercion. Scholars are fond of saying that the first deterrent threat failed when Eve ate the apple.¹ If so, that biblical story is swiftly followed by the first compellent demand: Moses's "Let my people go!" The pharaoh's stubbornness makes

him the target of God's graduated compellent punishments in the form of the ten plagues. This first case of compellence has a mixed record. While the pharaoh complies after the final plague, freeing the enslaved Israelites after his firstborn son is killed, soon he changes his mind and pursues them to the Red Sea, where his army must be crushed by brute force. And there is a hint of an assurance dilemma in the text of Exodus: the pharaoh refuses for the eighth time, saying, "Clearly you are bent on evil."²

The preceding chapters have shown that the assurance dilemma is pronounced in coercive counterproliferation. Nevertheless, nuclear weapons are a high-stakes issue, a heavily monitored technology, and an ambition that most proliferators pursue in secrecy.³ Here I explore how the concept of coercive assurance travels to other domains of coercion and show that when coercers make threats of many kinds their targets look for coercive assurance.

RANSOMWARE AND CYBER COERCION

In May 2017 cyber criminals linked to North Korea unleashed a global ransomware attack targeting 230,000 computers running the Microsoft Windows operating system in 150 countries. The hackers used an aptly named WannaCry virus to encrypt users' files and demanded ransom payments of \$300 to \$600 for their safe return. It was classic compellence: a ransom note of "Pay me or else." Yet, in making their threat, the hackers issued no complementary coercive assurance to their victims. How would a victim know that their files would be decrypted safely and intact? Would the cyber thieves care for your data? Would the hackers even provide the decryption key upon payment? In the words of one victim in Shanghai, "Even if you do pay, you won't necessarily be able to open the files that are hit. There is no solution to it."⁴ Many victims made similar calculations, and these instincts were correct; the hackers made little effort to restore access to encrypted files. A week into the attack, only three hundred victims had paid the ransom, netting the hackers a mere \$95,000 worldwide—a coercive success rate of just over 0.1 percent.⁵ Another cyberattack in Ukraine in June 2017, dubbed NotPetya, targeted more than 12,500 machines and spread online to sixty-four other countries.⁶ Similar to WannaCry, the virus "spread wider and faster than previous forms of known ransomware," yet "combined, they barely banked \$100,000."⁷ Cybersecurity analysts concluded that even if victims paid the ransom, the code lacked a decryption key that would "unscramble the noise of the computer's contents."⁸ "They are just being destructive," said one expert.⁹ Moreover, when the city of Baltimore was hit with a ransomware attack in May 2019, the mayor refused to pay the \$76,000 ransom "in part because there was no guarantee the files would be unlocked."¹⁰ Overall, victims tend to be more likely to pay ransoms with the hope of decrypting their files if the cost is

relatively inexpensive,¹¹ if they face high consequences for not accessing data immediately (e.g., they are a hospital), or if they have cyber insurance to cover the cost.¹² But few pay if they are not coercively assured.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Similar logics play out in the criminal justice system. Scholars of crime and punishment find that if there is a deterrent effect to capital punishment for single murders, there is demonstrably no deterrent effect to multiple murders. This is because “the marginal cost of murders after the first is approximately zero.”¹³ By then there is little assurance of nonpunishment. For the same reason, raising the severity of the penalty for petty crimes can backfire. If, say, robbers faced the death penalty, rather than a decline in theft we might observe a rise in thieves murdering their victims.¹⁴

International legal institutions have benefited from learning these lessons as well. Despite its inability to enforce indictments and convict perpetrators, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has actually reduced attacks on civilians by groups affiliated with indictees.¹⁵ The cause of this puzzling effectiveness is credible coercive assurance—the violators’ belief that their punishment will be easily lifted or “beaten” in exchange for improved behavior. Yet war criminals also respond if coercers renege. While ICC “indictments lead to a substantial initial decline in attacks against civilians by armed groups affiliated with indictees,” Andrew Miller writes, “the attacks return to pre-indictment levels when the indictments are not lifted.”¹⁶

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

Not only does coercive assurance help to explain the outcomes of a lot of coercion—it also helps to explain big, important cases. A brief look at one of the most consequential coercion successes of the twentieth century and coercion theory’s most iconic case—the Cuban missile crisis—makes plain the relative importance of assurances and threats as coercive tools. In October 1962 blindsided US leaders implemented a coercive strategy aimed at the removal of recently delivered Soviet intermediate-range missiles from the island of Cuba. They eventually succeeded.

Washington’s principal threat was to invade Cuba and destroy the missiles directly, risking nuclear escalation and a general war with the Soviet Union. Indeed, the Joint Chiefs of Staff infamously pressured President John F. Kennedy to attack without delay. For years afterward, at the encouragement of US policymakers, the history of the crisis was told as a war of nerve.¹⁷ In the words of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev were “eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.”¹⁸

For twenty-five years Kennedy administration officials refused to acknowledge that the United States had also deployed a second tool—a carrot—when it secretly offered to trade the removal of US Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba.¹⁹ Robert Kennedy had secured the backroom deal with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin at the height of the crisis and insisted on secrecy. Six months later, Washington dutifully withdrew the Jupiters.

A sticks-and-carrots lens is satisfied with these explanations. To this day, it is underappreciated that during the Cuban missile crisis the Kennedy administration employed a third tool—a coercive assurance—in the form of a noninvasion pledge.²⁰ The assurance not to invade Cuba was not just another carrot—it was a distinct and meaningful tool of coercive bargaining. Indeed, the assurance was more important than the carrot. Behind the curtain of Soviet decision-making during the crisis, Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali discovered in Russian archives that “Khrushchev was preparing to ask the Presidium to support him in accepting Kennedy’s letter of October 27 [without the missile trade].”²¹ The lens of the assurance dilemma affirms a minority view of the Cuban missile crisis held by scholars such as Robert Jervis that “Khrushchev would have withdrawn the missiles in return for the no-invasion pledge; the sweetener of the Jupiters arrangement was not needed.”²² Coercive assurance won the day.²³

THE PACIFIC WAR

Consider one of the most consequential coercion failures of the twentieth century: the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941. In the 1930s the Empire of Japan swallowed up neighbors in a bid for autarky and regional hegemony. Washington looked to protect its interests in Southeast Asia, including British garrisons, and prevent Japanese dominance of the Pacific. The key coercive tool at its disposal was squeezing oil exports to Japan, which accounted for about 80 percent of Tokyo’s supply. Yet the US oil embargo failed to compel Japan. How could Washington, with its preponderance of power, not only fail to coerce Japan but also convince it to fight so hopeless a war?

Perhaps Tokyo was just irrational. Indeed, no theory of coercion alone can fully explain the causes of the Pacific War begun by a fanatical and militaristic government in Japan. Yet the American coercive failure is far too interesting to dismiss as just a symptom of Tokyo’s unpredictability. In the face of coercion, Japanese leaders ended up believing that they were in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” position. First, as Dale Copeland observes, Washington attempted to keep Japan “uncertain” about its oil policy, “create confusion,” and “keep the Japanese guessing.”²⁴ President Franklin Roosevelt wished to impose graduated punishments on Japan in the form of escalating oil sanctions, and while in the summer of 1941 he was “unwilling to draw the noose tight,”²⁵ he did wish to “slip a noose

around Japan's neck, and give it a jerk now and then."²⁶ He did not seem to appreciate that his target might not want to live with a noose around its neck, unsure of when the next jerk might come.

Second, Roosevelt undermined his coercive assurance when Tokyo displayed a willingness to make concessions to Washington's coercion. After the oil sanctions began, when diplomatic negotiations recommenced between Secretary of State Cordell Hull and the Japanese delegation led by Amb. Kichisaburō Nomura, Japan was more conciliatory. On August 28 Nomura offered significant concessions to the US negotiating position—including adopting language about nonaggression toward its East Asian neighbors similar to that which the Americans had asked for in April talks. On September 3 Roosevelt responded by adding two more conditions—"deal killers, as Roosevelt certainly understood," Copeland writes.²⁷ The next day, after consulting Tokyo, Nomura offered more concessions in a memo to Hull, worded as the Americans had requested.²⁸ Again, the United States refused to accept them and ended negotiations.

The reaction in Tokyo was predictable from the perspective of the assurance dilemma. At an imperial conference on September 6, clear-eyed about the overwhelming might of America, Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe stressed that Japan could not stomach the status quo. A permanent oil embargo would mean "the gradual weakening of our national defense" and "inevitable" imperial decline.²⁹ Japan resolved now to pursue what diplomatic paths remained while simultaneously preparing for war. By mid-November Washington knew it had Japan on the ropes. A November 13 report assessed that Tokyo could not "withstand the present strain very much longer" and that it "must accept the inevitable or fight."³⁰ Roosevelt reopened negotiations on November 17 one final time and prepared to accept a prostrate Japan's best offer. Nomura was prepared to comply. But then, on November 26, Roosevelt lost a chance for a deal by making an additional ten demands of Japan.³¹

Far short of acquiescing, Tokyo lashed out. In the minds of Japan's leadership, Roosevelt and Hull had reneged on near bargains in September and November.³² The United States would never remove its noose from Japan's neck, Tokyo assessed. The coercive oil embargo was not contingent on Japan's behavior. War was its choice. "In the eyes of the Tokyo decision-makers," Scott Sagan writes, "the decision to attack the United States was compared, not to an act of suicide, but rather to a desperate but necessary operation given to a man with a terminal disease . . . a desperate operation offered the only hope of saving his life."³³ Sagan further laments that the "belief that the Japanese must have been irrational to attack the United States [in 1941] continues to plague our understanding of the origins of the Pacific War."³⁴ Indeed, it plagues our understanding of all coercive international politics. Leaders make these mistakes to this day.

Implications for Theory and Future Scholarship

EXPANDING THE STUDY OF COERCION BEYOND THREATS

This book has encouraged a shift in the study of coercion away from threat credibility. It is more common in scholarship on military coercion to focus on ever more reasons why strong states' threats lack credibility—for example, the casualty-sensitivity of the public,³⁵ why disproportional nuclear threats are not credible,³⁶ and how unremarkable and inexpensive military operations, especially signals sent with aircraft, demonstrate little resolve.³⁷ In the literature on economic coercion as well, the credibility and severity of sanctions was for a long time the only explanation for their success or failure. Sanctions would be more effective against vulnerable democracies³⁸ and economically dependent allies and partners³⁹ if multilateral coalitions could staunch leaks in a sanctions regime,⁴⁰ if pain could be more targeted against leaders and elites,⁴¹ and when the United States weaponized the interdependence of the global financial system.⁴² These approaches overlook coercive assurance.⁴³ And while this book has focused on compellence, assurance is integral to and must be investigated in cases of deterrence as well.⁴⁴

Coercive assurance is important enough to merit a new paradigm in coercion studies. To properly reckon with the assurance dilemma in the study of international relations, scholars can no longer explain the dependent variable of coercion success and failure without controlling for the credibility of coercive assurance. Appreciating the assurance dilemma makes it less surprising that strong states are poor coercers. But we could go even further. The field of international relations should measure power differently if our measures capture only the capacity to hurt. Strategy matters to the utility of power.

Scholarship on costly signaling could do an even better job of accounting for the assurance dilemma. A vast literature proposes that leaders use words and deeds to signal foreign policy interests and communicate resolve. More work must apply these strategies of commitment to pledges *not* to carry out threats and investigate how signals of resolve affect coercive assurance. We ought to know when sunk cost signals, such as positioning an aircraft carrier off a coastline, communicate more of an intent to use it than to not or when burning the bridge behind you to tie your hands impacts on the credibility of your assurances in addition to your threats. This book illuminates the downsides of resolve concepts, such as saber rattling, the madman theory, and two-level games.

Scholarship on how leaders suffer "audience costs" for backing down should also not revolve around their impact on threats. Existing debates focus on questions asked through a threat credibility lens: Do domestic audiences really punish leaders for backing down?⁴⁵ Do targets perceive

that they do?⁴⁶ Are democracies therefore better coercers?⁴⁷ Or do autocracies have their own audience costs?⁴⁸ Instead, evidence of a democratic coercion deficit should prompt us to examine how regular elections, multiple domestic power centers, or norms of transparent diplomacy impede the communication of credible coercive assurance. Perhaps even a proportion of the intended audience invoked by audience costs theory may prefer punishment not contingent upon a target's actions.

The study of reputation is also chiefly concerned with threats—bluffing,⁴⁹ empty threats,⁵⁰ and resolve in the eyes of allies or adversaries.⁵¹ An emergent consensus in the study of coercive assurance is that a reputation for reneging on past bargains can hinder one's assurances in future coercive diplomacy. This book has shown that targets of coercion consider their coercers' reputations for reneging on coercive assurances but that other tools of assurance can overcome them. For instance, Iran was willing to strike a nonproliferation bargain with the United States after the public demise of Libya's Qaddafi. Nonetheless, I have not fully investigated when coercers can develop positive reputations for upholding past coercive assurances. Nor have I delved into the debate about whether conceding states acquire reputations for backing down and therefore become more likely targets for future predation or when these reputational incentives alter strategies.⁵²

The assurance dilemma lens should also prompt a deeper appreciation that the concept of "credibility" is fundamentally a probabilistic risk calculation. Actors themselves can be neither credible nor incredible. Any coercive interaction is liable to include myriad causes of threat or assurance credibility or incredibility. In choosing whether to concede, targets of coercion are calculating the probability that they will be punished anyway. When we ask whether a threat or assurance "is credible or not," we really mean "How credible is it?" and "What risk are you willing to take that they are lying?" It is the net effect of signaling that matters in the end and the relationship between threat credibility, severity, and the confidence in the assurance that a target requires.

Further research should also consider individual-level variation in the appreciation of coercive assurance as a component of successful coercion. The cases in this book suggest that coercers either tend not to recognize the assurance dilemma or else grow to understand it as their coercive strategies struggle to achieve results. But some leaders never seem to appreciate the importance of coercive assurance. Why do coercive intuitions differ, where do they come from, and how do they change?

Future scholarship might also further consider the principal-agent problems of coercive assurance. For instance, military coercers have lost control over the ability to withhold punishment through organizational failure, miscommunications, or delays. This can have disastrous consequences in the extreme, as in 1940 when the city of Rotterdam was bombed despite

surrendering. Surrounding the city, the local German commander threatened to raze it by aerial bombardment, and he ordered preparation for such a raid to make his threat more credible. During multiple rounds of communication with the surrendering city, however, his order to stay the execution arrived late to the air base. Just as he acquired the city's surrender, German bombers appeared in the sky and unloaded sixty tons of ordnance anyway.⁵³

PROBING VARIATION IN THE ASSURANCE DILEMMA

This book has focused on identifying the assurance dilemma and its rational mechanisms—insincerity and multiple demands—as well as non-rational mechanisms—losing control. Nevertheless, each could be affected by broader geopolitical or domestic factors, suggesting a larger research agenda on variations in the acuteness of the assurance dilemma. When it is acute, the trade-offs between threat and assurance credibility will be more stark; when it is mild, they will trade off less.

Consider the following possibilities. First, asymmetrically powerful coercers have more trouble convincing targets that they will not wield their power. Yet the polarity of the international system could impact these perceptions if one pole checks another pole's capacity for predation. The assurance dilemma may be more acute under unipolarity.

Second, regime type is another clear factor as democratic politics and especially large swings in partisan preferences can exacerbate fears of spoilers. Democracies may also be more likely to conduct multilateral coercive diplomacy. And in a more populist world, such coalitions may be more fractious, if they are formed at all. Leaders of democracies may face more acute assurance dilemmas.

Third, the concept of trust could matter more than I give it credit for and moderate the acuteness of the assurance dilemma. A trusting relationship between coercer and target may be a boon to coercive assurance. A loving parent has no inherent desire to punish their child for the sake of it.⁵⁴ Yet a coercer in a trusting relationship with its target will also struggle to make credible threats, complicating their ability to bargain.

Fourth, the characteristics of particular coercive tools or certain stakes of a bargaining process could provide important context for the evaluation of assurance credibility. If threats can be automatically defanged upon compliance, the assurance dilemma would be mitigated—for instance, if retreat could put one outside the range of harm's way.

An ideally assuring threat is one that loses its teeth upon the target's compliance. Kenneth Oye once invoked the logic of such an interaction in a study of "linkage" in trade negotiations—side payments uncommonly understood as applicable to coercive punishment.⁵⁵ Oye drew a distinction between three types of contingent action: exchange, extortion, and

explanation.⁵⁶ Exchangers (using carrots) and extortionists (using threats) “are seeking to construct a connection between issues,” wrote Oye. “Do X and I’ll do Y,” or “Do X or else I’ll do Y,” respectively. But explainers point to an “already existing connection between issues”: “If you do X, it will be in my interests to do Y,” or “If you do X, I’ll have no need to do Y.” While Oye did not put it in these terms, credible assurance is what makes explanation work. Of course, whether a linker is perceived as exchanging, extorting, or explaining depends on the target’s perceptions of the linker’s interests.⁵⁷ Most of the examples in this book concern what Oye calls extortion (threats to carry out punishments). Even so, highly assuring contexts have in some coercive interactions made threateners appear as explainers.

Some punishments once imposed by a coercer can still be avoided by the actions of the target. As part of a strategy in 1890 of squeezing the Hawaiian Islands into submitting to annexation, the McKinley Tariff imposed duties on the importation of Hawaiian sugar. The policy quickly caused a local depression. As a result, Alfred Castle explains, “many businessmen and planters formerly opposed to annexation to the United States now believed that annexation, which would give planters access to the domestic subsidy, was the only solution to permanent instability.”⁵⁸ Concession, which would no longer classify Hawaii as a foreign market, would eliminate the punishment automatically.

Similarly, some concessions themselves defang threats. In 2016 Turkey successfully extorted the European Union into providing billions of euros in aid to handle the Syrian refugee crisis. To do so, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened to send migrants into Europe.⁵⁹ “We can open the doors to Greece and Bulgaria anytime and we can put the refugees on buses,” Erdoğan told Jean-Claude Juncker of the European Commission and Donald Tusk of the European Council.⁶⁰ In this context, conceding to Erdoğan’s demand to house, feed, and secure Syrian refugees in facilities on Turkish soil would drain the threat of its potency. Compliance would in fact help to ensure that Ankara did not put the refugees on buses. The frequency of such coercive contexts with more mild assurance dilemmas is a question for future research.

The cases in this book varied in terms of the acuteness of the assurance dilemma. All targets were bargaining over pursuit of a security asset and faced asymmetrically powerful coercers, who were mostly democracies. In all cases, coercion at some point confronted spoilers and multiple demands. These factors suggest that the assurance dilemma was acute. Yet South Africa faced economic coercion only, and while it was not an ally of the United States, they shared an adversary in the Soviet Union. The assurance dilemma may have been milder in this case. Iraq, Libya, and Iran faced both economic and military coercion, including from their chief adversaries, whom they had little basis to trust. These cases likely contained more acute assurance dilemmas. Moreover, the information environment varied.

In the cases of South Africa and Iraq, coercers had poor intelligence about the state of the targets' nuclear programs. In the cases of Libya and Iran, coercers collected better intelligence upon which to base policy decisions.

SANCTIONS VERSUS MILITARY FORCE

This book has parsimoniously considered together both economic and military coercion. Scholars would do well to further consider the assurance dynamics of each tool. Both sanctions and force may be employed in a graduated fashion to compel a target to concede once the pain becomes unbearable. Yet, in terms of coercive assurance, imposed sanctions are “on” at the time of negotiation, so coercers must commit to take action and lift them. Force is often “off” during negotiation, so coercers must commit not to take action after a bargain. (Although the two get closer together once a state mobilizes military force, delegates authority for its use, or engages in limited force as a threat of more to come.) Moreover, in terms of their severity, comprehensive sanctions can be imposed during a coercive effort, while comprehensive force is not used unless coercion fails and the coercer opts to impose its will by brute force. Relieving sanctions should be more difficult to credibly communicate.⁶¹

Implications for Policy

When coercion fails, states can turn to even more violent means to resolve disputes. It is therefore important that scholars identify levers that policy-makers might pull to bolster coercive assurance. By exploring the reasons why targets perceive inevitable pain, this book offered some productive policy lessons. Much existing theory on coercion assumes that targets will understand the incentive structures of their coercers, or at most it prescribes that leaders should explain their own incentives to targets—for example, their own interests, resolve, alliance politics, domestic constraints, and liberal values. The thinking is that if they understand us, they will know we are serious. This book instead advises coercers to understand their targets—their incentives, their fears, their perceptions. Indeed, the enterprise in which the coercer is engaged is explicitly one of manipulating those incentives and fears. Coercers need some empathy—coercive empathy but empathy all the same.

LEADERS SHOULD PRACTICE SINCERE COERCION

Before leaders make threats, they should be honest with themselves about their sincerity. When brute force is the more appropriate policy, it should not come in trappings of coercion. In the aftermath of 9/11, for

example, the Bush administration issued an ultimatum to the Taliban government of Afghanistan to hand over Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda terrorists or “share in their fate.”⁶² Bush later explained that “exposing their [Taliban] defiance to the world would firm up our justification for a military strike.”⁶³ The target was never going to avoid retribution. President Obama made a similar error in 2014 attempting to coerce the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Following a deadly terrorist attack in Paris, the president threatened, “We’re sending a message,” Obama declared. “If you target Americans, you will have no safe haven.”⁶⁴ Yet the US military was already engaged in a military campaign to degrade and destroy the ISIL organization. Indeed, just moments earlier in his statement, the president himself had articulated how “Special Operations Forces are hard at work” and “hitting ISIL harder than ever in Syria and Iraq . . . taking out their leaders.”⁶⁵ The threat was already being carried out.

Coercive assurances, explicit and implicit, have also been publicly violated by coercers. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and invaded the rest of Ukraine in 2022, observers decried the violation of coercive assurance offered to Kyiv while compelling the removal of former Soviet nuclear weapons at the end of the Cold War.⁶⁶ In toppling the Qaddafi regime in 2011, the United States and Britain similarly reneged on a coercive assurance made to Libya in 2003 bargaining over its weapons programs.⁶⁷ And in 2018 the Trump administration reimposed economic sanctions waived under the terms of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

All of these choices are puzzling from the perspective of rational coercion theory. Even the most hawkish coercers should desire a reputation for making credible assurances. The ability to assure is power, just as the ability to threaten is power. A state that cannot assure is a weaker state, no matter how much it can threaten. When states elect to coerce, they should do so sincerely by being willing to let the target choose to avoid punishment. Insincere coercion should be avoided.

Leaders should also be careful not to become so committed to their threats that they do not take yes for an answer if it finally comes. Sometimes we see last-minute concessions on the brink of war, a sign of targets taking concession gambles. Yet we also see a failure to accept concessions at the last minute. Windows for bargaining can open at the precipice—as with Iraq in 2002 and Iran in 2003—if only the momentum of punishment does not carry you over the cliff.

DIVERSIFY THE COERCION TOOL KIT

Policymakers need to similarly look beyond threats alone to improve their prospects of coercive success. To policymakers steeped in the logic of threat credibility, it is usually too soon to deem coercion a failure. Concessions are always just around the corner. More pressure is the best path

forward. And when coercion fails, these leaders lament: If only our threats had been more credible, if only we had squeezed the adversary a little harder, for a little longer, surely then they would have given in when we had them on the ropes. But this myopic lens ignores the sources of leverage and the prospects of success if leaders attempt to bolster the conditionality of their threats.

There is a limit to the utility of credible threats. As a mobilized Pentagon awaited final orders to begin bombing, the final ultimatums to Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 were fruitless. Targets stood fast, resigned to inevitable war. In 2003, days before the US invasion, with troops deployed to the region, Iraqi elites concluded grimly to IAEA visitors that “this war is going to happen, and nothing you or we can do will stop it.”⁶⁸ Echoes of that sense of inevitability pervaded William Burns’s phone call with his old Libyan negotiating partner, Musa Kusa, in 2011, in which he attempted to dissuade the Qaddafi regime from violent repression. Burns warned Kusa that “this would not end well,” to which Kusa “sighed heavily” and replied, “I know.”⁶⁹

Targets of coercion must believe that it is their own behavior that will determine their fate. Yet too often policymakers’ instincts in the face of defiance tell them just to threaten more. In an attempt to bolster the credibility and severity of their threats, coercers can place their targets in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” position. Targets are loath to live at the whim of another’s punishment. Roosevelt’s oil sanctions wished to “slip a noose around Japan’s neck” but provoked the opposite of acquiescence.⁷⁰ Iran hawks have also called coercive economic measures a “sanctions noose.”⁷¹ Protestors in Hong Kong braved Chinese authoritarians because they saw themselves “like a frog in a beaker of water that is being boiled. . . . If we die, well, we were going to die anyway.”⁷² And we should expect comparably desperate reactions to omnipresent prospects of punishment, such as how drone warfare aims to put its targets in a “constant state of ambush.”⁷³ Without assurance, threats are less effective and can provoke targets to lash out. What would you do with a knife to your neck?

COERCIVE PROSPECTS FOR NORTH KOREA

The contemporary case of coercion most similar to the cases covered in this book is that of coercive bargaining over North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. As of this writing, North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests, including one with a thermonuclear device in September 2017. It has also tested ballistic missiles with intercontinental range. Its Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 missile tests demonstrated the ability to reach the continental United States. The Trump administration called its strategy to confront North Korea “maximum pressure”—a mixture of economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and threats of military force. It was a strategy driven

by the logic of the threat credibility. Matched with summit diplomacy, the goal was North Korean “denuclearization.” And North Korean leader Kim Jong-un met with South Korean president Moon Jae-in at five inter-Korean summits and President Trump at two US–North Korean summits (Singapore in June 2018 and Hanoi in February 2019) without progress.⁷⁴ While it did far less to act on it, the Biden administration did not change US policy to denuclearize North Korea.

The lens of the assurance dilemma yields pessimistic conclusions for coercion on the peninsula.⁷⁵ Washington’s demands are entangled. Pyongyang wonders whether nuclear sanctions will not just be relabeled missile, chemical weapons, biological weapons, or human rights sanctions after any bargain. When nonnuclear issues have come to the fore, North Korea has bristled. For example, when the UN Human Rights Committee passed a resolution in November 2018 condemning North Korea’s gross violations of human rights, Pyongyang accused the United States of weaponizing the issue to “justify their racket for sanctions and pressure.”⁷⁶ A Foreign Ministry statement said that it would be the “greatest miscalculation” if Washington believed it could compel nuclear concessions from Pyongyang by ratcheting up the “human rights racket to an unprecedented level.” Rather, the Foreign Ministry warned, such a strategy “will block the path to denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula forever.”⁷⁷

Many spoilers also lurk with independent capacity to punish North Korea economically. Domestically, any US president faces meager odds of getting Congress to provide sanctions relief to the North under any foreseeable circumstances. In September 2018 Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho blamed “U.S. domestic politics” for pessimism about the implementation of the US–North Korean joint statement at the Singapore summit the previous June.⁷⁸ As in the past, any sanctions relief or economic carrots that are part of a coercive bargain with North Korea would have to come from countries in the region, such as South Korea, Japan, China, or Russia.⁷⁹

Another domestic reason to question the Trump administration’s signals of coercive control was the conspicuous division of the White House against itself.⁸⁰ Reacting in 2017 to a contradiction between the President Trump’s hawkish tweets, one of which described the United States as “locked and loaded,” and a softer op-ed coauthored by two US cabinet officials that expressed “no interest in regime change or accelerated reunification of Korea,”⁸¹ a North Korean official described the United States as “a divided country.” He “could not understand how the two Cabinet members could so clearly contradict the President.”⁸²

Perhaps no example was more emblematic of the confused signaling of a divided White House than National Security Adviser John Bolton’s invocation of the “Libya model” in May 2018 in his first television interview since assuming his post. North Korean state media responded with a statement describing how the United States had “coaxed” Libya to “disarm itself and

then swallowed it up by force.”⁸³ North Korea’s vice foreign minister, Choe Son-hui, further emphasized the point: “In order not to follow in Libya’s footsteps, we paid a heavy price to build up our powerful and reliable strength that can defend ourselves.”⁸⁴ And, for an internal audience, a May 2018 editorial in *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Workers’ Party of Korea, commented on a US reputation for duplicity: “Yielding to imperialists and choosing to make compromises with them is essentially a death sentence. . . . Libya continued down the path to make concessions to the U.S., not knowing that it would have to strip all the way down to its underwear. These concessions led to misery.”⁸⁵

The North is a state whose gross domestic product is a fraction of the annual US defense budget. Pyongyang knows and fears US power. Yet it defies Washington’s coercive demands over its nuclear program. US threats are not complemented by coercive assurance. These serious impediments to successful coercion suggest that the United States should abandon denuclearization as a realistic goal anytime soon and adopt new strategic aims, such as arms control and risk-reduction initiatives to keep the North Korean nuclear arsenal in check and posturing US and South Korean military forces for stable deterrence instead of compellence. But if compellence remains the US strategy of choice, policymakers in Washington should recognize that their threats of sanctions and military force are not yet perceived in Pyongyang as contingent upon North Korean behavior. Assurance credibility, not threat credibility, ought to be the focus of further efforts.

IMPROVING US SANCTIONS

Foreign policy scholars and practitioners are now awaking to the absurdity of imposing coercive economic sanctions without being able to lift them.⁸⁶ Yet sanctions, especially American financial sanctions, continue to be a primary tool of statecraft.⁸⁷ The Threat and Imposition of Sanctions dataset records that the United States imposed 191 sanctions on 74 countries from 1946 to 1990; in the far fewer years since the end of the Cold War, it has imposed 252 sanctions on 101 states.⁸⁸ That trend masks even larger growth in the number of entities sanctioned by the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which has ballooned by 933 percent since 2000.⁸⁹ And the imposition of sanctions has far outpaced their reprieve. From 2009 to 2019 OFAC designated twice as many “individuals, entities, vessels, and aircrafts” than it delisted—twice as much punishment as relief.⁹⁰ The Trump administration’s annual delisting rate was one quarter of the Obama administration’s average delisting rate.

This book suggests a few ideas for how to signal a capability and willingness to relieve economic pain in exchange for concessions. First, the Treasury Department could separate the mission of sanctions imposition and enforcement from the mission of sanctions relief. A separate office

tasked with sanctions relief—ensuring sanctions are tied to specific and separable demands, explaining the scope of relief to private actors, and monitoring whether economic engagement has indeed recommenced—would be beneficial to the coercive prospects of economic sanctions. It might be called the “Office of Coercive Leverage” and should be well staffed.

Second, the larger and more complex a sanctions regime, the harder it will be to unravel and thus the harder to assure the target that it will be unraveled.⁹¹ Treasury may be learning this lesson today by seeking to avoid omnibus sanctions packages and being more specific in the designation of sanctioned entities.⁹² But the logrolling mechanics of congressional agreement will push in the direction of less credible coercive assurance. Congressional leaders should be wary of undermining US foreign policy strategies as they seek to impose severe punishments on adversaries.

Third, sanctions could be imposed with time limits, so-called sunsets. Sanctions relief is too readily framed as a “reward” in public discourse. Automatic termination might avoid the politically unpalatable option of appearing to reward a sanctions target, typically an adversary. Sunsets would be the practical equivalent of the congressional pocket approval of sanctions waivers that the INARA legislation secured in 2015. The UNSC has indeed imposed sanctions with sunset provisions in the past.⁹³

Fourth, Congress should recognize the value of keeping presidential waiver provisions in legislative sanctions. While in 2015 INARA removed Congress as a domestic spoiler to sanctions relief and established a policy precedent for sanctions waivers by executive order, congressional action to impose sanctions on Russia for 2016 election interference (part of CAATSA) overturned that precedent. For domestic political reasons, those sanctions tried to limit the White House’s ability to lift them. To waive sanctions pertaining to Russian cyberattacks, for instance, the president would have had to “provide evidence that Russia had tried to reduce such intrusions . . . and Congress would have at least 30 days to vote on any changes he sought.”⁹⁴ And waiving CAATSA sanctions required a two-thirds vote in Congress—a high bar. Even some European allies opposed these legislative sanctions, in part because they were harder to lift.⁹⁵ After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the United States and its European allies concentrated on leveling unprecedented sanctions on Russia, including on its central bank and oil exports, to punish Vladimir Putin. Under what conditions these sanctions could ever be lifted was left for later discussion. If these coercive measures were to result in leverage over Putin’s behavior, some signal that they could be lifted in exchange for a Russian withdrawal would need to be credible. The assurance dilemma is pernicious in the case of Russia.⁹⁶

There have already been calls to reform the institutions that implement US economic coercion,⁹⁷ and the Treasury Department considered some of

them in a review of sanctions policy.⁹⁸ In this regard, the field of international political economy is ahead of the security field in its appreciation of the assurance dilemma.

DETECTING A WAR OVER TAIWAN

Perhaps the most catastrophic foreign policy pitfall on the horizon for the United States would be to blunder into a war with the People's Republic of China. That there is a clear tinderbox for such a conflict—Taiwan—rightly gives many pause. The status of Taiwan has been intentionally ambiguous since 1972, when the United States recognized China diplomatically and gained a major partner to balance against the Soviet Union. As part of that bargain, the “one China policy” allowed Beijing, Taipei, and Washington to disagree over the standing of Taiwan and yet accept the status quo. The 1972 Shanghai Communiqué reads: “The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position.”⁹⁹ And this remains the status quo.

The fear is that a rising China will finally be strong enough relative to the United States, at least in the Western Pacific, to change the status quo over Taiwan, either by coercion or brute force. As it has increased its military capacity, Beijing has flexed its muscle in the region, from the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea to carrying out military exercises in the air and waters around Taiwan. Its preparations for military contingencies are clear. Yet a war over this democratic island of twenty-four million people is by no means inevitable. China should be dissuaded from ever attempting to conquer it.

A war over Taiwan can be deterred. But it will take more than credible threats to deter it. In addition to arming the Taiwanese with advanced weapons and signaling its willingness to Beijing to fight for Taiwan, Washington must communicate its acceptance of the status quo. Washington should make it abundantly clear that it will not accept changes to the status quo from any party—not from Beijing or from Taipei or in its own policy. US leaders should not refer to Taiwan as a country, as independent, or a formal ally.¹⁰⁰ US lawmakers need not visit as part of partisan outbidding to show resolve. Washington should prevent Beijing from ever concluding that it seeks a formal alliance or diplomatic relationship with Taiwan. Attempting otherwise could be perceived as a *fait accompli* to change the status quo across the Taiwan Strait.

Beijing and Taipei should be sending similar signals that they are willing to accept the status quo provided no one else changes it. China's aggressive behavior in the Taiwan Strait—intercepting surveillance aircraft, flying beyond the median line, encircling the island with drones, or conducting exercises farther and farther around Taiwan¹⁰¹—has not effectively

communicated status quo ambitions and have not been stabilizing for deterrence. Rather it communicates the need to be deterred.

That deterrence must come in the form of both credible threats to defend Taiwan, or at least deny China a military victory at acceptable cost, and coercive assurances that complement those threats. Leaders must not equate assurance over Taiwan as a carrot for or appeasement of Beijing. It is just the opposite: a logic of conditional pain—pain that China could avoid.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Beijing will understand implicitly that governments in Washington or Taipei have no designs to hurt China. Multiple demands of China—for instance, to cease unfair trade practices, cyber espionage, or human rights abuses—could become entangled with red lines in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. There are spoilers within Taiwan and the United States who seek to out-hawk each other on China policy. Some might even argue in favor of preemptively altering the status quo over Taiwan before China does so. This book advises caution and careful attention to how coercive assurance can be undermined.

Assuring signals need not come at the expense of improving the credibility of US or Taiwanese threats. As the scholars Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas Christensen appreciated, “it is precisely because the United States should bolster and diversify its military presence in the region and help strengthen Taiwan’s defenses that it must also provide clearer and more persistently conveyed assurances.”¹⁰² This is the assurance dilemma at work. As the United States aims to augment the credibility of its threats, it risks undermining its corresponding assurances and must focus as much on shoring them up as it does the defense of Taiwan’s beaches. A war over Taiwan is avoidable but not with credible threats alone.

I began this book with the puzzle of high-leverage coercion. Washington often fails to coerce despite power asymmetry. Confrontations with Panama, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq all ended in conflict despite attempts at coercion by the United States. But it is not just a US problem. Many powerful actors are frustrated in their coercive aims. Even highly credible threats can fail because they are perceived as insufficiently conditional. If targets expect punishments to be applied anyway, defiance runs little or no additional risk, and compliance is fruitless. Yet, given the duplicity of statesmen and the uncertainty of the international system, it is a wonder that states can ever communicate credible coercive assurance. Through such a lens, the puzzle of this book is not why the strong have trouble coercing the weak but why the strong can ever coerce the weak. The United States pre-dates at will, an argument goes, so why should any weaker state ever be so naive as to strike a coercive bargain?

From either perspective, the message of this book is the same. Coercive assurance is a necessary component of coercion. But coercers face an

assurance dilemma: efforts to bolster the credibility of threats can undermine the credibility of assurance. In any coercive interaction there are factors that pull toward credible assurance and factors that push against it. Targets make a choice based on this information they glean from their coercers, and they wish to know that their coercers will remain in control of the application of punishment. Will I be punished anyway? What is the likelihood? How much am I willing to risk? Smart coercers do not ignore these questions. They answer them.

