

Coercive Diplomacy – A Mixed Tool of Foreign Policy International Political Science Association June 2026

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Abstract: This paper highlights the United States predisposition to engage in coercive diplomacy against its adversaries. As a menacing form of diplomacy coercive diplomacy has been utilized extensively and frequently throughout history as an aggressive foreign policy tool by political elites to achieve political and strategic objectives. Does the use of coercive diplomacy exercised by the United States using its elevated speech, and aggressive policies as tools of state craft help achieve its foreign policy objective and open war? Does its massive military and economic arsenal produce compellence of its challengers? In addition to economic sanctions, military build-up, or military exercises, applying violence as a diplomatic instrument may diminish the chances of military escalation and bring the players to the negotiating table. What has baffled policy-makers and political theorists is under what political conditions can this belligerent diplomacy be applied in international relations today as a feasible tool in the state's foreign policy arsenal? Using qualitative methodology, this study addresses explicitly under what conditions state aggression can be successfully adopted and what specific tools are used, misused or over-used could result in its failure and make open warfare more likely. Our understanding of diplomatic coercion is central to developing and applying an effective strategy would be increased noticeably if only policy makers would make a greater efforts to do four things, specifically (1) provide political leaders with a clear operational definitions of key diplomatic coercion concepts and variables, (2) analyze how policy makers view intelligence and the situation at hand, (3) evaluate the functionality of coercive diplomacy as an effective aggressive diplomatic tool for achieving the state's primary objective while discouraging or avoiding war and future aggression, and (4) prompt decision-makers to weigh the potential risks when excessively using coercion in their policy calculations. These uncomplicated steps would enhance the degree of successful decision making, provide the fundamental theoretical propositions with a solid empirical basis and make diplomatic coercion policies more useful for foreign and military policy makers.

Keywords: Coercive diplomacy; state terrorism; contentious politics, menacing behavior

Introduction

Coercive diplomacy¹ has been utilized throughout history as a tool of foreign policy to present a peaceful alternative and means to curtail military intervention or escalation to warfare. Although it is commonly used, there is no commonly agreed-upon definition of coercion. Unlike traditional diplomacy as the principle instrument of state interaction² used to negotiate an agreement, settle disputes or prevent and end war, coercive diplomacy is an aggressive interaction among states mainly used by stronger states against weaker ones. Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman (2002) defined it as “the use of threatened force, including the limited use of actual force to back up the threat, to induce an adversary to behave differently than it otherwise would” (p.1). It is a diplomatic method used by a nation-state in which the application of economic sanctions or embargoes, as well as the use of force or military action, is threatened or hinted at in order to force another state to give in to a certain demand or refrain from a particular course of action. The use of state coercion as a form of a threat against a challenger has been used extensively and frequently throughout history by political elites to achieve political or strategic objectives.

In order to be an effective tool of diplomacy, Alexander George, one of the pioneers of international relations, includes threats, persuasion, positive inducements, and accommodation to the major pillars of coercive diplomacy used by the state in a crisis bargaining strategy as an alternative to war or to strictly coercive military strategies.³ There are two important forms of coercion used in diplomacy during crisis, deterrence and

¹ Coercion is the use of threatened force, including the limited use of actual force to back up the threat, to induce an adversary to behave differently than it otherwise would. Coercion is typically broken down into two subcategories: compellence and deterrence. P. 10.

²Sauer, p. 2.

³ The subtitle of George's (1991b) book, *Forceful Persuasion*, is *coercive diplomacy as an alternative to war*.

compellence.⁴ On the one hand, the concept of “deterrence threatens punishment or denial to prevent an adversary from taking an unwanted action.”⁵ Compellence on the other hand the coercer “demands that the adversary undertake action.”⁶ Under both circumstances, the coercer threatens to use force at the highest level of pressure against its rival to behave (or not) in an expected and desired manner for a political or strategic objective.

What has perplexed international theorists and policymakers is under what political circumstances or crisis conditions can coercive diplomacy be applied today as a viable tool of foreign policy. Generally, “most conflicts are, in fact, reciprocal bargaining situations wherein the desired outcome hinges on the participants' skillful exploitation of potential force.”⁷ This study addresses specifically under what conditions can coercive diplomacy be successfully applied and what elements, if lacking could result in its failure. The gravity of the situation between the parties play a critical role on which tool the coercer will adopt to achieve its policy objective. “The explicit, serious, and urgent nature of an ultimatum that features of negotiation and coercion frequently reach their extreme forms.”⁸ The strategies are adopted by leaders to influence the behavior and calculations of their opponents on the international stage often threatening or employing military force.

A case in point, the US supported by the United Nations and the international community used deterrence and later compellence by imposing punishing sanctions on Iraq to force it out of Kuwait. The main concept of coercive diplomacy is to avoid war by convincing the opponent to change their behavior or face a punishing military response. Unfortunately for the Bush Administration neither tool worked, and hence the White House failed to provide the Iraqi leadership a face-saving mechanism and ultimately rushed to war that would have been avoidable. A case in point, “the failure of the UN to use the bargaining model to reciprocate Iraq squandered opportunities for additional Iraqi cooperation, and generated dynamics of deepening distrust and animosity made a negotiated solution more difficult and war a reality.”⁹

This study analyzes how the coercive diplomacy framework alone, without considering the operational code of the political leaders and the role of intelligence, is deficient in providing the decision-makers with a more integrated and informed situational picture. The primary objective is to evaluate the usefulness of economic sanctions and embargoes as effective tools of coercive diplomacy in stemming the possible eruption of military conflict. Or, dissuade aggression in conjunction with assessing the political leader's operational code and the role of intelligence as a new three-pronged analytical framework.

Other scholars such as Alexander Downes explains coercion as “the art of manipulating costs and benefits to affect the behavior of an actor.” He further explains that there are two forms of coercion, deterrence and compellence. “Deterrence consists of threats of force designed to persuade a target to refrain from taking a particular action and compellence which employs the use or threat force (economic or military) to take and reverse action.” Thomas Schelling on the other hand employs “brute force” as another definition, which simply implies getting what one wants by violence without trying to convince the adversary. It is a common practice that “coercive diplomacy includes economic sanctions as a significant factor to induce a state to change of action” (Umar, et. al., p. 1). This is normally the stage where the powerful nation applies economic pressure to achieve its objective without rushing to a costly war.

The adoption of coercion as a state tactic to force an adversary into compliance, is the last tool available short of open, long-lasting, and unpredictable war. In addition to economic sanctions, military build-up, or military exercises, applying veiled aggression as a diplomatic instrument is designed to diminish the chances of military escalation and bring the players to the negotiating table. Many policy-makers ignore the fact that instead of preventing open warfare, coercive diplomacy may in fact lead to large scale war beyond the control of

⁴ Deterrence and compellence rely on threats to motivate the adversary to comply with the coercer's demands, but they differ in regard to the nature of these demands. Deterrence demands that the adversary refrain from acting, whereas compellence demands that the adversary undertake action. In each instance, the objective of the coercer is to present the adversary with a situation in which compliance is preferable to defiance. (Schaub, p. 389)

⁵ Janice Gross Stein, p. 147. It is most effective against an adversary that is opportunistic and seeking to make gains.

⁶ Gary Schaub Jr., Deterrence, Compellence, and Prospect Theory. P. 389. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2004.

⁷ Maria Sperandei. (p. 253) Bridging Deterrence and Compellence: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Coercive Diplomacy *International Studies Review* (2006) 8, 253-280.

⁸ Paul Gordon Lauren. *Ultimata and Coercive Diplomacy*. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Jun., 1972), pp. 131-165. (p. 132)

⁹ Euclid A. Rose (2005). From a Punitive to a Bargaining Model of Sanctions: Lessons from Iraq, *International Studies Quarterly* (2005) 49, 459-479.

the instigators. What has baffled policy-makers and political theorists is under what political conditions can this belligerent diplomacy be applied in international relations today as a feasible tool in the state's foreign policy arsenal.

This study addresses explicitly under when conditions state settled aggression can be successfully adopted and what specific tools are used, misused or over-used could result in its failure and make open warfare more likely. In addition to analyzing how political leaders view intelligence and the situation at hand, the primary objective of this study is to evaluate the functionality of state power as an effective aggressive diplomatic tool for achieving the state's primary objective while discouraging war and future aggression. The state's enormous coercive resources including economic, military, and intelligence have been directed not only against their own civilians but against rival states.

Coercion therefore could be understood as using menacing force against the adversary to act relevantly with one's demands or discourage rivals from instigating an unacceptable behavior to the coercer. Even when applying brute force as defined by Thomas Schelling above, the targeted party still retains its capabilities to resist such coercion. It is this resistance in the two case studies that will be tested in this article. Since the US is the most recurring user of coercive diplomacy, this paper focuses on two case studies comparing and measuring the success of American coercive diplomacy toward Iran and Iraq. How successful was the US coercive threat in these two cases? Also, how did these less powerful states respond to such overwhelming American pressure? But first, we have to address the obstacle of accurately defining coercive diplomacy and how it is received by the target state. I contend that understanding what coercive diplomacy means to policy-makers and the academic community may bridge the gap between them in order to make sound decisions as they pursue foreign policies.

The problem of definition

As the world's sole superpower, the US has the power to impose extraordinary level of punishments at will and can more easily intimidate its opponents into submitting to its compelling demands. However, the diverse definitions of coercive diplomacy create deep misunderstanding between the coercer and the target state in the communication process. Coercive diplomacy by its very nature is veiled aggression used in a diplomatic language by policy-makers to accomplish specific objectives. In diplomatic conflicts, particularly when a threat is made by an unrivaled superpower, it often helps the aggressor deliver menacing messages under a veneer of politeness. The level of verbal aggression used by the superpower may mainly depend on the level of power possessed by the target opponent. "Communication is generally regarded as an essential aspect of diplomacy." (Lund, Jonsson and Hall, p. 195). Additionally, in the communication process noise in the channels often create misleading or ill-perceived diplomatic messages leading to a miscalculation and eventually war that the leaders are trying to avoid.

It is indeed a challenging undertaking to detach culture from language most importantly in coercive diplomacy where not only words matter but physical demeanors and military displays. Certainly, the art of diplomatic communication is to convey thoughtful messages ensuring the words are accurately understood in order to avoid causing any tensions or undoing any progress in the negotiations. The emotional reactions of diplomats may be misread or misunderstood which could be interpreted as offensive or threatening behavior. As such, that may hinder any diplomatic efforts, causing alienation, distrust and reducing any confidence in further negotiations. What is critical is that diplomats must show empathy toward their counterparts and acknowledge their points of view and hence softening their coercive attitudes displayed in these diplomatic talks. Only by softening the rhetoric and beginning to understand the language and culture could American diplomats build a rapport, reduce tensions, contain their counterparts and prevent possible war. In the two case studies conducted in this research, American diplomats displayed more military might and arrogance rather than adapt to cultural differences and hence elevate the level of coercive diplomacy leading to war.

Diplomatic communication is critical and highly sensitive in international relations. "Communication is to diplomacy as blood is to the human body. Whenever communication ceases, the body of international politics, the process of diplomacy, is dead, and the result is violent conflict or atrophy." (Tran, 1987, p. 8). However, even the most skilled diplomats face several inherent challenges rooted in its unique genre especially across diverse languages, cultures and religious traditions. Communication is the essence of diplomacy. There has never been a good diplomat who was a bad communicator. (Stearns, 1996, p. 112).

Conveying diplomatic language is more cultural than linguistic. "The Western way of thinking and speaking, we are reminded, is only a way of thinking and speaking, not the only way of thinking and speaking. Whatever its intrinsic merits or, indeed, its universal merits, in diplomacy, the fact that it is only one among several ways of so doing is more important. By implication, this warning contains an injunction to Western negotiators not only to be aware of these differences, but to adjust their own approach accordingly" (Sharp, para. 10).

Diplomacy is the primary tool for managing and resolving disputes between nations, helping to prevent conflicts from escalating into armed conflict. Therefore, it allows for the negotiation of treaties, agreements, and other mechanisms that can address the root causes of conflict and promote peaceful coexistence. Even during wartime, diplomacy can play a crucial role in negotiating ceasefires, peace treaties, and prisoner exchanges. Therefore, the diplomatic language aims to convey messages respectfully and avoid offense, but this can lead to using euphemisms and indirect expressions that may sacrifice clarity.

An experienced diplomat is cautious to the cultural sensitivity as they navigate diverse cultural contexts requires careful word choices to avoid misunderstandings and maintain positive relationships. Certainly, there is always a potential for misinterpretation even with professional translation, as nuances can be lost, leading to unintended negative consequences. The use of language differs across cultures and can lead to fundamental differences in understanding what is at stake. While ambiguity is often used strategically in peace agreements to allow for later interpretation and compromise, ambiguity can also be unintentional and detrimental, increasing the risk of miscalculation or overreaction and consequently war. Therefore, the clear and precise language understood by all sides is fundamental in diplomatic communication.

Due to its primitive knowledge of the history, culture and traditions of the two states in this study, Iran and Iraq, “the fact that it is the richest and most powerful country in the world notwithstanding, the United States does not actually handle itself very well or helpfully in day-to-day negotiations” (Sharp, para. 11). Sharp emphasizes that in dealing with other states, the US must “show respect for other cultures and make necessary adjustments to avoid offence” (para. 1) as such actions become unproductive and possibly undermine the long-term American strategies. Respecting and understanding the sensitivities of other cultures is likely to make it easier for the US to achieve its objectives using less diplomatic coercion and threats in order to avoid going to a costly war. It is a serious challenge even for experienced diplomats to disconnect language and culture from the fundamental factors of diplomacy. However, in order to help American diplomats achieve their foreign policy goals, they should appear less hegemonic, aggressive and demanding in their aspiration in dealing with their counterparts or at least appear more accommodating and tolerant of diverse views and cultural differences. It is those positive attributes that can help the US achieve its foreign policy goals without firing a shot.

In this article I describe two scenarios where the United States has made full use of coercive diplomacy as a tool to accomplish its objectives. The first is where the US successfully reached an agreement with Iran over Tehran’s nuclear program in 2015 but, failed to achieve an agreement when President Trump used military force. The second is the US over three administrations were unsuccessful in reaching a compromise with Iraq to peacefully withdraw from Kuwait in 1990 and failed again in 2003 to convince Saddam Hussain to depart from power. Coercive diplomacy and even military threats failed to achieve its goals without offering incentives to the weaker states. The two cases represent coercive diplomacy backed up by military force rather than offering the carrot to avoid war. These case studies illustrate the value of using coercive diplomacy tools without offering any face-saving mechanism, so that future policies can effectively be made with future adversaries.

Case Studies

In the two case studies discussed in this article, it is well known to the target countries that the US is negotiating from a position of strength and determined to achieve its objective. As a hegemonic power, Washington tends to behave from a position of superiority acting in a domineering manner in both cases expecting its counterparts to cave in without offering much in return. This perception of what they consider as an American intrusion, may allow the US to satisfy its demands but, could also risk a breakdown in the negotiation process or worse, an economically costly war, political division at home, suffering backlash on the international stage, and the charge of human rights violations.

The US diplomatic core is entrusted in protecting and advancing the interests of America and the American people. However, American diplomats do not always make moral or just decisions when dealing with states especially in the Middle East. This is contrary to what Middle Easterners’ conceptions of the US that manifest freedom, democracy, equality, justice and human rights that is an embodiment in American ideals and the Constitutional framework. This self-made intrusion, unilateralism and indifference to local cultures appear as a manipulation or even ignoring its own American democratic values and constitutional constraints. Maintaining a hardline diplomatic posture could lead the target countries to stand their grounds instead of caving in to US demands at all costs even risking the toppling of their regimes. Hence, by imposing its will on other countries the US foreign policy-makers have led to highly expansive and dangerous outcome for the country.

Most importantly for the two case studies, American diplomats either do not understand or intentionally ignore the cultures, history, customs and traditions of the Middle East. I argue that this is the main reason why US policies in the region leave issues not only unresolved, but expand and deepen the already contentious politics in the region. Ignoring the sensitivities of the Middle East is often counterproductive to the concept of

diplomacy where US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright maintained that diplomacy “is about building and nourishing partnerships for cooperative action towards common goals” to achieve American foreign policy objectives is “...the way people work to reach peace” (Sharp, para. 2).

However, diplomatic miscommunications often arise and could lead to more friction, misunderstanding and eventually open warfare between nation-states with diverse cultural heritage, historical development, and political systems as this article will demonstrate between the US diplomatic negotiation with Iran and Iraq. Therefore, “the disparity of views in the diplomacy studies field must be classified and consolidated before the enhanced role of diplomacy in the twenty-first century can be better understood. (23)¹⁰”

These domineering actions are by no means particular to the US or unique to a specific culture. However, my focus on the US is limited and focused on two cases in this study because Washington has been the dominating force in the Middle East since the end of World War II. By its very nature, diplomacy is not only a means of communication and an instrument of policy but, requires certain expertise since it “is an increasingly vital activity in the modern international relations system.”¹¹ In order to communicate effectively in a turbulent world, diplomats rely heavily on their in-depth experience in international relations, language and communication skills and solid understanding of the local customs, history and traditions of their counterparts. Such unique experiences put the diplomats at a clear advantage vis à vis their opponents.

When you add diplomatic coercion or pressure to the mix, political abuse begins to take over the morals and dedication to public service of diplomats. Such recognizable violation of their professional obligation to their political bosses, diplomats seriously harm their own moral ethos, strong values and professional code of conduct when they adopt oppressive tactics towards their opponents. Diplomats as trusted aid of the state is in charge of extracting the greatest benefits for the parties through negotiations in an effort to avoid military conflicts. “If power is the only currency in international politics, a focus on diplomacy adds little value to our understanding of international affairs.”¹² The question here is does coercive diplomacy lead to failure in achieving its foreign policy objective? This theory is applied here on two cases, reaching a nuclear deal with Iran and second, forcing Iran out of Iraq in 1990 and forcing it to open its alleged nuclear sites to UN inspectors. In both cases, the US applied coercive diplomacy to force compliance.

Diplomats have leverage and they often use it effectively during the negotiation process to achieve a desired outcome. More often than not, nation-states tend to have more common interests which makes it easier to reach a satisfactory compromise. However, as the negotiations linger without any major movements, these agents of the state may resort to coercive diplomacy tactics including threats, intimidations, boycotts or economic sanctions making war more likely. “Although it may take some time, discovering each other’s underlying interests is worthwhile”¹³ to solve the underlying issues and contain a military conflict from spreading. The evidence shows in the two case studies that pushing coercive diplomacy to a threatening level and ignoring the local cultural norms has proven to be a failed strategy that creates a much unneeded tension, friction, and eventually leading to a prolonged military conflict.

Intentionally ignoring the concerns or flatly violating the mores of the local peoples in the two case studies, tends to set the region in a violent spiral motion and increasing the level of resentments of American hegemonic power. According to Raymond Cohen (1997), Arab diplomats tend to attach significant value to context on multiple levels. These diplomats introduce to any negotiation a strong sense of their history, language and cultural traditions which has brought the participants together. This is a crucial sense of their identity which emphasizes the contributions of all participants to the negotiation table. Additionally, Arab diplomats also operate with a sharp emphasis on principle, justice and correcting the wrongs of the past and the participants seek to achieve what is right where any other approach is seen as a serious obstacle to any tangible progress in any negotiations.

Finally, Middle East diplomats usually attach significant importance to the development of a thick interpersonal context between negotiators in which personal friendship and trust may be established and in which, above all, a concern for the personal honor and dignity of each participant may be affirmed. (Cohen, pp. 25-43). Making vast cultural concessions as a result of US coercive diplomacy, Middle Eastern diplomats find it difficult to accept and strongly resort to a push back against American hegemonic power leading to a breakdown of the negotiations and eventually war.

Table 1.1 describes the fundamental diplomatic styles found in the literature between Middle Eastern and American diplomats. In this article, I explore these different and often conflicting styles of diplomatic practices.

¹⁰ Stuart Murray. Consolidating the Gains Made in Diplomacy Studies: A Taxonomy. *International Studies Perspectives* (2008) 9, 22-39.

¹¹ Murray, p. 23.

¹² Rathbun, p. 1.

¹³ Tom Sauer, p. 2. COERCIVE DIPLOMACY BY THE EU: THE CASE OF IRAN.

These core values might conflict most of the time but, they both emphasize the need for reaching an agreement. They often may share common interests but, different mind sets regarding the role of history, justice, correcting the wrongs of the past, the level and duration of the relationships, personal versus professional interests, loyalty to the profession, or the politics they represent.

Table 1.1: General Views of Negotiation Styles in Middle Eastern and American Styles
 Middle Eastern Style American Style

Motives	*Emphasize a strong sense of history & culture *Ensure justice *Correct past mistakes	*Solve current issues *Task orientation completion *De-link past with the present
Methods	*Private communication *Soft and indirect *Multiple approaches to solving problems	*Public communication * Too direct in their use of language *Handle what is at stake *One approach to solve problems
Goals	*Establish long-term interpersonal friendship with counterparts *Establish trust with counterparts *Preserve personal honor and dignity of each participant	*Subordination of history, culture, personal honor and ongoing relationship *Relationship is temporary
Target	*Permanently solve interrelated issues *Display a personal loyalty to the political leadership	*Reach an agreement/outcome, specifically for the matter in hand *Specific unrelated tasks

As Middle Eastern diplomats focus on the past and display a high level of pride in their language, and culture, American and most Westerners focus on the task in hand from the outset. As Americans appear to be overly direct in their verbal communication and demanding gestures, Middle Easterners understand such a strategy to be offensive and even threatening even if packaged under the banner of diplomacy. On the hand, the focus on culture, history and traditions, most American diplomats interpret this excessive time and energy spent to be counterproductive and that normally leads to a breakdown of the negotiations elevating the level of coercive diplomacy to a state of violence.

It is these conflicting values inherent in the coercive diplomacy practices which heightens tensions and unintentionally and reluctantly lead to war that the parties fully well know could be difficult to contain. Increasing aggressive rhetoric by US diplomats in the two case studies is counterproductive to what Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright stated above that diplomacy “is about building and nourishing partnerships for cooperative action towards common goals” to achieve American foreign policy objectives is “...the way people work to reach peace”. In order for diplomats to successfully work together, an agreed upon understanding of cultural, linguistic and historical norms must be established by all parties.

Since the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1990, the United States emerged as the lone and unrivaled superpower in the world entering a period of unipolarity. Since then, the United States began to issue a wave of coercive threats against much weaker militarily, economically poorer, less technologically advanced, and internally divided polities, most notably in this research are Iran and Iraq. In this asymmetric dynamic, can these two much weaker states challenge US hegemony and not cave in to its demands despite an intense pressure of coercive diplomacy?

Are there motivations for these much weaker states to challenge the pressure of US coercive diplomacy tactics and how do they possibly diminish the harsh American hegemonic response if they refuse? After all, facing possible US militarized and economic punishment can deter the weaker states from challenging American power. I am arguing that these two weaker states displayed strong motivations to challenge US hegemonic military intervention as a last resort to maintain their regimes and political power. Instead, these states took a gamble mostly unsuccessful to stand up against what they saw as an unfair and intrusive US domination of their internal political affairs.

The research of the two case studies discloses that Iran and Iraq although much weaker states still have incentives to challenge the US hegemonic power especially when America is heavily preoccupied with other foreign policy obligations, most notably wars, competition with a rising China and containing Russia. “Despite the overwhelming power disparities between the United States and its myriad small targets, compelling successes did not come easily. Even when successful, the outcomes of these gambits were too often not as decisive and enduring as U.S. policymakers had hoped, as the repeated appearance of Iraq as a target of U.S.

coercion efforts illustrates. Moreover, the United States' underwhelming post-Cold War compellent track record is not unique or even usual, for compellence by the powerful against the weak has historically proven difficult." (Art and Greenhill, p. 77).

In this research, Iran and Iraq as much weaker states who found themselves disgruntled of facing US coercive diplomatic actions will most probably resort to challenging American hegemony rather than crumbling especially when Washington is preoccupied with more pressing international priorities especially war. Kim and James (p. 7) argue that comparatively weak yet highly motivated challengers may interpret a hegemon's military intervention elsewhere as a window of opportunity. The system leader's preoccupation with an ongoing conflict heightens uncertainty regarding its capacity and willingness to confront and defeat additional challengers. As a result, deterrence—ordinarily sustained by a substantial disparity in military power—becomes attenuated. All else being equal, states dissatisfied with the international status quo are more likely than others to challenge the hegemon, as they possess stronger incentives to pursue change.

Needless to say, violent conflicts divert not only US attention but also depletes much needed economic, military, political and public support. This added pressure on the US hegemonic power allows Iran and Iraq the freedom to pursue their independent policies in an effort to weaken the challenge of American coercive diplomacy. Additionally, weaker states in general and Iran and Iraq in particular can pursue alliances to shield themselves from the wrath of Washington. Since the Iran-Iraq War, the United States "has used strategic deception as a coercive tool in most of the countries in the Middle East" (Umar, et. al., p. 9). In theory, this research attempts to provide the basis to answer the question, can the use of coercive diplomacy exercised by the United States as a tool of state craft which help achieve its foreign policy objective and produce compliance vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq and avoid open war?

Iran

Historically Iran was able to successfully divert attention and pressure using an influential proverb from the famous Persian poet, Jala ad-Din Muhammad Rumi¹⁴ who eloquently stated "*Raise your speech, not your voice. It is the rain that grows flower, not the thunder.*" This is the creed of how Iran has survived and thrived over the centuries despite the international pressure it has faced. Rumi's message of patience and clear thinking devoid of frustration illustrate Iranians' profound use of soft power shielding themselves from outside pressure providing the comfort to balance themselves between global powers while maintaining their political, cultural and linguistic identity and religious practices.

One of the most critical contentious issues between Iran and the West in general and the United States in particular is Tehran's nuclear program. The nuclear program is not new. The program began in 1957 with American support under President Eisenhower launching Iran's atomic energy program known as "Atoms for Peace." The program was not at all a contentious issue between Iran and the United States. A year before the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Khomeini "At a New Year's Eve in 1978 state dinner in Tehran, President Jimmy Carter toasted the Shah as "island of stability in a turbulent corner of the world." (Dagres, p. 189). Therefore, it appears that Iran possessing nuclear technology was not an issue for Washington, however, Khomeini's Iran was.

This nuclear program collapsed after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Even then, the United States and the global powers did not strongly confront Iran's program due to what it appeared to be for peaceful purpose. Overtime, however, concerns began to emerge about potential of converting the uranium enrichment for military use. But, The Islamic Republic of Iran has maintained its insistence that its nuclear program was intended for peaceful purposes with the aim of producing civilian energy for medical research. The leadership in Tehran knows fully well that as a member and signatory of the United Nations Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NYPT) it is obligated to not develop nuclear weapons.

Iran managed to successfully circumvent the American and European pressures for decades. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US planned to invade and occupy Afghanistan and Iraq, both countries border Iran. Secretly, George W. Bush coordinated with Iran for his policies of occupying Iraq and

¹⁴Mowlānā Jalāloddin Balkhī, known in Persia as Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī and in the West as Rumi, was born on September 30, 1207, in Balkh Province, Afghanistan, on the eastern edge of the Persian Empire. Rumi descended from a long line of Islamic jurists, theologians, and mystics, including his father, who was known by followers of Rumi as "Sultan of the Scholars." When Rumi was still a young man, his father led their family more than two thousand miles west to avoid the invasion of Genghis Khan's armies. They settled in present-day Turkey, where Rumi lived and wrote most of his life. In his introduction to an English edition of *Spiritual Verses*, translator Alan Williams wrote: *Rumi is both a poet and a mystic, but he is a teacher first, trying to communicate what he knows to his audience. Like all good teachers, he trusts that ultimately, when the means to go any further fail him and his voice falls silent, his students will have learnt to understand on their own*

Afghanistan as a part of the War on Terror. Iran has successfully managed to keep the international community at arm's length in an effort to evade the watchful eyes of the United States and European powers. However, since Iran was openly accumulating significantly large stockpiles of enriched uranium sufficient to produce a nuclear weapon, Washington and Europe could no longer ignore the situation as it became more dangerous to American security and a decision to curb the program had to be made.

As the Bush Administration prepared to launch the War on Terrorism and America began to go on the offensive against potential threat to the homeland, revelations related to Iran's nuclear program could no longer be ignored by Washington. In order to curb this program, the United States, Britain, France and Germany used coercive diplomacy and stiff economic sanctions. To provide comfort and legitimacy to the negotiations, President Obama allowed Russia and China to join the negotiation process which collaborated and finally these coercive tactics reached a settlement in the 2015 called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The goal of this agreement was not only to limit Tehran's nuclear ambitions but, also to increase transparency of Iran's activities and expand the breadth of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

This agreement however was short-lived. President Obama's successor, Donald John Trump ended the nuclear deal with Iran in 2018 for being ineffective and too generous to Iran. Therefore, the United States under President Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal, and in response, a year later, Tehran began reducing its compliance with the IAEA even in the face of American coercive diplomacy. Using excessive diplomatic coercion to pressure Iran to re-negotiate a new agreement on his own terms, President Trump had called the deal "a disaster and instead initiated new sanctions on the regime to cripple its economy" (Popli, para. 9).

Iran accused the United States of double standards where one administration signs an agreement only to be nullified by the next. American coercive policy is not new but, it goes back to the Reagan Administration. There seemed to be dual policies by President Reagan, a private and public. These shifting positions happened under Reagan shifted within a two-year span. In 1984 for example, "State Department designates Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism; U.S. enforces sanctions on Iran including: restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance, a ban on defense exports and sales, limits on exports of dual-use items, and miscellaneous financial restrictions." (Degrees, p. 190).

US ally Israel was undermining American strategy in the Iraqi-Iranian War by supplying Tehran with sophisticated weapons as the Reagan White House was supporting Iraq. Only two years later in 1986, the same Reagan Administration in what was termed the Iran-Contra Affair controversy showed that the Reagan administration secretly provided weapons to Iran in exchange for the release of Americans held hostage by pro-Iranian factions in Lebanon." (Degrees, p. 190). This diplomatic coercive policy only eroded the US position and credibility in the region and stiffened Iranian resolve to continue with the nuclear program to warn off Israeli attacks.

In fact, in 2020, the leadership in Iran announced that it would no longer be constrained by the limit set by the nuclear agreement. Although secret and public negotiations were held with both the Biden and Trump's second administrations, there is no progress worth mentioning in the re-negotiations of a new nuclear agreement. Although there were five rounds of negotiations between Iran and the United States. The sixth round was scheduled for June 15, 2025. However, on June 12, Israel began Operation Rising Lion in a series of strikes against Iranian nuclear and military targets and the US joined the attack two weeks later. As the writing of this article, the war between Iran and Israel rages on and likely to spiral out of control. Despite the overwhelming American hegemonic power, Iran chose resisting this perceived threat to the survival of the regime instead of caving in to the U.S. demands.

Iraq

The US had very little interest in Iraq prior to World War II. However, since the British influence was significantly reduced as a result of the war in the region, the new American hegemonic power quickly filled the void. Since the 1940s, US policymakers emphasized their strategic goals for the Arabian Gulf including, stopping the spread of Communism, preventing any power from subjugating the region, guaranteeing access to Middle Eastern oil and defending Israel. As the tensions heightened during the Cold War in the 1950s with the Soviet Union, the US understood the importance of the Arabian Gulf and began to cultivate Middle Eastern allies to contain the power of the Soviet Union.

The US-Iraqi relations since the 1950s was precarious at best and America's "distaste for Iraq only deepened through the 1960s and 70s" (Han, para. 7) as Iraq moved into the Soviet orbit of influence. Consequently, Washington adopted coercive diplomacy to punish its leadership for behavior unacceptable to Washington, it labeled Baghdad as a pariah state that practiced or encouraged terrorism. Over the years, "Iraq has been an enemy, a friend, and a frenemy of the United States, depending on the administration in Washington" (Simon and Weinstein, para. 1). In order to contain Iraq, the United States made allies particularly with Iran (until the 1979 revolution) and Saudi Arabia in the region to balance against Iraq. Since then,

Washington had justified its readiness to resort to swift military action as the first option against Iraq, rejecting all rational calls to exercise the traditional diplomatic track.

As Iraq experienced a dramatic oil boom in the 1970s, the United States looked to the country as a lucrative market for US exports goods and adopted a policy of accommodation with regard to the Baath Party. This policy of accommodation gave rise to close strategic and military cooperation throughout the 1980s as Iraq waged war against Iran. When Iraq invaded Kuwait and seized control of its oil fields in 1990, the United States shifted to a policy of containment. (Wolfe-Hunnicut, para.1) which was considered to be coercive diplomacy backed-up by military force.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ushered in an anti-American government which was a “devastating strategic loss” (Maloney, para. 3) for Washington undermining US security and economic interest in the Arabian Gulf. After this crucial loss, the US began to warm its relations with Iraq recognizing Baghdad’s strategic importance to America at a critical period of the Cold War. Washington could not afford to have two challengers undermining its security, oil supply and trade routes in the Arabian Gulf and balance against the spread of the Iranian Revolution throughout the Middle East. “From 1975 to 1990, Iraq and the US engaged in a relationship of mutual misunderstanding structured by the Cold War” (Forsberg, para. 1) and to balance against Iran.

Shortly after Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait in August 1990, Washington under George H. W. Bush shifted its policy to a coercive move of international pressure and eventually military power. President Bush successfully pushed the United Nations to support effective economic sanctions tariff resolutions against Iraq. These sanctions with the threat of military force adopted by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council were considered to be overly aggressive to coerce Iraq to unconditionally withdraw its force out of Kuwait. It is crucially important to understand that Iraq matters greatly to Washington especially to balance against an aggressive Iran. “Some have argued that the United States should simply cut its losses and pull out of the sanction regime. But the response to this suggestion is simple: the stability of and relationship with Iraq is of major strategic importance to the United States in ensuring the stability of the Gulf, the flow of petroleum to the global economy, and limiting the risk of a major war with Iran.” (Kaltenthaler, et. al., para. 4).

In both Gulf Wars in 1990-91 and 2003, the United States under Presidents Bush 41 and Bush 43 both employed coercive diplomacy but emphasized military action as the first option instead of diplomacy. “As the US increased pressure on Iraq to compel withdrawal from Kuwait, at some stage it gave up the diplomatic option in favor of war” (Subhan, p. 574). In addressing the nation on live television on March 17, 2003, President George W. Bush stunned the world by demanding that “Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours. Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict, commenced at a time of our choosing. For their own safety, all foreign nationals – including journalists and inspectors – should leave Iraq immediately.” (White House, para. 13)

In their book *Force and Statecraft*, Gordon Craig and Alexander George clearly and accurately inferred that “the failure of coercive diplomacy was acceptable if not preferred, since it would provide an opportunity to use military force to remove Hussein from power, destroy his military forces, and end Iraq’s weapons development programs...The US deliberately set itself on a collision course with Hussein and tried to convince him that it had thrown away its steering wheel; therefore, a ‘crash’ (that is, war) could be avoided only if he got off the road” (Subhan, p. 574). The White House’s unwavering coercive diplomacy toward Iraq was grounded in the firm belief that safeguarding the stability and security of the Arabian Gulf was a vital strategic interest of the United States.

The Iraqi leadership the US believes threatens these important pillars in American foreign policy and hence, Saddam Hussein and his inner circle must be eliminated or at least contained. It is abundantly clear from the statements and policies that President George W. Bush deliberately avoided the possibility of any diplomatic resolution even after the urging of world leaders to solve the crisis diplomatically instead of unleashing his military force that “Saddam might at any moment take seemingly conciliatory actions in order to trap the allied coalition in negotiation” (Subhan, p. 574).

The focus of American foreign policy in the Middle East under George W. Bush appeared to be a personal dual with the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The White House effectively used the media to influence public opinion and prepare the American people for war. The British journalist Shyam Bhatia from the *Guardian* has quoted a western diplomat saying that: “we fall into the same trap [as Iraq] by being even more extravagant and exotic in our untruths” (Subhan, p. 575). Both the defense and foreign policy establishments in Washington focused on utilizing all of their resources to topple President Hussein though such a war will almost certainly destabilize the region and divide Iraq into competing zones based on ethnicity and religious affiliations.

Even with such horrendous and dangerous consequences, the George W. Bush Administration continued with the highest levels of coercive diplomacy. Moving toward the war path, this time, “Bush has stocked his

administration with senior officials who have for years supported the United States toppling Saddam, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, and others" (ABC News, para. 4). This dangerous escalation devoid of any diplomatic initiative revealed Washington's policy intentions vis-à-vis Iraq which amplified the hidden ethnic and religious divide leading to an increased instability, mutual suspicions and animosity that was unsubstantiated during the time of Saddam Hussain.

The United States enthusiastically avoided diplomacy and resorted to coercive measures including military options. Washington only approached the United Nations as a leverage to drum up support to topple Saddam Hussain and his government. Instead of requesting United Nations Security Council resolution for war on Iraq knowing that only Britain will support such move and Russia, China and France opposed it, the US began to seek friends and allies outside of the Security Council. In his article that appeared in the *New Statesman*, Charles Glass said: "The US, abetted by whichever countries choose to support it, has assumed the sole power to decide which UN resolutions to enforce and how to enforce them." (para. 11).

Washington displayed coercive tactics even against a neutral platform such as the UN and initially rejected Kofi Annan's mediation proposal to diffuse tension with Iraq over the role of the weapons inspectors. The American permanent representative to the UN, Bill Richardson, rejected the idea of Annan's trip to Baghdad, saying: "You can't go. You can't box us in." Threat of use of force had been obvious to Iraq. (International Herald Tribune, March 2, p. 6). It was indeed the threat of use of force that forced Baghdad to give in to US demands.

Additionally, even when the UN General Secretary Kofi Annan tried to diffuse the situation between the US and Iraq with regards to the weapons inspectors, the US used maximum coercive diplomacy as a preference to dialogue. U.S. ambassador to the UN Bill Richardson, wished Annan on his trip to Baghdad "Godspeed," and described him as "very skilled" and said he had the "full support" of President Clinton. But Richardson insisted that nothing Annan does -- short of coaxing Saddam Hussein into giving U.N. weapons inspectors "unconditional, unfettered" access to suspected weapons sites -- will defuse the crisis. "If Iraq does not comply, there are going to be some very, very serious consequences," Richardson warned. (Washington Post, para. 5).

Even after the successful passing of the UNSC resolution endorsing Annan's agreement with Baghdad, American leaders have affirmed that they will use military force against Iraq if necessary. Thus, National Security Council chairman Sandy Berger stated that "the failure to allow the inspectors to go where they want, when they want, will result in the use of serious force. After two crises provoked by Iraq in four months, the time for diplomacy will be over" (International Herald Tribune, March 2, p. 6). Unfortunately, three consecutive US administrations between 1990 and 2003, Washington used excessive coercive diplomacy, wars, economic sanctions, enforcing two no-fly zones, and domineering what should have been a neutral institution UNSCOM charged with detecting and eliminating Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

To ensure the effects of its coercive diplomacy, the US backed up its threats by maintaining a significant military presence in the Arabian Gulf, presumably to keep Iraq weak and maintain the harsh embargo against Baghdad. Between the 1970s and the eventual downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime, U.S. policy toward Iraq was marked by an enduring bellicose tone. Reports—deliberately leaked—of CIA efforts to foster an Iraqi opposition capable of toppling Saddam Hussein underscored Washington's coercive approach. Yet, over time, these strident threats of force became progressively less convincing, casting doubt on the credibility of the world's sole hegemonic power, while the Gulf region itself remained plagued by insecurity and instability amid the militarized order established by the United States (Subhan, p. 576). In March 2003, a U.S.-led force invaded Iraq with the explicit aim of toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein. The rationale for the operation was that regime change provided the only sure means of disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD). At the same time, the Bush administration argued that the construction of a stable and democratic Iraq would promote reform and, hence, security in the wider Middle East.

In an attempt to draw up public support, Bush's inner circle effectively used coercive diplomacy to increase pressure on Iraq not only to have access to Iraq's military sites but crafted an elaborate policy to prepare for war and topple the Iraqi government. Critics however charged that the White House inflated and manipulated weak and ambiguous intelligence to paint Iraq as an urgent threat and thus make an optional war seem necessary. A recent report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, found not only that the intelligence community had overestimated Iraqi chemical and biological weapons capabilities but, also that the George W. Bush administration officials "systematically misrepresented" the threat posed by Iraqi weapons. (Lopez and Cortez, p. 90).

The US and coalition forces faced an Iraqi military that been devastated by the punishing strategy of containment that the Bush administration had called a failure in order to justify war in the first place. (Lopez and Cortez, p. 91). But many analysts predicted that the economic sanction regime used as coercive diplomacy in 1990 faced considerable skepticism at first when they proved to be unsuccessful in forcing Iraq to withdraw

from Kuwait. Nor did they persuade Iraq to comply with the full range of demands in the cease-fire agreement after the first Gulf War in 1991. Yet, the US viewed the sanctions as a punitive tool in its coercive diplomacy arsenal and refused to consider any possible lifting of the sanctions even after Iraq was forced out of Kuwait and complied with UN disarmament agreement. That US position certainly contradicted Security Council Resolution 687, which stated that sanctions would be lifted once Iraq lived up to UN disarmament obligations. (Lopez and Cortez, p. 95).

Despite the overwhelming military and economic power, the US backed by the UN economic sanctions regime, coercive diplomacy failed to force Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991 or to force Saddam Hussain and his sons to flee in 2003. In both cases, coercive diplomacy failed to achieve the desired objectives short of war. Clearly, even with the threats of military force in the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussain was “undeterred, Saddam ordered Scud missiles to be launched at Israel and Saudi Arabia and, in late January, directed forward elements of his army to advance into Saudi Arabia in an attempt to jump-start his “mother of all battles.” (Haun, para. 2). The second war with Iraq that “began March 19, 2003, with an overwhelming show of American military might, described by the unforgettable phrase “shock and awe” (Carroll and Kiley, para. 2) with the ‘Coalition of the Willing’, instead of caving in to Bush’s demands, the Iraqi leadership disbanded its military and sowed chaos throughout the country by allowing in foreign fighters and resistance groups, hence, making the US occupation very costly for Washington. Although Saddam Hussein was ultimately removed from power, the United States and its coalition partners faced sustained resistance, which led to significant military casualties, a decline in troop morale, considerable financial expenditures, and growing fragmentation of public opinion.

Conclusion

As indicated in the data above, the target states of Iran and Iraq resisted US coercive diplomacy in spite of the overwhelming military and economic power Washington possesses to protect their regimes and to maintain territorial integrity. “Despite such harsh methods at the disposal of the stronger states, the success of such coercion is not guaranteed” (Umar, et. al., p. 1). US coercive tactics employed against Iran and Iraq and other places in the Middle East has not been successful. The US military involvement in the Middle East including these two case studies which had serious destructive implications for the entire region cannot be ignored. The unfolding conflict between Iran and Israel and the US may cause further friction in other areas, then the situation in the region will be dangerously unpredictable and may spread to Asia and Europe. We are already witnessing “with US-Israel coercion and later aggression rendered millions of people homeless and millions have lost their lives and livelihoods” (Umar et. al., p. 9).

Resisting such coercive American demands by weak states such as George W. Bush’s 2003 demand that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein step down from power only emboldened Iraqis to fight what they perceived as clear aggression and fought the occupiers to defend the motherland. Defying such demands, Phil Haun argues, that weak states “share an important feature: they place one’s sovereignty at risk, which states prize more than anything else. Unwilling to pay such a high price, target states prefer to take their chances on the battlefield, slim though those chances may be” (Haun, p. 38 and 41). When these two concerns are absent, coercive diplomacy succeed as weak states are able to survive and weather the wrath of American power. Once the survival of the regime is at stake, the weak states choose to fight as evident in the attempts to dislodge by force Iraq from Kuwait in 1991 and forcing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to step down and leave his country in 2003. “Despite such harsh methods at the disposal of the stronger states, the success of such coercion is not guaranteed” (Umar, et. al., p. 1).

It is therefore evident that in both cases, Iraqi leaders elected to fight rather than surrender, leading to a failure of the coercive diplomacy. On the other hand, when the survival concerns are non-existent, however, coercive diplomacy ultimately succeeds which led to the nuclear agreement with Iran. Table 2 below shows that high-level coercion has only led to war in both Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and with the Israeli attacks against Iranian nuclear program with US support in 2025. However, once the US used the low-level factors adopting negotiations an agreement was reached with Iran to curb its nuclear program in 2015.

Table 2: Levels of Coercion

High-Level Factors	Low-Level Factors
War, military exercises, contentious politics, aggressive rhetoric, assets freeze, embargo, ideological rivalry	Soften rhetoric, confidence measures, secret meetings, peace overture, reconciliation, and an agreement
Results: War	Results: Agreement/further negotiations

In the case of Iran, American coercive diplomacy by President Trump threatening a military attack, Tehran began to dig deep its heels into the sand to defend its right to possess nuclear power for civilian use at least for now. When Israel attacked Iran militarily in an effort to destroy Tehran's nuclear reactors on June 12, 2025, the US and Israeli ultimatums backfired dragging the entire Middle East region possibly to the point of no return. When the US adopted a softer coercive diplomatic position during Obama's second term, a nuclear deal in 2015 was reached only to be undermined by President Trump's first term in 2018. "As Phil Haun argues, the United States often makes insatiable demands. It wants everything, including literally the head of the head of the current regime, and as Alexander Downes shows, U.S. demands threaten the very sovereignty and survival of the regime, leaving incumbents little choice but to resist." (Art and Greenhill, p. 84). Facing a guaranteed annihilation, Weak states' undetected determination, unexpected advantages from strategic choices, and enhancement of relative military capabilities produce the belief that they can overcome power disparity.¹⁵

Iraq and Iran are particularly poignant cases, once pushed into the corner without a face-saving option, they became accustomed to rising up against a foreign aggressor. There is doubt that the United States has a considerable advantage over any challenger using coercive diplomacy. However, abusing this power may only embolden possible challengers such as China, Russia, North Korea and terrorist organizations. Hence, instead of relying heavily on its advanced military, economic and political power, it makes sense to draw on international institutions to find solutions through collaboration making war the absolute last option instead of a first choice. Negotiation after all is about dialogue and compromise and offering the other side a carrot while also showcasing the stick when necessary. Offering only threats, dehumanization and condemnation of the opponent only hardened the position of the weaker states as the two cases above showed. With an adequate investment of time in understanding the psychologies, cultures and sensitivities of the Middle East and in a long-term planning, foreign policy-makers in Washington will arrive at a clearer vision of how using coercive diplomacy can achieve the desired outcomes through negotiations instead of the barrel of the gun.

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¹⁵ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 46 (Jan. 1969)

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