Coercion, Survival, and War[1]

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Coercion is back in vogue. After decades of focusing almost exclusively on deterrence, the pendulum in coercive diplomacy literature has now swung back toward the analysis of coercion – or "compellence," as Thomas Schelling called it.[2] Whereas American scholars and policymakers during the Cold War fixated on preserving the international status quo, in the last quarter-century the question has become how to use American military might to change it. How can the United States employ the threat and limited use of military force to persuade foreign leaders to modify their behavior, give up valued possessions, or abdicate power altogether? Recent scholarly work on this question can be roughly divided into two types. One type adopts a deductive approach, using general models of conflict, bargaining, and signaling to derive testable implications about the conditions under which coercive threats can achieve their objectives.[3] A second collection of studies approaches the question inductively, utilizing in-depth case studies of specific historical episodes – usually involving the United States – to derive lessons about when coercive threats are likely to succeed and fail.[4]

Phil Haun's excellent book *Coercion, Survival, and War* nicely combines the best of both worlds. Haun takes up a question that has often been asked in the literature on coercive diplomacy: why do coercive threats from powerful states – especially the United States – rarely suc-

[1]This commentary is part of a *H-Diplo/ISSF* roundtable on Phil Haun's *Coercion, Survival, and War: Why Weak States Resist the United States* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[2]See Schelling (1960), pp. 195–99; and Schelling (1966), pp. 69–91.

[3]For example, see Fearon (1995); Davis (2000); Schultz (2001); Schaub (2004); Slantchev (2011); Sechser and Post (2015); Sechser and Fuhrmann (2013, 2017).

[4]Examples of the U.S.-centric approach include Blechman and Kaplan (1978); George and Simons (1994); Jakobsen (1998); Byman and Waxman (2001); and Art and Cronin (2003).

ceed? In recent years, a number of studies have taken up this puzzle.[5] Haun's book makes an important contribution to this literature, combining deductive theoretical logic with careful case studies to generate practical lessons about what makes U.S. coercive diplomacy effective.

Haun's argument is straightforward. He argues that the content of coercive demands is the key explanation for why U.S. coercion often fails. In his telling, two types of demands cause weak states to resist coercive attempts by great powers. First, weak states resist demands for regime change, such as George W. Bush's 2003 demand that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein step down from power (41). Second, they resist demands for homeland territory (38). Both types of demands, Haun argues, 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. Marshaling case studies of U.S. coercive attempts against Iraq (1991 and 2003), the former Yugoslavia (1992–95 and 1999), and Libya (1986, 1991–99, and 2003), Haun finds support for his central claim that coercive threats succeed when survival concerns are absent (e.g., Libya in 2003), and fails when they predominate (e.g., Iraq in 2003).

This is a refreshing argument. In the coercive diplomacy literature, one finds surprisingly little discussion of the content of coercive demands. The question of what (or how much) to demand is the first question a coercer must answer, and one that requires strategic thinking. Demand too much, and the result may be an unpalatable choice between a costly war and backing down. Demand too little, and potential gains will be left on the table. How coercers balance these competing pressures at the initial stages of coercive episodes plays a central role in explaining how these episodes end.[6] Yet theories of coercive diplomacy typically pay little heed to the nature of coercive demands, instead emphasizing factors such as power and resolve, information and signaling, and bargaining tactics as explanations for coercive outcomes.[7] Haun's book offers a much-needed

[5]Studies addressing the puzzle of why weak states resist powerful coercers include Sechser (2007, 2010); Allen and Fordham (2011); De Wijk (2014); and Chamberlain (2016).

[6]Sechser (2018a).

[7]See, for example, the concluding chapters in George and Simons, *The Limits of*

reminder that coercion depends not only on how one behaves during a confrontation, but what the confrontation is about in the first place. Some coercive demands may simply be doomed to fail.

Haun's theory is straightforward and sensible, but it is worth questioning the range of its explanatory power. *Coercion, Survival, and War* covers just seven U.S. cases across a 17-year period, but a broader look at the historical record raises questions about Haun's demand-centric model of coercive diplomacy. First, it is too pessimistic to claim that regime-change demands cannot succeed. There are many examples of leaders voluntarily abdicating in the face of coercive demands to step down. The United States successfully used coercive threats to change regimes in three Central American countries – Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Costa Rica – during the early twentieth century. The leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan abdicated in the face of Soviet threats in 1920, thereby allowing their countries to be absorbed into the Soviet Union. In 1938, German leader Adolf Hitler compelled Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg to relinquish power to his pro-Nazi Interior Minister, Arthur Seyss-Inquart. U.S. military pressure helped usher Dominican leader Ramfis Trujillo into exile in 1961, and explicit U.S. threats forced the abdication of Raoul Cédras and his military regime in Haiti in 1994. These cases are anomalous for Haun's theory, which expects weak states to "reject demands for regime change" (4). Demands for regime change do not always work, but neither do they assure coercive failure.

Indeed, some evidence suggests that demands for regime change may actually be more likely to succeed than other types of coercive demands. The Militarized Compellent Threats (MCT) dataset, a database containing information about 210 coercive episodes around the world between 1918 and 2001, reveals that demands for regime change succeed at more than twice the rate of other types of demands (83% versus 35%).[8] Forfeiting power at the point of a gun is undoubtedly risky, but the historical record suggests that leaders often choose peaceful abdication when faced with violent expulsion by an outside power. Haun is right to focus attention on the interests of target regimes, but the argument that regimes cling to power at all costs is too simplistic, and it is contradicted by too much evidence.

Coercive Diplomacy; and Art and Cronin, *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy*.

[8]See Sechser (2011, 2018b).

At the same time, these anomalies draw our attention to a fruitful puzzle for future exploration: why do regime change demands appear to succeed so often? Alexander Downes, for example, argues that abdication demands succeed when the coercer can credibly threaten to expel the leader by force, and when it can assure the leader's survival in exile.[9] Downes' argument suggests that Haun is too fatalistic about the inevitability of failure in coercive attempts to remove governments: great powers have a variety of tools at their disposal to convince opposing leaders that a quiet exile is preferable to suffering the grim fate of Adolf Hitler or Iraq's Saddam Hussein.[10]

Haun also asserts that, except on rare occasions, "states will resist demands for their homeland territory" (38). Yet looking again beyond the book's seven cases reveals that states sometimes do relinquish important territory – and even their sovereignty – in the face of coercive challenges. For example, in 1939 and 1940, the Soviet Union demanded "mutual assistance" pacts from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia that included the establishment of Soviet military bases within their territory, access to their ports and airfields, and the deployment of Soviet troops. These demands escalated throughout 1940, culminating in the installation of pro-Soviet puppet governments in the three states. All of these coercive moves were accompanied by Soviet military threats, which Haun's theory would expect to fail. Yet all three target states acquiesced at every step, ultimately paving the way for their absorption into the Soviet Union.

Even the book's own case studies do not entirely support the homeland-territory hypothesis. Just two of the cases in *Coercion, Survival, and War* center primarily around territory: the 1990–91 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the 1998–99 dispute with Serbia over Kosovo. Moreover, only in the Kosovo case was the territory in question part of the target's homeland. Yet the U.S. effort to coerce Serbia to relinquish Kosovo was successful, whereas its attempt to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait was not. In other words, the book's only case of a coercive threat over homeland territory was a success – exactly the opposite of what the theory expects. Homeland territory is obviously an extremely valuable possession, and

[9]See Downes (2016).

[10]Douglas Jehl, "Haiti Generals Regain Access To $79 Million," *New York Times*, 14 October 1994.

coercive demands for territory fail with regularity.[11] But they do not always fail, and the challenge for Haun and other scholars of coercive diplomacy is to explain what accounts for the difference.

In the case of Serbia, Haun argues convincingly that in the end, "Kosovo was of marginal concern to Serbians" (125). Yet this explanation raises broader questions about when target states will perceive their survival to be at risk. Haun argues that coercive demands fail when they pose a threat to the target state's survival, but the book is vague about the conditions under which a demand will pose such a threat. A disputed territory's location in the homeland is neither necessary for it to be seen as critical to survival, as Haun shows in the 1991 Iraq crisis; nor is it sufficient, as revealed in the Kosovo episode. Under what conditions, then, is territory – or any other issue – likely to be seen as central to a state's survival? In each case study, Haun offers convincing arguments about whether the target regime perceived a survival threat. But at times these judgments seem more *ad hoc* than deductive, and in several cases one could envision an equally convincing counterargument. Haun argues, for example, that Qaddafi believed that relinquishing his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) ambitions posed no risk to his regime's survival in 2003 (167–68). But one could also argue that states should see WMD programs as critical to their security, and therefore are unlikely to give them up without a fight. Whereas the Bush administration succeeded in coercing Libya to give up its nuclear program, for example, it failed to coerce North Korea to do the same. Perhaps North Korea saw its nuclear program as essential for survival while Libya did not, but it is not clear that the survival hypothesis can account for these divergent beliefs. Moreover, Qaddafi's inability to deter Western intervention against him in 2011 – resulting in his capture and killing by rebel forces – suggests that he badly miscalculated. In short, the book leaves the reader wanting more discussion of the meaning of state survival, and the conditions under which coercive demands do – and do not – threaten it.

For all these quibbles, however, Haun's book is a valuable contribution to the literature on coercive diplomacy in U.S. foreign policy. It pushes back against the view that issues and interests are poor explana-

[11] In the 210 coercive episodes in the MCT database, coercive demands for territory fail roughly 60% of the time.

tions for the outcomes of coercive challenges.[12] It reminds us that the outcome of a coercive episode depends critically on how it begins. Coercers must choose their demands wisely: the objectives they select in the initial stages of a crisis shape whether they will have to fight for them later on. Policymakers and scholars alike will want to take Haun's wise counsel to heart.

[12]Art and Cronin find that "there appears to be no firm relation between demand type and successful outcome" in the 16 coercive diplomacy episodes they study. Art and Cronin (2003), pp. 401. Likewise, George and Simons conclude that "success or failure has little causal relation" to the type of demand. George and Simons (1994), p. 269. See also Fearon (1994).

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