Credibility is Not Enough:  
Resolve and the Effectiveness of the Unipole’s Compellent Threats  
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Motivation

The United States commands the most powerful conventional military in the world. In fact, its margin of superiority over potential adversaries may be the greatest enjoyed by any state in modern history. This extraordinary advantage in conventional power should enable the United States to coerce target states without having to fire a single shot. Yet, over the past two decades, leaders of Iraq, Haiti, Serbia, Afghanistan and Libya have dismissed U.S. threats and invited military clashes with the world’s sole superpower. What explains the unipole’s inability to compel many of the world’s weakest targets with compellent threats?

The existence of war between the unipole and a weak state violates hegemonic stability theory, which asserts that an obvious power imbalance should deter potential challengers from submitting to a military contest with the United States. Traditional theories of interstate coercion suggest that threatening a target state with the world’s most powerful military should be very effective in changing the target’s behavior. Yet the threat of U.S. military action has been insufficient to coerce many of these weak states. Formal bargaining models of war’s outbreak suggest that uncertainty about relative resolve could explain a failed threat and subsequent war between the United States and a weak target like Serbia. These models paint an incomplete picture, however, of the process by which a weak state would willingly engage in a war with an overwhelmingly powerful but marginally motivated opponent. This phenomenon also has far-reaching
implications for policy. In the absence of war among major powers, these clashes between the United States and seemingly weak opponents are among the most pressing challenges for U.S. foreign policy and for defense planning in the post-Cold War period.

**Resolve and the Logic of Costly Signaling**

The concept of “resolve” figures heavily in many current explanations of coercive failure, but it is neither understood nor applied correctly. The second chapter of my dissertation presents a new definition of state resolve and develops an argument about the conditions under which a unipole will be able to use compellent threats most effectively. I argue that state resolve consists of three related but distinct components: the willingness to initiate military action, the willingness to suffer costs in war, and the willingness to inflict violence on the opponent. There is no reason to assume, as current theories implicitly do, that these three components are positively correlated. A target state will consider not only the unipole’s willingness to execute its threat, but also its willingness to suffer and to inflict costs in an ensuing military campaign, when deciding whether to concede to the unipole’s demands.

Game theoretic logic on costly signaling suggests that only threats that are costly to issue and to send signal that the unipole is highly motivated to defeat a target that continues to resist after the threat has been executed. Consequently, conditions and strategies that make the use of force less costly undermine the unipole’s ability to wield compellent threats effectively, because they signal that the unipole is not highly motivated to defeat a stubbornly resistant opponent. In most situations, it is not risky for a unipole to issue a compellent military threat. Consequently, the willingness to do so does not signal that the unipole is highly motivated to defeat a target state. The manner...
in which the unipole conducts its military operations, however, determines whether executing a compellent threat is a costly signal of the unipole’s motivation. Compellent threats are most effective in inducing target state compliance when executing military action imposes significant human, political, and economic costs on the unipole.

The third chapter presents a simple formal model of this logic. It evaluates the interaction between a unipole issuing a compellent threat and the weaker state that is the target of the unipole’s threat. In the first stage of the game, the target must decide whether to resist the unipole’s demands. If the target resists and is not defeated after the initial application of force, then in the second stage the unipole must decide whether to commit to a more protracted campaign to defeat the target. The model’s results are consistent with the argument that a target will resist a unipole’s threats when it doubts the unipole’s commitment to defeat it in a second, decisive round of fighting.

**The United States and Compellent Threats**

The fourth chapter demonstrates that the end of bipolarity and changes in the U.S. war-fighting model have rendered the use of force a low-cost undertaking for the United States. The demise of the Soviet Union freed the United States to threaten military action in most regions without risk. Consequently, the willingness to issue a military threat is not a costly signal that the United States is highly motivated to prevail over a resistant opponent. The United States has also developed a war-fighting model that limits the human, political, and economic costs of executing military action. By eliminating conscription and relying increasingly on private military contractors; adopting many elements of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) thesis and emphasizing high-technology, low footprint operations; and relying on deficit spending and allies’
contributions to fund military operations, the United States has lowered its costs for employing military force. Furthermore, norms have evolved such that inflicting violence on target states is so politically costly that the U.S. military now goes to great lengths to minimize collateral damage imposed on target state civilians.

In combination, these trends have dramatically lowered the United States’ costs for employing force. Efforts to minimize the costs of military action make it easy for the United States to execute its compellent threats and thereby render the United States’ compellent threats highly credible to target states. Paradoxically, these same efforts undermine the effectiveness of U.S. compellent threats because they render the threat of military action an uninformative signal of the United States’ motivation to defeat its opponent. In other words, a target may believe that the United States will execute its compellent threat because it is easy for the United States to do so. This target will choose to resist a credible U.S. threat, however, because it infers that the United States is unwilling to suffer and to kill in a protracted campaign with a stubbornly resistant opponent.

Data

The fifth chapter evaluates a new dataset on the United States’ use of compellent threats in crises from 1945-2007. The dataset examines every international crisis for which the International Crisis Behavior Project (http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/) identified the United States as a crisis actor. For each of these crises, the dataset identifies whether the United States issued a compellent threat against the target state. In cases in which a threat was issued, it also identifies the type of threat, the target’s response to the threat, and the target’s reaction to the threat’s execution. Logit regression
confirms that the United States has issued compellent threats more frequently since 1990 than it did during the Cold War. The data are also consistent with the argument that the United States has employed compellent threats less effectively in the post-Cold war period, when the cost-minimizing trends described above took hold in the American war-fighting model. The final substantive chapter will present several short studies of cases in which the United States issued compellent threats. These cases will evaluate the mechanisms through which the United States has rendered its threats low-cost signals of motivation.

**Summary:**

Why do weak targets resist compellent threats issued by the world’s sole superpower? I argue that the use of force is not very costly for the United States in the post-Cold War period. Consequently, U.S. compellent threats fail against weak targets because they do not signal that the United States is highly motivated to defeat stubbornly resistant opponents. I evaluate the post-Cold War U.S. military model to demonstrate that the United States has actively minimized the human, political, and economic costs of employing military force. Results from a new dataset on compellent threats are consistent with the argument that the United States has employed compellent threats more frequently and less effectively in the post-Cold War period. Finally, the sixth chapter will evaluate cases in which the United States issued compellent threats to examine how the United States’ cost-minimizing strategies have undermined its ability to coerce weak targets.