Defeating US Coercion

Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman

The bombing of Serbia that began on 24 March 1999 typifies the logic that underlies the use of force by the United States and its NATO allies. Their air strikes and cruise-missile attacks were designed not to defeat the Serbian government, but to coerce Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to accept a political settlement. Instead of having to destroy his forces completely or to remove his government from power, it was hoped that the limited application of military force would convince Milosevic to change his mind and embrace peace. The Kosovo crisis, of course, is only the latest example of this tendency to coerce rather than demolish foes.

Successful coercion – the use of threatened force to modify an adversary’s behaviour – should be simple for the US which, since the demise of the Soviet Union, has found itself without rivals in military might, political influence or economic strength. Because of these overwhelming advantages, the US can threaten any conceivable adversary in a variety of ways, with little danger of a major defeat. Yet coercion remains difficult. Despite the lopsided US edge in raw power, regional foes regularly defy threats and ultimatums: against Somali militants, Serb nationalists, the Iraqi dictator and other adversaries, the US record of coercion has at best been mixed. Even when threats are carried out, adversary resistance often actually increases rather than decreases. Why do the United States and its allies so often find themselves unable to force lesser adversaries to change behaviour?

The uneven record is partially explained by the common axioms of coercive diplomacy. Coercion generally requires a credible threat of ‘pain’ beyond the benefits which an adversary may anticipate through resistance. The authors who first explored the nature of coercion and articulated this formulation, however, did not anticipate a world in which the US would impose constraints on its own use of force and therefore on the level of pain that it can realistically deliver. Adversaries can capitalise on such constraints and win a coercive contest despite being militarily, politically and economically inferior.

The present situation stems from the new strategic reality faced by the United States and its allies. Most obviously, the threat of nuclear annihilation no longer colours coercive crises: local conflicts in Angola, Somalia or other

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developing nations are not viewed through the lens of nuclear superpower competition. The stakes also differ considerably from the Cold War era. The Soviets often challenged the US in the developing world in order to expand their influence or to probe US credibility. For more recent adversaries, however, the coercive contest is often a question of their own survival: Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, Mohammad Farah Aideed and others might lose power, and even their lives, if they make the wrong move in response to US pressure. The United States and its allies, in contrast, often get involved for humanitarian reasons or to preserve alliance credibility: hardly concerns that immediately threaten the foundations of Western democracy.

But whether a reactive, adaptive foe will yield does not depend solely on the levels of threat or motivation present at the time US demands are issued. It also depends on the self-imposed limits the United States places on the use of force. Coercion is a dynamic process of move and counter-move, and adversaries shape their strategy to exploit US weaknesses. Thus, understanding the success or failure of US coercive diplomacy requires understanding how adversaries can manipulate key features of US-style coercion to reduce the costs inflicted or to convince the United States to abandon its effort.

**US-style coercion: a weak form of pressure**

Five factors can be identified in what might be termed ‘US-style’ coercion:

- a preference for multilateralism;
- an intolerance for US casualties;
- an aversion to enemy civilian suffering;
- a reliance on high-technology options; and
- a commitment to international norms.

All five factors, of course, represent generalisations: none is present in every instance of coercive diplomacy undertaken by the United States in the 1990s. Nevertheless, together, they undermine US credibility and place severe limits on America’s ability to threaten its enemies.

With few exceptions, all US coercive military operations since the end of the Cold War have been prosecuted under the auspices of the UN or NATO, or of _ad hoc_ collections of allies or partners. The preference for multilateralism stems from many factors. Sometimes coalition partners provide the bulk of ground troops. Allies also contribute the ground base and overflight privileges which effective military operations depend upon. In such cases, coalition unity becomes a central interest to planners and decision-makers. In other instances, the value of multilateralism is largely political: international cooperation infuses military action with legitimacy in the eyes of domestic and international audiences. While the United States often asserts its right and willingness to act unilaterally when threats demand it or when wider participation conflicts with domestic political or operational priorities, lone coercive operations remain the exception rather than the rule.
The United States’ use of military force is also dictated by decision makers’ sensitivity to casualties among US servicemen. Until the 1991 Gulf War, commentators often cast this sensitivity as the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’. Contrary to the predictions of those who regarded Operation Desert Storm as a final overcoming of the Vietnam experience, the relatively low American death total merely raised public expectations of ‘bloodless’ foreign policy. The erosion of public support following the October 1993 deaths of 18 US servicemen in Mogadishu, and the enormous attention surrounding the June 1995 shoot-down of an American airman over Bosnia, demonstrate the strong influence that even low casualty levels can exert on US policy. The extended deployment of US personnel to enforce the Dayton Peace Accords in the former Yugoslavia only confirmed this tendency. Unlike those of other NATO partners, US troops patrolled in convoys and avoided actions likely to provoke hostile responses from local factions. Although a number of empirical studies have shown that the effects of US casualties depends heavily on a number of other variables, public sensitivity affects policy decision ex ante, when planners’ concern for potentially adverse reactions weighs heavily.

Extreme sensitivity to casualties and suffering among the enemy civilian population similarly shapes the application of US force. Despite the vast devastation that resulted from the US bombing in Vietnam, for example, concerns that harm to civilians would undermine support at home and abroad severely constrained US target choices. More recently, coalition air-campaign planning during the Gulf War and subsequent strikes on Iraq placed a premium on avoiding collateral damage in Baghdad and other population centres, especially as regional partners voiced concerns about possible civilian casualties produced by US policy. The pervasiveness of global mass-media magnifies potential reaction to civilian tragedies resulting from the use of force; just as a single incident like the February 1994 Sarajevo market-place shelling galvanised support for more aggressive NATO actions, similar events resulting from US military intervention threaten to have immense strategic consequences. Public statements by administration officials, the devotion of resources to develop ‘non-lethal’ weapon technologies, and self-imposed restraints including restrictive rules of engagement during military operations all testify to an increasingly heightened sensitivity among decision-makers.

These factors – coalition maintenance and casualty intolerance (both American and adversary civilian) – vary with the level of US interests at stake. The preference for multilateralism reflects such variation, insofar as threats to peripheral US interests will often not weigh as heavily in planning calculations as threats to diplomatic relations with key regional or global partners. Public support has also proved more robust when vital interests are implicated. Nevertheless, these factors regularly shape the US use of force.

In part because of casualty sensitivity, US foreign policy also exhibits a tendency to choose coercive instruments that do not require putting US personnel in harm’s way. A long-standing tenet of the American ‘way of war’ has been a reliance on matériel over manpower, high-technology over low-tech
force. The heavy reliance on the vast US technological superiority, with modern cruise missiles and precision-guidance systems, has contributed to what Eliot Cohen has dubbed ‘The Mystique of US Air Power’. Such high-technology instruments provide the necessary target discrimination to satisfy the public’s demand for minimising civilian suffering, and do not place significant numbers of US personnel in danger. Cruise-missile attacks, which promise extreme accuracy, have increasingly become the option of first resort when coercive force is deemed necessary. The use of cruise missiles to attack suspected terrorist targets in Afghanistan during August 1998, and the subsequent threatened use against Iraqi forces in November, reflected this tendency, employed at the expense of predictably degraded strategic effectiveness.

Related to the aversion to civilian casualties is a traditional commitment to international legal norms, particularly the principles of proportionality and discrimination between civilian and military targets. Again, this commitment partly stems from the demands of ensuring perceived legitimacy among audiences at home and abroad. Because most US military adventures are justified rhetorically in terms of the sanctity of international principles, policymakers are careful to ensure that their actions comply as much as possible with international legal obligations. Such concerns often manifest themselves in carefully tailored and often highly restrictive rules of engagement. Certainly, Washington moulds interpretations of legal obligations to serve its agenda when the stakes are high. But, where possible, operations are tailored to conform to internationally recognised constraints.

As a consequence of these five characteristics, the United States often finds itself unable to inflict pain anywhere near commensurate with its military power. Equally important, these characteristics are ripe for an adversary to exploit, allowing it to force an end to a US coercion campaign.

**Counter-coercive strategies**

Adversaries have had ample opportunity to study patterns of US behaviour, and the lessons of previous crises are not lost on adversary leaderships. The most important use of this information is deciding whether, in the first place, to challenge the coercive threats. If the anticipated price is too high, an adversary may decide not to cause an affront at all. Saddam may have wanted to invade Kuwait when he built up troops along the border in 1994, but he recognised that the US response would be devastating, and he therefore desisted.

The relative predictability of US-style coercive diplomacy, however, and its susceptibility to adversary countermeasures, emboldens some adversaries to ignore US ultimatums, believing that they can endure the projected pain. Casualty intolerance, concern over allied relations and the other factors discussed earlier lead adversaries to conclude that the US lacks the will to carry out threats. Leaders from Slobodan Milosevic to Saddam Hussein have evoked the image of Vietnam to suggest that they can outlast the United States. Similarly, hostile local resistance to US naval forces attempting to transport
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troops to Haiti in late 1993 was widely attributed to the rapid withdrawal from Somalia earlier that year following the deaths of American servicemen.10

Aside from the possible debilitating effects on credibility, the key tenets of US-style coercion also give rise to a broad set of countermoves routinely employed by adversaries to neutralise coercive strategies. These methods can be grouped roughly into three categories – civilian suffering-based strategies, coalition-fracturing strategies, and American or allied casualty-generating strategies. There are no clear distinguishing lines between these strategies; many counter-coercive strategies play simultaneously on several features of American-style coercion. When such countermoves are effective, coercion is likely to fail because the US will impose insufficient costs on an adversary, an adversary’s pressure will force the US to end its campaign prematurely, or both.

Civilian suffering-based strategies
Perhaps the most common counter-coercive strategy is to exploit US sensitivity to civilian casualties and suffering, a sensitivity which often generates severe restraints on the use of force. Once force is employed, adversaries frequently capitalise on the inevitable tragic consequences befalling their civilian populations in order to erode support for continued or escalating coercive operations among the American and international public. Such strategies are a natural device for adversaries who cannot hope to compete militarily with US strength – indeed, the potential effectiveness of these strategies is probably enhanced by the fact that the adversary is far weaker and can present an image of themselves as victim.

During the 1965–68 Rolling Thunder campaign, the North Vietnamese government frequently used damage caused by US air strikes as propaganda, often with great success in undercutting US coercive pressure. North Vietnamese authorities repeatedly asserted that US air attacks were directed at Red River Valley dikes, with devastating effects on the local civilian population, thus playing on US decision-makers’ fears that such allegations would destroy public and foreign support. Concern over this issue caused President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration to emphasise that these dikes were off limits for campaign planners. These targeting restrictions gave the North Vietnamese freedom to place anti-aircraft and other military assets at the sites, countering operationally the air campaign.11

US concern for civilian casualties and a strong desire to uphold humanitarian norms, including the principle of combatant/non-combatant discrimination, provide an incentive for adversaries to utilise ‘human shields’ to deter US strikes. During the Gulf War the Iraqi government intentionally placed military assets in civilian-populated areas in an effort to immunise those assets from attack. Somali leader Aideed deliberately mixed his militia forces with civilians, making it almost impossible for UN personnel to target them without risking civilian bloodshed. Although Aideed’s methods differed from those of Saddam, he relied on the same premise – that civilian casualty
sensitivity would deter escalation by UN forces and, failing that, would undermine support for continued military operations. At the very least, such tactics make US planners more reluctant to conduct coercive strikes.

Civilian suffering-based counter-strategies are effective not only because of the sensitivity among US decision-makers but also because several features common to adversary regimes facilitate such tactics. Autocratic, dictatorial regimes are generally not dependent on popular support and have less to fear from allowing civilians to suffer than would a leader in a democracy. Saddam for many years rejected the UN’s ‘oil for food’ deal, even though it would have reduced privations among the Iraqi people, because he regarded popular suffering as a tool for ending Iraq’s international isolation. Moreover, the tight control of media maintained by dictatorial regimes and their well-oiled internal propaganda machines allow such leaderships to propagate deceitful accounts of incidents. While manipulating the content of information flowing to its own population, these regimes can then influence the timing and, indirectly, the substance of information disseminated abroad by selectively permitting journalistic inspection. Sudan, for years having virtually blacked itself out in the international media, welcomed television crews with open arms when the August 1998 cruise-missile strike destroyed a pharmaceutical facility in Khartoum. Saddam similarly permits interviews with suffering Iraqi people, but he is careful to ensure that they place the blame entirely on the international community.

US sensitivity invites adversary practices designed to put at risk the very civilians the United States seeks to protect. The typical US response then rewards such practices by placing further constraints on its own threats of force. For instance, the United States often responds to charges that it attacked civilian targets, even if largely the result of the adversary’s own efforts to collocate civilian and military assets or persons, by restricting its own rules of engagement or by placing additional limits on targeting. The Johnson administration’s public disavowal of any intention to strike Red River Valley dikes ratified the immunity North Vietnamese officials desired for military assets placed near the dikes, and vindicated the target commingling-plus-propaganda strategy. Similarly, after the North Vietnamese accused the US of blatantly attacking civilian areas, causing massive suffering during December 1966 air strikes against railway targets near Hanoi, Washington responded by prohibiting attacks on all targets within ten nautical miles of Hanoi without specific presidential approval.

An identical pattern of encouraging, then rewarding, civilian suffering-based strategies occurred during the Gulf War. The Iraqi leadership placed civilians in the Al Firdos bunker, believed by US intelligence to be a command-and-control facility. On the night of 13 February 1991, US F-117 strikes destroyed the bunker, killing dozens of civilians, a tragedy that the Iraqis attempted to exploit in the media. The incident ultimately turned out to have little impact on American public support. However, the US political leadership took no further chances: President George Bush’s administration (which
had previously been committed to avoiding the micro-management of target
selection that plagued the Johnson administration’s efforts in Vietnam) thereafter required that Baghdad targets be cleared beforehand with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹⁵

Events in Somalia during January 1994, at a time when the United States was carefully taking steps to reduce its involvement in that country, also reveals the extent to which media scrutiny and the need to ensure legitimacy and support can generate pressure for further restricting military operations when adversaries exploit civilian injury. On 9 January, Marine snipers, pursuant to their rules of engagement that allowed them to fire without provocation on individuals armed with crew-served weapons, apparently shot and killed a gunman. Somalis later appeared at a US checkpoint claiming that a pregnant woman was killed by US snipers. The incident was widely publicised despite lack of corroborating evidence, and three days later the rules of engagement were modified to eliminate crew-served weapons as fair targets. Within days such weapons pervaded the Mogadishu streets.¹⁶

These incidents reveal that US decision-makers respond to adversary counter-strategies almost as predictably as the tendencies that give rise to civilian suffering-based strategies. Even when domestic and international support for further US coercive strikes does not erode, the United States imposes a range of restrictions on its activities, thus limiting the coercive pressure it can bring to bear.

Coalition-fracturing strategies
Because the US exhibits a strong desire to conduct coercive operations multilaterally, coalition unity itself becomes a vulnerable centre of gravity that adversaries frequently attempt to exploit. As with sensitivity to civilian suffering, the strong US desire to maintain coalition support exerts tremendous pressures on coercive strategy planning. Because each coalition member brings its own set of interests, the need to maintain cohesion often places downward pressure on the level of practicable force available for coercive threats. The greatest impact of coalition dynamics on coercive operations therefore often goes unseen – it affects what the United States does not do militarily. Once coercive operations are under way though, adversaries often take a number of active steps to destabilise coalition maintenance. Saddam Hussein attempted to widen coalition splits at several key junctures in the Gulf War and subsequent crises. Prior to the coalition ground assault, his negotiations with the Soviet Union not only nearly averted the war but also caused some allies to question the need for military action. Iraq similarly tried to dislodge Arab support for coalition operations by linking resolution of the Kuwaiti crisis to the Arab–Israeli dispute, thereby attempting to drive a wedge between the Arab states and the US–Israeli axis.

Aside from such techniques, adversaries often direct their military operations so as to undermine support among key coalition members. Even adversary military actions that have little effect from a purely military
standpoint can have potentially enormous strategic consequences. Iraqi Scud attacks against Israel probably reflected Saddam’s calculations that drawing Israel into the conflict would have destroyed coalition unity. While unsuccessful in that respect, the attacks did nevertheless cause the US to divert air sorties away from more militarily effective efforts to hunting Scuds. Even low-level violence by Aideed’s faction in Somalia following air assaults on his compounds caused a major crisis within the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM II); small-scale attacks on UN personnel fed intense Italian opposition to what Rome viewed as an escalating conflict, creating dissension within the UN coalition.

As with civilian suffering-based strategies, the United States often reacts to coalition-fracturing strategies in a manner that creates damaging, reinforcing effects. Coalition dissent often leads the US to restrict the further use of force in order to repair diplomatic rifts. These restrictions reward the adversary’s coalition-splitting efforts and further encourage such ploys.

In January 1993, the United States shot down several Iraqi aircraft, and launched air strikes against military targets in response to Iraqi incursions and deployment of anti-aircraft missiles in protected zones. The resulting opposition among coalition partners to US military action gave rise to speculation that Saddam had deliberately incited US reprisals to win Arab support for the lifting of sanctions. Turkey, which provided key air bases supporting no-fly-zone enforcement, worried that an extended conflict could contribute to its own crisis involving separatist Kurds. Russia, under pressure from nationalist hardliners eager to re-establish economic ties with Iraq, criticised US air strikes as inconsistent with international law and unauthorised by the UN Security Council. Arab states, fearing public backlash in response to US military action against a regional power, urged Washington to call off further strikes. Vocal criticism from such former Gulf War partners may have emboldened Saddam Hussein to test the coalition’s resolve in the future and convinced him that provocation might be an effective strategy for breaking international efforts. Meanwhile, US planners were forced to acknowledge that coalition dissent necessitated limits on potential escalatory options. Even though the coalition has held together (relations have, however, continued to grow increasingly strained), the US response undermined its own coercive leverage by acknowledging its intention to trade potency of follow-on strikes for coalition support.

Coalition-breaking efforts have not induced a total collapse of allied support. But they have proved effective in reducing the level or type of force the coalition employs or threatens. Subsequent responses to Iraqi provocations, until Operation Desert Fox in 1998, were cautious with regard to the use of force.

**Casualty-generating strategies**

General Ho Chi Minh is often quoted as claiming that his Vietnamese forces would suffer ten times as many losses as those of the US, but that he would still
win in the long run. The underlying assumption was that the United States lacked the motivation to sustain casualties. Saddam Hussein similarly postulated that the US would be unable to stomach the losses he could inflict in a Gulf ground war. According to one account:

Saddam strongly believed that the United States’s Achilles’ heel was its extreme sensitivity to casualties, and he was determined to exploit this weakness to the full. As he told the American Ambassador to Baghdad, April Glaspie, shortly before the invasion of Kuwait: ‘Yours is a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle’.20

In retrospect, Saddam probably underestimated US resolve – American planners prepared for casualties upwards of 10,000 in the lead-up to Desert Storm – although the coalition rout made the point moot. But clearly the US concern for American casualties remains, especially in the eyes of adversaries, perhaps the weak point in its otherwise overpowering military capability.

When the US is protecting peripheral interests against a highly motivated adversary, direct attacks on US personnel have historically eroded American public support, especially when a clear and quick US victory seemed unattainable. The 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing, resulting in 241 deaths, catalysed the US decision to ‘redeploy’ its forces to the sea. A decade later, the deaths of 18 American soldiers in Somalia, this time covered grue-somely on television, solidified a decision to withdraw forces.

Because of the US penchant for utilising high-tech, low personnel-danger instruments, options for directly attacking US forces are often limited. In such cases, adversaries are likely to exploit the United States’ extreme concern with actions that place non-combat, American or allied personnel at risk. The Bosnian Serbs made frequent use of lightly armed UN peacekeepers or aid workers as hostages to stave off NATO air strikes during the Yugoslav crisis. Their ability to counter-coerce the Western powers became readily apparent in April 1993 when NATO began enforcing the ‘no-fly zone’. Although the Serbs issued no specific threats, fear of reprisals prompted the UN to suspend aid flights the day before the first NATO air patrols.21 On a number of occasions the Serbs responded to NATO air strikes against military installations by detaining peacekeeping personnel on the ground. In all these cases, the Serbs threatened the weakest points of the allied effort – the vulnerability of humanitarian assistance and ground personnel – successfully to up the ante and deter immediate follow-up strikes. Even without matching the Western powers militarily, the Serbs were able to manipulate the allies’ cost–benefit equation with relative ease.

Although taking hostages has proved to be an effective deterrent to US and allied strikes, adversaries themselves are quite unlikely to execute (as opposed to injure or kill in combat) US or allied personnel for fear of backlash, thereby negating potentially effective counter-coercive strategies. Adversaries considering such a strategy face something of a paradox: threatening US or allied personnel may cause coalition planners to rethink military action, but
carrying out such threats may prompt the reverse. Images of UN peacekeepers chained to Serb military vehicles in the face of NATO threats in summer 1995, while effective as a deterrent to strikes, also further demonised the Serbs in Western eyes. Any deaths that might have resulted would likely have generated intense calls for aggressive retribution by NATO, just as the deaths of US servicemen in Somalia and Lebanon provoked demands for revenge. Indeed, in these latter cases the United States swiftly overcame its aversion to inflicting casualties on civilian populations when its servicemen were threatened: the fire-fight that killed 18 US soldiers in Mogadishu also killed perhaps 1,000 Somalis, and the US responded to terrorist attacks in Lebanon by shelling Shi’a villages.

But often the threat alone to American and allied personnel is sufficient to obtain positive strategic results. The practice of detaining personnel friendly to the United States also has potentially deleterious effects on coalition unity, especially if there is a severely uneven distribution of risk among coalition partners. The US often pushed for air strikes against Bosnian Serb forces, for example, when it was the British and French, with forces on the ground, who would have borne the brunt of reprisals. Like civilian suffering-based strategies, measures that put American or allied personnel at risk often complement efforts to fracture coalitions by fuelling resentment among certain members. These techniques represent a sampling of operational measures employed by adversaries to capitalise on US sensitivities. However, adversaries also take advantage of the US aversion to casualties during diplomatic bargaining that accompanies coercive threats.

American and NATO officials widely hailed the use of threatened air strikes during the pre-Rambouillet 1998–99 Kosovo crisis as a success. Yugoslav President Milosevic accepted allied demands to pull back his military forces and permitted an unarmed international contingent on the ground to monitor compliance. These results obscure, however, what the debate behind the potential use of force – particularly the reluctance by the US to advocate operations that would put its troops at risk – portends for future coercive strategies and how adversaries may counter them. As NATO threatened air strikes, Clinton administration officials failed to reach consensus on what types of military forces the US would commit. Secretary of Defense William Cohen openly expressed his recommendation that the United States not send in ground troops as part of a peacekeeping force. This reluctance, at the same time as the United States appeared enthusiastic about air attacks, corroborates recent evidence from the Iraqi weapons-inspection crises and the US attacks on suspected terrorist sites that the United States will employ only low-risk, high-tech instruments unless vital interests are at stake.

Such a policy gives an opponent a strong hand in the escalation game. The fact that the US usually does not see sufficient interests at stake to go beyond air attacks allows adversaries to offer half-measures as concessions – offers that they reasonably expect the US to accept, given the reluctance to contemplate further military operations.
Counter-counter-coercion: implications for US foreign policy

Against the most likely range of potential adversaries, the United States will continue to have the capacity to bring massive fire-power to bear, and to do so without the realistic threat of retaliation in kind. However, the potential magnitude of force is but one small component of successful coercion. To take full advantage of its capabilities, the United States must recognise that its self-imposed limits often stymie coercion and provide opportunities for adversaries. Such a recognition requires first an understanding of coercion as a dynamic process. The United States often finds itself caught in increasingly problematic feedback cycles: adversary responses that cause rifts in coalitions may prompt the United States to alter its approach to repair the rupture, in turn emboldening the adversary to direct further efforts at coalition-splitting. Adversary efforts to exploit collateral damage (both real and fabricated) resulting from US attacks may prompt the United States to restrict its own future efforts, both undermining the potency of its follow-on threats and encouraging further exploitation of suffering. An analysis of whether the United States threatens sufficiently to affect adversary decision-making must focus not on the level of threat available at the outset of a crisis but on the likely level of threat available after various adversary counter-moves.

Historically, the US has responded to adversary counter-strategies with technological solutions, both to minimise its own casualties and to counter accusations that it did not care about adversary civilian suffering. One answer to North Vietnam’s attempt to exploit collateral damage was to introduce more advanced precision-guided munitions against targets likely to become the subject of propaganda efforts. When striking terrorist camps in Afghanistan in 1998, Washington used cruise missiles even though a manned-flight bombing mission could have inflicted greater damage, in part because manned flights posed a risk to US personnel.

Technological advances, particularly in precision targeting and intelligence capabilities, are immensely useful for improving the potency of military threats and narrowing an adversary’s counter-options. But viewed as the solution to the counter-coercive strategies described above, technological dependence can magnify the very problems it promises to alleviate. An over-emphasis on technology can unreasonably raise expectations about the tragic but inevitable destructive impact of military force. Like the policy preference for air strikes or cruise-missile attacks, exclusive emphasis on technological solutions diverts attention from difficult but necessary choices.

That counter-coercive strategies stem from, and then are often fed by, the key features of American-style coercion suggests two ways to enhance the effectiveness of future operations. The most obvious would be to eliminate the constraints themselves, to find ways to mitigate casualty sensitivity, multilateralism and so on. But these constraints do not simply reflect policy choices. Rather, they reflect deeply entrenched moral and cultural norms that have long guided American foreign policy. In addition, these constraints reflect the relatively low level of US interests often at stake – another factor that is not
likely to change. US leaders can spell out interests, operate more unilaterally, and otherwise try to minimise these limits, but eliminating them – or even reducing them substantially – may prove impossible.

A second, more fruitful approach is to mitigate the destructive cyclical effects that adversary counter-strategies themselves often create. Political strategies should aim to build stronger domestic and international backing for coercive operations. Because of the dynamic nature of coercive contests, public support, adversary resolve and levels of available force will vary as crises unfold, due to the moves and counter-moves of each side. As a result, successful propagation of coercive strategies will require building sufficiently high and robust domestic and international backing so that sudden drops in support do not induce US policy-makers to respond with the very restrictions on coercive strikes that the adversaries seek.

Political strategies accompanying coercive operations must express publicly more realistic expectations of casualties. The United States is right, for both moral and military-efficiency reasons, to conduct operations with care in order to avoid harm to civilian populations. But this objective is best served by acknowledging that military operations carry with them an inherent propensity for undesired or unintended deaths. If policy-makers are unwilling to accept that risk, they should question the use of force at all, rather than constraining operations in ways that not only erode effectiveness but encourage and reward adversary counter-strategies designed to produce the very suffering policymakers sought to avoid. Likewise, if the US and its allies decide to intervene, they should do so with the recognition that their own soldiers may die: if this is not acceptable, then the West should stay home.

US interests are often better served by refraining from military action than from utilising it in unworkable restrictions. Policy-makers often view limited air strikes, including cruise-missile attacks, as a compromise solution, satisfying demands for military action while avoiding the need to put US personnel in danger. This type of thinking makes sense politically, but from a strategic point of view it both undermines coercive strategies in a given crisis and decreases US credibility in the long term, thereby inviting future challenges.

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Notes

1 This description draws heavily on broader theoretical works on coercion, including Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), and Alexander George and William Simons (eds), The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy, 2nd edn (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).


3 For such conclusions and evidence drawn from other studies, see Eric V. Larson, Casualties and Consensus (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996).


14 Daniel Byman, Matthew Waxman and Eric Larson, Assessing the Effectiveness of Air Power as a Coercive Instrument (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, forthcoming 1999). US public opinion is often unpredictable, and the aversion to civilian suffering under certain circumstances may by overestimated. Importantly, however, the US political leadership tends to expect negative public reactions to civilian suffering and behaves risk-aversely.


17 Mark Fineman, ‘Hussein’s Moves Seen as Steps in Calculated Plan’, Los Angeles Times, 17 January 1993, p. A1. In one example of coalition resistance to US strikes, a former Egyptian Ambassador to the US urged ‘a pause from the policy of military escalation against Iraq in order to stop the rapid erosion of favourable Arab public opinion which was the base of support for allied action against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf
22 The use of terrorism by adversaries remains a possible exception.
23 Precision can even have negative consequences for casualty-sensitive nations. By vastly reducing the number of misses, the United States is open to greater criticism when mistakes happen: it is more difficult to explain to an outraged foreign public an errant cruise missile explosion than a ‘dumb bomb’ one, since misses with the latter instrument are expected.