National Security Strategy: The Diplomacy of Strategic Coercion

Professor Branislav L. Slantchev

January 1, 2014

Overview We examine the basic ideas of using force or of threats of using force in international relations. We begin with an overview of war as an instrument of policy since the 17th century. We then learn what we mean by **strategic coercion** and identify some basic forms of it, along with the issues we shall be studying in this course. We shall see that national security is ultimately a question of bargaining in the shadow of power, and hence of strategic choice. As Carl von Clausewitz remarked, "in strategy everything is simple, but that does not mean that everything is easy." We shall have many opportunities to see that this is indeed true.

---

1 War As Instrument of Policy

Each new advance in the art of war leads to predictions either about the end of civilization, or about the end of war itself. There's endless speculation about the future utility of military means in pursuit of foreign policy goals. Here, we will see that the violent use of force is "alive and well" and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. The reason is that military power is "the greatest persuader in international politics," or, as Cardinal Richelieu aptly put it, it is the *ultima ratio*, the final argument, in international disputes. The basic logic of force remains the same, unchanged and unchallenged despite the radical differences between civilizations in history. This is not to say, of course, that new developments do not present us with complications that necessitate changes in grand strategic doctrine. But as we shall see, the logic remains the same even when its implementation may become exceedingly complicated.

We are interested in the role of force in the pursuit of various national objectives — political, economic, social, cultural, ethnic and religious. War's most important characteristic is its **instrumental nature**. What does that mean? It means that war has no value in itself apart from the goals pursued through it. Mindless bloodshed and wanton destruction in a spasm of orgiastic hatred is not what war (at least theoretically) is all about.

Strategy deals with the theory and practice of the use of force, or the threat to use force, for political purposes; it is a bridge connecting military means with political ends. "War is conduct of politics by other means," said Carl von Clausewitz 150 years ago. This Prussian became famous for insisting that not only is war an instrument of policy, but political consideration permeate everything about the use of force: how much to use, how to use it, where, and when, and, most importantly, when to give up and settle.

Clausewitz and theorists who followed him have profoundly changed the way we think about war. Their ideas have thoroughly permeated the thinking of modern militaries, and professional armies today across nations have much more in common in their outlook and organization with each other than with their own ancestors. The people whose theories we shall briefly go over today are the same ones that are studied diligently by officers. Even if the execution of the ideas is often wanting, their influence is still important and should not be ignored.

In the chapter by Daniel Moran, you will have the opportunity to read about the development of abstract thinking about war intended to help grasp its "essence" through drastic simplification of reality. From very early on people have tried to apply scientific approaches to the study of war in order to discipline their thinking. These early efforts were generally quite futile, but they did provide a handful of enduring operational insights (e.g. combined arms warfare, which is the basis of current doctrine).

Most famous people like Jomini (land war), Mahan (sea power), and Douhet (air

power) were engaged almost exclusively in a worthy exercise which is going to be of peripheral interest to us. They wanted to derive "principles of war" that would enable any nation scrupulously observing them to be victorious in war. These principles are very common-sense and many of you will probably derive them in an instant. For example, (a) do not disperse your forces, (b) maintain unity of command, (c) apply maximum superior force at the point where the enemy is weakest. Obviously, these are simple rules of thumb that are so difficult to achieve in practice as to be nearly useless as guides.

We won't really care that much about ways of conducting tactical operations (that is, waging particular battles). Instead, we want to step back and, in the good Clausewitzian tradition, ask how we may relate political objectives with military means of pursuing them. And immediately, we shall recognize something that even this great thinker has overlooked.

2 Violent Diplomacy

The focus on purely military means is a bit narrow. We shall deal instead with a broad, process-oriented focus on the interaction between opponents: Given national goals, strategy tells us how to achieve them by the combination of threats, promises, and the application of force, given the interests, beliefs, and types of opponents—bargaining partners or enemies. The point is that taking into account only our side of the equation entirely, and dangerously, ignores the simple fact that when we are dealing with a smart and resourceful opponent whose interests are contrary to ours. Even the most careful designs will be upset by his ingenuity unless we take it into consideration as well.

We shall concentrate on analyzing options when the opponent is also acting/reacting according to his capabilities, beliefs, and expectations. This means that we are dealing with "strategic thinking" or a type of gaming. Since our opponent's expectations (what action he thinks will be most beneficial to him under certain circumstances and how he believes we will react to his actions) are the main factor that influences his behavior, we must analyze ways of influencing these expectations. Thus, our opponent will always retain some choice that we want to influence. This brings us to diplomacy and bargaining.

Diplomacy is usually (rightly) associated with bargaining and negotiation. It involves the use of words to secure outcomes that are better for both parties involved than any of the alternatives. It is in this context that we hear of compromise, exchange, and cooperation. Both sides must have some common interest for this type of bargaining to work. Even though many associate diplomacy with appeasement—when Britain/France sold out Czechoslovakia to Hitler at Munich in 1938—or secret dealings of elites contrary to the public interest—one of President Wilson's 14 Points was to denounce secret alliances and negotiations—international negotiation

was and remains an important instrument of foreign policy.

If diplomacy is benign (in the sense that it seldom kills directly), force is not. Usually, the use of force has its fans—who see it as noble, heroic and glorious, and it has its detractors—who see it as uncivilized, dirty, and repugnant. We will be somewhere in between these extremes. I will not extol the virtues of war but I won't shy away from discussing its usefulness either. The reading by Gray includes a useful overview of the ethics, or its lack, of war.

2.1 The Use of Force

To begin, however, we must decide what we mean by "use of force." One use is to take possession of the object under dispute, or forcibly deny possession of that object. For example, a country can occupy land, exterminate population, or repel an invasion—all through direct use of force at its disposal. A high school bully can simply beat up a smaller kid and take his lunch money. This kind of use of force is direct, and we shall call it *brute force*. The other type is less direct and involves threatening the opponent with pain without actually hurting him, at least in the beginning. Force can be simply used to hurt and, if we manage to uncover the points where it would hurt most, a threat to do so can motivate our opponent to avoid it. We shall call this the *coercive use of force*. It is strategic in the sense that it seeks to persuade an opponent to do our bidding without destroying him.

Consider two strategies of the great Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan. Sometimes he employed brute force and simply exterminated all the vanquished enemies. But other times he used coercion by marching captives in front of his army to forestall resistance.

Notice that brute force settles everything—there's no room for bargaining. When force is used coercively, our determination to gain our objectives and the opponent's desire to avoid being hurt opens up room for bargaining. The coercive power is thus aimed at influencing the other side's behavior, primarily through manipulating his expectations. For example, our bully does not have to beat up the smaller kid. If his reputation is good (or bad) enough, he can demand the kid's lunch money and get it by simply threatening to beat him up. It is important to note that while no actual force is used in this case, force is used nevertheless. It is the *latent use of force* here that produces the outcome. While the power to hurt is destructive, and seemingly aimless (because it does not immediately advance our objectives), it is useful because it can cause others to change behavior in accordance with our wishes.

Thus, **coercive diplomacy** is a type of bargaining where the opponent's expectations are influenced by the threat to hurt him. The threat must be understood and compliance rewarded. In other words, the opponent must be persuaded to yield through the application of threats. With force one may kill an enemy but with a threat to use force one may get an enemy to comply.

As the great Byzantine general Belisarius remarked, "The most complete and decisive victory is this: to compel one's enemy to give up its purpose, while suffering no harm oneself." This logic applies to actual war-fighting as well: one would rather fight as little as necessary to convince the opponent to give up than go all out until its total obliteration. As the British strategist and military historian Liddell Hart noted, "indirect methods... are the essence of strategy—since they endow warfare with intelligent properties that raise it above the brute application of force".[1] We shall study the coercive use of force in times of peace but also in times of war. As we shall see, the logic is actually quite similar.

In order for coercion to work, the opponent must receive the threat of force—latent, not actual, use of force—whose success will depend on its credibility. He must then be able to relate it to a proposed course of action; and finally decide whether to proceed—more on various calculations later. This means that it is the expectation of more violence that will get us desired behavior (if at all), not actual use of force.

This is the "coercion" in strategic coercion. "Strategic" refers to the simple fact that the process is a two-way street. Our actions engender reactions, we are influenced by our expectations of his expectations. This interdependent decision-making is called strategic interaction. Hence "strategic" in strategic coercion.

2.2 War as a Bargaining Process

I mentioned that we will be interested in the instrumental use of force for influencing expectations. In this sense, war is not a contest of strength but of endurance, nerve, obstinacy, and pain. **War is a bargaining process.** The power to hurt can be applied to induce compliance. But when? Traditionally, one could not directly hurt one's enemy without overcoming his military defenses. For most of history, war had a violent phase during which one side secured military victory and could then proceed with the threats to hurt to extract concessions. The defeated traded compliance for more damage (which now could be inflicted by victor with impunity), and the victor traded gains for costs of inflicting this damage.

	Professional Army	Civilians
Army Must Be Defeated	*Kings*	*Populations*
Don't Have to Defeat Army	*Limited War*	*Nuclear War*

Figure 1: A Typology of Conflict

Kings (roughly from early 1600s to late 1700s) avoided civilians, war is sport of kings; do not want to undermine legitimacy; professional small and expensive armies which generally avoided pitched battle.

[1] *Strategy*, p. xix.

Populations Napoleon resurrected the Roman practice of having citizen-soldiers and involved entire France in his wars of conquest. Violence was often directed against civilians but the enemy's army had to be overcome first. As mechanization proceeded at fast pace, wars became even more lethal, but only with the introduction of air power could the damage be taken directly to civilians. Still technology was not up to the task of inflicting pain without overcoming defenses first. Two most spectacular examples of these war are the two world conflagrations of the 20th century.

Nuclear War July 16, 1945 changed all that. With nuclear weapons one could threaten the destruction of civilians even without defeating the opponent's military first. In fact, early doctrine envisioned precisely that! One could drop nukes (either with bombers, or deliver them by ICBMs or submarines) on population centers while the enemy's army was still intact. This was a new type of bargaining.

Limited War Later, when the other side acquired the capability to respond in kind, a new mode of warfare was proposed-one in which both sides would limit their actions and refrain from harming civilians directly.

The last two raise an important point: while in simple military terms one's power is measured by the power the opponent can bring; that is, the impact of an army can be typically reduced by the presence of a larger army, the power to hurt is not typically reduced by the other's power to hurt in return. However, the willingness to use the power (and hence its effectiveness) will be affected.

From all this, we conclude that we are interested not in military victory but in coercion: no violence (Denmark in 1940); some violence (Netherlands after Rotterdam).

2.3 Typology of Strategic Coercion

Strategic coercion takes two basic forms: deterrence and compellence, which we shall cover in detail later on. Brute force also takes two basic forms, offense and defense, which are related to the two strategic forms by their goals with respect to the status quo:

		Status Quo Goals	
		Maintain	Change
Use of Force	Potential/Limited	*deterrence*	*compellence*
	Actual	*defense*	*offense*

Deterrence persuade opponent not to initiate action; we make the demand, explain the consequences of acting, and then wait (success is measured by whether

something happens); if the opponent "crosses the line" we've drawn we take punitive action. One role for jails (punishment) is to deter potential criminals. The success of prisons is thus measured by how empty they are. It is hard to judge whether an event fails to occur because of successful deterrence or for other reasons. Deterrence is conservative: it seeks to protect the status quo.

Compellence persuade opponent to change his behavior, we make a demand of action, then initiate our own, and continue doing it until the opponent ceases. We can distinguish three categories of compellence. We persuade opponent

- To stop short of goal;
- To undo the action (i.e. withdraw from land)
- Change his policy by changing government

Success of compellence is easy to see because it entails the reversal or halt of ongoing behavior. Again, this may happen for other reasons but it is hard to avoid the impression of doing it under duress. Compellence is active: it seeks to change the status quo. Types of threats: denial (make it difficult to gain object); punishment (hurt); escalating risks/costs.

These uses of force can all occur during particular conflicts.

2.3.1 The First Gulf War

- Deterrence: Us threatens Iraq not to invade Kuwait-long before August 2, 1990. Fails.
- Defense: Kuwait tried to resist the invasion. Fails.
- Compellence: US initiated multilateral sanctions through the UN & started preparing for military action; moved troops to region to protect Saudi Arabia and to impress Saddam that it meant business. Fails, although Bush could have worked for sanctions to become effective.
- Offense: US forcibly ejected Iraq from Kuwait in January 1991; first air campaign gaining superiority within days, then ground offensive. Succeeds.

2.3.2 The Kosovo Campaign

- Deterrence: not explicit; perhaps Milosevic should have known not to persecute Albanians after Bosnia; after Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) attacks, Serbs try to pacify the province which wanted independence. Fails.
- Defense: since KLA was not organized, there was not much of that. Fails.

- Compellence: NATO air strikes compel Serbian withdrawal. Succeeds.
- Offense: stage not reached because of success at previous one.

Sometimes (often) the order of these stages is not so clear-cut, there may be overlap and it may be hard to distinguish between them. Despite them being conceptually clear, in practice these distinctions are blurred.

3 Strategic Choice

In order to organize our thinking about national security, we must decide what it is that we want to study and what assumptions we want to make to simplify reality sufficiently to make it comprehensible. As I indicated a little while ago, the defining characteristic of international relations is the **interaction** among various actors, and so we shall make this interaction the object of our study.

To this end, we must distinguish three components: (i) the actors, (ii) the environment in which they act, and (iii) how outcomes are produced from the actions.

3.1 The Actors: Preferences and Beliefs

Here are some examples of different actors in whose interaction we might be interested: states fighting a major war, United Nations engaged in peacekeeping operations, governments of two states negotiating a trade treaty, the ministries of a country seeking accession into the European Union, State Department and Department of Defense struggling for control over foreign policy, General Motors and Ford lobbying the government for protection against "unfair" foreign-trade practices, French farmers dumping grapes to protest agricultural policies of the EU, individuals engaging in terrorism.

It should be evident that we are not interested in fixing some particular level of social aggregation as the unit of analysis. That is, we do not want to say that we shall investigate relations between states only, or between leaders of states, or even between organizations within states. International relations are far less conveniently structured than this, and we shall have to account of various different types of actors getting involved.

To deal with this complexity, we shall use an abstract definition of an actor. An actor has two attributes: **preferences** and **beliefs**.

To say that an actor has preferences simply means that it can rank order different outcomes according to some criterion or criteria. For example, consider the situation with Iraq and suppose there are six possible outcomes: (i) Iraq provides acceptable proof of dismantling of its WMD programs, (ii) Iraq agrees to dismantling whatever is left of these programs under international supervision, (iii) Saddam steps down as Iraq's leader, (iv) the United States invades Iraq and wins, (v) the United States invades Iraq and loses, or (vi) the US does nothing.

The United States is an actor that has a specific preference ordering. That is, it ranks these alternative outcomes in some rational way. Similarly, we can designate the State Department, or Saddam, or President Bush for that matter as actors, and they all will have their own preference orderings.

The other attribute of an actor is the beliefs it has about the preferences of other actors. Again, since we are interested in interaction among actors, we want to know how these actors will behave, which in turn depends on what they think others will do. To form an expectation about the behavior of other actors, it is necessary to have some belief about what preferences the other actors have. For example, we might be uncertain about whether Saddam's preferences are such that he prefers (i) to (ii) above, but we can hold a belief about the likelihood that it is the case. When actors are uncertain, as it is usually the case because they seldom possess complete information, beliefs are crucial to the choice of action.

Thus, we shall study the interaction among actors, where actors are defined by two attributes, their preferences and their beliefs.

3.2 The Environment: Actions and Informational Structure

Actors, of course, do not make their choices in vacuum. The other defining component of our approach to international relations is the strategic environment in which interaction takes place. An environment is composed of **actions** that are available to the actors and an **information structure**.

The first is simply the set of actions which summarize how actors can interact. For example, during crisis negotiations, the set of actions might include (i) escalating the crisis by taking a provocative step, such as mobilizing troops or sending aircraft carriers into a volatile region, (ii) deescalating a crisis, (iii) starting a war, (iv) backing down and accepting the other side's demands, (v) producing new demands, (vi) insisting on previous demand and adopting a wait-and-see attitude, (vii) organize support of allies, (viii) make an offer on an unrelated issue linked to the opponent accepting your position on the one currently under consideration. The list can go on and on, although in most cases it is surprisingly short because it excludes all "irrelevant" choices. For example, although an actor may choose to produce more sugar, this choice will not be part of the crisis bargaining environment because it is not relevant for the decisions to be made in that strategic context. The environment limits the possible actions physically as well. For example, the action "initiate nuclear strike" is simply not available to non-nuclear powers.

The second component of the environment is its information structure. That is, what the actors can know and what they have to infer from observable behavior of others. This is related to beliefs because that information available in the environment determines in part the beliefs that the actors will hold. For example, suppose that in the crisis one side ostensibly deploys an armored division in an attempt to force the other to accept its demands. The move may appear aggressive, causing the

other to update its beliefs and revise its estimate of the likelihood that its opponent is prepared to go to war. However, suppose that from its spies that side also learns that the tanks are old and there is insufficient fuel and supplies to actually put them in action. The deployment now appears as an empty bluff, and so the revised beliefs will very likely be different.

Thus, the actors (preferences and beliefs) interact in strategic environments (actions and information).

3.3 Strategic Interaction

Now, notice that I said "strategic" environment. What do I mean by **strategic interaction**? While we have defined the actors and the environment they operate in, we have not specified how outcomes are produced from their actions. The crucial aspect of interaction is that outcomes are not the result of any one actor's choices. Instead, in international relations, the choices of many actors determine outcomes.

An actor cannot choose an action simply because it has the best direct effect on the outcome it wants. Rather, it has to take into account the choices of others because they also affect the final outcome. So, an actor will choose an action both for the action's direct effect and its indirect effect on the actions of others. International politics is all about interdependent decision-making. That is, each actors does his best to further its goals knowing that the other actors are doing the same.

This is called "strategic interaction" and it can be extremely complicated because it involves forming expectations about what other actors are going to do, which in turn depends on what they think you are going to do, which, of course, depends on what you think they think you are going to do, and so on and so forth. Going through the chain of reasoning can be pretty difficult because you will end up in an infinite "I think that you think that I think that you think…" regression.

The tool for analysis of strategic interaction is called Game Theory, and it developed as a branch of applied mathematics early in the 20th century, but went nowhere until the US government financed researched for national security purposes in the mid 1960s. It was from these studies initiated for the purpose of finding ways of dealing with the Soviet Union that researchers discovered methods of dealing with uncertainty, beliefs, and strategic interaction in a productive way. In 1994, the Nobel prize in Economics went to three game theorists, the mathematician John Nash, the economist Reinchard Selten, and the strategic theorist John Harsanyi.

We shall use game theory in this course as well. Although nothing beyond simple algebra shall be required, you will find that tracing the logic can sometimes be difficult until you have gotten used to it. I anticipate that most of you will spend most of your time thinking through the logic of strategic interaction in the abstract models that we set up. This exercise will be quite rewarding not only because you will do well in the course and will gain understanding of international relations, but because you will learn a tool that you can use in everyday life. Once you get

accustomed to strategic thought, it will become second nature to you.

Therefore, we shall use game theory (among other things) to study the strategic interaction among actors in given environments.

4 Why Formalize Analysis?

This course has a heavy theoretical component and we shall spend quite a bit of time dealing with coercion in the abstract before we actually apply the insights theory gives us to illuminate historical events and analyze current problems. Of course, theory does not have to be formal. However, there are some great advantages to formalism. The two most important ones for the purposes of this course are that it (a) disciplines our thinking, and (b) provides a system of accounting.

The first is that by writing out a formal description of the situation we are analyzing, we are forced to deal very explicitly with the assumptions we are making, the factors we are including and excluding, and with the logic that marches us from assumptions to conclusions. You will be surprised how often people offer analyses based on vague logic or unstated assumptions, and how often conclusions can be shown not to follow from the assumptions. Creating a mathematical forces us to specify all necessary components and solving it (assuming we do it correctly) guarantees that the conclusions follow logically from the assumptions. Furthermore, as we shall see, sometimes the situation we wish to analyze is quite complex and as such it would be exceedingly difficult to keep in mind all subtle factors (or even to be aware they exist) one would need for a correct and complete analysis. The mathematical model can help here too because the solution will expose and clarify all such subtleties.

Of course, a model is only as good as the assumptions that go into it: if we oversimplify, we are bound to get some bizarre results or results that cannot be applied because the model has no plausible empirical referent. Since we cannot solve the model without specifying all of its components, this approach has the added virtue of exposing all assumptions that are necessary to produce the conclusions. Each model will be in some sense unrealistic—we always simplify reality to deal with it. This is not only the case when we have to formalize the model: the (often unstated) models we carry around in our heads that help us make sense of the world around us are often grossly simplified versions of reality. In fact, reality is so complex that we cannot possibly account for all factors when making decisions. If we tried to, we'd be paralyzed forever like Hamlet. The transparency of the mathematical model ensures that everyone can see what assumptions we made in order to reach the conclusions we did.

This system of accounting provided by the formalism is crucial because it has two benefits. First, it can produce accumulation of knowledge because other people may build upon and improve one's work by making more realistic assumptions or

changing the assumptions to see how robust the conclusions are (or they can find and fix mistakes). Either way, we will know more than we did before. In general, models should not be judged in isolation—each model will have some important shortcomings. What we should evaluate is the *modeling enterprise*: the series of models that people have created to analyze some interesting phenomenon. We begin with very simple models, and the successively improve them when we find that they are lacking because they fail to capture what turns out to be an important factor in the situation we are analyzing.

The second benefit is of crucial importance for this course: having forced one to expose his assumptions and to make his logic transparent, the formal model helps avoid normative biases. All too often, interpreting history is fraught with peril because analysts are apt to bring their prejudices to bear. Sometimes they may not even be aware these prejudices exist. But sometimes they essentially begin with the "conclusions" they want to reach (because they are committed to them for normative or other reasons) and then they twist and fit historical data to argue how they support these conclusions. This, of course, is specious reasoning but when it comes from a professor it can be extremely dangerous because often there is a serious asymmetry in knowledge of history between teachers and students, which allows less scrupulous teachers to manipulate the students and offer interpretations of history that are designed to produce particular conclusions.

Formal analysis lays everything in the open. In this course, you will know *precisely* what assumptions we are making, and you will know *exactly* what the logic is that leads from these assumptions to the conclusions. This means that in this course, we shall deal with real *conclusions*: that is, statements that follow logically from a set of assumptions. When we find that intelligent peace-loving rational actors may still end up going to war with each other, this conclusion will result from our analysis, it will not be some random assertion I have made simply because I like war. This, then, is the primary virtue of formal analysis—it keeps me, the professor, disciplined and forces me to provide as objective interpretation and analysis of history as I possibly can. You will be able to understand now only what the conclusions mean but also how we can obtain them from the assumptions we make. You may, and probably will, disagree with some of the assumptions. That's perfectly fine. Your next step then would be to figure out what consequences changing them in some way would have for the conclusions. You may be surprised to find how robust some of our conclusions will turn out to be.

5 Next time…

We shall learn how to describe strategic situations with the help of analytical devices called *game trees*.