THE LIMITS OF COERCIVE DIPLOMACY: THE 1979 SINO-VIETNAMESE BORDER WAR

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In 1979, China waged a brief but bloody war with Vietnam, with the hopes of punishing Hanoi for its invasion and occupation of Cambodia the previous year. Beijing’s attempt at coercive diplomacy was an embarrassing failure, however, resulting in tens of thousands of casualties for both sides. This article, using Alexander George’s models of coercive diplomacy and crisis management, examines the reasons for China’s failed coercion and confirms that the most important variable was the omnipresent military threat from the Soviet Union, which prevented China from successfully escalating the crisis to its advantage.

Nations have often used threats and other forms of coercive diplomacy against their adversaries with the hopes of achieving specific deterrence or compellence objectives. Why do nations sometimes fail despite overwhelming military superiority? To answer this question and others, Alexander George and William Simons attempted to systematize the concept of “coercive diplomacy” by compiling structured, focused case studies of past U.S. policy successes and failures. One of their main goals was to derive empirical generalizations from these cases and then operationalize a robust theory that would be applicable for government policymakers. The authors, however, did not examine any cases of coercive diplomacy by countries other than the United States.

An excellent “plausibility probe” of non-U.S. coercive diplomacy is the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, in which China unsuccessfully attempted to compel Vietnam into abandoning its recent invasion of Cambodia. This conflict qualifies as a case of coercive diplomacy under George’s definition because: (1) one party tried to force another party to stop and reverse an action; (2) it was a “limited” military action (i.e., not aimed at the adversary’s total surrender); and (3) there was no zero-sum conflict between the two combatants (i.e., fighting over a common border). It is my argument that careful examination of Chinese policies shows that George and Simons’s model is sufficiently flexible to analyze non-U.S. cases, and that the model’s ability to explain the success or failure of coercive diplomacy across countries allows it to claim a much broader relevance.

With regard to the specific case, Chinese efforts to apply coercive diplo-
macy to Vietnam, despite an overwhelming superiority in numbers and material, ultimately failed to achieve Beijing’s two primary objectives: withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and restoration of the status quo ante-bellum. I argue that numerous factors contributed to the failure, including tactical blunders by the Chinese leadership that squandered their initial strategic advantages; a clear asymmetry of motivation during the conflict itself that worked to the advantage of Vietnam; China’s unclear signaling of its objectives and the terms of compliance; China’s simultaneous use of the contradictory principles of crisis management and coercive diplomacy; and as external constraints (Vietnam’s military and political alliance with the Soviet Union) upon Chinese escalation of the crisis. Of these, I shall argue that the threat from Moscow was the most significant factor, for the Russians’ looming presence in the war reduced the credibility of Chinese threats of escalation, undermining a key pillar of successful coercive diplomacy.

China’s failure to coerce Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia establishes the robustness of George’s model for explaining the success or failure of coercive diplomatic strategies in non-U.S. cases. It also confirms George’s assertion that the requirements and goals of coercive diplomacy and crisis management, respectively, are often at cross-purposes. In particular, crisis management’s ambiguous signaling and pauses blur the clarity necessary for successful coercive diplomacy, and its emphasis on “limited” military action reduces the credibility of escalatory threats. With regard to the case study, I argue that the interaction of Chinese crisis management and attempts at coercive diplomacy had the effect of muting and sometimes directly contradicting their compellence goals. First, Chinese fears of provoking a Soviet response caused them to avoid actions that signaled future escalation to large-scale warfare and occupation, reducing the credibility of Chinese threats. Second, the strategic pauses that marked Chinese statements before and during the invasion relieved the diplomatic pressure on Hanoi and allowed the latter to regroup its forces. Third, movements of Chinese forces and threats of force intended to signal Beijing’s limited objectives were lost amongst other diplomatic “noise” about Vietnamese border incursions and “self-defense counterattacks.” Finally, Beijing did not select diplomatic positions and military moves that provided Vietnam with a face-saving exit, thus backing Vietnam into a corner from which it ostensibly had no choice but to resist Chinese coercion.

**GEORGE AND SIMONS’S MODEL OF COERCIVE DIPLOMACY**

The central logic of George and Simons’s model is that pressure, correctly applied, can force an adversary to comply with one’s demands. Success itself depends on a number of factors, including the magnitude of the demand, matching the strategy to the situation, and effectively implementing that strat-