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## **The Strategy of Coercive Isolation in U.S. Security Policy**

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## ABSTRACT

The isolation of adversaries is an important form of coercive diplomacy. Because countries that are isolated are more vulnerable to military force and more exposed to the costs of fighting, the diplomatic *process* of being isolated puts coercive pressure on them. This paper focuses on the theory and practice of such diplomacy—what I call “coercive isolation.” We first present conceptual model of the strategy, which highlights the logic of how it works. Then we examine three different ways in which it can be used—immediate deterrence, blackmail, and compellence—and discuss the costs and difficulty of succeeding in these contexts. Historical examples of each of the three scenarios are examined to illuminate important dimensions of the model. From this discussion we also draw several conclusions about the conditions that favour the success of coercive isolation strategies. Finally, we examine the role and utility of coercive isolation in three problem areas of U.S. security policy—humanitarian intervention, counter-proliferation, and regime change.

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# The Strategy of Coercive Isolation in U.S. Security Policy

## Introduction

The modern study of coercive diplomacy pioneered by academic strategists Thomas Schelling (1963; 1966), Alexander George (1994), Oran Young (1968), Glenn Snyder (1977), and Robert Art (1980; 2003), is propelled by a central concern with the political uses of force. In particular, the emphasis is on *threats* to use force and the limited applications of violence that lend credibility to such threats. To avoid having to impose “brute force” and instead to be able to get one’s way through the manipulation of threats, promises, and political relationships, is the point. Yet, in the study of coercive diplomacy there has been a tendency to downplay the diplomacy of isolating an adversary, despite such diplomacy’s potential to coerce by creating and increasing a target’s expectations of escalating costs. If leaders understand that their country is more vulnerable to military force when it is isolated, then the diplomatic *process* of losing support and being isolated will put coercive pressure on them. It is a good assumption that most political leaders, lacking the expertise to judge fine gradations of military advantage or disadvantage, put heavy weight on alignment conditions, and dramatic shifts in them, because they can easily grasp how such shifts may influence their exposure to the costs of fighting.

So it is on this kind of coercive diplomacy—“coercive isolation” or **CI** for short —that we shall focus. This paper proceeds in four steps. First, we present the abstract conceptual model of the CI strategy, identifying the “critical variables of that strategy and the general logic that is associated with [its] successful use” (George 1993, 118). Second, we move from the abstract model of CI to three general coercive situations in which it is used—immediate deterrence, blackmail, and compellence—and discuss the costs and difficulty of succeeding in these contexts. Here we will also look at historical examples of each of the three scenarios that illuminate key aspects or implications of the abstract model. Third, we will outline three further conditional generalisations concerning factors that favour the success of CI. Fourth, we will examine the role of CI in three broad issue areas of U.S. security policy.

### **The abstract model of coercive isolation**

In defining the abstract model of CI, we direct our attention to essential actors, relationships, and mechanisms of influence.

#### ***Manipulation of alignments as a means of coercion***

With CI, one influences the target by increasing its estimates of the costs of fighting in a particular way—by altering its expectations of support or opposition in a military confrontation. The focus of the strategy, then, is to influence “alignments” which, following Glenn Snyder, we define as patterns of “expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions” (1997, 6). That this lowering of a target’s expectations of support constitutes a military threat follows from a foundational understanding of the role of force in international politics where states exist in a persistent “state of war” in which the resort to force to resolve disputes is always possible (Waltz 1979, 103; Doyle 1997, 113-114). In these circumstances, anything that can be manipulated to make states more vulnerable to force and thus likely to pay a higher price for fighting is a form of “armed coercion” that can “affect the[ir] will and behavior.” (1967, 3; also see Art 1980, 5 fn2; Slantchev 2011).

#### ***Targets of influence: Primary and Secondary***

CI is a triangular, indirect influence strategy. In order to influence the primary target (PT) the coercer must influence secondary targets (ST), whose alignment choices determine whether and to what extent the primary target is isolated. This implies an inverted order of priority in the chain of influence: the ST comes first and the PT comes second. In short, a necessary condition for success against the PT is some degree of success vis-à-vis the ST. In light of this, it is worth noting two things. First, the type of influence used toward the ST will likely be very different than that used toward the PT. The approach to the ST—especially when it is closely aligned with the PT—will often emphasise “selective accommodation” and concessions more than confrontation and threats (Crawford 2011). The elementary logic of balancing is the basic idea behind this. To divide two potential adversaries that are already in alignment, it is generally counterproductive to threaten them both simultaneously. Second, in this framework, the CI attempt might “work” by isolating the PT but fail to influence its behaviour in the desired way. This may simply be due to the fact that the implications of

isolation are not costly enough to trigger a change in behaviour.<sup>1</sup> It may also be the case that isolation of the PT influences its behaviour in counterproductive ways that thwart the coercive objective.

### ***Coercive effects: Risk and Denial***

There are two kinds of CI effects—risk and denial (Pape 1992; Art and Cronin 2003, 362-363). The denial effect stems from an immediate disruption of the flow of aid to the target that reduces its resources available for preparing and practicing military defence, which may prompt it to recalibrate its plans. The *risk* effect is more political and psychological, operating in the realm of expectations and decision-making, where beliefs about future levels of support shape and reshape the target regime’s intentions. Here, as strategic theorists have emphasised, the target’s *anticipation* of escalating punishment is the driver of coercion. As Pape puts it, “What creates the coercive leverage is not so much actual damage as the expectation of future damage” (2003, 346). A degradation of a state’s alignment position will increase its vulnerability to force, and this should weaken its ambitions and resolve. While common sense suggest that denial effects are the more significant ones, for leaders who think about international politics in broad gauge terms, the political shock of having important partners alienated from them, and the implications of this shift for their strategic intentions, may very well carry more weight.

### ***The Primary Target’s initial expectations and the Secondary Target’s alignment change***

The abstract model posits that coercive pressure is put on the PT via changes in the ST’s alignment. But to be more specific, what matters, especially for the risk effect, is how much the ST’s alignment changes relative to the PT’s initial expectations of support. The strength of the risk effect is thus a function of: (i) the PT’s initial expectation and valuation of ST’s support and (ii) the degree to which ST’s position diverges from that baseline. In simple terms, the ST’s alignment can change from a supporting position to one of neutrality or, going further, to one of positive support for the coercer’s policy. Obviously, the PT’s risk assessments—of its exposure to costs if force is used against it—can increase considerably if the ST is realigned against it rather than simply neutralised. But whether this is so also

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<sup>1</sup> From the policymaker’s perspective, isolating a target may be desirable even if doing so does not prompt compliance, because it may still make noncompliance more costly for the PT.

depends on the PT's initial expectations of ST's support—indeed, these expectations *are the crucial baseline* in the coercion calculus. If the PT is initially counting on the ST to provide active support, then just neutralising it may deliver a coercive blow. But if the PT has initially discounted the likelihood of active ST support, and is merely hoping for its benign neutrality, then neutralising the ST will not dent the PT's resolve. In that case, realignment of its ST against it may be necessary to prompt a shift in its calculus. As an empirical matter, then, the analyst must try to ascertain the target's initial pattern of expectations in any effort to explain the success or failure of a CI attempt.

### ***Domestic political mechanisms***

Both risk and denial effects can influence the target's behaviour by compromising its leadership's domestic political position. Here, the effects of CI become mechanisms of "power base erosion," weakening the target leadership's internal "relationships with key supporters" (Byman and Waxman 2002, 59-60). As we know, for some regimes, the external power base is the *most critical* one: the internal position can be sustained—with domestic challengers suppressed, demoralised, or co-opted—so long as the network of outside support remains strong. But when the external subsidy is cut, their internal rule caves in. The denial effect of CI can thus drain the regime of resources it uses to stay in power and force it to capitulate. And the risk effect can gain traction through processes of internal elite politics. For example, a ruling faction may be demoralised or fragmented by the loss of external support and the anticipation that the regime will become increasingly vulnerable to threats and forced to fend for itself on its own resource base.

### **Deterrence, Blackmail, Compellence**

The distinction between deterrent and compellent purposes helps us to discern the uses of CI and its prospects. At issue, as Schelling put it, are matters of "timing" and "initiative," "who has to make the first move" and "whose initiative is put to the test" (1966, 69; also see Young 1968, 337-361). More precisely, it is about the difference between reinforcing a situation and changing it. Deterrence tries to "persuade an adversary not to change his present behaviour" while compellence tries to "persuade an adversary to *change* his behaviour" (Art 1980, 19). This broad distinction provides a benchmark for gauging the degree of difficulty involved in an influence attempt. Deterrence is generally held to be

easier than compellence. Thus, we may conjecture that CI is more likely to succeed in producing compliance when the goal is to deter the PT from doing something undesirable, than it is when the goal is to get the PT to change its behaviour.

But even within deterrence attempts there is an important question of timing and initiative. Is the attempt made before or after the target has taken openly escalatory steps? On this turns the difference between general and immediate deterrence (Morgan 1977). General deterrence operates before challengers decide to initiate a crisis: when it is working, it inhibits such steps, before the challenger gets to the point of provoking a crisis. An attempt at immediate deterrence begins after the challenger has clearly taken political steps to initiate a crisis by threatening to use force or otherwise act in unacceptable ways, and the deterrer then seeks to forestall that next move. In this paper, we will skip over general deterrence and focus first on immediate deterrence, the tougher context in which to achieve success. As Levy (1989), Fearon (1992), and others have suggested, any attempt to deter a target that *has* already decided to take an openly provocative step will be difficult, because the target will have already demonstrated some resolve, sunk prestige and other political costs in the move, and thus become resistant to reconsidering the trajectory of its policy. Most important from the perspective of CI, it is likely to be harder to move the ST in the midst of a crisis than it would be in a less confrontational atmosphere, because the ST will be most exposed to alliance reputation costs in a context where credibility and commitments are so blatantly on the line (Snyder and Diesing 1977, 432).

Within the category of compellence, there are also two kinds of influence attempts to consider—blackmail and compellence narrowly understood (Jakobsen 2013, 242). The first is proactive: it tries to impel the target to initiate an action, some new course or measure it otherwise would not. The second is reactive: it tries to impel the target to stop doing something it is already doing and would not otherwise stop doing. There are several important implications of the difference in context. In principle blackmail will be easier if it allows the primary target to take the action in a way that leaves open the possibility that it took it for reasons other than coercive pressure. By contrast, compelling a target to stop and undo a violent or destabilising action it has already started will be harder both because the reputational costs will be higher and because it is likely to have anticipated a counter-



reaction and to some extent decided it is willing to accept the costs. Additionally, the ST will likely be harder to pry away, because the PT will have likely consulted with it and taken steps to solidify its support prior to escalating the conflict. All else equal, then, we may assume that the level of difficulty increases as we move from immediate deterrence to blackmail to compellence.

**The abstract model of coercive isolation in three strategic contexts**

CI Objective	DETERRENCE		BLACKMAIL		COMPELLENCE	
Attempt is	Reactive		Proactive		Reactive	
Minimum change in ST's Alignment Necessary to Coerce PT	<i>Neutralisation:</i> If PT will only escalate challenge with ST's support.	<i>Realignment:</i> If PT will escalate challenge with ST's neutrality.	<i>Neutralisation:</i> If PT will initiate desired action if it loses ST's support.	<i>Realignment:</i> If PT will not initiate desired action if it loses ST's support.	<i>Neutralisation:</i> If PT will stop or undo undesired action if it loses ST's support.	<i>Realignment:</i> If PT will not stop or undo undesired action if it loses ST's support.
Level of Difficulty of Influence Attempt	Easier ←-----> Harder					

Now let us look closer at the three CI scenarios as they played out in cases in Asian security contexts. These cases highlight important theoretical principles and implications of the abstract models, and point toward several conditional generalisations that we will address later.

**Deterrence**

In the immediate deterrence scenario, the coercer seeks to deflect the PT from using force or carrying through on some other action that it has threatened to take. In the abstract model's ideal scenario, when the PT decided to initiate the threats it believed it would have the backing of the ST it needed to risk carrying them through. The coercer's objective, then, is to weaken the ST's alignment from the PT in such a way that the PT's expected costs shift against going forward, and it refrains from acting.

In some important ways, China-U.S.-Taiwan relations in the mid-2000s demonstrate the dynamics of the deterrence scenario. At the start of the decade, the citizens of Taiwan

elected to the Presidency Chen Shui-bian of the DPP, a leader and party strongly associated with a platform calling for independence. A move by Taiwan to declare independence was widely recognised to be a clear *casus belli* for the Mainland, which considers Taiwan to be a part of its sovereign territory. (For the background to all of this, see Bush 2005). China responded to Chen's election with a policy that mixed military build-up with a diplomatic stance of watchful waiting. As Chen then commenced a pattern of behaviour that in many ways indicated that he was serious about moving Taiwan toward a formal declaration of independence, China's portfolio of positive and negative incentives to deter Taipei from doing so seemed to be losing traction. Part of this slippage in deterrent pressure was likely the result of a pronounced strengthening of U.S. political and military assurances to Taiwan that occurred in 2001, under the newly elected US President George W. Bush. In its first year in office, the Bush Administration aligned itself very closely with Taiwan, responding to what key policymakers saw as a combination of increasing threat from Beijing to use force to compel unification, and a slackening of U.S. support for Taipei during the late 1990s. Over the next two years, however, several things became clear. First, Beijing was not about to force unification and was willing be patient and build cross-strait economic ties, as long as Taiwan did not make a bid for independence. Second, President Chen was becoming more reckless and, for domestic electoral reasons, was willing to push the envelope on independence in a way that pulled Taiwanese public opinion far toward that option. As Sutter notes, "Chen's re-election campaign in 2003-2004 featured a series of appeals to Taiwan nationalism and identity separate from China that Chinese leaders saw as direct challenges to their national interests and U.S. leaders saw as dangerously provocative" (2010, 223).

While it pursued the conventional deterrence strategy of building up missile forces that could punish Taiwan—Beijing also adopted a strategy of CI that pressured Taipei by weakening its ties to the United States. Between 2002 and 2006, according to Rigger, China "came to rely on the U.S. to restrain Taiwan" (2013, 302). The key to Beijing's strategy was to induce the U.S. to clearly signal that it would not support Taiwan's drive for independence and that it indeed opposed it. Beijing did not push for something unrealistic—like U.S. abandonment of Taiwan *per se*—but rather to amplify the divergence between the U.S. and Taiwan on the particular independence issue, and to remove any alignment (expectations of

military support) between them in the context of a conflict over that issue. After the 9/11 attacks, there arose a critical foundation upon which China could build better relations with the U.S., and in that way promote restraint of Taiwan. On 11 September 2001, China's president Jiang Zemin was one of the first world leaders to reach out to the U.S. and offer support, and thereafter China "appeared determined to cooperate with the U.S.-led anti-terrorism campaign" (Sutter 2010, 139). Over the next few years China would deliver both in the form of active support and by refraining from obstruction in other contexts where it otherwise might have. Before the year was out, writes Koehler (2013, 93): "China had voted in favour of four UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) dealing with Afghanistan and global counterterrorism efforts, including UNSCR 1368, which justified a vigorous international response to those who carried out the 9/11 attacks. As Beijing had only 2 years earlier strongly protested U.S. "interventionism" in the 1999 Kosovo campaign, its first-ever endorsement of U.S. military action against another state was seen in Washington as a significant, and welcome, departure from past practice."

Tucker adds: "China provided support for the 'war on terrorism' particularly by fighting money laundering, sharing intelligence, enhancing port security and helping to rebuild Afghanistan" (2013, 42). The increasing Sino-U.S. cooperation went beyond counterterrorism. In January 2003, for example, with the North Korean withdrawal from the NPT, China expressed its disagreement with Pyongyang's move and "found new common ground [with the U.S.] in dealing with the crisis caused by North Korea's nuclear weapons program," joining with the U.S. to set up the Six-Party talks process aimed at denuclearising the Korean peninsula (Sutter 2010, 124).

Although there remained, as always, important areas of tension in Sino-U.S. security relations, the overall relationship during these years was decidedly on the upswing (Sutter 2010, 152-154). It was in this context that the U.S. proved willing to cooperate in China's CI strategy, which some went so far as to describe as Sino-American "Co-Management" of the Taiwan issue (Huang and Li 2010, 272; Zhao 2006). Besides the increased cooperation in other areas of international security, China made a critical adjustment in its policy to encourage the U.S. pressure on Taiwan. The new Chinese leadership that took over in 2003 signalled that their primary near-term concern vis-à-vis Taiwan was not reunification (as

their predecessors had emphasised) but rather preservation of the status quo. This was an important accommodation of U.S. sensibilities and strategic priorities (Huang and Li 2010, 272). In a string of public statements over the next few years, the U.S. president and other high-ranking officials voiced increasing opposition to Chen's campaign. In June 2003, President Bush met Chairman Hu Jintao and, while reiterating the traditional outlines of Washington's One-China policy, emphasised that these included "no support for Taiwan independence," a point made again in another Bush-Hu meeting in October 2003 (275). In early December 2003, in response to Chen's proposal to hold a referendum on independence, the U.S. State Department spokesman announced that the U.S. "would be opposed to any referenda that would change Taiwan's status or move towards independence." When this warning seemed to fall on deaf ears, President Bush called out Chen directly at a joint press conference with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on 9 December 2003: he noted that "the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose" (Huang and Li, 2010 277). In October 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell lowered the boom again, declaring:

"There is only one China. Taiwan is not independent. It does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation, and that remains our policy, our firm policy...Independence movements or those who speak out for independence movements in Taiwan will find no support from the United States (Huang and Li 2010, 290)."

The result of this was a clear success for China's CI deterrence strategy. The sharp U.S. rebukes and distancing became a "key brake" leading to the slowdown and ultimate rejection of Chen's independence campaign (Sutter 2006, 430; Ross 2006).

This was driven home in December 2005 elections, when the KMT—the opposition to Chen's DPP—won important local elections that checked Chen's power. Moreover, with presidential elections in 2008 approaching, the opposition was strengthened by the evident damage of Chen's initiatives to U.S. alignment with Taiwan. In the campaign leading up to those elections Chen tried to shore up support with his primary constituents by leaning hard on the independence agenda again. This produced further frictions with the Bush

administration, and led to a sound defeat of Chen and the DPP in Taiwan's 2008 legislative and presidential elections. The subsequent government in Taipei has pursued a much more moderate and status quo oriented cross-strait policy (Huang and Li 2010, 316-333; Sutter 2011).

This example highlights a key principle in the logic of the abstract model. To achieve deterrence through isolation, the PT must value the ST's support to the point that it would not, in the absence of that support, undertake the escalatory threats. In short, the PT must consider the ST's support to be a necessary condition for acting, and perceive that it has that support. If those initial conditions hold, then after the PT has initiated an escalation, a sharp reversal in those expectations should produce a deterrent effect (assuming the PT is not able to find a substitute patron to provide support). The China-U.S.-Taiwan example covered above evinces this basic pattern of dynamics, and also the role domestic politics can play in translating the coercive pressure of isolation into policy change. In this instance, Taiwan's increasing alienation from the U.S. eroded domestic political support for Chen and the DPP and led to a new government committed to a more restrained approach.

### ***Blackmail***

In the blackmail scenario, the PT starts in a status quo position, trying to hold on to for example, a piece of territory, a military capability or posture, a relationship with another state or non-state actor, a form of government, or a policy toward ethnic minorities. In the ideal case, the PT initially calculates that it can sustain this position, even to the point of war—so long as it retains the expected support of the ST (or at least so long as the ST does not flip against it and join the coercing side). The coercer seeks to compel the PT to give up its position and accept a weakening or elimination of it. The coercive strategy tries to cause the ST to reduce its commitment to the PT in a way that pushes the PT to choose to comply with the coercer's demands in order to avoid the risk of fighting in its isolated condition.

A good example of this CI process at work is China's successful attempt to weaken Soviet support for Vietnam in 1988-1989, and in that way to impel Hanoi to retreat from its intervention in Cambodia. In 1979 Vietnam, with Soviet backing, invaded Cambodia and toppled the Khmer Rouge regime backed by China. In its place, Hanoi installed a proxy

government. China retaliated by launching a border war against Vietnam, and adopted the policy that it would maintain a militarised border and a state of war as long as Vietnamese forces remained in Cambodia (Ross 2009, 123). Throughout the 1980s, Hanoi insisted. Conversely, that it would not withdraw Vietnamese forces in Cambodia unless the Chinese threat was removed. Until late in the decade, Vietnam's position was reinforced by Soviet military and political support. But when the USSR, under Gorbachev, began to seek better relations with its great power competitors—and China in particular—China seized the opportunity to employ a CI strategy against Vietnam, in order to drive it out of Cambodia. China, in particular, insisted that normalisation of Sino-Soviet relations would hinge on Moscow pressuring Vietnam to retreat from its position in Cambodia (Ross 2009, 124).

The Soviets responded in two ways, both “consistent with Beijing’s preferences and at variance with Hanoi’s” (Khoo 2011, 149). First, Moscow overrode Hanoi’s refusal to allow the Khmer Rouge to play any role in a Cambodian political settlement. Knowing that China insisted on a place for the KR in the settlement process, the Soviets essentially turned against their ally’s position, pushing Hanoi to make the concession. When the Vietnamese balked, Moscow “bypassed Hanoi to deal directly with the Phnom Penh government” which then prompted Hanoi to accept the Soviet line (Khoo 2011, 150). Second, the Soviet retracted their support from Vietnam in a way that left it no choice but to carry through a prompt and full withdraw of forces from Cambodia. When fighting between China and Vietnam broke out in the South China Sea in March 1988, Moscow “maintained near total silence” as Vietnam’s attempt to contest China’s move to occupy the Spratly Islands was crushed (Ross 2009, 123). Two months later Hanoi signalled that it would withdraw one half of its 100,000 thousand-man force deployed in Cambodia.

In December 1988, China agreed to a Sino-Soviet summit in 1989 that would pave the way for a full normalisation of relations. But Chinese Premiere Deng Xiao-ping stipulated that a full Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia would have to be worked out before Beijing would make a final commitment to participate in the summit (Ross 2009, 122). In early 1989, in the context of a broader withdrawal of its forces in the region, Moscow pulled back its fighter and bomber aircraft deployed in Vietnam and began reducing its naval presence at Cam Rahn Bay. As Ross (2009) notes, with Moscow “withdrawing from Indochina...Hanoi

experienced reduced support for its Cambodia policy...without Soviet military support, the risk to Vietnam of continuing its occupation of Cambodia and alienating China grew considerably as China showed less restraint in challenging Vietnamese policy” (Ross 2009, 123). Just ahead of the May 1989 Sino-Soviet summit, Hanoi announced that it would pull out the rest of its forces from Cambodia within six months without any preconditions (Khoo 2011, 150-151). Even as Soviet military aid to Vietnam sharply declined, China maintained military pressure on the border with Vietnam. Its coercive leverage over Hanoi, as a result, intensified. The blackmail logic of CI was clearly at work: Vietnam was driven to give up its position in Cambodia and concede to China’s, by its loss of Soviet backing—a loss that China cultivated by manipulating inducements to the Soviet Union.

This example highlights the importance of the value to the PT of ST’s support. In this instance, the alignment was highly asymmetrical, between the Soviet great power patron and a relatively weak protégé. In these circumstances the imbalance of strategic interdependence is such that the patron, in theory at least, can exert a great deal of control over the small ally by threatening abandonment. The logic of CI blackmail flows from this dependence: detaching the patron is, for all intents and purposes, sufficient to drive the PT into compliance.

### ***Compellence***

In the ideal compellence scenario, the PT has already initiated use of force or commenced some other action that the coercer wants to halt and/or reverse. Its decision to initiate force was informed by the expectation that it would be supported by ST—and thus to some extent protected from the retaliation it might suffer for its escalation. The coercer’s goal here is to expand PT’s perception of vulnerability to retaliation by reducing its expectations of ST’s support, and in this way force the PT to alter and undo its behaviour.

The compellence pattern of CI played out in the “other side” of the Nazi-Soviet Pact—that is, in the strategic relationship between the Soviet Union and Imperial Japan. In May 1938, and then again between June and August 1939, the Soviets and Japanese fought border wars along the Mongolia-Manchuria border. The 1939 battle of Nomohan/Khalkhin Gol involved high intensity combined arms warfare and produced an estimated 45,000 Japanese fatalities

and 17,000 Soviet fatalities. In both instances, the Japanese army initiated the confrontations. It did so at a time when expectations of close German-Japanese alignment were increasing. Just as the final battles in Nomohan/Khalkhin Gol started (a Soviet counter-offensive against advanced Japanese positions, between August 20 and August 31), Stalin and Hitler came to terms. The Nazi-Soviet Pact was announced to the world on August 24<sup>th</sup>, and Tokyo was among the capitals most surprised by the shocking *volte face* of their presumed German ally (Handel 1981).

The Soviet's military success at Nomohan/Khalkhin Gol undoubtedly played a role in stopping the Japanese challenges, but the impact of the diplomatic shock should not be underestimated. Tokyo agreed to a formal cease-fire with the Soviets on 15 September 1939, despite the determination of Japanese officers in Manchuria to continue the fight. The surrounding political-military terrain had been shaken up in a big way. With the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, Moscow had made concessions to Germany but gotten something very important in return. That was, for the time being at least, the neutralisation of German military pressure in the West, pressure that Japanese strategists had expected and counted upon to weaken Soviet defences in the East. An immediate consequence of the political shock of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in Tokyo was the fall of the Hiranuma government that had been responsible for the confrontational approach to the Soviets in the Far East (Chihiro 1976, 193).

This case highlights, once again, the domestic political process through which CI pressures can be translated into compliance. At the end of August 1939, a new government was formed under Prime Minister Abe, one that initiated a sustained policy of accommodation with Russia that ultimately led to the April 1941 Japanese-Soviet neutrality pact. But most of all, the case highlights the importance of shifting the PT's perceptions of alignment from the initial baseline of support. Arguably no government was more surprised by the Nazi-Soviet Pact than the Japanese government. In 1938-39 it had reacted to the tightening of axis relations by escalating military confrontations with the Soviet Union—perceiving Germany to be in a position of inflexible antagonism toward the USSR. The Hitler-Stalin pact overturned that perception dramatically raised the risks to Japan of continued fighting with the Soviets.



No more did Japan launch military challenges to Soviet positions in the Far East: the Nazi-Soviet Pact allowed Moscow to isolate Japan and compel it to stop (Crawford 2012, 263).

### **Three conditional generalizations**

In view of the concepts and cases outlined above, we may pose several conditional generalizations. These are the building blocs of “generic knowledge” (George 1993) about the utility of CI strategies; statements, in particular, about general conditions that favour their success.

First, *the PT perceives itself to be highly dependent on ST’s support*. There are two major dimensions of this dependence worth emphasising. First, the PT should consider the form and level of the ST’s support to be necessary for it to sustain its position or initiative in the face of the risks of confrontation with the coercer. Second, the PT should not be in a position to easily garner this kind of support elsewhere, if its relations with the ST are broken. In short, substitutes are not available. In terms of the rough alignment values posited in the abstract model, what these conditions mean is that it will only be necessary to neutralise the ST in order to get compliance, something that, from the coercer’s standpoint, is easier to do than realigning the ST (Crawford 2011). For the policy maker considering whether to attempt CI, a certain kind of estimate is thus critical: that is, an estimate of the PT’s expectations about ST’s support and the level of such support that it considers necessary to sustain or advance its position.

Second, *the coercer can offer inducements that are valuable and credible to the ST*. In terms of “valuable” we mean both how useful they are to the ST and how hard it would be for the ST to otherwise obtain them. The essential point is that it will be hard to coerce the PT if one lacks the reward power necessary to get the ST to change its relations with the PT in a significant way. On the credibility piece, what is important to emphasise is that the coercer will need to convince the ST that the rewards it has been promised will be delivered if the ST changes its relations with the PT, *even if the PT does not comply* with the coercer’s demands. Making the rewards to ST contingent on PT’s compliance may sound like a good way to avoid being bamboozled, but what it does is give the PT a veto—in the form of non-compliance—over the improved relations between the coercer and ST. So a credible policy of inducements

toward the ST will be one that the PT cannot nullify either through counter-concessions to the ST or non-compliance. For the policy maker considering whether to attempt CI, this points to a second kind of critical estimate. Here the question is, do we have at our disposal, or can we mobilise, the kind of rewards that could sway the ST, and can we credibly put them on the table?

Third, *the coercer's approach is well coordinated with key allies that have stakes in the conflict*. While the focus of the model is on the manipulation of alignment relations between the ST and PT, it is important to recognise that the level of coordination between the coercer and its partners—assuming it has them—may significantly impact the influence of a CI attempt. This is, in a certain sense, an amplification of the point made by Art and Cronin noted at the beginning (2003, 371). The quality of the coercer's coordination with allies is most likely to impact its approach to the ST in connection with the condition outlined above relating to reward power. The coercer's efforts to accommodate the ST (so as to isolate the PT), may be thwarted by the coercer's allies opposed to making concessions to the ST that would bolster the strategy, or whose animosity toward the ST weakens the credibility of the coercer's promises. Further in the background, the coercer's allies may also weaken the PT's perception of the costs and risks of increased isolation, either by acting in ways that suggest that they would try to restrain the coercer or, even worse, that they would open up channels of relations with the PT that counteract its constricted alignment.

### **Current U.S. security policy contexts**

In this section, we will consider the role of CI in three areas of U.S. security policy. With each, we proceed in two steps. First, a sketch of the basic contours of the problem and of the general view of the utility of CI in relation to it, with specific illustrations. Then, we will draw from relevant theories in IR and security studies that enable us to work deductively toward a better understanding of the limits of the CI approach in these contexts.

#### ***Humanitarian intervention***

As a way to compel governments to stop campaigns of mass displacement and mass atrocity, CI has intuitive appeal. Working to isolate an abusive regime from its external supporters would seem to make sense as both a coercive strategy and as a normative “naming and

shaming” strategy. Mass atrocity campaigns, moreover, may be on the upswing, and host country “generators” often use them for their own coercive diplomacy purposes (Greenhill 2010). In the early 2000s, as Sudan’s genocidal campaigns in Darfur escalated, there was a widespread sense that Chinese support for Khartoum was abetting the atrocities, and that detaching China from the position of unconditional supporter helped to moderate Khartoum’s repression. But perhaps the best example of how CI can work well is found in the culmination of NATO’s 1999 campaign to compel the FRY to stop its expulsion of Kosovars from Kosovo, after Belgrade had refused to accept an imposed settlement at the Rambouillet conference. The evidence is somewhat clouded by the fact that NATO was sending signals that it would escalate its use of force against the FRY at the same time that Russia retracted its political support for the FRY. So it is not possible to separate out the effects. There is some evidence that it was both the danger of NATO escalating militarily, and the leverage of Western economic inducements that led Moscow to, as one Russian General and Defense Ministry official put it, “sell out” Belgrade (Lambeth 2001, 45, 47). We do know, however, that up to that point Serbia had implemented an effective defence on the ground against NATO air war, and that NATO’s coercive diplomacy campaign appeared to have bogged down into stalemate. In 1998-99, when Russia had inserted itself into the negotiations between NATO and Belgrade, it had taken a position against NATO demands and, with this backing; Milosevic had refused to bend (Crawford 2000/01). However, as Lambeth (2001) puts it:

“this negotiating impasse suddenly dissolved in the first days of June, when Moscow broke ranks with Belgrade and agreed to endorse NATO’s terms for war termination” (45). [This] constituted a severe blow to the Serbs, who now saw themselves isolated and vulnerable to greatly intensified NATO bombing.” (47)

Soon after Moscow withdrew its support for Belgrade, Milosevic agreed to most of NATO’s terms, and the air campaign against the FRY stopped. This case provides as good an example as we are likely to find of CI working well against states engaging in mass displacement campaigns. Most of all, it demonstrates how a sharp increase in the target’s isolation, combined with the prospects of escalating force, can compel a target to decide to stop a mass displacement campaign and essentially reverse course, retracting its instruments of

violence driving the movement, and allowing the refugees to return. In certain ways, the case is an example of both blackmail and immediate compellence. It was blackmail in that, ultimately, what Serbian compliance meant was the surrender of de facto control over territory that remained, in terms of international law, part of the sovereign territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It was also compellence in that it caused Belgrade to decide to stop the ethnic cleansing campaign it launched in an attempt to counter-coerce NATO. One broad factor critical to understanding the success of both dimensions of CI compellence is that the FRY government was not confronted with demands that would essentially entail giving up power and the collapse of the country. After compliance, both the regime and the country would go on.

By contrast, in situations where mass atrocities have been initiated in “desperation” by regimes fighting to hang on to power (Downes 2006), it is unlikely that isolation will compel them to decide to stop using those means. To put it in perhaps unpalatable terms, if security fears are driving the mass atrocities, isolation is likely to intensify that motivation and reinforce the undesirable behaviour. Indeed, how to compel such generators of mass displacement or atrocity campaigns to stop them, short of a decisive victory or defeat, is one of the most vexing practical policy problems. That is because it is usually the case that interveners are not galvanised to take action until such atrocities have already started.

Nevertheless, there has been increasing emphasis on *preventative* measures in the scholarly and policy literatures on humanitarian intervention, and in particular on finding ways to deflect regimes from resorting to mass displacement as a solution to their conflicts with internal enemies (Albright and Cohen 2008). In this respect, CI may appear to have some prospects as a tool of deterrence. When a target regime begins to exhibit the “early warning signs” associated with a nascent mass migration campaign, a state (or coalition) may try to deter it from initiating by increasing its isolation, convincing regional abettors, for example, to sever their supporting ties.

But there is a strategic logic that suggests that attempting CI for these deterrence purposes may be counterproductive. As Greenhill (2010) has argued, regimes often resort to these techniques because they have few other avenues of effective influence. Coercive mass

migration has, for them, relative utility because their options are impoverished. Further isolating such regimes could very well eliminate policy alternatives to coercive mass migration, and thus make it a more attractive option. If external supports help to give the target regime enough confidence to *not* employ the most extreme form of defence against internal enemies, then weakening those external supports may provoke rather than deter. In these circumstances, the political shock of isolation could be positively counterproductive. The question then becomes whether the resulting material denial effects would be significant enough to stymie the target's mass displacement effort, despite its increased intention to carry it out. Recent experience suggests that forced mass displacement can be done in a low-tech fashion (think marauding gangs and militias) that cannot be easily stopped by the reduction of external material support.

### ***Nuclear non-proliferation and reversal***

Recent experiences would seem to demonstrate the need to isolate nuclear proliferators in order to coerce them to halt or reverse their weapons programs. This lesson is inferred from negative examples. With North Korea, for example, the United States has struggled to create a context in which it can maximise political and economic leverage because China has—until recently—been unwilling to distance itself from Pyongyang. Similarly, with Iran and its nuclear program, Tehran has blunted the U.S. counter-proliferation efforts to a considerable degree by falling back on support from Russia, China, and even India. The most important of these supporters has been Russia. For that reason, one of the primary goals of the Obama administration's policy "reset" with Russia was to find accommodations with Moscow on other issues that would help to detach it from Iran. The reset, nevertheless, was short lived. On the Iran nuclear front, the CI picture is one of limited success at best. The Western powers' "unilateral" (i.e., non-UN Security Council endorsed) economic sanctions that are now crippling Iran are doing so despite Russian and Chinese opposition. The sanctions have not stopped Iran from expanding its nuclear fuel production capabilities, an effort that seems to be gaining momentum. It remains to be seen whether the sanctions effort will deter Iran from crossing the line to weaponisation (or the production of weapons grade fuel). In any case, the political logic behind the efforts to isolate North Korea and Iran, and the frustrations of the policy in both instances, suggest that the failure to isolate them is responsible for the unsatisfactory counter-proliferation results. In addition to these two

negative examples, the case of Libyan nuclear reversal also seems to support the proposition that isolating the target in a mechanism for coercing it into giving up its weapons program. Libya's effective isolation (along with the American military threat manifest in the Iraq "demonstration effect") does seem to have been a critical condition leading to Gaddafi's 2003 capitulation to coercive diplomacy (Litwak 2012, 115).

Nevertheless, there is something essential to the logic of CI that is likely to work against success in counter-proliferation. To see why, return to the conceptual foundations of foreign policy analysis, and consider the means by which states build strength and balance against threats. Here we traditionally distinguish between external and internal means. Externally, states cultivate relationships with other states that bolster their position; internally, they extract resources to build their own military capabilities. We understand these two avenues for building strength as being "substitutable" in the sense that states may make trade-offs between them (Morrow 2000, 76-77). Of course, in many contexts they will do both simultaneously, so it is not purely a matter of either/or. Nevertheless, the logic of substitution suggests that when external means are more available, or cheaper, states will rely on internal means less, and vice versa. Thus, when states that have grown accustomed to relying on allies for security lose some of that support, and are unable to find new allies elsewhere, they will ratchet up their own internal means of protection. A handful of examples will suffice to establish the significance of these postulates. When the Cold War ended, security policy analysts and practitioners worried deeply that NATO, without a primary threat to drive its cohesion, might collapse and the European members that had thrived under its security umbrella, might "renationalise" their security postures—shift back toward an emphasis on internal means—and that this would lead to destabilising arms races and security competitions. Before that, of course, the reverse relationship was thought to be the problem: European states, embedded in a large alliance, with a strong leader committed to upholding a protective umbrella, were shirking in their own internal defence efforts, and thus "freeriding" on the alliance leader's contributions. Finally, we know that strong security assurances may be used as a way to defuse a state's motivation to acquire nuclear weapons. An increase of external supply of security will, in other words, promote a decrease in the internal effort to achieve it by building the bomb.

These examples convey the logic of the internal/external means substitution dynamic, and point to why CI is likely to have perverse effects on counter-proliferation efforts. This will certainly be the case if the security-motive—as opposed to prestige or domestic political concerns—is a major driver of the proliferator’s bid (as it almost always is). Nuclear weapons are a dramatic way of reducing dependence on external sources of security; or of compensating for a loss in security provided externally. If one is willing to concede that security concerns propel North Korean and Iranian nuclear developments, then there is reason to believe that in neither case would achieving a greater isolation of the target have increased the likelihood of success. The point is perhaps obvious now with North Korea, given its position as a de facto nuclear weapons state. If the goal is to limit North Korea to a small nuclear arsenal—and perhaps, someday, to roll it back—it is hard to imagine that deepening Pyongyang’s isolation further will do anything to advance those goals. While it may be advantageous for other reasons to promote Chinese distancing from North Korea (e.g., restraining its provocations towards South Korea and Japan), it is very likely that Chinese support for the North will be a necessary condition for its nuclear renunciation.

With Iran the picture is less clear because the objective today is more about deterring weaponisation than compelling de-weaponisation. Here, increasing Iran’s isolation by distancing Russia from it—especially in the context of the UN Security Council, where decisions to sanction Iranian non-compliance with IAEA commitments and Council resolutions, will be fought out—may very well have a deterrent effect. It could do this by increasing the credibility of threats to launch a preventive war before Iran crosses the nuclear weapons threshold. It would do this especially if Russia agreed to support a UNSC enforcement resolution that made the threat explicit—an extremely unlikely scenario given today’s geopolitical context. But even if this did happen, there is good reason to think that for Iran, the prospect of having all of the permanent members of the Security Council either against it, or willing to abstain on the question of the U.S. using force against it, will significantly strengthen Tehran’s security rationale for pursuit of the bomb. Once again, then, isolation would not necessarily produce the desired coercive effects.

Finally, a closer look at Libyan nuclear rollback suggests that the influence of isolation on the outcome is less straightforward. The sequencing of diplomacy and events shows that Libya’s

nuclear reversal decision was taken *after* its isolation was *reduced* and in particular, after security assurances and bridges between Libya and supporters in the region—the EU, the U.K., Italy, and France—were being rebuilt (Jakobsen 2012; Jentleson & Whytock 2005/06). Here, the background condition of deep isolation no doubt was a considerable source of pressure on the regime, but the decision to disarm was taken when Libya’s security situation was moving in a better and less isolated direction and the U.S. and Britain were offering a “tacit assurance of regime survival” (Litwak 2012, 115).

### ***Regime change***

Finally, we should consider the utility of CI to promote regime change, in particular a policy that tries to make the target’s leaders relinquish power, rather than using brute force to depose them. Common sense, as well as the framework outlined in the first section, suggests that it will be very hard to succeed at regime change via compellence. Nevertheless, there are some contingencies in which it may be possible. A good example here is U.S. coercive diplomacy against the Haitian junta in 1994, which after several false starts, finally drove it to step down in the face of an imminent invasion (Pastor 2003). Here, as with the Kosovo case discussed above, the escalating military threat *per se*, was critical. But this was conjoined with the complete isolation of the Haitian junta: UN economic sanctions had been imposed in 1993, and were tightened just before the U.S. initiated the final stage of coercive threats, which were backed with a unanimous Security Council chapter 7 enforcement resolution (Kreps 2011, 75-77). There is some evidence that the U.S. tried, to some extent, to achieve this kind of a result in Afghanistan in October 2001, obviously with no success (Jakobsen 2013, 243).

The Syrian civil war presents the most obvious current context in which this kind of CI might appear useful. France, Britain, the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other regional players, seem committed to pushing the Assad-led Baath Party regime to relinquish power. At the same time, it is clear that Assad is drawing significant diplomatic and material support from Russia and Iran, in its fight against the fractious and increasingly radicalised opposition forces—a fight that has drug on for more than two years as of this writing—and its broader struggle against the outside powers supporting the regime’s enemies.



Some observers have clearly invoked the compulsion form of CI as an appropriate response to this situation outlined in this paper, arguing that Russia (the secondary target) could be persuaded to stop backing the Assad regime by assurances (from the outside powers promoting the opposition) that Russia's current perks in Syria would be continued under a new regime. The resulting isolation of the Assad regime would then lead it to capitulate to demands that it give up power. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan suggested as much when he claimed "Assad...is only able to stand up with crutches, he will be finished when the crutches fall away" (Burch 2012, 1). It goes without saying that any strategy of coercive diplomacy to push Assad to step down would have to include strong promises to allow him and his coterie a safe exit and exile (as was the case with the Haitian junta). So it must be understood that the isolation created by a CI strategy cannot be so severe as to leave the leaders no exit option and thus force them to hunker down and fight to the death. With that said, we can discern a theoretical logic that helps to clarify under which circumstances it may be possible to compel leaders, such as Assad, to surrender power by weakening their external support network.

The best way to frame this theoretically starts with the arguments of David (1991) and Levy and Barnett (1991), which explicitly connects weak state leaders' alignment choices to their efforts to gain security and power vis-à-vis internal challengers. David observed that the prime concern of many leaders of weak states in the developing world is not the security of their state per se, but rather their ability to remain in power, and that they often make alignment choices with an eye to "which outside power is most likely to protect [them] from the internal and external threats [they] face" (1991, 238). In the same vein, Levy and Barnett explain that "Third World states often form external alliances as a means of confronting internal threats," because the internal means are either impossible or much more costly to procure (1991, 378). The external support network thus sustains the viability of internal rule for that leadership. In such circumstances, the denial logic of CI would imply that isolating the target deprives it of material support—in the form of hardware, training, or cash—that it must have to sustain its internal position of power either by repressing or buying off its enemies. Unable to find substitutes, it loses strength against domestic forces (supported by the coercer) and is compelled by them to abdicate. The expectations logic of CI would imply that the primary target's leadership perceives that its internal position cannot be sustained

once the lifeline to external support is severed, and it exercises the exit option without further fight.

These observations point to a useful generalisation: leaders that have made these kinds of external alliances—those that primarily function as props to their internal position of power—can be dislodged from their positions by the political shock and denial effects of CI—assuming that their principal supporters can be detached, other effective substitutes are not readily available, and a credible exit option is offered. But the other side of the coin is also important to stress: leaders that have external alliances but *do not* depend on them to rule at home are unlikely to be dislodged by the denial and political shock effects of CI. This does not mean that they will, in their isolated position, ignore an immediate military threat. But it does mean that they cannot be leveraged out of power simply by weakening them against internal threats, because even when they are isolated internationally, their internal position is strong.

Turning back to Syria, the question is whether removing Russia support for Damascus (which could only be achieved through costly Western concessions to Moscow on other fronts) would be enough to convince Assad to capitulate. Obviously, if Russia's material support for Damascus stopped while military support for the rebels at the same time increased, a shift in the balance of forces on the battlefield could lead to Assad's defeat. But, if the goal is to achieve Assad's willing abdication, through some kind of orderly process, without escalating the civil war to the point of military annihilation of the regime's forces, then the key issue is whether Assad's domestic power base would lose its political will and cohesion if the scaffolding of Russian political support were more or less taken down. Developments over the last two years suggest that the Assad regime does draw enough support from parts of Syrian society that it is not so sensitive to the level of external support coming from Russia. There can be little doubt that the Alawite clans surrounding Assad will remain loyal to the bitter end. Beyond that the picture gets more interesting. The broader Syrian military elite—with an institutional history of ties to Russia—might be willing to pull their support for Assad if Russia seemed to be cutting its ties of support to them. But their interest in defending the position of Alawites and other minorities versus the increasingly extremist Sunni factions would remain. The Syrian Christian minority—which is also presently aligned with the Assad

regime—is the part of Assad’s domestic coalition most likely to jump ship if Russia distanced itself further from the regime. Then the Syriac community would be likely to lean toward Turkey, a powerful secular neighbour with Christian minorities of its own and an interest in preventing them from being wiped out by the more extreme wing of the opposition. Given these considerations, it seems that successful political isolation of Damascus—say, by a change in Russian behaviour in the Security Council—would do little to compel Assad to abdicate, unless it were a process facilitated by the Syrian military, essentially a coup, in coordination with Russian military support.

The most important problem that the U.S. and its European and regional partners face is not that Russia is committed to propping up the Assad regime, or that Russia has too little leverage over Damascus—it is that there is very much to fear from a smashing rebel victory that annihilates the regime. First, after such a victory, chaos would likely ensue, triggering massive ethnic cleansing and refugee flows in the region. Second, there is a good chance that the most dangerous and radical elements of the opposition will win out in the struggle to determine who rules in the aftermath of the regime’s collapse. So, as has become more evident in the first half of 2013, an orderly political transition is clearly more desirable to the U.S., Russia, and others than a dramatic defeat and collapse of the Assad regime’s forces (Ballout 2013). Thus, even if a weakening of Russian support *would* unravel the regime, and it were possible to effect some weakening of that support through clever diplomacy, CI might be a bad approach if success led to a chaotic escalation of the civil war. Two other major considerations are relevant here. First, if an orderly political transition leading to some kind of moderate successor regime is really imperative, it will need to come about through negotiations with the existing regime. And for this option to have any chance at all, some kind of *assuring* Russian influence with the regime in Damascus, as well as Russian prodding, will be necessary. Second, any policy that compels Assad to give up power in an orderly transition will *also* need to offer a credible exit path and safe haven to which to retire. It would be nearly impossible for western powers—especially with all of the demands for war crimes prosecutions having been made—to provide such assurances. Only Russia can do it with some credibility.

For these reasons, if the goal is to compel the Assad regime to willingly relinquish power, it would be counter-productive to try to seriously isolate Damascus from Russia. Without Russian support, the Assad regime will not throw up its hands but instead fight to the bitter end. With Russia's support, it will be more likely to participate in a political process of negotiations leading to some kind of transition from power more orderly than that which would follow from military collapse and the sectarian and multi-cornered civil war almost certain to continue in its wake. Recognition of this seems to lay behind the U.S.-Russia joint initiative, launched in May 2013, to set up a negotiation process for settling the civil war.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have tried to do four things. First, we presented the principle concepts, propositions, and relationships for developing a policy-relevant, "middle range" theory of the strategy coercive isolation. On this score, we specified the primary and secondary targets, the kind of alignment shifts that can be used to isolate the primary target, the mechanisms through which isolation can influence the primary target's behaviour, and the patterns of *its* expectations that make it more or less vulnerable to these mechanisms. Second, we outlined three general CI scenarios—deterrence, blackmail, and compellence—and illustrated their dynamics with three historical cases involving Asian security issues. Third, we extracted from those illustrative cases several contingent generalisations concerning the conditions for CI success. Fourth, we considered three important issue areas in current U.S. security policy, where the utility of CI is worth considering. With respect to each of these, we tried to describe and illustrate how CI might work to promote the coercer's policy objective, and then drew upon wider theoretical work to develop insights into the limitations of CI in those contexts.

These initial and partial steps do not add up to a fully-specified theory or to a rigorous analysis of all of the policy issues at stake. Instead, in this theoretical "ground clearing" effort, our purposes have been more modest: to define and illustrate the main contours and elements of a theoretical framework, and then to show how the framework can help us to begin to pose questions and seek answers concerning the efficacy of CI strategies, and their utility in relation to political issues confronting U.S. security policy today.

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