

Coercion in Action

DETERRENCE AND COMPELLENCE IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

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From both academic and policy perspectives, the current situation surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict provides an instructive case study in the role of coercion in ethnopolitical conflict. In the current status quo of “no peace, no war,” coercive policies are—and will be—heavily utilized, both in negotiations and in efforts to influence opponents and external actors.

According to traditional security studies approaches, coercion consists of two main paradigms: *deterrence* and *compellence*. In one of my previous memos, I examined ways in which Armenia implements deterrence strategies in the Karabakh conflict.¹ In this memo, I analyze the compellence strategy Azerbaijan has implemented. This study also includes a comparative analysis of the interaction between the two main types of coercion. It argues that compellence, in comparison to deterrence, has a more complicated theoretical structure and implementation mechanism, which makes its practical realization more difficult.

The Interaction Between Deterrence and Compellence

The two main elements of coercion, “defensive” (deterrence) and “offensive” (compellence), are distinguished less by their quantitative and qualitative military, political, and economic parameters than by their differing main goals: whether to preserve or change the status quo. Deterrence is typically a strategy of preservation, while compellence is a strategy for change.

¹ Sergey Minasyan, “The Quest for Stability in the Karabakh Conflict: Conventional Deterrence and Political Containment,” PONARS Eurasia [Policy Memo No.188](#), George Washington University (September 2011).

In contrast to deterrence, compellence still lacks a solid theoretical base and requires conceptual improvement. It remains in the shadow of deterrence, even if it received a new lease on life in the aftermath of the Cold War, when it seemed that classical deterrence methods based on bipolar confrontation between nuclear powers had lost their relevance. For a time, this gave way to new conceptions within security studies focused more on conventional deterrence and compellence. Nonetheless, compellence has yet to receive a thorough satisfactory treatment.

Besides its approach to the status quo, another important factor distinguishing compellence from deterrence is a difference in approach toward the passage of time and the initiation of action. Deterrence implies a “passive approach” with no fixed timeframe, with the main (and frequently only) condition being that the deterrer’s opponent abstain from a particular unacceptable step. While threatening grave consequences if the opponent were to take that step, the deterrer shows a willingness to wait indefinitely, leaving the burden of responsibility for future developments on its opponent.

In comparison, compellence constitutes active political-military conduct, aimed at persuading an opponent to alter the status quo through the threat of force. Compellence requires permanent and constant initiative. A compeller’s threats persist until its opponent makes concessions or annuls previous actions. To be maximally effective, compellence needs a deadline, after which the compeller should be prepared to use force. Importantly, open military violence is not the main aim of compellence. As economist and strategist Thomas Schelling famously asserted, “successful threats are those that do not have to be carried out.” This means that the compeller’s threat must be credible..

At different stages of conflict, the same actor can employ strategies of deterrence and compellence. Prior to the establishment of a ceasefire in 1994, for example, Armenia relied mainly on a strategy of compellence in the Karabakh conflict. However, Armenia now favors deterrence. The same side can also simultaneously implement deterrence and compellence toward different actors. For instance, Armenia implements a deterrence strategy toward Azerbaijan and, simultaneously, a compellence strategy toward Turkey, seeking to force Ankara to recognize the 1915 genocide and to deter any direct Turkish involvement in the Karabakh conflict.²

By default, the implementation and functioning of compellence is more difficult than deterrence. In principle, a deterrence strategy in a given context can only fail once -- when the deterrer’s opponent decides to carry out an undesirable step, like launching military action. In the case of compellence, there exist two clear indicators of failure. The first is if the compeller’s opponent does not concede. The second is if the compeller ends up using force.

² For more on genocide recognition as an asymmetrical political resource, see Alexander Iskandaryan and Sergey Minasyan, “Pragmatic Policies vs. Historical Constraints: Analyzing Armenia-Turkey Relations,” *Caucasus Institute Research Papers* 1, January 2010.

Another important feature of compellence that makes it more complicated to implement is the different politico-psychological nature it confronts. As one RAND study noted:

It is usually easier to make a potential aggressor decide not to attack in the first place than it is to cause the same aggressor to call off the attack once it is on the way for a variety of fairly obvious reasons such as the political and psychological cost of reversing a policy after it is publicly announced.³

In a compellence framework, this translates into the fact that it is easier for an actor to abstain from unrealized intentions under the threat of imminent loss than to abandon results it has already achieved even under the threat of severe consequences. According to political scientist Patrick Morgan, “using force to maintain the status quo often seems psychologically more legitimate (to observers and involved parties) than trying to change it.”

The Practice of Compellence: Does it Work in the Karabakh Conflict?

Developing the fundamentals of coercion, political scientist Thomas Schelling focused mainly on U.S. compellence strategy toward North Vietnam, in particular the gradual escalation of military threats that reached the level of strategic bombing by the U.S. Air Force. Nonetheless, his classic work fails to explain why this strategy did not ultimately lead to the success of compellence and even dragged the United States into full-scale war.

In this respect, one of the most vulnerable aspects of compellence is its reliance on the credibility of the threat of force. In doing so, it underestimates variation in opponents’ “pain thresholds,” which makes it impossible to rely solely on quantitative parameters of power and the compeller’s will.

An analysis of Azerbaijani officials’ public statements suggests that the military-political leadership of Azerbaijan appears not to take seriously the higher “pain threshold” of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, even if the entire dynamic of the two-decade-long conflict should have convinced them of this. This leads to the Azerbaijani government’s illusory belief that compellence can succeed, when in fact it threatens to lead to a failure (an inability to get Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to change policy).

Alongside consideration of variable “pain thresholds,” it is also necessary to expand consideration of the military balance. Just as third parties can play a role in deterrence by offering protection to allies (“extended deterrence”), they can also play a role in minimizing compellence threats. In the case of the Karabakh conflict, the initiation of an arms race based on oil and gas revenues is an important element of Azerbaijan’s compellence strategy. However, the Azerbaijani-Armenian military balance does not only depend on the conflicting sides’ own capacity to arm, but also on the

³ David E. Johnson, Karl P. Mueller, William H. V. Taft, *Conventional Coercion Across the Spectrum of Operation: The Utility of U.S. Military Forces in the Emerging Security Environment* (RAND), 2002, 14.

involvement of an influential external actor, Russia, that provides preferential weapons transfers to Armenia.

Moreover, while military balance is important, it is only one of many elements of an effective deterrence or compellence strategy. Indeed, a balance of motivations/interests tends to play a more significant role. In a study of the Cuban missile crisis, political scientist Richard Ned Lebow has shown that:

The military balance was not the determining factor of either resolution or the crisis outcome. Kennedy's choice of the blockade over the air strike, Khrushchev's decision to withdraw the missiles, and Kennedy's willingness to withdraw the Jupiters reflected their political values and estimates of the risks and the cost of escalation. Leaders with different values or conceptions of the feasibility of military action would have made different choices.

Indeed, as in asymmetric conflict, a strategy of compellence can fall flat against a quantitatively inferior opponent that has a higher motivation to achieve its goals. Asymmetries of power and motivation are often even interrelated. As political scientist Ivan Arreguin-Toft has argued:

Power asymmetry explains interest asymmetry.... Strong actors have a lower interest in winning because their survival is not at stake. Weak actors on the other hand have a high interest in winning because only victory ensures their survival.

Despite the many difficulties of implementing a strategy of compellence, however, it should not be thought of as a fundamentally weaker strategy than deterrence. While compellence may be difficult to realize, it also has its advantages. An actor that implements a compellence strategy secures the luxury of controlling the degree and duration of propagandistic rhetoric. In the case of the Karabakh conflict, the Azerbaijani leadership has been unable to reach its goals for two decades via a policy of compellence. But its claims that Azerbaijan will sooner or later carry out its threats, surely and inevitably, allows the leadership to preserve its political reputation in both domestic affairs and the international arena.

A strategy of compellence also *a priori* creates a psychologically and politically more comfortable context regarding the threat of war. It is much more pleasant for Azerbaijani elites to consider the possibility of a new war in Karabakh as something that depends on them, rather than for Armenians in Karabakh to feel under constant threat. The Azerbaijani leadership permanently threatens new hostilities, with visible satisfaction, exploiting the opportunity provided by the peculiarities of compellence.⁴

⁴ In an interview to Turkish television in March 2012, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated that if Armenia abandons its position, then it would be possible for Armenians to live in Nagorno-Karabakh in safety. After that, he added: "However, now they live in fear. We know that. People cannot always live in fear. As they are also well aware that today the Azerbaijani army can easily restore the country's sovereignty in Nagorno-Karabakh. Easily!", "Azerbaijani President Says Armenian Leadership Must

An important element in Azerbaijan's strategy of compellence is the permanent maintenance of tension along the front line. Calls from the international community to cease hostile incidents that lead to pointless casualties and to withdraw snipers from the line of contact remain unanswered. Azerbaijan has reason not to ratchet down tensions, as its compellence strategy would then lose credibility. Only the presence of permanent clashes along the line of contact and Azerbaijan's border with Armenia allows the long unrealized threats of Baku to be taken seriously.⁵

A strategy of compellence also has some room for flexibility. As Richard Ned Lebow has put it, "threats in case of proposal rejection and rewards if agreed." A more positive dimension of compellence has proven effective in many cases, including U.S. policy in Central America, Latin America, and the Asia-Pacific region. It has not come to fruition in the case of Karabakh, however. Offering rewards to Karabakh Armenians in exchange for their willingness to change the status quo could be a significant component of Azerbaijan's compellence strategy. This, however, would require serious political courage from the Azerbaijani leadership. Shifting emphasis toward the positive side of compellence, to include identification of possible compromises, holds some risk for the leadership of Azerbaijan. Aside from domestic reputation losses, it would significantly weaken the potential for a successful compellence strategy if Baku were to decide it had to return to issuing threats of war.

Conclusion

The reason for the continuing inefficiency of compellence in the Karabakh conflict is not only its theoretical vulnerability as a strategy. Of course, to force an opponent to surrender what it already holds is much more difficult than keeping an opponent from making a move under the threat of retaliation. However, two decades of maximalism have also driven the sides into a trap of high expectations and limited flexibility, particularly with regard to the issuance of positive proposals within a strategy of compellence.

Strategies of both compellence and deterrence have been implemented in the Karabakh conflict since it began, while attempts to analyze the phenomena are fairly new. The subject of coercion requires more theoretical attention, which in turn is necessary for developing more practical recommendations.

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Approach Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in the Light of Reality," *Trend*, March 3, 2012, <http://en.trend.az/news/politics/1999533.html>.

⁵ During the meeting with the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Irish Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore, on June 13, 2012, his Azerbaijani colleague Elmar Mammadyarov rejected the mechanism to investigate the incidents on the contact line and to withdraw snipers, arguing: "if we start applying that mechanism now that will only mean reinforcing the status quo." See more: <http://asbarez.com/103627/baku-rejects-sniper-withdrawal/>, June 14, 2012.