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Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION

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Coercion—the use of threatened force to induce an adversary to behave differently than it otherwise would—offers considerable promise to mitigate, or even to solve, many security challenges facing the United States in the coming decades.<sup>1</sup> Yet coercion through military force rarely works as planned. Although U.S. military forces are without equal today, recent setbacks in Iraq, Bosnia, and elsewhere suggest that using this overwhelming force to shape even a relatively weak adversary’s behavior is difficult.

Coercion is simple in concept but complex in practice. This study, which seeks to improve the practice of coercion, is organized around several fundamental questions—Why is coercion important? How does it work? Under what conditions does it succeed or fail? What is the context for coercive diplomacy today?—that develop the theory of coercion and show how it fits with practice. Answers to these basic questions will provide a backdrop for the larger focus of this study: developing principles to guide the coercive use of air power.<sup>2</sup> To this end, the study identifies the role air power has played in successful coercive operations, factors that have degraded its effective application, and ways that it might be used more successfully in the future.

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<sup>1</sup>We use the term “coercer” to indicate the power issuing the threat of force and the term “adversary” to indicate the target of coercion. As discussed later in this report, even this distinction becomes muddy when an adversary tries to counter-coerce the coercer.

<sup>2</sup>We generally use the term “air power” rather than “aerospace power,” because most of the examples, particularly in the historical section, involve air-breathing platforms.

## COERCION AND U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

To improve the U.S. ability to coerce adversaries, it is first necessary to understand the role coercive diplomacy plays in U.S. foreign policy. Recent political and geostrategic changes have elevated the practical necessity of effective but limited uses of force. In crises placing less-than-vital U.S. interests at stake, policymakers and the public alike usually prefer coercion over unrestrained, “brute force” solutions. Because many post–Cold War security threats pose at most an indirect or limited risk to vital U.S. national interests, the level of force used to respond will correspondingly be limited.

Geostrategic trends also raise the importance of coercion. The end of the Cold War has brought about the emergence of a world in which the United States has no peer competitor. Because of this lopsided force advantage (and, as noted below, the reduced potential for nuclear escalation), the United States has the option of using military force with little threat of a major defeat. In short, the chance of a coercive threat escalating into a full-fledged war should be more frightening to any aggressors than to the United States.

Accompanying the world of unipolarity and conventional war is increased uncertainty. Although the Cold War world was hardly as stable or as predictable as many people now recall, the U.S. military nevertheless had a well-defined mission: deterring a conflict with the Soviet Union and, if deterrence failed, defeating Soviet forces. Such a mission is thankfully missing today. Yet because the identity of potential threats is less clear, deterrence becomes harder while coercion becomes more necessary. Deterrence is more difficult when specific threats cannot be anticipated. The United States faces too many low-level threats to forecast and deter each one with a credible warning. The United States may, however, choose to react to threats after they materialize. At the outset of conflicts in Kuwait, Somalia, and Bosnia, U.S. policymakers did not issue a clear warning to deter aggressors, but later decided to intervene.

The end of superpower rivalry requires a corresponding shift in analytic emphasis. During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war led to a focus on how nuclear weapons might be used to prevent, or limit, a broader conflagration. Success in brute force terms—reducing the Soviet Union to a smoking, radiating ruin—would be a failure in

policy terms, even if the exchange ratio were 10:1 in favor of the United States. Today, the threat of total nuclear war is remote.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the context for coercive diplomacy that dominated the Cold War—two major, nuclear-armed powers locked in a zero-sum rivalry—is no longer the appropriate backdrop against which to consider the effectiveness of coercive instruments.

Nevertheless, one constant remains from the Cold War: military force is still a vital foreign policy tool. Sanctions, international law, and other mechanisms for affecting states' decisionmaking have proven neither reliable nor efficient in stopping aggression or abating undesirable behavior. Although military force may be the last instrument policymakers want to use, the absence of alternatives elevates the potential value of coercion.<sup>4</sup>

## THE ROLE OF THE USAF

Perhaps more than any other service, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) will play a major role in future coercive operations and strategies. Several comparative advantages of air power make it a natural coercive device. The USAF is increasingly able to deploy rapidly and bring to bear quickly tremendous strike power around the globe. This speed and strength pose a potent threat to any adversary. Particularly when the United States seeks a quick resolution to a crisis, the speed of an air deployment will play an important part in successful coercion. Combinations of speed and lethality may enable the USAF to halt ground invasions or other limited aggression before a *fait accompli* occurs. Air power is also an attractive coercive tool because the amount of force employed can be discrete and limited, resulting in relatively few casualties on either side and enabling policymakers to exert considerable control over the scope and scale of operations.

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<sup>3</sup>Because of the past emphasis on nuclear coercion, this work will focus on conventional coercion except when otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup>For recent criticisms of the effectiveness of sanctions, see Haass (1997) and Pape (1997). For a critique of international regimes, see Mearsheimer (1994/1995). Kirshner (1997) offers a more nuanced account that describes different types of sanctions and their varying effects.

Technological advances, such as advanced sensors and communications, offer the hope that the United States can achieve its goals without massive force. Since World War I, air power experts have focused on the problem of finding, and then destroying, enemy targets. As Operation Desert Storm revealed, air strikes can now destroy a wide range of previously immune or impenetrable targets with relative ease. The improved accuracy of precision-guided munitions increases the potential destructiveness of even a small number of sorties.

The USAF's long-range strike capabilities are particularly useful for coercion. In contrast to the Army (or shorter-range carrier-based aircraft), the USAF can strike deep inside an adversary's territory, bypassing its conventional surface forces.<sup>5</sup> Ground power, on the other hand, requires first defeating an enemy's army before threatening an enemy's heartland. Long-range strike capabilities also make the USAF less dependent than in the past on facilities in allied territory. Finally, air power can not only strike quickly but can be withdrawn quickly; ground forces are hard to withdraw both during and following an operation.

USAF capabilities offer a potential solution to dilemmas resulting from casualty intolerance. Policymakers believe the U.S. public is increasingly unwilling to accept even small numbers of American casualties during military operations. Because ground combat, in general, involves greater risk of bloodshed than air operations, policymakers will often prefer air strikes over its alternatives when they expect that air power can accomplish the mission in question.<sup>6</sup> Technological advances may also enable the United States, particularly the USAF, to minimize enemy civilian casualties. During the Vietnam and Persian Gulf conflicts, U.S. leaders worried that enemy civilian casualties would erode American public support for the war

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<sup>5</sup>This reach has long been the promise of air power advocates. Until recently, air power first had to defeat the air defense forces of the enemy, a process that itself often bogged down in attrition. Recent technological advances—most notably, stealth, precision guidance, and improved ability to suppress enemy air defenses—may place the United States in a unique position to avoid these difficulties. Future improvements in air defense, however, may again limit the ease of deep strikes.

<sup>6</sup>Eric Larson argues that policymakers misread casualty sensitivity during the Gulf War and that casualty sensitivity in fact depends on the perception of the stakes involved and the perceived prospects for success. See Larson (1996b).

effort. The ability of precision strike to reduce unsought casualties thus enhances the political feasibility of coercion.

Finally, the USAF offers a highly versatile coercive instrument. Air power can attack strategic, operational, and tactical targets. It can resupply friendly forces and provide essential intelligence. One, some, or all of these functions may play a role in successful coercion.<sup>7</sup> Future coercive strategies should be designed to harness these improved capabilities. This requires, first and foremost, an understanding of what factors enhance or impede coercive operations in general.

## METHODOLOGY AND CASES EXAMINED

This study draws from a wide range of past attempts at coercion, including many that did not involve a significant role for air power. The cases were chosen using several criteria. First, high-profile and well-known cases were examined to ensure that the most historically significant cases, which are often the ones best researched by scholars, are included and properly understood. Second, the cases were chosen to show the limits and advantages of various coercive instruments and strategies—several cases were included specifically because they illustrate a rare, but important, point about coercion. Third, we looked at a range of coercing powers and geographic areas, thus reducing the likelihood of bias arising from the identity of the actor or arena which, in itself, should not infect the study of coercion. The cases in this study do not, however, represent either a universal set of coercion cases or even a representative sample thereof.<sup>8</sup> Appendix A lists these cases and briefly notes the most salient points for this study.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this study is to provide useful “rules of thumb” about the use of air power as a coercive instrument. It deliberately avoids a

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<sup>7</sup>*Essays on Air and Space Power* (1997), p. 135.

<sup>8</sup>We recognize the methodological tension in building conclusions on such a limited sample. The conclusions we present should be considered hypotheses derived from the cases in question rather than theories tested on these cases.

<sup>9</sup>At the time of publication, the ultimate outcomes of Operations Desert Fox and Allied Force are still indeterminate. These operations are therefore not included in the appendixes.

narrow focus on whether air power can coerce by itself or other classic, but perhaps academic, themes of many studies on this subject. Instead, it tries to use the historical record to infer useful lessons about the proper use of air power and its limits. Several illuminating cases are deliberately given more weight than their historical importance where they suggest particularly valuable lessons for the USAF.

## ORGANIZATION

The remainder of this study has four parts. Part One considers how to think about coercive diplomacy in general and argues that the traditional approach toward the study of coercion is of limited value to policymakers. Part Two surveys a range of historical cases to determine conditions under which coercion is more or less likely to succeed. With these general lessons in mind, Part Three examines the political and diplomatic context in which the United States will conduct coercive operations in the near future. It explores how coalitions and domestic politics will affect the ability of the United States to practice effective coercive diplomacy. This part also explores the special challenges associated with coercing nonstate actors. The fourth and final part considers the implications for the United States and the USAF, and it offers recommendations to guide coercive strategy.